



CULTURE AND NATURE: THE EUROPEAN HERITAGE OF
SHEEP FARMING AND PASTORAL LIFE

**RESEARCH THEME: ORAL TRADITIONS AND PASTORAL
LIFE**

RESEARCH REPORT FOR THE UK

By Simon Bell

Estonian University of Life Sciences

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1. INTRODUCTION

Britain is a country rich in traditional stories and folk songs and the folk music tradition still lives on. In those parts of the country where sheep farming is practiced it is logical that songs are sung about sheep, sheep farming and shepherding. In Wales and the north west of Scotland where Welsh and Gaelic are spoken there is also a rich oral tradition in those languages, with songs and poetry being written by farmers and other country people on a regular basis. There is also some poetry and songs written in Scots – a version of English which developed north of the border, and in some regions of England there is some dialect poetry still written.

2. Scots songs and poetry

“Ca' the ewes tae the knowes” means “Call the ewes to the hills”

Ca' the ewes tae the knowes
Ca' them where the heather grows
Ca' them where the burnie rows
My bonnie dearie

Hark a mavis evening song
Soundin' Cluden's woods amang
Then a foldin' let us gang
My bonnie dearie

We'll gae doon by Cludenside
Through the hazels spreading wide
All the ways that sweetly glide
To the moon sae clearly

Doon the Cluden silent hours
All in moonshine midnight hours
All the dewy buddin' flowers
The fairies dance so cheery

Ghaist nor boggle shall thou fear
Thou art to love Heaven so dear
Naught of ill shall come you near

My bonnie dearie
Fair and lovely as thou art

Thou hast stolen my very heart
I can die but canna part
Wi' my bonnie dearie

The Shepherd Lad O' Rhynie

Oh come o come, my bonny love,
We'll baith jine haunds and mairry,
What o the world say that they will,
For we'll baith jine haunds and mairry, mairry,
For we'll baith jine haunds and mairry, mairry.

I'll gie tae ye my pipes and drones,
Tae play when ye are weary,
And a that I'll seek back fae ye,
Is a kiss fae thee my dearie, dearie,
Is a kiss fae thee my dearie, dearie.

I widnae hae yer pipes and drones,
Tae play when I am weary,
And a kiss fae me ye'll never get,
And aye ne'er shall ca ye dearie, dearie,
And aye ne'er shall ca ye dearie, dearie.

I'll gie tae ye my fleecy flock,
Though they were twice as many,
And a that I'll seek back frae thee,
Is we'll baith jine haunds and mairry, mairry,
Is we'll baith jine haunds and mairry, mairry.

But when her faither heard o this,
He widnae let her tak him,
And a that he could say tae her,
It's best that ye forsake him, sake him,
It's best that ye forsake him, sake him

And when she heard whit he had said,
He went tae a place near Rhynie,
And he threw himself oot ower a rock,
And wis nivver seen be ony, ony,
And wis nivver seen be ony, ony.

And when she heard whit he had daen,
The tears came doon lamenting,
And she's weepit lood, and she's weepit sair,
For her shepherd lad o Rhynie, Rhynie,
For her shepherd lad o Rhynie, Rhynie.

O faither, faither, mak ma bed,
And mak it lang and narrow,
For my love died for me today,
I shall die for him tomorrow, morrow,
I shall die for him tomorrow, morrow.

She put her airms roon her faither's neck,
And her hairt wis foo o sorrow,
And she pit her heid on her faither's chest,
And she ne'er did see the morrow, morrow,
And she ne'er did see the morrow, morrow.

The Shepherd's Wife

The Shepherd's wife cries o'er the knowe,
Will ye come hame, wi ye come hame;
The Shepherd's wife cries o'er the knowe,
Will ye come hame again een, jo?

What wi I get to my supper,
Gin I come hame, gin I come hame?
What wi I get to my supper,
Gin I come hame again een, jo?

