

11th December 1809.



A

DESCRIPTION

OF THE

Curious Monuments and Antiquities

IN THE ISLAND OF

ICOLUMKILL.

Also, an Account of the Island of STAFFA, where the rural Throne of the late King Fingal is extant; being the Chief of the Heroes so much admired by the Poets.

By a Gentleman who made the Tour of Europe, prior to this Description, in a Letter to a Friend.—It is now published at the Desire of several Gentlemen of Distinction, who reside in the Country; and was given to the Bearer John M'Cormick, upon account of his Misfortunes, to aid him in his Support.

IN the course of my eastern travels, many of the personages of distinction to whom I had the honour of being introduced, were as curious to be informed of the Caledonian antiquities, as I was to be initiated in their manners and customs, as well as to view their several different edifices, structures, and monuments; which cannot but attract the attention of the curious, nay, even the sentimental traveller.

The most of the personages, in the genteelst and most polite manner, shewed the utmost civility to me, my Go-



vernor and Linguist: indeed the generosity of many of them, inspired them so much in our favour, that they not only personally attended us, in viewing the ancient structures, sculptures, cathedrals, &c. but endeavoured to give us the intention of their erection, and what was meant by the sculptured figures on the monuments. In return of which favours, some of them requested that I would give them a description of the above island, with the antiquities thereof, so much admired by foreigners, but I could not gratify them at the time: and therefore, at my return, I went with a few companions in a barge or long boat, from the island of Mull to the aforesaid island, and took a short view thereof, guided by an honest man who lives on the spot, and seems to have an historical account of the meaning or emblems of the remaining undefaced figures, in the various fabrics in the said remote Island.

COLUMBA was a native of Ireland, descended from the royal family of that kingdom, and nearly allied to the kings of Scotland. Like many others who made a conspicuous figure in the world, his birth is said to have been preceded by some extraordinary circumstances.—Maveth, the disciple of St. Patrick, is said to have predicted the name of Columba, and the lasting glory which he should acquire by converting the Western Isles to Christianity.

His mother, also, when with child of the Saint, dreamed one night that a person, whose figure and mien seemed to denote him to be more than human, had presented her with a veil or garment of the most beautiful texture and colours; that in a little time, however, he resumed his gift, and raising and expanding it in the sky, allowed it to fly through heaven. As it flew, it continued to extend itself on all hands, over mountains and plains, till at length it covered an expanse which her eye was not able to measure. Finding what she once had possessed thus gone out of her reach, and likely to be irrecoverably lost, she could not help expressing her sorrow and regret, till the angel thus addressed her: “Be not grieved at not being allowed to retain the
“invaluable gift but a very short time. It is an emblem of
“that child of which thou art soon to be the mother: for
“him hath God ordained, as one of his prophets, to be
“extensively useful upon earth, and to lead an innumerable
“company of souls to heaven.”

Columba was born in the year 521; and his parents being thus, as they believed, admonished of the part which their son

was destined to act in life, and to which they soon perceived his genius and early disposition to piety to be peculiarly adapted, lost no time in providing him with such education as tended to qualify him for the sacred office. They first put him under the care of Cruinechan, a devout presbyter, who discovered, as he thought, in his disciple, while yet a child, extraordinary symptoms of his future glory and greatness.

Ireland had now for a long time enjoyed the sweets of the gospel, and abounded in saints and learned men, while the isles and northern parts of Scotland were covered with darkness, and in the shackles of superstition. On those dismal regions, therefore, Columba looked with a pitying eye, and, however forbidding the prospect, resolved to become the apostle of the Highlands.—Accordingly, St. Columba, St. Oran, and St. Kenneth, three brothers, cousins to the king of Ireland, fitted out a vessel called the Currachan, covered with cow-hides, and brought with them artificers of all kinds, necessary for erecting temples for our Saviour's worship, and committed themselves to the direction of Heaven, for being landed in some colony or desert, where they might exercise their religion without persecution: consequently, A. D. 565, they arrived in the West end of the Island, at a harbour, called, after the vessel, Port Currachan to this day. The length of the ship was sixty-four feet, the breadth in proportion, and the dimensions of the mould is hitherto preserved in earth and stone. At the place of landing, there are several heaps of small stones, of different bulks, within the sea-mark—being a punishment inflicted by St. Columba upon his transgressing disciples; and each heap was to be gathered in proportion to the sins they committed; and their submission was received by their patron as a sign of their penitence, and upon their confession, kneeling before him, they received absolution. There was lately found near this port, a large mass of marble, interspersed with such a variety of colours, and is in quality so fine when polished, as will, in beauty, and by its rarity, exceed the Italian and Venetian marble.

