

S O M E      T Y P E S

•    O F    2

B L A C K F A C E      S H E E P .

R. McMillan,  
    Woodlea,  
        Moniaive.

3 \* 2 \* 1911.

## SOME TYPES OF BLACKFACE SHEEP.

In starting to lecture on this subject I should like, if you will allow me, to hunt back so far as may be possible for the origin of the breed, and to find out to some extent its original characteristics and appearance. I think having done so, it will be easier to follow up the breed into the various types which under the management of clever owners it has assumed. I may say at once this part of my subject will not detain us long.

Over 400 years ago a well known writer in speaking about the sheep in the vale of Esk says "Until the introduction of the Cheviots the "rough woolled Blackfaces alone were to be found." It is maintained by some that the breed was first introduced to Scotland by James IV in 1503, when he planted a flock in Ettrick Forest. If this is to be credited, however, we shall be forced to believe that the sheep seen in the vale of Esk were only called Blackfaces because of the fact that their faces happened to be black, and that the sheep, more or less as we know them, were not known in Scotland till a later date. Professor Lowe in his book *"Domesticated Animals of Great Britain" (1842)* calls the race The Blackfaced Heath Breed, and ascribes its origin to the heathy hills of Yorkshire and Lancashire. But then he goes on to say "It has been settled for a period unknown in all the high lands of the "counties of Roxburgh, Dumfries, Selkirk, Peebles, Lanark and all the "adjoining districts." Now if it had been settled for an ~~Unknown~~ period in Scotland, I don't think Professor Lowe had any really good ground for asserting that England has the credit of originating what is now at any rate a Scottish breed. I would rather believe that the Blackfaces, like the men who owned them in the old days, raided the borders, and again, like so many Scottish Borderers, stayed where they had obtained a footing. On one point I am sure we are all agreed and that is that the introduction of the breed as we have now known it for a very long time, has proved an unmixed blessing not only to Scotland and England but also to Ireland and Wales. It seems certain that in the early days of Blackfaces there existed in the Highlands a native breed [

breed of small whitefaced sheep which was noted for the fineness of its wool. An admirer, writing to the Highland Society in 1790, makes the following comment:- "The coarse woolled sheep have been debasing the "breed under the name of improving it, so that I am inclined to believe "that on the mainland of Scotland the true unmixed breed is irrevocably "lost." Another writer says:- "Formerly<sup>and</sup> I believe from time immemorial, "the Highlands and the entire North of Scotland, were stocked with a "race of sheep almost as different from those of the Southern provinces "as goats and deer are from the ancient breed, whose fur consisted of a "sort of down, overtopped by long straight rigid hair, somewhat like the "coat of the beaver and other furred animals widely different from the "wool of European sheep in general." He continues:- "This animal had "a short tapering tail thinly covered with strong silvery hairs."

To my mind this animal, from the description I have quoted, more resembled the deer than the sheep, and it is rather curious to see the deer getting a bit of its own back, by displacing the sheep on so many of our Highland mountains and glens.

I had occasion a few years ago to go deeply into this question of the origin and antiquity of our Breed, and from the fact that no really authentic information is forthcoming I am driven to the belief that as a *pure* breed the Blackface sheep has only existed for 150 to 200 years.

As I have said old writers tell us of sheep that they describe as having black faces and coarse wool, but that to my mind proves nothing. This much must at all events be granted that until the Statistical Account of Scotland of 1795 was published, we have no record whatever of any owner who took the slightest pains to improve his sheep or even to keep them pure. In that year we have David Dun of Kirkton described as having "the best stock of Blackface sheep to be met with in Scotland" and I am quite willing to hail him as the pioneer. Unfortunately we know very little about either him or his flock, but I think I remember reading that he met his death in a very sudden and tragic manner by falling off a sheep bridge over which he was leading a ewe. The lands of Kirkton (or Allanhead as they were variously called) were merged in the Farm of Knowehead and the sheep stock taken over by the Messrs [

Messrs Foyer at valuation. Probably the earlier successes achieved by Knowehead sheep were attributable to the stock already on the Kirkton portion of the Farm.

