

7. The Davies Report – a Governor Thwarted

During the period directly after the Munro Report there was a brief renaissance in the economic and farming life of the Islands. Wool prices improved towards the end of the twenties, and considerable efforts were made by some farmers to improve their husbandry and farm management *e.g.* at Port Howard grassland burning was restricted to wet camp, gorse hedges for shelter were planted, and ploughing for reseeded took place. At Hill Cove the shelter belts of Southern Beech and Scots Pine trees, which had been planted at the beginning of the century by Robert Blake (Senior), were extended. Also at Hill Cove ploughing and seeding of oats, rye grass, meadow grass and turnips was done on an experimental basis. Despite these initiatives an indicator that the fundamental problems remained can be seen during the 1933 Centenary celebrations. During the festivities an agricultural show was held. A sheep judge had been brought over from the mainland of South America to judge the stock. Tom Norris, from Buenos Aires wrote a report at the end of his brief visit¹ within which he heavily criticised the resistance to change, which he detected in the Islands. The response of the farmers to Norris' remarks was dismissive. The Colonial Manager of the Falkland Islands Company (L W H Young) wrote:

Mr Norris has not realised the difficulties of sheep farming in a cold and erratic climate on very poor land and no comparison is possible with farming known by him in Australia, the Rio Negro and Southern Argentina.²

The economic effects of the Great Depression and the continuing decline of total sheep numbers and lambing averages on Falkland farms brought about another cycle - of concern, followed by research and finally report writing - in the period directly before the outbreak of World War II.

On the 7 May 1935 a Conference of farmers was held at Government House who resolved that the Government should secure the services of a stock advisor from New

¹ CSO/105/33; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Norris, T; (1933) *Some Falkland Islands problems, from notes made during a visit February 12th to March 3rd 1933*; Stanley: Falkland Islands Government.

² CSO/105/33; Falkland Islands Government Archives; Young, L W H; letter; 2 September 1933.

Zealand. Governor Henniker-Heaton wrote to the Secretary of State for the Colonies on 19 June 1935 some candid words:

The present position of the sheep-farming industry of the Falkland Islands, on the prosperity of which, as you are aware the Colony is almost entirely dependent is such as to cause serious concern. I would explain that the slow progress of the industry and the backward condition of many farms in this Colony, whose sole dependence is wool growing, is attributable largely to the failure of Government in the past to allocate funds except at brief and rare intervals for the assistance and instruction of farmers in modern methods and in research and development.³

On 22 April 1936 the Governor informed the farmers community that the New Zealand Government had agreed to the secondment of David Weir, from the New Zealand Department of Agriculture, for three years, to advise on matters concerning the sheep farming industry of the Islands. Weir had served 15 years as a Senior Inspector of Stock prior to coming to the Islands, and he was considered to be a highly capable officer, with a special interest in animal husbandry.⁴ Weir very soon came to the conclusion that the closure of the Experimental Farm had been a major blunder, and he was asked by the Colonial Secretary to state his opinions:

I am still of the opinion that the re-establishment of an experimental farm would be in the best interests of the Colony. Some assurance would however be necessary in the event of re-establishment that a fair trial would be given in order to prevent any future arrangements meeting the same fate as the Experimental Farm at Green Patch.⁵

The Governor agreed with Weir, but concluded that no further action was possible until the research work on grasslands improvement had been completed. While Weir was in the Islands the Governor took every opportunity to promote fresh thinking and innovation. He encouraged Weir to produce, in conjunction with Tom Beaty the Stock Inspector, a series of practical *Notes for Farmers* on a variety of topics. The intention

³ CS155/35 Falkland Islands Government Archive; Despatch No.84; 15 June 1935.

⁴ CS155/35; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Despatch No.223; 29 November 1935.

⁵ CS230/36; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1936; Minute by Weir, D; dated 12 April 1937.

was that these *Notes* should be published monthly. One topic discussed was the production of silage, with an outline of the main causes of previous failures in the Colony.⁶ The Governor convened a Farmers Conference in May 1937 at which he gave the keynote address and David Weir was the chairman.⁷ Many issues concerning animal husbandry and land improvement were discussed, and at the conclusion of the conference Norman Keith Cameron commented that ‘members were fortunate in having Mr Weir as head of the Agricultural Department.’⁸

On 20 November 1937 William Davies, the Senior Grassland Investigator of the Welsh Plant Breeding Station, arrived in the Falklands at the invitation of some of the farm managers and with the support of the Governor. The invitation came as a response to the worsening economic situation. Davies’ report was primarily concerned with the improvement of the grassland pasturage, and although it did not contain as much animal husbandry advice as in the Munro Report, Davies reiterates many of Munro’s conclusions and recommendations.

In the opening chapter of the Report Davies stated the problem succinctly; he begins at the same point as Munro - with the decline in the number of sheep carried.