In said year 565, St. Columba, after consecrating the burying-place with earth from Jerusalem and Rome, erected the palace of St. Oran, which is said to be the first cathedral in Scotland, erected for the worship of our Saviour. He also erected the magnificent and splendid church called St. Mary's: the remains of this building is a real imitation of the plan now extant of the temple of Jerusalem. In a lane

or entry near the place of worship, is a building called the Place of Contemplation; and betwixt the said place and the temple, is interred St. Columba: his monument is not now visible. South from St. Oran's church, are buried forty-eight kings from different nations, with inscriptions on their tombs in different languages, such as Hebrew, Greek, Latin, Irish, &c. The arms of their kingdoms are beautifully engraven upon their tombs; and the most of them have the effigies of the monarchs drawn at full length, armed with swords, targets, and some with spears of an ancient construction, engraven with admirable taste. Also M'Donald, king of the Western Isles: the inscription on his tomb cannot be read. It is said, that 900 cows, at three merks Scots each, were consumed at his burial.

Near the royal tombs, is interred the abbot M'Kinnon; with his effigy drawn at full length, with lions supporting his head and feet, a crook in his hand, as a shepherd over his flock, arrayed also in his altar-ropes: he has a star on the back of his left-hand, another on his breast, a ring on one of his fingers, directing two of his fingers to the star, an angel on each side of his head, and another on the crown thereof: the inscription on his tomb is in the Hebrew language, which was lately translated into English by a visiting gentleman: Here lies John M'Kinnon, late Abbot of Iona, who died in the year 1500. May the most high God have mercy on his soul!

Abbot M'Kenzie's effigy is drawn in the same manner: but the inscription on his tomb, as well as on the tombs of other four Abbots, are so defaced that they cannot be read. There are also, in different places here, the tombs of the Highland Chieftains, the coats of arms of their families, and mottoes, with their warlike apparelling, &c.: some inscriptions are still visible and legible.—Here is also the tomb of Paul Campbell, treasurer to the king of Scotland: he was son to the ancestor of the family of Argyle: a large two-handed sword, with the figure of the coins circulating at the time, are engraven upon the stone; but the inscriptions thereon are quite defaced. Also the tomb of the famous Dr. Beaton: his elegy is visible, and in the English language, below his armorial bearing, viz.

*Behold, he falls by the dart of
iniquitous death,
who often delivered others from their complaints:
Glory be to God alone!*

Within the Nunnery, on the south-west of the village, are interred different Nuns. This building is a fine piece of architecture; and one tomb in particular cannot but attract the attention of the curious, viz. the tomb of the Lady Abbess: her effigy, in full length, is drawn in the most lively manner; she is in a praying posture, having uplifted hands, her eyes open, an angel on each side of her head playing on a harp, her lap-dog at the skirt of her garment, the moon above her head, and a comb for her hair. Fronting the Lady Abbess, on the same stone, is the Virgin Mary, with the Babe at the breast, a crown on his head, above which are the moon and stars; with the effigy of the Lady Abbess on the middle of the tomb, praying and saying, O holy Virgin, pray for me! The inscription on the tomb is as follows:

*Here lies the Mrs. Anna,
the daughter of Donald, son of Charles, late Abbess of Iona,
who died in the year 1540;
whose soul we commit to Abraham's bosom.*

And the said Nunnery is encircled with several cathedrals, monasteries, and other edifices, built in the Gothic manner. There are many other tombs, with crosses, in the island, having inscriptions in different languages. The chief cross, called St. Brandan's, is now the cross at Campbeltown; and the bell of St. Mary's Chapel, is in one of the steeples of Glasgow.

The following Figures are still visible in the Island.

Figure 1. The sin of Ingratitude, represented by three ruffian-brethren robbing their nurse of a cow, one holding the cow by the horns, the second by the tail, the third attempting to kill her, and the woman behind, with open mouth and uplifted hands, appealing to Heaven for protection.

Figure 2. Upon the right side of the Place of Contemplation, is the figure of an Archangel, with beam and balance, weighing the souls of men; the devil crouching behind to catch either beam or balance, if found wanting in their separate functions.

Figure 3. Our first parents, Adam and Eve, in the garden of Eden, standing on opposite sides of the tree of knowledge, having aprons of leaves, and hands across, covering their nakedness; the Archangel, with a sword in his hand, turning them out of the garden, and threatening destruction; the promised Saviour appearing for their preservation, and bruising the head of the serpent.

Figure 4. Our Saviour riding to Jerusalem upon an ass, and a great multitude following him, praying for his blessing.

Figure 5. The band of soldiers apprehending our Saviour, and Peter cutting off Malcheus' ear.

Figure 6. Samson killing the lion.

Figure 7. John the Baptist beheaded, his wounds gushing with blood, the executioner holding the head in his hand, the daughter of Herodias receiving it from the executioner, and John lying on the ground beheaded.

Figure 8. It is a cross lately found below the ground near the Nunnery, upon which is engraven very naturally, our Saviour crucified, in the very manner described in the scripture; and is fixed in a standing posture near the Nunnery.

There were many streets and walks leading to the west of the village: the chief street was called the King's Street. About the whole fabrics there was a fresh lake, surrounded with a fine grove of birch-wood, which made the place very agreeable.

