

# Scots doctors and their compatriots in the service of eighteenth-century Czars

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**ABSTRACT** Scots doctors, several of them from one Dumfriesshire village – Lochmaben – played a key role in eighteenth-century Russia, several as personal physicians to the Czars. Some gained fame and fortune through their clinical skills, others through their acceptance in high society, others as a result of their contribution to the establishment of civilian and military health services and medical education, and a few through their influence on the Imperial and Privy Councils.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout the whole of the eighteenth century, many people from Britain, and especially Scotland, spent much of their lives working in, and making a considerable contribution to, Czarist Russia, at a time when it was looking westwards and coming out of its cultural isolation. By the time Napoleon reached Moscow in 1812 a census showed at least 111 British living there.<sup>1</sup> In addition to bankers, merchants, engineers, entrepreneurs and agriculturalists (some of whom formed their own Protestant colony – Voronovo outside Moscow), there had been at least two sailors who rose through the ranks to become admirals, naval architects who designed and supervised the building of the new Russian fleet (with iron from Scotland) and doctors who became medical academics, physicians to the royal court, Directors General of the Army Medical Service and even Privy Councillors, each in their own way exercising considerable influence on the development of that vast country. One Scots lady, Countess Bruce, even became a lady-in-waiting to Catherine, with most unusual responsibilities. This paper focuses on a few of the Scots doctors working there at the time of Catherine the Great.

## CATHERINE THE GREAT (1729–96), EMPRESS OF RUSSIA (1762–96)

Catherine continued the work of Peter the Great, modernising and westernising her vast country and making it a significant European power. Born in Stettin (now Szczecin, Poland), she married Grand Duke Peter of Holstein (thought by many historians to have been intellectually challenged) who succeeded to the throne in 1762 but was soon overthrown by the Imperial Guards who installed Catherine in his place.<sup>2</sup> Though not

Russian she is known to have been fluent in Russian, French and English.

Her achievements were many. She founded the first Russian school for girls, now the Smolny Institute in St Petersburg, and, in 1763, Russia's College of Medicine, with a teaching staff of only ten, and an annual revenue of 470,000 roubles plus 1% of earnings of all St Petersburg citizens, civilian and military, who thereafter received free medical care. She created the first teaching hospital, the only hospitals before that being the military ones created by Peter the Great, stipulating that each summer all patients were to be moved out to the country so that the city hospital could be thoroughly cleaned and aired. She further decreed that all provincial capitals must have a hospital, and each county with a population between 20,000 and 30,000 must have a doctor, a surgeon, an assistant surgeon and a student doctor. In 1783 she founded a hospital for venereal diseases in St Petersburg with 30 male and 30 female beds, making a rule that total anonymity was to be observed, no patient's name ever being asked or recorded.

She made the church subservient to the state, reorganised urban and provincial administrations to ensure better control of her empire and, largely as a result of two wars, greatly extended her territories and influence. However, she will also be remembered for her encouragement and spread of feudal serfdom (any title or gift of land being accompanied by a gift of hundreds or even thousands of serfs who had few legal rights and no right of access to the Czar or Empress as everyone else had). She showered honours, wealth and feudal titles on loyal followers (including her doctors), but ruthlessly suppressed any dissent. Without doubt she indirectly contributed to the revolution which toppled the Czars and led to the communist state 150 years later. Regrettably, in the light of

so many achievements, she is better known for her well documented and numerous affairs of the heart, leading to her being described by many scholars as a nymphomaniac. Potemkin recorded that Catherine could ‘. . . not be without love for an hour.’<sup>3</sup> A short time after her unconsummated marriage to Peter she realised what a disaster it would prove to be and took a lover, Serghei Saltykov, undoubtedly the biological father of Prince Paul (born 20 September 1754). Her second child, born in April 1762, was fathered by another lover, Count Grigory Orlov. Her husband is said to have remarked ‘Heaven knows how it is that my wife becomes pregnant’ but the authenticity of the remark is questionable.<sup>3</sup> She never allowed him to see either child and, though no conclusive proof can be found to confirm it, was probably behind his murder in 1764.<sup>4</sup> The history of her lovers inevitably brings us to her doctors, all of whom were Scots graduates.