I fear from my opening sentence I may have led you to expect an accurate description of the old time sheep which formed the parent stock. I am sorry I cannot do so as only the sketchiest descriptions are to be found. The oldest likeness of a Blackface tup occurs in Professor Lowe's book from which I have already quoted. The formation of his body might be considered quite good even at the present day but his head would be thought so bad as to render him quite useless. His face is small and hollow, the horn comes on edge out of his head, and leans forward in spiral turns. I may say here that it is only within the last half century that a successful effort has been made to get rid of this forward horn. It was realized I think first by the Archibalds that this formation was the cause of many bad cases of lambing and of not a few deaths among the lambs. I will only trouble you with one more quotation, and it is from the Provost of Sanquhar, written of Dumfriesshire sheep about 1795:- "Originally the Blackfaces were short woolled, ill furnished in the forequarters, and small sized, but these defects have been considerably reduced by the growing practice of the farmers of buying rams from different places."

Now, Gentlemen, we have arrived not only at the pioneer in good breeding but also at the point where thoughtful men in general began to take steps to do away with the worst defects in their flocks, most of them the results of careless ~~care~~ in breeding. We have no right to throw stones at the memory of these "old timers" who were quite content to jog along and take what nature chose to give them. Have we not any number among ourselves who would have done no better under similar circumstances? Do we not all know the man whose boast it is that he never pays more than Two pounds for a ram, and who only seems interested at a ram sale when he hears the Auctioneer say "Going at 30 snillings? Not for him are the pleasures of watching the yearly progress up the ladder of success, the enhanced prices at the sales, the successful appearance at the local show and possibly even the ticket at the Highland.

He may congratulate himself on the fact that he has spent less money on improvement than his neighbours, but I am sure if he would face the fact squarely, his receipts will also have been much less than those of his more enterprising contemporaries. We may parody the words of the poet and say

*The ram upon the mountain grim,  
A bit of mutton was to him,  
And it was nothing more.*

We have no sort of use for that man. He is probably a tee-total non-smoker, a <sup>socialist</sup> ~~radical~~ and a wife-beater, and very likely he even grossly overstocks his farm. Don't we all just hate it when by some strange chance his lambs beat ours in the sale ring?

With the advent of Mr. Dun a much brighter day had dawned for Blackface sheep. The first Mr. Foyer to rent Knowehead started in to improve his sheep late in the 18th or early in the 19th Century. The work was carried on by his descendants for five generations, and so successful were their efforts that for a long series of years no breeder of any note even dreamt of getting on without the frequent purchase of Knowehead blood.

The Foyers were very successful exhibitors at our leading shows, and in addition to numerous other good performances they took every first prize in the Blackface section at the Highland Show of 1879. The long and honourable connection between the Foyers family and Knowehead was unfortunately severed in 1886, and the entire stock went to the hammer. The times were very bad and prices correspondingly low, with the result that the ewes and lambs only fetched an average price of about 40/-, and the ewe hoggs, 32/-.

A breeder who achieved great notoriety for many years about the middle of last century was Thomas Murray the tenant of Eastside. His flock was much run upon for change of blood, but so far as I can make out he allowed his stock to run to seed through always selling his very best and failing to buy in anything good enough to replace. He had either curious methods or considerable luck, perhaps both, for I understand that all through a tenancy of fifty five years he had only to give his [

his ewes hay upon two occasions. As the lowest point of his farm was 1,000 feet above sea level and ran from that to the top of the Pentlands, you will see what I mean by luck. Mr. Murray was the first man to start dipping his ewes at New Year, a very great and serious innovation I have no doubt the new plan was considered.

In 1847 the late Mr. Archibald entered upon his first lease of Overshiels, and took over the sheep stock from the Trustees of a Mr. Mitchell. He had only been tenant for one year, and prior to him a family of Taylor had been in occupation for eighty years. No attention had been paid to the breeding of the stock, and Mr. Archibald at once set himself to remedy the existing defects. For years it had been the custom on the farm to castrate all the male lambs that came in to the marking, and to keep for rams those that had been missed and came in later. I wonder what the idea was! Possibly it was thought that only those lambs were worth keeping on, which had been cute enough to dodge the shepherds on the gathering morning. It almost reminds one of the process of selection employed in the choosing of Gideon's army! The bulk of Mr. Archibald's ram purchases were made from Mr. Foyer at Falkirk October Tryst, at that time the most important ram fair in the country, but his first really important speculation was made at the Highland Show of 1853, when he bought the first prize aged ram "Kirkhope" from Mr. Milligan, tenant of the farm of that name. This turned out a most judicious investment and from him through "Benhar" are descended practically all the sheep that have made the name of Overshiels famous all over the world.

The first appearance of the Archibalds at the Highland Show was at Dumfries in 1860, but on that occasion and in the following year they did no good. Their subsequent successes have, however, been too numerous to mention, and on several occasions they have taken every first prize.

