

## 6. 1924 The Munro Report – an opportunity missed

Falklands husbandry compared poorly with that in Patagonia. One observer in the mid-1920s reports almost no progress in the previous 30 years; farming methods were half a century behind the Coast.<sup>1</sup>

Both Governor Middleton and a number of the leading farmers in the Colony shared this gloomy assessment of the state of the main industry of the Islands in the 1920s.<sup>2</sup> The Governor made an historic speech to Legislative Council on 23 July 1924 on the state of the sheep farming industry. Middleton's speech revealed both his extensive knowledge and his deep concern for those working within the industry. ("I have made it my duty to collect such information as I could") The speech outlined the problems of the deteriorating quality of the grassland (and the subsequent decline in the aggregate number of sheep carried). The Governor was particularly concerned with the economic disposal of surplus sheep, and he considered that the requirement for the establishment of a refrigeration factory to be most urgent. Another major concern of the Governor was the need for the farming industry to cooperate in the marketing of its products.

As a result of the speech the Islands Government sponsored a major investigation by a Senior Stock Inspector from the Department of Agriculture in New Zealand. Hugh Munro's Report was published in 1924 and it was the first truly systematic examination of the condition of the natural resources of the Falklands, and how they might be more effectively managed and exploited.<sup>3</sup> In the event, the failure to implement many of the Munro Report's recommendations had considerable long-term effects on the Islands.

In the years prior to Hugh Munro's arrival in the Islands, R C Pole-Evans, the Manager of Port Howard made a number of observations about the state of Islands

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<sup>1</sup> Bernhardson, W; (1989); op.cit.; p498.

<sup>2</sup> The Falkland Islands Company had expressed its concerns about the crisis in the sheep farming industry as early as 1921. See: CS819/21 *Representation by Falkland Islands Company regarding crisis in sheep farming industry*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 7 July 1921.

<sup>3</sup> Munro, H; (1924) *Investigation into the conditions and practice of sheep farming in the Falkland Islands*; London: HMSO.

sheep farming, and the general deterioration of the pastures. These comments were very similar to those that would be made by Munro. However Pole-Evans' solutions were very different; he supported regular burning of whitegrass and he believed that the land would be improved by concentrating stock in certain areas of land. He did acknowledge that after poor lambing of the stud flock the lack of 'feed may have something to do with it.'<sup>4</sup> In 1924 Pole-Evans applied to Governor Middleton for permission to import between 1,000 and 4,000 sheep from the South American mainland. In December 1925 Pole-Evans wrote to the Governor detailing the improvements which the imported sheep had brought to his farm. Lambing averages were considerably higher. 'This I know that they have paid us and also we would have been very much in the soup this year with the rotten lambing had we not had them.'<sup>5</sup>

To accompany the Munro Report, Governor Middleton wrote a long and comprehensive memorandum on the sheep farming industry of the Islands. This memorandum recalls that thirty years before Munro's investigations another much shorter Report had been written - also by a New Zealand Stock Inspector John Mowat.<sup>6</sup> This early Report prefigures many of Munro's conclusions. John Mowat's Report<sup>7</sup> is significant because of its early date, and also because it shows that within a few years of human settlement and farming, serious problems began to emerge for both sheep farming and the environment:

Sheep farming in the Falkland Islands has not progressed with the times, possibly owing to its isolated position and the smallness of the area. The sheep farmers are not in most cases alive to their own interests - the sheep are not well bred ... there seems to be an idea that the more sheep there are on the ground the more wool will be clipped, such an idea is a fallacy. Sheep farmers have suffered from general practical management that is generally speaking poor in comparison with the system in vogue in the Australian Colonies. I consider the great want here is more sub-dividing fencing, which would at

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<sup>4</sup> Bernhardson, W; (1989); op.cit.; p509.

<sup>5</sup> CS140/24; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Pole-Evans, R C to Middleton, J (Governor). 30 December 1925.

<sup>6</sup> Mowat's appointment with the Falkland Islands Government as Stock Inspector was for three years. He arrived in the Islands in September 1895.