An interesting fact about the Scots doctors serving her was that three – Drs Matthew Halliday, James Mounsey and John Rogerson – all came from near Lochmaben in Dumfriesshire in the south west of Scotland, though curiously only Mounsey is listed in the history of Lochmaben and its environs, and, as we shall see, he probably never qualified in medicine.<sup>5,6</sup> Unfortunately, we know little about Halliday (1732–1801) except that he was the son of a William Halliday, that he married Anna Regina and fathered many children before dying in 1801. On retiring from the court of Empress Elizabeth he was succeeded by Rogerson, a fellow-countryman.

### DR JOHN ROGERSON (1741–1823)

It might be thought that Dr John Rogerson came to be in Russia and eventually became Catherine’s personal physician in response to advertisements which it is known she had had inserted in foreign papers, principally German ones, inviting skilled immigrants. However, it is more likely he was pointed in that direction and introduced there by James Mounsey. In a somewhat convoluted way they were related; Mounsey’s half brother was married to Rogerson’s father’s half sister! However he came to be there it was not long before he earned the respect and gratitude of the royal family by saving the life of Princess Dashkova’s son who, in 1765, had a severe episode of croup. We are not told the underlying illness which produced the croup but it was likely to be diphtheria, then endemic. The records tell us little of Rogerson’s subsequent clinical work and successes except that his duties soon came to include checking Catherine’s many suitors and lovers to ensure that they did not have any venereal diseases, which were so prevalent at that time in Russia.

Born on 22 October 1741, the son of Samuel and Janet Rogerson, in Lochbrow near Lochmaben, Johnstone Parish, Dumfries, Scotland, he was christened in the parish church four days later (a common practice in those days

of high neo-natal mortality). He went to school locally then proceeded to Edinburgh University, studying under Cullen. He married Janet Wilson in Hangingshaw, Applegarth Parish, Dumfriesshire in 1763 whilst still a student and graduated as MD (a primary degree in those days) in 1765. A year after graduating he went to Russia, where he worked until 1816, though making many visits to his homeland.

On 18 February 1769, three years after his arrival, he was appointed Court Doctor by Imperial decree, responsible for the medical care of members of the court rather than exclusively that of the Empress. On 16 January 1776, only ten years after qualifying he was advanced to Body Physician to the Empress with the rank of Councillor of State. In 1779, on 5 April, he was made a Privy Councillor. He was, in effect, not only the Empress’s private physician and medical adviser, but one of the most influential men in the country, living, eating and socialising with the nobility, and in the process gaining a reputation as a socialite rather than as an intellectual or a clinician. He must certainly have met such Scots as William Grey who thrived as a trader and money-lender, Sir Samuel Greig (1735–88) who succeeded Admiral Knowles of the Royal Navy as advisor to Catherine on the development and modernisation of the Russian Navy, and he is known to have had many dealings (not always amicable) with the British Ambassador to the Russian Court, Sir James Harris.

Whether or not he returned to Scotland to make the purchases, or employed an agent to do so, is not known, but in 1782 he bought the property known as Gillesbie in the Scottish Borders and, much later, Dumcrieff Mansion, Moffat, also in the Scottish Borders, a property at one time (1783–4) rented by the famous road builder John Loudon McAdam who is buried in Moffat cemetery.

Rogerson must have been back in his native country when, on 5 December 1782, he was elected an Honorary Member of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh, and four years later a Freeman of Dumfries, just 20 years after qualifying as a doctor. It is known that he paid home visits in 1799 and in 1804 (including London on this visit) and that in 1810, six years before he retired from his work in Russia, he purchased yet another property, Wamphray, paying £90,000 for it, a very substantial sum in those days. He died on 23 December 1823, aged 82, in Dumcrieff and was buried in the Rogerson Aisle in Wamphray Church.

One who warmed to Rogerson was a John Robison who later wrote of Rogerson that ‘his society and friendship were the chief comforts of my life while I was in Russia.’<sup>7</sup> He too was a Scot, born in 1739 near Glasgow, educated in the grammar school and, from 1750, at Glasgow University where he graduated MA in 1756. Then, still only 18, he applied unsuccessfully to be assistant to Robert Dick, Professor of Natural Philosophy. After this setback, he turned to an academic career in chemistry

until, in 1770, he took up a post in Russia where his friendship with Rogerson blossomed. In 1774 he left Russia and became Professor of Natural Philosophy in Edinburgh during the Scottish Enlightenment.

