Chapter - II

Glasgow to East India Company
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GLASGOW TO EAST INDIA COMPANY

England had produced great administrators. Thomas Munro was one among them. They were trained in the art of warfare and administration. When English East India Company in India had decided to extend its business and administration, the services of the administrators were utilized for the benefit of their commercial activities. The early life of Thomas Munro, one of the founders of the English administration in India is traced in this chapter.

Thomas Munro was born in Glasgow on May 27, 1761. His father Alexander Munro was an eminent merchant in Glasgow and his mother was a sister of Dr. William Stark, a well known Glasgow physician and anatomist of that day. He was the second child of a family of five sons and two daughters.¹

As children of a well-established merchant, Thomas Munro, his four brothers and two sisters, in other, more peaceful times could have expected to be reared in that style of hardy industriousness and gentility that marked the burghers of late eighteenth century Glasgow.

But the last quarter of the eighteenth century was not a normal time for those in the Virginia trade, especially if, like Alexander Munro, they were not among the Glasgow ‘aristocracy of Virginians’.² These were the great firms in the American trade with sufficient resources to withstand the disruption of the trade that attended the revolt of the American colonists.

Though Alexander Munro had inherited his business from his father, Daniel, a second- generation resident of Glasgow, the family firm was neither large nor established enough to place the family in the participate of commercial families – the ‘Virginians’.³ Still, a secure status was theirs, and the means were available for each of the seven

¹ Burton Stein, The Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire, Delhi, 1989,232
² Burke’s Genealogical and Heraldic History of the Peerage; Baronetage and Knight age London: Burke’s Peerage Ltd, 1949, 1453.
children of the Munro family to expect the excellent education demanded by substantial citizens of the town for their children.

Moreover, if they were excluded from the status of the commercial aristocracy, the Munro family could claim another sort of standing-descent from a fifteenth-century Hugh Munro, Baron of Foulis, whose property was sold in the time of Thomas Munro’s great grandfather in order to pursue business in Glasgow. This aristocratic claim was accepted at the time of the award of Thomas Munro’s hereditary baronetcy in 1825.4

Along with his brothers, Thomas Munro attended the Grammar School of Glasgow for three years. Young Munro entered as a student in the University of Glasgow in the thirteenth year of his age. Here he was distinguished in Mathematics and Chemistry and was besides a great reader of history and literature and his teachers in each held out much for his brightness and industry.5 The quality of his early education is a mark not only of his individual capacity, but of the high standard of education in the Glasgow of his youth.

While at school he was distinguished for a singular openness of temper, a mild and generous disposition, with great personal courage and presence of mind. Apart from schooling, a severe childhood attack of measles which left Munro’s hearing impaired for life; also recorded was his subject’s natural physical vigour that was to hold him in good stead throughout an active Indian career.

Munro seems to have attained his full height of six feet by the age of sixteen. Being naturally of a robust frame of body, he excelled all his schooling fellows in athletic exercises, and was particularly eminent as a boxer. He was possessed of a high courage extra-ordinary ability, and power of self denial, with all that nobleness of nature which was peculiar to him, and which so much distinguished in and after life.6

He never made an improper or unfair use of his superior dexterity in the pugilistic art. He studiously avoided quarrels, and never struck a blow, except under circumstances

4 Ibid.
6 Burton Stein, *the Origins of the Colonial State and His Vision of Empire, Delhi; 1989; 1845.*
of great provocation. Neither did he ever presume so far on the formidable talent which he possessed, as to conduct himself with the slightest degree of insolence towards his companions. These qualities secured him at once the respect and esteem of his youthful contemporaries.

On all expeditions and occasions of warfare, procured him the honour of being their leader and military adviser. He had taught himself Spanish at the age of sixteen in order to read Cervantes and reference to the character and adventures of Don Quixote dot his lifelong correspondence, with the help of a dictionary and a grammar.  

This knowledge soon proved useful, for being the only person known to have knowledge of the language. He was called on to translate some papers found in a Spanish vessel captured by a privateer belonging to a mercantile house in Glasgow. The reward which he received for this he gave to his mother as his first earnings.

Munro spent most of his vacations at a country house called ‘Northwood side’ some five miles from Glasgow. This spot was beautifully situated on the banks of the river Kelvin. Here, wood and stream created pleasures that proved more memorable than any of his other recollections of Scotland. The neighbourhood of Kellermont on the Kelvin had been the childhood home of his mother, which added sentiment to the nostalgia of summer holidays there. And the days he spent here fishing in the stream, or swimming in Jackson’s dam, are often referred to in his correspondence from India.

