



HELP, THE GOAT MEN OF SOUTH ARMAGH HAVE EXPORTED EVERY OLD IRISH GOAT FROM IRELAND!

BEING A CONSIDERATION OF THE STATISTICAL IMPORTANCE OF IRISH TRAVELLING HERDS DURING THE VICTORIAN AND EDWARDIAN PERIODS

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OLD IRISH GOAT SOCIETY

It is recorded that in July, 1880, as many as 900 head of Old Irish goats were exported to Britain over a three-week period, and if we were to extrapolate this to reach a tentative conclusion for the whole month, then this could represent an export of around 1200 goats and possibly as many as 3,000 for the summer of that year. The total goat population of Ireland was 265, 789 animals for that same year, which might suggest that the goat men of South Armagh were responsible for taking around 1.1% of Ireland's goat stock- or 1 goat in a hundred- out of the Emerald Isle and across the Irish Sea to Great Britain on an annual basis.

Just how large these travelling herds were is anybody's guess, although we do have records of a travelling herd of 600 that weaved its way through the Hebridean islands to the Orkney Islands, and another of 300 that was driven through South Wales to Kent. This might suggest that the 900 that were exported in July, 1880, could have represented as few as 2 or 3 travelling herds, although it may have accounted for many more.

The reader may well have given thought to the number of goats that were to be found in Ireland in 1880, it being reasonable to think in terms of thousands, even hundreds, although the total is finite enough to come down to tens and units. This figure was derived from the statistics for the provinces, the sub-totals being as follows:

Leinster	67,493
Munster	88,182
Connaught	37,102
Ulster	73, 012

Ulster makes the point again, this having a total count that ended with a mere twelve goats to round off the figure.

The foregoing begs the question: how accurate can these figures be? With the goat exports of the goat men of South Armagh, their travelling herds were included in the import/export statistics collected and collated at ports; but just how were goats, along with other livestock, counted across the whole country?

Research to date has not come up with a useful answer, although the history of agricultural statistics in Great Britain may offer some clues.

In Great Britain, agricultural statistics were first made when Britain suffered a series of bad harvests during the 1790's, its purpose being to work out the ability of the country to be self-sufficient in food production. An early issue here was that those compiling the returns didn't necessarily submit compatible information.

Following this, crop production data was collected in 1800, this time using pre-printed questions to aid uniformity. Another crop census was undertaken in 1801, this taking place alongside the first census of the population.

The first proper agricultural statistical census in Great Britain was undertaken in 1865, this subsequently taking place every June. It concerned both crop distribution and livestock numbers.

From 1866, the Board of Trade collected and printed agricultural statistic on an annual basis, following which, and from 1899, the newly established Board of Agriculture received the returns for acreage and livestock numbers.

It is important to point out here that the returns were known as 'parish summaries', and that they were submitted on a voluntary basis until they were made compulsory as late as 1917. Thus, the earlier figures are not necessarily regarded as entirely accurate or definitive, it being thought that in the early days there was a fear amongst the populace that the results might be used to increase taxation.

What seems to be the case for Great Britain is that a census for livestock numbers was entirely voluntary during the whole of the Nineteenth Century; was organized by way of collecting data through parish records; and did not involve livestock until the last third of the century.

What, then, of the goat in this context? Strangely, and although poultry was included in the annual returns, the goat most certainly was not. In fact the Livestock Journal for 1881 gave the full statistics for goat keeping across Europe, it being noted that whereas 21 countries apparently knew their goat numbers down to a single animal, there were no statistics for either England or Denmark. Why, one may ask, did Prussia know that it had 1,477, 335 goats, and Romania know that it had 194,188 of the same, whereas England had not the faintest idea!

Even more strange from the point of view of Great Britain was the fact that Ireland was included in the above all-European statistics, the goat population then being 266, 553. Such was the absurdity that Ireland should know exactly how many goats it had, whereas Great Britain did not, led to the newly formed British Goat Society (1879) making representation on this matter to the Board of Trade, but to no effect.

One interesting aspect of these statistics from an Irish point of view was that total goat numbers in each country were published alongside the number per cent. of the population, this being a guide to the importance of this particular animal in each country. In Ireland, this was 5.0 percent, or one goat for every 20 people overall.

To take the anomalies further, whereas the first proper agricultural statistical census took place in Great Britain in 1865, the present writer has found livestock census numbers for Ireland as far back as 1847, these including those for goats as well as for cattle, sheep, horses and donkeys.

What, then- and in the absence of any firm clues as to how goat numbers were arrived at so finitely in Ireland from the Victorian period onwards- can the British experience tell us about how annual goats census's were likely to have been organized in Ireland?

Firstly, and until we can prove otherwise, individual townships may well have been responsible for the returns in much the same way as parishes were in England, and this may have been largely voluntary, at least initially.