Another star of that time, with whom Rogerson corresponded, was William Robertson, famed historian, theologian and Principal of Edinburgh University, whose *History of the Reign of Emperor Charles V* (1769) he gave to Rogerson to present to the Empress on his behalf. So delighted was she with the book that she sent Robertson a gold enamelled snuff box encrusted with diamonds. Rogerson used the opportunity to ask her for information that would assist Robertson in the preparation of the book he was then writing, *The History of America* (1777).

With one notable exception, that we shall look at, most references to Rogerson's work relate not to medical care but to his safeguarding Catherine from venereal infection. If she saw a young man she fancied, usually an officer, he was first 'tried out' by her Scots lady-in-waiting Countess Bruce, then by Anna Protasova. In recognition of this service to their Empress these ladies were called *les eprouveuses*. Having progressed so far the young man or men then had several weeks' instruction about the Empress's likes and dislikes from Potemkin, her principal adviser, her lover and, for a time, her husband. If the young man still seemed suitable he was then thoroughly examined by Rogerson before being permitted to sleep with the Empress.<sup>8</sup> Rogerson's nearness to the Empress and the inevitable jealousies this aroused in Potemkin and others led to him being falsely suspected of spying, firstly for Sir James Harris and later for the Prussians, and, more realistically, of having too much power and influence.<sup>9</sup>

He gained a reputation as an inveterate though seldom successful gambler and, though apparently respected by Catherine for his charm and social graces, was spoken of as a 'usually fatal doctor' by most others who saw the effect of his 'fatal laxatives and bleeding'. When Field Marshall Prince Alexander Golitsyn died in Rogerson's care, bled and purged to death, Catherine jokingly remarked to Potemkin 'I'm afraid anybody who gets into Rogerson's hands is already dead.'<sup>10</sup> It was a joke in the court that once when he pleaded with her to take some of his notorious pills or potions she remarked to him 'You couldn't cure a flea-bite' but on one of the rare occasions when she agreed to swallow the medication he horrified the court by patting her on the back and saying 'Well done, ma'am, well done', something no-one else would have dared to do. The mystery is why Catherine continued to employ someone so inept and, presumably, trust herself to him, as did Czar Paul who succeeded her. The year after Catherine's death Paul appointed him Privy Councillor and in 1801 when Paul was assassinated Rogerson helped the Empress to escape whilst he carried

the future Czar Nicholas I in his arms. Finally, aged 75, he retired to Scotland.

He may not have advanced medicine but we are indebted to him for the vivid picture he paints of the Russia of that time when travelling widely with Catherine. Now housed in the National Library of Scotland, the diary of their travels around the district of Kursk, south of Moscow, describes where they stopped for the night or to change horses, the scenery, the crops, the types of cattle, the stone bridges, the roaming gypsies, the forests of every known type of tree and the birds of prey including eagles soaring above them. Surprisingly in that age of Russian feudal lords and serfs he mentions a hospital for the poor and, quite separately, a workhouse for the poor. 'Whatever else he was, he was what today we would call 'a character'.'<sup>11</sup>

### THOMAS, 1ST BARON DIMSDALE (1712–1800)

An Aberdeen MD, Dimsdale came to prominence in 1767 when he published *The Present Methods of Inoculation for the Smallpox*. It has been suggested by some that it was because Rogerson drew Catherine's attention to the paper at a time when a severe epidemic of smallpox was sweeping across Russia, decimating the population, that he made his name. However, it is difficult to see how Rogerson could have been involved when that was actually before his appointment as Court Doctor. Somehow Catherine heard of him and, in 1768, she invited Dr Thomas Dimsdale and his son Nathaniel, his assistant, to visit Russia to inoculate her and her son against smallpox – then the principal cause of death, accounting for an estimated 60 million deaths in Europe in the eighteenth century.

