

sons have assured me, they have seen some as big as their fist.

*A Description of the Island Hirta; communicated also by Sr. Robert Moray.*

**H**IRTA lies, from *Snod* in *Skye-Island*, West and by North. From the nearest Land to it in the *Hereisch* (from whence people ordinarily take Boat) it lies due West; and is about 50 miles from the nearest Land.

There are three Islands together, *Hirta*, *Soa*, and *Burra*; but *Hirta* only is inhabited. The other two are excellent Pasturage for Sheep: every Sheep there having two Lambs every year.

In *Burra* there is no landing, but to the Men of *Hirta* only, in regard of the difficulty thereof; there being but about a foot broad of Landing-place, and that only to be attempted when the Boat rises. For their ordinary way is, when they come near the Rock, they turn the Boat and set the side to the Shore, two men, one at each end of the Boat, with two long Poles keeping it off, that the Waves dash it not so violently against the Rock, when it rises; at which time only the Fellow, who is to land, makes his attempt. If he miss his Landing-place he falls into the Sea; and the rest of the people hale him aboard; he having before a small Rope fasten'd about his middle to prevent that danger. But when he safely lands, (which they seldom miss to do) the rest of his Fellows land one by one: except so many as they leave to attend their little Boat, which ordinarily is of six Oars.

If there be any Strangers, (as many go from the nearest Islands in Summer) they must be tied about the middle with a strong Rope; and when the men of *Hirta* have climb'd up to the top of the Rock (which is above twenty four Fathom, before they set their foot on grass) they hale up the Strangers to them with the Ropes. When they have gathered as many Eggs, and kill'd as many Fowls as will load their Boat; they lower all in the Boat, and the ablest Fellow is always left behind; who, having none to help him, must throw himself into the Sea, and so recover the Boat. This *Burra* lies from *Hirta* about six miles Northward.

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*Soa* lies near *Hirta*, on the South-west. In this, except Fowls, there is only remarkable a Creek, where great *Seals* haunt. The people are so mad, that they go in their Boat, about four of them, in that narrow passage, to kill these *Seals* with Poles: having scarce room for their Oars, and every where seeming to close up the mouth thereof. If the Wind changeth during their being there, it is not possible to save Man or Boat.

There are several Rocks, rising out of the Sea, amongst these Islands, which the People of *Hirta* call Stacks: some ten, twenty, twenty four Fathoms above water, without any Grass upon them. On the round tops of the Rocks a great number of Fowls breed, and in all the Cliffs.

Amongst the rest there is one called *Stacka Donna*; upon the top whereof breedeth such an abundance of Fowls, that though it seems inaccessible, yet the men of *Hirta* have ventured to go thither. After they have landed with much difficulty, a man having room but for one of his feet, he must climb up twelve or sixteen Fathoms high. Then he comes to a place, where having but room for his left foot and left hand, must leap from thence to such another place before him; which, if he hit right, the rest of the ascent is easie: and with a small Cord, which he carries with him, he hales up a Rope, whereby all the rest come up. But if he misseth that Footstep, (as oftentimes they do) he falls into the Sea, and the Company takes him in by the small Cord, and sits still until he be a little refreshed, and then he tries it again; for every one there is not able for that sport.

*Hirta* Island is two Miles in length, accounted *Five-penny-Land*. In it there are Ten Families. The Men seldom grow old; and seldom was it ever known, that any man died in his Bed there, but was either drowned or broke his neck. The Men are strong, big, and well skinned. Their Food is only young Fowls and Eggs; their Drink Whey and Water. Much given to keeping of Holy-days; having a number of little Chappels, where sometimes they watch whole Nights, making merry together with their Offerings.

The most Service of their Women is to harrow their Land: which they must do, when their Husbands are climbing for Fowls for them.

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Their ordinary way of dividing their Land, is one Halfpeny to every Family. The Rocks also are divided, such and such on every Halfpeny. And there is a kind of Officer left by the Master of the Island, who governs in his absence, and so regulates, that the best Climbers and the worst are mixed together, that so none of the Land be unlaboured; that is, that all the Shelves of the highest Rocks be searched for Eggs.

The way of their Climbing, when they kill their Fowls, is thus; They go two and two with a long Rope, not made of Hemp, but of Cow-Hides salted, and the Thongs cut round about, and plaited six or nine fold. Each end of the Rope is tyed about each one of their Middle, and he that is foremost goes till he comes to a safe standing, the other standing firm all that time to keep him up, in case his foot should have slip'd: When the foremost is come to a safe standing; then the other goes, either below or above him, where his business is; and so they watch time about; seldom any of them being lost, when this is observed.

The aforesaid Officer, when any couple is to be Married, brings them to one of their Chappels, and administers an Oath to them; so they are married.

Their Children, when they come to the Age of 15 or 16. or thereabout, come with the Master of the Isle to the *Hereish* Island, and are there Baptized.

An ordinary way of killing the Fowls in the Mist is this, Some of these Fellows lie beside the Door of the little Houses they have in their Islands, flat upon their banks, and open their Breasts. Which, when the Fowls perceive, they sit upon them, and are presently catch'd, and their necks broke. One Fellow has kill'd hundreds of Fowls in one night, after this manner.

Sometimes they set Grins on the very top of the highest Rocks, and make them strong for great Fowls. One being setting of these Grins, as he was walking along his great Toe was catch'd in one of them, which made him stumble and fall down: yet the Grin being fast and strong, kept him hung with his head downward, till those that missed him came in the morning, and found him so fallen.