Having remained three years at college, he was at the expiry of that period, placed by his father in the Glasgow firm of Somerville and Gordon to begin apprenticeship in the West Indian trade. This was usual for merchant families of Glasgow, for he was to follow his father in business. He was about this time also offered a lieutenancy in a military corps. Then raising by the city of Glasgow for the public service, but though himself strongly disposed to accept this offer, his father objected to it, and in compliance

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8 Munro Collections, 151/148, Mother to Munro, 17 March 1783, Tamil Nadu Archives, Egmore, Chennai. Hereafter it is referred as TNAC.
with the wish of his parent, he declined it. In 1777 there was no thought that his education, his apprenticeship, and his future as a Glasgow burgher would deviate from a well-established pattern in Glasgow.  

The revolt of the American colonies caused that to change, for the dislocation of the American trade upon which Glasgow depended threw Alexander Munro and many other small merchants into bankruptcy. The trade depression of the day was not solely the consequence of political events in America, but was an early manifestation of changing trends in Britain’s world trade. By the early decades of the nineteenth century the whole of the British economy entered a downturn which lasted until the close of the century.  

Glasgow, because of its dependence on the shattered American trade, led the depression in trade that was soon to affect the entire British economy. For many firms in Glasgow the severe depression lasted until around 1795, and Munro’s father was therefore compelled to turn his frustrating and humiliating idleness to some account on behalf of his family. With other poor and ambitious Scots he looked to the new colonies in India for the employment of his sons.  

In the following year, however, the house of which his father was a partner became embarrassed. The passing of the Act of confiscation by the congress of the United States led to its stopping payment, and the Munro families were reduced to comparative poverty. When finding it impossible to establish his son in business as he had originally proposed, he began to think of putting him in a way of pushing his fortune in India.  

With this view, the father was now glad to accept for his son a midshipman’s berth in the mercantile marine of the East India Company’s ship Walpole. With this vessel, young Munro sailed from London on the 20th February, 1779, but just before sailed he was able to get it changed for Cadetship. Not being able to afford to pay for

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10 Munro Collections, 151/146 Father to Munro, 31, January 1786, TNAC.  
12 Munro Collections 151/146 Father to Munro 3 August 1784 and Munro Collection151/148 Father to Munro, 23 April 1793, TNAC.  
13 Munro Collection, 151/147 Father to Munro 12 February 1788, TNAC.
his passage, young Munro obtained permission from the Captain of the Walpole to work his way out to Madras as an ordinary seaman.

Munro arrived at Madras, the place of his destination, on the 15th January, 1780.14 Here he was kindly received by the numerous persons to whom he brought letters of introduction but kindness of manner, and the hospitality of the table, seem to have been the extent of their patronage. He was left to push his own but very indifferent prospects for the future, but little present encouragement. He was soon after his arrival, however, nailed into active service against the forces of Haider Ali.

His brother Alexander found in the army of the English East India Company in Bengal. Daniel began a commercial career more conventionally in Jamaica, but ultimately he too became a soldier, and later a merchant, in India. James and William were being prepared to become military surgeons with the Company in Madras as well. William died in 1786 before completing his education, but James did serve in India with his brothers as a military surgeon. Relief from grinding and humiliating poverty did not come to the Munro family until the middle 1790’s.15

Those decades had been difficult and distressing for the entire family. Alexander Munro’s business failed in 1777 because he was unable to collect American business debts to set against his obligations in Glasgow. For the next several years he tried to re-establish his business on a consignment basis, selling coats, beer and ale, but encountered persistent difficulties with Glasgow tax authorities.16 More humiliating for him was the reluctance of old business acquaintances to loan him the capital to proceed on a more stable basis.

But most humiliating was a judgment won against him by a set of Glasgow creditors for which he could not pay and therefore faced the threat of imprisonment. His American debts were never repaid, and long after hostilities ended and normal diplomatic relations were established with the new United States, Alexander Munro complained to

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15 Munro Collection, 151/146, &151/147, James Munro to Thomas, 29 January 1790. TNAC.
16 Munro Collections, serial letter 12 July to 23 November 1781, TNAC.

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his son in India that American courts denied claims such as his, whereas British courts treated American plaintiffs with the same causes in a sympathetic way.  

His later business ventures all turned sour, yet he pressed on with them. Munro’s mother, writing in 1789, reported the failure of a business of four years ‘duration using funds that had been sent by their sons in India. She also hoped that her ‘lads in India’ would create a fund for Erskine, their sister.

Alexander Munro confined much of his bitterness to Thomas. He criticized the indifference of Daniel to the plight of the family. Moreover Daniel, having been some years in Jamaica and beginning to prosper as the manager of a plantation and merchant, proposed leaving the West Indies and trying his fortunes in India. The father’s resentment towards his son’s irresponsibility and exaggerated sense of personal honour, which was causing him to abandon his profitable situation in Jamaica, was reciprocated by Daniel, who complained to his brother that he had taken his position in Jamaica as a result of his father’s pressure and against his own wishes.

