

The Ottoman East and the 'Moral Geography' of Europe's Enlightenment

Karen Bird
Griffith University

*European perceptions of the Islamic Ottoman Empire in the eighteenth century have often been read through the prism of Montesquieu's *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). His 'moral geography' depicted a despotic and decayed Islamic Ottoman polity in contrast to the dynamism displayed in European states. Montesquieu's comparisons and contrasts between the Ottoman East and Europe appear to support Edward Said's claim that European thinkers in the eighteenth century adopted a similar binary approach. Indeed, while Said's analysis of European 'orientalism' was predominately based on nineteenth century sources, eighteenth century 'orientalists' have to some extent been represented merely as precursors to this later binary construction. I argue however, that alternative "Orientalist" voices could be heard in Enlightenment Europe. These voices avoided the stereotypical depictions of 'the Orient' which were generally based on distorted and invariably demeaning European assumptions. By utilising critical discourse analysis I contest the rigidity of Said's East-West binary, highlighting the contrarian views in the scholarship of Scottish doctors Alexander (1715-1768) and Patrick Russell (1726-1805) and British diplomat Sir James Porter (1710-1776) who lived, worked and documented their life experiences in the eighteenth century Islamic Ottoman Empire. Although the Russell brothers and Porter adopted what Said referred to as an "Orientalist" literary style which contained the Eurocentric commentary evinced in Montesquieu's writing, I will argue that they avoided viewing the Islamic Ottoman Orient exclusively as a despotic space.*

Introduction

The selective use of diaries, personal correspondence and travel accounts written by sojourners played an important part in shaping European understanding of other people and other places. By describing what they observed, many Western sojourners delineated images of others as both alien and exotic, while others acknowledged the observed differences with admiration and reverence. Western awareness and curiosity of the Orient grew throughout the eighteenth century and attitudes "were sometimes narrowed rather than broadened."¹ Edward Said believed that as eighteenth century Western Europe expanded its sphere of influence in response to its explorations and advancing knowledge, "its sense of cultural strength was fortified."² Western Europe's self-image was increasingly viewed through a gaze of critical difference and 'othering', producing an opposition that constructed the Orient as an inferior inversion to Western civilisation.

¹ G. S. Rousseau & R. Porter, *Exotism in the Enlightenment*, Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1990, p. 39.

² E. Said, *Orientalism*, London, Penguin Books, 2003, p. 117.

During the European Enlightenment, perceptions of the powerful Islamic Ottoman Empire were often read through the prism of French politician and philosopher Charles-Louis de Secondat Baron de Montesquieu's (1689-1755) *The Spirit of the Laws* (1748). Montesquieu used negative descriptions of "Oriental despotism" throughout his political writing to categorise Eastern governance in Muslim lands in opposition with his prescription for an ideal European state moderated by "just laws and good institutions."³ The first section of this paper will argue that although Montesquieu's binary approach was influential and appears to support Edward Said's claim that many European Enlightenment thinkers adopted a similar approach, alternative voices were also apparent. In the second section of this paper, I will examine separately, observations made by Scottish doctors Alexander and Patrick Russell and British diplomat Sir James Porter who, unlike Montesquieu, resided within the Islamic Ottoman Empire during the eighteenth century. I will analyse their texts for evidence of Montesquieu's stereotype of 'Oriental despotism.' Did they critically dismiss the Islamic Ottoman space as insular and static in comparison with a dynamic and cosmopolitan Europe, or did they express a level of cultural insight towards the differences and similarities they were exposed to? I critique and analyse their observations considering Roxanne Euben contention that direct exposure to what is culturally unfamiliar is just as likely to engender alienation or antagonism as openness.⁴ Did they "dare to know" by having the courage to use their own understanding?⁵

British eighteenth century travel writer Richard Pococke (1704-1765) noted travelling could be used to its "greatest advantage" when travellers mixed "with the people of the country", "in order to make observations on customs and manners." He encouraged travellers to avoid privileging their own nation "by making proper reflections on national virtues and vices both at home and abroad."⁶ Pococke claimed that observers who lived, worked and documented their experiences while residing in the Orient were ideally positioned to contribute to an open appraisal of East-West contact. This paper suggests that because Montesquieu used a critical appraisal of 'Oriental despotism' in Muslim lands for his own political purposes, he was unable to contribute to this open appraisal. Further, this paper contends that because the Russell brothers and Sir James Porter had been exposed to a broad array of European Enlightenment ideas, they were able to contribute to a more nuanced discussion about their experiences in Ottoman lands. Their candid observations avoided an exclusively East-West binary. Central to the scope of this movement were ideas which valued social, political and cultural differences whilst acknowledging

³ J Israel, *A Revolution of the Mind, Radical Enlightenment of the Intellectual Origins of Modern Democracy*, Princeton, Oxford, Princeton University Press, 2010, pp. 156, 162, 164, 165, R. Porter, *The Creation of the Modern World*, New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 2000, pp. 96-129.

⁴ R. L. Euben, *Journeys to the Other Shore: Muslim and Western Travelers in Search of Knowledge*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, (ed) 1990, p. 18.

