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FALKLAND ISLANDS.

Comparative Notes

on

Sheep Farming

in the

Falkland Islands and in South Patagonia.

BY

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FALKLAND ISLANDS:
PRINTED AT THE GOVERNMENT PRINTING OFFICE, BY C. G. ALLAN.
1923.

COMPARATIVE NOTES ON SHEEP FARMING IN THE FALKLAND ISLANDS AND IN SOUTH PATAGONIA.

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At a representative meeting of Falkland Island farmers held in the Governor's Office in Stanley in 1922, a leading farmer stated that in methods of farming the Falkland Islands were fifty years behind the Coast. He did not specify the direction in which the Colony is so backward, but it is scarcely denied that in the last 30 years there has been little progress. In farming, as in every other industry, the producer must either go forward or fail, and, despite temporary high prices for wool, the present is undoubtedly a critical period for farming in the islands. Not the least ominous sign is the continuous decrease in lambing percentages in many parts of the Colony. There are farmers with many years of experience who hold the opinion that all that is possible has been done and that no further progress can be made.

The following notes, touching a phase of the contrast between farming practice in the Falklands and in South Patagonia, may have some interest for those who do not hold the despairing view of the local industry quoted above.

Climatic conditions in the two places are analogous. If there is a difference, it is in favour of the Falklands where the winters are less rigorous and the snow does not lie so long. Farms are wind-swept alike in both countries and, with few exceptions, treeless. The carrying capacity does not differ widely unless the Colony is greatly overstocked. The Coast benefits, however, through drier and better drained camp.

The writer has been informed that sheep on the mainland produce four times the profit that an equal number do on a farm in the Colony. Briefly, two main reasons may be suggested:- (a) refrigerating factories (freezers) on the Coast enable farmers to dispose of surplus stock at very remunerative prices, (b) owing to higher lambing percentages, these farmers have the inestimable advantage of being able to cull much more heavily, with better animals and better wool as the result.

Each matter will now be examined separately in some detail.

(a) Freezers.

The chief economic handicap, under which Falkland Island farmers suffer, is the absence of a profitable market for the meat produced – or what may be stated more generally as surplus stock for disposal. The establishment of freezers in Patagonia – foredoomed to

failure in the opinion of many who were apparently best qualified to judge – has made a vast difference in the prosperity of the farmers in the territory. The profits made by the freezing concerns also have been so good that they now seek further fields for extension and are turning their attention to the Falklands. If it can be shewn that it is a "paying proposition," there is little or no doubt that the establishment of a freezer in the Colony will immediately follow.

The writer has been informed that a supply of 70,000 sheep per annum would warrant the erection of a freezer, but the large initial cost would not be justified for a lesser number. It is, therefore, necessary to ascertain the amount of stock now ordinarily available for disposal. The supply must, of course, be constant – the question of quality will be referred to later.

The figures given below are based on the returns supplied by the Chief Inspector of Stock and shewn in the Gazette for February 1923. The average of the flocks, for the last three years only, has been taken, but the statistics are in conformity with the records for a much longer period:-

Average number of sheep in April	...	...	658,270
Increase by lambing, viz. 60% of breeding ewes (256,800)	...	...	154,080
		Total	812,350
Deductions:-			
*Consumption, 2.6%	17,457		
Death rate, 11%	89,358		
Flocks at counting	658,270		
			765,085
	Surplus stock	... ...	47,265

The number now to be reckoned as surplus is, therefore, nearly 23,000 short of a paying freezing proposition. If, however, a freezer were established, it would follow as a necessary sequence that the number of breeding ewes would be largely increased. The summer pasture would, it is said, carry the additional stock to the time of disposal. The proportion of breeding ewes to total flocks in the Falklands is at present less than 40%. On the Coast it is approximately 50%. More than 25% of the total number of ewes in the Colony are put down as "other ewes" or culls. When the sole consideration is not wool, it does not seem unreasonable to suggest that 40,000 of the

* The consumption rate is high and is much lower on the average farm where however the death rate may be greater than 11% and lambing less than 60%. The general result arrived at is approximately correct.

64,644 culls (the present average number in the Colony) might be put to the rams: with normal lambing the requisite number of 70,000 would then be made up.

