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MEMORIAL ADDRESS

James Little and his Corriedale Sheep

P. G. STEVENS

Canterbury Agricultural College, Christchurch.

"NOW I do not call a man a breeder who gets fresh blood every year for his flock, and what is more, though he may have one or two extra good sheep every year, yet his flock will show all sorts of type in wool, shape, and expression, and his sheep will not have that level appearance that all good flocks should possess."

That is a quotation and it is the best introduction to James Little. It is from a letter he wrote to Sir James Wilson, of Bulls, in 1913. The Board of Agriculture with Sir James as chairman was to be appointed the following year. In anticipation of this he was collecting the opinions and experiences of stock breeders to provide material for discussions by the Board on the improvement of sheep, cattle and pigs in New Zealand.

Little could express the ideas in the quotation with confidence as at that time he had completed 50 years of experimental sheep breeding in New Zealand, and was accepted as the master breeder in the evolution of the Corriedale. Such was his self-reliance that at no time did he look to fellow breeders to provide him with regular supplies of breeding stock; such was his skill that from diversity he produced uniformity.

He was born in Mid-Lothian in 1834 and during his youth and early manhood lived and worked amongst the hill sheep of south-eastern Scotland. Even had he made no major contribution to New Zealand sheep breeding he would still have been one of that considerable army of pioneer sheep men who came to New Zealand from north of the Border and played an important part in the development of the sheep industry.

His arrival in New Zealand in 1863 was of more than passing interest as he came in charge of nine Romney Marsh rams and 22 ewes, bought by agents in England for Dr. Webster. It was the second recorded importation of the breed. The first, four rams and 16 ewes, arrived in Wellington ten years earlier for Leonard Young who sold them almost immediately to Ludlam. It was from the Ludlam and Webster importations that many of the purebred flocks seeking registration during the 'nineties claimed their descent.

Little and his Romney sheep eventually arrived at Corriedale. This station and Balruddery, which was close by, were taken up by Dr. Webster in the early 'sixties. They were in North Otago about 15 miles north-east of Oamaru and five miles south of the Waitaki river. North Otago was not included in the original South Island purchases, and it was not until 1848 that Tracy Kemp persuaded the Maoris to sell this and other South Island areas to the Government. Four years later in 1852, W. L. Valpy rode over the area while traveling from Christchurch to Dunedin (he later took up 30,000 acres) and in the same year Mantell, Commissioner of Crown Lands, reported on its suitability for settlement. Between 1852 and 1856 the sheepmen moved in and all the land in the triangle bounded on the north by the Waitaki river, the west by the Kakanui range, and the east by the sea was taken up. (Over 500,000 acres). This open tussock-covered hill country was settled only about seven years before the arrival of Little with his Romney sheep in 1863.

Dr. Webster, the owner of the two stations, was a medical practitioner and though he did not practise in New Zealand he is credited with holding the position of deputy Inspector General of Hospitals. Until 1878 when he died, he appears to have entered fully into the farming life of North Otago and in addition served on various public bodies including the Oamaru Provincial Council and the Oamaru Harbour Trust. But most important, he gave Little a free hand with his sheepbreeding projects.

No environment could have been less suitable to the Romney than the North Otago of that time. The average rainfall was light. For the 50 years following 1867 it was 22 inches a year. The highest, 34 inches was in 1894. The lowest, 10.4 inches, was in 1907. Nineteen of the 50 years were less than 20 inches. The whole area ranging from fertile valleys and easy hills to the steep Kakanui range was under light tussock and native grasses, and was held in areas of 10,000 acres upward by the sheep men. Although Little was not a pioneer of the area, he was an early arrival. Oamaru boasted only 40 houses and 200 inhabitants, of whom only 20 were over 40 years old, while the whole North Otago triangle contained only 1200 people.

The sheep population increased rapidly and by 1866 had reached 400,000, of which Webster owned 13,000, all Merino except the small Romney flock on Corriedale station.

