Famous sheep breeds: the Merino

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H. Biggin and Son's Grand Champion Merino ram at the 1959 Perth Royal Show

G. & S. Threlfall's Poll Merino ram which gained the Reserve Grand Championship in the Merino class and the Championship in the Strong Wool Poll Merino class at the 1959 Perth Royal Show
THE Merino breed has often been described as “the Royal Family of the Sheep World” and this title was never more applicable than in the case of the present-day Australian Merino—a sheep which, in addition to producing the world’s most valuable wool is so staunchly-constitutioned that it will thrive under a wide range of conditions and has survived droughts in which the hardy native animals perished in thousands.

There is much that is not known—and probably never will be known—concerning the origin of the Merino. Spain was the original home of the breed but although the Romans were eulogising the fine wools of Spain long before the birth of Christ, it is generally believed that the sheep which produced that wool were not Merinos but a breed which grew a long, plain-stapled wool of a reddish-brown colour.

Even the origin of the name “Merino” has long been a source of conjecture, and many different explanations have been given for its adoption. One is that the name was originally “Marina” signifying that the breed came from across the sea. Another is that it came from the Spanish term for “wandering”; or from the Latin “majorinus” signifying a head-man, or a judge or governor. To my mind, the most feasible explanation is the one now most popularly accepted—that the name came from the Beni Merin, the Moroccan tribesmen who, during the Moorish invasion of Spain in the 12th Century, moved to Spain in large numbers taking their sheep flocks and horses with them.

The term “Merino” appears but rarely in the Spanish archives prior to 1600 A.D. and does not seem to have come into general use until nearly two centuries later.

It was during the Moorish rule that Spanish sheep-husbandry reached its highest peak, for the Moors had long been famed as stock-breeders. Following upon the expulsion of the Moors in the 16th Century there appears to have been a gradual falling-off in the quality of the Spanish sheep and wool although for many years they maintained their reputation as the world’s best.

For centuries, Spain’s virtual monopoly of the fine wool trade was closely guarded and laws were passed making the exportation of Merino sheep an offence punishable by death. Up to the 18th Century the Merino flocks were the property of the Crown, certain religious orders, and a few

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Fig. 1.—An 18th Century drawing showing a Spanish Merino ram and ewe. They would grow fleeces weighing about 6 lb. and 4 lb. respectively.
wealthy grandees who together formed a powerful and unscrupulous federation privileged to travel their vast "cabanas" or flocks to the mountains for summer grazing and back to winter on the plains. The "Council of the Mesta," as the sheepowners' committee was called, practically made its own laws and there was no redress for the unfortunate villagers whose commonage and crops were eaten out by the travelling hordes.

The Merinos of those days differed greatly from the big-framed robust sheep which have made Australia famous. They were light-cutting, sparsely-woolled animals with small-framed, active bodies ideally fitted for the rigours of the almost continuous travelling. Some of the outstanding cabanas were the Escorial owned by the King of Spain, the Negretti and the Infantado named after their aristocratic owners, and the Paular which belonged to the Carthusian monks. Sheep from these ancient Spanish flocks provided foundation stock for most of today's leading Merino studs in many parts of the world.

MERINOS IN BRITON

It is often rumoured that Merino sheep were introduced into England in Elizabethan times but if so they were absorbed into the native breeds. I have often thought that both the Dorset Horn and the Ryeland could conceivably have an infusion of Merino blood far back in their ancestry. The Ryeland wool differs from that of other British breeds, while the spiral horns and the unique breeding habits of the Dorset Horn also suggest some Merino forbears. Both breeds are white-faced and neither quite fit into the Downs class.

The first recorded importations of Merinos into England were made during the reign of George III. Despite the ban on exports, it would appear that a few were smuggled out through Portugal and shipped to England late in the 18th Century.

Later, through the efforts of Sir Joseph Banks, some Negretti rams and ewes were obtained by more orthodox means and then when the Spanish insurrectionary forces became Britain's allies against Napoleon, many very large shipments were made.

A number of Merino flocks existed in England until fairly late in the 19th Century, but the cessation of the Napoleonic wars made it possible to import fine wools cheaply from abroad, and concurrently, the growing industrialisation of Great Britain switched the demands from wool to meat for which the British breeds were much better suited.

THE DISPERAL OF THE SPANISH FLOCKS

France probably smuggled in a few Merinos quite early in the 18th Century and in 1723 a breeding flock was sent to Sweden.

In 1765 the Elector of Hanover, a cousin of the King of Spain, obtained a draft of 82 rams and 198 ewes from some of Spain's finest flocks and a similar consignment was sent to Saxony in 1778. Prussia, Austria and France also obtained breeding flocks from Spain, and Louis XVI of France established a Royal stud at Ramboullet—which has given its name to a well-known Merino strain.

Napoleon's invasion of Spain in 1809 hastened the dispersal of the Spanish flocks. Many thousands of Merinos were
driven across the Pyrenees into France by the victorious French armies and large numbers were butchered to feed the invaders.

