THOUGHTS ON HUNTING, IN A SERIES OF FAMILIAR LETTERS

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649177547

Thoughts on hunting, in a series of familiar letters by Peter Beckford

Edited by Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd.
Cover @ 2017

www.triestepublishing.com

PETER BECKFORD

THOUGHTS ON HUNTING, IN A SERIES OF FAMILIAR LETTERS

Trieste

THOUGHTS ON HUNTING

In a Series of Familiar Letters by PETER BECKFORD, ESQ., with Illustrations by G. DENHOLM ARMOUR and Introduction by E. D. CUMING

HODDER AND STOUGHTON
NEW YORK AND LONDON

SI QUID NOVISTI RECTIUS ISTIS,
CANDIDUS IMPERTI: SI NON, HIS UTERE MECUM

Horace

Butler and Tanner, The Selwood Printing Works, Frome, and London

INTRODUCTION

THE year 1911, marking as it does the centenary of the death of the author, seems appropriate for publication of a new edition of *Thoughts on Hunting*.

What Izaak Walton is to angling, that Peter Beckford is to fox-hunting; each is the father of the literature of his sport; but with this difference, that whereas Walton as an instructor has long since been relegated to honourable retirement, Beckford retains his place as 'head master' and will retain it so long as fox-hunting continues. The reason lies on the surface; Beckford knew his subject from the bottom and was above all things thorough; he seems always to have kept a huntsman, but he himself was a perfect master of all that pertained to hounds whether in the field or in kennel, and had occasion required could have discharged the duty of kennel huntsman or of feeder with complete knowledge of its minutiæ. A man much above the average in ability, intelligence and power of observation, he made a study of fox-hunting in its every aspect; and his *Thoughts* were penned only after many years of experience. Various changes have come over the sport during the hundred and thirty years which have passed since his book first saw the light; but its essentials remain the same, hence the permanent value of Beckford's work. It is hardly too much to say that the *Thoughts* are unique; even as they were the first word on their subject, so they are like to be, in a sense, the last, for in each of the numberless works since written on fox-hunting, acknowledgment of Beckford is to be found.

It is curious to contrast with the author's enduring monument the inscription—self chosen, surely—on the memorial tablet in Steepleton Church:

> 'We die and are forgotten—'tis Heaven's decree;
> Thus the fate of others will be the fate of me.'

The production of *Thoughts on Hunting*, however, was a mere incident in Beckford's career; though the book passed through five editions in his lifetime and undoubtedly won him recognition among his peers, he could not have anticipated the permanence of its fame. He had been a Member of Parliament, he had travelled, he was highly educated, and he had many interests other than hunting; and though he lived in an age when authorship was uncommon and the production of a book of any kind by a country

gentleman must have been a nine days' wonder among his neighbours, Beckford himself set no great store by it: when he had it printed, at Salisbury, he omitted his name from the title-page.

Which omission invites the reflection that posterity is under no small debt to the critic who dealt with the work in the *Monthly Review* of September, 1781. Had that critic not passed upon the book the ignorant strictures which caused so much annoyance we might never have known the name of the writer. Beckford might have justified his own epitaph; have died and been forgotten like others. The second edition of the *Thoughts* was published as a direct response to the critique in the *Monthly Review*; the preface clearly suggests that this was its purpose, and no fewer than seven footnotes are inserted in answer to the charges of cruelty; moreover the third edition did not appear until 1796. This work is a reprint of the fourth published in 1802.

Having regard to our debt to that Monthly Reviewer, it may be worth glancing at his pages; they have interest of their own as throwing light upon the manner in which fox-hunters and fox-hunting were regarded at the time by those who knew nothing of either:—

'There appears to be so little affinity or correspondence between hunting and literature upon a general comparison of the professors of each, that a didactic treatise on the art of hunting was rather an unexpected acquisition; and still more so to find the precepts delivered in an easy and agreeable style. The work before us does not only come from *a keen sportsman* but from a man of letters; a coincidence the less to be wondered at if we are justified in conjecturing his profession from some hints that have escaped his pen.'

The critic, it must be confessed, bases his conjecture that the writer was a clergyman on somewhat slender grounds; the 'hints' to which he refers are these two passages in Letter XXII: (1) 'I can assure you it (i.e. the ill-luck which so frequently attends fox-hunting) has provoked me often and has made *even a parson swear*.' (2) 'It (digging out a fox) put a clergyman who was present, in mind that he had *a corpse to bury*, which otherwise had been forgotten.' It crosses one's mind that the critic had a very low opinion of the attainments of country gentlemen if these two remarks commended themselves as providing him with the clue to a mystery otherwise insoluble. But let us see what more he has to say:—

'The task of laying down some principles of hunting has thus devolved upon the Writer under consideration; and perhaps the business could not have been left in better hands.'