Ye'se get a panfu o plumpin parridge,.
And butter in them, and butter in them
Ye'se get a panfu o plumpin parridge,
Gin ye'll come hame again een,jo.

Ha, ha how! that's naething that dow,
I winna come hame, I canna come hame;
Ha, ha how! that's naething that dow,
I winna come hame gin een, jo.
The Shepherd's wife &c.
What will I get &c.

A reekit fat hen, weel fryth'd i'the pan,
Gin ye'll come hame, gin ye'll come hame,
A reekin fat hen weel fryth'd i'the pan,
Gin ye'll come hame again een jo.

Ha, ha, how! &c.
The Shepherd's wife &c.
What wi I get &c.

A weel made bed and a pair o clean sheets,
Gin ye'll come hame, gin ye'll come hame,
A weel made bed and a pair o clean sheets,
Gin ye'll come hame again een jo.

Ha, ha, how! &c.
The Shepherd's wife &c.
What will I get &c.

A luving wife in lily-white linens,
Gin ye'll come hame, gin ye'll come hame,
A luving wife in lily-white linens,
Gin ye'll come hame again een, jo.

Ha, ha, how! that's something that dow,
I will come hame, I will come hame;
Ha, ha, how! that's something that dow,
I wi I come hame again een, jo

The Blind Shepherd

The land is white, an' far awa'
Abune ae bush an' tree
Nae fit is movin' i' the snaw
On the hills I canna see
For the sun may shine an' the darkness fa',
But aye it's nicht to me.

I hear the whaup on windy days
Cry up amang the peat
Whaur, on the road that speels the braes,
I've heard my ain sheep's feet,
An' the bonnie lambs wi' their canny ways
An' the silly yowes that bleat.

But noo wi' them I mauna' be,
An' by the fire I bide,
To sit and listen patiently
For a fit on the great hillside,
A fit that'll come to the door for me
Doon through the pasture wide,

Maybe I'll hear the baa'in' flocks
Ae nicht when time seems lang,
An' ken there's a step on the scattered rocks
The fleggit sheep amang,
An' a voice that cries an' a hand that knocks
To bid me rise an' gang.

Then to the hills I'll lift my een

Nae matter tho' they're blind,
For Ane will treid the stanes between
And I will walk behind,
Till up, far up i' the midnight keen
The licht o' Heaven I'll find.

An' maybe, when I'm up the hil
An' stand abune the steep,
I'll turn aince mair to look my fill
On my ain auld flock o' sheep,
An' I'll leave them lyin' sae white an' still
On the quiet braes asleep.

Songs of Angus and More Songs of Angus / Jacob, Violet, 1863-1946

3. English songs and poetry

Searching for lambs

As I went out one May morning,
One May morning betime,
I met a maid from home had strayed,
Just as the sun did shine

What makes you rise so soon, my dear,
Your journey to pursue?
Your pretty little feet they tread so sweet,
Strike off the morning dew.

I'm going to feed my Father's flock,
His young and tender lambs,
That over hills and over dales
Lie waiting for their dams.

O stay! O stay! you handsome maid,
And rest a moment here,
For there is none but you alone
That I do love so dear.

How gloriously the sun doth shine,
How pleasant is the air;
I'd rather rest on a true love's breast
Than any other where.

For I am thine and thou art mine;
No man shall uncomf'ort thee.
We'll join our hands in wedded bands
And a-married we will be.

Sheep shearing song

Now Winter is Past and the Summer is here
So it's down to the meadows the sheep for to shear
To wash the fine flock in the pools of the Thames
To clip them and tar them and wash them again
When the wickets are set in the bed of the stream
We drive in the sheep, their fleeces to clean
With clippers and tar then the shearers come round
To cut off the fleeces and seal up the wounds
When sheep shearing's done then it's homeward we'll come
The men go to Bampton to toast the black ram
And the wool's bound for Witney, fine blankets to make
So women, give thanks for you family's sake

The Lincolnshire Shepherd: this one uses the old Celtic-derived form of sheep counting used across northern England

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp.
Yon owd yowe's far-weltd, and this yowe's got a limp
Sethera, methera, hovera, and covera up to dik,
Aye, we can deal wi' 'em all, and wheer's me crook and stick?

