THE PEDIGREE FLOCKS OF SHEEP

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The pedigree flocks or ram breeding flocks or stud flocks of the various breeds over a period of years have undertaken the task of keeping the flocks of commercial sheep farmers supplied with rams. Despite the ancient lineage claimed for some breeds, the actual starting point for the present day improved breeds and the formation of breed societies with their flock registration and published flock books, together with the pure-bred / pedigree concept are comparatively recent introductions. Robert Bakewell with his improved Dishley Leicester sheep and his Dishley Sheep Society in the twenty years prior to 1800 set the fashion for both the system of breeding and the control by breed societies which has persisted to the present day.

Breed societies are composed wholly of breeders whose flocks are registered with the appropriate society and although the various breed organizations may differ in the details of the rules under which the registered ram breeding flocks operate there are some general principles common to all. These may be summarized as follows: First the maintenance of the purity of the breed by allowing the use of animals only within the group of registered flocks; second the maintenance of a standard of breed type by a system of inspection; third the improvement of the breed by demonstrating superior individuals to breeders and, fourth the advertising of the merits of the breed to encourage the extended use of rams by the commercial flock owners.

The effectiveness of any or all of these aims is still a controversial matter.

Sheep of a variety of breeds were imported into New Zealand in considerable numbers from the 1850s onwards but it was not until 1895 that pedigree breeders organized themselves into a pure breed society and published an annual flock book which contained details of the ram breeding flocks. The original organization, the New Zealand Sheep Breeders' Association, catered for all breeds and continued to do so until some rapidly increasing breed groups were powerful enough to form their own societies. In this way the Romney Marsh, Southdown, Corriedale, Ryeland, Cheviot and other breed groups became separate entities. Initially flocks were admitted to the books of the parent body (and later to the new breed group bodies) on proof of pure-breeding and by inspection, but after a few years the entrance portal was closed and present day flocks have descended from those originally admitted to the flock book plus those imported in more recent times.

Of the imported breeds some were the result of selective breeding with a local type of sheep, others were the result of using rams of already improved breeds on local types of sheep, while others were the result of deliberate cross-breeding between two already improved breeds. Whatever the method used it is interesting to observe that the formation of breed societies and the issue of flock books

in overseas countries is little earlier than in New Zealand and in some cases actually later.

An important feature of the flock book of the New Zealand Sheep Breeders' Association is the admission to full flock book status of two breeds of local origin. The now well known Corriedale is the product of crossing long wool rams (Lincoln and English Leicester) and Merino ewes. The resulting half-bred attained popularity in the low rainfall hill country. The evolution of a relatively true breeding half-bred by the selection and mating of half-bred types in successive generations and without recourse to either of the parent breeds is one of the major achievements of New Zealand sheep breeding. A more recent breed, the South Suffolk, has resulted from the deliberate crossing of two of the fat lamb breeds, the Southdown and the Suffolk.

The recognition of both breeds followed a common pattern. At first flocks were admitted to an appendix of the flock book to record the work carried out by interested breeders. Later when there was some agreement amongst breeders on the always controversial question of breed type standards, some flocks were accorded full flock book status after inspection.

In addition to the common feature of registration with the breed society the ram breeding flocks have other common characteristics. In the main ram breeders' flocks are small and have a relatively short life time. These factors prevent the majority of breeders from embarking on a large scale long term improvement policy and their flocks become propagating rather than breeding flocks. In each breed however there are always a few flocks large in size and with a long lifetime. These flocks invariably become the nucleus flocks of the breed and on them depends the type and breeding quality of the whole breed. If the standard they attain satisfies the commercial sheep breeders then the breed flourishes—if they fail then the breed fails.

The following summarises the past and present position of the ram breeding flocks of the various breeds in New Zealand. It is important to remember that the only reason for the ram breeding flocks is the breeding of rams for the commercial flocks. A heavy demand for rams of a particular breed indicates that the breed is meeting needs of commercial farmers and the result is increased numbers of flocks and ewes of the breed. A reduced demand for rams of a particular breed is reflected in a reduction of ram breeding flocks and ewes.

ROMNEY MARSH

The Kent or Romney Marsh Sheepbreeders Association was founded in England in 1895 and issued the first flock book the same year—this also was the foundation year of the New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association which provided for the registration of Romney sheep in this country.

The first recorded importations arrived in 1853—four rams and sixteen ewes. These sheep passed from Leonard Young to A. Ludlam, Upper Hutt, and in later years many of their descendants founded the first registered flocks. In 1862 Dr Webster of Corriedale, North Otago, imported nine rams and twenty-two ewes. These, with the importations of Bealey Bros. (1867 and 1869) of Hororata, Canterbury, were also prominent in the breeding of flocks later accepted for registration.

In 1894 there were 35 registered flocks which mated some 13,000 ewes. Ten years later flocks had increased to 395 and ewes to 63,000 while in 1951 flocks exceeded 900 and registered ewes mated 192,000. The average annual increase in stud ewes mated has in recent years exceeded 5,000. These figures show clearly the enormous increase in the use of rams of the breed and this is emphasised by the proportions of the various breeds in the stud sheep total. In 1900 of the 513,000 total stud sheep 73,000 or 14 per cent were Romney Marsh, but by 1952, this had increased to the extent that of the total of 598,000 stud sheep 327,000 or 55 per cent were Romney.