Besides buying from Knowehead, the Archibalds made many purchases from Mr. Craig of Craigdarroch and Polquheys, and found that the lambs from that stock did them much lasting good. Mr. Craig was most particular about his breeding sheep, and was especially hard to please in the matter [

matter of wool. A minute amount of kemp in his coat was sufficient to cast any but the most perfect tup. His best known ram was probably "Sandy Hole", first prize aged tup at the Highland Show of 1868.

When the Cumberland Mining Co acquired the property of Glenbuck at the end of the 18th century it carried a stock of very fine Blackface ewes. Failing after a few years in their attempt to work the minerals, the Company sold off the sheep and let the farm to a man who stocked it with wethers. In 1811 Mr. James McKersie became tenant and at once set about reinstating ewes. He succeeded in collecting a few young sheep whose descent could be traced back to the original stock, and in addition purchased ewes and lambs from Mr. Welsh of Earlshaugh. Mr. Welsh had a very noted stock at that time, his rams gaining every first prize at the first Highland Show held at Dumfries in 1830. Mr. McKersie, being a very clever manager and an excellent judge, soon made Glenbuck stock as good as ever, and for many years did a very thriving business in tup lambs. A brother-in-law of Mr. McKersie's named James Mitchell did much to maintain the high character of the stock. I am told he used to disappear for weeks in the East Country, and then suddenly turn up again, driving a few of the best sheep he had been able to find.

Mr. Howatson made his first start at Crossflatt, of which farm he became tenant in 1863 and proprietor before the end of his lease. He at once set about improving the existing sheep stock and we can gauge with what rapidity success came to him by the fact that in 1870 he sold his ram "Cairntable" for the, at that time, unheard of price of sixty pounds. The foundation of the improved stock, on the female side, was a pen of ewe hoggs purchased from their breeder, Captain Kennedy of Finnarts, when first prize winners at Ayr Show in 1864. In 1872 Mr. Howatson purchased the estate of Glenbuck and took over McKersie's sheep, and from that date onwards his success, both in the show yard and in the sale ring, has been phenomenal. His ram "Seventy Two" made a record which I do not think has been surpassed, by taking first prize at the Highland in three consecutive years, namely at Inverness in 1883, Edinburgh in 1884, and Aberdeen in 1885. His sire was "Seventy One" bred on Overshiels. The most impressive sires bred at Glenbuck have undoubtedly been "Glenbuck Yet", sire "Niddnie", grandsire "Benhar", both bred at

Overshiels, and to come to more recent times "Morning Sun", sire "Woolgrower IV", bred at Glenbuck. "Glenbuck Yet" gained first prize as a shearling at the Highland Show at Stirling in 1831; "Morning Sun" was first prize shearling at Dumfries in 1903, the twelfth shearling in succession bred at Glenbuck to gain first prize at the Highland Shows. This is another record to the credit of Glenbuck, which I venture to prophesy will never be approached. It is exactly a hundred years now since McKersie founded the Glenbuck stock, and judging from the successes gained at the Highland Show and at the subsequent ram sales of 1910, it is quite evident the quality of the sheep, to put it very mildly, shows no sign of falling off.

For many years in the second half of last century, a very notable breeder was Mr. James Greenshields of West Town, whom I think I may call without impertinence one of the grand old men of the Blackface sheep world. Between 1871 and 1878 he had great success with both show and sale sheep, and to him belongs the honour and glory of having been the first to house winter his tup lambs. His sheep were specially renowned for the beautifully clear black and white brock of their faces.

At this point I feel I must make a personal explanation. I started to write this lecture with the intention of not mentioning by name any of our living breeders. I found, however that to give any sort of historical sketch of Blackface sheep without going more or less minutely into the story of Glenbuck and Overshiels was to attempt the play of Hamlet without the Prince of Denmark. I trust, therefore, that other prominent present day breeders, the perfection of whose sheep I yield to no one in recognising, will excuse me if I break off somewhat abruptly. We all know and admire the beautiful sheep shewn off Borland, Woolfords, Claggan, Letter and a host of other places perhaps not so famous, and my earnest wish is that these flocks may go on from strength to strength, and make history like the two older places I have spoken of.

