

The case of John Dyer's fat-tailed sheep and their tail-trolleys: 'a thing to some scarce credible'*

by John Goodridge

Abstract

The eighteenth-century English georgic poem was a compendious form and incorporated a wealth of information on many subjects, including agriculture. This essay considers an example taken from one of these poems: a description of the fat-tailed 'Carmenian' sheep from John Dyer's *The Fleece* (1757). Comparing this with portrayals of this type of sheep in other texts, the essay focuses on a curious detail described by Dyer and others, that of how wheeled carts were constructed to protect the long tails of these sheep from harm. This has often been regarded as a traveller's tale, but the essay argues that it is indeed true, and that the story's dubious reputation probably springs from the fact that writers from Rabelais to Goldsmith have used it satirically.

In Book II of his ambitious georgic poem on shepherding and the wool trade, *The Fleece* (1757), John Dyer re-tells a story, originating in Herodotus, of a breed of sheep whose tails were so big and heavy that their shepherds had to build little wheeled carts to put underneath them, to prevent them from dragging along the ground and becoming damaged. Dyer calls the breed 'Carmenian' sheep:

WILD rove the flocks, no burdening fleece they bear,
In fervid climes: nature gives nought in vain.
Carmenian wool on the broad tail alone
Resplendent swells, enormous in its growth:
As the sleek ram from green to green removes,
On aiding wheels his heavy pride he draws,
And glad resigns it for the hatter's use.¹

In a short article on the subject, published in 1980, David Larson traces this 'hoary tale', as he calls it, through eighteenth-century English literature. Having cited some of the many sources

* An early version of this essay appeared in *ad familiares*, 13 (1997), pp.3-4 as 'Was Herodotus off his trolley?' I am grateful to Dr Peter V. Jones for permission to re-use this material. It is based on research begun during my tenure as Lord Adams Research Fellow at the University of Newcastle upon Tyne, and I am grateful to Claire Lamont, Terry R. Wright, and the University's Fellowships and Studentships Committee for their support. Thanks for help and advice are also due to Parvin Fatemi, Tim Fulford, Bob Heyes, John Lucas, Leonora Natrass and Alison Ramsden.

¹ John Dyer, *The Fleece: a poem, in four books* (1757), Book II, lines 414-20. A full text of the poem is available online at: <<http://www.hn.psu.edu/Faculty/KKemmerer/poets/dyer/fleece1.htm>>, visited 30 January 2006.

for the story, he characterises it as ‘one of those false versions of natural history which are repeated as fact simply because no one bothers to challenge them’. He further comments on Dyer’s use of the story:

In Dyer’s account the sheep’s tail becomes an example of the efficient providence of nature. It would be wasteful of nature to cover the sheep with wool in hot climates, so it is bare, but since the inhabitants need some wool – for hats apparently – nature, giving ‘nought in vain,’ bestows it only on the tail which consequently needs wheels to bear its weight. [...] No example, for Dyer, is too insignificant to reveal the mercantile efficiency of God’s natural order. Gifted with a truly sterling lack of humor, Dyer apparently finds nothing amusing in the picture of a naked sheep trailing an enormous tail on wheels through pastorally smooth fields, and gladly giving it up to the (presumably) grateful hatter.²

We are asked to laugh at everything here, from the ‘lack of humor’ to the utilitarian mercantile ideology, with its supposed lack of aesthetic judgement. Larson finds Dyer ridiculous, and so assumes that the story is ridiculous too: but he is mistaken. The fat-tailed sheep undoubtedly exists, and so, I believe, do the trolleys. This essay considers some of the evidence for their existence, and attempts a fuller and perhaps fairer survey of the ways in which the story was used by Dyer and other eighteenth-century and earlier writers.

The fat-tailed sheep of the Middle East, *Ovis aries dolichura* and related types,³ represents one of the oldest and most important of all domestic sheep groups,⁴ and is recorded from the earliest periods throughout the Middle East and the eastern half of Africa, as far east as India, and as far north as Southern Russia.⁵ The size of its tail varies greatly in the accounts on record.

² David M. Larson, ‘Eighteenth century tales of sheep’s tails and one of Benjamin Franklin’s “American Jokes”’, *Philological Quarterly*, 59 (1980), 242–47. See also Charles Child Walcutt, ‘Franklin and Goldsmith on sheep’s tails’, *Notes and Queries* 177 (1939), 438–39.

