1 Sheepishness

The sheep approaches to see if I have anything to offer. I try to read his face, but it's difficult: the eyes all but disappear behind the big searching muzzle. When at last his gaze meets mine, I find it off-putting. The pupils aren't circular like a human's, but slits. Nor are they vertical like a cat's eyes. They are more alien than that: horizontal slots across a pale yellow cornea. In the face of the goat standing next to us, between the horns rising from the top of his head and the beard dangling from his chin, those sideways eyes seem full of diabolical intelligence and character. But the sheep's face, between long ears that poke horizontally from the side of the head, and a beardless chin overshot by a broad nose, is all laterals and no verticals, so the sideways shape of his pupils is exaggerated rather than complemented. If this sheep's face was a hospital monitor, it would be flatlining: no sign of life.

Sheep are hard to read.

Partly this is because they are so familiar. Along with their closest relatives, goats, sheep have been an intimate part of human lives for 11,000 years – longer than any other species except the dog. Our landscapes are full of them, and our houses and wardrobes and refrigerators are full of what we make of them – as are our churches, sacred scriptures, books, visual arts and popular culture. Millennia spent making sheep into what we want them

Ruminating sheep.

The spring lamb has been a common motif of New Zealand postcards for decades.

to be – both in the flesh, and in our collective imaginations – obscures our view of what they really are, in themselves.

It is this paradox that has brought me to a farm animal sanctuary to meet a couple of sheep in person. I live in a country whose modern economy, society and landscape have all been shaped by sheep-farming more than by any other single force – a country in which, during my childhood, there were 30 sheep for every human being. Yet I had never, before this day, spent any time with actual live sheep – never touched one. Even in my country, in which sheep are everywhere, they are nevertheless for most of us, most of the time, out of the way.

I grew up in New Zealand in the 1970s, a decade in which the number of sheep in the country rose to its all-time high of 70 million. Along with everything else it gave us (including an economy), the national flock provided the standard caricature of New Zealand to a world ignorant of any other fact about the place. Given the extent to which settler New Zealand was built on the wool and meat of *Ovis aries*, it is hard to argue that the joke was unfair. The most common postcard available to overseas tourists,

the one designed to epitomize our country, showed spring lambs and daffodils. Most likely, those adorable baby animals ended up on a family dinner table as roast legs of lamb, the meal that came closest to a national dish. To grow up as I did was to experience a world that was more sheep-shaped than any other before or since.

Yet readers of this book will also belong to cultures that have been formed, to some degree and in certain ways, by the lives and deaths of sheep. New Zealand is only one legatee, albeit a conspicuous one, of *Homo sapiens*'s long-standing engagement with *Ovis*. Somewhere around 9000 BCE, sheep were domesticated by humans. And from these flocks came the cultural phenomena that constitute civilization as we commonly understand it: cities, religion, writing, accounting, commerce, capital, industry.

At the same time, we have exploited the bodies of sheep for material purposes – fleecing them, so to speak, of their fibre and flesh, their milk and their mammary cells. We have also made profligate use of them as signifiers, as bearers of our meanings. In this respect *Ovis aries* epitomizes Henry David Thoreau's insight that, for humans, animals 'are all beasts of burden, in a sense, made to carry some portion of our thoughts'.[1] In the case of sheep this has been literally true: until the importation of papermaking techniques from China during the Middle Ages, European books and documents were inscribed on parchment made from animal hides, predominantly those of sheep.

Of course, we have made extensive – indeed unlimited – use of many other species as well. Yet no other domestic animal fades from view, even as we use it, quite as completely as the sheep. No other animal tends so thoroughly to become (for most of us) nothing *but* a signifier or blank page or resource unit. For it is surely the case that, despite their massive contribution to our lives – past and present – we think less of sheep than just about any other animal. This is the species we make proverbial

for stupidity and failure to stand out from the crowd. To be or behave like a (flock of) sheep means to give up one's individualism, identity, initiative, intelligence and will. Even our word for them (in English) fails to distinguish between the singular and the plural. It's no surprise that in George Orwell's political fable *Animal Farm* (1945), for instance, it is the sheep who accept indoctrination by the ruling pigs most easily, and whose brainwashed chorus of 'Four legs good, two legs bad' is used to silence any opposition or resistance.[2]

Where do they come from, these stereotypes that portray sheep as the most negligible, the most easily dismissed, the most routinely overwritten of animals? As we examine the history of our species's attitude to sheep, we find that even the ways in which we habitually dismiss them have much to tell us.

