

COUNTING SHEEP

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A Celebration of the Pastoral Heritage of Britain

PHILIP WALLING

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❧ INTRODUCTION ❧



*... For there is good news yet to hear and fine things to be seen
Before we go to Paradise by way of Kensal Green.*

G. K. Chesterton, 'The Rolling English Road'

THERE IS A PARALLEL WORLD AT WORK IN BRITAIN which most people, even those who live close to it, hardly ever notice and, even when they do, know little or nothing about. It's a world that has existed time out of mind and was once the foundation of all the wealth of England. And despite its decline from high importance in the Middle Ages and the ravages caused by the opening up of the New World, it continues, keeping faith with the passing seasons, obeying its own imperatives and adapting to survive.

This is the world of sheep husbandry.

Just as robins and blackbirds occupy the same territory and yet completely ignore one another, so most modern Britons occupy the same land as millions of sheep and, for all the notice we take of them, they might as well exist in another dimension. Everybody recognises sheep when they see them – they have woolly coats, live in fields, eat grass and have lambs in the spring – and there are few country places in Britain where you won't encounter sheep. But those things apart, to most people sheep are only sheep. They would not be able to

name the breed, or the part of Britain it belonged to, or know what it was doing or why it was there. One of the purposes of this book is to try to remedy that. Another is to show you a little about something that we do really well here in Britain, something of which we ought justifiably to be proud. Because producing food and wool from our own soil is a real activity, not a metaphor, and unlike much that happens in modern Britain, it does not evaporate when you try to grasp it

How many of the millions of people who scurry past Shepherd's Bush every day give a thought to where the name came from? It was once an open heath, where sheep grazed under the eye of their shepherd, and there would have been a hawthorn bush trained into a shape that was once ubiquitous all across the downs and heaths of England. The thorn was pruned to grow into the shape of an oval cup, rather like an armchair; all the inner wood was removed and the outer branches were allowed to grow densely and knit together to a thickness of about eighteen inches. The trunk was shaped to make a kind of a platform upon which the shepherd could lay a bed of straw for comfort, and then he could step up onto it, throw a sack over the bushy sides to protect his arms from the thorns, and stand like a sea captain on his bridge, scanning the flock on the heath from his vantage point. Some shepherds' bushes were shaped to form a roof, as well as sides, and with a sack thrown over the top, would have made a fine shelter from the sun and rain.

Right in the middle of one of the most cosmopolitan cities on earth we have this permanent reminder of the enduring place that sheep have had in our lives. There are hundreds of sheep streets, sheep washes, sheep towns, associations with wool and weaving and spinning in every part of the kingdom. But these historical references and allusions should not lead us to believe that sheep belong to the past and have lost their importance. Far from it. We still have about 23 million of

them in the United Kingdom, even though the national flock is reduced from 1992, when we had the ninth largest in the world, with 44.5 million head of sheep, half of them breeding ewes. It has never fallen below 20 million, apart from during and just after the two world wars when crop production took precedence. The sharpest reduction came in the year to June 2001, when the foot-and-mouth slaughter reduced the flock by 5.5 per cent. It has never recovered from this.

Britain and its people have been formed by waves of migrants flowing in over thousands of years. Historians can tell us something about their origins and the effect they had when they got here. But little is known about the domestic animals they brought with them. Perhaps they weren't considered worthy of recording, only being livestock, but the immigrants' animals, particularly their sheep, established themselves just as surely as did their human keepers. Some were crossed with the breeds they found here, others retained their purity for centuries, while a few have remained almost as they were when they arrived. By adapting to the landscape and climate, they found a place and established their character.

More than any other piece of land in the world, Britain is quintessential sheep country. Its climate and terrain are ideal for rearing sheep and sheep have been kept in large numbers throughout the British Isles for thousands of years. Our temperate climate, with little or no snow cover in most winters, and nearly always some vegetation available at any altitude, allows sheep to be kept outside in most places, throughout the year. From the thin soils and semi-tundra of the mountains of Scotland, Wales and the Lake District, to the Pennine fells, the rich lowlands of the Midlands, the marshes of Kent and the moors of the West Country, over many centuries, breeds of sheep have been developed which have become marvelously adapted to the land they live on. We have more than sixty different native breeds – a breed for every type of land and

climate – and much of our landscape is the result of centuries of sheep grazing.