The distribution of these ram-breeding flocks is of interest and an analysis shows that 45 per cent are in the Wellington land district and 26 per cent in Otago-Southland.

Canterbury and Hawke's Bay with about 7 per cent each are next in order of importance.

SOUTHDOWN

In 1892 the Southdown Sheep Association was formed in Sussex and in 1893 another group of breeders formed the Southdown Sheep Club. The two bodies amalgamated in 1897 to form the Southdown Sheep Society of England.

The first recorded importation was to Taranaki in 1842 but there is no indication of the fate of the two rams and ten ewes imported.

The first effective importation was in 1863 when the Deans estate purchased a flock of 100 odd ewes which had been imported from Australia by Henry Matson. These sheep were reputedly from the flock of Jonas Webb, one of the breed founders in England.

When the New Zealand flock book was issued in 1895 only five Southdown flocks mating 950 ewes were listed. By 1910 flocks had increased to 44 and by 1922 to 265. During the next ten years numbers rose to 644 flocks and 56,000 ewes. By 1952 registered flocks had passed the thousand mark and ewes had increased to over 96,000. The spectacular increases are due to the demand following the first world war for the early maturing lightweight lamb and the special ability of the Southdown ram to produce this lamb.

BORDER LEICESTER

The Society of Border Leicester Sheep Breeders was formed in Scotland in 1898. However the first importation of Border sheep arrived in 1859 and was followed by others in 1860, 1861 and 1862. These inportations were made by the New Zealand and Australian Land Company and were located on their Otago and Southland properties.

The Border was one of the early favourites both for producing breeding sheep and for fat lambs. In 1894 there were 47 registered flocks and 12,000 ewes and peak numbers were reached in 1912 with about 140 flocks and 19,000 breeding ewes. Through the 1890's and up to 1920 the breed maintained a prominent position but during the thirties and forties numbers declined. Recent demands for rams for export to Australia and in New Zealand for breeding Border-Romney and Border-Corriedale crossbred ewes for fat lamb mothers has revived interest in the breed and served to increase the number of registered flocks.

LINCOLN

The first effective importation—30 ewes and 20 rams—was that of the New Zealand and Australian Land Company in 1862. These sheep were first taken to Southland but later moved to Otago.

In 1900 there were 150 registered flocks mating 21,000 ewes. The breed had enjoyed enormous popularity during the eighties and nineties and even in 1900 44 per cent of the rams used were Lincoln. From then on however the breed rapidly declined in importance and numbers, and by the early fifties only some seven flocks and 1,500 ewes remained.

ENGLISH LEICESTER

There were heavy importations of the breed to various parts of New Zealand between the forties and eighties. The first flock book in 1894 listed 39 flocks and about 8,000 ewes. The breed continued in popularity until about 1910 when flock numbers reached 148 and ewes 23,000. From then on numbers declined, slowly until 1940 when there were still 100 flocks and 12,000 ewes and then rapidly until to-day there are only some 24 flocks and 2,000 ewes.

SHROPSHIRE

The first importations arrived in Canterbury in 1864 and during the next 30 years the breed numbers increased rapidly. In the first flock books of the nineties there were 65 flocks and 20,000 breeding ewes but the breed was at its peak by 1910 with 31,000 ewes. It was already second in importance to the Border as a fat lamb sire. By 1950 only seven flocks and 1,300 ewes remained.

RYELAND

The English Ryeland Flock Book Society was not formed until 1907 but the first importations to New Zealand arrived in 1902 and by 1907 at least five other groups had been imported to Canterbury.

These and later importations were registered with the New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association, but in 1924 the Ryeland Society of New Zealand issued its own flock book listing 12 flocks and 850 ewes. Peak numbers were reached in the fifties with 86 flocks and 5,000 ewes.

CORRIEDALE

Seven flocks are listed in the appendix of Volume II (1906) of the flock book of the New Zealand Sheep Breeders Association, while in 1916 in Volume 12 twenty flocks were admitted to full flock book status. In 1923 Corriedale breeders formed their own Society and the first flock book was issued in 1924. Since 1930 the breed numbers have remained very stable with an average of some 160 flocks and up to 30,000 breeding ewes. This is understandable as the breed caters for a fairly well defined area of light rainfall hill country together with a profitable, if unpredictable, export trade.

SUFFOLK

This fat lamb sire breed was a very late arrival and the first importations did not arrive in Canterbury until the end of 1913. Until after 1940 there were never more than nine flocks and 200 ewes in the country but during the past few years flocks have increased to over 50 and ewes to 1,500. The breed, itself the result of using improved Southdown (and probably Hampshire) rams on the hardy Norfolk Horned Heath ewes, has in turn been a partner in the foundation of the Canterbury South Suffolk.

DORSET HORN

There was an importation to Canterbury in 1897 but the first sheep registered in the flock book arrived in 1903. During the next twenty years there was little interest in the breed although occasional returns appear in the flock book.