In the middle of the island are two hills; the one is called Angel-hill; there being the remains of a place of worship to be seen on the top of each of them. It is said that at Whitsunday, the priests rode on white horses, clothed in white robes, to the said places of worship.

The island is about three miles in length, and one in breadth, and is very fertile in grain and grass; and in property belongs to the Duke of Argyle: there are 460 people residing therein.

The inhabitants buried their Males separate from their Females, till within these forty years past.

Tradition says, that Chomanus was sent from the monastery of Icolmkill, by Columba, to plant the gospel in Ilay, and being buried in this place, gave name to the parish of Keil-Choman. It is situated in the island of Ilay, is 20 miles long, and 6 broad, and is of a peninsular form; as Lochgrunart and Lochindale, two arms of the sea, cut deep into the country.

The most remarkable event of Keil-Choman, is the battle fought between the M'Donalds and the M'Leans, in 1588. M'Lean being married to M'Donald's daughter, was to have part of Ilay as her portion; but the treaty not being implemented, he came from Mull with 1400 of his clan, to force M'Donald to a compliance. M'Donald, with 1000 of his tribe, gave him battle, and destroyed the flower of his army.

M'Lean himself was killed with an arrow, and lies interred in the kirk of Kilchoman. A savage courtship indeed! but such were the times! It is not certain how long the M'Donalds maintained their dominion in Islay, and other places, after that era; but sure it is, that, by their restless disposition, they at last forfeited them.

Character of the Inhabitants, &c.—The people, in general, are sober, industrious, humane, and ready enough to follow any branch of business that they see clearly is for their advantage. The ground they have to labour, and the method of labouring, show their industry and perseverance. The number of poor they support, shows their humanity; as also two shipwrecks that happened within these few years. In both instances, the poor sailors were treated with kindness and humanity. One of these vessels was wrecked in Ross; and it is very remarkable, that a quantity of cork, very useful, and much wanted in the country for their nets, scattered over a strand of upwards of a mile in extent, was not touched by the inhabitants, though many were too poor to buy it, even if they had an opportunity. They are by no means superstitious; yet they still retain some opinions handed down by their ancestors, perhaps from the times of the Druids. It is believed by them, that the spirit of the last person that was buried, watches round the church-yard till another is buried, to whom he delivers his charge. A man in Icolumkill, of the name of Mr. M'Innis, touches for the King's evil. He is the seventh son; and it is firmly believed in the country, that he has this gift of curing. He touches or rubs over the sore with his hand, two Thursdays and two Sundays successively, in the name of the Trinity, and says, "It is God that cures." He asks nothing for his trouble. It is believed, if he did, there would be no cure. He is often sent for out of the country; and though he asks nothing, yet the patients, or their friends, make him presents. He is perfectly illiterate; and says, he does not know how the cure is effected, but that God is pleased to work it in consequence of his touch.

Such has been the general good behaviour of the inhabitants, that none have suffered capital punishment in the memory of any person living.

ACCOUNT
OF THE
ISLAND OF STAFFA.

THREE leagues north from Icolumkill, is the famous island of Staffa. It is supported upon pillars in the middle of the ocean: the pillars are of a mixed marble; and no marble containing such a variety of mixed colours was ever discovered in Britain. The island is square, and extends about three quarters of a mile: the subterraneous part thereof is so naturally arched and decorated, that it exceeds the most exquisite performance of the greatest artists in the world. There is a melodious cave in the island: any music played or sung therein, will in reality have a sound more melodious than an organ. The rocks towards the sea seem as if they were polished by artists of great taste: the pebbles on the shore have every appearance of beautiful pearls.—There is only one family in the island. In stormy weather, their house not only shakes, but even the very kettles on the fire.—There is further a greater curiosity: A barge under sails, and at low water, will with ease proceed sixty yards into the said cave; and at the distance of a league, when passing the same in dark nights, a visible sparkling like diamonds, will cast a lustre at a great distance. On the top of the island there is a beautiful natural seat of marble, resembling an easy chair, which is said to be king Fingal's throne; and contiguous thereto, there are three pyramids resembling sugar-loaves, which beautifies the royal seat.

About 50 leagues south-east from Staffa, lie the remains of a most ancient cathedral: it was erected by one of the kings of Ireland, who, for his piety and distinguished zeal in propagating the Christian religion, acquired the name of St. Cormaig.

All the colonies of the Highlands came mostly from Ireland, *viz.* the M'Donalds, M'Dougalds, M'Leans, M'Lachlans, M'Carbries, M'Neils, M'O'Sheunugs, M'Mhicuhs, &c.:—the M'Leods, M'Fees, M'Corguidals, M'Callums, from Denmark:—the M'Kenzies, Frazers, and Gordons, from France:—the Campbells from Spain.—The first religion in Scotland was called Druidism; in Erse, Druinich. They worshipped the sun, till Columba came from Ireland, who was a disciple of John the Apostle; and the preachers were called, *Culdich, i. e. Cultores Dei*, Worshipers of God.