The writer has in the above calculations been dealing solely with farming as it is at present carried on in the Falklands. It is apparent that many alterations would have to be made in breeding and in the composition of flocks if a freezing factory were established. It has been alleged that the breed in the Colony is unsuitable for freezing and that the quality of the meat is inferior. At least one farmer, with long experience in the Falklands and on the Coast, has expressed this opinion strongly: others no less qualified to speak have expressed their conviction to the contrary. Incidentally it may be mentioned that, at the time canning operations were going on, the mutton exported from the Falklands was reported to be the best on the market.

The question, however, of what can or cannot be done with reference to a freezer, is only hypothetical. The present all important matter is whether increased profits can be obtained from the production of wool and whether anything can be learned from the Coast.

(b) Upkeep of Flocks.

(1) Culling.

Nearly 30 years ago one of the ablest sheep men who has ever visited the Colony addressed a forcible letter to the farmers in which he stated that the secret of success in farming lay in "culling, culling, culling." In other words, in withdrawing from breeding. The writer asked one of the most successful sheep farmers in Patagonia, with a farm carrying under 30,000 sheep, to tell him the direction in which the greatest progress has been made in recent years. The reply was that it was in breeding, the advance within the last 10 years being particularly emphasized. As he himself is able from his open wind-swept camp to sell from 200 to 400 ram hoggets yearly at prices ranging from £3 to £6 each, to send 10,000 animals to the freezer and to sell his clip at 1/6 a lb., f.o.b.,* it may be conceded that his opinion is entitled to respect. His flock is Corriedale with a Romney strain. The greater part of his wool is classed at 56, and his fleeces average over 8 lbs in weight.

The following general notes on raising lambs on the Coast may be of interest whether the methods coincide with those followed in the Falklands or not.

(2) Division of holdings on the Coast.

The first object is to divide the camp in such a manner that it is possible to spell each paddock for a certain period in the year. As a general statement, all the flocks are moved down from summer to winter

* 1922 price.

camp as late as possible in April. The dry flocks are moved back in September if the weather is favourable, and the breeding flocks after shearing in January. There can be no hard and fast rules, but the above appears to be best suited to local climatic conditions. Extensive subdivision has proved profitable.

(3) Composition of Flocks.

Although it is natural that this varies where the farmer can dispose of animals to a freezer, the variation may not be so great as is commonly imagined. The farmer, quoted in subsection (1) above, assured the writer that he would make very little difference in the composition of his flock this year if he were breeding for wool alone. The effect of the dry spring and summer on the pasture had caused him to make some, not very important, alterations. The breeding flock was slightly smaller than usual and more dry ewes were carried.

The supreme importance in sheep farming of correct composition of the flock appears to justify a comparison between the practice in the two places under review. This can be best done by reducing the total flocks in the Falklands and two typical holdings on the Coast to a common number, say 30,000 sheep. One of the Coast farms taken is very broken and is regarded as bad camp. This is called A; the second is medium to good camp and is called B. The figures and percentages work out as follows:-

	Falklands.		A		B	
	Number	%	Number	%	Number	%
Rams	450	1.5	517	1.7	349	1.17
Breeding Ewes	11,700	39.0	14,608	48.7	13,423	44.74
Hoggets	6,210	20.7	9,758	32.5	12,344	41.14
Wethers	8,700	29.0	4,472	14.9	2,590	8.64
Culls	2,940	9.8	645	2.2	1,294	4.31
% Rams to Breeding Ewes		3.85		3.57		2.60

The proportion of hoggets to breeding ewes is 53% in the Falklands as against 66.8 in the case of farm A, from which, however, a large number of lambs had been taken off for freezing before the winter stocking, which the figures represent. This throws us back on the bad lambing in the Colony.

One of the main objects of this section on the comparative composition of flocks is to suggest that, even if the farmers continue to breed for wool only, they may find that the line of progress is to follow,

in so far as lambing returns permit, what the Coast farmers would do if the frozen meat market failed them.

(4) Distribution of flock.

The farmers in Patagonia attach more importance, than the majority of farmers in the Colony, to the desirability of running sheep of the same age in separate flocks. This applies principally to the breeding flocks, the number of wethers and dry ewes not permitting of the age division on a comparatively small farm. The practice of parting sheep off into flocks of the same generation appears to typify one distinction between good and bad farm management. The breeding ewes are divided into two tooth, four tooth, six tooth and full mouthed flocks, with further subdivisions according to numbers. This naturally cannot apply to the stud flock. 2,000, or better still, under, is regarded as the number for a breeding flock, provided that the camp is suitable. The best winter camp is allocated to the shearling ewes as the poorest lambers. It is relevant to this and the preceding section to say that it is practically a hard and fast rule on the Coast for no sheep to be kept beyond 5 years of age. A full mouth ewe and her lamb are for instance both sent to the freezer. It is asserted by a high authority that for anatomical reasons a ewe should not have more than four lambings.