There was a further importation from Australia in 1937 and this commenced a period of minor breed activity. In 1953 there were 16 registered flocks with nearly 1,000 ewes.

DORSET DOWN

This was another late arrival in New Zealand and the first importations were registered in 1921. These registrations lapsed two years later and it was not until 1947 that the breed appeared again. At present there are some seven flocks and about 100 registered ewes.

HAMPSHIRE DOWN

This breed was amongst the early arrivals and five rams arrived in Canterbury in 1863. Three flocks appear in Volume I (new series) of the New Zealand Sheep Breeders' Association and in 1901 some 300 registered ewes were mated, but two years later the registration of all three flocks was dropped. It was not until 1951 that the breed was re-introduced by the importation of five ewes and one ram followed by another importation of a similar number the following year.

CHEVIOT

This breed arrived in Otago in 1857 and the original importation was followed by a number of others during the next forty years. By 1900 three leading ram breeders mated over 2,000 ewes but by 1911 the registrations of these and other flocks lapsed and for all practical purposes the breed disappeared in New Zealand, although a number of unregistered flocks continued breeding. In 1937 a new flock was registered and mated 30 ewes. By 1945 the numbers had increased to 11 flocks and 800 ewes, and in 1953 to 53 flocks and about 3,600 ewes.

MERINO

The breed was an early arrival and from the 1840's onwards thousands of sheep were brought across the Tasman from Australia each year. In 1893 the breed in New Zealand totalled nearly 6,000,000 and made up about one third of the sheep population. The rest of the population were mainly Merino derivations—half-breds and cross-breds. Strangely enough at this time there were only 11 registered stud flocks with 2,000 ewes. Apparently most commercial breeders were content to breed their ram requirements in their own flocks. By 1910 breed numbers had become reduced to just under 2,000,000 and by 1940 had dropped under the 1,000,000 mark. Strangely enough registered flocks increased to close on 60 with over 15,000

stud ewes, an obvious reversal of the policy of earlier years of home breeding rams in commercial flocks.

SOUTH SUFFOLK

In 1940 the New Zealand Sheep Breeders' Association admitted one flock consisting of 150 ewes to the appendix of the flock book. Ten years later the number had increased to 59 flocks and 1,775 ewes. In 1955 16 flocks and 1,155 ewes were granted full flock book recognition while 58 flocks and 2,675 ewes remained in the appendix. The number of registered flocks has since increased to nineteen. The appendix is now closed which means that no more Southdown-Suffolk crossbred flocks will be admitted. By 1968 those flocks already in the appendix must have qualified for full flock book status otherwise they will be removed from the book.

OXFORD DOWN

The first importations arrived in New Zealand in 1904 and there were further importations in the following years. Registration of these flocks continued for about ten years and then lapsed.

KERRY HILL

In 1937 a small group of this breed was imported to Hawke's Bay and the registration of the flock was continued until 1952.

From time to time representatives of other breeds have been imported. Some importations were prior to the issue of flock books while others at a later date did not seek registration. The most important of these follow.

WENSLEYDALE

Importation in 1894 and again in the 1930's and 40's.

TUNIS

An American version of the North African Tunis imported to Auckland in 1900 and used in fat lamb trials at Ruakura in 1904. Although the crossbred lambs were quick growing their carcass shape was less satisfactory.

DARTMOOR

There was one importation to Canterbury in 1864.

ROSCOMMON

An importation arrived in Wellington in 1904.

NORFOLK DOWN (Norfolk Horned)

A group of this breed arrived in Canterbury in 1868.

COTSWOLD

The first importation was in 1863 and during the next twenty years the breed was fully used for crossing purposes. However by the beginning of the century it had been displaced by the Lincoln and Romney.

This story of the changes in the pedigree flocks is also the story of the changes in the breed type of the sheep population of New Zealand. The original population of both islands was the Merino carried across the Tasman in hundreds in 150-200 ton sailing ships. British breeds commenced to dribble in at an early date and long wool rams, mainly the Lincoln, were freely mated to Merino ewes to produce the half-bred. Even before the commencement of the export of carcasses the half-bred proved a better commercial proposition on all except the hardest country.

At this point the breeding policies of the two islands separated. The South Island continued with and did not go beyond the half-bred type of sheep (hence the Corriedale). The North Island continued to use Lincoln rams (and perhaps some Cotswolds) on successive generations of cross-bred ewes until by the 1880's the North Island sheep population was virtually Lincoln. The heavy death rate among young sheep focussed attention on the Romneys which were already in the country. They at least satisfied the first requirement of livestock production—they lived. From then on it was only a matter of time to convert the crossbred Lincoln population to grade Romney.

The fat-lamb sire breeds behaved in the same way. During the 1890's the Border Leicester and Shropshire struggled for supremacy while the Southdown although present in the country in some numbers was little used. By 1920 the Southdown which produces the early maturing, lightweight, Down-cross lamb was well on the way to popularity and from the thirties onwards had already completely displaced the favourites of the 1890's and the early years of this century

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