Between 1863 and 1878 Corriedale station was the home of Little. Most of his time was spent on the routine management of the Merino flocks, but he interested himself in two breeding problems which provided experience and knowledge for his later work. The first problem was to maintain the imported Romney flock as a pure-bred flock; not an easy task when we remember that it was an isolated community, and in any case there was no breed society and no flock book to guarantee the purity of any sheep that might be available.

Little's own account of his problems gives some indication of his acute observation and his self-reliance. He admitted that he knew nothing about Romney sheep, and indeed had never seen a Romney until he picked up the consignment in a stable in London just before he sailed to New Zealand. But his already considerable experience among the hill sheep of his native Scotland entitled him to regard himself as a fair judge of a sheep.

By the time he reached New Zealand he had decided that there were only two really worth while sheep in the shipment—a ram and a ewe which he named the Duke and Duchess of Kent. It was on these two sheep that he based his Romney breeding plan. The other eight rams were used only in the Merino flock to breed halfbreds. The Duke was bred to all the Romney ewes, and in the course of time was replaced by his sons from the Duchess. Little observed that the original sheep were robust and prolific, but after some ten years of breeding on the Duke and Duchess plan they became delicate and each succeeding generation began to show more tail end—more pig mouths, rough hips, and subject to all manner of ills. On the other hand every year there were a few rams and ewes better than anything that had appeared before, while the prolificacy of the flock remained very high. He records that in one year the lambing was just short of 200 per cent.

Although Little firmly believed in what he called "sib" breeding, that is, inbreeding, up to a certain degree, he was haunted by the fear of what might result if he had to continue too far. He wrote, "I was continually on the Doctor's track to get me a fresh ram." Several were obtained. One came from Ludlam, but as he had wool which Little described as "of a dull, leaden hue, and so fine I have seen Merino flocks with as coarse wool," he was not used. A little later two

rams were imported from Kent. Little described one as "a splendid type of Romney, but carrying in its fleece a lot of dead hair or kemp, while the other was a passable English Leicester." Again neither was used. It was not until Dr. Webster went to England and searched Kent armed with a written specification that an acceptable sheep was obtained. During these years both rams and ewes were sold to other breeders. The usual price for rams was 30 to 50 guineas, but in 1874 Little records the sale of one at 120 guineas.

After the death of Dr. Webster in 1878 the flock was sold to a neighbouring station owner, Reid of Elderslie, and Little's work as a breeder of Romney sheep ceased.

While he was building his reputation as a breeder of purebred Romneys, he was also experimenting with crosses of the Romney on the Merino. Almost as soon as he arrived at Corriedale he suggested that a fixed cross between the Romney and the Merino might have some advantages. The suggestion met a lot of criticism from other sheepbreeders on the grounds that the Merino was still the best sheep for the country and in any case, a cross could not be made to breed pure. It was admitted, however, that the first cross was good, but only Little believed it would pay to go further.

He wrote: "In thinking over this question, I recollected there was a farmer whose property adjoined that which my father had charge of in the old country, who had a flock of a fixed type between the Cheviot and the Scotch Blackface. It was also well known to the initiated that only a few of the English and Scottish sheep were strictly speaking, purebred. Pondering over these things I failed to see the force of the argument that it would be impossible to fix a type of sheep either one-half, three-quarters, or seven-eighths Longwool-Merino, and that it would depend greatly on the country to be dealt with which would be the most suitable."

Little persuaded Dr. Webster to allow him to try out his ideas. In 1868 he started crossing experiments with 600 Merino ewes which he mated to selected Romney rams of his own breeding. The halfbred progeny were mated together and this continued for several generations. Dr. Webster was so impressed with the sheep which Little produced in his nucleus flock that the whole of the Romney halfbred ewe flock was mated to rams bred in the in-bred experimental group.

In 1878 Dr. Webster died and Little moved to Allandale in North Canterbury, where his brother had already established himself.

By now Little had convinced himself that the future sheep for Canterbury was the halfbred type ewe. There was, in fact, already a general recognition of the advantages of the halfbred—the heavier fleece worth approximately as much per pound as the Merino, higher lambing percentages, better mothers and quicker growing young sheep. For these reasons the mating of Lincoln and Leicester rams to Merino ewes to produce halfbreds was already in progress before Little commenced his work in North Canterbury.

