

The Trade in Pedigree Livestock 1850-1910

By EDITH H. WHETHAM

GEORGE COATES published the first volume of his herd book for Shorthorn cattle in 1822, but it was fifty years old before the Shorthorn breeders formed a society to take responsibility for later issues. The first volume of the Hereford herd book was published in 1846, the second in 1852, though the Hereford Herd Book Society was not formed until 1876. In Table I the breeds of cattle and sheep are classed by the decade in which the first herd or flock book was published, with the date at which the relevant society was formed in brackets if it differs substantially:

century by migrants from Europe, including farm families from Britain and Ireland. Barclay, the historian of the Aberdeen-Angus cattle, estimated that about 2,000 of that breed were exported from Scotland to North America between 1880 and 1883.¹ The editor of the Hereford Herd Book wrote in 1882:²

Now that there is a very extensive demand sprung up for purebred Hereford cattle for exportation to America, their being entered in the English Herd book is made a *sine qua non*. Those who have hitherto ridiculed the

TABLE I
HERD AND FLOCK BOOKS BEGUN IN BRITAIN BY DECADES

	Cattle	Sheep
1820-9	Shorthorn (1875)	-
1840-9	Hereford (1876)	-
1850-9	Devon (1884), Sussex (1879)	-
1860-9	Aberdeen-Angus (1879)	-
1870-9	Ayrshire, Galloway, Jersey, Red Poll (1888), N. and S. Welsh Black (combined 1904)	-
1880-9	Guernsey, Highland, Longhorn	Oxford Down, Shropshire, Suffolk
1890-9	Lincoln Red Shorthorn, South Devon	Border-Leicester, Cheviot Cotswold, Dorset Horn, Hampshire, Kent (Romney), Kerry Hill, Leicester, Lincoln, Southdown, Wensleydale
1900-10	British Holstein (Friesian), Dairy Shorthorn	Blackfaced, Derbyshire Gritstone, Devon Longwool, Dorset Down, Exmoor, Lonk, Ryeland, Welsh Mountain

The functions of the breed societies were to publish the pedigrees hitherto kept by the livestock breeders; to register new entries, and to confirm that they qualified under the rules of each society; and to publicize the merits of the relevant breed.

The stimulus to the formation of these breed societies seems to have come from the countries being settled in the last half of the nineteenth

idea of entering their herds, and who have not paid proper attention to keeping private herd books, anxiously send in such pedigrees as they can make out.

¹ J. R. Barclay, 'Aberdeen-Angus Cattle', *Scot. Jnl Agr.*, II, 1919, p. 459; R. Wallace, *Farm Livestock of Great Britain*, 5th edn, 1923.

² T. Duckham, 'What is a Hereford?', *Livestock Jnl*, 10 Nov. 1882, p. 431.

Among cattle the Guernsey and Jerseys, and among sheep the Hampshire Downs, Oxford Downs, Shropshires, and Southdowns, acquired breed societies in the United States before they appeared in Britain, where their beginning was sometimes in response to pressure from America.³ The annual report on the trade in Shorthorns published by the *Livestock Journal* commented in 1906 on the higher prices obtained at British sales for those animals whose pedigrees met the requirements of the American and Argentine herd books.⁴ Shorthorns were the dominant breed among the exports of cattle since it was the dominant breed in Britain and Ireland until the Second World War. Out of a total of nearly seven million cattle recorded in Britain in 1908, about 4½ million were then classed as Shorthorns, including both the Lincoln Red Shorthorns and the "Irish" cattle. In contrast, the Devons, Ayrshires, and Herefords had fewer than half a million each, and other breeds still smaller numbers.⁵

The number of animals exported from the United Kingdom "not for food" increased in

the 1880's and 1890's, after a rise had occurred in the 1870's in average export values (Table II). In these decades, the westward expansion of the railways across North America opened up the prairies for cattle ranching, and created a huge demand for livestock, at first for Shorthorns, and then for Herefords and Aberdeen-Angus. Between 1870 and 1890, the number of cattle in the United States about doubled, from thirty million to sixty million. By this last date there were also more than twenty million cattle in the Argentine, mostly bred from Shorthorn, Hereford, or Aberdeen-Angus bulls, and breeders in South America became the main buyers of British pedigree cattle in the new century.⁶

Overseas countries periodically banned imports of live animals from Britain whenever there was an epidemic here of foot-and-mouth disease. Such action was reasonable enough in North America, where this disease was hardly known, but it was endemic in South America.⁷ Further complications to the trade arose at the end of the century with the use of tuberculin to diagnose tuberculosis. Most importing

³ H. M. Briggs, *Modern Breeds of Livestock*, New York, 1958.

⁴ J. Thornton, 'Shorthorns in 1905', *Livestock Jnl Almanac*, 1906, pp. 114-26.

⁵ *Agricultural Output of Great Britain*, Cd. 6277, 1912, p. 37.

⁶ *Historical Statistics of the United States: Colonial Times to 1957*, Bureau of the Census, Washington, 1960.

⁷ F. P. Matthews, 'Shorthorns in 1911', *Livestock Jnl Almanac*, 1912, pp. 120-7; 'Shorthorns in 1913', *ibid.*, 1914, pp. 25, 117.