The presumption that sheep are unintelligent can be found as far back as Aristotle, who asserted in about 350 BCE that

> the sheep is said to be naturally dull and stupid. Of all quadrupeds it is the most foolish: it will saunter away to lonely places with no object in view; oftentimes in stormy weather it will stray from shelter.

Yet just a couple of paragraphs later, he remarks that 'shepherds train sheep to close in together at a clap of their hands', so that 'when a thunderstorm comes on', they can summon their flocks back to the sheepfold.[3] The contradictions here resound throughout history: sheep are stupid because they follow obediently, but also because they stray disobediently; they are too dull to know what they are doing, but they can learn to come on command (like dogs, in whom we consider this to be evidence of human-like cleverness).

From Shakespeare's day comes the most charming expression of the already ancient belief in ovine silliness: Edward Topsell in his *History of Four-footed Beasts* (1607) concedes with regret that 'the head of the sheep is very weak, and his braine not fat.'[4] Less charmingly, a century and half later, during the era of the great systematizers of the Enlightenment, the pre-eminent French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, considered 'the weakness and stupidity of the sheep' to be so extreme that 'without the assistance of man, the sheep could never have subsisted, or continued its species in a wild state.' Fortunately, it so happens that 'this animal, so contemptible in itself, and so devoid of every mental quality, is, of all others, the most extensively useful to man.'[5] Here is another formula central to the human–ovine relationship: the sheer inanity of sheep justifies our use of them.

A further variation on the theme of sheepish dimness is demonstrated in the following century, and on the other side of the world, by Lady Mary Anne Barker, a well-to-do settler in colonial New Zealand. In her book *Station Amusements* (1873), designed to entertain a London readership with tales of life on an antipodean sheep run, Barker introduces a chapter entitled 'Our Pets' by distinguishing between dogs, cats, horses and fowl, all of who possess 'individuality', the capacity necessary for them to be companions of humans, and sheep, who do not:

> I never heard [sheep] spoken of with affection . . . This must surely arise from their enormous numbers. 'How can you be fond of thousands of anything?' said a shepherd once to me, in answer to some sentimental inquiry of mine respecting his feelings towards his flock. That is the fact. There were too many sheep in our 'happy Arcadia' for any body to value or pet them . . . Even the touching patience of

> the poor animals beneath the shears, or amid the dust and noise of the yards, was generally despised as stupidity.[6]

Two further important and durable themes emerge here. First, sheep can only be conceived as a mass of identical units rather than individuals. Second, their 'patience', in the old sense of acceptance of suffering, is 'despised as stupidity'.

This latter stereotype, that of the sheep as long-suffering or self-surrendering, has its own powerful cultural genealogy – and one that, most paradoxically, derives from a symbolic status more exalted, potent and central than any other creature in Western culture. For within the Christian tradition, the sheep – or more specifically the lamb – stands for Jesus Christ himself.

The sheep appears at the very origins of the Jewish and Christian Old Testament traditions, identified from the outset as the archetypal sacrificial victim and the incarnation of passive surrender. In Genesis the first animal sacrifice occurs when the shepherd Abel, son of Adam and Eve, offers to God the 'firstlings of his flock' (Genesis 4:4). The original 'scapegoat' is actually a sheep: God provides Abraham with 'a ram caught in a thicket by his horns' as a substitute victim for his son Isaac (Genesis 22:13). Lambs, in particular, remain stuck with this role throughout the scriptures. Examples include the Passover lambs' blood that preserves the Israelites from the death of the firstborn in Egypt, and the proverbially meek and self-sacrificing 'lamb to the slaughter' foreseen by the prophet Isaiah, who, 'as a sheep before her shearers is dumb . . . openeth not his mouth' (53:7). These archetypes are taken up in the New Testament, where Jesus becomes 'the Lamb of God, which taketh away the sin of the world' (John 1:19). In the Book of Revelation, the 'Lamb that was slain' appears as one of the apocalyptic manifestations of Christ (5:8). Despite this particular Lamb's assertive actions – he presides over the

Christ as the 'Little Lamb' defeating the ten kings: illustration to Beatus of Liébana's *Commentary on the Apocalypse*, *c.* 1220–35.

Caravaggio, *Sacrifice of Isaac*, *c.* 1603, oil on canvas.

destruction of the heavens and the earth – the Greek word used is not the usual *amnos*, 'lamb', but the diminutive *arnion*, 'little lamb', or 'lambkin'.