But Little saw what most other breeders overlooked. As halfbred numbers increased, so must Merino numbers decline. There would come a time when no surplus Merino ewes were available to produce halfbreds. He was also influenced by the possibility of the export of frozen carcasses. For some time New Zealand sheepowners had been watching developments overseas. The freezing works of T. S. Mort which opened in Sydney early in 1861, and the shipment of frozen meat from Paraguay to Britain in 1871 offered new possibilities for New Zealand sheepfarming. No longer would the fleece be the only product of any value. Little planned a sheep which would thrive on the low-rainfall hill country, produce both a profitable fleece and a

commercial carcase, and most important of all, breed true. In short, he wanted a new breed which would replace the future uncertainty of the cross breeding system.

He was right in his forecast of the disappearance of the Merino ewe and the change-over was even more rapid than he expected. The New Zealand sheep population of 3,000,000 in the sixties and 10,000,000 in the 'seventies, was practically all Merino. However the 18,000,000 sheep of the 'nineties were made up of only one-third Merinos. Already half the total flock was Lincoln, Leicester, and their crosses, while the remaining sixth was Romney and Downs, mainly Shropshire, and their crosses. Merino numbers had already declined and the growing demand for halfbred ewes could be satisfied only by two methods. One was the continuous use of first cross halfbred rams on ewes of halfbred type, a method which is followed by the halfbred breeders even to-day. The other was to produce a true-breeding sheep of halfbred type.

But to get back to Little. The foundation stock on Allandale was a flock of 2000 Merino ewes which Little bought in from high quality, old-established flocks. These ewes were mated with Lincoln rams, some of which were obtained from Sutton, the leading breeder of the time, and others from the Webster estate. This is the first mention of Lincolns belonging to Dr. Webster, and although Little has not recorded it, it is difficult to believe that he had not tried Lincolns as well as Romneys in his crossing experiments at Corriedale. In any case, at Allandale he decided in favour of the Lincoln.

From amongst the variety of Lincoln-Merino half-breeds, Little selected the few which fitted the pattern of his future breed. Of all the ram lambs, he selected the best 100, but even these were culled to 20 before he used them. These selected sheep became his nucleus (his stud flock) and he proceeded to breed on from generation to generation. Once the nucleus was established there was no return to either of the parent breeds—the Lincoln or the Merino. His experience with the Romney flock at Corriedale led him to adopt a family system of line breeding based on a number of unrelated Lincoln rams and unrelated groups of Merino ewes, so that he had groups of unrelated halfbred sheep which he could intermingle indefinitely. However, when he did find an outstanding breeding ram, he used him and his descendants extensively over all the nucleus groups. Such a ram was Old Jonathan, and the descendants of this name are prominent in the Hui Hui flock to-day.

For the next fifteen years, Little proceeded toward his objective of producing what he already called a Corriedale sheep. In 1893 McIvor published a book, "The History and Development of Sheepfarming," in which one section is devoted to a tour of New Zealand sheepfarms though most of it deals with Australia. McIvor describes the Allandale flock and says, "Being the only breeder of this class of sheep in the colony, Mr. Little was unable to secure a change of blood. Hence every two years or so, to maintain the standard he had perforce to introduce new Merino ewes and an entirely new strain of Lincoln rams." This came to the notice of Little and he at once wrote to the Australian "Pastoral Review," as follows: "In breeding these sheep, it is but natural that the same care and attention should be given to them as to any purebred flock, and I have left nothing undone in this respect. The principal thing in establishing such a flock is by making a start with the best sheep on both sides, and then carefully culling for the first years. It cannot be expected that the first cross sheep when mated together will give such uniform progeny as a sheep a few generations removed. Neither will a first cross sire when used on inbred ewes. This I have proved on two occasions I have tried the experiment, and the result has not been satisfactory. It is in this

respect that the account of my flock in the "History and Development of Sheepfarming" is incorrect. It there states, "hence every two years or so Mr. Little to maintain the standard had to introduce new Merino ewes and a new strain of Lincoln rams. This is wrong, as it was on the two occasions referred to that I used the new strains.

