COUNTING SHEEP

A Celebration of the Pastoral Heritage of Britain

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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 marvellously 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 carcase 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 carcase. 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 homogenously 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

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.