

Hiding in plain sight: St Kilda's other race of 'ancient sheep'*

by Andrew Fleming

Abstract

The 'St Kilda sheep' kept in British landscape parks in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries belonged to a race of primitive northern short-tails, probably dating back to the Iron Age. Exported from St Kilda in the mid-nineteenth century, they were bred to black by a coterie of rich and aristocratic owners, as the St Kilda name was becoming increasingly fashionable. From the 1880s, after the greater antiquity of 'Bronze Age' Soay sheep came to be recognized, authorities questioned the racial integrity of the St Kildas. Denying their specific provenance, they renamed them Hebrideans. The last part of this article discusses the selection pressures and modes of 'management' of St Kilda sheep on their native island. It is suggested that, in the Iron Age, sheep may have looked less like Soays, and more like St Kildas before they were bred to black, or perhaps Borerays.

[Hebridean sheep] are always just out of emotional range. They remain resolutely primitive.

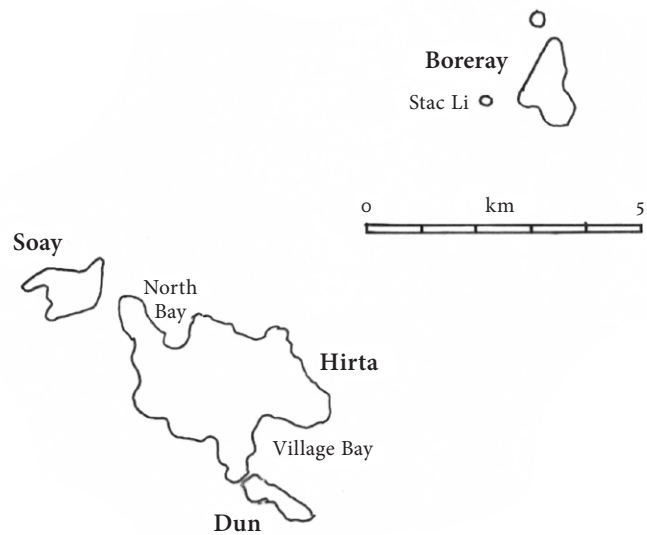
John Lewis-Stempel, *The sheep's tale* (2022), p. 103

'Rare breeds' or early 'races' of livestock, which have often survived owing to accidents of history, cater for a variety of interests. They carry a genetic inheritance worth conserving for the maintenance of diversity and the opportunities which it provides for modifying existing breeds or creating new ones. Such livestock might display characteristics which once went out of favour but are now more highly esteemed. As Harriet Ritvo has demonstrated, the fate of old-fashioned livestock after the introduction of 'improved', more 'commercial', breeds illustrates contemporary perceptions of zoological science and the objectives of animal breeding, as well as illuminating the lifestyles of those who conserved old breeds and experimented with them. Archaeologists and prehistorians have naturally been interested in the light shed by 'primitive' races of livestock on the history of the complex process known as 'domestication', on the objectives and practice of past animal husbandry, and on the economic and social roles of early domesticates. They also have to try to answer the

* I thank Josephine Pemberton for helpful comments on an early draft, and Christine Williams and Ken Ballinger for introducing me to their sheep and discussing them.



MAP 1. Great Britain



MAP 2. The St Kilda archipelago

deceptively simple question: what would these animals have looked like?¹ Every breed or race is a human cultural artefact, a 'brand' with its own history, mythology, and prestige.

This article touches upon Soays, Hebrideans and Borerays: three 'races' of 'primitive' sheep associated with the St Kilda archipelago, which lies some 60 km west of the Western Isles of Scotland (Maps 1 and 2). At the outset it should be noted that early commentators on the historical status of old races of sheep faced the problem of the wide dispersal of their objects of study, which in north-west Europe survived mostly on remote islands and archipelagos. In the early nineteenth century such sheep were rapidly being replaced by more 'advanced' breeds.² When dealing with 'races' of relatively similar sheep, early authorities faced well-known 'lump or split' dilemmas. The names assigned to such old races were governed by perceived phenotypes, traditional breeders' terminology, and hypotheses about their history. By the second half of the nineteenth century, certain old-fashioned sheep were being moved from their long-established home regions, to be kept in landscape parks, sold or given away, and/or crossed with other breeds.

Readers of this journal will doubtless be familiar with the Soay sheep often seen at British rare breed centres or accompanying reconstructions of Iron Age round-houses; they will probably know that these primitive sheep lived for centuries on Soay, one of the islands in the St Kilda archipelago. This article, however, is mostly about the origins of an elegant, often black, sheep which, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, was more likely than the Soay to be encountered in English parklands. It was first known as the 'St Kilda' and later as the 'Hebridean', the name which has survived to the present day. Nowadays, Soays are recognized as descendants of earlier ('Bronze Age') sheep, whilst the sheep formerly known as

¹ H. Ritvo, *The animal estate: the English and other creatures in the Victorian age* (1987); G. Barker, *The agricultural revolution in prehistory: why did foragers*

become farmers? (2006).

² D. Low, *The breeds of the domestic animals of the British Islands*, II, *The sheep* (1842), p. 8.

St Kildas are considered to be descended from a race of pre-Norse, 'Iron Age' sheep, cognate with other northern short-tails (also known as Scottish Dunfaces), such as the Manx Loghtan, the North Ronaldsay and the Shetland, which are believed to have been introduced to north and north-west Britain sometime between c.500 BC and c.AD 500.³

In this article I am principally concerned with the St Kildas, or Hebrideans. They were small sheep, black or dark brown; some of the rams sported four or more relatively straight horns, so that they were occasionally described as 'grotesque' or 'bizarre'.⁴ Owing to their 'proved attractiveness...as villa ornaments and pets' the popularity of these sheep endured for the first two or three decades of the twentieth century. On the eve of the First World War it was estimated that there were over 50 British flocks of 'four-horned sheep', as they were sometimes called.⁵ After 1900 or so some authorities maintained that the St Kildas did not come from St Kilda; they started to call them Hebrideans, and their provenance was widely taken to be North Uist, in the Western Isles. In the mid-twentieth century, Hebridean numbers declined and the race appeared to be facing extinction. However, interest revived in the 1970s; the Hebridean Sheep Society was founded in 1994, and these sheep have since gone from strength to strength. In terms of sustainability and niche marketing, Hebrideans offer certain valuable characteristics. There are now some 23,000 of them, more than all the other British northern short-tails put together. Like Shetlands, they are a 'rare breed' which has prospered in recent years. John Lewis-Stempel's recently published *The sheep's tale* ('the story of our most misunderstood farmyard animal'), has evidently been considerably influenced by his experience of keeping Hebrideans.⁶ For images of modern Hebridean sheep, see Figure 1.

In 2001 the late David Kinsman published *Black sheep of Windermere: a history of the St Kilda or Hebridean sheep*. He cited eight 'possible places of origin' in north and west Britain for these sheep if they were first exported in the eighteenth century, or four if they were moved south around 1880, as he suggested. However, Kinsman's text effectively identified just two likely origins, St Kilda or North Uist (with a decided preference for North Uist), which left the 'St Kilda' name unexplained.⁷

More recently, the following was written: 'we [livestock] inspectors considered one of the breed names, St Kilda, to be a somewhat fanciful invention by southern owners that was intended to add an aura of mystery and romance to their sheep, and preferred the more accurate name Hebridean'.⁸ However, the sheep in question *did* come from St Kilda, as I shall

³ D. Kinsman, *The black sheep of Windermere* (2001); M. Ryder, *Sheep and man* (1983); J. Clutton-Brock, *Domesticated animals from early times* (1981).

⁴ Kinsman, *Black sheep*; *Hampshire Chronicle*, 18 Oct. 1902; J. C. Ewart, 'Domestic sheep and their wild ancestors. I. Sheep of the urial and mouflon types', *Trans. Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland* [hereafter *TransHASS*], Ser. 5, 5 (1913), p. 186.

⁵ *Lakes Chronicle and Reporter*, 23 Sept. 1887; J. C. Ewart, 'Domestic sheep and their wild ancestors. I. Sheep of the urial and mouflon types', *TransHASS*, Ser. 5, 25 (1913), p. 186. Not all 'four-horned' sheep were

necessarily St Kildas.

⁶ D. Braithwaite (ed.), *Hebridean sheep: old breed for new times* (2009); O. R. Dyrmondsson and R. Niznikowski, 'North European short-tailed breeds of sheep: a review', *Animal* 4 (8) (2010), pp. 1275–82. J. Lewis-Stempel, *The sheep's tale: the story of our most misunderstood farm animal* (2022).

⁷ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, especially pp. 97–100.