On reaching St Petersburg after a perilous journey Dimsdale inoculated Catherine and Paul, who later succeeded her as Czar. Her willingness to try something as 'dangerous' and 'untried' as inoculation against smallpox was analogous to Queen Victoria accepting chloroform for childbirth in the following century.<sup>12</sup> Dimsdale's inoculation of the Empress and Prince Paul on 12 October 1768 was successful; Catherine, suffering only a few pustules and a sore throat, returned to her duties three weeks later. Many others now followed her example and Catherine bought houses in Moscow and St Petersburg which Dimsdale ran as vaccination hospitals. In *The Gentleman's Magazine* of 1751 (volume 21) there is a description of the vaccination technique:

'Draw a piece of thread through a ripe pustule... put it in a clean phial. When the operation is to be performed, make a slight scratch, cut off a small piece of the thread charged with variolous matter, a 1/8 inch or even less, and lay it upon the scratch, cover it with a bit of sticking plaster and the operation is performed.'

Another article in the same journal describes the death, eight days after inoculation, of a 5-year-old child in Durham. The writer curses 'this quackish practice which, it is presumed, this sad accident will put a stop to in this city and neighbourhood'. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the debate raged about the benefits and dangers of what we now term vaccination against smallpox. Cartoons were published showing people with cow's horns and cloven hooves, said to result from cowpox inoculation.<sup>13</sup> Nearly 200 years later, in 1978, the World Health Organisation declared that smallpox had been eradicated.

All together, Dimsdale inoculated 140 members of the gentry emulating their Empress, then travelled to Moscow where another 50 were inoculated. Before leaving St Petersburg in 1768, he handed over responsibility for running the houses to Dr Matthew Halliday (1732–1801), another Scot who had first arrived in Russia in the reign of Elizabeth, Catherine's predecessor.

On a subsequent visit he treated Grand Dukes Alexander and Constantine, and lesser royals, and established a trading company, making sufficient money to purchase a private island now known by the name given to it by the communists – the Island of the Decemberists.

Credit should be given to Catherine the Great for the example she set in those superstitious times and for her courage in inviting Dimsdale and Rogerson to advise her. Her generosity to each of them demonstrates her gratitude. In addition to £500 expenses, a £10,000 fee, a life pension of £500 per annum and a rose-cut diamond mounted in a gold ring for Thomas Dinsdale, she created him a 'Baron of all the Russias'. With her permission he was able to add to his arms a wing of the Russian eagle, in a gold shield, with customary helmet adorned with a baron's coronet over the shield. To his son, Nathaniel, she gave a magnificent gold snuff box now in the Gilbert Collection, London. Father and son eventually returned to England, setting up home at Essendon, which became the home for several subsequent Barons Dimsdale.

Dimsdale's history is a fascinating one. He was the son of John Dimsdale, a surgeon in Essex, and his wife Sarah. The family were Quakers, his grandfather Robert Dimsdale having been the companion of Penn in America. After studying at St Thomas's Hospital, Thomas settled in Hertford. Soon after, in 1745, he joined the army as a surgeon in the campaign against the Young Pretender, Prince Charles Stuart, but after the taking of Carlisle he left the army, determined to become a physician in Hertford. On 3 July 1761 he graduated Doctor of Medicine of Aberdeen University and on 28 August of that same year was admitted as an Extra-Licentiate of the Royal College of Physicians of London. (An extra-licentiate was licensed to practise outside the City of London within a seven-mile radius around the City. The 'extra' became redundant when the 1858 Medical Act

confirmed the extended coverage of the College to the whole of England rather than just London.)<sup>14</sup>

On his return from Russia he continued his interest in smallpox and inoculation (his text on the subject reaching a ninth edition), continued to practice in Hertford, with his sons opened a banking house in 1776 in Cornhill and was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in May 1769. He served as MP for Hertford from 1780–90, and on his retiring settled in Bath. He died on the penultimate day of the eighteenth century and is buried in the Quaker burial ground at Bishop Stortford. A twentieth-century relative, Dr Helen Dimsdale *nee* Easdale Brown (1907–77), was the first woman consultant neurologist in Britain, appointed to Maida Vale Hospital in 1947 and the Royal Free Hospital in 1950, retiring in 1970.

### DR MATTHEW GUTHRIE (1743–1807)

Born and educated in Edinburgh he graduated MD in 1763, initially worked for the East India Company and first visited Russia in 1770 with Sir Charles Knowles and his secretary John Robison (see above).<sup>15</sup> On leaving the East India Company he served in the Royal Navy until 1776 when he visited and settled in St Petersburg, and from 1778 until his death 29 years later was Chief Medical Officer of the Corps of Noble Gentlemen there. A man of many interests outside medicine he was elected a fellow of the Royal Society of London in 1782, a member of the Societies of Antiquaries of both London and Edinburgh and wrote on subjects as diverse as music, scurvy, the plague, dances and history.