I count 'em up to figgits, and figgits have a notch,
There's more to being a shepherd than being on watch;
There's swedes to chop and lambing time and snow upon the rick,
Sethera, methera, hovera, and covera up to dik.

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c..

From Caistor down to Spilsby from Sleaford up to Brigg,
There's Lincoln sheep all on the chalk, all hung wi' wool and big.
And I, here in Langton wi' this same old flock.,
Just as me grandad did afore they meddled with the clock.

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c..

We've bred our tups and gimmers for the wool and length and girth,
And sheep have lambed, have gone away all o'er all the earth.
They're bred in foreign flocks to give the wool its length and crimp,
Yan, tan, tethera, pethera, pimp.

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c..

They're like a lot of bairns, they are, like children of me own,
They fondle round about owd Shep afore they're strong and grown;
But they gets independent-like, before you know, they've gone,
But yet again, next lambing time we'll 'a' more to carry on.

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c..

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp,
Fifteen notches up to now and one yowe with a limp.
You reckons I should go away, you know I'll never go,
For lambing time's on top of us and it'll surely snow.

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c..

Well, one day I'll leave me yowes, I'll leave me yowes for good,
And then you'll know what breeding is in flocks and human blood;
For our Tom's come out o' t' army, his face as red as brick,
Sethera, methera, hovera, and covera up to dik.

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c..

Now lambing time come reg'lar-like, just as it's always been,
And shepherds have to winter 'em and tent 'em till they're weaned
My fambly had it 'fore I came, they'll have it when I sleep,
So we can count our lambing times as I am countin sheep

Yan, tan, tethera, tethera, pethera, pimp &c.

The Canny Shepherd Laddie o' the Hills

There's songs aboot oor soldiers and oor sailors by the score,
Of tinkers and of tailors and of others there's galore;
But I'll sing ye a song that you've never heard before,
It's the canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

Oh the shepherds o the Coquet, the Alwin and the Rede,
The Bowment and the Breamish, they're all the same breed,
Wi their collie dog beside them and a stick with horn heid
It's the canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

They climb oot ower the mountain ere it's turned the break o' day,
Through the bent and moss hags and round bogs they wend their way,
Quick tae see a mawkit yin or a sheep that's strayed away,
It's the canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

They send the collie around the sheep with a yell o "Gan oot wide"
Then whistle with the notes so shrill the dog drops in his stride
"Come by Moss! Doon a bit I'll tak my stick oot ower yer hide"
It's the canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

If the lambing time is stormy he will curse and he will swear
There's a yowe that's lost its lamb and I've skinned an auld yowe there,
Some o them have ta'en the sickness, nae mair trouble can I bear
It's the canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

In the back-end tae the marts he'll gang if the prices they are dear
To celebrate he'll treat his pals tae whisky and tae beer,
But if the prices they are bad, it taks a dram tae cheer
The canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

In the winter when its stormy and drifts are piling high
He'll never flinch tae tak the risk that in the snow he may die
His first care is his sheep are settled and sheltered safe may lie
The canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

At Alwinton they may turn oot tae see the Shepherds' Show
Then into Foreman's for a drink they with their cronies go,
They'll argue and they'll sing and shout, but fecht, well bless me no
The canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

Now if ye've gaun among them as A've done for forty years
Nae kinder hearted folk you'll meet if you look far or near
The kettl'e set a boiling and they cry "Sit you doon here"
The canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

Chorus

A've said nae words aboot their wives A'm shair there is no need
But in every house I've been tae yet they seem tae be the heid,
And I'm sure you'll all agree with me, it taks a hell of a good wife to breed
A canny shepherd laddie o' the hills.