⁸ J. M. Watson, 'Some thoughts on the origins of the Hebridean breed of sheep', in Braithwaite, *Hebridean sheep*, p. 20.



FIGURE 1. Modern Hebridean sheep: a) ram; b) ewe and lamb

demonstrate. In his account of their dispersal, Kinsman gave prominence to the role of two flocks kept near Windermere in north-west England in the 1880s. It is now possible to show that the original spread of these sheep occurred thirty earlier than this, as a consequence of a particular historical event. In what follows, I discuss some of the implications of the new narrative in relation to genetics, selection pressures and past modes of sheep 'management' on Hirta (the only seriously habitable island in the St Kilda archipelago), as well as current understandings of the physical appearance of sheep in the British Iron Age.

I

Early references to pre-modern St Kilda sheep (other than Soays) have been summarized by John Love. In 1578 their horns were described by Bishop Leslie as longer than those of a buffalo, and in 1698 as extraordinarily large, with Martin stating that the sheep of St Kilda differed from those of the adjacent isles '*only in the bigness of their horns, which are very long*' [my italics]. The illustration cited by Kinsman of a well-observed multi-horned black ram depicted in the early fourteenth-century Luttrell psalter also seems pertinent here. Sir Geoffrey Luttrell, for whom the psalter was made, was involved in English military campaigns in Scotland.⁹ According to Martin, in 1697 St Kilda sheep were 'speckled, some white, some philamort [orange/brown]'. In 1764 Macaulay stated that the natural colours of the wool were black, white, grey and brown. St Kilda sheep on Hirta in the 1850s/1860s were described as relatively small, 'and had shorter wool and were white in colour, with a few black ones among them'.¹⁰

⁹ J. Love, *Natural history of St Kilda* (2009), pp. 220–2; M. Martin, *A description of the Western Isles of Scotland* (1716), p. 280 (first published 1698); Kinsman, *Black sheep*, pp. 23–4.

¹⁰ M. Martin, *A voyage to St Kilda* (1753), p. 17; K. Macaulay, *The history of St Kilda* (1764), p. 213; H. J. Elwes, 'Notes on the primitive breeds of sheep in Scotland', *The Scottish Naturalist* (Jan 1912), p. 26.

Kinsman has described how northern short-tails, which include the 'Hebrideans', are very well adapted to the climate of the region and were once a key component of traditional household economies, providing milk, wool, meat and other useful products. Lewis-Stempel has noted that only about 5 per cent of his Hebrideans have needed help with dropping their lambs.¹¹ In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, northern short-tails were gradually replaced by more 'advanced' breeds, as large sheep-farming enterprises were developed in the Highlands and Islands, often at the expense of traditional communities. It seems that Cheviot sheep were introduced to St Kilda probably in the first decade of the nineteenth century, and 'thrived remarkably well', though they evidently had little impact on the appearance of the sheep on Hirta, where unimproved sheep were not phased out until the late nineteenth century.¹² In 1873 St Kilda acquired a new factor, John Tolmie MacKenzie, who promoted the commercial production of tweed more vigorously than his predecessor, enlisting the support and collaboration of the Fergusons, the family which provided the ground officer, who by 1877 owned 150 sheep. In his early years as factor, Mackenzie introduced Blackface tups.¹³ When John McDiarmid carried out his survey of St Kilda's agricultural economy in 1877, he was evidently witnessing the transition to commercial tweed production and the keeping of more modern sheep. During his visit, the male islanders inspected his Ulster coat closely, one of them exclaiming excitedly 'we could manufacture that ourselves!' Already, McDiarmid noted, St Kilda tweeds were 'a good deal sought after for suits'. 'A number of their sheep are blackish-brown', he wrote, 'and when their wool is properly mixed with the white, it gives the cloth a slight brownish tinge, which is the only colouring it receives'. McDiarmid characterized the sheep on Hirta as 'a cross between the old St Kilda breed and the blackfaced'. In 1878 they were described as 'of the Norwegian breed, small and black-faced and with very short tails'. MacDiarmid suggested that if fresh Blackface tups were annually introduced the sheep would soon be very good Blackfaces.¹⁴

II

At the Perth agricultural show in 1833, a Mr Stewart, from Chesthill near Loch Tay, exhibited 'an ox from St Kilda, noticed as a curious specimen'. Two years later, the Highland and Agricultural Society's show at Ayr featured 'a stot [bullock] from St Kilda', fed by Colonel F. Macadam Cathcart at Craigengillan in north Kirkcudbright, south-west Scotland. At the same show, 'rams and ewes from St Kilda, showing four horns each, were examined by all with considerable interest'.¹⁵ It is not clear who exhibited these animals. Cathcart was the convenor of the show, Sir Thomas Francis Kennedy the deputy convenor. The two men lived about 25 km apart. The immensely rich coal-owner, Kennedy, owner of a thousand acres (c.400 hectares) around Dalquharran in Ayrshire, is much the more likely candidate for ownership of the sheep. Unlike Cathcart's home, Dalquharran Castle was surrounded by a substantial

¹¹ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, pp. 55, 60, 96, 97, 232–5. Lewis-Stempel, *The sheep's tale*, p. 34.

¹² *Inverness Journal and Northern Advertiser*, 21 Oct. 1814.

¹³ *Shields Daily Gazette*, 23 July 1877. By 1877 the recently introduced Blackface tups had been on Hirta

for 'six or seven years' (J. McDiarmid, 'St Kilda and its inhabitants', *TransHASS* 10 (1878), p. 245).

¹⁴ McDiarmid, 'St Kilda'; *Greenock Advertiser*, 3 Aug. 1878.

¹⁵ *Inverness Courier*, 12 Feb. 1834; *Caledonian Mercury*, 8 Oct. 1835; *Carlisle Journal*, 10 Oct. 1835.

landscaped park. Kennedy was a Whig MP, who retired from Parliament in February 1834. Around this time he visited St Kilda on his yacht *Kitty*, with a French guest; he had been there before, and wanted to see the islanders again.¹⁶ The trip took place in late June. If the sheep were acquired in 1834, Kennedy could have arranged for them to be transported on the boat used by the factor, whose visit was imminent; alternatively, they might have been sent off on the steamship *Glenalbyn*, which made two late summer visits that year.¹⁷ The *Glenalbyn* ended her trips at Oban, where sheep could have been transferred onto a Glasgow-bound steamer. Kennedy's guest described them as 'Norwegian'; they had short tails, brown wool as in Iceland, were multi-horned, and provided excellent mutton.¹⁸

Among eminent breeders, breeding parkland sheep was something of a sideshow; the improvement of cattle, especially Shorthorns, was a much more serious matter. At the 1835 Ayr show, Kennedy won several prizes, including one for the best bull of the Shorthorn breed.¹⁹ It is not clear whether the St Kilda sheep introduced to the Ayr region were sold or given to others; Cathcart died in 1865, Kennedy in 1879.

In what follows, it is important to note that knowledge of the movements of sheep in the nineteenth century is extremely patchy. Many transactions must have been private sales or gifts which have left little or no paperwork. Research for this article has been based mostly on newspaper reports digitized in the British Newspaper Archive. Other sources might well throw more light on social relationships between breeders. Much of this, however, might be considered otiose. The fact that livestock breeders shared certain objectives – such as, for example, turning out St Kilda sheep as uniformly black as possible – implies that they often agreed on their direction of travel. When not meeting up at sales or agricultural shows, owners and breeders doubtless exchanged correspondence. Some associations of breeders were more formally organized than others; the Shorthorn Herd Book dates back to 1822, and the Shorthorn Society was founded in 1874. However skilled and knowledgeable individual breeders might have been, each successful breeding enterprise soon became a cluster of transactions, livestock with new and valued characteristics being admired and coveted. Doubtless advice was frequently and eagerly sought. Fame was the spur, initially at least; successful breeders would discover that their successes were also lucrative.²⁰

III

In the summer of 1852, about a third of the population of Hirta departed for Australia. Some of the emigrants, at least, sold their sheep before they left, the money raised helping to defray expenses.²¹ The islanders who remained, not then preoccupied with commercial tweed production, would have had no need for extra sheep; as elsewhere in the region, the maximum size for a flock kept by a household solely for domestic requirements was ten, with charges

¹⁶ F. Bourgeois de Mercey, *Scotia, souvenirs et récits du voyage* (2 vols, 1842), II, p. 90.

¹⁷ *Caledonian Mercury*, 1 Sept. 1834; *Caledonian Mercury*, 4 Aug. 1834; *Inverness Courier*, 13 Aug. 1834.

¹⁸ Bourgeois de Mercey, *Scotia*, pp. 113–14.