³ Latin specific names within the species *Ovis aries*, the domestic sheep, are no longer scientifically recognised as representing true sub-species (see M. L. Ryder, ‘Sheep’, in Ian L. Mason (ed.), *The evolution of domestic animals* (1984), pp. 63 and 65), but they remain useful in the present context. Frederick E. Zeuner in *A History of Domesticated Animals* (1963), pp. 163–64, distinguished between the long fat-tailed sheep (*O. a. dolichura*), the broad fat-tailed sheep (*O. a. platura*) and the fat-rumped sheep (*O. a. steatopyga*). The sheep we are seeking has to be a long fat-tailed rather than a fat-tailed one, though Sir Percy Sykes, *A History of Persia* (third edn, two vols, 1930), I, p. 32, writes that ‘The fat-tailed sheep, *Ovis aries steatopyga*, is the sheep of Persia’.

⁴ The ‘Western Asia’ region (including the Arabian Peninsula and the Near and Middle East where fat-tailed and fat-rumped sheep predominate) accounts for 70% of the sheep produced in Asia, according to C. Devendra and G. B. McLelior, *Goat and sheep production in the*

Tropics (1982), pp. 144–45. They add that ‘Historically this area can be considered the cradle of sheep domestication’.

⁵ For prehistoric sources on fat-tailed sheep see M. L. Ryder, *Sheep and Man* (1983), pp. 786, 130. Classical sources include Herodotus, *Histories*, Book III, para. 113; Aristotle, *History of Animals*, ref. 606a13; Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, Book VIII, para. 198; Aelian, *On the Characteristics of Animals*, Book III, para. 3, and Book IV, para. 32. Later sources include Marco Polo, *Description of the World* (wr. c.1298); Jean Thénard, *Le Voyage et itinéraire d’outre mer* (Paris, c.1530); Joannes Leo (commonly ‘Leo Africanus’), *Description of Africa*, (first pub. Venice, 1550), trans. into English by J. Pory as *Geographical History of Africa* (1600); Fynes Moryson, *An Itinerary* (1617); Ludolf the Elder, *New History of Ethiopia* (1682); and Sir John Chardin, *Account of His Voyages* (1686). Among more recent sources, Russell (1756), Goldsmith (1774), Youatt (1837), How and Wells (1912), Zeuner (1963), and Ryder (1983), are all discussed and cited elsewhere in this essay. Also of interest is Sir Charles Fellows’s short description in *A journal written during an excursion in Asia Minor, 1838* (1839), p. 10, and Sykes, *History of Persia*, p. 32.

It is usually described in terms of weight, and the figures range from eight to eighty pounds.⁶ The weight of the wool on the tail would be negligible, and has little to do with the need for trolleys. Larson's scatter-gun criticism of Dyer would have been more effectively focused on this aspect of the story, which the poet may have misunderstood. Modern reference sources on tropical sheep explain why these sheep have such enormous tails. They have evolved in order to serve as a storage area for fat, which can be drawn on in arid or desert conditions, rather like a camel's hump; and they have been further enlarged by selective breeding for the quality of fat they produce, which is used in some areas of the Middle East as a butter or ghee, and is known in Iran (the location of Dyer's sheep) as 'Donbeh'.⁷

The question of the trolleys at first sight also seems straightforward. Ancient and modern sources regularly mention trolleys as well as sledges, splints, belts, nets and other devices for supporting an oversized tail. They are described, for example, in M. L. Ryder's magisterial *Sheep and Man* (1983). Ryder considers that Herodotus may have 'exaggerated somewhat', but nevertheless 'the carts were real enough, since such two-wheeled carts, harnessed to the animal, have been used for fat-tailed sheep all over the Middle East in recent times' (p. 120). There are even seventeenth-century and later illustrations of them, which Ryder reproduces (pp. 229–30). However, in *captioning* these illustrations, Ryder appears to change his mind about the carts, and writes:

[...] there appears to be no conclusive evidence that they ever existed, and Dr Helen Newton Turner considers that the lack of photographic evidence or a first-hand account suggests that the story is a complete fabrication. During the 1950s a cart was on loan to the Wool Industries Research Association, Leeds, from the Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, but there is no conclusive evidence that this was not a model made for a nineteenth-century exhibition.⁸

One's first response to this apparent recantation is surprise, since history seems to be filled with 'first-hand' accounts of sheep's-tail trolleys. The earliest reference to tail support mechanisms

⁶ Sources vary in reliability and geographical location; the following is a selection of fat-tail dimensions: 'three cubits in length' (Herodotus); 'a cubit in breadth' (Aristotle, Aelian); '18 inches long' (Pliny); 'thirty pounds and upwards' (Marco Polo); 'eighty pounds' (Leo Africanus); 'twenty to thirty pounds' (Goldsmith); 'fifty pounds' (Russell); 'six or eight pounds' (Fellows); 'over 70 lb' (How and Wells); 'up to 19 pounds' (Sykes).

