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## PROLOGUE

### THE TALE OF ROBIN HOOD

I buried Robin Hood in his favourite place, the little paddock beside the Dulas. Across the brook, somewhere in the hazel thicket that climbed the evening hillside, a blackbird sang requiem.

Maid Marian was there, of course. She was, after all, his number-one wife. I shed no tears; I'd done my crying when the local vet, Peter Jinman, had informed me there was no hope. Robin Hood had irreversible anaemia due to a semi-tropical disease, vectored by a parasitic worm in a bird's dropping. The incomprehensible incongruity of it all was part of the hurt: the Dulas wanders its way in very English Herefordshire.

Even Jinman, a pillar of the veterinary establishment and soon to become president of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, had never encountered *Haemonchus contortus*, barber's pole worm, in Britain.

I wondered on that spring day when we buried Robin if Little John and Friar Tuck would greet him in Heaven. Because surely sheep, of all the creatures, with all that Christian symbolism and parable attached to them, get past St Peter?

*Agnus dei.* 'Behold the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world.' *John I.29.*

It is twenty years since Robin Hood's interment, but I

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remember him, and always with a wry smile. He was a singular ram. A pedigree Ryeland – his official name was Spenwood Xtra Special – he was fat, white, woolly, with a face like a teddy bear; my young children, Tris and Freda, adored him for his cuddliness. I admired his presence, eccentricity, and sheer interest in the world about him. He would sit in that hill-country paddock, its west end framed dramatically by the Black Mountains, on his haunches – *exactly* like a dog – and gaze out through the metal bars of the gate and watch the tractors go past on the lane.

He was a \*\*\*\*\*\*, though, when I took in a bale of hay in winter because he would jump up, trying to get first bite from the load on my shoulder. He weighed about 80kg; his methaney breath would be in my face. Any 'sheep cake' (concentrate food) in a bucket and he would be unstoppable, diving in, then wandering off with the blue plastic bucket stuck on his head.

I liked him. And I think he liked me. There were times when he would deign to let me rub him under his chin as he stood four-square, head jutting forward. He was imperious, as if conscious of the glorious history attached to his kind. Ryeland sheep, first bred in the fifteenth century by the monks of Leominster Priory. Robin Hood was not just a sheep in a Welsh Marches paddock. He had ancestry – breeding, you might say.

Neither was he a mindless machine, as the Cartesians used to conceive livestock, his life a blank prelude to being dispatched by the butcher. He had personality. Which is why he had an individual name from us, as well as his state-ordained DEFRA number on his blue ear tag.

I love sheep like Robin. But I admit I sometimes loathe them too.

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Which, I think, is pretty much the standard ambivalence of anyone who knows sheep, as I do, having farmed them for twenty-five years. (My family began farming them eight hundred years ago.) When do I hate them? When they *will not* do as you want. When they escape, which they dismayingly do at the most inopportune moment, such as minutes before weddings, funerals, going on that long-promised holiday. Sheep are cunning beyond ken when they set their minds on the greener grass on the other side of the fence, and it always seems to be greener there (to a sheep, at least).

Mostly, I admire sheep, and the more I have ‘run them’, as we say in Herefordshire, the more they have intrigued me.

This is my laudation to sheep and their place in our lives. And my life in particular. Sheep that have given my life some of its best moments, because few experiences match lambing under spring moonlight, or breaking open a bale of hay in a January snowstorm on the top of a faraway hill, the sheep gathered gratefully around. And you yourself grateful to be their good shepherd.



*Tris and Freda with Action Lamb and May.*

## INTRODUCTION

The sheep have been here almost as long as we have. Although the first Stone Age people to journey into Britain were pure hunter-gatherers, the latter waves brought their semi-domesticated livestock, including sheep, with them. The New Stone Agers spread up the land via the river systems, where the banks acted as natural ‘races’, or corridors, for the livestock to be driven along; the water floated the Neolithics’ coracle-type boats, the animals aboard. Little Noah’s Arks.

By the Bronze Age, sheep farming had made irredeemable marks in the landscape. Excavations in the Fens have revealed earthen ‘sorting pens’ for sheep, and the same Bronze Age people created much of the chalk downlands, and also grassland at previously wooded altitudes, by the grazing and browsing of their ovines. When the Romans colonized in AD 53 they found a landscape very much like that of today – after all, it had been grazed for millennia, with the trees largely gone from the uplands. Those Lake District fells, which have inspired everyone who has ever wandered them lonely as clouds in historic times, were revealed from their arboreal cover by sheep and sheep farmers in prehistory. Grazing over the millennia since has prevented the fells re-wooding, the sheep eating new shoots as they appear.

The Romans, like every other invader, found Britain to be wet, warm (relatively, courtesy of westerlies and the Gulf Stream) and green. In other words, the ideal *terra* for keeping sheep.