¹⁹ *The Scotsman*, 30 Jan. 1836.

²⁰ Ritvo, *Animal estate*, ch. 1.

²¹ E. Richards, 'St Kilda and Australia; emigrants at peril 1852–3', *Scottish Historical Rev.* 71 (1992), p. 137.

levied on every sheep above that number.²² In the mid-1850s, the North Yorkshire landowners Mark Milbank (1819–83) and his brother Frederick (1820–98) visited St Kilda on Lord Hill's yacht. According to Frederick ('F. A') in 1860, Mark 'arranged to purchase' '28 ewes and two rams' which were 'very wild and hard to catch'. The brothers chartered a boat, and 'after many perils' the sheep were landed at Loch Seaforth on Harris. They weighed 23 lbs (c.10.5 kg) when fat; their colours were 'a sort of dun, bluish grey, and dark brown, and all bore 'the patch on the rump like the red deer'; their wool was 'of the finest kind, almost, if not quite, equal to the Shetland, and each sheep will produce from 3 lb to 4 lb (1.4–1.8 kg).²³ The sheep purchased by Mark Milbank were taken to England 'by steam to Glasgow, and then by railroad...their legs being tied together for the whole distance. They became in a short time thoroughly domesticated, and have thriven wonderfully well'. By 1860, they had become 'naturalized in a Yorkshire park', producing two lambs annually, and providing 'most excellent eating'. 'I may mention', wrote Frederick, 'that my brother has a large herd of these sheep, and has killed many for the table ... the wool makes capital stockings', its fineness requiring no dye'. In 1860, Mark Milbank showed sheep at the first show held by Bedale Agricultural Society; his tup and two ewes from the islands of St Kilda were 'highly commended', along with a tup and two ewes from North Uist (as well as sheep from Brittany).²⁴

The Milbanks held estates at Barningham in the extreme north of the North Riding of Yorkshire (as it then was) and at Thorp Perrow (near Bedale in central Yorkshire). At Loch Seaforth the brothers were guests of Lord Dunmore, who constructed Ardvourlie Castle in the early 1860s mainly to accommodate the Milbanks' regular Harris shooting parties.²⁵ The Milbanks presumably chartered a boat to fetch the sheep from St Kilda. In the mid-1850s it was evidently already possible to transport a small flock of lively sheep over a long distance by rail, using the lines of more than one railway company. If this move took place after November 1855, it would have been possible to disembark the sheep at Bedale station, only 2.5 km from Thorp Perrow; if it happened earlier, they could have alighted at Leeming Lane station, some 5 km away. Digitized newspapers mention almost nothing of what happened later to the Milbank flocks of St Kildans. The Thorp Perrow sheep were apparently still there in the mid-1880s (see below).

IV

At the Highland and Agricultural Society's show in Glasgow in July 1867, 'several pens of black four-horned St Kilda sheep attracted much attention'. They were shown by Sir John Orde, from

²² National Archives of Scotland GD 41/529, Diary of Sir Thomas Dick Lauder; R. Wallace, *Farm livestock of Great Britain* (4th edn, 1907), p. 521.

²³ Josephine Pemberton (pers. comm.) points out that this description would fit Soays, though she also notes that the weights quoted are very low as compared with modern Soays. However, there seems to be no source which indicates that the Milbank sheep are likely to have been Soays (which 'belonged' to the laird,

and would have to be procured from the island of Soay if sold). It is hard to ignore the coincidence between the time of their purchase and the availability of extra sheep after the emigration – a coincidence which also applies to the sheep purchased by Sir John Orde.

²⁴ *North British Daily Mail*, 13 Nov. 1860; *Yorkshire Gazette*, 13 Oct. 1860.

²⁵ *Glasgow Herald*, 6 Mar. 1879.

Kilmory, near Lochgilphead in Argyll near the south end of the Crinan Canal. The St Kilda sheep exhibited had 'a black face, black legs, brown-black shaggy knotted wool, which on the older animals turns dark gray'. In form, the animal was 'narrow – pinched up with the rotundity and fulness of a dried prune'. 'Originally obtained from the island of North Uist, and now gradually spreading, this breed exists in St Kilda and other islands and some districts of the mainland in a semi-wild state'. At three years the sheep attained 'a dead weight of about forty pounds [18 kg] the carcass'. The wool was described as 'particularly fine and lustrous'. The reporter was impressed by the sheep's 'four black horns, two shorter ones involuted downwards almost enclosing the face, and two very long ones arching upward and outward, admirable pointed weapons, which, from the fire of its black eyes, the creature is evidently ready enough to use'. One reporter was sceptical, describing the sheep as 'wholly black, diminutive in size, and except as curiosities...of comparatively little value for the production of either mutton or wool'. However, the sheep at the show were commended.²⁶

The key figure at Kilmory was Sir John Orde's farm manager James Aitchison (or Aitcheson) who developed a considerable reputation as an improving farmer and livestock breeder. In 1845 he won first prize at Lochgilphead Show for his Swedish turnips. In 1855 he advertised Southdown sheep and small Indian cows for sale; in 1863 he was selling Brahmin (aka Brahman)/Highland crosses as draught oxen. Aitchison's work with white cattle was spectacular and famous; by 1879 his crosses between semi-wild white Highland cattle and West Highlanders had produced stock which had reached 'a high state of efficiency'. In 1861, at the banquet held at the Highland and Agricultural Society's show at Perth, the Duke of Atholl, president of the society, proposed a toast to the health of the judges, making a point of mentioning Aitchison's name.²⁷

Orde, who had been to St Kilda in 1834, on the *Glenalbyn*, purchased North Uist (in the Western Isles) in January or February 1855.²⁸ No one at the time was in any doubt that Sir John's interesting sheep came from St Kilda; they too may well have been sold at the time of the emigration to Australia. The factor of St Kilda may have sold them directly to Orde's North Uist factor or offered for them for sale at Lochmaddy market (North Uist). Later, in the 1870s, Orde's North Uist estate manager, Mr MacDonald, was keeping some 'strange four-horned sheep' at Newton, the home farm (from which St Kilda happens to be visible).²⁹ It seems likely that back in the mid-1850s he had been able to obtain enough St Kilda sheep to split the flock, perhaps after a couple of breeding cycles: sending some south to Kilmory and cannily keeping some back on the home farm. Some such manoeuvres were probably partly responsible for the misleading 'North Uist' label which the sheep acquired later.

²⁶ *Daily Review* (Edinburgh), 31 July 1867; *Evening Mail*, 5 Aug. 1867; *Newcastle Courant*, 2 Aug. 1867; *Elgin Courier*, 2 Aug. 1867.

²⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 14 Nov. 1845; *North British Agriculturalist*, 5 Sept. 1855, 25 Nov. 1863; *Dundee Advertiser*, 30 July 1879; *Dundee, Perth and Cupar Advertiser*, 2 Aug. 1861.

²⁸ M. Robson, *St Kilda: church, visitors and 'natives'* (2005), p. 338; *Inverness Courier*, 22 Feb. 1855.

²⁹ J. Harvie-Brown and T. Buckley, *A vertebrate fauna of the Outer Hebrides* (1888), quoted in Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 83. H. J. Elwes, *Memoirs of sport, travel and natural history* (1930).

V

In October 1887 two 'St Kilda rams (four horns)' were offered for sale by the home farm of Vaynol Park, near Bangor in north-west Wales. In the early 1890s and in 1905, St Kilda sheep were available from the same source.³⁰ Vaynol was the seat of George Assheton Smith, owner of the nearby Dinorwic slate quarries and one of the biggest landowners in Wales with over c.30,000 acres (120,000 hectares).³¹ In his park, Assheton Smith kept a herd of white park cattle, which he founded in 1872 with 22 animals from Sir John Orde's Kilmory herd, and increased by adding 'the remaining 32' in 1886 after Orde's death. St Kilda sheep might have arrived at Vaynol as early as 1870, the year after Assheton Smith had come into his majority, and also the year when Orde shipped two specimens of Indian humped cattle to Vaynol. Alternatively, they might have arrived with the 1872 cattle shipment, or conceivably later, at any time up to the mid-1880s.³²

From autumn 1888, the breeders of livestock at Vaynol were the Lort family at the home farm. Sometime before 1900 V. P. Lort induced a St Kilda ram to serve several goats.³³ After the death of Assheton Smith in 1904, the Lorts moved away from the Old Hall at Vaynol; Lort took up residence at Bryniau Heulog, just outside Vaynol Park. In the years before the First World War he corresponded with James Cossar Ewart, livestock breeder and Regius Professor of Natural History at the University of Edinburgh, about the experimental crossing of different breeds or races of sheep. His work took in not only St Kilda sheep but also Soays and Manx Loghtans. Bryniau Heulog evidently operated for some years as an unofficial out-station of the Edinburgh University farm and its sheep-breeding experiments. Lort also sent Soay sheep to H. J. Elwes, a naturalist and keen sheep breeder, at Colesbourne Park near Cheltenham.³⁴

VI

In 2001 Kinsman suggested that 'all the oldest parkland flocks' of St Kildas could be traced back to two flocks kept in the 1880s near Windermere in the English Lake District. One (Figure 2) belonged to Revd Thomas Staniforth at Storrs Hall, on the east bank of Lake Windermere and just south of the town, the other to J. D. Bridson on the nearby Belle Isle, an island in the lake. These sheep were at Windermere by at least the mid-1870s. In August 1877 Bridson held

³⁰ *North Wales Chronicle*, 24 Sept. 1887; *The Field*, 19 Sept. 1891, 17 Sept. 1892, 20 Oct. 1894, 28 Jan. 1905.