The French, who have remained closer to their soil than we have, talk much about *terroir* – the semi-mystical belief that the soil imparts a unique quality to everything that grows on it. Mention *le terroir* to a Frenchman and he will nod knowingly; no further explanation is required to explain, for example, the difference between wines made from the same variety of grape grown on adjoining plots of ground – sometimes only separated by a track or a stone wall – *mais c'est le terroir, c'est évident!* And our native sheep are just as much a product of their soil as are the Frenchman's grapes, or his cheeses or anything else that he gets from it. The soil imbues its products with certain characteristics. Sheep bred and reared for long enough on soils overlying limestone appear to take on a black or blueish bloom to their skin; whereas acidic soils, especially those containing iron, seem to impart a reddish hue. The best sheep-breeders are instinctively aware of these effects and strive, whether consciously or not, to enhance them. Breeders of the Swaledale aim for highly defined black and white skin and hair colouring; any shade of brown is not tolerated and they aim for a blueish cream fleece, like skimmed milk. By contrast, everything about the Herdwick, bred on the thin soils of the Lake District, tends towards steel-grey with reddish contrasting tones. And the Wiltshire Horn, on the calcareous soils of its native downs, is the quintessence of chalky whiteness.

But there is another thing about our national flock that is unique to Britain. We are the only sheep-keeping country in the world to have developed, over the last century and a half, a remarkably sophisticated stratified national meat-producing system, based on double cross-breeding, which has come to be called the *sheep pyramid*. The sheep at the top are pure-bred mountain and hill ewes, of which there are many millions, which form a genetic reservoir upon which the modern British

sheep industry depends. These are moved downhill to better land and crossed with Longwool rams to produce breeding females which, in their turn, are crossed with Down breeds (referred to as terminal sires) to produce what are called butchers' lambs. The effect of this system is that most of the lamb we produce for the table in Britain is descended from one of our pure breeds of mountain or hill sheep.

However, we have not always had this pure-breed crossing system. Until about the beginning of the eighteenth century there were many different regional *types* of sheep, few of which were breeds that we would recognise today. All of the *types* were descended from four main wild prototype ancestors, and over long centuries they developed distinctly local characteristics. The *Urial* (or *Turbary*) ranges from the near east and eastwards into Tibet; its main distinguishing characteristics are a fawn coat, curved single horns in the rams and light erect horns in the ewes. They are prolific, twins being usual and triplets fairly common. Then there is the *Mouflon*, which was once widely distributed across Europe; the rams have massive horns that grow at right angles to the head, backwards (and sometimes outwards) and end in a tip just below the eyes after completing two thirds of a circle. The ewes are nearly always polled, i.e. hornless. The third is the *Argali* from central and northern Asia. Both sexes are horned but the rams' horns are larger than the ewes' and curl outwards with up to three spirals; they also have a distinctive white or grey muzzle (like the Swaledale). The fourth is the *Bighorn*, originating in north-east Asia and Siberia and later extending throughout North America, where, like their bovine counterpart the bison (and many other native species), they were hunted almost to extinction during the nineteenth century. Both sexes have horns, massive and curled on the rams. They have a hairy-woolly coat, like a Wiltshire Horn, a white rump like a roe deer and a white or grey muzzle like the Argali.

Their development into local types was partly through their adaptation to the soil and climate, emphasised by geographical isolation, and partly because breeders in a particular locality tended to favour a particular kind of sheep for sound practical reasons, such as there being a local market for its wool, or for its meat, or for its docility or fecundity, or whatever. Often a number of influences coincided and breeders enhanced certain characteristics because their experience told them that animals with those traits tended to thrive better than those lacking them and thus were more profitable.