A number of the sheep-owning Spanish grandees joined the French, and the revolutionary Government—which was badly in need of money—promptly seized their flocks and sold them to the highest bidders.

Fig. 3.—An old photograph of the Peppin’s famous ram “Emperor.” This ram was a Rambouillet Merino, but it will be noted that he was a plain-bodied animal, with the triple neckfold as his sole claim to “development”—an animal not differing greatly from the present-day ideal.

William Jarvis, the Americal Consul at Lisbon took full advantage of this unique opportunity and vast numbers of Merinos from the best Spanish flocks were shipped across the Atlantic.

These were not the first Merinos to reach North America, for small drafts had been smuggled out at various times through Portugal but the purchases arranged by Jarvis meant that America had what was probably the largest group of purely Spanish Merinos in the world.

Russia and South Africa were among other countries which introduced Merinos about this time and this widespread dispersal marked the end of Spain’s supremacy in the wool world—a supremacy which she never showed signs of regaining.

THE MERINO IN AUSTRALIA

According to old letters, there was a Merino ram among the 44 sheep landed in Australia from the First Fleet in 1788, but as all but one of these sheep were soon reported to have died from sickness and the attacks of dingoes, it is unlikely that Australia’s first Merino survived more than a few weeks.

The first sheep flocks of the pioneer settlers were the hairy fat-tailed sheep from the Cape and the long-legged, flop-eared Indian breeds, most of which resembled goats rather than sheep.

The introduction of the Merino to Australia came about more or less by accident. In 1797 Captain Waterhouse of H.M.S. “Reliance” and Captain Kent of H.M.S. “Supply” were sent to the Cape of Good Hope to purchase livestock for the colony in New South Wales. The widow of Col. Gordon, the former commander of the Dutch garrison at Cape Town had some Spanish Merino sheep, 26 of which were purchased privately by Waterhouse and Kent for £3 a head, each taking 13 sheep.

All but one of Kent’s sheep are reported to have died on the voyage to Australia but Waterhouse appears to have landed most of his consignment and distributed some among other settlers, retaining the nucleus of a small flock for himself.

Among those who obtained some of Waterhouse’s importations or their pro-
The Merino was introduced to Australia by Captain John Macarthur and the Reverend Samuel Marsden, both of whom played prominent roles in establishing the Merino in Australia.

Macarthur had already tried to improve the wool of the Cape and Indian sheep by mating them to a rough-wooled Irish ram and he made the most of the opportunity of further improvement with the Merinos. At a sale of Merinos from the Royal flock of King George III held at Kew in 1804, Macarthur purchased seven rams and a ewe. Two rams failed to survive the voyage to Australia but the remainder were landed safely in June, 1805.

Marsden received five rams as a gift from King George III in 1808, and although the current demand in the new colony was mainly for sheep to provide meat, a small group of breeders were far-sighted enough to concentrate upon fine wool production.

They encountered many difficulties, for Australia had very few Merinos to grade up to original flocks, but their tenacity commenced to pay dividends quite early in the 19th Century when “Botany wool” achieved a reputation on the English sale floors.

With settlement spreading westward following the discovery of a pass over the Blue Mountains in 1813, Australia’s sheep flocks increased rapidly and heavy importations of Merinos from famous German studs took place throughout the 19th Century.

French Rambouillets and descendants of the Spanish flocks transferred to England were also used in building up the quality of Australian fleeces, but until about the middle of the 19th Century the Australian Merino was essentially a fine-wooled sheep yielding a light-weight fleece.

Attempts to increase the size of the sheep and to grow a more robust type of “bale-filling” wool were made from about 1840 onward, mainly by experimental crossbreeding with British long-wools such as the Leicester and Lincoln.

The Peppin Era

Undoubtedly, the most successful move toward producing a large-framed, strongly-constitutioned animal that yielded a heavy fleece of long-stapled medium wool, was that made by G. H. W. Peppin and his sons. George and Frederick, who arrived in Victoria from England in 1850.

In 1858, the Peppins purchased portion of the Wanganella property in New South Wales, which they operated as a fattening proposition until 1861 when a stud flock was formed using 200 ewes of their own breeding and 100 from Canally near Ballanald. Rambouillet and German rams were used, and the outstanding Rambouillet ram “Emperor” had a great influence on the stud in its early years.

Fig. 4.—Wrinkles were still fashionable in 1906 when this concertina-patterned ram was awarded the Grand Championship at Sydney. A few years later the trend swung back to the plain-bodied sheep.
1866 they purchased two American Vermont rams, one of which was the famous "Grimes" destined to play an important role in the development of the Peppin Merinos.

Concurrently with the development of the medium-wooled type in New South Wales, breeders in South Australia were working on similar lines in the evolution of the strong-wooled strain which has many adherents in our own State.

**THE VERMONT INVASION**

During the last quarter of the 19th Century, despite the influence of the heavy-cutting Peppin sheep, the average cut per head of the Australian sheep was low (just over 5 lb. in 1883).