He proceeds to sketch the general plan and scope of the work, illustrating his remarks with well-chosen extracts, and quotes, with approval of its literary quality, the author's picture of a run in Letter XIII. So far

there is much to gratify and nothing to offend; but he has by no means finished his task. Having, he says—

'Discharged our duty to the Public and the Author in the capacity of Reviewers, we cannot think of dismissing a subject that never till now came so professedly before us without introducing a word or two concerning humanity to the brute creation: although we believe that this is a subject of which true sportsmen never think or wish to be reminded.'

The insinuation conveyed in the concluding words was sufficiently unfair; but the critic proceeds to develop his case on passages quoted from the book:—

'Thus we find, eat or not eat, work or play, whipping is always in season, and as there is so much stated work to perform we need not enquire why two whippers-in beside the huntsman are required for one pack of fox-hounds.'

Beckford makes the first words of this comment the text for an explanatory note to the passage which evoked it (p. 22); the reviewer's curious conception of the functions of whippers-in justifies his suggestion that the critic seemed to be unacquainted with his subject! Again, animadverting upon the precept that 'we should give scope to all the hare's little tricks, nor kill her foully and over-matched,' the reviewer delivered himself in these terms:—

'Thus the result of a true sportsman's compassion is not to put a speedy end to the sufferings of the little timid animal, but to prolong its terror until it has tried all the efforts agonized nature can dictate.'

And again referring to the author's advice to destroy old hounds—which, as Beckford points out, he materially misquotes:—

'Of a truth a sportsman is the most uniform consistent character, from his own representations, that we ever contemplated.'

Inasmuch as Beckford thought it worth while to issue a new edition rebutting, in the footnotes we all know, the charges levied against sportsmen generally and himself as their spokesman, it has seemed worth while to examine to this extent the lucubration itself; the more, since it was instrumental in revealing the identity of the author. The dignity and restraint of the preface to which Beckford attached his name can only be appreciated at the full after perusal of the *Monthly Review* attack. Though he amplified some of the passages in the first edition and gave neater finish to many sentences, Beckford did not in the second edition tone down nor alter a word in any of the passages attacked. How keenly he felt the accusations of wanton cruelty his footnotes show, but calumny could not make him qualify in the least degree any word he had written. We want no other evidence of his character than is furnished by his prompt disclosure of identity.

Beckford's character for humanity scarcely needs defence; if his

pages show him a rigorous disciplinarian, they also show the necessity for strict discipline; and if he appear to counsel liberal use of the thong, the least attentive reader will remember passages which prove him kinder than his creed.

Perhaps by very reason of the general applicability of the *Thoughts* to fox-hunting, as we follow the sport, it is difficult to realize how widely the circumstances under which Beckford and his contemporaries hunted differed from those prevailing in the twentieth century. He had many and great advantages; of railways nobody had yet dreamed; wire was in the womb of a yet more distant future; fields were small—though not always small enough nor knowledgeable enough in venery to please the Master; and throughout the whole series of Letters we find no single reference to the enormity of riding over wheat, seeds or roots. This last may be partly due to the nature of Beckford's country; it was part of that now known as the South Dorset, but he hunted also in Cranbourne Chase, now included in Viscount Portman's country, over which he enjoyed certain rights in virtue of his office as Ranger of the Bursey-stool Walk.[1] He says he hunted in three countries, 'all as different as it is possible to be.'

One other advantage enjoyed by some eighteenth-century masters at least is unknown to the M.F.H. of our own day. 'The fixing a day or two before-hand,' Beckford writes (Letter XIX),'upon the country in which you intend to hunt, is a great hindrance to sport in fox-hunting.' Beckford, it would seem, laboured under this disability, while the imaginary Master he addresses had his whole country to himself and could order the operations of the day as wind or weather might suggest without consultation with neighbouring hunts. The follower of the latter would have to be up betimes and meet hounds at the kennels. As Beckford had to settle a day or two in advance where he intended to hunt, he no doubt let his followers know his plans. His supporters, too, were not often required to be at the covertside by sunrise. He approved such early hours for other people; but did not follow his own prescription, preferring a later start *unless* his hounds were out of blood; in that case he went out early, in order to give them the several advantages attaching to better scent, to tired and full-fed foxes. Whatever time he went out, he did not prolong his day's sport into the afternoon; he would never draw after one o'clock. He took out a stronger pack than is considered desirable nowadays: 'from twenty to thirty couple are as many, I think, as you should ever take into the field'[2]: a pack of twenty couple is held large enough under any conditions to-day.

There is reason to conclude that his country was poorly stocked with foxes, at any rate by comparison with modern fashionable countries:

[1] *Anecdotes respecting Cranbourn Chase*; 1818. Rev. W. Chafin.

[2] Forty years earlier the pack used was larger. The Duke of Richmond, on one occasion at least, took out as many as thirty-five couples. *Records of the Old Charlton Hunt*, 1910. Earl of March, M.V.O., D.S.O.