³¹ *North Wales Times*, 26 Nov. 1904.

³² *The Sketch* 26 May 1897; Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 141.

³³ William Lort (c.1825–91) arrived at Vaynol in the autumn of 1888 (cf. *Brecon County Times*, 9 Sept. 1887, and *North Wales Chronicle*, 8 Dec. 1888). As an old friend of George Assheton Smith and an established breeder of dogs and horses, he became Assheton Smith's amanuensis. After his death in 1891 his son V. P. continued his father's breeding activities at the Vaynol Home

farm. William Lort's daughter Eurgain also became a successful and respected livestock breeder, setting up a pony study at nearby Castell Mai. See *The Field*, 30 May 1891; *Crewe Chronicle*, 27 June 1891; *Pall Mall Gazette*, 7 Aug. 1912, 13 Mar. 1913; *North Wales Weekly News*, 9 Aug. 1923. For the experiment with goats, see *The Field*, 10 Feb. 1900.

³⁴ Fleming, 'Soay sheep: the back-story', *Cambridge Archaeological J.* 3 (2021), pp. 8–9; see catalogue of University of Edinburgh Archives Online for correspondence between Ewart, Elwes and 'G. P.' [presumably V. P.] Lort.



FIGURE 2. St Kilda sheep at Storr's Hall, Windermere, in the 1880s

Source: Kinsman, *The black sheep of Windermere*.

sheepdog trials on Belle Isle. One report noted that 'No 1 [dog] had a four-horned black Scotch sheep among the lot'. Another provided behavioural information: 'some of the sheep selected were black Scotch horned ones, and in place of being driven by the dogs, they speedily turned on the latter, and drove them, using their horns to some effect in butting the dogs. Having rid themselves of the dogs, several of them took a swim in the lake, and had to be rescued by boats'. In 1871 Bridson had competed at the Leeds Smithfield Club Exhibition, for 'the best pen of three horned Scotch, Lank, or mountain wedders of any age'; if the sheep which he entered were St Kildas, he must have acquired them in the 1860s.³⁵

The Revd Thomas Staniforth took over Storrs Hall in 1859. He was a very wealthy man, a famous Shorthorn breeder who travelled widely in search of the finest breeding stock; he was also a founder member of the Shorthorn Society. J. D. Bridson, a parvenu from a family of industrialists, was considerably younger than Staniforth. He must have been keen to boost his social credentials in the Lake District; it would have been natural for him to have stocked his island park soon after he started renting Belle Isle in 1865, probably obtaining sheep from his neighbour on the lakeshore. Bridson had been visiting the area for several years. At the Belle Isle sheepdog trials, admission was by ticket only, 'to keep off the rougher element'.³⁶

³⁵ *Soulby's Ulverston Advertiser and General Intelligencer*, 30 Aug. 1877; *North British Agriculturalist*, 29 Aug. 1877; *North British Agriculturalist*, 13 Dec. 1871.

³⁶ *Yorkshire Gazette*, 13 Aug. 1887; *Soulby's Ulverston Advertiser and General Intelligencer*, 5 Sept. 1878; *North British Agriculturalist*, 13 Dec. 1871.

Kinsman attempted to trace a connection between the owners of the Windermere flocks and Sir John Orde at Kilmory. He noted that Orde and Staniforth were both educated at Eton and Christ Church, Oxford (there was a four-year age difference). Orde's son and Bridson's brother were both members of the Royal Northern Yacht Club in the 1870s. The Assheton Smith family were also prominent sailors in northern waters. From 1829, Vaynol's previous owner, Sir Thomas Assheton Smith (1776–1858) had commissioned no fewer than eight steam yachts from the pioneer Clyde shipbuilder Robert Napier, sailing them out of Port Dinorwic. In the 1880s, George Assheton Smith's 500-ton steam yacht *Pandora* had the capacity to operate in the North Atlantic and Arctic oceans; she did so in 1882 and again in 1886, when Assheton Smith and his friend William Lort (V. P's father) went to the north coast of Norway 'in search of sport'. In 1891 a party of naturalists visiting Vaynol were shown three eider ducks caught on a voyage to Greenland by the *Pandora*. Sheep at Vaynol Park in 1901 included some from Iceland.³⁷

The *Pandora* apparently did three trips to Scotland between 1882 and 1893, although there seems to be no record of the Assheton Smiths having been to St Kilda.³⁸ It is important to remember, however, that visits made by those who did not write about them will largely have evaded scholarly scrutiny. It is not clear whether Staniforth, whose sailing exploits seem to have been confined to Lake Windermere, was acquainted with Sir John Orde. However, it is highly likely that the Assheton Smiths and the Ordes knew each other, and quite conceivable that the Windermere sheep arrived via Vaynol rather than via Kilmory. The interest created by the showing of St Kilda sheep at Glasgow in 1867 (see above) may have been the stimulus for their acquisition by Staniforth and/or Bridson; alternatively, they may have responded to an advertisement of sheep for sale from Kilmory in 1872 (or perhaps a comparable one around the same time): 'St Kilda or four-horned black sheep. A few of these curious and now very rare sheep for sale. Lots of four or more ewes and ram, or lambs of 1872, to suit purchaser'.³⁹ Although the fine detail eludes us, it is evident that Kinsman's account requires revision – not least to take account of the fact that St Kildas *did* originally come from St Kilda. We also need to recognize that the Windermere flocks held no particular primacy in the establishment and dispersal of St Kilda sheep, which resulted from a series of transactions taking place over several decades. By the 1880s, there were distinct classes for such sheep at a couple of the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland's shows.⁴⁰

VII

By the first decade of the twentieth century, a few men had become interested in *Soay* sheep (also long associated with the St Kilda archipelago), because of their high relevance to the history of domestication and livestock management. They also experimented with breeding

³⁷ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 136; *Berkshire Chronicle*, 18 Sept. 1858; *The Field*, 30 May 1891; *Crewe Chronicle*, 27 June 1891; *Westminster Gazette*, 19 Aug. 1901.

³⁸ *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper*, 17 Sept. 1911.

³⁹ *The Field*, 28 Dec. 1872.

⁴⁰ H. Holmes, 'Regional patterns in the exhibition of breeds of cattle and sheep at the Royal Highland Show 1872–1905', *Folk Life* 50 (2013), pp. 122–40. The shows were held at Dumfries (1886) and Glasgow (1888).

from Soays, in the hope that crosses with more developed breeds might produce sheep with commercially viable properties. Those who kept St Kildas, by contrast, were mainly concerned with owning attractive parkland livestock. Few owners kept both St Kildas and Soays. When livestock from Storrs Hall were sold in September 1887, after the death of Thomas Staniforth, a 'Mr Rivers' was among the purchasers of St Kilda sheep. Evidently not everyone recognized General Pitt-Rivers the archaeologist. However, one journalist claimed that he purchased 'the greater portion of the Storrs flock' and knew that he had 'a few animals of that breed in his park'.⁴¹ Pitt-Rivers was already keeping Soay sheep at Rushmore Park on Cranborne Chase in Dorset, having become interested in them because he needed to find a 'primitive' sheep whose bones might be compared with those found on his Romano-British sites. Probably it was one of Staniforth's obituaries after his death on 8 July 1887 which drew the General's attention to the existence of *another* primitive race of sheep from St Kilda. He seems to have written almost immediately to John Tolmie Mackenzie asking for 'St Kilda sheep'; he wanted 2 rams and 10 ewes. Mackenzie wrote back on 18 August, pointing out that such sheep were kept 'on an island which is almost inaccessible'.⁴² However, at this point Pitt-Rivers would have become aware of the forthcoming and well-advertised sale of St Kilda sheep at Storrs Hall.⁴³ He presumably attended the auction on 8 September in person.⁴⁴