But it is hard to trace the origins of our modern breeds because the evidence is lacking, incomplete or confusing or they have been difficult to classify. Some breeds manifest what could be described as primitive features – for example, six horns, or a carcass like a goat, or they automatically shed their fleece in spring – whilst others have been selectively bred for certain characteristics such as high milk yields or a particularly meaty carcass. There is also much scholarly disagreement over the routes by which different types of sheep came into Northern Europe. Advances in DNA analysis and carbon dating of bones have thrown some light into certain dark corners and added to the evidence, but there are still large gaps in our knowledge about the origins of particular breeds that will probably never be filled. There are many reasons for this: the literate ruling class (with notable monastic exceptions) tended not to concern itself with matters deemed proper for peasants. The origins and management of domestic livestock were not considered worthy of aristocratic concern. And the peasant flockmasters and breeders, assuming they were literate, tended to get on with their work rather than record what they were doing. Some of the later pioneers responsible for the breeding revolution in the eighteenth century were secretive about their methods and sometimes deliberately confused their rivals by misrepresentation. Breed names have been used imprecisely

and interchangeably over the centuries and breed characteristics have changed radically according to demand, fashion and sometimes individual whim. And, rather like an elephant being hard to describe, even though we all know one when we see it, it is difficult to describe in words the differences between one breed of sheep and another.

Also, we tend to underestimate the effect of modern photography in reproducing a breed exactly as it looks. It was only fairly recently that livestock painters began to strive for realism: the sheep in William Taylor Longmire's 1870 painting of *Herdwick Sheep at Windermere, Seen from Low Wood* (kept at Townend in the Browne Collection by The National Trust) actually look like sheep, although not much like modern Herdwicks. And the pictures of the celebrated livestock painter Thomas Sidney Cooper, who knew livestock from a countryman's perspective, are accurate representations of animals as they were. But going further back in time, from the eighteenth century to the Middle Ages and beyond, when it would have been fascinating to see what domestic sheep actually looked like, such images as we have are far from realistic. Many of them were propaganda, done as caricatures to exaggerate desirable attributes, such as the 1842 picture of Jonas Webb's improved Southdowns, and an 1863 painting of Shropshire Downs, both of which depict sheep as preposterous blocks of meat standing on impossibly thin legs. There are some apparently accurate images from the second half of the eighteenth century, but they are remarkable for their realism.

We have also tended to take our sheep so much for granted that we forget that mankind has depended on them for much of our history. They are the essential domestic animal, more so than the cow, the goat or even the pig. They are also our oldest domestic animal and for centuries have satisfied many of our needs. Their tenfold purpose – meat, fat, blood, wool, milk, skin, gut, horn, bone and manure – provided us with food,

clothing, housing, heating and light, all manner of domestic implements, soil fertility and parchment – which for centuries was the only material upon which a permanent written record could be preserved. Over the millennia each of these products has assumed a greater or lesser value as our needs have changed. We no longer use much tallow for candles, as we did during the eighteenth century, when the demand across Europe was such that the fat from a sheep's carcase was worth twice as much as the meat. Similarly during the wool boom of the Middle Ages the fleece was worth much more than the carcase. Now the carcase is worth between ten and twenty times the value of the fleece and the tallow is of negligible value. But throughout our association with them there has never been a time when we have not depended on sheep for one or other of their products. Our sheep represent a store of seasonal plant production that we can call upon when nothing else is available.

For centuries, when wool was our greatest cash crop, flockmasters kept sheep for the weight and quality of their wool. And the woolliest sheep were often the most ill-shaped, ungainly animals, slow to mature and living to great ages. Their breeding properties, carcase shape and fecundity were not all that important because only a few lambs were needed every year to maintain the flock size. Few animals were killed for meat and those that were tended to be older ones that had matured into the kind of mutton which would now be unattractive to modern palates. Many of these wool-bearing types were of venerable lineage, descended from sheep introduced into lowland Britain by the Romans to supply wool for their cloth manufactories. As the towns and cities grew, the demand for meat (and candle tallow) increased – although wool was still a worthwhile crop. Even into the 1980s the annual wool clip was reckoned to pay the farm rent. But as the urban population burgeoned in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,

for the first time in our long relationship with sheep we began to keep them almost exclusively to satisfy the demand for their meat. In the last decade or so, a fashionable niche market in sheep's milk products has opened up again in Britain for the first time in nearly a century. We abandoned sheep milking – mostly for cheese making – when liquid cows' milk became commonplace, unlike in Continental countries, where sheep's cheese continued to be made and sold in large quantities and cows' milk in bottles never caught on as it did in Britain.