About the beginning and middle of last century a great proportion of the best Blackface grazings in Scotland had their stocks changed into Cheviots, but after a succession of bad winters and late Springs the Blackfaces had to be re-instated on grounds they should probably never have [



have left. The Cheviot breeders of that day committed the fatal blunder of making their sheep too long and too open in the wool, thus destroying the hardiness of the animal and rendering it quite unfit for high stormy lands. It seems a pity to have to say it, but I fear there is a considerable risk of the present day craze for early maturity destroying to a certain extent the hardiness of Blackface sheep. There is no doubt whatever that when grown under favourable circumstances they mature early, but the fact must not be lost sight of that this is by no means the principal characteristic of the breed. The points which breeders must study to acquire and retain in their flocks, are hardiness of constitution, the ability to endure any amount of winter storms and Spring barrenness on land at any altitude, and the power to come up fresh and smiling at five and six years of age. If a farmer stock lightly and use none but well bred rams, possessing good bones, heads and frames, and of a size suitable to his ground, he will find his wether lambs have all the early maturity points it is safe to try for.

I feel I am treading on very controversial ground at present but before making a dash back to terra firma I should like to touch on the subject of the treatment administered to the rams which are exposed for sale in the Autumn. As every one knows who is interested in the matter, either as a buyer or a seller, the lambs are housed very early in the winter. In order to force them into readiness for early clipping they must have much heat and much good feeding. The clipping may take place about New Year time or it may come off months earlier but in any case you may take the heating and the feeding for granted. Now I for one most heartily approve of the housing system provided it is carried out on rational, sanitary lines. By this I mean of course that the houses must be thoroughly well ventilated. I disapprove absolutely of the "Hothouse" or "Sweating" System which seems necessary if sheep are to be ready for clipping in November or December. It is without doubt the best method in this respect that no food is wasted, and the animal is easier to keep right in his feet and joints. Where I do think the prevailing custom is rotten is in the early clipping and the heavy summer feeding. A ram is naturally wanted to be at his best and fittest when he [

he is put to the ewes in November, and to ensure this I maintain that he should not be shorn till much later than is the case at present. The ewe which has nursed a lamb, or perhaps a pair of twins, during the summer, is clipped in July, and November finds her wool grown long enough to afford a sufficient protection from its cold blasts. How different is the case of the young ram who has spent his summer lolling about in a field with the run of his teeth at all the delicacies of the season, from cabbages galore to new milk ad libitum! He swaggers on to his beat with about a year's growth of wool trailing all round him. Snow and frost come and it is quite a common occurrence to find him balled up like a snow man ~~and~~ and unable to move. Even if only rain come it is probably a couple of days before he is thoroughly dry again. And all the time when we expect the sheep to be ranging about and doing his work satisfactorily we condemn him to carry about, probably six pounds of quite unnecessary wool. He looks for all the world like a fashionable woman in a hobble skirt, and I am sure all we men agree in thinking he could not resemble anything more ungraceful. Given two equally matched race horses with equally skilful jockeys to ride them, the one which incurs a one pound penalty will lose the race, and yet as I have said the young ram is expected to do his work quite as well as if he did not have this crushing burden to bear. Another handicap to the young tup is the fact that in nine cases out of ten he has to work on what food he can pull from the hill side. Now is this giving him fair play after his summer treatment? I say, certainly not, and I maintain that the early clipping and the heavy summer feeding that must of necessity follow in its train, are between them responsible for a great proportion of the barren ewes in the country. Now it is an axiom that the producer must produce the goods wanted, and present them in the manner desired by the consumer, and if he fail to do so he will get left. I am here to insist that the ram buying public has the remedy in its own hands, and whenever it shows unequivocally that late clipped unforced rams are wanted, they will be produced in sufficient numbers to supply all demands. Undoubtedly there has sprung up an enquiry of recent years for late clipped shearlings, but so far the demand has been so limited as not to warrant ram breeders in increasing [

increasing the supply to any great extent. It is well known that the present day outwintered tups have been forced quite as heavily through the summer as the housed ones, and in addition they must have acquired the tendency to rheumatism through lying on the wet muddy ground all winter. My own ideal of a ram for service on a hill of any considerable height is one that has been kept during the winter in a roomy, well ventilated house or shed, and either clipped in March and turned out a month later, or else turned out early and left rough till June, when the rest of the eild stock on the farm is clipped. A ram which has been treated in this fashion will have escaped months of stowing in the very worst atmosphere possible for the production of bacteria and germs of every evil description.