The imagery of the shepherd and his flock is also repeated frequently in both Testaments, where it provides the symbol of the submission of God's people to his will: the Psalmist sings, 'he is our God; and we are the people of his pasture, and the sheep of his hand' (95:7), while St John writes, 'he goeth before them, and the sheep follow him: for they know his voice' (10:4). In Christian tradition, the sheep remained the epitome and emblem of obedience to the will of God. The medieval bestiarists – writing most often on sheepskin parchment – described *Ovis* as 'a soft

Jan van Eyck, *Adoration of the Mystic Lamb*, detail from Ghent Altarpiece, 1432, tempera and oil on wood.

Edward Burne-Jones, *The Good Shepherd*, 1857, watercolour.

Four stamps issued by New Zealand Post for 2015, the Chinese Year of the Sheep.

Christ bequeathing his shepherd's crook to the clergy. Frontispiece to Hugo de Fouilloy, *Treatise on Shepherds and Flocks, c.* 1270.

animal with wool, a defenceless body, and a peaceful nature', who 'represent[s] the innocent and simple among Christians'.[7]

It is, then, to Judaeo-Christian thought that we owe the overwhelming Western association of sheepishness with self-abnegating passivity, an association so deeply engrained that it remains in force well beyond its religious origins. In today's secular cultures, this archetype of sheepish passivity, separated

Zhao Mengfu, *Sheep and Goat*, handscroll, Yuan Dynasty, China (1271–1368), ink on paper.

from its scriptural context, loses the original sense of redemptive self-surrender and folds back into the pre-existing (agricultural) idea of sheepish stupidity.

The exceptional power of these combined stereotypes becomes all the more striking if we compare them with other cultures' attitudes to *Ovis*, for the ascription of passivity and stupidity to sheep is a uniquely Western convention. In ancient China, for example, although sacrificing animals to ancestors was a fundamental part of religious practice, and references to the sacrifice of domesticated sheep can be found as far back as the Shang Dynasty (over 3,000 years ago), *Ovis* functioned merely as one sacrificial animal among others, rather than the paradigmatic one.[8] Nor does the Chinese tradition associate sheep strongly with surrender. The same word (*yáng*) applies to both sheep and goat, and since this is also the word for the masculine principle in nature (within the fundamental opposition of *yíng* and *yáng*) and for the sun, the image of the sheep/goat/ram signifies (from the Han dynasty onwards) auspiciousness, good fortune, 'renewal and change', 'happiness and prosperity'. Rams' heads were commonly used as a motif on roofing tiles, for example, to render the dwelling lucky. The eighth sign of the Chinese zodiac is either the goat or the sheep, and those born under that sign are, although

Petroglyphs of bighorn sheep, Moab, Utah, USA.

mainly placid and gentle by nature, also stubborn, strong-willed, passionate and capable of militancy.[9]

In the Americas, by contrast with both the Chinese and European traditions, familiarity with the indigenous sheep, the perennially wild and indocible bighorn (*Ovis canadensis*), produced (for example, among the Hopi and Navajo) an association of sheep with sharpness of sight and hearing, and with power over nature and the body.[10]

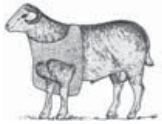
Even in the so-called West the ancient and still-dominant archetypes and stereotypes that associate sheep with mindless lack of individuality have been challenged in recent years. Scientific studies (discussed in detail in the next chapter) show that sheep possess extensive spatial memories, ample capacity to learn from experience and a highly developed ability (beyond that of dogs, and comparable to humans' own) to identify individuals by their faces, even after long periods of separation.

The chapters that follow are driven by these contradictions between our commonest assumptions about sheep and the ways in which the animals themselves challenge, subvert or resist

those assumptions – driven, so to speak, by the tension between sheepishness and sheepliness.

In writing this book, I have been repeatedly astonished by sheep. My more surprising discoveries include the following: the first domestic sheep were suckled rather than milked by humans; there have been sheep the size of oxen; ancient Romans and Greeks dressed their sheep in custom-made jackets; in Africa and Central Asia, rams sometimes wear aprons as a contraceptive measure; in parts of France, sheep have been shepherded on stilts; the catastrophic foot-and-mouth disease is no more dangerous to sheep than the common cold; the first cloned animal was a sheep; bighorn rams are mostly homosexual; sheep can recognize each other by their footprints; they can belch silently through their noses; they can see behind them without turning their heads; there are sheep with tails so fat they account for one-sixth of their total weight; there are sheep with four horns or six, and even with three or five.

(Actually, one item in the above list is false; by the end of this book the reader should know which. And here's a hint: it's not the most implausible one.)



Anti-mating aprons are still used to control unwanted breeding in flocks where ewes and rams cannot be separated.

Jean-Louis Gintrac, *Inhabitants of the Landes, c.* 1850, oil on canvas. French shepherds in the marshy Landes region used stilts to watch their flocks.