The decline in wool production is no less serious, for while the reduction in the number of sheep from 1908 to 1938 represents a fall of 14.7%, the wool export is down by 15.6% over the same period ... These figures when considered as a whole clearly show that gross production of wool has declined in a more or less progressive manner, and this notwithstanding that during the 1908-1938 period considerable efforts have been made to improve the stock by importation of rams from overseas.⁹

There are two key elements in the Davies Report:

⁶ CS69/37; *Brief notes on economical flock improvement for circulation to farmers*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1937.

⁷ CS83/37; *Farmer’s Conferences*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1937.

⁸ CS83/37; *Farmer’s Conferences*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1937.

⁹ Davies, W; (1939); *The Grasslands of the Falkland Islands*; London: HMSO; p4.

- (i) The substitution of native grassland species with introduced plants which are more beneficial for livestock.

This conclusion of Davies has proved to be very influential in the subsequent history of agricultural research and development of the Falklands. Recent research carried out in the Falklands sought to find suitable legume plants for widespread introduction. Davies acknowledges the value of some native grassland species - especially Tussac, but he concluded that, on the whole, the low nutritive value of the native species indicates that they should be replaced by introduced species whenever possible.

- (ii) A significant increase in closer field sub-division.

The Davies Report challenges directly the basis on which the whole of the Islands farming industry had been based since its inception, *i.e.* open range, large scale ranching. For Davies all the potential for improvement would remain untapped until the existing paddocks are sub-divided. Unless this occurred the decline in sheep numbers would continue. Although Davies concedes that many owners and farmers took the opposite view to his own, he nevertheless contended that:

All the evidence suggests that pasture deterioration will take place progressively the more rapidly in proportion, as the stock carried becomes less. The hope of the industry lies in increased production and in carrying an ever-increasing head of stock.¹⁰

At first sight this opinion seems to directly contradict the advice given by Mowat and Munro. But, in fact, what Davies was not arguing for was overstocking; rather he wanted large flocks on smaller - sub-divided - camps, and where the sheep were more frequently moved to new camps. For Davies, as a grasslands specialist, the only way that the increased sheep population could be achieved is by creating much smaller fields and by the introduction of better grazing management. Simply running fewer sheep on the existing large camps would improve nothing - in fact they would continue to deteriorate.

¹⁰ *ibid.*; p57.

Davies shared Munro's concerns about the widespread practice of grassland burning, and although Davies acknowledges the damage done by burning in the past, his advice is framed within his general conclusion of the importance of introducing white clover. He also considered that other legumes might be successfully introduced into the Islands, e.g. Red Clover for hay production and Lotus Major (*Uliginosus*) for swampy areas. Davies observed that the problem of seed setting would have to be faced if white clover was to be spread as rapidly and as widely as possible. Because many perennial clovers are nearly all obligatory cross-fertile (annual clovers are mainly self-fertile), fertilisation is normally done by bees and other insects. Davies concluded that expert advice should be sought from someone qualified in apiculture. Bees are found in Southern Patagonia and Punta Arenas working white clover, and the seed sets and ripens freely.

These observations are recorded because it is often claimed in the Falklands that bees would not stand up to the wind and weather in general. The prevalence of pollinating bees in Southern Patagonia with its high persistent winds and more rigorous winter climate would seem to imply that bees could be established in the Falklands.¹¹

Davies stated that the problem of the introduction of the appropriate bee 'should be relatively simple.' Despite these reassuring comments it is questionable whether the Western Honey Bee (*Apis mellifera*) would ever prosper in the Islands. The comparison with Southern Patagonia is not a fair one. Patagonia has more shelter and nectar sources available than the Islands. There would probably be sufficient sources of pollen available in the Islands, but it is likely that there would be insufficient nectar sources available for Honey Bee colonies to thrive. In addition Honey Bees will not usually fly in wind speeds which exceed 27km per hour. The average daily wind speed in the Islands' summer regularly exceeds this speed. The various species of Bumble Bee e.g. Northern White-tailed Bumble Bee (*Bombus magnus*)¹² might well thrive - particularly with their ability to fly in higher wind speeds and colder temperatures than Honey Bees. As things presently stand, the comparative lack of

¹¹ *ibid.*; p45.

¹² See: Prŷs-Jones, O and Corbet, S; (1987) *Bumblebees*; Naturalists' Handbook 6; Cambridge University Press; 'Recently a British species, *Bombus ruderatus*, appears to have become established in South America, having been introduced from New Zealand.' p2.

insect species in the Islands indicates that the pollination and seed setting of plants that require insect pollination is problematic. The introduction of other bees such as the various species of Leafcutter Bee (*Megachile* spp.) from Patagonia might prove to be more successful.