<sup>7</sup> CO78/164; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1923 (Mowat, J T; *Report of Chief Inspector of Stock*; 29 December 1895).

once increase the sheep carrying capacity of the Islands. Much might be done in many places towards improving the feed by grass sowing especially on the islands.<sup>8</sup>

In correspondence to a New Zealand newspaper Mowat stated that:

There is still some of the old Falkland Island tussock left; on the small islands, where the stock have been unable to get at it, it still flourishes. Cattle and horses fatten very quickly when they are placed on these tussock islands, but they are never allowed to remain there too long or they would soon destroy the plants, as they eat the roots as readily as the vegetation.<sup>9</sup>

Mowat is particularly scathing about the quality of sheep, and their husbandry:

The class of sheep here is not what they should be on such fine country. This owing mainly to ignorance on the part of the owners, and their placing too much reliance on the Scotch shepherds, with which the island is overstocked ... Everything is done in a slipshod, slovenly manner.<sup>10</sup>

Not all farms in the Colony are criticised by Mowat:

The Falkland Islands Company are the largest owners here, they have 200,000 sheep, in my idea, the best flock in the Colony ... Robert Blake is spoken of as the model farmer of the Colony; he is no doubt a practical man, and has a very creditable flock.<sup>11</sup>

In company with the thinking of their time neither Mowat nor Munro challenged the assumptions which lie behind the open ranching style of monocultural sheep farming. They sought to improve farming efficiency, and the natural environment must be made to serve the aim of producing a better-managed sheep farming industry. Thus

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<sup>8</sup> Middleton, J; (1924) *Memorandum on the Sheep Farming Industry in the Falkland Islands*; London: HMSO; quoting the words of John Mowat 29 December 1895; pp.19-20.

<sup>9</sup> Correspondence to the Marlborough Express dated 14 April and 15 April 1896, and reprinted in the *Falkland Islands Journal* 1970; p35.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*; p35.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid.*; p35.

Munro deals ruthlessly with any perceived competitors to sheep, *e.g.* Upland Geese and birds of prey:

I am of the opinion that a substantial reduction in the number of wild geese is highly desirable from its present numbers ... They are a pest and they should be treated as such. I suggest that the money which the Government is at present paying for the destruction of wild geese would be more advantageously expended on experimental work, and that in place of continuing the present system, legislation should be enacted providing that farmers must destroy wild geese on their land to the satisfaction of the Chief Inspector of Stock ... I recommend that experiments be carried out with a view to destroying geese with poisoned grain.<sup>12</sup>

For Munro, birds of prey should fare little better: 'I am of the opinion that Government could substantially increase the royalty for destroying them with great advantage.'<sup>13</sup>

What the Munro Report does show quite clearly are the practical difficulties of establishing agricultural reform on the Islands, and how the needs of these reforms can be balanced with the needs of the environment. Much has been written on this subject since the Munro Report, but in large measure subsequent reports are only reiteration of Munro's conclusions.

The Munro Report begins by stressing the importance of indigenous plants and that:

Notwithstanding the importance of the subject and the accumulated experience of nearly 70 years, which should be available regarding it, great diversity of opinion still exists on essential points in connection with pasture management among capable men who are in charge of various stations.<sup>14</sup>

The Report stated that there was:

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<sup>12</sup> Munro, H; (1924); op.cit.; p43.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*; p43.

<sup>14</sup> *ibid.*; p7.

Very great damage done by over stocking and the uncontrolled burning of grass. The process of decay has been so gradual, and spread over such a long period, that serious concern has only arisen in recent years.<sup>15</sup>

Munro stated that overstocking is probably the easiest error of judgement to commit and that such practice reduces the overall carrying capacity of the land. As regards Tussac Grass Munro's words are stark and to the point:

In view of the fact that this [Tussac] can probably be classed as one of the most nutritious grasses in the world, it is quite remarkable to see it so much neglected in a country where nutritious vegetation of any kind is all too scarce.<sup>16</sup>

Munro asserts that it is clear that the Islands had been overstocked for least thirty years prior to his arrival in the Colony. While some areas of land had been well managed, it was unfortunate that the best land in the Islands has suffered the greatest damage from burning and overstocking. The consequence of the degradation of native grasses was their replacement with inferior vegetation such as Diddle-Dee. Munro deplores the damage caused by the retention of useless old sheep.

