

SOME ACCOUNT

OF A

ROYAL HUNTING IN THE FOREST OF ATHOLL, IN 1563.

In a Letter from Bishop Geddes to the Secretary of the Society.

SIR,

AMONG the many good effects that the institution of the Society of Antiquaries must naturally produce, I think we may reckon this as one, that it will render every Scotchman, conversant in books, more attentive to whatever he may meet with in them, anywise regarding the antiquities of his country, as he will know where any information of that nature will be thankfully received.

When lately taking a cursory view of the work written by our countryman William Barclay against Buchanan, Bouchier, and other authors, who attacked monarchical government in the latter part of the sixteenth century, having observed a description of a royal hunting, as it was called, at which Barclay himself had been actually present in his youth, it occurred to me that an extract of

the passage might perhaps be willingly heard in one of our meetings. I therefore here subjoin it, to be used as you shall judge proper.

Spottiswood, and our other historians, in as far as I remember, tell us only in general, that in the summer of the year 1563, Queen Mary amused herself with hunting in the forests of Mar and Atholl; but Barclay gives us the following particulars of what happened then in the latter of these two countries.

It seems the Earl of Atholl had been forewarned of the Queen's intention to honour him with a visit, and resolved to give her the best reception his country could afford. Hunting was that in which it principally excelled; and the Earl spared no expences or trouble that could tend to bring this diversion to its utmost perfection and splendour. He sent out no less than two thousand of his nimblest Highlanders, to gather all the deer they could from the woods and hills of Mar, Badenoch, Murray, and Atholl, to the place that had been pitched upon as most proper for exhibiting them to view, and for affording, by their means, the best entertainment to the Queen, and to the nobility who were to attend her. These Highlanders, with their usual ardour to please their chief, travelling with great agility through the mountains by day and by night, in the space of two months, against the time appointed, brought together more than two thousand deer, with many does and roes, to the place that had been pointed out to them.

Here the Queen and a great number of noblemen, seated in a valley, and a vast multitude of people that had flocked thither on such an occasion, enjoyed this extraordinary sight with the greatest satisfaction. One thing was very observable, and, Barclay says, made such an impression on his mind, that he could never

forget it. This was, that all this great flock of deer were directed in all their motions by one stately animal among them. They all walked, stopped, or turned, as he did; they all followed him. He, as the author adds, in Virgil's words,—

“Cervus erat forma præstanti et cornibus ingens.”

The Queen was particularly well pleased to see all the deer so attentive to their leader. But, upon her signifying this to those around her, the Earl of Atholl, who had been accustomed from his youth to that kind of hunting, and knew the nature of the deer, from long experience, told her that they might all come to be frightened by that same beautiful beast. “For,” said he, “should that stag in the front, which your Majesty justly admires so much, be seized with any fit of fury or of fear, and rush down from the side of the hill, where you see him stand, to this plain, then would it be necessary for every one of us to provide for the safety of your Majesty and for our own. All the rest of those deer would infallibly come along with him, as thick as possibly they could, and make their way over our bodies to the mountain that is behind us.” This information struck the Queen with some dread; and what happened soon after was a sufficient proof that what the Earl had said was not without foundation. For her Majesty having ordered a large fierce dog to be let loose on a wolf that appeared, the leading deer, as we may call him, was terrified at the sight of the dog, turned his back, and began to fly thither whence they had come. All the other deer that very moment turned likewise, and ran after him. They were surrounded on that side by a line of Highlanders; but well did they know that they were far from having strength enough to stand against the violent shock of this crowded body of deer, moving with so

great a velocity; and therefore they did not so much as attempt it. They had even no means of saving their lives left, but only to fall flat on the heath, in the best posture they could, and allow the deer to run over them. This method they followed; but it did not preserve several of them from being wounded; nay, word was brought to the Queen that two or three men had been trampled to death.

In this manner, the deer would have all gone off together, had not the huntsmen, accustomed to such events, followed them instantly, and, with great dexterity, detached from the rest those that were in the rear. Against these the Queen's stag-hounds, and those of the nobility who were then present, were then directed, and the chace was very successful. About three hundred and sixty deer were that day laid on the ground; five wolves likewise, and some roes, were killed. The Queen was well amused, and highly pleased with this magnificent proof of respect paid to her by the Earl of Atholl.

These are the circumstances of this hunting, related by William Barclay in his second Book *Contra Monarchomachos*, p. 81, 82, from what he himself had seen.

We meet, in Lindsay of Pitscottie's History of Scotland, p. 227, 228, 229, with a description of another still more grand diversion of the same kind, given in the year 1529 to King James V. with his mother Queen Margaret, and the Pope's Legate, by the then Earl of Atholl; but as that history is now in every body's hands, since we were favoured with the late edition of it, I need not here mention what may be there read.

Neither need I take notice, that the hunting described by Barclay bears some resemblance to the *batidas* of the present King of Spain, where several hundreds of huntsmen form a line, and drive

the deer through a narrow pass, at one side of which the King, with some attendants, has his post, in a green hut of boughs, and slaughters the poor animals as they come out, almost as fast as charged guns can be put into his hand, and he fire them. These are things sufficiently known; and the same manner of stag-hunting is practised in Italy, Germany, and in other parts of Europe.

Perhaps some member of this Society may some day look upon our ancient hunting as a subject not unworthy of being treated of in a particular dissertation; and then the two passages of Barclay and Lindsay, that I have had in view, will, I imagine, be considered.

We may observe, that both these authors confirm, what is indeed otherwise well enough known, that in the sixteenth age there were many wolves to be found in Scotland, though they are now, by all accounts, long since extirpated out of all Britain. Indeed, the French and Spanish geographers, even in their latest publications, are pleased to allow us a plentiful share of the largest and most fierce of these animals; but this arises from their copying, without proper examination, what ancient authors wrote with truth of their own times, though it be otherwise in our days.

I leave it to others to determine whether or not it would be expedient and practicable to root the foxes also out of our island. And I am, with great regard and esteem, &c.

JOHN GEDDES.

Edinburgh, April 1. 1782.