

AN ACCOUNT
OF
SHEUCHY DYKE, IN THE EAST OF FIFE.

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AGREEABLY to my promise, I went to Leuchars on Thursday the 27th of August. In the house of Mr Kettle, minister there, I accidentally met with Mr Rait, minister at Dundee, who had been assistant to Mr Walker, late minister at Leuchars. At my request, both these gentlemen were so obliging as to accompany me to Sheuchy Dyke. We rode together over a great part of the ground, and conversed with several of the oldest inhabitants; and if we had been so lucky as to pick up any information sufficient to gratify the curiosity of your inquisitive friend, this little excursion would have been exceedingly agreeable, as the day was very fine, the scene uncommonly wild, and human nature exhibited in some of its most simple forms. About a mile beyond the village of Leuchars, and to the eastward of a ditch that runs southward by the back of the house of Earlshall, there is a large tract of level, swampy, sandy ground, lying between the rivers Eden and Tay, which bears

the name of Sheuchy Dyke, so called, as I suppose, from its being intersected with ditches, called *Sheuchs*, and *dykes*, or walls, built of earthen sods or turf; of which materials all the houses are built, no stones or materials for brick being to be found throughout the whole tract. Within the limits of Sheuchy Dyke, and about a mile to the eastward of the ditch above mentioned, one enters upon the Tents Moors, comprehending a large tract of ground, where the Danes are said to have encamped, and afterwards settled. To the north-west of the Tents Moors, there are six lochs or lakes, very long and very narrow, running parallel to each other, and between these moors and the adjacent country. One of these lakes is called the Canal Loch, and seems to have been the longest and deepest of the whole. To the southward of this, and next to the moors, there is another, called the Foremunt Loch; and, pretty near the middle of the line formed by it, a farm-stead, built on the south side of it, called the Foremunt also. At the west end of the lochs, but more towards the south than Foremunt, there is another farm-stead called Big-end; and, more southerly still, and nearly in the centre of the Tents Moors, there is a farm-stead called Kingshaldrie, where it is said the tent of the King of the Danes was pitched. We met here with several very old men, and some whose forefathers and they had lived in these moors during six and seven generations. We entered into conversation with them, and asked them a variety of questions, with a view to discover whether they bore any foreign names, and made use of any foreign words, idioms, customs, or manners of living. All of them agreed in the tradition, that anciently the Danes had encamped in these moors, and that some of their descendants continued to live there. They particularly mentioned one family, of the name of Landsman, who, in their own and their fathers memory,

lived in a place they pointed out to us, and are since removed to the water side, opposite to Dundee, where some of them still live by hiring horses. Besides this family, they could condescend upon no other; and positively denied that any of the people presently living there were of Danish extract. And indeed we could discover nothing, either in their names, language, or modes of living, that could with any degree of certainty fix this imputation upon them; for such they would have considered it. The most common, and almost the only names, among them at present are, Symson, Henderson, Robertson, Dow, and Berry. They seem to be a plain simple people, and such as one expects to find in a situation so sequestered. Their minister gives them a very good character for sobriety, honesty, and industry. They have no tradesmen or artisans among them; and live chiefly by raising corn and feeding sheep, which, as they pasture upon dry sandy downs along the sea shore, make excellent little mutton; three quarters of which, together with the head and feet, boiled in broth, were lately served up to the minister in the same dish, when upon his annual course of family visitation among them. The women, I observed, were uncommonly dirty; and I was informed by the minister, that when they have any guests, the wife never sits down to table, but stands and serves her husband and his friends, now and then only snatching a bit, or a *sup*, as the occasions of her service will permit. I found that very commonly they used the word *tafil* for table; but this is used in other parts of Scotland, and even of this country also. Inquiring at an old man, whether he remembered of any ships being wrecked upon their coast? he mentioned several; particularly one, the crew of which, contrary to the accusations commonly laid to the charge of these people (that they used to light false fires, to mislead ships and plunder their wrecks),

he hospitably entertained in his house; but, he added, they staid so long, that at last *it irkit* him. Nearly in the same sense, they say in Holland, *hit ircht mij*. But as we still retain in our language so many Saxon words, and among the rest the word *irksome*, which comes from the same root, it is not improbable that anciently the word *irk* might have been in use. No certain inference, therefore, can be drawn from the use of it, respecting the foreign origin of these people. Wishing to take the dimensions of this good man's intellect, especially as I understood he was an elder of the kirk, and the minister was present, I inquired at him by what means they used to prevent their women in child-bed, and their new born infants, from being carried away by the fairies? The honest man told me very gravely, that indeed he had never seen a fairy himself, but that he had known many who, in the night time, had been much disturbed by them in their houses. That, in particular, he was well acquainted with one, whom he named, whose child was carried away by them, and a fairy infant left in its place; that the goodman never recovered his own, but got rid of the fairy child by burning its toes in the fire. And that he was likewise well acquainted with another man whose wife was carried off by them; that frequently she appeared to her husband afterwards, and urged him to win her back from them; but, being married to another, he refused. I had great curiosity to know by what means the honest woman was to be won. But either the old elder was not *en fait*, or did not choose to inform me, for fear, I suppose, the minister might think he held communion with evil spirits. After this, the minister conducted us to another old man, who, though no kirk elder, seemed to be of more understanding, better information, and in every respect more entire, than the other. He told us, that his forefathers and he had, during seven generations, lived in the same