Many if not most of these figures are credible. In *Akenfield: Portrait of an English Village* (1969), p. 309, Ronald Blythe quotes the vet 'Tim Swift' making the interesting point that 'you dock lambs' tails because if you don't all the fat runs into the tail'. H. Epstein, 'The fat-tailed sheep of Arabia', *Zeitschrift fuer Tierzuechtung und Zuechtungs Biologie*, 63 (1954), pp. 393–94, shows that the propensity for sheep to accumulate localised fat deposits varies enormously under different conditions, and may mutate swiftly.

⁷ For the development and function of fat tails see

Epstein, 'Fat-tailed sheep', pp. 393–94; Devendra and McLelior, *Goat and sheep production*, p. 119; A. R. Carles, *Sheep production in the Tropics* (1983), p. 25. The sheep's tail in early middle-eastern civilisations was variously used to provide fat for burnt offerings and for tallow, and was in some cultures regarded as a delicacy: see Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, pp. 120, 716. For 'Donbeh' and its nutritional significance see V. Parvaneh, 'The physical and chemical characteristics of sheep tail fat (Donbeh)', *Tropical Science*, 14 (1972), 169–71; Arto der Haroutunian, *Middle Eastern Cookery* (1984), p. 31. See also C. C. Young, 'Concerning the fat-tail and the broad-tail sheep', *American Breeders Mag.* 3 (1912), 181–200.

⁸ Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, p. 229. The Royal Scottish Museum, Edinburgh, was unable to find a record of any such trolley in response to my enquiries. I am indebted to James L. Wood, Curator of Engineering and Industry, for his help.

known is from a neo-Babylonian tablet from the sixth century BCE, referring to 'sheep with a belt', which Ryder interpreted as a tail support mechanism.⁹ Herodotus (III, 113) is the key classical source on trolleys, which he notes at the end of his description of 'Arabia':

One other thing is remarkable enough to deserve a mention – the sheep. There are two kinds, such as are found nowhere else: one kind has such long tails – not less than 4½ feet – that if they were allowed to trail on the ground, they would develop sores from the constant friction; so to obviate this, the shepherds have devised the art of making little carts of wood, and fix one of them under the tail of each sheep. The other kind have flat tails, eighteenth inches broad.¹⁰

The story of the trolleys was taken up in the Renaissance period by Jean Thénault (c.1530), who calls them 'petites charrettes', and Leo Africanus (1550), who describes them as 'exiguus vehiculis' (small carriages). In 1682 Job Ludolphus (usually known as Ludolf or Rudolf the Elder), included in his *New History of Ethiopia* an illustration of a two-wheeled trolley (Figure 1, taken from the 1684 edition).¹¹ Alexander Russell (1756) and Oliver Goldsmith (1774), whose accounts are quoted and discussed below, both describe boards which may be wheeled. William Youatt (1837) also mentions them, citing Herodotus, Ludolf and Russell.¹² Marco Polo's Victorian editor Sir Henry Yule (1871) quotes the testimony of an Afghan sheepmaster, who 'testified that trucks to bear sheep-tails were sometimes used among the Taimúnis (north of Herat)', i.e. in north-west Afghanistan, fairly near the current borders with Iran and Turkey.¹³ The classicists How and Wells in their *Commentary on Herodotus* (1912) record that sheep tails are 'still at times protected by wheeled boards'.¹⁴ The agricultural historian Frederick E. Zeuner (1963) reproduces the illustration from Ludolf (Figure 1), and notes that the trolley is 'still used today in some parts of India and Asia Minor'.¹⁵ Apart from M. L. Ryder's qualified report, the most recent mention of the trolleys by a western writer that I have found occurs in Bruce Chatwin's 1980 essay, 'A Lament for Afghanistan', in which he describes some of his most cherished memories of the country before the Russian invasion: they include 'the fat-tailed sheep brindling the hills above Chakcharan, and the ram with a tail so big they had to strap it to a cart'. Chatwin's 'Chakcharan', sometimes spelled 'Chaghcharan', is about 150 miles to the east of Henry Yule's Herat, in western Afghanistan.¹⁶

⁹ Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, p. 130.

¹⁰ Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by Aubrey de Sélin-court, rev. by A. R. Burn (Penguin edn, 1972), pp. 249–50.

¹¹ Thénault is quoted in Rabelais, *Gargantua*, ed. Ruth Calder (1970), p. 104n. Leo Africanus is quoted in Herodotus, *Histories*, trans. by George Rawlinson (1875), p. 502n. Ludolf's illustration is reproduced by Zeuner, *History*, p. 164. See also n. 5.