⁵ J. Schmidt, *What is Enlightenment?: Eighteenth Century Answers and Twentieth-century Questions*, (ed. and trans by James Schmidt), Los Angeles and London, University of California Press, 1996, p. 58.

⁶ R. Pococke, *A description of the East and Some other Countries, Vol. II., Part II., Observations on the Islands of the Archipelago, Asia Minor, Thrace, Greece, and some other Parts of Europe*, London, Bowyer, 1745, pp. 277-78.

"underlying human and environmental similarities."⁷ The Russell brothers and Sir James Porter contested the norms of a perpetual binary in East-West relations and could explain and value differences within their midst.

Montesquieu's Use of 'Moral Geography' in the development of his Political Theory

Montesquieu moved in a circle of aristocratic thinkers whose "erudite libertinism" and anticlericalism fueled their animosity towards the excesses of centralised royal power and the use of war as an instrument of national policy.⁸ He was not a *democrat*, since he feared the influence of the lower classes on the machinations of the state, preferring the extension of aristocratic involvement.⁹ Travelling extensively throughout Europe and Britain between 1720 and 1731, he conversed with philosophers and observed political institutions. On his return to France in 1731 he began to compile *The Spirit of the Laws*, documenting a history of government, religion, politics and social change.¹⁰ His treatise highlighted the differences between states that were moderated by fair civil laws and social institutions, and those which were not. Montesquieu recognised "power must check power by the arrangement of things",¹¹ and feared that French and European liberty could be crushed by despotic administrations. Montesquieu relied on the travel writings of sixteenth and seventeenth writers to inform *The Spirit of the Laws*, referencing this growing number of written reports of travellers to the Orient and his knowledge of European governance. He used comparative analysis to locate political liberty in "monarchical governments[s]" that govern by "fundamental laws."¹² He distinguished three distinct types of government: Republican, Monarchical and Despotic and attached the attributes of virtue, honour and fear as the defining political sentiments behind each.¹³ Montesquieu noted a crucial difference between Monarchical and Despotic power. The former operated under the stewardship of a single individual whose power was constrained by established laws, and the latter involved a single individual who ruled according to his personal caprice. Developing a "prototypical modern image of the despotic regime", Montesquieu used the notion of 'Ottoman despotism' to characterise "Muslim rule throughout Persia, Mughal India, in Hindu India, in China, Japan and elsewhere in South and East Asia."¹⁴ This use of 'Moral geography' imbued Montesquieu's mature thought, highlighting what he believed to be the stark contrasts between European and Oriental civilisations. His

⁷ F. G. Whelan, *Enlightenment Political Thought and Non-Western Societies: Sultans and Savages*, New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 38.

⁸ M. Richter, *The Political Theory of Montesquieu*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1977, pp.36-37.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.36.

¹⁰ Baron De Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, Harold Stone, (1989) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1748, pp. xviii-xxviii.

¹¹ Montesquieu, *Spirit*, Book 11, Chapter 4, p. 155.

¹² *Ibid.*, Book 2, Chapter 4, pp. 17-19.

¹³ *Ibid.*, Book 2, Chap 1 to 11, pp. 10-30, B. S Turner, 'Orientalism, Islam and Capitalism', *Social Compass*, vol. 25, no. 371, 1978, p. 375, . J-P, Rubies, 'Oriental Despotism and European Orientalism: Botero to Montesquieu', *Journal of Modern History*, vol. 9, no. 1-2, 2005, p. 163.

¹⁴ F. Whelan, *Enlightenment Political Thought and Non-Western Societies: Sultans and Savages*, New York, Routledge, 2009, p. 20, Montesquieu, *Spirit*, Book 17, Chapter 3, pp. 279-281.

construction of a model type of Oriental despotic power became the “archetype of all forms of absolute power” at a time when the Ottoman Empire’s capital and mainland provinces were geographically in Europe.¹⁵ In effect, he sought to remind Europe of the extreme consequences they risked to their liberty, if despotic monarchies (such as the Ottomans) were allowed to get a foothold in Europe again.

Not all travel writers shared Montesquieu’s view of the Orient. A tension existed between the Enlightenment’s desire to understand human diversity and its aspiration to create universally applicable principles.¹⁶ Escalating European commercial and colonial expansion inspired a literature describing voyages and travels into “unknown worlds.”¹⁷ Nigel Leask contends that most travel narratives were shaped by the “dominant intellectual concerns of their authors”, providing a window into the world of the eighteenth century traveller.¹⁸ Writer’s descriptions were dependent upon “the large matrix of prejudices, fantasies and assumptions that they [brought] to bear on any encounter with, or description of, the Other.”¹⁹ And these prejudices could be contradictory. Caution is therefore required when analysing and interpreting this genre. The differences they explored might be “differently conceived”, some imbued with the Romantic idioms of the Picturesque and the Sublime, whilst others, were filled with oppositional East-West binaries.²⁰ The influence of similar conflicting European-Oriental comparisons and classifications gained momentum late in the eighteenth century allowing Western self-definition based on the concepts of progress, nation, reason, individualism, and secularisation to be built in opposition to Muslim Empires.²¹ Europe’s geo-political relationship with the Islamic Ottoman Empire was influenced by this binary, although alternative contrarian voices were apparent in the writings of some eighteenth century sojourners.

