

Patrick Russell (1727–1805), surgeon and polymath naturalist

Indraneil Das

Institute of Biodiversity and Environmental Conservation, Universiti Malaysia Sarawak
94300 Kota Samarahan, Sarawak, Malaysia
Email: idas@ibec.unimas.my

ABSTRACT.– The life and times of Patrick Russell (1727–1805), a Scottish medical practitioner and natural historian from Edinburgh, are traced, with emphasis on his work in the Ottoman town of Aleppo (currently, Halab, in north-western Syria), with that of his half-brother, Alexander Russell (1715–1768), and along the Coromandel Coast (in eastern India). Russell is best known amongst zoologists for the discovery of his namesake, the venomous serpent referred to as Russell’s Viper, *Daboia russelii*. His two folio volumes, centred around his time in the Coromandel coast of south-eastern India, was lavish in its illustrations of Indian snakes, and executed by an unknown Indian artist. Vernacular, rather than English or scientific names were used in this compendium, arguably the first text exclusively on a herpetological topic published on the Indian fauna. Apart from snakes commonly occurring in the south-eastern India, the work also describes a few species sent to Russell by colleagues from other parts of Asia. He also experimented on the venom of the local snakes, and documented their effects on dogs, rabbits and chickens, these being the first attempts to classify the venomous snakes from the harmless ones in the country.

KEYWORDS.– Patrick Russell, Alexander Russell, biography, medicine, herpetology, natural history, Aleppo, Syria, Coromandel Coast, India.

“After all that has been already done, India still presents a wide field for research; and the progress made, of late years, in other branches of knowledge, affords room to expect material improvement in Natural History...”

Patrick Russell (1795) Preface in *Plants of the coast of Coromandel, selected from drawings and descriptions presented to the Hon. Court of Directors of the East India Company* by William Roxburgh.

Introduction

The Age of Enlightenment reached Scotland’s shores before the glorious Victorian Age in England, in the 18th Century. Witness the Act of Union passed by the Parliament of Scotland (1707); the establishment of Britain’s first circulating library as well as medical school (1726) and of the Royal Bank of Scotland (1727); game of golf played on Bruntsfield Links (1735); the first series of public lectures by political economist Adam Smith (1748); publication of the first edition of *Encyclopædia Britannica* (1768–71);

creation of the Royal Society of Edinburgh for “the advancement of learning and useful knowledge” (1783); and the birth of Scotland’s famous sons (David Hume, philosopher, 1711; James Hutton, geologist, 1726; Alexander Monro, discoverer of the lymphatic and nervous systems, 1733; James Boswell, biographer, 1740 and Sir Walter Scott, poet, 1771). In the field of medicine, in particular, that of surgery, Edinburgh was the world centre (Fillmore, 2009), attracting attention of scholars and students, including, most famously, the Darwin family, several of its