Another feature in the ram trade noticeable in these last few years, is the wonderful demand for forced lambs. Now I can understand, and do heartily sympathise with, the buyer who prefers to back his judgment by investing in tup lambs from some well known, well bred stock. There is deep down in the breast of every Britisher the love of a little gamble, or "flutter" as our American cousins call it, and I can think of nothing more fascinating than to attend the various ram sales and take home sufficient lambs to supply one's estimated needs in the following season. But my warning against the craze for early maturity comes in here also, and I cannot but believe that a lamb, which has been pampered with every sort of artificial feeding ever since it was quite young, will turn out in most cases a grievous disappointment. Of course the demand for ram lambs is nothing new. The time was, and not so very long ago, when one could get little else to buy. No, as there were brave men before Agamemnon, so there were tup lamb sellers before the present day giants in that trade. I have been told a story of the late Mr. Bryden of Burncastle which clearly illustrates this point. He wanted to procure a few lambs off the celebrated farm of Eastside, and asked the tenant, Mr. Tom Murray, if he would supply them. The answer was "They are all spoken for this year and next, but if you like I will put your name down for five the year after."

The types of sheep at the present day are numerous and varied, and he [

he must be a very fastidious buyer who fails to find the kind he wants. My own idea is that a good ram must have size and quality. If he is deficient in size he will naturally only beget little sheep, and if he lacks quality he should never have been kept for breeding. By size I do not of course mean length of leg only, because if you take him all over many a low set sheep is in reality a bigger one than his neighbour which may stand six inches higher. By quality I mean the possession of a good, strong, well shaped head and horns, and the right sort of bone and wool. I say quite frankly I have no use either for the big leggy brute, with coarse head and poor wool, which reminds one of a sheepish looking camel, or for the little, stumpy, hairy chap which makes one wonder what the cross would be like between a skye terrier and a door mat. It is only within comparatively recent years that the small sheep has had a real look in at all, and if I read the signs of the times correctly his day is already over. Looking at the matter from a practical point of view why should any one lay himself out to breed small growthless sheep any more than little stunted children? I quite admit one may overdo the size of one's ewes where the hill is hard and poor and the downfall chiefly notable by its absence. But all the same I consider that the full size that is capable of being produced and maintained in safety, is the right point to aim at. I am pretty safe in saying that the early clipping of rams had a lot to do with what I may call the *recent* craze for undersized sheep. The public apparently wanted an animal whose wool would be trailing on the ground in September: it stands to reason that a small sheep will reach maturity sooner than a big one, and that the shorter you can make your tup's legs the sooner they will be covered up. Now why *should* one try to cover up a tup's legs at sale time? If the bones are big enough and of the right kind it is surely an advantage for the public to see them. I have already referred to the great handicap which long wool is to the ram on the hill, and I am driven to the conclusion that like some forms of charity it is useful only for covering a multitude of sins. I consider that it would pay every one concerned to revert a little to the older type of wool which our fathers considered the best and which was mellower to the touch, freer from kemp, rather shorter in [

in the staple, and fully as thickly planted as at the present day. I have asked a good many shepherds their opinion on the wool question, and they seem to think unanimously that the softer coated ewes are the better milkers. Shepherds also maintain that not a few deaths occur every year owing to the long trailing wool having prevented the new born lamb from getting at its food. Very strong fleeces are also apt to shed along the back, and the parting makes a channel for the rain by which it at once reaches the skin.

Now I don't wish to convey the impression that I fail to realize the immense benefit that accrues to farmers every year from the increased weight of wool now grown on our sheep. On the contrary I am all for making the clip as heavy per head as possible. But as I said I consider we are working on wrong lines in trying to grow fleeces that tend to cover the legs at the expense of the body, and in which length too often takes the place of density.

I understand from men, who were breeding sheep before I was born, that in nothing is so much improvement shown as in the wool, when compared with the clips of a hundred years ago. In those days an ordinary Blackface fleece seems to have been simply a mass of kemp containing almost as much black as white. The point I wish to make is that the kind our fathers grew say forty years ago made a better covering for the sheep and was more in favour with the manufacturers than is the bulk of what we produce now, and that in fact we ought to retrace our steps a little bit.

In conclusion I hope you will agree with me that the best types of Blackfaces to be met with to-day are very fine animals indeed. To the breeders of this generation is due the credit for the popularity our breed has attained as an early maturing, easy and profitable one to feed. I am afraid that you may consider that too much of this paper is taken up with semi-historical matter. I can only say I found the sayings and doings of the old time breeders most fascinating to trace out, but probably I have erred in not knowing when to stop. I cannot help but express my conviction that we who live in the twentieth century owe them a very deep debt of gratitude. Remember they had to start at bed rock when type [

type and quality were practically unknown. We largely reap the benefit of their labours, and it is for us to see to it that our children and children's children receive the heritage from us unimpaired.

Acknowledge help from donors and for  
donations to and from the [unclear]

W. H. H. H.

Clipping in March and April in the [unclear] and in the  
month of the [unclear]

M. H. H. H.

W. H. H. H.

W. H. H. H.