(5) Mating the rams with the ewes.

The proportion of rams placed out to the ewes is understood to be 3 per cent in the Falklands. This is higher than is general on the coast where 2, or a little more, per cent, is usual except in very broken country; it may, however, be necessary where the discredited practice of using old rams, which have lost much of their virility, obtains.

The rams are normally placed out at approximately the same dates in both countries. In this connection the question of keeping the rams back in camp where the grass comes away late may be mentioned. There are farmers, in the Falklands at least, who hold that this can only be regulated within narrow limits on the ground that the rams waste themselves if kept back from the ewes. The opposing view is, that provided the rams are kept well away from the ewe camps any loss due to this is much preferable to the certainty that the ewes will not have good feed at and after lambing and will lose their lambs – or what is worse bring up weaklings.

In "Sheep, Farm and Station Management," the Australian handbook, it is stated that "Many people yard the ewes and rams during the coupling season so many nights a week. This practice is commendable where there are small paddocks entailing no driving distance to yards."

The sheep are not yarded in this way on the Coast. The practice, which may also be followed on some farms in the Falklands, is for the breeding flock to be gathered on its feeding ground with the

rams turned in, about a week after the rams have been placed out. The process is repeated once more about ten days later. The sheep are not held but are let go again almost immediately. This has been found to be all that is necessary: it is in adherence to the strongly held principle that there should be an absolute minimum of interference with the breeding flocks from the time they are sent to their winter camp until lambmarking. The rams are taken off the flocks six weeks after they have been placed out.

(6) Lambing.

The most striking disadvantage, suffered by the Falkland Island farmer as compared with his neighbours on the Coast, appears in the lambing returns. On good farms in the latter place the farmer reckons in an average season on getting a lambing percentage of not less than 90 per cent of the breeding ewes. 94 and 96% are not uncommon. The best yield in the Falklands at the present day over flocks of 20,000 and upwards is not more than 74%, while the general average for the Colony is under 60%. There are records to shew that percentages were higher in the past. No cause has been assigned for the decrease which is capable of proof by available evidence. It is beyond the writer's province to go further than to state what is done on the Coast before and during lambing and up to marking.

In the first place, as has been shewn, the breeding flocks are put on to spelled land; it stands to reason that, if there is not ample feed for the ewe and the lamb she carries, the problem settles itself and no further enquiry is necessary. Spelling land is not in question on the Coast. It is as much an accepted fact as placing rams out. Where it has not been the practice in the Falklands it is arguable that the failure can account for the decrease in the lambing from the days when the soil was comparatively virgin.

Secondly, carrying on the principle of non-interference, dogs are not only kept entirely away during the winter but, on many farms, are not allowed to be used in gathering for lamb marking. There is little doubt that there is frequently considerable loss in the Falklands between lambing and lamb-marking. It is at least possible that part may be attributable to the mothers getting frightened and the lambs being lost. However, some of the best farmers believe that their particular camp cannot be gathered without dogs, although they must necessarily be kept well in hand and used as little as possible.

The ewes on the Coast are said to be excellent mothers and no allegation is made, such as is heard in the Falklands, that they are callous and desert their lambs. It is said that where this occurs it can only mean that the ewe is unable through age or insufficient nourishment to raise her lamb. This does not of course apply to shearling ewes as there is always trouble to be anticipated with the first lamb.

As the farmers on the Coast are in a position to dispose of all their full mouth ewes after lambing, they do not have to contend with losses through old and broken mouth ewes being unable to feed themselves and supply their lambs with milk.

(7) Lamb-marking.

It is probable that there is no appreciable difference in the practice in lamb-marking in the two countries. A plan which is attached of the most recent type of lamb-marking pens may be of interest. The mesh wire required is made on the farms from old wire in a machine which used to cost £20 and now probably costs £40. It will be known to some farmers in the Falklands. The cost of manufacturing the mesh is estimated at about 4d a metre, 3 ft. 8 ins. in height. For bringing the flock in as quietly as possible twine netting is carried round to extend the wings at the entrance of the pen as may be necessary.