This urban demand for meat caused a sea change in the British pastoral world over less than fifty years in the middle of the eighteenth century when a few farsighted farmers and graziers anticipated this revolution. The change in emphasis to meat marked the beginning of a long decline in the quality of fine English wool, and our renowned Longwools, such as the Lincoln and the Cotswold, and the incomparable Shortwools – notably the Ryeland – that had produced the wool-wealth of England in the Middle Ages were reduced to shadows of their medieval glory.

Then gradually, throughout the nineteenth century, the different regional types of sheep were developed into the kinds of distinct breeds we know today. Most of these were associated with a particular locality, but they were much more homogeneously bred to conform to standards of breed uniformity than they had been when the emphasis was only on wool. By the second half of the nineteenth century the enhancing effect on their offspring of crossing together certain pure breeds became more widely recognised (particularly after the work of the monk Gregor Mendel in cross-breeding peas). Then when the railways made it easy to move livestock over long distances at a fraction of the cost of droving, the way was open to British sheep farmers to develop the sheep pyramid, the sophisticated national meat-producing system that we have today.

This book is an attempt to give a flavour of the wonderful

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story of how we and our versatile, compliant companions made our landscape in the great endeavour of taming the wilderness. For man and his sheep stand in partnership outside wild nature, on the side of the civilised world, transforming its vegetation for human benefit. Perhaps the most exciting thing is that the whole pastoral history of our Islands can be traced through breeds that still graze our pastures. They are all still here. So let's start at the beginning.



THE SHEEP OUR ANCIENT ANCESTORS KEPT



*... Theirs is no earthly breed
Who only haunt the verges of the earth
And only on the sea's salt herbage feed –
Surely the great white breakers gave them birth ...*

Roy Campbell, 'Horses on the Camargue',
from *Adamastor*, Faber & Faber, 1930, p. 80

ABOUT THIRTY YEARS AGO MY NEIGHBOUR ACQUIRED a dozen piebald Jacobs (gentlemen's parkland sheep, as I thought) with two, four and sometimes six horns, to graze the fields around his house. He was a lecturer in engineering and had designed his own elaborate sheep pens to hold his little flock for handling. He had also acquired a collie dog. But this dog flatly refused to have anything to do with sheep. If she even got wind that she was expected to go anywhere near them she would run into her bed and refuse to come out. No amount of cajoling, or even dragging, made the slightest difference to the recalcitrant animal.

From time to time his wife and daughter and anyone else who happened to be at the house were enlisted to try to pen

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up his Jacobs, but for eighteen months he failed to get them to go into his pens. They simply refused to be driven anywhere near them and whenever he tried to corner them they scattered. It was like a circus. They all gave birth during their first lambing time without needing any help, so he left them to fend for themselves. They were not shorn that year and by the next spring they were a sorry sight, carrying two fleeces, one on top of the other.

However, there were compulsory dipping regulations in force. And after their second lambing, when the flock had grown to over thirty mixed females and uncastrated males (which formed a separate little pack away from the ewes), he had to find a way to get them into his pens to comply with the law. So he asked me if I would go round with my dogs and help him.

Now these sheep were wild. I only had to rattle the chain on the gate and their heads went up. As the dogs circled round them they split up into two groups: one flocked on a little hillock at the top of the field and the other made for a gap in the hedge into the next field. I put one of my dogs round the escapees and with some difficulty she brought them back through the hedge into the field, but as soon as they realised they were being manoeuvred towards the sheep pens, they divided themselves into another two troupes, one which allowed itself to be eased into the pens, but the other legged it for the opposite corner of the field from the little group on the hillock. The more we tried the more agitated they got.