From Herd Laddie o the Glen (1988)

Songs of a Border Shepherd

Willie Scott

Shepherd and Singer

Compiled by Alison McMorland

The Darby Ram

As I went in to Darby,
All on a Market Day,
I saw the largest ram, sir,
That was ever fed on hay.

CHORUS:

And he rambled, rambled all around
In and out of town did he ramble,
And he rambled til them butchers cut him down.

This ram had four feet, sir,
Four feet on which to stand,
And each one of his hooves sir,
covered an 40 acres of land.

CHORUS

The wool upon his back, sir,
It reached up to the sky;
The eagles made their nests there,
You could hear the young ones cry.

CHORUS

The horns upon his head, sir,
They Reached up to the moon;
A man climbed up in January,
And didn't come down 'til June.

CHORUS

The wool that grew upon his tail,
If you had sheared it off,
Would have made the finest tailors
A hundred yards of cloth.

CHORUS

The Butcher that cut him down sir,
He drowned in the blood.
And the little boy who held the bowl,
Was washed away in the flood.

CHORUS

In Derby there can be seen two statues of 'The Derby Ram' - A stone statue can be found at the junction of East Street, this was erected in 1995 and was the work of Michael Pegler and a bronze sculpture of a ram with a boy sitting astride was erected in 1963 in the Main Centre. The ballad of the Derby Ram is hundreds of years old and was extremely popular among the townspeople of Derby and there are various versions, some rather near the mark, which were passed down from generation to generation. The earliest known printed version is dated 1883. This has 15 verses and differs considerably from the version of equal length of 1867 by Llewellyn Jewitt in his book Ballads and Songs of Derbyshire.

4. Welsh folk songs

There are many folk songs in the Welsh language but not many feature sheep or shepherds but one is about goats: **Counting the Goats**

Cyfri'r Giefr

Oes gafr eto?
Oes heb ei godro?
Ar y creigiau geirwon mae'r hen afr yn crwydro

Cytgan:

Gafr wen, wen, wen le
finwen, finwen, finwen
foel gynffonwen, foel gynffonwen
Ystlys wen a chynffon
wen, wen wen.

Gafr ddu ...

Gafr goch ...

Gafr binc ...

Gafr las ...

In English translation:

Where is the goat? It's time for milking.
Off among the craggy rocks the old goat is wand'ring.

Chorus:

Goat white, white, white
With her lip white, lip white, lip white
With her tail white, with her tail white
With her tail and flank white,
White, white, white.

Goat black (etc)
Goat red (etc)
Goat pink (etc)
Goat blue (etc)

On repeat, increase speed of melody AND follow with all preceding colours

Welsh poetry also has a long tradition and this poem features a shepherdess as a :

The Banks of the Dee.

Anonymous

One morning in May, when soft breezes were blowing
O'er Dee's pleasant tide with a ripple and swell,
A shepherdess tended her flock that was feeding
Upon the green meadows that lay in the dell,
Her blue eye she raised, and she looked all around her,
As if she'd fain see some one far on the lea,
And spite of its brightness, I saw the salt tear
For one who was far from the banks of the Dee.

The maiden I thought was preparing to solace
Her stay with a song amid the fair scene,
Nor long was I left in suspense of her object,
Before she broke forth with a melody clean;
The tears she would wipe away with her napkin,
While often a sigh would escape from her breast,
And as she sent forth the notes of her mourning,
I could find that to love the lay was address'd:

"Four summers have pass'd since I lost my sweet William,
And from this fair valley he mournful did go;
Four autumns have shower'd their leaves on the meadows
Since he on these eyelids a smile did bestow;
Four winters have sped with their snowflakes and tempest
Since he by my side did sing a light glee;
But many more springs will be sown for the harvest
Ere William revisit the banks of the Dee."