Alexander and Patrick Russell lived and worked in the Arab city of Aleppo as medical practitioners, and Sir James Porter was the British ambassador to Istanbul. They were living in an age which valued learning and enquiry for its own sake.²² When documenting their observations and experiences, their insights were influenced by emerging intellectual trends in the eighteenth century. The physical

¹⁵ M. Curtis, *Orientalism and Islam: European Thinkers on Oriental Despotism in the Middle East and India*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2009, pp. 74-101.

¹⁶ D. A. Harvey, *The French Enlightenment and its Others: The Mandarin, the Savage and the Invention of the Human Sciences*, New York, Palgrave Mc Millan, 2012, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

¹⁸ N. Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetic of Travel Writing (1790-1840)*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 2.

¹⁹ C. Thompson, *Travel Writing*, London, Routledge, 2011, p. 136, See also J. Haynes, *The Humanist Traveller: George Sandy’s Relation of a Journey began An. Dom 1610*, London, Associated University Press, 1986, pp. 72-74.

²⁰ Leask, pp. 43-53.

²¹ J. Cesari, *Why the West Fears Islam: Exploration of Islam in Western Liberal Democracies*, USA, Palgrave McMillan, 2013.

²² G.J. Toomer, *Eastern Wisdom and Learning: The Study of Arabic in the Seventeenth Century*, 1996, Oxford, Clarendon Press.

exploration of the Levant by "specialist[s]"²³ and the ongoing translation of manuscripts and books collected from the region, contributed to the advancement of European knowledge of human progress and human antiquity. As a result of exposure to this expanding intellectual repository, a neo-classical academic movement had emerged which valued the Levant beyond its heritage as a Judeo-Christian religious site and acknowledged the antiquity of its classical past.²⁴ During this same period, the vast Ottoman Empire was threatened from within and without. The Empire had given ground at its borders to its European political and commercial competitors whilst retaining its political legitimacy and basic institutional structure.²⁵ Because the Empire's central geography was vital to the geo-political interests of these European powers, the British were particularly keen to ensure the balance of power in the region by reinforcing Ottoman stability.²⁶ Aware of a Russian desire for Mediterranean penetration, the British wanted to "bulwark" the Empire against Russian expansion whilst protecting its own commercial and imperial interests in the Mediterranean, the Middle East and India.²⁷ Ottoman Sultans and their extensive bureaucracies began the monumental program of modernisation and reform during the later eighteenth century. This program involved the implementation of European methods in military training and organisation, improved civil administration, educational and economic practices.²⁸ The Russell brothers and Porter were observers of this slow transition.

The Russell's *Natural History*

Doctor Alexander Russell arrived in Aleppo from Edinburgh in 1740 and was joined by his younger half-brother Patrick in 1750. Both were born and educated in Edinburgh and came from a large well-connected family of doctors and lawyers who had affiliations with the Levant Trading Company.²⁹ The company was founded in 1592 by Elizabeth I and granted lucrative trading monopolies in the Eastern Mediterranean by arrangement with the Ottoman Empire. Britons were encouraged to venture into the region to advance their personal station and wealth.³⁰ Company viability was dependent upon the services of local British Levant Traders or "Pashas" whose own success was reliant upon the whims of domestic and international politics. Alexander Russell joined a small factory community associated with the

²³ Teams of botanists, surveyors, epigraphers who used a range of skills including measurements, statistics, thermometer readings, botanical and zoological specimens and geological plans advanced the scope of knowledge of the region - see P. J. Marshall & Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of the Enlightenment*, 1982, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, London, pp. 67-71.

²⁴ P. J. Marshall & Glyndwr Williams, *The Great Map of Mankind: British Perceptions of the World in the Age of the Enlightenment*, 1982, J. M. Dent & Sons Ltd, London, pp. 67-71.

²⁵ I. M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Societies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, pp. 592-595.

²⁶ British, French, Russian, Venetian and Hapsburg interests actively plied for influence at the Porte.

²⁷ I. M. Lapidus, *A History of Islamic Studies*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1999, p. 593.

²⁸ D. Goffman, *The Ottoman Empire and Early Modern Europe: New Approaches to European History*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2002, pp. 224-234.

²⁹ C. Laidlow, *The Birth of the Levant: Trade and perception of the Ottoman Empire*, Istanbul Turkey, Tauris Academic Studies, 2010, p. 136.

³⁰ J. Mather, 'The Levant Company: The Turkey Merchants', *History Today*, vol. 61, issue 5, 2011, p. 3.

