

## Abi Cotler O’Roarty “Herding Towards Enlightenment”

*A little pure wildness is the one great present want, both of men and sheep.*

–John Muir, “Wild Wool”

The fate of human beings has been tied to that of sheep for centuries. Many things have changed since the first wild sheep were brought into the fold of commerce and industry. But one thing has stayed much the same, the best way to get a flock of sheep from one pasture to another, is to herd them yourself, over land, at whatever pace the sheep agree to travel. Therefore, it’s no surprise that in nature writing, sheep have been the context for many a naturalist’s foray into the wild. The careful covering of terrain, the need to tune into weather and land patterns, the sheer length of time it takes to walk with the animals, lends itself to the observations and analysis which can become the stuff of great environmental literature.

For three such authors and their works, John Muir’s “My First Summer in the Sierra,” Gretel Ehrlich’s “The Solace of Open Spaces” and Peter Matthiessen’s “The Snow Leopard,” following a flock, or flocks, of sheep into nature has played a role well beyond that of the obvious work which it requires. Indeed, for each book, sheep function to reveal a personal enlightenment for the author, symbolizing basic explorative themes of the book itself. In essence, sheep are a mirror for each text and can be used as a tool for understanding some bedrock assumptions and transformations occurring within them.

In 1869, John Muir, seeking to explore the raw majesty of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, managed to get himself hired to guide a flock of sheep to summer pasture near Yosemite, California. Almost forty years later, he assembled his notes from that breathtaking experience into the book titled “My First Summer in the Sierra.” Here, one can see Muir’s sublime enchantment with much of what he encountered in those mountains: from spiritually transcendent peaks, to dancing grasshoppers, from thundering waterfalls to blazing sunrises. But one thing that Muir does not delight in, is the constant presence of the sheep to which he and his cohorts are assigned, finding them slow, dimwitted, dirty and to be pitied or despised all other ways. Yet, although he portrays these animals as merely a nagging means to an end, it is through a look at his beliefs about them that some basic tenets of his writing can be understood.

Early on in the text, Muir makes it clear that he thinks of sheepherding, in general, as a distasteful activity, saying that the shepherd is “likely to be degraded by the life he leads” (23). Muir attributes this degradation to the lack of balance in the sheepherders life, focusing as he does on solitary, physical work in which, even if he hears the blessings of other animals, it is “only through a blur of mutton and wool, and they do him no good” (24).

Muir doesn’t hold back on his thoughts on the sheep themselves, either. He does show pity for the creatures and their fear of freedom, which he associates with some people he knows. But his favorite descriptor for the flock is “silly.” At one point, he writes in detail about trying to get the them to cross a stream of which they are afraid, saying “the silly creatures would suffer any sort of death rather than cross that stream” (113). The men spend much of a day shouting, cajoling and trying to outmaneuver the stubborn sheep to the far bank of the river and Muir’s frustration is evident. Eventually, he concludes that, “Sheep brain must surely be poor stuff.”

The river crossing provides the reader with several reasons for Muir’s dislike of the sheep, the obvious one being what he sees as their stupid, flock mentality. It is a sentiment that is

echoed time and again in this section (and others) with comments like, “A sheep can hardly be considered an animal; an entire flock is required to make one foolish decision” (114). When he laments that nearly a whole day is lost to this crossing, it is clear that another reason for his dislike of the sheep is the time they take up, keeping him away from his note-taking, exploration and general exaltation of his surroundings. This is clear throughout the book, when he remarks on his need to get into the field as soon as possible, once he’s done the minimal work required of him by his sympathetic employer, saying, “these small duties done I am beyond the flock free to rove and revel in the wilderness...” (130).

Still another explanation as to Muir’s distaste comes from John Knott’s book, “Imagining Wild America,” where Knott says that, “The animals Muir gave the greatest attention were those that displayed the most energy” (100). Indeed, the slow grazing, heat phobic sheep are a clear foil to the kinetic grasshopper, ouzel and Douglas squirrel, which Knott notes as some of Muir’s favorites. So this might indeed be a reasonable assumption.

But in looking at Muir’s comments on nature throughout the book, one gets the idea that there is more going on in his comparisons of the sheep to other animals than a mere wish to convey lack of intelligence or energy. When he says, “man alone, and the animals he tames, destroy these gardens,” he seems to hint at the larger problem he has, that they are too close to the civilization of man and therefore not “wild” enough to be celebrated as a true part of nature (95).

Muir’s ideas about the supremacy of wildness are much in line with his predecessor, Henry David Thoreau. Like Muir, Thoreau made much of nature as being separate and, in most ways, preferable to the culture of human beings, proclaiming, “Give me a wildness whose glance no civilization can endure...” (644). Muir agrees with Thoreau on this and many other tenets in “My First Summer...” seeing domestic sheep as intrinsically less than those in the wild. Thus, in his effort to immerse himself in the wild and escape culture as much as possible, he must find their presence both annoying and repugnant. For example, he says, “Wonderful the beauty, strength, and graceful movements of animals in the wilderness, cared for by Nature only, when our experience with domestic animals would lead us to fear that all the so-called neglected wild beasts would degenerate...all wild animals are as clean as plants” (142).