'Pastor', from the *Fanciers' Gazette*, described the Storrs Hall sheep as 'quaint little creatures, principally black, with the peculiarity of having four, even five, horns'; apparently those who attended the sale were 'charmed with these little oddities'. According to *The Field*, they made 'admirable ornaments around a country residence, and so when sold realized far more than ordinary sheep would have done'.⁴⁵ In 1890, talking to the Wiltshire Archaeological Society about his excavations on Cranborne Chase, Pitt-Rivers stated that 'the sheep [whose bones he had excavated] were of a long, slender-legged breed, the like of which is only to be found at present in the Island of St Kilda'. Sheep bones from the Roman city of Silchester were soon being interpreted in accordance with Pitt-Rivers' views. It seems that the General continued to feel that Soays provided the best comparative material for his Dorset Romano-British sheep.⁴⁶

VIII

On Hirta itself, weaving had proved highly successful as a commercial enterprise. By the first decade of the twentieth century, traditional St Kilda sheep had largely been superseded. The process seems to have been slow. In 1885 'a considerable proportion of the sheep' were still 'of the old St Kilda breed'; the others were 'a cross between that and the blackfaced variety.'

⁴¹ *Lakes Chronicle and Reporter*, 9 Sept. 1887; *The Truth*, 27 Sept. 1887.

⁴² Fleming, 'Soay sheep'. On p. 5 I assumed, almost certainly incorrectly, that the sheep meant by the factor were Soays. In fact, the 'almost inaccessible' island was probably Hirta itself, where not all the St Kildas had been phased out at this date.

⁴³ E.g., *North British Agriculturalist*, 3 Aug. 1887; *Penrith Observer*, 16 Aug. 1887.

⁴⁴ Someone else read his paper to the British Association for the Advancement of Science in Manchester on 6 Sept. (Rethinking Pitt-Rivers – A year in the life: 1887 <http://web.prm.ox.ac.uk/rpr/index.php/pitt-rivers-life/51-a-year-in-the-life-1887.html>).

⁴⁵ *Lakes Chronicle and Reporter*, 23 Sept. 1887; *The Field*, 10 Sept. 1887.

⁴⁶ *John Bull*, 13 Sept. 1890; *Reading Mercury*, 30 Jan. 1892; Ewart, 'Domestic sheep', p. 187.

Perhaps the islanders were in no hurry to lose the qualities of the older race. As late as 1905 it was reported that 'folds are erected here and there for the shelter of the small black sheep, the most audacious creatures I have ever looked upon, each of them having four horns'. Perhaps a few old-fashioned sheep were being retained to tempt potential buyers among the tourists. However, by 1930 the sheep were described as 'a mixed breed owing to crossing with Blackface, Cheviot and Leicester rams'.⁴⁷

From the later nineteenth century, the name 'St Kilda' was regularly given to British houses and streets, hotels and boarding-houses, marine vessels, and at least one racehorse. Perhaps in the mistaken belief that there had once been a saint named Kilda, it was attached to a number of churches and high-class schools. In 1898 the North Bristol School for Girls, founded in 1861, was suddenly renamed St Kilda's Collegiate School for Girls, not long before it moved from King's Square to the edge of Durdham Down in Clifton.⁴⁸ During the 1870s an actress bore the stage name Miss Edith St Kilda; the 1880s saw appearances by Miss Maud St Kilda, a popular travelling variety artist.⁴⁹ From 1877, regular summer steamship trips to St Kilda helped to spread the salience of the name among the middle classes.

'St Kilda' had evidently become one of those names exuding a certain aura, rather like, say, 'Clarendon', 'Albany', or 'Montpelier'. In due course the prestige of the name evidently 'trickled down' to the general populace in the usual way, because of its cachet in elite circles. Traditionally, knowing about St Kilda was about being rich or privileged enough to be able to visit this particular *ultima Thule* in the comfort and exclusivity provided by a yacht, often a steam yacht. (Sir Thomas Acland's *Lady of St Kilda*, for instance, contained a top-of-the-range Broadwood piano, which was played by his musically-gifted wife Henrietta when the Aclands treated the St Kildans to an impromptu concert in 1834;⁵⁰ it may nowadays be inspected at Killerton Park, Devon). St Kilda *aficionados* knew the difference between run-of-the-loom handwoven tweeds and *St Kilda* tweed, which was sold at a premium price in top department stores in London, Dublin and Edinburgh, and quite widely available elsewhere. The fabric was in considerable demand among the sporting fraternity. In 1911 the St Kildans sent a suit-length of tweed to King George V, who supposedly wore his St Kilda suit when in Scotland. Five years after the evacuation, those islanders who still visited Hirta in summer, partly in order to continue weaving, made a suit-length of tweed as a silver jubilee present for George V. Production of St Kilda tweed reached its zenith around 1910.⁵¹

Another way of brandishing the name was to keep St Kilda sheep in one's park. Those who did so were members of a national elite: men from major landowning families, often with aristocratic pedigrees, or men who had acquired great wealth through extractive or industrial enterprises. Often these categories coincided. Most of these men were listed in Bateman's

⁴⁷ R. Connell quoted by Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 92; *Carlisle Journal*, 29 Aug. 1905; National Records of Scotland AF 57/32, note made 8 July 1930.

⁴⁸ *Bristol Times and Mirror*, 25 June 1898; *Bristol Mercury*, 5 Jan. 1899.

⁴⁹ *The Era*, 7 May 1876; *North Wales Chronicle*, 15 July 1882; *Manchester Times*, 20 June 1885; *Derbyshire Times and Chesterfield Herald*, 30 Jan. 1886.

⁵⁰ *Inverness Courier*, 17 June 1835.

⁵¹ E.g., among many newspaper sources, *The Gentlewoman*, 23 Mar. 1912; *Westminster Gazette*, 29 June 1910 (for London); *The Scotsman*, 10 July 1912 (for Edinburgh); *Dublin Daily Express*, 20 Sept. 1880 (for Dublin); Fleming, 'Soay sheep', p. 12; M. Harman, *An isle called Hirta: history and culture of the St Kildans to 1930* (1997), pp. 116–17.

Great landowners of Great Britain and Ireland. Many were national politicians. Some owned parks large enough to serve as open-air zoos, like today's 'safari parks'; the perimeter wall at Vaynol was about 12 km long.⁵² There is little space here to elaborate. Thomas Kennedy and George Assheton Smith both had steam yachts as well as interests in coal mines and slate quarries respectively. One of the buyers of Thomas Staniforth's sheep in 1887 was Sir Hussey Cressigny Vivian (later Lord Swansea), whose seat was Singleton Park (later the campus of Swansea University). Vivian was the brother-in-law of Assheton Smith of Vaynol and had major interests in copper-smelting, railways and other industries in the Swansea area. He was an MP, like Thomas Kennedy and F. A. Milbank. These men had usually been educated at Eton (or Harrow) and Christ Church, Oxford (or Trinity College, Cambridge), and they tended to be members of the Carlton Club. Other St Kilda sheep owners included the Earl of Harewood, the Duke of Bedford (whose wife, with her natural history interests, cruised the north of Scotland in the family's steam yacht), the Earl of Pembroke and Leopold de Rothschild. Queen Victoria herself owned a few St Kilda sheep; shortly after her death, three were transferred from Windsor to Regent's Park Zoo. Daisy Greville, Countess of Warwick and one-time mistress of Edward VII, mentioned in 1930 that she had been keeping 'the four-horned black St Kilda sheep' at Easton Lodge (Essex) for 30 years; she toyed briefly with the idea of obtaining some of the sheep to be evacuated, and of employing a St Kildan to look after them.⁵³

St Kilda sheep owners recall the aristocratic livestock fanciers described by Harriet Ritvo: they bred 'exemplary livestock...expensive to produce and to maintain', animals 'shaped for higher destinies than the knives of ordinary butchers and the palates of ordinary consumers'. These were 'wealthy and powerful magnates [whose] rhetoric of service reminded ordinary farmers that the men who could afford to raise prize animals were their natural leaders, at the same time that the opulence of the display underlined the exclusiveness of high stock breeding'. George III and Prince Albert participated; foreign aristocrats admired. 'For both animals and people a distinguished lineage divided those with hereditary claims to high status from arrivistes'. In 1865 a *Times* leader implied that 'auctioned [shorthorn] cattle had become works of art...intrinsically desirable objects of conspicuous consumption'.⁵⁴

In the second half of the nineteenth century, another distinctive black sheep was available: the Black Welsh Mountain. It had been bred in the 1830s or earlier by Lieutenant-Colonel Sir Charles Morgan of Tredegar Park, near Newport (1760–1846), and was later promoted by his son and grandson (both known as Lord Tredegar); every December they held a local agricultural show, at which their Monmouthshire neighbour, Lady Augusta Llanover (1802–96), a redoubtable advocate of all things Welsh, usually gave a prize for Black Welsh sheep.⁵⁵ Welsh farmers didn't like them very much, referring to them scathingly as 'Lady Llanover's fancy'; apparently, they leapt hedges, didn't put on flesh readily, and their wool took a good deal of preparation for market.⁵⁶ Such sheep should have been an ideal choice for aristocrats! However,

⁵² F. G. Aflalo, 'Some private zoos', *Pall Mall Magazine* 25 (1901), pp. 77–87.

