

10. 1961-1971 Yet more reports – ‘Old ground, new ploughs’

World War II was a testing time for the Islands. A large military garrison was established on the Islands in 1942, which placed considerable demands upon the civilian community. The period directly after the war ended saw unprecedentedly high wool prices, which reached a peak in the early 1950s. The pressures on the farming community and the finances of the Colony were thus considerably eased. But this proved to be a false economic dawn; from the mid-1950s onwards wool prices fell sharply. The increasingly widespread use of man-made fibres resulted in the world-wide decline of wool production industries.

The overall economic vitality of the Islands began to decline gradually, and emigration became a noticeable social factor. Once again the familiar cycle of farmer’s alarm and Government disquiet - followed by the commissioning of reports and surveys - occurred. A number of reports were commissioned during this period. A summary of these now follows:

§ a. The Wannop Report 1960-1961.

A R Wannop was the Director of the Hill Farming Research Organisation, and he spent two and a half months in the Islands. He visited many farms and his report lays particular stress on the value of fencing and sub-division.

Wannop’s overall assessment revealed a familiar pattern: the total numbers of sheep appear to be still declining, though less rapidly than formerly, from the peak of 1898. This decline has been offset, to some degree, by an increase in annual wool clip per sheep. Wannop noted that in common with all countries where wool is the dominant farm product, cattle are as a rule unpopular - despite the well-known benefits in pasture improvement which increased cattle numbers can bring. In spite of the proven ability of cattle to improve pasture there are only a few examples in the history of Islands’ agricultural history where cattle have been systematically used - *e.g.* at Port Howard by R C Pole-Evans.

The sheep husbandry system continued to be extensive grazing - although slight modifications of this have been introduced on a few farms during recent years. Wannop noted that many farms had difficulty in maintaining sheep numbers, and in too many cases some ewes were kept well beyond normal culling age to augment the total lamb crop. Wannop outlines the nutritional deficiencies of the grasses and lack of trace elements on some farmland, and he commends the use of cobalt supplements for some sheep farms.

Wannop discussed the reasons for the apparent marked fertility of the fields directly adjacent to the settlements and shepherd's houses. Consolidation of the land by sheep and cattle hooves, ploughing and reseeded, and animal manure, had resulted in considerable improvement. He noted however that only a small proportion of the sown grasses and clovers persist for a long time, the determining factor being the amount of fertiliser used. Inherently poor soil and low fertility means that although some of the settlement fields contain some wild white clover it seldom showed vigorous growth, and that even when inoculation of the seed had been carefully carried out there is only a little nodulation. Under present farming policies the incentive to improve settlement fields was not great.

Wannop compared his findings with those of William Davies made in 1939, and in so doing defined pasture degradation in terms of the Islands environment:

The impression is that the unpalatable White Grass and Diddle-Dee are becoming even more dominant and that there is also an increase, on those parts where sheep have concentrated, of annual grasses such as *Poa annua* and *Aira praecox*.¹

Wannop concluded that the grasslands are continuing to decline, and he suggested that this is due to a combination of uncontrolled extensive grazing and overstocking.² He was cautious in his conclusions because he recognised that he did not have personal knowledge of the character of the grasslands fifty years previously, but he concluded

¹ Wannop, A R; (1961) *Report on visits to Falkland Islands Sheep Stations*; Stanley: Falkland Islands Government; p4.

² *ibid.*; p4.

that the presence of Goose Grass (*Aira praecox*) amongst the White Grass was an indication that the finer grasses formerly growing between the White Grass bogs had been exhausted and the ground thus left vacant had been colonised by Goose Grass:

Though these natural pastures are not really overstocked they are definitely overgrazed in parts ... Without some change in grazing management there is likely to be a further, even though slow, decline in the quality and productivity of the camps.³

Wannop clearly understood that the improvement of the camp, as a whole or even part of it, was a difficult undertaking under the Islands' climatic and geographical conditions. Although everyone agreed that lime and fertilisers would be beneficial for selected areas of farmland, little was used because of the cost. Thus, without experimental evidence to the contrary, camp improvement could only be brought about by either the introduction of other grasses at existing fertility levels or by altered grazing management, or a combination of both. He pointed to the example of Roy Cove farm as model of what could be achieved. He outlined several other examples of camp improvement - all of which deserve praise - but they are unlikely to give their maximum result unless combined with some grazing control. When it becomes possible to alternate grazing and rest periods this not only prolongs the effectiveness of grazing but if well controlled can actually lead to rejuvenation. He starkly observed 'nearly every camp seen was in real need of a rest from grazing, but this will only be possible with fencing and sub-division.' Some farmers did make efforts to sub-divide; West Point Island had been sub-divided and 'this has been most beneficial to all areas, especially the hills which can now be given a rest from grazing during the dry summer months.'⁴