Levant Trading Company but was not directly employed by the company.³¹ During his fourteen years in Aleppo, Alexander Russell compiled an authoritative account of his life in the city and its immediate environs, recording his observations and experiences in letters and journals.³² He later edited and self-published his findings when he returned to England. Patrick Russell made additional contributions to his brother's work (especially referencing the treatment of the Plague) and republished the *Natural History* some years following his later return to Britain.³³ Janet Starkey believes the currency the Russell brothers brought to their writing was enhanced by their exposure to an "enlightened" Scottish education. Edinburgh had been a centre for academic excellence in a wide range of fields and the Russell's scientific and medical training at Edinburgh University had placed them at the forefront of eighteenth century European Enlightenment education. The Russell's utilised the pioneering terminology and classification method developed by Swedish biologist Carl Linnaeus (1707-1778) to inform their scholarship.³⁴ The use of the Linnaean framework involved careful observation and taxonomic classification, an approach that was applied and adapted to describe non-European peoples and lands.³⁵ The brothers not only made their own observations but incorporated details extracted from classical and Arabic texts as well as British and European travel accounts.³⁶ Their writing served as a "unique window into the complicated intellectual influences [they] imbibed and [their] efforts to apply and adapt them in varied locales."³⁷ The candor expressed in their writing also reflected their autonomous position in Aleppo as they were not directly employed by the company and the factory community only supplied a fraction of their clientele and therefore income.³⁸

The Natural History of Aleppo is full of carefully documented personal observations of mid-eighteenth century Aleppo. Using a Linnaean taxonomic approach, Alexander Russell listed and described the physical attributes of Aleppo's geography (landscape, rock formations and soils), climate, wildlife (domesticated

³¹ *Ibid.*, J. Mather James, *Pashas: Traders and Travellers in the Islamic World*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2010, p. 3.

³² *The History of Aleppo* is considered a landmark study in European knowledge of the Arab World see M. van den Boogert, *Aleppo Observed: Ottoman Syria Through the Eyes of two Scottish Doctors, Alexander and Patrick Russell*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2010.

³³ See A. Russell M.D., *The Natural History of Aleppo containing a Description of the City, and the Principal Natural Productions in the Neighbourhood, together with an Account of the Climate, Inhabitants, and Diseases, particularly the Plague*, 2nd Edition, Revised. Enlarged and illustrated with Notes by Pat Russell, M.D. & F.R.S., Volume 1, 1794, London, G.C. & J. Robinson, Porter-Noster Row.

³⁴ J. C. M. Starkey, *Mercantile Gentleman and Inquisitive Travellers: constructing The History of Aleppo*, 2004, www.levantineheritage.com/pdf/Aleppo.pdf, viewed June 2014, pp. 1-35. See the forthcoming research paper written by Linda Andersson (Linnaeus University) and Bruce Buchan (Griffith University) – *The Edinburgh Connection: Linnaean Natural History, Scottish Moral Philosophy and the Colonial Implications of Enlightenment Thought*.

³⁵ Andersson Burnett, L., and Buchan, B., 'The Edinburgh Connection: Linnaean Natural History, Scottish Moral Philosophy and the Colonial Implications of Enlightenment Thought' in *System of Nature. A Global History of Linnaean Science in the Long Eighteenth-Century*, Hanna Hodacs, Kenneth Nyberg & Stéphane Van Damme (eds.), Oxford: Voltaire Foundation, (forthcoming).

³⁶ Starkey, *Mercantile Gentleman and Inquisitive Travellers*, pp. 1-4

³⁷ Starkey, pp. 1-4

³⁸ Mather, *The Levant Trading Company*, p. 147.

and native animals, birds and fish), botany (plants and herbs) and food. He thoughtfully analysed aspects of the city's architecture and market places whilst casting a critical eye over the medical, judicial and educational facilities available. He sympathetically described the daily occupations and pastimes of many of Aleppo's "natives",³⁹ including the religious practices of the various communities who co-existed within the city.

Alexander Russell observed that Aleppo's inhabitants "though of different religions... seemed to be much the same people."⁴⁰ Montesquieu, in contrast had thought the distinguishing characteristics which separated the Christian and Mohammedan religions should lead "one to embrace the [followers] of first and reject the other without question or doubt."⁴¹ Montesquieu criticised the Orient's religious practices whilst Alexander Russell wished he could say "that those who profess Christianity were better than their [Mohammedan] neighbours."⁴² He was not blind to human imperfections noting that Mohammedan prayer rituals were "exact", whilst their "alms giving" to help alleviate the prevalence of "poverty" within their community were not executed with the same fervour.⁴³ Alexander Russell described how an old *muftee* who had befriended him had begged him not to misrepresent the Mohammedan faith on his return to England. He feared that Russell would judge Islam critically because of the "practice" he had observed.⁴⁴ The elderly *muftee* suggested that he "take instead the reverse of what [he saw]... [as] pretty near the truth."⁴⁵ Russell noted that he would not "take the liberty" to say the "Moslems" were "quite so bad" as the *muftee* described.⁴⁶

Whilst giving credence and authority to the "native" voices within the Aleppo community, Alexander Russell chose to be broadly critical of the Moslem "doctrine of predestination."⁴⁷ As medical practitioners, the brothers had observed the Plague which devastated the Aleppo community in 1742, 1743, 1744 and again 1760.⁴⁸ The European practice of isolating plague victims in infected zones did not occur outside the European enclave in Aleppo. The "Turks" had little faith in medicine as a cure for the "curse" of the Plague. Rather, they viewed the Plague as inflicted by "God almighty" for the sins of their community. Most doctors were Jewish or Christian and less predisposed to this "notion" and therefore concerned about infection. To avoid treating the infected, Alexander Russell describes how the Jewish and Christian doctors would encourage the Turks "in their false notions," allowing the disease to ravage their communities "without assistance." He described these doctors as the "meanest and most ignorant of mankind."⁴⁹ The text noted the

³⁹ Mather, p. 147.