"To breed rams successfully I started line breeding and at the present time (1893) have a stud flock divided into five flocks. In flocks One and Two, I have bred carefully from selection and have used the same rams as long as possible. In the remaining three flocks I have introduced fresh strains, a first cross in one, and rams two generations removed from the parent breeds in the other. The system adopted by most persons similarly situated to myself is to buy about March five-year-old or cast for age ewes from the stations, mate them with a longwool ram and at weaning time sell both ewes and lambs and again buy in the following March; or keep the lambs and freeze the wethers as two or four-tooths and put out a longwool or Down ram to the halfbred ewes. In any case they sooner or later fall back on the Merino ewe. She is a good nurse, but you cannot expect as good a percentage as from a halfbred, and after rearing a halfbred lamb she will not give any great fleece. In my case I have my place stocked with young sheep all in full profit. The wool weighs well and always commands a good price and has several times yielded the highest price in the market. In addition I hold letters from buyers for export carcasses which show they have had the most satisfactory returns from my sheep."

In spite of the confidence Little had in his sheep and the returns he was getting from them, many sheepbreeders still looked on his work with something like ridicule. This attitude is well shown in an article in the "Weekly Press" in 1898 by A. W. Rutherford, who was the owner of Mendip Hills and Leslie Hills and one of the Amuri "Wool Kings." He was of course a Merino breeder, but economic circumstances were forcing him to turn over at least in part to halfbred sheep. His choice of a ram was the English Leicester. He regarded the Border Leicester and Lincoln as less suitable, but of the Corriedale he says, "Out of respect for the feelings of my old friend Mr. Little, I decline to take his beloved Corriedale seriously and so will pass them without comment." However, ten years later in 1907, in the same paper, he wrote, "Owing to the demands of the frozen meat industry the tendency is in the direction of substituting Corriedales for Merinos."

Little took every opportunity of advertising his sheep. He exhibited them at Agricultural and Pastoral shows as "inbred half-breds." At least it was under this name that they appeared in prize lists, but in the accompanying show descriptions they were always referred to as Corriedales.

By this time Little had been joined by other breeders. Most of them worked from the Lincoln-Merino foundation, a few used the Leicester-Merino. It is of interest that between 1890 and 1894 at least three of these early breeders used inbred halfbred rams obtained from Thomas Tanner of Hawkes Bay. By 1900 the new breed had attracted sufficient attention to warrant some action on the part of the New Zealand Sheepbreeders' Association, and in 1902 the Association set up a special committee to consider the best way of entering or registering inbred halfbred sheep in an appendix to the Flock Book. Earlier in the same year the conference of Agricultural and Pastoral Associations held in Dunedin had considered the question of a name for the inbred halfbred sheep. The Otago representative at the Conference moved that, "Seeing it is contemplated to admit inbred halfbred sheep into the Flock Book, this conference recommend a name for the breed." He suggested that the name Southern Cross should

be adopted instead of Corriedale, the name by which inbred halfbreeds were already commonly known.

An amendment to the motion was immediately forthcoming. D. D. Macfarlane, another of the Amuri wool kings, moved that the name Corriedale be adopted. This was seconded by Buckley from Ellesmere, and carried without discussion. Thus was the breed officially named.

The New Zealand Sheepbreeders' Association in 1903 gave appendix recognition (not registration), to the breed, under the following conditions:

- "1. That the record be confined to experiments between recognised purebred longwool sheep and Merinos, or progeny of the same.
- "2. That such experiments must have been conducted continuously for a period of five years prior to the first entry in the record. That persons intending to start experiments shall give notice of their intention to the Council."

The first flock listed and described in the appendix is the Allandale flock owned by James Little, which had then been in existence 25 years.