¹² William Youatt, *Sheep: Their breeds, management and diseases* (1837), pp. 113–14. The anonymous author of *The natural history of Quadrupeds, and cetaceous animals: from the works of the best authors, antient and modern* (2 vols, 1811) also mentions the 'small wheeled machines' used to support tails in '[t]hose countries of

Asia which abound most in sheep' (II, p. 285).

¹³ *The book of Ser Marco Polo, the Venetian, concerning the kingdoms and marvels of the East*, trans. and ed. by Sir Henry Yule (third edition ed. by Henri Cordier, 1903), p. 100n.

¹⁴ W. W. How and J. Wells, *A commentary on Herodotus* (1912), p. 292.

¹⁵ Zeuner, *History of domesticated animals*, p. 164.

¹⁶ Bruce Chatwin, *What am I doing here* (1989), p. 293. Cornelia Starks has kindly drawn my attention to a slightly more recently-written literary source, Lee Langley's novel *Changes of Address* (1987), set in 1940s India, where the narrator mentions the 'Dumba fat-tailed sheep I had seen in the hills, each with a little cart attached to carry its enormous, and later succulent tail'. ('Dumba'

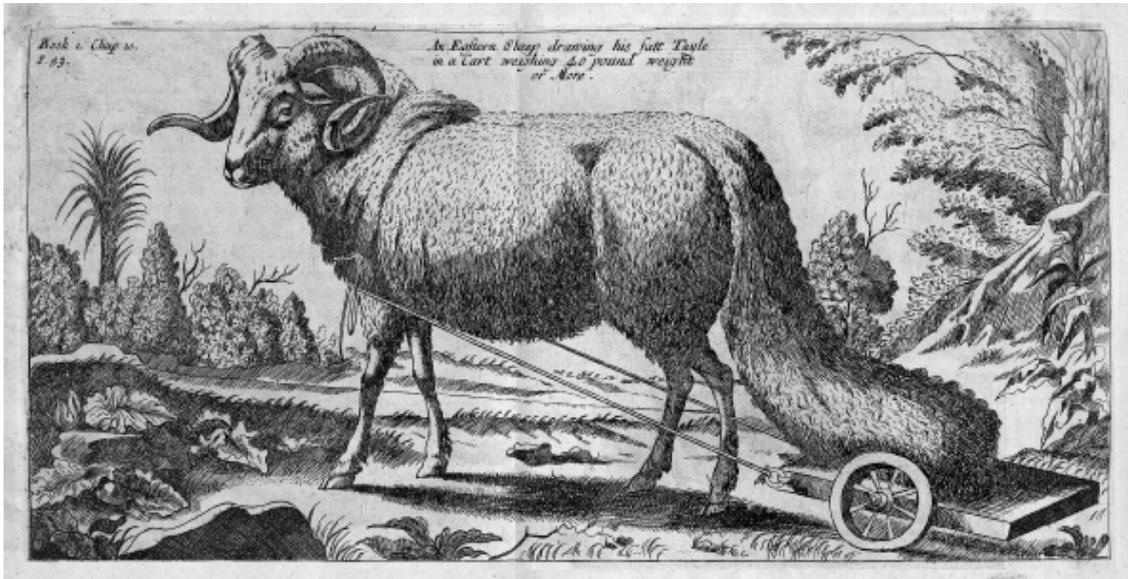


FIGURE 1. Fat-tailed sheep with tail-trolley, from Job Ludolphus (Ludolf the Elder), *A New History of Ethiopia* (1684, Wing L3469), from the plate between pp. 52 and 53. From a copy in Cambridge University Library, by permission of the Syndics of Cambridge University Library.

John Dyer took notes on other subjects from the first English translation of Leo Africanus (1600), which suggests that this may be his source for the story of the trolleys.¹⁷ We can generally trace a number of the accounts cited, ultimately, to Herodotus. This in itself may rouse suspicion, since the subject of whether Herodotus was the ‘father of history’ or the ‘father of lies’ (or both) remains an issue for lively debate among classicists.¹⁸ But could so many other writers have succumbed to a false story? (Perhaps as a result of the well-known effects of certain middle-eastern smoking materials?) From Russell (1756) to Chatwin (1980) there are a number of clear, credible, first-hand accounts by writers who have no obvious wish to deceive, who do not seem gullible, and the transmission of whose texts is straightforward. But in any case, who would want to fake up seventeenth-century illustrations, or nineteenth-century models of the trolleys – and for what purpose?