⁴⁰ Mather, p. 21.

⁴¹ Montesquieu, *Spirit*, Book 24, Chapter 4, p. 462.

⁴² A. Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo 1754*, p. 21

⁴³ Both considered Pillars of Islam which the devout must adhere to equally.

⁴⁴ A. Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo 1754*, p. 30.

⁴⁵ Russell, p. 30.

⁴⁶ Russell, p. 30.

⁴⁷ Russell, p. 25.

⁴⁸ Russell, p. 52.

⁴⁹ Russell, p. 54.

symptoms and treatments of the Plague available to medical practitioners in the mid-eighteenth century. Describing how religious superstitions were impeding appropriate medical treatment throughout the broader Arab Muslim community, Russell claimed his skills were recognised and readily sought after by the city's "natives" and "grandees". Whilst Russell's religious sympathies acknowledged a role for the protection offered by "Divine Providence", the treatments he advocated were symptomatic of an educated European doctor who prescribed greater reliance on best medical practice than the whims of any particular transcendental being.⁵⁰

Alexander Russell's fluency in Arabic enabled him to converse and move freely amongst the religiously diverse population of Aleppo. Observing opium abuse amongst the community, he compared this addictive practice with the alcohol abuse he was familiar with in Edinburgh. Aleppo's opium addicts experienced similar health problems as the addicts he had treated at home who had "ruined their constitutions by hard drinking."⁵¹ Alexander Russell's observations suggest he was a man who was acutely aware of human frailty and able to compare similar vices without an East-West binary.

Similarly, he avoided criticism of Islamic theology, expressing an enlightened interest in comparative religious practices and exhibiting a tone of religious toleration. Aware that Moslems expressed a belief in the superior nature of their religion, he noted their "prejudice" increased the closer the faithful got to "Mecha."⁵² Because Aleppo was closer to "Mecha" than "Constantinople and Smyrna", the prejudice was thought greater in Aleppo, although he believed "it [had] greatly declined" during his time there.⁵³ Alexander Russell surmised this decreased prejudice had led to the confirmation of "many public honours and civilities" by local dignitaries upon the Europeans in Aleppo which previously would have caused "great popular discontent."⁵⁴ He observed how hierarchical structures within Aleppo society administered Porte "capitulations", privileging European interests and ensuring they experienced "civility" and "safety" throughout the Empire.⁵⁵ He noted how the protected trading status offered by these capitulations prevented European traders from being subjected to broader government oppressions.⁵⁶ Halil Inalcik contends that the awarding of privileges by Ottoman officials to Levantine European business interests coincided with the political and military usefulness for the Ottomans of that Western state.⁵⁷ The Russell's observations compliment our current geo-political understanding of the changes which occurred within the Ottoman Empire in the mid-eighteenth century. The shift in the balance of power in the eastern Mediterranean had challenged Ottoman ascendancy. Recognising their weakening position, the Ottomans began to

⁵⁰ Russell, pp. 54-56.

⁵¹ Russell, p. 22.

⁵² Principal pilgrimage site in modern day Saudi Arabia, Russell, p. 25.

⁵³ Russell, p. 21.

⁵⁴ Russell, p. 21.

⁵⁵ Russell, p. 34.

⁵⁶ Russell, p. 34.

⁵⁷ H. Inalcik, *Turkey and Europe in History*, Istanbul, EREN Press, 2008, p. 148.

modernise their empire.⁵⁸ Ottoman readiness to accommodate the Europeans within their midst was framed to suit these ends.

The Ottoman education system also came under Alexander Russell's scrutiny. Whilst recognising the heritage of the Ottoman literary canon, he was disturbed by the level of "ignorance" which blanketed mid-eighteenth century Aleppo society. Writing and literacy levels were low except for a few words from the "Koran". He blamed this state of affairs on corrupt officials who taught little and seldom advanced the public benefit.⁵⁹ School buildings were described as decayed, the libraries poorly resourced and kept for the private "vanity" of a limited few.⁶⁰ Similarly critical of the corrupt medical fraternity, he described how medical licenses were available "to the most ignorant" for a "few sequins."⁶¹ As a consequence, he believed that local scientific acumen was at a "very low ebb" and "far from ... improvement."⁶² Russell linked these multiple sources of corruption with "bad government" and noted that the hardships experienced by the common people were increased when the "demands of the governors... increased."⁶³ He candidly described how "natives" struggled for legal redress from the "person in power,"⁶⁴ but also acknowledged that the system of laws would apportion justice swiftly when proof of guilt was unequivocal.⁶⁵