⁵³ *Lakes Chronicle and Reporter*, 9 Sept. 1887; Kinsman, *Black sheep*, pp. 156–9; National Archives of Scotland AF 57/50, letter from Lady Warwick to Thomas Johnston, 18 June 1930; AF 57/26, letter from

Tom Johnston to Lady Warwick 16 June 1930, letter from Lady Warwick to Tom Johnston 18 June 1930.

⁵⁴ Ritvo, *Animal estate*, ch. 1.

⁵⁵ E.g., *Hereford Journal*, 21 Dec. 1842; *Sporting Gazette*, 30 Nov. 1895.

⁵⁶ *South Wales Daily News*, 23 Nov. 1892.

if newspapers are any guide, the Black Welsh mostly remained in their original Cambrian homelands.⁵⁷ Somehow they never caught the imagination of the great and the good. It took the celebrated name of St Kilda to do that.

IX

St Kilda sheep, then, came south to Ayrshire in the mid-1830s, and to both Kilmory and Thorp Perrow in the mid- to late 1850s. The Windermere sheep may well have been in place by the mid-1860s, the Vaynol Park flock by the mid-1870s. The Kilmory flock endured into at least the Edwardian era, sheep being advertised for sale in 1872, 1882, and 1903. The Thorp Perrow sheep were apparently still there in the mid-1880s, surviving the death of Mark Milbank in 1883. The source for this statement, an Irish newspaper, stated erroneously that Milbank purchased them in North Uist.⁵⁸

At this point the story becomes more complicated. At the show held by the Highland and Agricultural Society of Scotland (HASS) at the People's Park, Glasgow, in July 1888, Sir John Campbell Orde of Kilmory showed a St Kilda tup, ewe and lamb for which he was awarded a first ticket. However, at the same show Lady William Osborne Elphinstone of Tulliallan Castle (beside the head of the Firth of Forth), exhibited some 'the black Hebridean sheep' which, 'with their striking heads of horns', attracted 'considerable attention'.⁵⁹ Three years later she showed two pens of black four-horned Hebridean sheep at the HASS show at Stirling, as well as 'a web of tweed made from the wool of black Hebridean sheep', in 'a beautiful shade of dark brown', 'the natural colour of the wool of Hebridean four-horned sheep' which 'was manufactured by P. and J. Haggart, at the Breadalbane Mills, Aberfeldy, from St Hilda [*sic*] wool sent by Lady Osborne Elphinstone, who presented a piece of the same material to the Duchess of Edinburgh'.⁶⁰ Although there was evidently scope for journalists' confusion, it is clear that in the late 1880s and 1890s 'Hebridean' sheep were distinguished from 'St Kildas'; 'upwards of 80 black Hebridean 4-horned sheep' were for sale at Brodick Castle, Arran, in 1895, and 80 were for sale at Oban in 1897. In 1888, some bones and skulls 'including 'Hebridean sheep (all but extinct)' were dug up in a cave on Brassington Moor, Derbyshire.⁶¹

What was the origin of these 'Hebridean' sheep? In 1904 Lady Gordon Cathcart, kept a flock of 'Hebridean' sheep, some sporting six horns, at Sunninghill, beside Windsor Great Park in Berkshire, and another at Cluny Castle in Aberdeenshire. Allegedly, their origins lay with the Spanish Armada.⁶² Lady Cathcart owned Benbecula, South Uist, Barra and Vatersay: that is, all of the Western Isles south of Sir John Campbell Orde's North Uist. Lady Elphinstone's sheep could have been obtained from Lady Cathcart: both women belonged to the highest echelons of late Victorian society and would have known each other socially. According to Kinsman,

⁵⁷ They could however be encountered at Hemel Hempsted in 1904, Basingstoke in 1910, and Taunton in 1912 (*Luton Times and Advertiser*, 16 Sept. 1904; *The Field*, 11 June 1910; *West Somerset Free Press*, Sept. 1912).

⁵⁸ *Kilkenny Moderator*, 9 Mar. 1887.

⁵⁹ *North British Agriculturalist*, 25 July 1888.

⁶⁰ *North British Agriculturalist*, 29 July 1891; *Aberdeen Free Press*, 28 July 1891; *The Gentlewoman*, 8 Aug. 1891.

⁶¹ *Ardrossan and Saltcoats Herald*, 9 Aug. 1895; *Glasgow Herald*, 27 Sept. 1897; *Derbyshire Advertiser and Journal*, 14 Sept. 1888.

⁶² *The Tatler*, 21 Sept. 1904.

the Uists 'could have provided the foundation stock for parklands until the late 1880s'; he cites no other plausible origin areas for the later nineteenth century.⁶³

In the 1880s and 1890s, then, St Kildas and Hebrideans were regarded by the knowledgeable as separate races. However, in 1906 John Guille Millais wrote the following: '[four-horned varieties of the Hebridean sheep] are often called 'St Kilda' sheep but the title is an error. The sheep of the island of St Kilda are a deteriorated variety of the Hebridean sheep'. In 1912, Richard Lydekker wrote that 'the small black so-called St Kilda sheep kept in several English parks appear to be of uncertain and mixed origin in most cases, being more or less crossed with black Welsh or other primitive breeds'. In the same year, Elwes, in a section headed 'Hebridean Sheep', claimed that 'it is probable, indeed almost certain, that the breed known generally as St Kilda in English parks is a mongrel in which the Blackfaced Scotch has a considerable share'. He also noted that 'a race of small black sheep, of which the males have often – in some flocks usually – and the females more rarely, four horns, is kept in several English parks under the name of St Kilda sheep, but they are in most cases of uncertain origin, and more or less crossed with Black Welsh or other small breeds'.⁶⁴ In 1925 a St Kilda sheep owner in Hampshire was told by no less an 'authority' than the *laird* of St Kilda, the MacLeod of MacLeod, that the sheep's name was something of a mystery, 'because they never existed on that island'. In the late 1950s the naturalist Morton Boyd doubted their 'St Kildan credentials'.⁶⁵ The way was open for the formalization of the 'Hebridean' label in the late twentieth century (see above).

The loss of the 'St Kilda' label seems to have been initially due to a slip made by Millais, a distinguished naturalist and wildlife illustrator who was, after all, writing three volumes on *The mammals of Great Britain and Ireland*. Other factors may have contributed to his approach, however. In the last years of the nineteenth century, the exclusivity of St Kildas was becoming upstaged, at least among the *cognoscenti*. In the 1870s (or possibly the early 1880s), the origins of primitive sheep were evidently being discussed by the pioneering archaeologist General Pitt-Rivers, the naturalist Henry Nottidge Moseley, and the museum administrator Norman MacLeod (who lived in the same London street as Pitt-Rivers in the mid-1860s, and, after he purchased St Kilda in 1871, 'owned' the Soays on Soay). I have discussed these interactions in more detail elsewhere.⁶⁶ For men with palaeozoological interests, such as Pitt-Rivers, the Gloucestershire livestock breeder and naturalist Henry Elwes, and James Cossar Ewart, who bred sheep at Edinburgh University in the early twentieth century, the Soays, with their affinities with wild mouflons, were the most historically significant race of primitive sheep. Soays were even more 'niche' than St Kildas, since they were harder to acquire; they belonged to the laird rather than the islanders, and had to be brought off their steep-sided eponymous island in a tricky operation – if the state of the sea made it possible to tie up a boat there.

As Ritvo has noted 'for both animals and people a distinguished lineage divided those with hereditary claims to high status from arrivistes'. Those in the know began to cast aspersions

⁶³ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 99.

⁶⁴ Ritvo, *Animal estate*, p. 61; Millais quoted in Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 190; R. Lydekker, *The sheep and its cousins* (1912), p. 60; Elwes, 'Notes', pp. 29, 32.