Their father’s ceaseless scheming to advance the fortunes of his sons sprung from humiliation before his neighbours and former business associates in a Glasgow that, he complained, took no other measure of its forty thousand inhabitants than their relative affluence. He complained to Thomas in 1783 and later that he had little contact with old friends, they avoid associating with us because we are poor.

A cruel manifestation of this poverty and ostracism that touched his sons in India, as it did the parents, was the plight of their sister Erskine, whose numerous letters to Munro in India display high intelligence, humour and affection.

This crisis of family honour was averted along with Erskine’s lack of courtly attention a few years later. Erskine married in 1798 John Turnbull, respected Edinburgh advocate and intellectual who was considered for a chair at the University of Glasgow.

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17 Munro Collections, 151/147, Father to Munro, 2 June 1788, TNAC.
18 Munro Collection, Mother to Munro 22January 1789, TNAC.
19 Munro Collection, Father to Munro 12 July 1781, TNAC.
20 Munro Collection, 151/146, Munro to his mother, 21 August 1783, TNAC.
21 Munro Collection, 151/148, Father to Munro, 23 April 1798, TNAC.
Turnbull died in 1802 and Erskine was remarried in 1805 to Henry Erskine, the lawyer who had won her brother Daniel’s acquittal in 1785 and who was destined for high political office, succeeding Henry Dundas as Lord Advocate of Scotland in 1806.\(^{22}\)

Margaret was to make an equally impressive marriage to George H. Drummond of a leading Scottish banking family, in 1801.\(^{23}\) Thus, the young women who for a time caused social distress for Alexander Munro eventually added luster to his reviving fortunes.

A different source of embarrassment to the Glasgow household of the Munro family was illegitimate offspring of their ‘lads in India’. Of their three sons in India, only Daniel was married. Alexander, or ‘Sandy’ as the family called him, and Thomas remained bachelors until they returned to Britain.

Of the sons of Alexander and Margaret Munro, only James remained to be launched upon a career by the time that some improvement in their financial condition had occurred in the 1790’s.\(^{24}\) Daniel, Thomas and Alexander all contributed to James’s medical education as well as to his outfitting, stock of medicines and passage to India. James’s career there was cut short by illness, and he was compelled to return to Scotland, where he died in March 1798.\(^{25}\)

Alexander had managed to maintain a military career in Bengal at consistently higher pay and allowances than his brother Thomas in Madras, while also expanding his Bengal business interests in indigo production and general trading. By 1794 he decided for the latter activity exclusively, resigned from his unpromising military career and joined Daniel in business.\(^{26}\)

\(^{22}\) Munro Collection, 151/151, Father to Munro, 23 February 1801, TNAC.

\(^{23}\) Munro Collection, 151/149, Father to Munro, 24 March 1806, TNAC.

\(^{24}\) Munro Collections, 151/146, father to Munro, 31 January 1786, TNAC.

\(^{25}\) Munro Collection, 151/148, father to Munro, 17 March 1798, TNAC.

\(^{26}\) Ibid., father to Munro, 10 December 1793, TNAC.
Both prospered and sent ever larger remittances back to Glasgow. Daniel died in 1799, leaving his son to be sent back to Scotland, and also a large debt for Alexander to settle. In 1806 Alexander realized a considerable fortune from his Indian business when he sold it and joined his parents and sisters in Edinburgh, to which city the Munro family had removed in 1802.

In Edinburgh the parents lived comfortably in a house purchased for them by Thomas at the corner of Frederick and Prince’s Streets. Margaret Stark Munro was to die in 1807. Alexander, whose late letters to Thomas displays a shakier hand, died in 1809, before reached Scotland on his furlough.

For twenty of the last thirty years of his life, Munro’s father strove unstintingly to do well by his son. He desisted only from the late 1790’s when the increased income from India permitted him to live comfortably according to the burgher standards of the time, and thus to cease striving to re-establish himself in business, to the relief of his family.

The older Munro always found it difficult to accept how little his sons seemed prepared to do to repay his constant strivings for them, how unwilling they seemed to be to aid him on their behalf. Still, Alexander Munro sought to exercise paternal guidance from afar.

Thomas Munro was following as a soldier in the desperate war against Haider Ali. In 1782 he expressed the hope to his mother that opportunities would open in America or in the West Indies for his two youngest brothers so that, when they came of age and must leave Glasgow as he did, they would not have to serve in India, particularly as soldiers.

Thomas Munro’s first career was started by his services to the English East India Company. He took part in the two wars between the English East India Company and Mysore and Marathas. His participation in the two battles are discussed in the next Chapter.

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27 Munro Collection, 151/149, Erskine to Munro, 28 February 1800, TNAC.
28 Munro Collections, Father to Munro, 20 February 1805, TNAC.
29 Munro Collections, Father to Munro, 16 May 1784, TNAC.