

SHEEP, THEIR TYPES AND CHARACTERISTICS.

NO. IX.

FINE WOOL—AUSTRALIAN MERINO.

Though comparatively unknown to the breeders of this country, and hitherto not generally recognized among writers as a distinct variety, the peculiar type of Merino that produces the fine wool of Australia is entitled to a distinctive appellation, and will be so recognized. Under peculiarly favorable conditions of climate, and under the patronage of wealth that brought to its fostering care all the accessories that a bountiful nature had not vouchsafed, the sheep husbandry of Australia presents proportions, and its history furnishes lessons that cannot fail to arrest the attention of student and breeder.

The first introduction of fine-wool sheep into Australia is to be credited to Capt. John Macarthen, of the British army, who was sent to Sydney in 1790, in charge of the guards for the penal settlement. This gentleman's attention was attracted to the few sheep that had been introduced into the colony for the purpose of supplying ~~wool~~, and he early conceived the idea that, on account of the peculiarity of climate, the fleeces of these animals (descendants of the hairy sheep of Bengal, introduced from the Cape of Good Hope), was improved, despite the entire absence of efforts at their amelioration. In 1797 a small flock of Merino sheep which had been sent to the Cape of Good Hope by the Dutch Government, was, through the influence of Capt. Macarthen, imported into Australia. These were divided between two other gentlemen and Capt. Macarthen, the latter's share being five ewes and three rams.

The rams he used upon the coarse-fleeced ewes in his possession with such success as to confirm him in the purpose of establishing fine-wool husbandry on Australian soil. In 1803 Capt. Macarthen returned to England, taking with him samples of wool from the flock which he had bred. These he brought to the attention of the English manufacturers, who were at that time dependent upon Spain for their supply of fine wools, already so deficient in quantity as to threaten the extinction of the fine-cloth manufacture. By appeals to the people and memorials to the government, the interest of Lord Camden, Secretary of State for the Colonies, and other eminent personages was secured, and finally the royal consent was given for transferring a few fine-bred Merinos from the private flock of George III, at Kew—"the twin Cabana with the French Imperial Cabana, Rambouillet"—he was promised a grant of ten thousand acres of land, and set out on his return to Australia to lay the foundation of the celebrated Camden estate, amid trials and hardships that would have daunted a less resolute spirit than his, and to plant the seeds of a pastoral wealth that will forever remain a worthy monument to his foresight and energetic services. Graham, in his treatise on the Australian Merino (1870), says "from 1803 up to 1828 or 1829 we hear little of imported sheep; and, meanwhile, under the intelligent management of Mr. Macarthen, it took some twenty-three years to perfect the pure breed of Australian Merinos." The inference is doubtless intended that, by the judicious use of the King George III rams and their progeny, the flock afterwards celebrated as the "Camdens" resulted from persistent and intelligent inbreeding through a series of years. In 1826 the animals, "although small, were extremely compact, low set, short-legged, bodies close to the ground, and as much alike as the grains in a handful of duck-shot. Their wool was exceedingly fine, but certainly not dense." Mr. Graham continues: "From about 1829 to 1840 the Australian wool had a character so uniform and fixed that an English wool-broker or sorter could with certainty select, by the touch alone, from a bale of others, a Botany Bay fleece, as they were called. Up to 1839 I do not recollect any importation of English breeds, and I consider that about this time, and mainly for this reason, the Australian Merino attained its highest point of excellence. Time, climate and intelligent management had all been employed in eradicating the legion of bad qualities which characterized the original stock; and the whole of the sheep in the colony were the types of one, differing only from the operation of local influences and the degree of intelligent care bestowed upon them by their various owners. Of course, some flocks were better than others, but all had the stamp of the Australian Merino impressed upon them."

About 1840 the first Leicester sheep were imported into Australia, for the purpose "of placing the Merino fleece on the Leicester carcass," and in spite of the discouragements that were presented in every instance except the first cross, so general was the mania for

big bodies covered with big fleeces, that, "before this sad truth was discovered, three-fourths of the sheep in the district were completely ruined." Experiments with Oxford Downs led to similar results. Though there have been repeated importations of Merinos from France, Germany and a few from the United States—from which the best results have been obtained—the opinion seems to prevail among the best Australian authorities that the highest merits of their Merinos are those secured by judicious breeding within themselves. Size has been attained by a system of careful selection and liberal alimentation. Runs that were "understocked" became conspicuous for the size of the animals composing their flocks, while animals upon crowded ranges presented little or no increase of carcass. These are facts that wool growers can realize without going beyond their own experiences. The liberal provider is always better paid for his grain and grass than is his short-sighted neighbor who feeds with a stinted hand.

The growth of Australian sheep husbandry has been marvelous. In seventy years from the time that Macarthen landed from the Argo with his little flock of Merinos the number of sheep in the several colonies was over sixty millions, and the value of the annual wool clip nearly six million pounds sterling. The finest wool exhibit made at the Centennial Exhibition was from Australia; warranting one of the commissioners from that colony in saying, "Although Australia may freely boast of the unequalled richness and variety of her mineral productions, of the large returns and great fortunes amassed from her gold fields, yet nothing approaches the wool industry in importance."

The effort of breeders has been to secure fineness and length of staple, in which they have been eminently successful. In weight of fleece they are behind American breeders—the secretary of the New South Wales Commission to the Centennial Exhibition reporting 2¼ pounds of washed wool as the average of the flocks. This is from the lack of density which is here encouraged. Australian flock owners are the chief competitors of our own fine-wool growers in the United States markets, as the general light condition of the wools allows them an advantage in importation over South American fleeces, under the present tariff imposing a specific duty on wools of foreign growth.

Australian sheep husbandry is pastoral. Many of the runs are fenced, a system for which is claimed certain advantages, such as health of sheep, size and stamina, carrying capacity of land, expense of management, losses of animals by poor shepherds, allowing shepherd's time for attending to improvement of breed of his sheep, and an increased return from land of 20 to 60 per cent. Of course fencing involves ownership of the land—a fact that divests it of much interest that it would otherwise possess for the American flock owner, who seeks the frontier not so generally to become the owner of land as to secure the benefits from its use while it remains the property of the government.

In no other locality has the wonderful

faculty of the Merino for adapting itself to natural surroundings been more forcibly exemplified than in Australia. Removed thousands of miles from its former home, with every condition of climate, vegetation and management completely changed, it left the impress of its pure blood and high merits upon the flocks from the date of its introduction. Yearly widening the circle of its new-found ranges, it gained a foothold under the tropic sun that scorched the Darling Downs, and "hot country wool" became an important item in the commerce of a country which, in point of fine-wool production, stands first on the world's steadily widening list.