⁶⁵ *Hampshire Advertiser*, 1 May 1925; K. Williamson and J. M. Boyd, *St Kilda summer* (1961), p. 78.

⁶⁶ Fleming, 'Soay sheep'.

on the racial integrity of the St Kildas. St Kilda sheep became impure, mongrel 'Hebrideans' during an epoch when disdainful comments about *human* Hebrideans (including the islanders of St Kilda) were hardly unknown.⁶⁷ There is a certain irony here, in that the variegated-looking sheep which grazed Hirta in the eighteenth century must surely have looked quite like 'mongrels' to an observer; yet they came to be described as such only after they had been bred to an elegant black by the *crème de la crème* in the nineteenth century.

If their owners were disillusioned or disappointed by the eclipse of their sheep, they did not show it; at any rate they do not seem to have resisted the tide of expert opinion. The insouciant English gentleman has always cherished his amateur status – which means that in certain technical matters he must bow to the view of the professional.

X

In 1925 a St Kilda sheep owner in Hampshire declared that they did best when left to themselves. More recently, Lewis-Stempel has emphasized the resilience of 'Hebrideans' in terms of their catholic foraging habits, their tolerance of bad weather, and their relative freedom from disease.⁶⁸ On Hirta, the St Kildas seem to have been kept virtually as 'wild' as the Soays on Soay, or the Borerays on Boreray. It seems unlikely that the islanders were able to have much influence over the characteristics or genetic makeup of these sheep; in any case they probably welcomed diverse natural wool colours.

Natural selection would doubtless have increased the hardiness of any race of sheep living in St Kilda's testing climatic conditions, leading to a gradual reduction in size, and probably promoting differential mortality in rams (see below). Ewart noted that Soays seemed 'to be incapable of laying up a store of food to serve as a reserve during times of scarcity', and perhaps the same was true of the St Kildas.⁶⁹ The islanders may have unwittingly selected against more well-fleshed animals by picking them out for slaughter, although the nature of round-up operations described above throws into doubt how selective they were able to be. In the case of Soays, the absence of the estate factor for most of the year meant that the islanders could choose how many of the laird's sheep they declared as slaughtered (they were supposed to pay for every one). Only if they were intending to be scrupulously honest with the factor would it have been to their advantage to pick the fatter ones.

I have previously suggested that the capacity of 'Bronze Age' Soay rams to outfight 'Iron Age' St Kildas (as implied by Ryder) may have persuaded the islanders to restrict the senior race of sheep to Soay after the introduction of the St Kildas some two thousand years ago. However, accounts of rams fighting to the death in other parts of Britain, apparently of interest to newspaper readers in the early twentieth century, make it clear that in fights with St Kilda

⁶⁷ R. Buchanan, *The land of Lorne, or a poet's adventures in the Scottish Hebrides* (1871), p. 245. In T. Steel, *The life and death of St Kilda* (1965) the attitudes of the islanders, as recorded by scornful comments of late nineteenth century tourists, are taken to account in part for the later 'failure' of the community. See also A. Fleming, *St Kilda and the wider world: tales of an*

iconic island (2005).

⁶⁸ *Hampshire Advertiser*, 1 May 1925; Lewis-Stempel, *Sheep's tale*, esp. pp. 51, 122–3, 145.

⁶⁹ J. C. Ewart, 'Domesticated sheep and their wild ancestors. II. Wild sheep of the argali type', *TransHASS*, Ser. 5, 26 (1914), p. 76.

sheep the superior weight of the Soays would not necessarily have been decisive. In 1927 it was reported that 'of the six rams which have recently met their death in combat with other rams on the Welsh border, five have been Ryeland rams, all of which have been worsted by Welsh rams half their size'. In 1926, in Denbighshire (north Wales) a Ryeland ram weighing about 2 cwt (about 100 kg) had his neck broken in a fight with a Welsh adversary half his weight, which had 'curved horns about 10 inches [25 cm.] in diameter'.⁷⁰ In such fights, the neck-breaking or brain haemorrhage-inducing head-butt evidently constitutes the decisive fatal blow – so neither weight nor horn configuration are critical. Interestingly, the genetic signature of a few St Kilda rams reported to have been taken to Soay in the 1850s or 1860s has been picked up. Evidently the Soay rams were unable to keep them away from the ewes – as one might perhaps expect on such terrain. An extra complication is suggested by Lewis-Stempel's statement that 'given a choice of breeds to be brides, a ram will invariably choose his own breed over others. Sheep are intensely tribal'.⁷¹ Perhaps it may be assumed that rams of both early St Kilda sheep races were quite feisty enough, and that, in the wide open spaces of Hirta, classical dominance-and-submission behaviour usually made fights to the death unnecessary. In this context, the impressiveness of his horns may have given the St Kilda ram a distinct advantage. Perhaps, however, the decision to confine Soays to the island of Soay was based not on the relative prowess of fighting rams but rather on an overall assessment of the qualities of Soays, and a desire to preserve them.

The islanders are known to have kept rams separately on Dun in the nineteenth century, and they would have been able to do this at any time after Dun became a small island, which, I have argued, probably occurred in the later Middle Ages.⁷² In 1877, between 20 and 30 'of the native St Kilda breed', said to be 'of a light-brown colour' were being kept on Dun.⁷³ Perhaps the island had been pressed into service as a reserve for old-fashioned St Kilda sheep (unless a few of these had survived on Dun after it became an island). All in all, it seems very unlikely that much selection was possible, let alone achieved, in the traditional feralistic sheep economy. In 1842 David Low noted the lack of selection of rams in many flocks on Orkney and Shetland, the number of rams and ewes being equal. Kinsman's comment was that such management would provide 'a mechanism for the long term stability of the sheep type'.⁷⁴ If new sheep, perhaps especially new rams, were sometimes introduced, at St Kilda or elsewhere, the sheep's genetic inheritance would have become more complex. Nevertheless, all in all, it seems, genetic 'churn', rather than any clear direction of human selection, was probably dominant in the long term for both Soay and St Kilda sheep.

XI

Since the St Kildas became parkland animals they have been subjected to selective breeding. It has been suggested by Kinsman that about 30 per cent of the Hebridean genome is derived

⁷⁰ *Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer*, 27 May 1927; *Cornish Post and Mining News*, 1 Jan. 1927.

⁷¹ P. Feulner *et al.*, 'Introgression and the fate of domesticated genes in a wild mammal population', *Molecular Ecology* 22 (2013), pp. 4210–21. Lewis-Stempel,

Sheep's tale, p. 99.

⁷² Fleming, *St Kilda and the wider world*, pp. 64–5.

⁷³ MacDiarmid, 'St Kilda', p. 245.

⁷⁴ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 68.

from Jacob sheep.⁷⁵ Perhaps from the outset, breeders of St Kilda parkland sheep were selecting for black, an objective which would not have been difficult to achieve.⁷⁶ As we have seen, the original sheep purchased by Mark Milbank were variegated in colour. By 1867, however, the St Kildas at the HASS show in Glasgow could be described as 'wholly black', although another source describes the wool on their bodies as brown-black, turning to grey in the older animals. In 1872, St Kildas put on show in Glasgow and advertised for sale from Kilmory were described as black; those sold from Storrs Hall in 1887 were described as 'principally' black.⁷⁷

Breeders of St Kilda sheep, and those who wrote about them, were interested in the fact that some of the rams were polyceratic, sometimes possessing four horns, and occasionally five or even six. Four horns were certainly a property of St Kilda sheep shown at Ayr in 1835, and at Glasgow in both 1867 and 1872.⁷⁸ It is not altogether clear how far breeders valued this property, or tried to select for it. According to Kinsman, in the 1870s 'only black fleeced individuals were selected and only multi-horned rams were selected'. But he also notes that 'over the past thirty years there has been a reverse and the breed is now predominantly two-horned 'with a major diminution in polled, scurred [hornless] and multi-horned stock'. The literature contains various assertions about where, when, and whether polyceratic sheep occurred; Donald Ferguson, ground officer on Hirta from the early 1890s, when he was in his fifties, said that there had been no four-horned sheep there in his time. Perhaps the most interesting remark is one attributed to the late Magnus Magnusson, who apparently claimed that four-horned tups were especially prized as fighting animals, the Vikings being known for their addiction to gambling on stallion and ram fights.⁷⁹ Such a scenario would have incentivized medieval attempts to select for this property. It seems that such selection would not have been too difficult. Around 1900 Andrew McElfrish at Lochmaddy apparently put several four-horned rams to a range of ewes and discovered that 'the four-horned lambs were exact replicas of the horns of the sires; so much so, that anyone could easily point out each ram's get'. The upper horns of a ram which received 'good grazing and a little hand-feeding in winter' measured 36 inches (91 cm); the lower ones impeded his grazing, although 'by grazing at the sides of slopes, banks and ditches, he was able to pick up a living'.⁸⁰ On Hirta, such a ram would not have starved.