Dr Newton Turner’s suspicions may perhaps be informed by unease at later sources; for it is certainly clear that at some point in the history of the story of the tail-trolleys, sceptical and

Note 16 continued

is a Persian word for tail.) I exclude from this brief survey any accounts which seem equivocal, facetious, or otherwise suspect. The range of further reference to topographical and travel books made in some of the sources, especially Youatt, suggests there may be further references to the story to be found.

¹⁷ Edward A. Parker, ‘A study of John Dyer in the light of new manuscript materials’ (unpublished B. Litt. thesis, University of Oxford, 1938), p. 146.

¹⁸ On the historicity of Herodotus see John Hart,

Herodotus and Greek History (1982); K. H. Waters, *Herodotus the Historian: His problems, methods and originality* (1985); Detlev Fehling, *Herodotus and his ‘sources’: Citation, invention and narrative art*, trans. by J. G. Howie (1989); John Gould, *Herodotus* (1989). For specific commentary on the passage on tail trolleys see Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. by George Rawlinson (1875), p. 502, n. 3; How and Wells, *Commentary*, p. 292. See also Peter V. Jones, ‘Scepticism, rationality and an infinite curiosity helped make Herodotus western history’s key figure’, *The Guardian*, 20 Mar. 1997, p. 6.

comic counter-narratives emerge. This may be seen as early as 1534, when Rabelais used the story in a context which suggests comic exaggeration:

If this description astounds you, you will be even more astounded by what I tell you about the tail of the Scythian ram, which weighed more than thirty pounds, or about that of the Syrian sheep, to whose rump (if Thenaud speaks true) they have to fix a little cart to carry it, it is so long and heavy. You clods from the flat lands possess nothing to compare with that.¹⁹

With its measured reference to Thenaud and invitation to the reader to be astonished, this version toys expertly with the hopes and fears about veracity raised by the sort of ‘traveler’s tale’ it was by now no doubt becoming. Its shift towards mythic status is most clearly signalled, however, by its appearance in the shifting, double-mirroring world of eighteenth-century satire. In this guise it was cleverly used by both Oliver Goldsmith (1759) and Benjamin Franklin (1765). Franklin was parodying false English notions about the wealth of the American colonists:

The very Tails of our American Sheep are so laden with Wool, that each has a Car or Waggon on four little Wheels to support and keep it from trailing on the Ground. Would they [the colonists] caulk their Ships? would they fill their Beds? would they even litter their Horses with Wool, if it was not both plenty and cheap?²⁰

This is the familiar Swiftian tactic of ironic, grotesque distortion, using the story as a ‘tall tale’ in order to pursue a strategy of *reductio ad absurdum*. All earlier accounts are of two-wheeled carts, so Franklin has *four* wheels; wool is of course used for bedding, so Franklin suggests the idea of it being used for *horse* bedding and caulking ships; and so on.

Goldsmith would tell the story ‘straight’ and *in propria persona* in 1774 (quoted below), thus playing the subject both ways in the ironic manner pioneered by the Scriblerian satirists earlier in the century. His 1759 version, though, is satirical, and told by a ‘character’, supposedly the writer’s cousin, presented as a malicious gossip, who says:

There goes Mrs. Roundabout, I mean the fat lady in the lute-string trollopee. Between you and I, she is but a cutler’s wife. See how she’s dressed as fine as hands and pins can make her, while her two marriageable daughters, like bunters, in stuff gowns, are now taking six-pennyworth of tea at the White-conduit-house. Odious puss, how she waddles along, with her train two yards behind her! She puts me in mind of my lord Bantam’s Indian sheep, which are obliged to have their monstrous tails trundled along in a go-cart. For all her airs, it goes to her husband’s heart to see four yards of good lutestring wearing against the ground, like one of his knives on a grindstone.²¹

This is sharp satirical work of a type very familiar in the period (a ‘trollopee’ is a loose dress, with obvious connotations). Goldsmith’s modern editors have been unable to cast light on the

¹⁹ François Rabelais, *The histories of Gargantua and Pantagruel*, trans. J.M. Cohen (Penguin edn, 1955), Book I, ch.16, p.73.

²⁰ Benjamin Franklin, “A Traveller”: News-Writers’ Nonsense, *The Public Advertiser*, 22 May 1765, in Leonard

W.Labaree (ed.) *The Papers of Benjamin Franklin*, XII, *January 1 through December 31, 1765* (1968), p.132.