Russell claimed to use impartial and attentive observation to interpret the culturally diverse environs of Aleppo. He returned to England in 1755 and published *The Natural History of Aleppo* in 1756. Avoiding Montesquieu's theme of 'moral geography' when making comparisons between European and Oriental civilisations, Alexander Russell did not describe the Orient as a despotic space. He did recognise government corruption and the influence of Mohammedanism, but he was not pejorative in his descriptions. As an author he adopted a 'natural historical' approach that was exemplified and modeled on the Linnaean classification system and applied to his purpose.⁶⁶ Exposure to the academic rigour and scientific specification which informed Enlightenment Europe's sense of itself as the centre of knowledge and knowledge creation enabled Russell to avoid the potentially distorting influence of "naive empiricism" which had informed earlier sixteenth and seventeenth traveller's accounts.⁶⁷ His theoretical reflections contained many favourable and sympathetic observations of his time in Aleppo which allowed him to avoid engendering alienation and antagonism.⁶⁸ Russell's scholarship therefore offered a counterbalance to the prevailing attitudes of his time.

⁵⁸ A. Hourani, *A History of the Arab Peoples*, London, Faber and Faber, 1991, pp. 258-260.

⁵⁹ A. Russell, *The Natural History of Aleppo 1754*, p. 25.

⁶⁰ Russell, p. 25.

⁶¹ Russell, p. 25.

⁶² Russell, pp. 25-26.

⁶³ Russell, p. 31.

⁶⁴ Russell, p. 34.

⁶⁵ Russell, p. 31.

⁶⁶ Thompson, *Travel Writing*, pp. 46, 81.

⁶⁷ Thompson, *Travel Writing*, p. 81.

⁶⁸ Laidlaw, *The Birth of the Levant*, p. 221.

Porter's History and Progress

Irish born James Porter moved to England at an early age following the death of his English father. Raised by his mother and her family in the "reformed faith",⁶⁹ he received a rudimentary early education before being placed in business in London.⁷⁰ Porter pursued a program of self-education, which enhanced both his prospects and reputation in London society. Through his business connections and recognised ability, Porter gained employment on the continent in 1736, serving in commercial and diplomatic roles in Prussia and later in the "House of Austria."⁷¹ Family affiliations with a senior member of the Levant Trading Company in London probably influenced his appointment in 1746 as ambassador to Constantinople for a fifteen year term.⁷² Porter is described in the introduction of his edited memoir as a popular administrator, who used his privileged position in the Porte to assist "persons ... to carry on their trades and professions in security, despite the arbitrary rule of the Sultan."⁷³ Anglo-Welsh philologist Sir William Jones (1746-1794) described Porter's life amongst "an extraordinary people" as an example of someone who pursued "social virtue" for the "pleasure and advantage of another."⁷⁴ Jones, described Porter's time in Constantinople as advantageous to the commercial interests of the LTC and the national interests of England.⁷⁵ He suggested that Porter was a "judicious writer" who wrote *Observations on the Government and Manners of the Turks* with openness to new information that renounced "ancient prejudices."⁷⁶ The first volume of Porter's text was collated from his journals and correspondence and published in 1854. Offering descriptions of historical development, population and religious distinctions, geography, climate, commerce, industrial and mercantile conditions and trade, Porter elicited a sympathetic appraisal of the Ottoman Empire. The editor believed Porter expressed a "bias in favour of the Turks" which led him to regard "everything in brilliant colours."⁷⁷ So effusive was Porter's praise that his posthumous editor endeavoured to rectify this anomaly by cross-checking Porter's facts with the best available sources, acknowledging that Porter's work diverged from more conventional critical appraisals of Ottoman Turkey.⁷⁸

Porter believed that European knowledge of Turkey had been poorly informed by writers who had never visited the country and by travellers whose empiricism had "run through immense regions with a fleeting pen." They created sweeping reports which he thought were often "absurd" and full of "idle traditions"

⁶⁹ Followers of the Protestant Religion.

⁷⁰ J. Porter, James (ed. Sir George-Larpent Bart 1854), *Turkey: Its History and Progress: From The Journals and Correspondence of Sir James Porter, Fifteen Years Ambassador at Constantinople; continued to the Present Time, with A memoir of Sir James Porter, Vol. 1*, London, 2005, London, p. 2.

⁷¹ J. Porter, *Turkey: Its History and Progress*, pp. 4-5.

⁷² Porter, p. 5.

⁷³ Porter, p. 6.

⁷⁴ Porter, pp. 13-14.

⁷⁵ Porter, pp. 13-14

⁷⁶ Porter, pp. 14-15.

⁷⁷ Porter, p. v.