To Muir, all that is wrong with the sheep, their dirtiness, stupidity, slowness and demands on his time could be seen as a function of their tainted association with man. This idea is reinforced in his later text, “Steep Trails,” chapter one of which is an essay entitled, “Wild Wool.” Here, Muir declares, “Well done for wildness! Wild wool is finer than tame!” and makes a case for the superiority in every way of wild wool over domestic (3). “‘Here,’ said I, ‘is an argument for fine wildness that needs no explanation. Not that such arguments are by any means rare, for all wildness is finer than tameness, but because fine wool is appreciable by everybody alike’” (3).

While “Steep Trails” contains more direct proclamation of Muir’s call for wildness in sheep, as demonstrated, there is plenty in “My First Summer...” to point to this preference as well. Thus, even though Muir sees the sheep only as a way of getting out into nature to sing out its wild glories, they end up serving as a perfect foil to this need, illustrating the very glorification upon which much of his recollection is based.

Interestingly enough, it is Gretel Ehrlich who actually wrote the introduction to the most recent edition of “My First Summer in the Sierra,” making only the following mention of the central livestock, “Muir hated the sheep” (ix). The restraint that Ehrlich shows here in honoring

Muir's perspective is notable, given that she relates very different feelings about shepherding in her book, "The Solace of Open Spaces." There, she solidly advocates the intrinsic value of the flocks themselves, as well as the role that they, and the work they require, play in her overall transformation which she catalogs.

If Muir despises his sheep because they aren't wild enough, a case could be made that Ehrlich celebrates them for just that very reason. In her chapter entitled, "Friends, Foes, and Working Animals," she praises the same flock mentality that so vexes Muir, evoking Konrad Lorenz' conceptualization of an anonymous flock as the first society, praising, "Herds are democratic, nonhierarchical" (67). In this chapter, she also writes about the values of working animals, saying, "What's stubborn, secretive, dumb and keen in us bumps up against the same qualities in them." She notes that because ranchers are charged with the care of these animals in order to produce food, they develop an odd partnership made of "frankness and respect that rigorously excludes sentimentality" (63). Later, she concludes that, "Animals hold us to what is present: to who we are at the time, not who we've been or how our bank accounts describe us" (63-64). Thus, she weaves a case that working animals, by our very influence on them, become reflections of our own natures and can be useful towards the end of self-realization.

But to serve our psychological needs is not the only reason Ehrlich finds her charges praiseworthy. Throughout the book, there are many other examples where she crafts favorable descriptions of the sheep and of working with them based on their intrinsic nature, regardless of their service to us. Early on, in the chapter called, "From a Sheepherder's Notebook," she writes of the sheep's movements calling them "whimsical" and "contagiously enthusiastic" (58). She also speaks, with a note of awe, of the massive operation undergone during lambing season, likening it to a "maternity ward experiencing an epidemic," and of the feminine side of a male rancher who gruffly admires a newborn lambs' cuteness (19). All of this is portrayed in a positive light and even when a fellow rancher has to kill a lamb to eat it (which some shepherds won't even do), Ehrlich refers to his deftness and reverence with respect, comparing him to an expert conductor and using words "disrobed" and "dismantled." Her deference is reinforced when she writes, "A breeze fanned the acrid smell into our clothes as if to remind us what we'd done" (26).

It seems though, that Ehrlich's most impassioned connection with the sheep has to do with her own personal struggle to rearrange her life after the death of her lover in New York, a major evolution over the course of the book. These soul-searching moments show up early on in her discussion of shepherding when she notes the patience involved in a job that may draw in outsiders and loners, but ultimately can teach "what makes the natural world tick and how to stay sane" (21). These lessons build as an early sense of numbness and pain begins to erode with the progression of her work. For example, in "From a Sheepherder's Notebook," she describes the numbness as a "wrist twisting inside my throat," but remembers, while watching what she thinks is her dog killing a sheep, that "In nature there are neither rewards nor punishments; there are only consequences," and seems to find comfort in this (57). Later she notes that "to herd sheep is to discover a new human gear somewhere between second and reverse—a slow steady trot of keenness with no speed" (59). It is the opposite of her former life in New York and in this constant, steady moving, she notices a sense of longing and asks herself what it is for. Here, it's as if the reader can actually see her figuring things out, realizing and exploring the questions of her struggle with her own grief.