The Report clearly outlines the damage caused by burning and Munro concluded:

It is not suggested that burning is wholly bad on all classes of country or that it should be prohibited entirely. There are no doubt occasions when coarse vegetation on wet camp reaches a stage when burning is justified; but it should be confined to wet camp and resorted to even there only when considered essential and under the most favourable conditions.<sup>17</sup>

and:

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<sup>15</sup> *ibid.*; p8.

<sup>16</sup> *ibid.*; p8.

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*; p13.

The burning of dry camp destroys the roots of the grass, and this in turn damages the surface soil. This eventually reduces the fertility of the land to such an extent that it will no longer produce grass until fresh soil is brought to the surface by the plough. 'The evil of burning this class of land (dry camp) does not end with the damage that is directly due to the fire, for the reason that stock crowd on to burned areas and graze the succulent young grass so hard, that further extensive damage is due to this factor.'<sup>18</sup>

Munro stated that the most effective method of improving the situation was a three-fold combination of greater sub-division of the land, the reduction of the number of stock carried and a greatly restricted grass-burning regime. Greater sub-division of paddocks would allow a better rotational system of grazing. Munro suggested that the use of lime and clovers would increase the quality of animal fodder. A letter to Governor Middleton, Robert Blake (Senior), who had already introduced similar farming practices at Hill Cove confirms Munro's analysis: 'Both paddocks are good, and according to what Mr Munro said; they should be better next year. My observations and experiments made in England agree with Mr Munro's forecast.'<sup>19</sup>

With regard to the use of cattle in land management Munro advises that:

It would be very beneficial to pastures to carry many more cattle than is done at present, more particularly on properties which are sub-divided into areas which will enable them to be used to the best advantage as scavengers to clean up the coarse vegetation as well as for the purpose of consolidating the surface soil.<sup>20</sup>

The reasons for high level of mortality of young sheep is outlined; Munro contends that the main reason is the exhaustion of the pastures, and the poor nutritional value of

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*; p12.

<sup>19</sup> CS92/26; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Blake, R; letter to Governor Middleton; 10 February 1926.

<sup>20</sup> Munro, H; (1924); *op.cit.*; p15. These words echo the observations made by J L Waldron, of Port Howard, made fifty years earlier: 'The wild cattle having fed it bare as possible, not nearly so much white grass but a fine grass sprung up in its place.' Coulthard, F., McAdam, E. and McAdam J H (2001) James Lovegrove Waldron - notebook and original diary 1866-1876. *Falkland Islands Journal* vol 7, p89.

the remaining vegetation. There are natural deficiencies in the soil, but this can be compensated for by the provision, in the sheep paddocks, of rock-salt Blocks called 'sheep licks.' Munro criticises the rough handling of the sheep by some shepherds, and the failure of some farms to reduce the mortality of sheep by the bridging of creeks and ditches. Munro is scathing in his comments about the sheep breeding he observed during his travels in the Islands, and he urges investigation in to the value of several breeds of sheep - especially the Corriedale, Merino, and Romney. Munro warns against the danger of indiscriminate inbreeding.

Munro made detailed comment on the quality of wool that the Islands produced. The quality of the farm maintenance Munro found in many settlements evinces the following comment:

With very few exceptions, most of the things that matter in the way of permanent improvements on the stations were done by the pioneers of the sheep-farming industry during the period of 1860 and 1890, and those who have been responsible for the welfare of the industry since have not only failed to carry on the work of development at a normal rate, but they have actually failed - some woefully - to maintain that which was accomplished for them.<sup>21</sup>

One of Munro's most significant recommendations was that an Experimental Farm should be established, as soon as possible in the vicinity of the Green Patch settlement. In order to make it partially self-supporting, a small stud flock of sheep and a herd of stud cattle should be imported and carried on the Experimental Farm. The progeny of these stud animals should be sold and used to raise the standard of quality of the stock in the Colony. This Experimental Farm could also investigate re-grassing methods, the growing of fodder crops, good practice in the management of cattle and sheep, the draining of waterlogged land, and more modern methods of providing shelter for sheep *e.g.* the planting of Gorse (*Ulex europaeus*) hedges and stock-proof fencing. Munro urges that all farms institute a proper system of farm accounting and the keeping of stock records.