⁷⁸ Porter, p. vi.

that informed knowledge without “discerning credulity.”⁷⁹ To ascertain a “correct outline” about the Turkish people, their government, manners and customs, Porter suggested a “long and continued residence in the country.”⁸⁰ He believed one needed to make connections and dependencies amongst the different ranks of Turkish society to ascertain “some truth” about the hitherto imperfect accounts proclaimed. Describing the Turkish people as generally “humane and courteous”, Porter noted that friendships dissolved if personal interests were fractured. Personalities that were normally considered “grave and sedate” could change and become “agitated”, “furious” and “ungovernable”, triggering a response that “perpetuat[ed] revenge through successive generations.”⁸¹ Porter was not blind to the imperfections he noted around him. His descriptions of Turkey’s natural endowments were juxtaposed with his analysis of how human induced “desolation” impacted upon the Turkish landscape. Turkish “ignorance of arboriculture”⁸² had resulted in deforestation which saddened the eye because of man’s intractable “negligence and ingratitude” of the beneficence that surrounded them.⁸³

Porter was aware that ruling certitude which informed hereditary monarchies of Europe was missing in Turkey. He reasoned the lack of commercial mining investment was caused by ruling incertitude. Mining investment required a long term vision which was absent when leaders could not be certain of their tenure.⁸⁴ As a result he noted Turkey derived little profit from its natural wealth. Porter recognised the inherent problems which beset the Ottoman Empire were a direct result of dysfunctional political structures but avoided presenting these observations as a symptom of an East-West binary.

In matters of religion, Porter thought the Turks “tenacious, supercilious and morose”. He understood that “Muhammadanism” was grounded on the belief “there [was] one God and Muhammad [was] his Prophet.”⁸⁵ And he described the binding nature of Muhammadan law disclosed within the “narrow limits of Koran” as difficult to fathom. He thought that language barriers helped the Turkish to evade scrutiny of their religion and legal system, making accurate theological knowledge difficult to obtain. Not sympathetic to “absurdities” of a faith that defied reason, he thought Muhammadanism promoted religious zealotry against those who did not adhere to the faith.⁸⁶ Porter believed that Turkish zealotry was injurious to the rest of mankind because it encouraged “violence, fraud and rapine” against anyone who did not embrace their doctrines.⁸⁷ Porter described the violence against non-believers but noted it was “subdued” because of the commercial importance of the Christian and Jewish populations to the wealth of the Government treasury.⁸⁸ Religious

⁷⁹ Porter, p. 223.

⁸⁰ Porter, p. 224.

⁸¹ Porter, pp. 224-226.

⁸² Porter, p. 43.

⁸³ Porter, p. 38.

⁸⁴ Porter, pp. 44-45.

⁸⁵ Porter, p. 225.

⁸⁶ Porter, p. 227.

⁸⁷ Porter, p. 227.

⁸⁸ Porter, pp.227- 229.

tolerance had a price in the Porte. The “potent preservation” of Christians and Jews could be organised by the Turks if commercial gain amongst Turkish pashas could be ensured.⁸⁹ This privileged position afforded to Christian and Jewish traders permitted them to survive and flourish in Turkish society.

Whilst Porter expressed broad criticism of many of the tenets of Muhammadanism, he was also aware that the Turkish people were not exposed to the “executions, tortures, pains and penalties” that had been inflicted upon Christian Europeans.⁹⁰ He observed the successful co-existence of diverse religious communities within the Aleppo community but also noted that broader diffusion of ideas and inquiry was impeded because of poor literacy and the absence of printed material. George Sale’s English translation of the Koran (1734) informed his understanding of the Muhammadan text. He noted that some Western admirers had favourably compared the Koran with the Christian bible, but he thought Muhammad a crafty imposter who had constructed the Koranic narrative for his own ends.⁹¹ Derogatory labeling of this nature informed Edward Said’s conjecture that similar attitudes were an enduring feature of Orientalist Islamophobia. Whilst Porter’s criticism may be viewed in this framework because he questioned the authenticity of the Koranic narrative, he could move beyond his own religious certitudes to acknowledge that the Prophet’s laws offered important legal protections for the common people in areas of property and criminal law.⁹² The Koran contained both “political institutes and religious dogmas.”⁹³ Porter described how the Prophet’s divine inspiration had separated ecclesiastical and civil administrations; with Mullahs presiding over the Courts of Justice and Imams officiating at the Mosques. The Prophet’s seventh century reference to the separation of powers parallels the ideas explored by Montesquieu in *The Spirit of the Laws*. However, Montesquieu did not recognise this correlation. Rather, Montesquieu broadly rejected the role of religion in political affairs and described the misfortune Muhammadanism caused its people when it was coercively used to maintain the state.⁹⁴ Porter’s observations contested Montesquieu’s opinions. Though he questioned the religious pretensions of the Turkish legal code, he equated their validity to those found “in the legislature of western countries.”⁹⁵

Further to Porter’s analysis of the impacts of religion on Turkish society, his memoir advanced opinions on “Turkish Despotism.” He noted how “habit or prejudice” caused humankind to advance their own governments at the expense of other models, whilst contending that Turkish governments were “grossly misrepresented” by stories of despotism. Claims of the damaging influences of religious passions had led to descriptions of barbarism and claims that Turkey was “subject to the caprice, cruelty and avarice of a tyrant, who aim[ed] merely at the

⁸⁹ Porter, pp. 227-229.

