

# PEDIGREE SHEEP-BREEDING

By R. HENRY REW

OF all domesticated animals the sheep has, from time immemorial, been most closely associated with mankind. An erudite author sixty years ago, having laboriously collated an assortment of allusions to sheep made by sacred and profane writers, concluded that "the history of these animals is so interwoven with the history of man that they never existed in a wild state at all. Biblical history from the time of Abel is full of allusions to the flocks which formed the chief possessions of the Jewish people and their neighbors. The spoils of war and the tribute of vassal kings largely consisted of sheep. Thus we read that Mesha, King of Moab, was a sheep-master, and rendered unto the King of Israel an hundred thousand lambs and an hundred thousand rams with the wool. Moses after his victory over the Midianites obtained as loot no less than 675,000 sheep, and long before the Christian era sheep were cultivated in Western Europe. Spain and Italy possessed them from an unknown period, although long after Rome was founded the inhabitants had not learned to shear the fleece; and, until the time of Pliny, the practice of plucking it from the skin was not wholly abandoned, so long that the humble shepherds of Syria preceded, in their knowledge of necessary arts, the future conquerors of their country.

The most remarkable breed of sheep which history records is that which links the present with the past—the merino.

Its origin is wrapped in obscurity, and beyond the fact that it is a product of Spain—perhaps the most valuable which that country has given to the world at large—nothing is certain. There is a story which at one time seems to have obtained some credence, that merino sheep were originally, 1464, derived from England. But at that period Spain already possessed the finest wool-producing sheep, and manufactured the best woollen fabrics in Europe. It is probable that the indigenous breed of the country was fashioned into excellence by the favorable influences of

climate, soil and situation, and that upon this stock was grafted alien strains by the races which successively occupied the country. During the long Roman occupation, undoubtedly sheep were imported, for Columella informs us that his uncle introduced some of the fine-wooled sheep of Italy and also some African rams. There is little doubt, also, that sheep from Northern Africa were introduced by the Moors when they overran Spain, and at any rate it was during their long tenure of the country that the wool of Spain arrived at its greatest excellence.

The Spaniards long preserved with jealous care their monopoly of the merino breed, and it is said that it was not until 1723 that a small number of pure merinos were exported to Sweden. It was not until the middle of the eighteenth century that an attempt was made to introduce merinos into France by Colbert, whose effort, however, was thwarted by popular opposition. In the year 1786 the French government took up the project and established the flock at Rambouillet, which continues to this day. The earliest importation of merinos to Germany was made in 1765 by the Elector of Saxony, who obtained from the King of Spain one hundred rams and two hundred ewes, part of which he kept on his own farms and the others he distributed throughout the country. Nowhere has the breed flourished more completely than in Saxony, and nowhere has greater skill and assiduity been devoted to its cultivation and improvement. Darwin quotes the methods of the Saxon sheep-breeders as an instance of the possibilities of artificial selection. "In Saxony," he says, "the importance of the principle of selection in regard to merino sheep is so fully recognized that men follow it as a trade. The sheep are placed on a table and are studied, like a picture by a connoisseur; this is done three times at intervals of months, and the sheep are each time marked and classed, so that the very best may ultimately be selected for breeding." In 1775 the Empress Maria Theresa imported three hundred

