

LYTTELTON TO SHANTAN?

Sheep Saga with a Sequel

(Written for "The Listener" by
JAMES BERTRAM)

WHAT, would most *Listener* readers say, has been the best story that has ever appeared in this journal? It might be interesting to take a poll. But I know I should plump solidly for an article that came out in these pages just two years ago—on February 16, 1945. It was called "Lyttelton to Lhasa — the Story of a Mob of Sheep."

That article gave the amazing history of 150 New Zealand Corriedales, Merinos, Romneys and Lincolns that left these shores in the middle of one war, got caught in the beginnings of another, and finally ended up on the roof of the world. It was the sort of story that couldn't have been invented; it had to be true.

The sheep, as many readers will remember, had been ordered by the Chinese Ministry of Agriculture on the instigation of Rewi Alley of the Chinese Industrial Co-operatives—they were intended to improve the breed and the fleece of Indusco flocks in Kansu, in Northwest China. With the help of T. Alley of Wellington, Messrs. Wright Stephenson & Co. filled the order with that special loving care that is reserved for really unusual enterprises. In December 1941, shrouded in wartime secrecy, the sheep left Lyttelton. A few days later, Japan struck at Pearl Harbour.

Troubled Odyssey

The rest of the story should be familiar—it is a theme for a modern New Zealand epic that I commend to any of our younger poets. Re-routed from Rangoon when the Burma Road fell to the



"If the origins of the domestic sheep are obscure, the evidence seems to point to the Asiatic highlands between Tibet and Turkestan. There, something wild was first tamed—a goat-like animal that probably had long hair and a short tail" ("The Listener, February 15, 1945). This picture shows a boy at Rewi Alley's school in Shantan with the school's pet ram, typical of the flocks Alley wants brought up to date.

advancing Japanese, the sheep were finally landed in Calcutta. The only remaining route into China was over the old pack-trails that crossed the ice-bound passes to Tibet. Along these trails the little flock vanished from sight, heading for the eternal snows.

For two years they were "off the map." Then in 1944 they were located by two passing Americans on the frozen plateau well east of Lhasa—stranded in a position from which they could not easily

be moved, and shut off by an impenetrable mountain barrier from the river-valleys and oases of Kansu where they had long been eagerly awaited.

The Americans reported that the Tibetan shepherds were crossing their own stock with these aristocratic visitors from the islands of the South, and that they were "exciting great interest." So, as Rewi Alley wrote back to his brother in Wellington late in 1944, "it seems they have come to the end of their trail. They will have their effect on the sheep of Central Tibet, but not on those of the province of Kansu for which they were intended."

Heroic Failure

That, in brief, is the story that was featured in *The Listener* just two years ago. And the reason why I personally would give this article top marks in New Zealand journalism is not just that it was a scoop—as it undeniably was—nor because it was exceptionally finely told; but because it had two rather special marks of distinction.

In the first place, the article itself and the editorial comment upon it showed that rare quality of imagination that picks out a really significant story from routine news. Here was drama of a kind that townsmen and countrymen alike could appreciate. The motive was of universal interest: help from a little country to a big one in distress (though fighting gamely on our behalf), help of a kind that only this little country could give. And it was a drama with an all-New Zealand cast—not least, the island-bred sheep to which this country, like England in those dimly-apprehended



REWI ALLEY looking out over the Shantan Oasis. Most of the land visible is pasture, and the white patch in the distance is a flock of Indusco sheep.