little farm; but that originally they came from the parish of For-gund; and that he had always heard that the lochs or lakes in the front of the Tents moors, towards the landside, were Danish intrenchments, made after the Danes had been defeated by the Scotch in a great battle,—the circumstances of which, mentioned by him, coincided exactly with those of the battle of Loncarty, with this difference, that he said the countryman who, with his sons, armed with yokes, rallied the Scotch, and led them on to the second charge against the victorious Danes, was predecessor to Hay of Morton, whose little estate lies in the neighbourhood, instead of predecessor to the Earl of Errol. This honest man, however, is not, I understand, singular in his opinion, that it was after the battle of Loncarty that the Danes encamped, and some of them afterwards settled, in these Moors. The tradition which is handed about is as follows:—That the Danes, after that defeat, fled from the field of battle by that range of hills which runs along the southern banks of the Tay; but, being hotly pursued and overtaken, many of them were killed near to Naughton, where several *tumuli* are still to be seen. That after this they took possession of a rising ground to the southward of Sandford, whence they had a prospect of the mouth of the Tay; and as, upon examination, it has been observed that some stones, raised upon the top of this eminence into a *tumulus*, have been scorched with fires, it is conjectured that there they lighted fires, as a signal for their shipping. But these not appearing, and they being again attacked by their pursuers, and several of them killed, as is indicated by a number of *tumuli* observable there also, they fled at last to the Tents Moors, and there entrenched themselves, waiting an opportunity to escape out of the country by sea; but no such opportunity offering, upon

their submission, they were allowed to remain and settle there. To me, however, it does not appear very probable that all these circumstances, if there had been any foundation for them, could have entirely escaped the notice of all our historians; neither that an enemy, so hotly pursued, and so frequently routed, could have had numbers, utensils, or leisure, sufficient for throwing up such extensive works as these entrenchments must have been, provided the lochs upon Tents Moors really be entrenchments; or, admitting that in all respects they were equal to such an undertaking, I do not see how they could have subsisted on this barren inhospitable spot, during the execution of it. If, in this invasion, the Danes had landed on the Fife side, at the mouth of the Tay, left their ships there, and marched along its southern banks to the siege of Perth, it might, with some appearance of probability, have been conjectured that they had thrown up these entrenchments upon their first landing, and whilst they were entire, to serve as a defence for the guard to be left with their ships, and, in case of any disaster, to serve as a place of safety for their army to retreat to, and reembark at, without being much exposed. But as all our historians are agreed that, on this occasion, the Danes landed in the South Esk, near Montrose, and marched through the county of Angus up to Perth; and as Hector Boethius expressly says they carried their shipping up the Tay, and invested Perth, both by land and water, it is not to be doubted, but, after their defeat at Loncarty, the greater part of them would immediately betake themselves to their ships; or if, through ignorance of the country, or the closeness of the pursuit, part of them had been driven beyond reach of their fleet, and, in hopes of falling in with it in the mouth of the river, fled along the heights on the south side of it, these, especially after so many defeats, must, by the time they got to

Tents Moors, have been very unequal to such extensive operations. For these considerations, I cannot help thinking, that either these lakes are no entrenchments, or that they must have been made upon a very different occasion ; and that if the Danes, who encamped and settled in these Moors, were any part of the remains of Loncarty, they must have been so few in number, as to have been beneath the public notice or resentment.

To what period soever these remains may be supposed to refer, there seems reason to think that the Danes on different occasions invaded Fife. According to Fordun, about the year 872, Constantine II. was slain by them in a cave (near Fife-ness), which he designs *Nigra Specus*.—Scotichron. lib. iv. c. 16. Wyntown gives it the same name.—Cronykil, b. vi. c. 8, l. 64. Sir Robert Sibbald informs us, that this is “ now called the *Devil's Cove*, because of “ that black execution.”—Hist. Fife, P. i. c. 8. The Danes remained a whole year (A. 874) in Pictland ; and, during the unfortunate reign of this Constantine, seized about a fourth part of the kingdom.—V. Pinkerton's Enquiry, ii. 178, 179.

On the south side of the Eden, between Falkland and Auchtermuchty, are the remains of what is called a Danish camp. For an account of this, see Statist. Acc. iv. 449.

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