Our island story is also the story of our sheep. The proof is

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there, everywhere you look. Take place-names, even in such an unlikely, über-urban, mega-metropolitan place as London. Woolwich is from the Old English 'wich', a farm that produced wool; Lambeth is the place where lambs were landed; at Shepherd's Bush there was a hawthorn where a sheep herder once took shelter; glitzy Mayfair was the location in the seventeenth century of a springtime sheep and cattle market; the primary elements of Osterley, 'cowstre' + 'leah', record the pasture, or ley, where a flock of ewes was kept. Nearby Lampton was the lamb farm.

Moving outside London: the Old English 'shep' or 'ship' for sheep gives us places as geographically diverse as Shepperton (first recorded in AD 959) in Surrey, Shepton Mallet in Somerset, Shipton in Yorkshire. Wetherby, also in Yorkshire, is where wethers, or castrated male sheep, were kept . . .

Then there is everyday language and folklore. A sheepish smile. As gentle as a lamb. The black sheep of the family. Mutton dressed as lamb. (The Normans, when they invaded, instilled a class division in sheep terminology. The Franco-phone conquerors gave their nomenclature to the meat of livestock – mutton, beef – which they ate, while the living beast, worked by the enslaved locals, retained its Anglo-Saxon/Scandinavian terms. 'Lamb' has a Germanic root, meaning 'wee sheep'; in the late Middle Ages, the plural of lamb was, as with ox and child, 'lambren'.)

More common-or-garden sheep terms: like lambs to the slaughter. Be a lamb. Wolf in sheep's clothing. Further, the common phrase 'to separate the sheep from the goats' comes from a passage in the New Testament. In the story, the sheep (righteous people) find salvation with God, and the goats (sinners) are sent to damnation. Red sky at night, shepherd's delight . . .

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Shepherds were believed to know the weather. They did (to an extent), because they spent their lives outdoors, watching sheep, gazing at stars, huddling from rain, sheltering from sun, crouching from wind. For centuries almanacs and astrology books were sold on the shepherd's back; in the 1700s the most popular almanac was *The Shepherd of Banbury's Rules to Judge the Changes of Weather* (1744), originally published as *The Shepherd's Legacy* by John Claridge in 1670.

The preface stated:

The Shepherd, whose sole Business it is to observe what has a Reference to the Flock under his Care, who spends all his Days and many of his Nights in the open Air, and under the wide spread Canopy of Heaven, is in a Manner obliged to take particular Notice of the Alterations of the Weather, and when once he comes to take a Pleasure in making such Observations, it is amazing how great a Progress he makes in them, and to how great a Certainty at last he arrives by mere dint of comparing Signs and Events, and correcting one Remark by another.

The almanacs contained some sense: red skies at night appear when dust and small particles are trapped in the atmosphere by high pressure, and pleasant weather is moving in. The almanacs contained much nonsense. The most notorious weather proverb is 'March comes in like a lion, and goes out like a lamb'. Obviously. March is the month of the spring equinox.

If Britain was ideal for sheep, sheep were ideal for Britain. Sheep were and are extremely effective at extracting energy from natural vegetation, which does not have to be grass. Far from it. My Hebridean sheep – which are of Viking origin – will happily 'browse' bramble, ivy, holly, thistles, wildflowers,

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as well as 'graze' grass. As a rule, though, the more lush green grass a sheep has access to, the bigger the sheep.

From the beginning, sheep were multi-purpose beasts. They gave milk, wool, meat, skin. Their guts were used for sewing thread, their horns as needles, trumpets and drinking cups. The eighteenth-century agricultural revolution of Jethro Tull is taught in schools; what the textbooks omit is that the first farmyard revolution was in medieval times when sheep were 'folded' on the arable part of southern and Midlands farms to manure them. A sheep is a walking muck-spreader. A living, organic machine for fertilizing ground.

Poor sheep, they never get their due, do they? Let us go back to the late, lamented Robin Hood in a Herefordshire paddock. The humble wool of the back of Ryeland sheep like Robin Hood was the source of medieval England's wealth, stability, power. Democracy. (As Trotsky once pointed out, as soon as you have want, you need a policeman to keep the people in order. Then a policeman, to keep an eye on the policeman . . .) 'Lemster Ore' it was called, from the flocks grazing around Leominster Priory, and worth its weight in gold. Robin Hood was part of our farming history, our national story. His kind, as well as filling the national coffers, filled our stomachs, put the clothes on our backs (and legs, feet, arms, hands, head).

Poor sheep. Overlooked in our history, and now accused of abetting climate change through their 'gaseous emissions' and destroying the landscape with their hooves and mouths. According to zealous rewilders, our mountains are 'sheep-wrecked' when they could be covered bounteously with trees. (The new forests enveloping our uplands will be a sad surprise to curlews, red grouse and skylarks, I suggest.)

*Baa.* Humbug. Sheep can be good for the environment. Back

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