The information still had to be collected and collated, although just which body was responsible for this remains to be ascertained.

Given this, just how accurate these annual returns were becomes a matter for speculation.

Firstly, there is the matter of best intentions being thwarted by circumstance. It may sound trite, but Pat. Murphy's little Coleen may have dropped down dead within hours of her lively presence in the township being recorded. Thus, Connaught may have actually had 37,102 goats at the beginning of census day in 1880, but only 37,101 by the time that the sun went down on Coleen's inert form!

Also, and as recorded by Michael J. Murphy for Dromintee, kids that were not rounded up from the common pasturage went feral, and would a township have an accurate idea of just how many goats there were living free-range on the mountain at any one time? We know that some feral herds at least were well-established in the Eighteenth Century, and one wonders the extent to which these were ever counted and acknowledged in a census.

There would also have been a variety of factors that could have resulted in goats not being counted: the difficulties involved in getting to isolated places, people being absent at the time, and so on. In this context, and given the difficulties experienced by the Old

Irish Goat Society in counting the goats on the Islands of Lough Ree, we have to question whether the goats of the Black Isles were a regular feature of the annual census.

Aside of circumstance, there was also human nature to contend with. Laziness, indifference and a perverse dislike of 'authority' may have played its part; along with the ingenuity involved in 'putting one over' with regard to the authorities.

One is reminded here of the way in which the hill farmers of Snowdonia, in Wales, played the system with regard to the subsidies to be had per sheep. When the man from the 'ministry' came along to make an annual head count prior to paying out, human nature dictated that he wasn't going to enjoy clambering over the mountainside to make an individual count. Equally, human nature took advantage of this, resulting in the hill farmers painting appropriately sized rocks white, that then blended in with the grazing sheep. Thus it was that flock size was inflated, and the pay-out increased. Another 'wangle' in this context involved a consortium of farmers and a single lorry. Given the route to be taken by the man from the ministry, a flock of sheep would be nicely placed at farm A for his inspection. Then, and as he moved on to farm B, these sheep were loaded on to a lorry, and were then nicely placed to be counted there. This one flock would then spend the day being counted over and over again, from farm to farm.

One wonders here, whether the lively mind of the Brythonic Celt was any more ingenious than that of their Goidelic Celtic cousins across the Irish Sea.

Overall, then, It is difficult to imagine that an annual head count of Old Irish goats could have been as accurate as coming down from the thousands to the units. There must have always been a margin of error, whether unwitting or intentioned. What we have, even so, is a reasonable statistical account that can be used comparatively to show trends, and then look for historical reasons as to why.

At this point, the patient reader may well be wondering just how it came to be that the goat men of South Armagh managed to export every Old Irish goat from its homeland. Obviously, something is amiss here, as do we not still have Ireland's landrace breed in situ?

The problem here, is that there are numerous accounts in the literature, repeated over and over again, that relates to what must have been the goat men of South Armagh being responsible for the exporting of 241,427 goats to England in 1926. Obviously, the whole idea is ludicrous, this figure relating to the total number of goats in Ireland at that time! Had this statement been true, there would not have been a single goat left in Ireland, but little thought seems to have been given to this.

From where did this idea come? It seemingly originated with G. Kenneth Whitehead, and appeared in his book entitled 'The Wild Goats of Great Britain and Ireland', published in 1972 as:

The importation of goats from Ireland still continued after World War I, and as late as 1926 the total of goats exported from Leinster, Munster, Connaught and Ulster to England was 241,427, a decrease of less than 10 per cent on the figures for 1881.

Here we see that Whitehead is suggesting that an equally huge number of goats were exported to England in 1881, the difference being less than a 10% decrease in 1926 as opposed to 1881.

Whitehead would have got the 1881 figure from Holmes Pegler, who writing in his 1886 edition of 'The Book of the Goat', stated that the goat population of Leinster, Munster, Connaught and Ulster in 1881 was 266, 553, *not* that this number of goats were exported during that year.

The misunderstanding therefore hinges on a confusion between total goat numbers in Ireland in 1881 and 1926, and the actual number of goats exported, which has yet to be researched.

So, the goat men of South Armagh are exonerated, and by no means responsible for denuding Ireland of its most cherished goat breed, either in 1881 or 1926.

Oft times, the queries and questions relating to a particular piece of history outweigh the answers available, this being no less true of some aspects of the continuing research into the origin and history of the Old Irish goat in general, and issues around total goat numbers over time in particular. This notwithstanding, in presenting what is known in relation to the latter, and additionally what can be assumed or speculated, we here aim to open up fields of thought that may lead on to discovering the history behind the annual goat census in Ireland, along with the nuts and bolts of how it was carried-out.