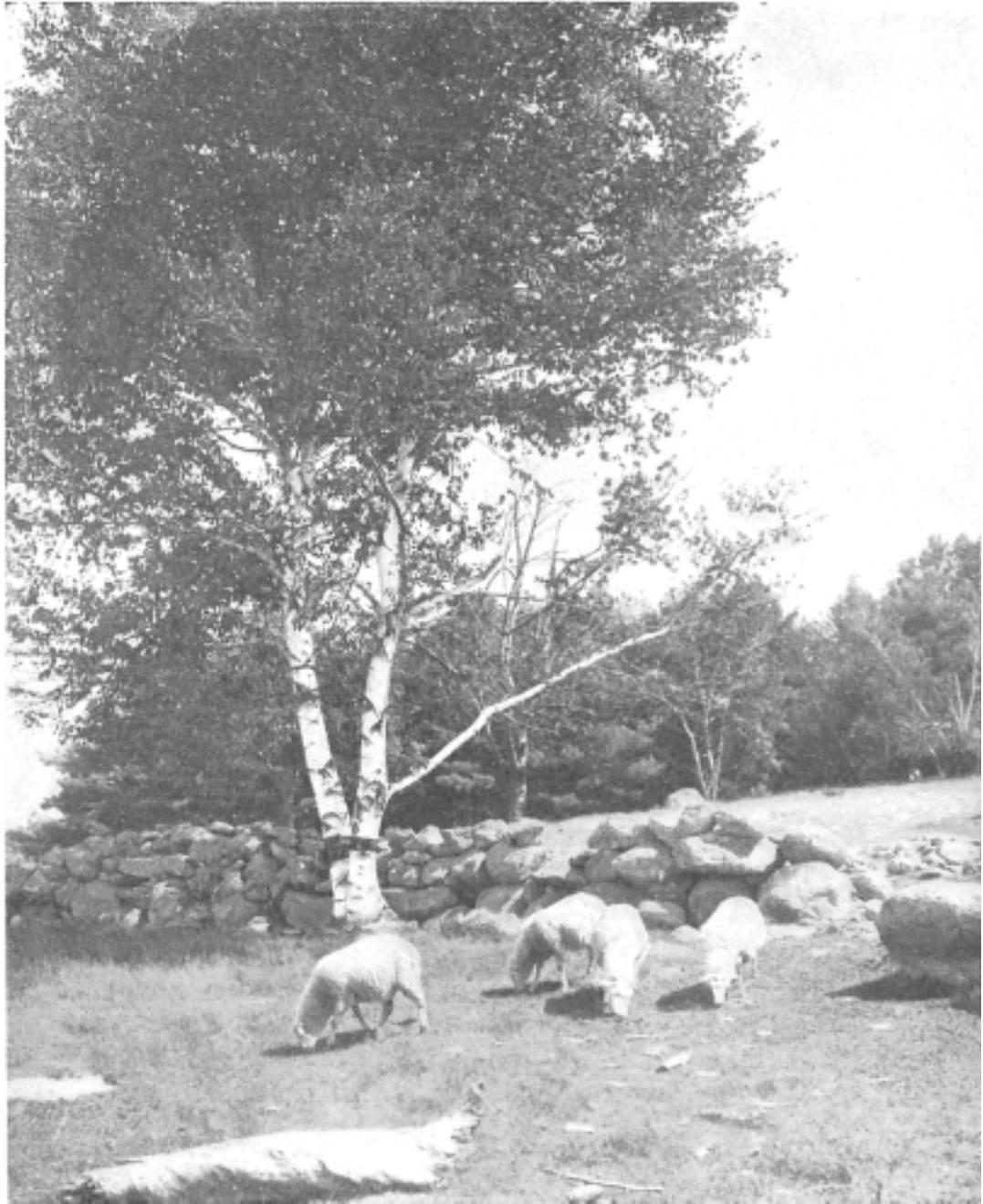
merinos into Hungary, and in 1786 Frederick the Great introduced them into Prussia. The breed has, in fact, long since been naturalized all over Europe, has established and maintained the vast flocks of Australia, and forms the preponderating element in the sheep industry of America.

It is remarkable that the only considerable sheep-breeding country which has not acknowledged the conquering sway of the merino is Great Britain. This is the more remarkable inasmuch as a determined effort was made by very influential people to introduce and acclimatize the breed in the British Isles. George III.—“Farmer George”—at the end of the eighteenth century obtained a number from Spain and established a flock at Kew, and many pioneers of agricultural improvement enthusiastically supported the enterprise. A society for the cultivation of the breed was established in 1811, and expended much money; crosses were tried with several native breeds, including the Southdowns, Leicesters, Wiltshires and Ryelands, but the results were not satisfactory, or at any rate fell so far short of expectations that the experiments were speedily abandoned. A number of pure bred merino flocks were started and for many years maintained, but these have now all been given up, and although a careful search might still find a few surviving specimens of the breed, yet merinos, for all practical purposes, do not exist in Great Britain.

Everyone now recognizes that this stolid resistance of British farmers was of incalculable advantage to the future of the sheep-breeding industry. That resistance preserved to the British Isles, and to the world, the finest of mutton-producing sheep. He is *par excellence* the fine sheep, in the sense implying immaculate and immemorial pedigree, as he is also the fine-wool sheep of all ages and all climes. Compared with him the British breeds of oldest descent are upstart. When about 1765 or thereabouts Robert Bakewell began the work which resulted in the “Dishley” or “New Leicester” breed, and ultimately in the reformation of the whole United Kingdom sheep stock, the raw material with which he started had survived probably with little change from the Middle Ages.

To Bakewell undoubtedly belongs the credit of demonstrating the principles which revolutionized the farm stock of the British Isles. Up to his time the sheep had been regarded as a wool-producing animal primarily, if not exclusively; but he devoted attention entirely to improvement of the animal's form regardless of both size and wool. He aimed at a form to carry the largest proportion of meat in proportion to bone and at securing this result at the earliest age. He so improved sheep, which in the ordinary course were fattened and killed at the age of three or four years, that they attained the same fitness for meat production when fifteen months to two years of age. There is scarcely a mutton breed now existing which is not in some measure indebted to this man's efforts, for rams from the Dishley flock were sent to all parts of the country. There were of course many other enlightened and enterprising breeders who followed in Bakewell's steps or worked contemporaneously with him. In particular the Southdowns were improved by John Ellman of Glynde, and perhaps of all breeds which still flourish this may claim the oldest ancestry and the purest descent.