²¹ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Bee*, 13 Oct 1759, in Arthur Friedman (ed.), *The collected works of Oliver Goldsmith* (5 vols, 1966), I, 378 and note.

source for 'my lord Bantam's Indian sheep'.²² However, in 1749 William Ellis said he had 'heard of a gentleman that lives within twenty miles of London, who keeps about thirty Turkish ewes and a Turkish ram', and 'all of them have broad tails', and that 'Another gentleman in Hertfordshire kept three or four of these Turkey-sheep; one of their tails weighed 8 lbs'.²³ Keeping sheep had evidently been a fashionable pastoral game among the moneyed classes since the mid-eighteenth century. In Sheridan's *School for Scandal* (1777), a fine piece of 'scandal' is woven around the fact that 'breeding' is an accepted topic in social conversation:

MRS. CANDOUR You known, Sir Benjamin, very trifling circumstances often give rise to the most injurious tales.

CRABTREE That they do, I'll be sworn, ma'am. – Did you ever hear how Miss Piper came to lose her lover and her character last summer at Tunbridge? – Sir Benjamin, you remember it?

SIR BENJAMIN Oh, to be sure! – the most whimsical circumstance.

LADY SNEERWELL How was it, pray?

CRABTREE Why, one evening, at Mrs. Ponto's assembly, the conversation happened to turn on the difficulty of breeding Nova Scotia sheep in this country. Says a young lady in company, I have known instances of it; for Miss Letitia Piper, a first cousin of mine, had a Nova Scotia sheep that produced her twins. What! cries the Lady Dowager Dundizzy (who you know is as deaf as a post), has Miss Piper had twins? – This mistake, as you may imagine, threw the whole company into a fit of laughter. However, 'twas the next day everywhere reported, and in a few days believed by the whole town, that Miss Letitia Piper had actually been brought to bed of a fine boy and girl.²⁴

The fashion began at the top, King George III ('Farmer George') being the most eminent fashionable sheep-keeper. In 1789 he took receipt of several Spanish Merinos, and he wrote articles on sheep matters for Arthur Young's *Annals of Agriculture*, under the shepherd's pseudonym of 'Ralph Robinson'.²⁵ Merinos were circulated among a wide circle of landed gentlemen, and this helped to establish a fashion for exotic domestic breeds which were often of little relevance to local agrarian conditions.

Given this contemporary fashionable interest in sheep-breeding, I would venture that Goldsmith's 'lord Bantam' is a pseudonym for a real lord who had perhaps travelled in the East, was keeping a 'fat-tailed sheep', and either had an original tail-trolley or devised an imitation; or else is a composite 'type' representing faddish aristocratic sheep-keeping. Whatever the correct interpretation, Goldsmith clearly is not concerned with discrediting the story of the

²² *Lord Bantam* is the title of a much later text, a satirical novel of 1871 by John Edward Jenkins about 'a young aristocrat in democratic politics' (*Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, online edition, visited 30 Jan 2006). One suspects the phrase was once a familiar generic nickname, perhaps implying aristocratic 'cockiness'.

²³ William Ellis, *A compleat system of experienced improvements, made on sheep, grass-lambs, and house-lambs; or, the country gentleman's, the grazier's, the sheep-dealer's, and the shepherd's sure guide* (1749), quoted by

Youatt, *Sheep*, p. 125.

²⁴ D. W. Lindsay (ed.), *The Beggar's Opera and other eighteenth-century plays* (1993), p. 413.

²⁵ William Marshall, *The review and abstract of the County Reports to the Board of Agriculture* (five volumes, 1818, repr. 1968), V, pp. 45–46; Robert Trow-Smith, *A History of British Livestock Husbandry, 1700–1900* (1959), pp. 132–33, 151–52; Lord Ernle [R. E. Prothero], *English Farming, Past and Present* (6th edn, 1961), p. 196.

trolleys (which would only serve to invalidate his simile), but with drawing on it as a 'real' and 'known' fact in order to give his satire a 'real' and 'known' context, a characteristic procedure in eighteenth-century satire.

Goldsmith's *non-satirical* view of the trolleys is clear and fairly simple:

The second variety to be found in this animal, is that of the broad tail'd sheep, so common in Tartary, Arabia, Persia, Barbary, Syria, and Egypt. This sheep is only remarkable for its large and heavy tail, which is often found to weigh from twenty to thirty pounds. It sometimes grows a foot broad, and is obliged to be supported by a small kind of board, that goes upon wheels.²⁶

But the best and fullest account of the phenomenon I have found was published slightly earlier, in fact shortly before *The Fleece* went to press. It reveals both the contemporary view of the matter, and the sense of unease which comic usage seems by now to have injected into its discussion. Alexander Russell, Physician to St. Thomas's Hospital, wrote as follows in 1756:

They have two sorts of sheep in the neighbourhood of Aleppo: the one called Beduin sheep, which differ in no respect from the larger kinds of sheep in Britain, except that their tails are somewhat longer and thicker: the others are those often mentioned by travellers on account of their extraordinary tails; and this species is by much the most numerous. This tail is very broad and large, terminating in a small appendage that turns back upon it. It is of a substance between fat and marrow, and is not eaten separately, but mixed with the lean meat in many of their dishes, and also often used instead of butter. A common sheep of this sort, without the head, feet, skin and entrails, weighs about twelve or fourteen Aleppo rotoloes (of five pounds), of which the tail is usually three rotoloes or upwards; but such as are of the largest breed and have been fattened, will sometimes weigh above thirty rotoloes, and the tails of these, ten (or fifty pounds); a thing to some scarce credible. These very large sheep being, about Aleppo, kept up in yards, are in no danger of injuring their tails; but in some other places, where they feed in the fields, the shepherds are obliged to fix a piece of thin board to the under part of the tail, to prevent its being torn by bushes, thistles, etc.; and some have small wheels, to facilitate the dragging of this board after them; whence, with a little exaggeration, the story of having carts to carry their tails.²⁷

Russell has the caution of a man who fears he may not be believed. A 'thin' board with 'small' wheels is a cart as clearly as Goldsmith's 'small kind of board, that goes upon wheels', but Russell still has to pretend that there has been 'a little exaggeration' by those who have said so. This note of caution rings true, and if we bear in mind Russell's status as a rational, observant physician, and consider the significant number of credible later first-hand accounts, I think it reasonable to conclude that what Sir Henry Yule called an 'ancient and slippery story' is basically sound.²⁸

Dyer's tail-trollied sheep allows the poet to observe and moralise a fairly well-known

²⁶ Goldsmith, *An history of the earth and animated nature* (1774), III, p. 47, quoted in Friedman (ed.), *Collected works*, I, 378 and note.

²⁷ Alexander Russell, *The natural history of Aleppo and*

parts adjacent (1756), p. 51, reprinted in John Masefield (ed.), *The travels of Marco Polo* (1908), p. 59n.

²⁸ *Book of Ser Marco Polo*, p. 100n.



FIGURE 2. Fat-tailed sheep, taken from William Youatt, *Sheep: Their breeds, management and diseases* (1837), p. 114. Youatt describes it as 'a rather unusual variety of the fat-tailed sheep that formed part of the collection in the Jardin des Plantes in Paris.'

phenomenon, about which he need not necessarily be humorous: the ram resigning his tail to the hatter is, as even the editors of *The Stuffed Owl* conceded, 'poetic enough' as it stands.²⁹ It remains for us to identify Dyer's 'Carmenian' sheep. Larson says that 'Dyer writes about an actual breed of wool-less sheep, but in his version the sheep's tails do bear wool'. This is misleading. Because of the enormous changes which have taken place in virtually all breeds, the subject of 'pre-improvement' sheep is a vexed one, and agricultural historians normally distinguish 'types' rather than 'actual breeds' of sheep in the early modern period.³⁰ Nor does Dyer write of a wool-less, or 'naked' sheep as such. The poet is making the general point that in 'fervid climes' (i.e. the tropics) the sheep bear 'no burdening fleece', which is perfectly true, a majority of tropical varieties being 'hairy' rather than 'woolly' or 'fleecy'.³¹ Of the Carmenian sheep Dyer writes:

Carmenian wool on the broad tail alone
Resplendent swells, enormous in its growth.³²

This again does not say that the sheep is 'naked' or 'woolless', but that the wool grows extensively on the tail alone. I am not able to supply visual evidence which precisely matches this, but Figure 2 shows a fat-tailed sheep with an even covering of short hair over most of its body,

²⁹ 'Vergil wrote poetically of sheep-scab and manure; and Dyer's image of the ram gladly resigning his fleecy tail to Lincoln and Bennett is poetic enough,' *The Stuffed Owl: an anthology of bad verse*, ed. by D.B. Wyndham Lewis and Charles Lee (1930), p.76.

³⁰ Robert Trow-Smith, *A history of British livestock husbandry to 1700* (1957), and *A history of British livestock husbandry, 1700-1900* (1959); N.C. Russell, 'Animal

Breeding in England, c.1500-1770' (unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Imperial College of Science and Technology, University of London, 1981).

³¹ Devendra and McLelior, *Goat and sheep production*, p.123; Carles, *Sheep production*, pp.24-5; Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, p.47.