Like others before him, Wannop also tackled the controversial subject of burning. Controlled grazing and more sheep would remove most of the need for burning of White Grass. He warned:

³ *ibid.*; p 4.

⁴ Napier, R B; (1970) West Point Island; *Falkland Islands Journal*; p31.

Normally burning is a process that leads to some fertility loss and to a greater dominance of coarse herbage, the finer grasses suffering more from the effects of fire.⁵

Wannop was sanguine about the long future of the Islands' wool industry.

An economy based on wool production is vulnerable in conditions under which artificial fibres may in the future become highly competitive and force [wool] prices down. Methods of reducing the cost of wool production should, therefore, be continually under review, as well as the means of ensuring continued productivity under a system which is an extractive form of farming, since nothing is done at present to replace the materials removed annually in the form of wool and slaughtered sheep.⁶

He pointed out that although sub-division of the camps and controlled grazing will undoubtedly lead to more sheep and wool, the question of raising soil fertility, and thereby the productivity of the natural pastures to any significant extent, still remained unanswered.⁷

Wannop concluded by encouraging the Islands Government to appoint a suitable scientific researcher to investigate potential improvements in soil and grassland fertility. In due course C D Young⁸ was appointed in this capacity and he served in the Islands from 1965 to 1968.⁹ Young was appointed to carry out trials on commercial farms. Most of Young's work consisted of re-seeding trials using a wide range of legumes and grasses.

There were high hopes in the Islands following Young's appointment as Grasslands Officer. The major landowners fully supported the appointment, and the Falkland

⁵ Wannop, A R; (1961); op.cit.; p10. Wannop recognised that under the current extensive farming methods used in the Islands, White Grass could not be kept in check by grazing alone: 'White Grass cannot be kept in check by grazing, and after some years the accumulation of uneaten herbage is such that in a dry period it is itself a fire hazard. Controlled periodic burning every four or five years is in these circumstances necessary ... but it is best not overdone.'

⁶ *ibid.*; p11.

⁷ *ibid.*; p11.

⁸ Young was a member of staff of the West of Scotland Agricultural College.

⁹ See: 2373; Falkland Islands Government Archive; *Pasture: Young Report 1968*; 1968.

Islands Company gave £1000 per year for three years to support the work of the Grasslands Officer.¹⁰

We are anxious to cooperate to the full with Mr Young, the Grasslands Officer, and we hope that some of the experiments will be made on the Company's land.¹¹

However a lack of adequate resources caused Young to become rapidly disillusioned. His Report is full of his personal sense of frustration. He soon discovered that much research had already been done in the Islands before he took up his post, but that few of the recommendations that had been made by Munro *et al.* had been acted upon. For example:

It is most depressing for an agriculturist to come out here to what is supposedly a virgin field and find that so much work has been done by his predecessors but that so little attention has been paid to it.¹²

Tom Davies commented, in 1971, that:

In his report of October 1968 Young concluded that carrying out critical experimental work on commercial farms was so difficult as to be virtually impossible and he suggested that the next step should be the setting up of an experimental farm.¹³

Despite his frustrations, Young clearly saw what needed to be done:

To carry out any advanced programme of research without an experimental farm is a hopeless task, and unless immediate steps are taken to provide such

¹⁰ 2373; Falkland Islands Government Archive; *Pasture: Young Report 1968*; Young, W H (Colonial Manager, Falkland Islands Company); letter to the Colonial Secretary; 10 May 1965.

¹¹ CO2373; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1968; Yorath, J H; a letter from the Falkland Islands Company to Sir Cosmo Haskard (Governor) 30 September 1965.

¹² Young, C D; (1968) *Report on pasture improvement experiments carried out in the Falkland Islands during 1965-1968*; Stanley: Falkland Islands Government.