Davies recognised that his work was only a reconnaissance survey, and that more detailed research needed to be done. He proposed that grassland research be carried out under the supervision of the Director of Agriculture. Davies did not underestimate the difficulties of implementing his proposals about the introduction of new grass species. Testimony to his caution came some years later, in 1956, when one observer noted:

One has to go down on hands and knees to trace any clover or English grasses remaining on the plots which were sown at the time of the visit of Dr William Davies to the Islands in 1938. But in the paddocks at the settlement some excellent herbage has been established at considerable cost and this is most useful for the small pure-bred flocks where rams are bred. It has been a problem to get clover established and one manager has been enterprising enough to have appropriate bacterial culture flown out from England to treat clover seed before sowing, and the results are promising.¹³

Davies' conclusions are stark:

The time has arrived when the Falklands must consider very seriously whether the present ranching policy is to continue, or whether a complete change of methods involving a policy of grassland improvement together with a more intensive system of pastoral agriculture is to be put into effect. Continuance of the existing ranching system cannot but lead to a still greater lowering of carrying capacity, and to the decreased wealth of the country as a whole. With a change over in methods and the gradual substitution of a more intensive type of grassland farming the decline in production would cease ... sub-division of paddocks, the better management of pastures, and the replacement of the

¹³ Sheep in the Falkland Islands; anon; *The Times Agriculture Review* - Spring 1956; p15.

present herbage by better plants are all essentials in the developmental scheme.¹⁴

Davies' 'root and branch' criticisms of Islands farming methodology initially received a very mixed response - some of it distinctly hostile. Nevertheless the history of the farming industry since the Shackleton Reports of 1976 & 1982 has seen some of the key ideas contained within the Davies Report implemented.

Governor Sir Herbert Henniker-Heaton, made little secret of his support for the work of William Davies.¹⁵ On 13 December 1938 a meeting took place in the Governor's Office between Henniker-Heaton and L W H Young (The Falkland Islands Company Colonial Manager) and Robert Blake (Manager Director of Hill Cove Farm and also a Director of The Falkland Islands Company). The Governor outlined his view that the position was grave, and that it was clear that serious measures would have to be taken to deal with it. Young and Blake expressed their willingness to cooperate with any measure 'for the advancement of the Colony' but that they had 'no faith whatever in any sub-division of the farms.'¹⁶

With the encouragement of the Governor, the Department of Agriculture attempted to implement some of Davies recommendation in a modest way in the vicinity of Stanley. The Department of Agriculture experimented with a 6000-acre area of poor peat land near Stanley Common. Tussac plantations were weeded 'to promote the growth of this valuable indigenous fodder plant.'¹⁷ Extensive draining of Stanley Common was attempted, and ditches and drains around Government House paddocks were repaired. Large areas of land were dug and sown with oats. All the paddocks were top-dressed with lime. Sod walls (topped with gorse hedges) were built and fences were renewed and extended. Tussac on the foreshore of Government House was cut as winter fodder, and the land around them was weeded and dressed with

¹⁴ Davies, W; (1939); op.cit.; p58.

¹⁵ CS252/38; *Report by Mr W Davies on the grasslands of the Falkland Islands*; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 1938.

¹⁶ CO78/212/2; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1939. See also: C/18/38; Falkland Islands Government Archive; 14 December 1938.

¹⁷ CO78/208/10; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1938. see also: Weir, D; (1938) [Agricultural Advisor, Falkland Islands Government]; *General Report*; Stanley: Falkland Islands Government; 23 September 1938.

guano. Consignments of grass seeds were sent to nearly all the farmers for experimental purposes. Fourteen acres of foreshore at Surf Bay were planted with Tussac roots. Three acres of sand grass were planted to stabilise the ridges of the peninsula.¹⁸ Given the straitened financial situation of the Islands directly before World War II this represents a considerable investment in agricultural improvements. Regrettably this scale of effort was restricted to the efforts of the Department of Agriculture, to an area near to Stanley, and to only a few progressive farms in Camp.

When the Davies Report finally reached the Islands in 1939 it was distributed to all sheep farmers and managers, but Governor Henniker-Heaton lamented the fact that 'it received no acknowledgement from any of the large [land] holders.'¹⁹

The Governor's enthusiasm for the Davies Report was defeated by a number of factors: the conservatism of some farm managers and owners, the lack of investment capital available at the end of the period of the Great Depression, and the onset of World War II.

Following the outbreak of World War II, sheep numbers rose again, the wool price gradually improved, and directly following the declaration of War wool prices rose to unprecedented heights. After World War II sheep numbers fell again, but wool prices continued to rise - partly as a result of the demands for wool products which resulted from the Korean War. It was not until the wool prices fell sharply in the late 1950s that the next crisis arose.

During the middle of the World War II another Governor, Sir Alan Cardinall, wrote a lengthy Despatch to the Colonial Office, in which he attempted to address the long-term problems of the Islands.

¹⁸ CO78/208/10; Colonial Office Records; Public Record Office; Kew; 1938.

¹⁹ Bernhardson, W; (1989); op.cit.; p527. see also: CS252/38; Falkland Islands Government Archive; Despatch No.52; 15 April 1940; op.cit.