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<sup>21</sup> Munro, H; (1924); op.cit.; p32.

Munro's final recommendation is that farmers in the Islands organise themselves into an Association with a view to taking joint decisions about matters of mutual interest.<sup>22</sup>

After eight months in the Islands, Hugh Munro returned to New Zealand. On his way home he met with the Board of the Falkland Islands Company, in London, on 8 January 1925. The Board unanimously resolved to thank Hugh Munro for his work, and also to thank Sir John Middleton for the great interest he had taken in the sheep farming industry. However, the Falkland Islands Company Board of Directors made it quite clear that in their opinion, as far as the Company's farms were concerned, that they rejected Munro's assertion of overstocking being the cause of pasture and stock deterioration.<sup>23</sup>

At a meeting of the Legislative Council on 29 July 1925 it was resolved that: 'The establishment of the Government Experimental Farm, recommended by Mr Hugh Munro in his report ... was agreed on the motion of the Hon. G J Felton.'<sup>24</sup> In August 1925 the Experimental Farm was established at Lot 5 on the Port Louis Farm. In October 1925 Legislative Council voted £17,000 to provide funds to establish the Experimental Farm. However it soon became clear that the money allocated was insufficient to fund the project.

The Colonial Secretary wrote on 10 March 1927 to the Colonial Office to express his concerns about the future of the Experimental Farm and under-funding of the project. The original financial provision was insufficient. The Colonial Secretary wrote: 'It is apparent that certain of the objectives to be achieved by the Experimental Farm cannot be attempted unless a considerable increase in expenditure is authorised.' The Colonial Secretary described the newly arrived Farm Manager Arthur Ashworth as 'a hardworking and practical man, with enthusiasm, energy and sound common-sense.'

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid.*; p45.

<sup>23</sup> CS638/24; *Stock Commissioner forwards report on the sheep farming industry in the Falkland Islands*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 4 October 1924.

<sup>24</sup> Miller, S [Junior] (1976); Anson - The Government Experimental Farm 1926-8; *The Falkland Islands Journal*; p11.

<sup>25</sup> CO78/175/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

After several illustrations of the practical problems involved in establishing the project he commented:

It is indeed hard to exaggerate the obstacles which have to be surmounted in this connection and the magnitude of the task is very well illustrated by the fact that that every effort was made without success to let the construction of the house out to contract in accordance with the original intention. Possible contractors are but few, they have informed me personally that they have sufficient work to keep them occupied for several years, whilst in any case they are averse to undertaking work away from Stanley.<sup>26</sup>

The state of the existing fences and further fencing costs appear to have been a major problem:

The majority of the existing fences in the Colony are barely capable of holding sheep and much less cattle. Mr Ashworth maintains that reliable fencing is an essential foundation of all experiments in sheep breeding and improvement of pastures.<sup>27</sup>

The centre of the farm was established 5.6km away from the landing jetty, thus: 'transport of materials over this distance of rough country, with no road, has entailed considerable labour with consequent heavy expenditure.' With the benefit of hindsight - given the transportation difficulties, which existed, in the Islands at that stage in its development - the decision to site the farm so far from the coast was a mistake. After detailing a host of unforeseen incidental expenditures the Colonial Secretary commented:

I am bound to share the view strongly expressed by the Farm Manager (Ashworth) in this connection that rather than starve the Farm of the means of operation it would be better not to proceed further with its establishment.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> CO78/175/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

<sup>27</sup> CO78/175/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

<sup>28</sup> CO78/175/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

A revised estimate of £24,000 was proposed, and on 4 April 1927 Legislative Council voted for the extra funds required. It is also clear from the Colonial Secretary's Despatch that under-funding was not the only problem. There was also considerable opposition to the project by some established farmers.

Following receipt of the Colonial Secretary's Despatch the order for 2 Ayrshire heifers was cancelled, and this decision undermined a key element of the Munro plan to improve the pasturage by carrying more cattle. However the stud flock sheep were imported from New Zealand.