¹³ Davies, T H; I A Dickson; C T McCrea; H Mead; W Williams; (1971) *Sheep and Cattle Industries of the Falkland Islands*; Stanley; Foreign and Commonwealth Office/ODA; p1.

an establishment there is little point in bringing out another agriculturist to a post in this Colony.¹⁴

Thus after a period of 44 years Munro's proposal of 1924 concerning the establishment of an experimental farm once again received scientific commendation.

Young was very clear about his conclusion that sub-division and rotation grazing were the most important methods of grassland improvement available to Islands' farmers. He also foreshadowed the direction sheep farming in the Islands was to take after the 1980s:

In view of the number of times that it has been advocated as an improvement method it is surprising that so little sub-division has been done ... In recent years many farms have worked out a system of spelling camps but there are still too many large camps. The splitting up of camps would be greatly encouraged if the farms themselves were split into smaller units. The most intensive farms in the islands are all comparatively small.¹⁵

Not all of Young's work was unsuccessful: One farm chosen by Young for experimentation was West Point Island. The farmer concerned commented:

The most outstanding of these improvements was the establishment of various types of grasses on the patches of clay, which exist on some of the hills. Before Mr Young's experiment it had been impossible to get cover grass to hold on these clay patches.¹⁶

§ b. The Guillebaud Report 1967.

The Governor of the Islands appointed C W Guillebaud of St. John's College, Cambridge, to conduct an economic survey of the Islands. Guillebaud visited the Islands between 4 March and 9 April 1967. His report dealt with many economic issues - especially the prospects for diversification of the Islands' economy, the

¹⁴ Young, C D; (1968); op.cit.; Introduction.

¹⁵ *ibid.*; p 21.

¹⁶ Napier, R B; (1970) West Point Island; *Falkland Islands Journal*; op.cit.; p31.

National Income, Standard of Living and levels of Remuneration. Guillebaud also wrote extensively on public finances and population trends.

Guillebaud made a number of recommendations in his Report. He considered the appointment of a senior grassland expert to be the best way of conducting research into grassland improvement. He encouraged farm owners and managers to consider the possibility of increasing the number of cattle held on their farms. Guillebaud recommended that high priority should be given to exploring the feasibility of constructing an airstrip near Stanley, with a view to establishing an air-link with the South American continent. Guillebaud addressed the issue of land ownership and tenure. He urged the current landowners to explore the possibility of establishing one or more tenant farms on their land, and give their employees a financial interest in the sheep farms on which they worked.

Guillebaud understood his limitations:

Writing as an economist with no special knowledge of the technical problems of sheep farming, I must rely mainly on the opinion of experts who have made detailed studies of the system of sheep husbandry as practised in the Falkland Islands.¹⁷

Thus Guillebaud accepted the findings of Munro, Davies and Wannop. Guillebaud examined the sheep and wool statistics for the period 1909 -1963. He concluded that from 1909 to 1963 there had been no expansion in the total amount of exported wool produced in the Islands. The amount of wool produced in the period 1959-1963 was virtually the same as that produced in the period 1909-1913. He acknowledged that there has been a considerable rise in the average yield of wool per sheep - an increase of 22% in the period 1944-1963.

From these figures Guillebaud concluded that the evidence pointed not just to the absence real improvement, but also to a gradual deterioration of the pastures under the largely prevailing system of uncontrolled grazing, with a consequential decline in the

¹⁷ Guillebaud, C W; (1976) *Report on an economic survey of the Falkland Islands*; Stanley: Falkland Islands Government; paragraph 29.

carrying capacity in terms of sheep on the farms. The increase in the yield of wool per sheep was undoubtedly due to improved methods of breeding.

Guillebaud asked the familiar questions: 'what can be done to improve the fertility of the soil, and so enable a larger number of sheep to be carried successfully?' From the work of Munro, Davies and Wannop, Guillebaud draws three conclusions: first, that there is impressive unanimity of expert opinion that sub-division of the camps is an essential pre-requisite to any improvement in the condition of the grasslands. Secondly that all the writers since 1924 are agreed that the fertility and carrying capacity had been, and were continuing to deteriorate. Thirdly that with a few exceptions remarkably little progress has been made during the period 1920-1960 towards sub-division and fencing of pastures, and other practical measures for conserving or improving the fertility of the soil.