The greatest triumphs of the sheep-breeders' skill in the nineteenth century were achieved in the deliberate formation of new breeds by the judicious assimilation of varied materials. The modern Shropshire is the final result of patient and persistent striving after an ideal. On the Welsh borders, whence the Shropshire breed took its rise, there were one or two ancient breeds of sheep, and on that foundation stock has been engrafted the materials which in the course of the last century have resulted in what is now one of the most popular and widely disseminated breeds of mutton-sheep. The process which attained such famous results in the Shropshires has been applied, in greater or less degree, to the score or more of various other breeds which make up the varied tale of British flocks—Hampshire Downs, Suffolks, Cheviots, Cotswolds, Border Leicesters, Dorset Horns, Lincolns, Devon Longwools, Kents, Wensleydales, and many others, are each the creatures of scientific breeding. Some, like the Lincolns and the Cotswolds, retain the ancient name of their unimproved



**The Pasture.**

Photo by R. H. Winslow.

progenitors, and perhaps owe less than others to alien influence. There are also one or two breeds like the Black-faced Mountain, and the hill sheep of Wales and Devonshire which survive with little change by reason of their natural suitability to their habitat in districts which remain as free from the plough and as exempt from agricultural improvement as they have



Old Wiltshire Sheep.



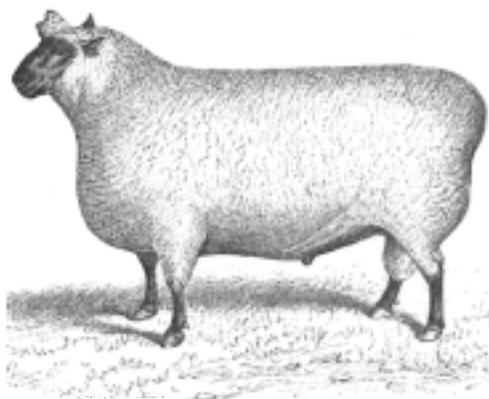
Southdown Two-shear Ram.

been through all the centuries of history. But in the main the modern sheep is an artificial product compounded of diverse elements. The most notable instance of the manufactured breed is perhaps the Oxford Down. About the middle of the last century it occurred to one or two enterprising flock-masters in Oxfordshire that it would be desirable to unite in one sheep the

excellences of the Longwool and the Down. These, it may be explained, are the two main divisions of the domesticated sheep as known in Great Britain. Broadly, they represent the sheep of the marshes and lowlands, and the sheep of the hills and uplands. The rich valleys, with their luxuri-



Merino Ram.



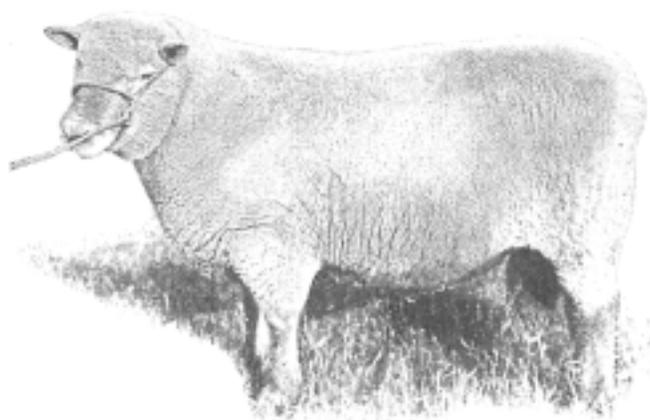
Oxford Down Ram.

of the faults of the two varieties, they established a breed which is admirably adapted to a wide range of conditions.

The art of pedigree sheep-breeding is not easily acquired. No doubt it is an empirical art, for veterinary knowledge, greatly as it has increased, and physiology, much as it has revealed, have as yet come far short of explaining the mystery of heredity. The practical judgment of the breeder will achieve results by a process which is more intuitive than reasoned. And the man who possesses the observation, the insight and the skill to construct out of living materials the ideal of his imagination is surely entitled to rank as an

artist. Whether or no the breeding of sheep develops the artistic temperament

ant pasturage, tended to develop sheep of considerable size and with heavy fleeces of wool, while on the exposed hillsides, with their scantier grass and more rigorous climate, the sheep were smaller, more active and less heavily woolled. The object of those who evolved the Oxford Down was to obtain the size, and to some extent the wool, of the Longwool, together with the compactness, the activity, and above all the superiority of mutton which distinguished the Down, or Shortwool. They were eminently successful in their effort, and although, naturally, they could not absolutely secure all the merits and none



Duke of Richmond's Prize Southdown Ram.

it undoubtedly fosters the spirit of contemplative philosophy, and the tending of flocks has always been associated with peace and contentment.



Shropshire Ram Lambs.