TABLE II
BRITISH EXPORTS OF LIVE ANIMALS AND AVERAGE
EXPORT VALUES 1861-1910

Quinquennial average	Cattle		Sheep	
	Thousands	£ per head	Thousands	£ per head
1861-5	0.5	25	3.8	6.2
1866-70	0.5	26	3.7	4.0
1871-5	0.7	46	4.8	8.1
1876-80	0.6	73	2.8	8.1
1881-5	3.1	39	5.3	7.5
1886-90	2.0	44	7.4	6.8
1891-5	4.6	19	7.2	7.5
1896-1900	3.3	34	8.8	11.5
1901-5	2.8	45	5.7	12.1
1906-10	4.8	45	8.8	12.7

Source: Departmental Committee, *British Export Trade in Livestock*, Cd. 5947, 1911, pp. 24, 26.

countries then required that animals should have passed the tuberculin test, carried out by veterinary surgeons in government employ either in the exporting country or while in quarantine at the port of entry; animals which reacted to the test while in quarantine were destroyed without compensation. Since there was no official testing service in Britain, animals had to be exported subject to the risk of destruction on arrival. The main reason for establishing the committee of 1911 was to persuade the Board of Agriculture to set up a testing and quarantine station in Britain; it had just begun to function when war was declared, and the trade soon vanished.⁸

In spite of these difficulties, and in spite of the low prices of the 1890's, the demand for British livestock continued, and exports reached a new peak in the boom years of 1906-7. Some of this demand may be ascribed to a "snob" element attached to animals imported at high cost from British breeders, whose private records might trace pedigrees back into the eighteenth century; but apart from fashion and prestige there remained the undoubted value of British pedigree livestock when used in the right circumstances by those who had an "eye for the beast." By the end of the nineteenth century, the top breeders in North and South America, in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa, as well as in Britain and Ireland, were using related livestock whose pedigrees were known for several generations, whose characteristics differed because of adaptations to suit local conditions, but whose differences were kept within limits by the interchange both of livestock and of judges for the main exhibitions in each country.

Such differences were perhaps more marked in the case of sheep than of cattle. Until the 1890's the sheep industries in North and South America, and in Australasia, served the international market in wool, with meat as a subsidiary product for limited local markets. The demand for breeding stock concentrated on the long-woolled British breeds, notably Lincolns,

Kents (Romneys), and Leicesters; rams of these breeds were used for crossing with merino or part-merino ewes which were the original imported stock, though English Shropshires were also favoured in parts of America as giving a good fleece, high fertility, and a meaty lamb. When refrigeration opened the British meat market to farmers in other continents there was a gradual shift from the long-woolled to the Down breeds of sheep, in order to produce early maturing lambs rather than wool, the price of wool having fallen sharply upon international markets from the 1860's onwards. But in the Argentine the demand for Lincoln sheep for the unfenced pampas remained strong through the first decade of the twentieth century.⁹

The formation of breed societies was thus one response to the growth of the export trade in pedigree livestock, but other changes also occurred in the organization of the home trade. Some breed societies instituted collective sales of breeding stock for their members, since only the largest breeders could hope to attract overseas buyers to their annual sale of surplus stock. A group of Shorthorn breeders in the Midlands began twice-yearly collective sales at Birmingham in 1868, and others followed at York, Perth, and Aberdeen. The Sussex Cattle Society held an annual sale at Lewes from 1888, the Highland Cattle Society one at Oban from 1892.¹⁰

A further development was the growth of firms specializing in the marketing and transport of livestock, and in the introduction of foreign buyers to likely sources of supply. The firm of A. Mansell at Shrewsbury, for example, was the official auctioneer for the Shropshire Sheep Society, and it was exporting more than three thousand head of various types of livestock in 1910-11.¹¹

The background to this expanding trade in British pedigree livestock was of course the

⁸ Cd. 5947, 1911, App. x.

¹⁰ J. Thornton, 'Shorthorns in 1907', *Livestock Jnl Almanac*, 1908, pp. 112-21; E. Walford Davies, *Sussex Cattle*, Lewes, n.d.; J. Cameron, 'Highland Cattle', in C. Brynôr Jones, ed., *Livestock on the Farm*, 1915, p. 93.

¹¹ Cd. 6032, 1912, *passim*.

⁸ Departmental Committee, British Export Trade in Livestock, Cd. 5947, 1911, and Cd. 6032, 1912, *passim*.

rapidly expanding imports of food into the United Kingdom. Within thirty years from 1870, British imports of fresh, chilled, and frozen beef grew from a few thousand tons annually to more than 200,000 tons, and of mutton and lamb to nearly that figure. Dr Perren has recently described how the exports of meat from North America diminished after 1900 as home consumption caught up with production, but Britain continued to draw

imports of meat and dairy products from the southern hemisphere until after the middle of the present century.¹² This trade evolved naturally from the export of British breeds of livestock during the latter half of the nineteenth century, converting the grass of the empty continents into food for the British people.

¹² R. Perren, 'The North American Beef and Cattle Trade with Great Britain 1870-1914', *Econ. Hist. Rev.*, 2nd ser., XXIV, 1971, pp. 430-44.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Dr W. J. Carlyle is Associate Professor of Geography at the University of Winnipeg, and his address is 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada R3B 2E9.

Dr Andrew Jones is an Ordinand at Ridley Hall, Cambridge. In addition to land measurement his interests include manorial customs in the Middle Ages.

Stuart Macdonald teaches in the Department of Economics, University of Queensland. In addition to innovation in agriculture, his research interests include the flow of information in engineering and electronics.

Cormac Ó Gráda lectures in the Department of Political Economy in University College, Dublin, and is currently working on agriculture, population, and emigration in nineteenth-century Ireland.

Richard Perren is a lecturer in Economic History at the University of Aberdeen. He has completed a book on *The Meat Trade in Britain, 1840-1914*, and is currently working on the output of livestock producers and patterns of meat consumption between 1800 and 1875.

Edith Whetham is currently President of the British Agricultural History Society; she was formerly Gilbey Lecturer in the History and Economics of Agriculture, University of Cambridge, and sometime Fellow of Newnham College, Cambridge.

Dr Ian D. Whyte lectures in Geography in the University of Lancaster. His research interests centre on agriculture and rural society in early modern Europe, with special reference to Scotland.