(8) Death-rate.

There is evidence on the Coast, as in the Colony, of the endeavour of farmers to minimize their death rates, and it is difficult to obtain reliable figures. As far as it is possible to make an estimate, the death rate in the Falklands varies from 10 to 15 per cent and in Patagonia from 5 to 8 per cent. Many farmers in the latter place will assure one that they scarcely ever lose a sheep for which they cannot account. There can be no doubt that ditching and draining on scientific lines have made a considerable reduction in the losses on the Coast. Bogs on the low ground, and forest country are of considerable extent, but there can be little comparison between the difficulties the farmers there have to contend with and those in a great part of the East Falkland at least. It is however, reasonable to suppose that a material reduction would be made in the very serious Falkland Island figures, if the farmers could afford the expense and the labour of extensive fencing and ditching. This appears to be essential expenditure with the present heavy losses in lambs.

(c) General.

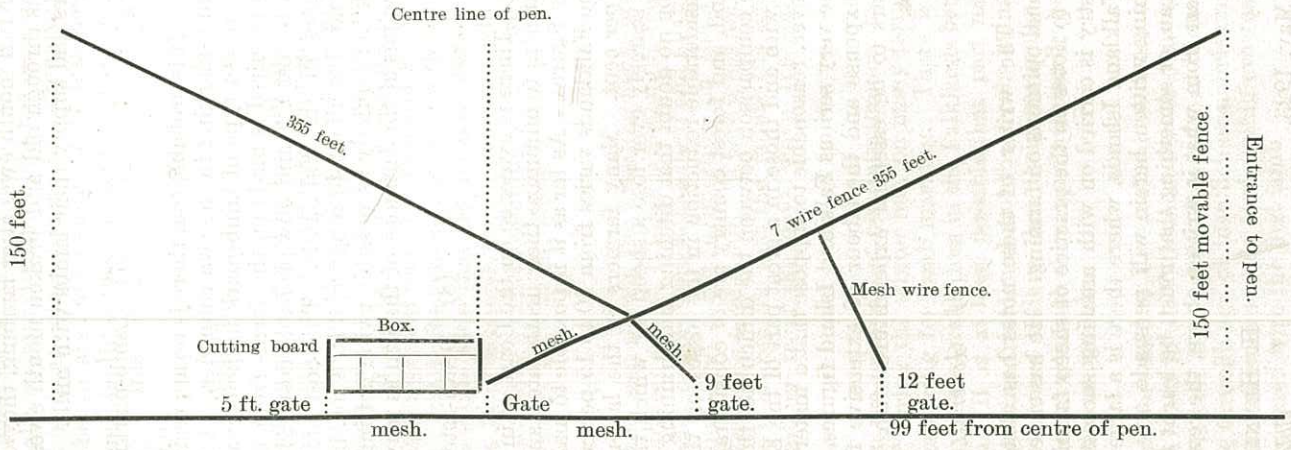
The writer of these notes has abstained from expressing any personal opinions on farming. He has endeavoured to limit his observations to notes on the practice of sheep farming on the Coast, where the industry is carried on with amazing success, as compared with that in the Falkland Islands, where there is a large measure of stagnation. If anything written herein will persuade any farmer that there is much that can, or something that must, be learnt from South Patagonia, from or apart from what is written above, the reward will be ample.

H. HENNIKER-HEATON.

23rd May, 1923. *Colonial Secretary.*

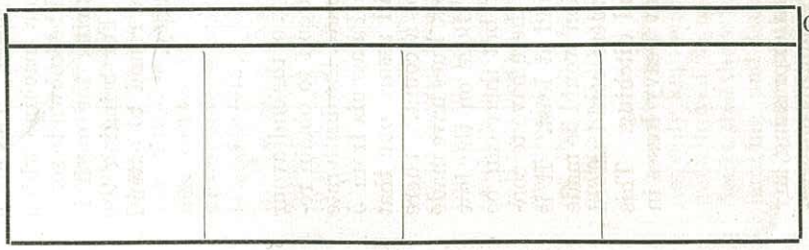
Plan of Lamb-marking pen.

(Not to scale).



Total length of fence 600 feet.

PLAN OF BOX.



Length of Box 20 ft. 6 in.