With the arrival of a new Governor - Sir Arnold Hodson - the Experimental Farm came under critical and unfriendly scrutiny. Hodson was much less predisposed to the Experimental Farm as was his predecessor. The consequences of the change in Governor and the lack of continuity of policy had serious long-term consequences for the farming industry.

On 22 July 1927 the new Governor sent a confidential telegram to the Colonial Office which stated that:

A grave error of judgement has been made throughout in the conception and establishment of the Experimental Farm ... My predecessor therefore seems to me to have reached entirely the wrong conclusion in his estimate of the position and to have been encouraged in his error by Councillors equally ill advised ... During a recent tour of East Falkland I have been much struck by the prosperity of the local sheep farm industry and I am unable to appreciate the necessity for the establishment of an experimental farm ... Farmers themselves have taken measures indicated for recovery of pasture by reduction of numbers carried ... There is apparently a complete reversal of feeling in this matter ... it is difficult to see what benefit will accrue ... there will be a heavy recurrent burden on revenue without useful purpose served. Submit therefore the farm should be closed down forthwith ... Members of the Council at

present in the Colony concur and I would suggest that you may think it fit to consult Bonner and Felton who are in the United Kingdom.<sup>29</sup>

In a later letter Sir Arnold Hodson sums up his general attitude to matters concerning agricultural advisors thus: 'practical men do not require to be taught their own business.'<sup>30</sup> Hodson's failure to understand the concept of the Experimental Farm is clearly seen in this remark. The whole ethos of the Experimental Farm, as envisaged by Munro, was that it would be the place where practical animal husbandry and farm management could be demonstrated, and not that it should be a didactic, theoretical or academic institution. Hodson was mistaken because he failed to appreciate that the 'practical men' of the Islands did need help.

However despite the Governor's upbeat remarks, the condition of Islands farming had not, in fact, improved, but rather had continued to deteriorate. Lambing percentages were still falling (averages below 52%) A simple reduction of sheep numbers (as some farmers had done) was not the answer - the pastures would not be improved by this method alone.

In a private and confidential letter to Colonial Office the Colonial Secretary (Colonel A E Beattie) made his own view known about the new Governor's opinions. Beattie heavily criticised the attitudes and opinions of both the Governor and the leading local farmers. Beattie also criticises the Governor's compliance with the additional suggestion, made by some local farmers, that the post of Chief Inspector of Stock, and the Stock Department, be abolished. Beattie agreed that the current holder of the post was very unsatisfactory - but that the *position* was an 'absolute necessity.' The cause of the Governor's concern about the Stock Inspector and the Stock Department was an outbreak of dog distemper, for which the Governor held the Stock Inspector responsible.<sup>31</sup> The Colonial Office was astonished by the Governor's opinions and its reply to Hodson's view that a Stock Inspector was a 'useless extravagance' was swift and to the point: 'Your view ... if accepted would justify the abolition of every

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<sup>29</sup> CO78/180/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

<sup>30</sup> CO78/180/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 28 February 1928.

<sup>31</sup> CS366/27; *Suggested closure of Stock Department*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1927.

Agricultural Department in the Empire.’<sup>32</sup>

A leading farmer (George Bonner) from San Carlos Farm, was consulted by the Colonial Office and Bonner stated that he thought that Sir Arnold Hodson was wrong to suggest that the Experimental Farm be closed down. He was concerned about the cost of the project, but he thought that the project should be given a fair trial. Not to be deterred by these opinions, in October 1927, the Governor telegraphed the Colonial Office again requesting permission to close down the farm.

On 25 November 1927 the Manager of the Experimental Farm sent Governor Hodson an account of the results of the lambing experiments at the Experimental Farm. The Colonial Secretary wrote on 10 December 1927: ‘I am to say that it is with regret that His Excellency has learnt of the very poor percentage of lambs obtained from the imported ewes.’<sup>33</sup> These discouraging words hastened the Manager’s decision to leave the Experimental Farm.