This charade went on for ages, with me getting more and more irritated and the dogs more and more desperate. These sheep had never been bossed or dogged and with each failed attempt to get them into the pen they grew bolder, leaping over the dogs and running away like deer with their leggy little lambs keeping close to their mothers. My neighbour's daughter and wife emerged from the house roused by our shouting. The

four of us, with my two dogs, eventually got the flock penned, but one ewe and her lamb leapt the wooden railings and took off down the road towards the village. We later cornered them both in a garden a mile and a half away. They were completely exhausted or we wouldn't have been able to catch them, but even so, the ewe still had enough fight left in her to jump about as I dragged her by a horn towards the van, with her frightened lamb tagging on behind. But as soon as I got her into the van the lamb turned tail and took off down the road as fast as it could run. I sent the dogs, but they couldn't turn the terrified lamb, and after a hell of a chase, it finally gave up and flopped down on the verge, panting and lay there. I picked it up and threw it in the van with its mother, who by this time had set up a tremendous bleating and was running at the back windows butting them, trying to break out. This was my first encounter with primitive sheep and it rather prejudiced me against them.

Apart from oddities like Jacobs, there are two main primitive types of sheep, which came into Britain by two different routes. One is the northern short-tailed group (which for shorthand I call 'Viking' sheep). These came into northern Britain via Scandinavia and Russia from central Asia. By a genetic quirk, they only have thirteen vertebrae in their tails, compared with twenty in other sheep. The second type is a long-tailed Celtic sheep believed to have come from the Near East through the Mediterranean into southern Britain and then spread north. An example of this Celtic type is the Soay that roams semi-wild on Hirta, the largest of the abandoned St Kilda islands. But its near neighbour, the Hebridean, is a short-tailed Viking sheep. It seems that the two early migrations reached the furthest extent of their ranges in the Western Isles, where they met but never mingled. Rather as the Isle of Barra is Catholic and next door the Isle of Lewis is fiercely Protestant.

One of the most unusual of the Viking sheep is found on North Ronaldsay, or Rinansey (Ringan's Isle) in Old Norse,

the most northerly of the Orkney Islands, their last redoubt in Britain. They have endured here, on the very edge of the British Isles, because their island is so isolated and for the last two centuries have been confined to the foreshore for a large part of the year. Here they fend for themselves, and have adapted themselves to living on a diet of seaweed.

They do most things the opposite way round to other sheep. At their best during winter, when the red seaweed they prefer, *Palmaria palmata*, or 'dulse', is most abundant; they can't eat grass for too long, or they are poisoned by the copper in it, yet they cannot get all the annual sustenance they need from seaweed alone; and unlike other sheep, which eat by day and chew their cud at night, they feed according to the tides, lying up on the foreshore at high water and then following the ebbing tide onto the rocks to graze the exposed seaweed. They can even swim. Some of the most intrepid will plunge into the ebbing seawater and head for an outcrop to be the first to reach the tastiest fronds. They are as agile as goats, negotiating the slippery rocks, unafraid of the surging tide. And they are not entirely vegetarian. They have developed an odd partiality to the feet and legs of dead seabirds. When the new automatic revolving lighthouse at Dennis Ness was installed, it attracted flocks of birds, which flew into it and were killed. Their carcasses proved irresistible to the sheep, which came from all around the shore to eat their legs.

Although the sea sustains them, it is an exacting benefactor. For in winter, powerful Atlantic tides surge around the island, in contention with the calmer waters of the North Sea. And when a westerly gale blows against a running tide over the shallow uneven seabed, many of the smaller low-lying islands, such as North Ronaldsay, are often ringed by broken water and overblown by spindrift for days on end, confusing land and sea. During particularly violent storms, the little sheep have hardly any protection from the crashing waves that douse them with

salt-water and spray, and even on calm days the land is seldom free of a ruffling breeze.