Guillebaud sought to explain why this situation had occurred; he understood fully the problems caused by low wool prices before 1939-1945, and that since the end of World War II profits have been used to build up reserves or in much needed, but expensive, improvement in the housing of the farm employees. 'But this notwithstanding they could and should have done more to sub-divide their large enclosures.'¹⁸

Guillebaud commended the improvement efforts of Port Howard Farm Hill Cove Farm and Roy Cove Farm. Hill Cove's improvements had been largely due to rotavating pastures and then re-seeding, whereas at Roy Cove ploughing followed by re-seeding was the method employed. On East Falkland, Douglas Station and Salvador Farm were taking active steps in pasture improvement - partly through ploughing and partly through fencing and sub-division.

Guillebaud recorded his disappointment in the overall record of the Falkland Islands Company's farms - comprising of six farms covering some 1,330,000 acres - which were still 'being ranched in the old way.'¹⁹ The Falkland Islands Company strongly disagreed with this conclusion; Guillebaud conceded that while he was writing his

¹⁸ *ibid.*; paragraph 41.

¹⁹ *ibid.*; paragraph 50.

report the Falkland Islands Company were re-commencing re-seeding experiments with a type of machine on some of its farms. He commented that ‘this sort of experiment, which might produce instructive results ... shows a very welcome, if belated, change in the policy of the Company.’ It was during this time that it was becoming increasingly clear that Yorkshire Fog grass had some serious limitations as a pasture grass. Much research was taking place in an attempt to breed more suitable strains of grass. The Falkland Islands Company were aware of this research, and its own experiments with re-seeding should be seen in the light of these new developments.

Guillebaud outlined some possible prospects for the diversification of the Islands economy. Many schemes tried in the past had met with failure and disappointment. The production of soap, tallow, skins, sand extraction for glass production, harvesting of alginates, tinned meat and frozen mutton, had all been considered. Some of these ideas were tried but found commercially unsustainable.

The errors of the Ajax Bay Freezer scheme ²⁰ were outlined:

It cannot be said that anyone emerged with much credit from this sorry story ... neither Government which was reluctant to accept advice or criticism from within the islands; nor the farmers whose co-operation left much to be desired; nor the Colonial Development Corporation which made very bad mistakes in the planning, construction and administration of the scheme.²¹

Guillebaud was quite clear in his conclusions about the economic necessity of change and diversification:

²⁰ Guillebaud was referring to the ill-fated project of the 1950s to utilise surplus sheep through the frozen meat trade.

²¹ Guillebaud, C W; (1976); op.cit.; paragraph 61.

For the time being, the sheep farming industry in the Falkland Islands would be well-advised to concentrate its efforts in improving the pastures; but that it should always keep in mind the possibility that at some stage the scales may be tipped in favour of meat rather than wool.²²

The Report sympathised with the islanders who have had to deal with a number of disappointments. He noted the fact of the latest of these was the attempt by the Falkland Islands Company to establish a Mink Farm²³ in the hope that this might provide a new and profitable industry for the Colony.

§ c. Grasslands Improvement Conferences 1966 & 1967.

In 1966 & 1967, during the period of C D Young's tenure of office in the Islands, conferences were held in the Town Hall, in Stanley. Almost all farm managers attended and a wide variety of subjects were considered. Young reviewed his work and he expressed his frustrations and hopes for the future:

I must add that the amount of experiment work, which can be done by travelling around farms, is severely limited, and if you have any faith in the agricultural future of this colony (and I am not sure of this myself) you must insist that a fully staffed and well organised experimental farm is set up and allowed to flourish.²⁴

Subjects covered at these conferences included sub-division; the production of silage; direct seed drilling, improvement of wet land by drainage, tree planting, the grazing value of native grasses, types and methods of fencing, the effects of mowing White Grass and the use of Tussac for winter feed. Young reported on the trials of legume species. It is quite clear that there was great desire on the part of the farm managers to improve and innovate. These conferences produced no lack of ideas or willingness to consider and try them. What is not clear, however, is whether or not the men on the

²² *ibid.*; paragraph 63.

²³ Strange, I; (1972) *The Falkland Islands*; *op.cit.*; pp. 122-123.

²⁴ Young, C D; (1968); *op.cit.*; p20.

farms had the full support of either Government or the London-based farm owners, or that there was sufficient expertise available locally to support them in their efforts.