⁹⁰ Referencing the legacy of the religious wars within Europe and the Papal Inquisition, Porter, p. 236.

⁹¹ Porter, p. 245.

⁹² Porter, pp. 251-252.

⁹³ Porter, pp. 242-243.

⁹⁴ Montesquieu, *Spirit*, Book 24, Chapter. 4, p. 462.

⁹⁵ Porter, p. 243.

oppression of his subjects."⁹⁶ Porter avoided using 'moral geography' which separated European and Ottoman polities and suggested that European Christian monarchies were equally predisposed to despotic extremes. He acknowledged that the Turkish Empire had only "extended widely and flourished long" because of its solid political system and acquiescence to the Muhammadan religion and law.⁹⁷ Because property, commercial and criminal law existed within a Muhammadan framework, Porter identified how corrupt administrations (political, judicial and religious) abused this legal framework and "[brought] opprobrium upon the Turkish Empire."⁹⁸ He rejected the proposition that the Turkish Sultan was despotic because he recognised the legitimacy of the Sultan's powers were underwritten by the Koran and limited by religious and legal codes. If a Sultan abandoned the law, he was viewed as an infidel and deposed as the lawful sovereign.⁹⁹

Porter described how administrative improvements undertaken by successive Sultans during the eighteenth century improved their accountability and administrative outcomes. He observed that Sultan Mahmud (r.1730-1754) had maintained state tranquility by centralising his administration and changing his Vizirs (advisers) every three years. This action avoided corrupt practices caused by Vizirs whose personal "ambition for glory and restless disposition for war and conquest" eroded the stability of the Empire and impacted on the Empire's relationships with its neighbours.¹⁰⁰ Porter conceded that the Turkish Empire was ruled by a limited monarchy with legal constraints upon its sovereignty which were "circumscribed by the Koran".¹⁰¹ His observations highlighted the seemingly symbiotic relationship between Turkish religious and state authorities at a time when European Enlightenment thinkers were staunchly advocating for a "separation of [those] powers."¹⁰² Porter identified that a state bureaucracy that supported the Sultan and his Vizirs acted with great efficiency and doubted that such efficiency could be emulated by any Christian power.¹⁰³ In taking this position, Porter challenged the prevailing negative accounts of Oriental despotism and Muhammadanism in Ottoman lands.¹⁰⁴

Conclusion

This paper analyses the written accounts of three British men who lived and worked in the Islamic Ottoman Empire during the mid-eighteenth century. They "dared to know" the "other" by having the courage to use their own understanding. Each refrained from using Montesquieu's binary approach which framed a theme of 'moral geography' when making comparisons and classifications between European

⁹⁶ Porter, pp. 255-257.

⁹⁷ Porter, pp. 244,256.

⁹⁸ Porter, p. 257.

⁹⁹ Porter, p. 259.

¹⁰⁰ Porter, p. 260.

¹⁰¹ Porter, pp. 265-266.

¹⁰² Montesquieu was the prime exponent, see Baron De Montesquieu, *The Spirit of the Laws*, ed. Anne Cohler, Basia Miller, Harold Stone, (1989) Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1748.

¹⁰³ Montesquieu, p. 268.

¹⁰⁴ J. Mather, *Pashas*, p.227.

and Ottoman polities. Edward Said believed that the eighteenth century European literary canon exhibited a pejorative attitude towards Oriental people and Oriental lands because of this 'Orientalist' framework. I have sought however to challenge the rigidity of Said's position. Close examination of the writings of Alexander and Patrick Russell and Sir James Porter offer a broader spectrum of opinion. These men were well received in their respective Ottoman communities and as educated men of the Enlightenment era, were ideally placed to observe and make comparisons between European and Ottoman life experiences. They wrote with a tone of European authority which privileged their ability to make commanding observations. However, this paper acknowledges that whilst they adopted a Eurocentric "Orientalist" literary style (because after all, they were European and they were observing the Ottoman Empire), their cultural comparisons avoided viewing the Islamic Ottoman Orient exclusively as a despotic space. They were able to use their direct exposure to what was culturally unfamiliar to develop attitudes which avoided engendering alienation and antagonism toward 'others'. This brief examination of their scholarship establishes the existence of eighteenth century Enlightenment narratives which displayed a tolerance and empathy for other people and other cultures. European imperialism in Islamic lands was marginal during this period as the European powers did not have a military presence on Ottoman soil. By the late eighteenth century, capitalist endeavor, resource plundering and the burgeoning encroachment of Western spheres of influence in the Islamic East would dim these sensitivities. Positive assessments of other people and other cultures in comparison to European norms struggled to gain acceptance in Western thought throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. Whilst Said's analysis highlighted the development and ramifications of 'orientalist' dismissiveness in the nineteenth and twentieth century, I have argued that the applicability of Said's framework to the eighteenth century is limited. The importance of Said's scholarship rests on his critique of the residual impacts of European orientalism that emerged in the nineteenth century. The focus on those legacies, however, underscores the pressing need to re-examine and revive the less essentialist European perspectives expressed in the eighteenth century.