This poem is all about a sheep: The Ewe

The Ewe.

By the Rev Daniel Evans BD

So artless art thou, gentle ewe!
Thy aspect kindles feeling;
And every bosom doth bedew,
Each true affection stealing.

Thou hast no weapon of aught kind
Against thy foes to combat;
No horn or hoof the dog to wound
That worries thee so steadfast.

No, nought hast thou but feeble flight,
Therein thy only refuge;
And every cur within thy sight
Is swifter since the deluge.

And when thy lambkin weak doth fail,
Tho' often called to follow,
Thy best protection to the frail
Wilt give through death or sorrow.

Against the ground her foot will beat,
Devoutly pure her purpose;
Full many a time the sight thus meet
Brought tears to me in billows.

But if wise nature did not give
To her sharp tooth or weapon,
She compensation doth receive
From human aid and reason.

She justly has from man support
'Gainst wounds and tribulation;
And has the means without distort
To yield him retribution.

Yea, of more value is her gift
Than priceless mines of silver
Or gold which from the depth they lift
Through India's distant border.

To man she gives protection strong
From winds and tempests howling,
From pelting rain, and snow-drifts long,
When storms above are beating.

The mantle warm o'er us the night
Throughout the dismal shadows;

What makes our hearts so free and light?
What but the sheep so precious!

Then let us not the Ewe forget
When winter bleak doth hover;
When rains descend—and we safe set—
Let us be grateful to her.

Her cloak to us is comfort great
When by the ditch she trembles;
Let us then give her the best beat
For her abode and rambles.

5. Nursery Rhymes

There are many nursery rhymes in Britain and one of these is very popular, called “Baa baa black sheep”, sung to a variant of the 1761 French melody *Ah! Vous dirai-je, Maman*. The original form of the tune is used for Twinkle Twinkle Little Star and the Alphabet song. The words have changed little in two and a half centuries. It has a Roud Folk Song Index number of 18267. More recent versions tend to take the following form:

Baa, baa, black sheep,
Have you any wool?
Yes sir, yes sir,
Three bags full.
One for the master,
One for the dame,
And one for the little boy
Who lives down the lane. (*or Who cries down the lane.*)

This nursery rhyme probably dates to the Middle Ages, when England was the major player in the international wool trade. A tax had been placed upon wool, with 1/3 going to the “master” (local lord), 1/3 to the “dame” (the church), and the rest to the “little boy” in the lane (local farmer). In recent years it has become a subject of controversy regarding political correctness, with early childhood teachers converting “black sheep” to “rainbow sheep” to avoid any hint of racism.

The colour of the sheep in the rhyme must also be of some significance. Black wool is difficult to dye and would therefore seem to have little use in making textiles. However many shepherds prized black fleece and kept one dark sheep in a flock of white ones. When the fibre was carded for spinning a little of the black was mixed in with the white to produce a light-grey wool. The cloth made from ‘grey’ wool was believed to be warmer and more weather proof than that made from only white fleece. Unlike the pure black wool it could be easily dyed.

On the other hand, a single black ram could contaminate the whiteness of a flock’s fleece. This is probably the source of the unflattering phrase, “black sheep of the

family." The first record in print is from Charles Macklin's *The man of the world, a comedy*, 1786:

"O, ye villain! you – you – you are a black sheep; and I'll mark you."

6. Folk Tales

There are also many folk tales and some of these involve sheep or shepherds. Here is one example:

The Clever Shepherd

Long ago England was divided into several different kingdoms. Canterbury was one of them, and the king there had an only daughter who was both wise and beautiful. When she was about twenty years old the king said to himself, "It is time to think of getting a husband for my daughter, but one would have to go far to find a princess so fair and clever as her, and I shall insist that she has a husband who properly values her."