⁷⁵ D. Kinsman, 'History of the Hebridean sheep', in Braithwaite, *Hebridean sheep*, p. 19.

⁷⁶ Josephine Pemberton (pers. comm.) writes: 'in Soays, the self allele at the agouti locus that causes the same colour all over is recessive, so will breed true (i.e. self x self gives self). The light/dark variation in Soays is caused by another locus called TYRP1 and here the dark allele is dominant so not quite so easy to breed true, but selection would quickly get you there given such simple genetics'. In 1908 it was claimed that Mendelian experiments had shown that 'cross sheep can produce absolutely pure types, and that when it is found necessary to rejuvenate a flock which may have deteriorated by sib-breeding, this true type can be reinstated within a couple of years in place of the five

years usually taken by breeders' (*Dundee Courier*, 7 July 1908).

⁷⁷ *Newcastle Courant*, 2 Aug. 1867; *Evening Mail*, 5 Aug. 1867; *Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, 14 Dec. 1872; *The Field*, 28 Dec. 1872; *Lakes Chronicle and Reporter*, 23 Sept. 1887.

⁷⁸ *Carlisle Journal*, 10 Oct. 1835; *Newcastle Courant*, 2 Aug. 1867; *Paisley Herald and Renfrewshire Advertiser*, 14 Dec. 1872.

⁷⁹ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, p. 19; Elwes, 'Notes', p. 26; J. M. Watson, 'Some thoughts on the origins of the Hebridean breed of sheep', in Braithwaite, *Hebridean sheep*, p. 21.

⁸⁰ Letter from McElfrish quoted in Elwes, 'Notes', pp. 30–1.

The St Kildas or Hebrideans have been in the hands of breeders for over 160 years. A recent writer states that 'it would appear that our Hebrideans today do not have quite as strong a claim to belong exclusively to the northern short-tailed group of sheep as other breeds and that flocks were put together not from pure Norse-derived stock alone, but also from later part-Linton animals, selected simply because they were black' ('Linton' was the old term for Blackface).⁸¹ It would be interesting to know whether this author would have said the same thing had he known that the St Kildas did originally come from St Kilda, and even more interesting to hear comment from a geneticist. Does the genetic distance between the St Kildas (or 'Hebrideans') and the other 'cognate' breeds surveyed by Kinsman, such as the Manx Loughtan or the Shetland, need to be reconsidered or perhaps freshly investigated? Do such distances provide us with historical information? Would it be possible, desirable or useful to try to 'breed back' towards a variety of St Kilda sheep looking more like the originals, perhaps more like their 'Iron Age' ancestors? Such questions may be well worth considering in the light of the new historical understanding for which I have argued here.

XII

If we are concerned with former appearances, the 1884 photograph of Thomas Staniforth's redoubtable St Kildas, with their fuzzy 'top-knots', assumes considerable importance, as Kinsman appreciated.⁸² The rediscovery of comparable early images would be of inestimable value. This photograph in particular is an important reminder that breeding towards black would have been done with varying degrees of knowledge, skill and perhaps enthusiasm, especially in the early days. Many of the early Hebridean flocks would have been 'works in progress', so to speak. To this day, of course, owners of 'rare breeds' still have choices to make, and outcomes to ponder; there is scope for discussion and argument about the breed's general direction of travel, and that of individual flocks. The animals exhibited at shows would have been carefully selected to reflect qualities desired or specified: in this case, blackness and polyceratism. Descriptions in newspapers, on which I have mostly relied here, would often have reflected such selective preferences, and also been affected by the quality of journalists' notes or recollections. In the parks, presumably sheep would often have looked more variegated than selected show animals. By turning variegated St Kildas into black parkland 'Hebrideans', sheep breeders have unwittingly increased the apparent distance between Soays and St Kildas, which now hide – at least in genetic terms – in plain sight. In terms of the appearance of 'prehistoric' sheep, a good guide may be the picture of the 'polycerate [multi-horned] breed of the Hebrides', painted by William Shiels in the late 1840s, and reproduced by Kinsman (Figure 3). Kinsman's comment is that these sheep are quite similar to modern Hebridean sheep, except for the range of fleece colours. He also cites Rosa Bonheur's 1857 painting entitled 'sheep of the Highlands',

⁸¹ Watson, 'Some thoughts', p. 22.

⁸² It is conceivable that this photograph features George Easton, Staniforth's farm manager, and also that the suit he is wearing was the suit of St Kilda tweed

which he had had made (*Lakes Chronicle and Reporter*, 9 Sept. 1887).

⁸³ Kinsman, *Black sheep*, cover, figs 4.3, 3.13, p. 69 and plate 3b.



FIGURE 3. Hebridean sheep painted by William Shiels, 1844–50

Source: Wallace, *Farm Livestock of Great Britain*, 1907

FIGURE 4. 'Sheep of the Highlands', painted by Rosa Bonheur, 1857

Source: The Wallace Collection via Creative Commons, UK Art.





FIGURE 5. A group of Boreray sheep

which also seems to convey a good impression of a comparable race of pre-modern sheep (Figure 4).⁸³

In this context, it must be worth mentioning the sheep of the island of Boreray, which were also systematically exploited by the islanders of Hirta; poor weather conditions had prevented their evacuation in 1930 (Figures 5 and 6). Although there is a 'Soay and Boreray Sheep Society', Borerays are nowadays mostly left to their own devices on their infrequently visited island. They are described as a cross between early Blackfaces and 'the old Scottish shortwool sheep that still survive at North Ronaldsay in Orkney and in the Shetland Islands'; they have 'a largely creamy-brown coat coloration; about a quarter of them being grey-brown, a few blackish and the occasional one tan in colour'.⁸⁴ Face colours vary considerably. The Borerays do very well on their seabird-fertilized island, where numbers may reach six or seven hundred, a very high density of about 12 sheep per hectare. Lambing percentages are very high ('comparable to the carefully shepherded Border hirsels');



FIGURE 6. A friendly Boreray ram

⁸⁴ Love, *Natural history*, pp. 235–7, following Ryder quoted in J. Bullock, 'Borerays, the other rare breed on St Kilda', *The Ark*, Aug. 1983), p. 19. For fuller information, see this article, and J. M. Boyd, 'The Boreray sheep of St Kilda, Outer Hebrides, Scotland: the natural history of a feral population', *Biological Conservation* 20 (1981), pp. 205–27.

experiments have demonstrated the speedy development of an effective maternal bond and of suckling behaviour, which probably reduces the mortality of newborns. There are about six ewes to one tup, suggesting that 'many tups simply do not have enough body reserves to last out the long St Kilda winter'.⁸⁵ Online images show the diversity of the Borerays' physical appearance; despite the Blackface admixture, they may well be one of the best currently available approximations to the appearance of late prehistoric sheep at St Kilda and elsewhere. Those seeking sheep for reconstructed 'Iron Age farms' might do well to look beyond the Soays – to Borerays, Manx Loaghtans, and comparable races of northern short-tails which have not been bred for black like the St Kildas.

XIII

From the mid-1850s, St Kilda sheep found favour with a coterie of rich and aristocratic landowners, who converted them into elegant black parkland sheep, whose popularity spread, especially in the twenty or thirty years leading up to the First World War, along with the vogue for St Kilda and its tweed. However, it is the qualities selected for during their long sojourn on St Kilda which make their descendants, the 'Hebrideans', more sustainable in some respects today than more 'advanced' breeds.⁸⁶ It was not until 30 years after the initial spread of the St Kildas that archaeologists and palaeozoologists came to recognize the greater antiquity of the Soay race of sheep, a finding which led influential authorities to downplay the purity and historical status of the St Kildas; denying that they came from St Kilda, they renamed them Hebrideans. It may now be time to re-evaluate the historical role and genetic inheritance of these sheep, and also that of the Borerays, the Cinderella race whose perceived historic status may also have been affected by focus on the Soays. It might well be more appropriate for Borerays, rather than the Soays, to accompany reconstructions and visualizations of Iron Age round-houses. Work on the genetics of these 'primitive' sheep does not so far seem to have clarified their history and relationships within north-west Europe. Perhaps now would be a good time to initiate such a project.

⁸⁵ Bullock, 'Borerays'

from Kinsman, *Black sheep* (2001); Lewis-Stempel,

⁸⁶ Fleming, 'Soay sheep', p. 7, quoting information

Sheep's tale.