### DR(?) JAMES MOUNSEY (1710–73)

Another member of the Lochmaben triumvirate, he served in Russia from 1736–62 and, though described as, and using, the title 'Doctor', there is no record of him ever having qualified though it is thought he attended Edinburgh University. On arrival in Russia he was appointed a 'Lekar' (signifying a medical man with no degrees) and served for several years in the Russian Navy before spending five years in private practice in Russia.<sup>16</sup> He made his name when Field Marshal Keith, another Scotsman, received a gunshot wound in his leg which became so badly infected that Russian surgeons wanted to amputate. Mounsey advised against this, and travelled with him to Paris where several pieces of cloth were removed from the wound after which Keith made a complete recovery. Mounsey travelled extensively in Russia and was elected to the Royal Society in London in 1750, his citation stating:

'Physician-in-Chief to the Czarina's Army which marched through Bohemia and Poland to the assistance of the Allies and a gentleman of extensive learning, curiosity and knowledge in Natural History which he seems industrious to improve and

communicate. Residing in a country where it is very difficult to obtain any satisfactory information he is likely to prove a desirable and useful member.<sup>17-20</sup>

Perhaps on the basis of this reputation he was appointed physician to Empress Elizabeth and describes her extreme obesity, epistaxis, dropsy and dyspnoea. In 1761 she began to have fits (no details are available) and died under his care in 1762 of a cerebro-vascular accident, presumably linked to her hypertension, cardiac failure and long-standing obesity. Her successor, Peter the Third (Catherine's husband), appointed him 'Chief Director of the Medical Chancery and of the whole Medical Faculty throughout the whole Russian Empire', in effect Minister of Health. Mounsey was the last to hold that position, the first having been another Scot, Dr Robert Erskine. With Peter's fall it was inevitable that Catherine would not wish to keep him. Just a few years later, Rogerson, a man he may have seen as a boy in Lochmaben, succeeded him as Physician to the Empress Catherine.

Mounsey returned to Scotland in 1762. He bought the estate of Rammerscales where he built a mansion and in its garden cultivated the seeds of the medicinal rhubarb plant he had brought back from Russia, later giving some to the Royal Physic Garden in Edinburgh. The powder from them formed the basis of Dr Gregory's famous laxative mixture, *Mist. Rhei Co.*, listed in the British Formulary until as late as the early 1950s.

Sadly, to the end of his days, he felt his life was under threat from Catherine's agents because of the many secrets of the Russian court known to him. He died in Edinburgh in 1773 but is buried in Lochmaben Old Churchyard, having achieved much with remarkably few qualifications. The last of his descendents in Russia died in Leningrad during the 1942 German siege.

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## SIR SAMUEL (CARLOVITCH) GREIG (1735-88)

Mention has already been made of this distinguished sailor, and a social acquaintance of John Rogerson. The son of an Inverkeithing ship owner, he rose to be Grand Admiral of Russia. He started as a junior officer in the Royal Navy, fought under Admiral Sir Edmund Hawke, and soon distinguished himself sufficiently to be seconded with four other young Royal Navy officers to the Navy of Empresses Elizabeth and Catherine. By 1774 he was a Vice Admiral and responsible for the building and commissioning of vessels, all of which he arranged to be fitted with iron from the Carron Works of Falkirk. Offered command of Catherine's new Mediterranean Fleet, he declined but accepted the command of her Baltic Fleet. His career was a spectacular one but not unique for Scots in Russia. In 1715, at the time of the Jacobite rebellion, there were two Scots admirals directing the Russian Navy and advising on its development. His son (1775-1845) became Admiral in Attendance on the Czar and a member of the Imperial Council.

## CONCLUSION

Of the many Scots who lived and worked in Russia in the late eighteenth to early nineteenth centuries, several were doctors from humble backgrounds who served as physicians to the Czars, contributed to the establishment of civilian and military health services as well as to medical education and, as Privy Councillors, must have exerted considerable influence on the government and development of Russia in the century before its revolutions.

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more myth than fact.]

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