Samuel McCaughey (he was knighted later) was the "sheep king" of that era owning vast properties and depasturing about a million and a quarter sheep in New South Wales and Queensland.

He bought rams from Boonoke and Wanganella in an attempt to raise the fleece weights, but after seeing the success achieved in a neighbouring flock by using an imported American ram, he purchased ten rams from the U.S.A. which formed portion of a consignment offered for sale in Sydney in 1883.

These rams were descended from French Merinos—and it will be recalled that much
of the success of the Peppins was due to the introduction of the French Rambouillet ram, "Emperor" and the American Vermont ram "Grimes."

It would appear that these early American importations were good sheep, even judged by modern standards—big, plain-bodied animals carrying dense fleeces of stylish wool. They yielded heavy fleeces of greasy wool and although their wool carried far more "condition" than is favoured today, reports indicate that they were successful in increasing the yield per head even on a scoured basis.

Their progeny were highly successful in the main sheep shows, wresting the laurels from Wanganella which had up till then, taken most of the major awards.

Fired with enthusiasm, inspired by the success of the American rams, McCaughey made a special trip to the U.S.A., where he spent over £50,000 on Vermont rams which he shipped to Australia in vast numbers.

Some were good—many were not. Some were plain-bodied—others were a mass of wrinkles. They yielded fleeces weighing, in some instances at least, over 50 lb. "in the grease," but in many cases there was far more grease than wool and the scoured weights were often lower than those from plain-bodied Australian sheep.

The importation of these concertina-patterned Vermonts by McCaughey triggered off "the cult of the wrinkle" in Australian flocks.

"The more wrinkles, the greater the skin area; the greater the skin area, the more wool," was the slogan. Judges refused to look with any degree of favour on plain-bodied sheep, and a glance at the photographs of the Grand Champions from 1890 onward shows how the craze for wrinkles affected even the topline judges.

By the beginning of the present century, more and more breeders were beginning to realise that the "Vermont invasion" had been a tragedy for many studs—that Australia had gained little if anything from the importations and had lost far more than she could afford in wool quality and lowered constitution.

Drought years demonstrated that flocks carrying a preponderance of Vermont blood fared badly, and although wrinkly sheep continued to find favour with some show judges until about 1910, there was an ever-increasing preference for plain-bodied sheep whose sole concession to "development" was in the handsome triple neck-fold—the type of sheep which takes the honours in the shows of today.

POLL MERINOS

When it is realised that few of our modern breeds of livestock have been pure-bred for more than half a century—that little was known about the science of genetics by most of our leading stud-breeders until the present century was
in horned flocks and herds, attempts have been made to evolve polled strains. Several of Australia's leading Merino stud-breeders have worked on these lines for about 25 years and the Poll Merino Breeders' Association was formed in 1956 and now has over 200 breeders on its register. The polled characteristic is a dominant factor and the Poll Merino strain is rapidly gaining in popularity. "Poley" enthusiasts claim that the horns are a disadvantage, in that horned rams are liable to be caught up in fences; are more susceptible to head strike by blowflies, following injuries sustained in fighting, and that the growing and carrying of a heavy pair of horns takes nourishment that could otherwise be utilised in wool and meat production.

WHY BUTTERFAT TESTS VARY

It is often asked why it is that milk tests for fat vary from time to time with individual cows or with bulk samples from the same cows in herds. The age of the cows, seasons of the year, stage of lactation and temperatures are just a few of the reasons why these variations occur. The Babcock test was developed in 1890 and ever since then the content of butterfat in milk and cream has been used in the buying and selling of these products, and as the basis for calculating production records of cows and herds. No matter how accurate the methods used, the fat tests will vary and slight fluctuations on the day of testing can make large differences when multiplied by the total milk production for the month.

As a general rule the average tests of the Channel Island breeds are much higher than the Australian Illawarra Shorthorns and Friesians. Jersey milk would average as a general rule over 5 per cent. fat; Guernseys over 4.5 per cent.; Australian Illawarra Shorthorns and Friesians 3.5 to 4 per cent. Inheritance within the breed plays a part in the fat variations as some herds are selected for milk production and others for butter fat. Again some cow families test much higher than others and with the lower testing breeds this could be a very valuable attribute.

The fat content tends to decrease slightly as the cow ages and this difference can be as much as 1 per cent. between a cow's highest and lowest average testing lactation. Probably one of the causes which has a big influence on butter fat tests is air temperature, as low temperatures tend to increase the fat content while high temperatures tend to decrease its percentage in milk. This could affect the breeds or individual animals with high fat content milk more than the ones with low tests. Probably the biggest upset occurs when sudden changes of temperature take place. Taking this into consideration the big climatic variations in the seasons of the year will have an influence on the butterfat percentage of milk.

Other factors apart from those given, which can have an influence on the fat content of milk are feed, interval between milkings, stage of lactation, methods of milking, condition of animal and management.
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