The island's flock was banished to the foreshore in the 1830s because the islanders were in desperate circumstances. Seaweed grows in vast quantities in the cool coastal waters around North Ronaldsay, nourished by the Gulf Stream. The crofters had used its almost unlimited growth as fertiliser for their sandy soil, dried it for fuel (there is no peat or wood on the island) and in winter, when other fodder was scarce, supplemented their animals' diet with it. But there was still a vast annual crop that went unused.

So when James Traill, an Edinburgh lawyer, bought the island in 1727 for 2,000 guineas (£1 an acre) he probably had more than half an eye on the huge potential for kelp making. His purchase included the foreshore, which gave him the right to gather the 'tangles', as the seaweed *Laminaria digitata* is called locally, to make the kelp. Traill made it a condition of the crofters' tenancies that they collectively produce a certain tonnage of kelp each year. It was an arduous business. Between forty and fifty cartloads of wet tangles made a ton of kelp after being dried and burnt, in controlled fires, like charcoal-burning, in shallow pits on the shore. A ton of kelp would make about 8 lb of iodine.

During the fifty years between 1740 and 1790, kelp brought in about £37,000 to North Ronaldsay. The crofters produced about 150 tons a year, at an average price of £5 a ton, which rose to £20 during the Napoleonic wars. Half the income went to the crofters, the laird received a third and the balance went on shipping and expenses. But this large cash income had a corrosive effect on the crofters' moral economy, inducing them to neglect their crofts and fishing and live entirely on the profit from the kelp trade. The prosperity which it brought to the island caused its population to grow in fifty years by 40 per cent from 384 to 522.

In 1793 Sir John Sinclair of Ulbster in Caithness (first President of the Board of Agriculture and the man responsible for bringing Cheviot sheep to the north of Scotland) warned of the foolishness of relying on the kelp trade, ‘agriculture, which in every county is the first and foremost of the arts, is greatly neglected; and a style of living has been introduced among the proprietors, which their lands can by no means support, and which, if ever this manufacture should fail, must bring certain ruin upon them, their tenants, and their families’.

Sinclair was proved right: by 1832 the price of kelp had collapsed, and, with the islanders facing destitution, even famine, something drastic had to be done. Traill’s grandson, the then laird, drawing on his experience of colonial administration in India, together with his land-grieve (agent), Robert Scarth of Sanday, known as ‘a mesterfu’ man’, came up with a radical plan to save the island’s people from extinction.

Apart from encouraging emigration to larger, less populous islands, the plan involved ‘land-squaring’ and building a dyke round the island to keep the sheep off the cultivable land across which they had hitherto roamed unchecked. Up to then the whole island was cultivated in a Scottish version of the communal open-field system (the ‘run-rig’) that had been abolished in much of the rest of Britain by this time. The crofters were allotted strips of the island’s arable land each year so that everybody got a share of the best and the worst. Land-squaring abolished the run-rig and divided the land between the crofters to make it more productive and banishing the sheep prevented them from roaming over the crops and damaging them. The island’s flock was still kept mainly for its wool (and a little tallow for lights) and only occasionally killed for meat, because as is usual in pastoral societies they seldom ate their sheep (and when they did it was only the older ones).

The drystone sheep dyke was twelve miles long, built round the island above high water, to ‘louping height’ – about

six feet – a little higher than the sheep could jump. It separated the 270 acres of foreshore from the rest of the island. The crofters were then allotted the right to keep a certain number of sheep in the communal flock, according to the size of their squared-up holdings. The flock has been confined to the beach-head and foreshore ever since, although the ewes are allowed into the fields for about four months between lambing in mid-April and weaning in late July or early August. The nutritive value of seaweed varies with the seasons, but its great benefit is that it is at its best in mid-winter, when it is most plentiful and there is little else to eat. In spring, at lambing time, it also has milk-stimulating qualities.