On 23 December 1927 the Colonial Office declined to accede to another request by the Governor’s to close down the Experimental Farm, but the Farm Manager left the Islands within a few months after the arrival of Sir Arnold Hodson. The Governor requested again on January 1928 that the Experimental Farm should be closed down and on 16 March 1928 the Colonial Office agreed to the Governor’s request. The Experimental Farm was closed down shortly thereafter. The Farm, its livestock, buildings and implements were quickly sold by public auction. One of Hodson’s successors - Sir Miles Clifford - commented later:

At least six have spoken to me of the futility of closing it down before it had been given a chance to show its worth, and it was undoubtedly one of the more mischievous of the late Sir. A Hodson’s activities.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> CO78/180/15; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1927.

<sup>33</sup> CS60/1927; *Livestock (Experimental Farm) Sheep imported from New Zealand*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 8 February 1927.

<sup>34</sup> Hand-written comments by Governor Sir Miles Clifford on copy of the Gibbs Report in the Government Archives in Stanley.

An Islands historian - Sydney Miller (Junior) - regarded the closure of the Experimental Farm as a disaster for the Islands and he pointedly observed that:

Sir Arnold Hodson, in no way a farmer, had, at the time of writing his very outspoken views to the Colonial Office had been in the Colony less than eight months.<sup>35</sup>

and:

Since those unhappy days, forty-one years were to pass until the British Government sent out an Agricultural Investigation Team under Mr Tom Davies ... which has produced our Grasslands Trials Unit (GTU) ... so Sir John Middleton's ideas and schemes of the early 1920s are coming to pass after a gap of fifty years.<sup>36</sup>

Within one year of the demise of the Experimental Farm Sir Arnold Hodson was asking the Colonial Office to fund work by the Rowett Research Institute - and in particular that the Institute should supply experimental officer.

Sir Arnold Hodson made a half-hearted attempt to redeem the situation by despatching Mr Faithful, the farmhand at the former Experimental Farm to visit two sheep stations to give advice to the Farm Managers about grass seeding. The scientific rigour of these experimental plots can be judged from the remark that 'Unfortunately Mr Evans (the Farm Manager) did not know what quantity of seed and fertiliser were used in the Experimental Plots, but sowing must have been extremely heavy.'<sup>37</sup> Faithful continued to provide rudimentary advice throughout 1928; he visited a number of farms on West Falkland Island, recommending a number of harrowing and ploughing methods.<sup>38</sup>

Meanwhile the numbers of sheep stocked and lambing continued to steadily decline. Initially the true financial consequences of this decline were masked because of high wool prices on the world market. But by 1932 a slump in wool prices placed the

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<sup>35</sup> Miller, S [Junior](1976); Anson - The Government Experimental Farm 1926-8; *The Falkland Islands Journal*; p14.

<sup>36</sup> *ibid.*; p16.

<sup>37</sup> CO78/181/8; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1928.

<sup>38</sup> CS328/28; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 13 August 1928.

Colony's economy in difficulties, and the farmers lobbied for exemption from export tax.

The Munro Report and the story of the Experimental Farm provide a good example of the difficulties of establishing agricultural reform on the Islands. The problem of a lack of continuity of leadership in the Islands is well illustrated by the fact that after a six-year tenure of office by an experienced Governor (Middleton) - who was very knowledgeable about sheep farming - a new Governor (Hodson) arrived in the Colony with very limited knowledge and experience of sheep farming. The new Governor dismissed the work of his predecessor after a superficial tour of East Falkland during the wintertime. Hodson was also unable to withstand the pressure brought to bear on him by some conservative elements of the farming community.

The consequences of the change in personalities at Government House, in 1927, exacerbated the situation which already existed in the Colony. A number of factors combined to cause the failure of the Experimental Farm. They include:

- The innate suspicion of some residents of the Colony towards so-called 'experts' and the reports which they produce.
- The tendency in the Islands Government to underestimate the full costs of development projects.
- Local rivalries and personalities.
- The entrenched opinions of tough individualists who live in a frontier-style environment and culture.

Despite the failure to implement fully the Munro Report another opportunity for significant agrarian reform came ten years later with the initiative of a new Governor and the report of William Davies.

