

Mutton or Wool—or Both?

I WISH I could remember the standard wool counts, or even the meaning of a count in the first place. But I can't. I ask Jim as often as we have his sheep or mine in the yards, and forget next day. I am, in fact, so impervious to such knowledge, which we never used when I was a boy, that I suspect most of

JUNE 28 those who say they possess it — especially farmers who assume a wise look in a saleyard or a shearing shed, pluck out a few strands of wool, and at once say 56 or 48. I know that there are people who can say such things without humbug, who must be able to say them to live, to say them quickly and accurately and know what their decision will mean when the wool reaches the mill. But I don't think they are usually farmers.

Nor am I sure that farmers who do know such things are to that extent more successful. I am afraid Jim was right when he told me one day, after what I thought a luminous summary of something I had just read about genetics, that "genetics is all very well, but it doesn't help you in your farming." I think I know why it doesn't help, and I think Jim knows, too, but it might begin to help if farmers were as eager to learn as the mother who told me once why her daughter was getting lessons in voice production.

"There's no doubt," she said, "as helocation do 'elp the speakin'."

Breedin' do 'elp the wool count, too, but New Zealand has not yet made up its mind whether it is breeding for wool or for mutton. More than any other country in the world we depend on mutton, and although we have one big success to record in trying to breed for mutton and wool simultaneously, we are still a little afraid of that. We are beginning to be afraid, too, of quick maturing but small fat lambs. At a ram sale I attended in the autumn, the pens held Romneys, Southdowns, Suffolks, Ryelands, Southdown-Suffolks, Southdown-Romneys, Lincoln Merinos, Romney-Merinos, Border Leicesters, English Leicesters, Southdown-Borders, and only

one pen of Corriedales (our single fixed breed of half-breeds). The lambs we shall see everywhere in a week or two will be of many sizes, many shapes, many counts, and almost as many colours.

I HAVE met two missionaries in my life whose matter and manner I have never forgotten—Egerton Young, who spent most of his days in ice and snow, and Dan Crawford, who buried himself in the long grass of Central Africa. The first was a genial, simple, entirely unselfconscious man who had heard a call and answered it, and never once allowed himself to think that his

JULY 2 situation was in any way remarkable. The second was humble on his knees, autocratic and irascible on his feet, a bearded, round, explosive, and irritating man who drove audiences away when he came home to talk to them, but left them with something to think about for many years to come. We should, I think, meet such men twice, as we should go to school and college twice, once when we are young and once when we are old; but that is seldom possible. In Dan Crawford's case it would have been possible only if one had been prepared to follow him back into the long grass, since he came out once, he said, to make sure that he was not wrong in regarding civilisation as lunacy, and was going back convinced that it was. As far as I know he died in the long grass, but I came on his autobiography the other day on a second hand book counter, and have found it almost as pungent all these years afterwards—it was written before 1912—as I found the crazy little warrior himself when I met him in my early manhood.

Books are, of course, a safer medium for autocrats than lectures and public platforms. Printed pages are not sensitive, do not speak back, do not argue or ask questions, do not frown, laugh, sneer, or interrupt. They may do some of these things years afterwards; they have long memories; but they don't do them at the exasperating moment when the author has just wet his pen. So Dan's book is good-natured, humorous, humble, cranky, and exciting. It is not

by "SUNDOWNER"

quite true that he went all unarmed and went all alone. But it is nearly true. He carried a gun for defence against wild animals—lions, crocodiles, elephants, leopards, and mad hippos—and to provide himself and the natives with food. Once, too, he commanded an armed force assembled to resist an attack by Arab slave-raiders. But in general he walked with God and had no fear. Two out of three of the people round about him were actual or potential murderers, cannibals, liars, and thieves, and to an appalling degree dirty and diseased. But he lived and ate with them, preached to them, prayed for them, and engaged in the strangest theological discussions with them. Simultaneously he explored and mapped the country, made anthropological notes, and once or twice, but never willingly, got involved in high politics.

I can very rarely agree with him, even when I sympathise with him, and now and again I find it difficult even to believe him. I do believe him, though I require a little assistance sometimes in overcoming my unbelief. Here, for example, is a duck-shooting story that, if I had not met the teller and talked with him, not felt the fire of his faith and wilted a little in the glow of his zeal for the truth as he saw it, might have started me thinking cheap and foolish thoughts about the power of the African sun. I give the story in his own words:

Clouds of water-fowl rose on our approach, so dense that blindly banging with a No. 12 we bring them down freely. Anyone of an arithmetical turn of mind I invite to consider carefully the following figures indicative of the thickness of this flock—at one bang 114 (one hundred and fourteen) fell to the right barrel of a Greener.

LAST year I had dead lambs before I had any live ones. This year it has happened again. Though I should not have them alive or dead for another fortnight, a ewe died yesterday and another this morning; each with twin lambs almost ready to be born.

JULY 8 Then this afternoon I surprised a hawk finishing off a fifth lamb that had apparently been born prematurely.

Five lambs lost and two ewes before the season begins reflect little credit on my shepherding, and I wish I could feel innocent. All I can tell myself is that my neighbours have made a bad start, too. The five live lambs I have seen this year appeared a few days ago not far from my own boundary. So far I have seen five on their feet with their mothers, three dead, two ewes dead, and a third in extremis and almost certain to die tonight. They are younger and better sheep than mine, in good condition, and grazing on a sunny face. It seems to have happened also, as in my own case, that the casualties have been good sheep and not unthrifty or weak ones. In this respect, as in so many others, sheep reproduce our own story: creaking doors hang on, and even function, long after their expected end.

(To be continued)



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