In 1911 the Sheepbreeders' Association went a step further by publishing the annual returns of the 18 flocks then in the appendix. In 1916, 20 flocks were moved from the appendix and admitted to full Flock Book status. Meanwhile in 1910, the Corriedale breeders formed their own association, which in 1923 became a separate body, the Corriedale Sheep Society. The new society issued its first Flock Book in 1924.

But Little had disappeared from active breed participation before this. In 1904 his son, H. T. Little, founded the Hui Hui flock with sheep obtained from his father. In 1915 James dispersed the Allandale flock, but continued with an appendix flock founded in 1904 on Mt. Hilton station. This flock was based on English Leicester-Merino half-bred ewes, which were mated to Corriedale rams from the Allandale flock. Both Mt. Hilton and the flock were sold in 1920 just a year before James Little died. He thus completed 57 years of active sheepbreeding in New Zealand.

Although the Allandale flock did not survive to receive full Flock Book recognition, many of the flocks in the book, including the Hui Hui flock of his son H. T. Little, obtained from it their foundation stock; and although Little did not live to see the formation of the Corriedale Sheep Society, he did see full purebred recognition given by the New Zealand Sheepbreeders' Association. He saw also the name Corriedale published in the annual sheep returns. In 1919 under the heading purebred sheep were listed for the first time 14,000 stud Corriedale ewes (about 8 per cent of the total stud ewes) and 205,000 ewes under the heading of ewes of a distinctive breed. Again about 8 per cent of the ewes returned in this class.

The home of the breed in New Zealand is still the light rainfall, hill country of Canterbury and most of the present day 40,000 stud ewes and the million and a quarter flock ewes are in that province. However many overseas countries saw the value of the breed for their own sheep farming conditions and exported freely from the early flocks. Little himself was a pioneer exporter at a time when there was no breed society and no inspection of export sheep. But he and the others laid a solid foundation. Overseas sheepmen came and bought and returned to buy again and again.

What a reward for his labours had Little been present at the first International Corriedale Congress held in the College hall in

November, 1950, when delegates from overseas countries met to discuss a common interest—Corriedale sheep. As a result of the congress Uruguay was appointed the first home of the International Secretariat of the breed and was invited to publish the International Corriedale Year Book. This appeared in 1953. Little would have appreciated this book and he certainly would have been in agreement with the expressions in the foreword written by a Uruguayan breeder which runs "The International Congress was not merely a social episode, nor even an assembly called together for the purpose of bestowing unstinted zootechnical praise. The various delegates presented problems, difficulties and possible solutions, showing above all else a spirit of determination. At the present time the ruling policy of the breed, now holding the second place in sheep production in all the world, must not be left to the bias of those who defend it nor even to mere exigencies of tradition. We are steadily producing wool and meat but we must not lose sight of the changes in taste and demand of the consumers' market. The Corriedale breed lives and prospers in inhospitable districts, and is successfully exploited in the more progressive regions where social betterment exacts a more intensive cultivation of the soil."

But he would have appreciated even more the factual material contributed by the various countries: an estimated 10,000,000 Corriedale sheep in Argentine; over 7,000,000 (about one-third of the total sheep) in Uruguay and increasing numbers in the other South American countries—Peru, Chile and Brazil. In Australia over seven hundred stud breeders with 200,000 stud ewes: the United States of America with twelve hundred stud breeders and 15,000 stud ewes, and total Corriedale numbers estimated at 12 per cent of the sheep population; and even Japan where 90 per cent of the half million sheep are Corriedales.

No matter where Corriedale sheep are bred, associated with them is the name of James Little. The overseas breeders he dealt with are long since dead but their successors have not forgotten the man who bred their early importations. An additional reminder, if one is needed, is an inscribed tablet set in a block of native stone on the Corriedale estate. The inscription on the tablet reads: "New Zealand Centenary 1940. This stone was erected to commemorate the origin of the Corriedale breed of sheep on this estate by Mr. James Little 1868." James Little commenced his experimental breeding with Lincoln and Merino sheep in 1878. He dispersed the resulting Corriedale flock in 1915. He died in 1921 but his sheep live on in the flock of his grandsons.