³² Dyer, *The Fleece*, Book II, 416-17.

and a 'resplendent' and 'enormous' growth of wool on its (long and fat) tail and its chest. Wool, like fat deposits, may vary considerably in location and extent, and it is probable that Dyer is thinking of a type which closely resembles this one, but lacks chest wool. The absence of early scientific documentation, and the breed alterations I have mentioned, make it difficult to locate Dyer's 'actual breed' more closely, though I shall attempt to do so. None of Dyer's editors has glossed 'Carmania', which is not in the *OED* or the modern atlases.³³ Dyer, however, latinizes place names throughout the poem, and I am confident that he is doing so here, drawing on the Latin word 'Carmani', defined as 'a people of the Persian Gulf', the equivalent modern name being Kerman or Kirman.³⁴

There are references to Kermani wool in the eighteenth century, though no specific description of a Kermani sheep. John Smith (1747) quotes from 'The Atlas General' on 'Kerman or Karman, 330 Miles from South to North, 180 East to West', noting that 'their Sheep bear the finest Wool in Persia'; and from the *Dictionnaire Universel du Commerce*: 'The Wools of Kirman are the finest in the World'. Youatt (1837) confirms that 'the best' Persian wool was grown in the province of Kerman, and finds that *numuds*, or fine felt carpets are manufactured there.³⁵ This may shed light on Dyer's 'hatter', because felt was the major material for eighteenth-century hatmaking, and an important product of Persia. In Britain Nuneaton (a town very much within Dyer's Midland territory) was a major felt-making centre, and the poet can be expected to have known something about the industry.³⁶ There is in fact a modern Kermani sheep (also identified with the 'Baluchi' and 'Karakui' types), whose wool is described as 'the finest from native breeds in this zone'. However its tail, though fat, is bi-lobed and 'carried high', suggesting a 'fat-rumped' rather than a 'fat-tailed' type.³⁷ The breed may of course have changed its tail characteristics in 250 years.

Dyer's description, then, shows some awareness of the distinctive characteristics of eighteenth-century middle-eastern sheep husbandry. Whether his account remains humourless (or

³³ This and other latinizations in *The Fleece* are glossed in my forthcoming edition of the poem, co-edited with Dr J. C. Pellicer.

³⁴ The present city of Kirman was only so named in medieval times, though Karmania was in Alexander the Great's time a separate satrapy: see Ilya Gershevitch (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, II, *The Median and Achaemenian Periods* (1985), pp. 248, 239. Leon E. Seltzer (ed.), *Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer of the World* (1952), p. 932, includes both a city and a province of 'Kerman or Kirman', defining the province as the same as the ancient 'Carmania'. A possible but much less likely reading of 'Carmanian' is the 'Karaman' breed, from Turkey. Like 80% of Turkey's sheep, this is fat-tailed, and Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, pp. 222–23, mentions the tail-trolley story in relation to Turkish sheep generally. On the other hand the Karaman produces only coarse wool. According to Ryder its tail may weigh up to 6 kilos (as much as 18%

of body weight). Its habitat is the vast Anatolian plain of central Turkey and it has the same kind of hardness as the Kermani sheep.

³⁵ John Smith, *Chronicum rusticum-commerciale or, memoirs of wool* (2 vols, 1747, repr. 1969), II, pp. 215, 462; Youatt, *Sheep*, pp. 126–27. The *Columbia Lippincott Gazetteer*, p. 932, lists among the industries and products of the modern province of Kerman, 'Sheep and camel raising', and adds: 'Fine wool, which is the main export, also is the basis of the Kerman rug and shawl industry'. Similarly the city of Kerman, a 'major road and trading centre', has 'rug weaving (Kirman rugs); m[anu]f[acturin]g of shawls'.

³⁶ For felt and hat manufacture see Ryder, *Sheep and man*, p. 738; Eric Kerridge, *Textile manufactures in early modern England* (1985), pp. 137–8.

³⁷ Devendra and McLelior, *Goat and sheep production*, p. 146; Ryder, *Sheep and Man*, p. 237.

unconsciously humorous) the reader may decide.³⁸ It certainly reveals an imaginative and practical engagement with most aspects of the subject of 'The Fleece', scientific as well as cultural. In an age of highly specialised and compartmentalised intellectual life, we need to consider more than just the aesthetics of the poem if we are to appreciate this adequately. The cultural history of this story also shows how aspects of agrarian history may be refracted through very different texts with differing aims and effects, and how carefully one needs to sift them to establish the value of the evidence they provide.

³⁸ John Chalker, *The English Georgic: A study in the development of a form* (1969), pp. 54–55, notes elements of burlesque in the poem; and Dyer is notably alert to the possibilities of punning and word-play: see John Goodridge, *Rural Life in Eighteenth-Century English Poetry* (1995, 2006), pp. 110, 161.