The paradox is that Scarth's scheme was not intended to benefit the flock, which was considered something of a nuisance, and of marginal value to the island's economy. Had the flock not been banished to the foreshore it is unlikely it would have survived because the crofters would probably have sacrificed the sheep to grow the crops which they desperately needed to sustain the population. Although it was not a new experience for them to eat seaweed, forcing the flock to subsist on it most of the year was a unique experiment, and not certain to succeed. It is probable that there were many sheep unable to adapt to the new regime which simply died, and the current flock is descended from the survivors.

Scarth established the Sheep Court to regulate the management of the flock according to rules agreed between the laird and the crofters. Each of the five 'toonships' elects two Sheepmen to the Court to enforce the Regulations, and the Court appoints a secretary. In Scarth's time there were seventy-one crofts, keeping 2,250 sheep. Now the flock is between 2,500 and 3,000, because there is an abundance of seaweed, which is no longer used for anything other than feeding sheep, but there are far fewer crofts.

As with all the short-tailed types, these little sheep are

very prolific: three-quarters have twins, triplets are common and even quads not uncommon. The lambs are nearly all born within four weeks in April and May, and are very small at birth, little bigger than kittens, so there are hardly ever any lambing problems. But despite their prolificacy, it is traditional on North Ronaldsay to allow ewes to rear only one lamb each. The rest are killed shortly after birth. They prefer to kill the gimmer (female) lambs unless they are wanted for replacements, because the wethers (castrated males) make a bigger carcase – about 15–20 kg deadweight. So for every 100 ewes, they keep about fifteen gimmer lambs and kill all the rest.

This sinister business is never mentioned in any of the books or travel articles. The National Sheep Association handbook on *British Sheep* is silent on the subject, as was nearly everybody I spoke to. Even nineteenth-century writers do not refer to it. It is possible that the killing was not as extensive as it is now, although I doubt it. Shepherds usually go round the lambing fields trying to save lambs' lives. Here they go round with an iron bar. Far more lambs are killed than reared because it is commonly believed that each ewe is only capable of rearing a single lamb. This is curious because the North Ronaldsay's short-tailed cousin, the Shetland, can rear multiple lambs. It might simply be the crofters' prejudice, or the sheep's diet, or poor milk supply, but it can't have anything to do with the size of the island because even if they kept half the number of sheep, the crofters would still believe each ewe only capable of rearing one lamb.

As the propensity for multiple births is inherited and most of the island's sheep are twins and triplets, these will tend to breed twins and triplets themselves. If the crofters were to breed only from ewe lambs that were singles it might be possible to breed out the fecundity, but that would require either a communal effort recording and marking the sheep, or

individual owners managing their own sheep separately from the rest, which is impossible under the present system.

Individual owners cannot even select rams for breeding with their own ewes, because all the sheep run together on the shore. The only control over breeding is to castrate all the ram lambs except the few kept for breeding. The rams left entire and running with the flock all year have a very narrow window of breeding opportunity, because the ewes only come into season for a few weeks each November and December; otherwise they are unreceptive to the males, which tend to keep away from them in a separate group.

One result of this breeding free-for-all is that the sheep carry a remarkable range of wool colour, from the chocolate tones of moorit, to steel-grey, black, cream and white. Every animal is an individual, and for modern commercial farmers, who strive for standardisation, this would be anathema. But the crofters delight in their sheep's individuality and do not want animals that all look the same. They have a fine inner fleece for warmth, and an outer protective layer of wool to keep out the weather. Ancient Iron Age sheep would have had a similarly wide range of fleece colour and would have looked like these sheep before weaving began to demand white wool that would hold a dye.

Shearing is done with hand shears that leave an inch or so of new wool, impregnated with lanolin, which repels the weather and protects the sheep. The machine hasn't caught on because it leaves the skin too bare for them to withstand a salt-water drenching soon after clipping. Shearing is done at the first new moon at the end of July or beginning of August. It was once common practice in agricultural and pastoral societies to work with the movement of the planets and wait for the most propitious celestial time to carry out important annual tasks. In the West we have largely abandoned what we have come to believe is superstition. But not on North Ronaldsay.