So he devised a scheme which he thought would make sure that the man who won her was of the right sort. This scheme was to have each suitor sit up a whole night with her, and the first suitor who neither slept nor slumbered should have the princess the next day in marriage. But every aspirant who failed to keep awake should lose his head. This deal was now proclaimed, and many knights came and tried to win the fair lady. However, all of them lost their lives.

One day a young shepherd who grazed his flock near the highroad not far from the city of the king said to his master, "Sir, I see many gentlemen ride to the court at Canterbury, but I never see them return."

"Ah," said his master, "I don't know how you should, for they try to sit up with the king's daughter according to a decree the king has issued. Any man who can keep awake a whole night with her will become her husband. But if he fails he will lose his life. None has managed to stay awake so far."

"Would they let a shepherd marry the princess if he did not sleep?" asked the shepherd.

"Yes," his master answered. "It does not matter who the candidate is. Prince or beggar, it is all the same."

"Well then I'll try my fortune," said the lad, and off he trudged to the king's city.

On his way he had to cross a stream. A plank served for a bridge and he sat down midway on it and pulled off his shoes and stockings to wash his feet. While he had his feet in the water a fish bit his toes. He caught it and put it in his pocket. Afterward several other fish came nibbling at his toes, and he caught them too.

When he reached the palace he knocked loudly at the gate with his long shepherd's crook. Having told his business he was at once led to the king. "So you want to marry my daughter, do you?" said the king.

"Yes," answered the shepherd.

"Very well," said the king, "come along with me to the hall where you are to sit up with her. If you can keep awake this whole night long you shall marry her tomorrow."

"But if I can't?" said the shepherd.

"Then off goes your head," was the king's response. "But you do not have to try if you do not want to take that risk."

"Oh, yes!" answered the shepherd. "I am going to try, come what will."

The king led the way to a handsome hall where the princess sat waiting to see the new suitor. Everything was ready for him and he was given a luxurious chair. Then dishes of rich food and fruits and drinks of many kinds were placed before him.

The shepherd ate and drank plentifully. but found it make him sleepy. He did his best to fight off the drowsiness, but by midnight he was on the point of slumbering.

"Oh, shepherd!" cried the princess, "I have caught you napping."

He roused up at hearing her speak, and said "Hm, I guess I was busy fishing again."

"Fishing?" exclaimed the princess. "No, shepherd, how could you be fishing here in the hall?"

"I have been fishing, and have the fish in my pocket, he insisted."

"If so, let me see the fish!"

The shepherd drew a fish out of his pocket.

"That is a nice little fish," said she; "and in your pocket! Dear shepherd, do you think you could catch one more?"

"Maybe I can," he answered.

He sat quietly a while with his hand in his pocket. Then he suddenly drew out another fish.

"You can go to sleep now, if you wish, and I will excuse you to my father," she said, for she had taken a liking to him.

The shepherd slept till morning, and when the king came to the hall with his headsman as usual, the princess cried out, "Here is no work for you this time."

"How so?" asked the king. "Has the fellow neither slept nor slumbered?"

"I gave him permission to sleep after midnight," she replied. "Before that he sat here with me fishing in his pocket," and she showed her father the two fish he had given her.

The king exclaimed, "He must be a clever fellow. It looks as if we had at last found a man worthy of you. But, my friend," he said while turning to the shepherd, "I wonder if you could catch a fish in my pocket?"

"I will try," the lad answered. "But you have to lie down first."

The king lay down, and the shepherd began to fumble in one of the king's pocket. The king did not appreciate that very much and said,. "Fish no more," said he, "but take my daughter, just as I have decreed."

The wedding was celebrated with great triumph, and thus the wise shepherd became a prince.

[Retold from Johnson 1906:341-46]

CONCLUSIONS

British folklore is rich and its folk songs many, although the subjects are very wide ranging and sheep and shepherds are but two motifs or subects from many. The selection of sheep and shepherding folk songs presented here are a sample of a much larger canon. It is clear that this is a subject that continues to attract attention and it also shows that shepherding has a resonance in British society.