This working out of grief and wresting out a new life for herself is never more clearly symbolized than when Ehrlich writes about her relationship with John, the man who first hires

her to tend sheep. One can almost hear the double meaning involved when she asks John, "Where are my boundaries?" and he replies that really, there are none, "it's all the outfit's land" (55). In essence, she is being told, *you are one of us now-- you're becoming part of something new*. John also lets her know that she is just going to have to figure things out on her own and when she asks about a road he says, "You can see to hell and back up there, Gretel" (60), letting her know that she already has all the answers she needs to undertake her journey (both that of shepherding the flocks as well as inner explorations).

These conversations, along with the other soul searching revelations that Ehrlich makes while driving the herds, clearly illustrate that although she finds intrinsic value in the sheep for their own sake, working with them is also a metaphor for the entire transformation which she is undergoing throughout the length of the book. This idea is reinforced by Ehrlich herself when, in a 1994 interview she says, "Solace is a book about surviving a loss; it's a book written in the throes of grief, so what I was reaching for were the things that were saving my life" (Morris 83).

The sheep in Peter Matthiessen's, "The Snow Leopard" differ from Ehrlich's and Muir's in one crucial way, those that he is following through the mountains of Tibet are wild bharal, not domesticated sheep being kept by human beings for the purpose food and wool. However, John Muir might be startled to find that Matthiessen observes his bharal acting with much more of a single minded, flock mentality than one might have guessed. This behavior is hinted out throughout the book, as in one of the first interactions Matthiessen, and his partner George Schaller, has with them. Here the bharal are approached from above and, caught dozing (expecting trouble only from below), they "jump up as one animal," evoking both Muir's and Ehrlich's observations on herd behavior (99). But the best example of the similarities between the bharal and domestic herds comes later in the book when Matthiessen observes a group to which he has gotten close. Originally, he revels in "this wonderful immersion in pure sheepness." Then we seem him essentially herding the flock this way and that, according to his needs, in much the same manner of shooing as ordinary shepherds have employed forever. Ultimately, he resorts to referring to the sheep as "contrary beasts," who, "having fled so often for no reason, confound me once again. With a man popping up almost on top of them, they now relax a little, and begin to feed." He summarizes his reaction to the situation as "fed up," and ends up sounding quite a bit like John Muir, if only momentarily (241).

But even more than a study of nature and wildness, "The Snow Leopard" is a book about Matthiessen's personal explorations of his Zen Buddhist beliefs, arising from the death of his wife. Once again, we see, that the sheep in the story echo and represent many of the questions with which the author grapples throughout and in Matthiessen's case, the comparison between the animals and his own soul-searching is made outright by the author himself. In fact, there are several places in which he refers to the sheep being like him, including in an early section on the trail where he says, "And soon we drift apart like grazing animals in silence" (102). Later on, he talks about his conflicted feelings about fear and death, saying, "at other moments I feel free as the bharal on those heights, ready for wolf and snow leopard alike" (147). He also associates the bharal with his own issues of self-awareness when he tries to approach them from upwind so they won't smell him coming, giving himself a chortle of self-satisfaction at outwitting them. But when the sheep do, somehow, sense his presence, he is dumbfounded, surmising that "Perhaps I underestimate my smell." It's as if he's admitting a certain lack of awareness of self or of his self's essence.

There are other examples too, of the ‘Zen of sheep,’ as presented by Matthiessen. For example, after spending some time at the Crystal Monastery, he admonishes his distracted sheep gazing, saying, “When I watch blue sheep, I must watch blue sheep, not be thinking about sex, danger, or the present—even while I think of it—is gone” (249). Similarly, he asks himself “Why nature should devote so many centuries...to the natural selection of these characters that favor head-on collisions over brains...speaking for myself in these searching days, less brains and a good head-on collision might be just the answer.” This connection between the sheep and a Zen principle, like that of mindfulness, is also alluded to by a critique in the “Dictionary of Literary Biography,” where John L. Cobbs writes that, “‘The Snow Leopard’ demonstrates how the natural world bears on the spiritual by analyzing how objects in nature are unobfuscated signs of ‘being’” (204). This idea is best illustrated in relation to the bharal when, after they confound Matthiessen’s best effort to get a good look at them, one comes down to his level, calmly awaits him and seems to ask, “Have you seen us now? Have you perceived us?” (241). It is the addition of the second question which really drives home the idea of human perception versus animal *being*—another basic tenet of Buddhism.

The bharal also reflects the idea of ambiguity, which arises repeatedly in the book. In fact, the entire mission for Schaller is to determine whether the bharal is in fact a sheep, as was previously thought, or a member of the goat family instead. This uncertainty is echoed throughout the text and can be seen just in the observation of the bharal, which should be the role of Schaller the scientist, but is often performed by Matthiessen as well. Conversely, Schaller delves into the “Tibetan Book of The Dead” at the urging of Matthiessen and even writes some very writerly haiku. Ambiguity is also reflected in the mistakes the men make as to who the real llama of the monastery is, in their questioning of the true nature of the porter Tukten and in the very tribal origins of the people whom they encounter. As it turns out, Schaller decides that the bharal are closer to the original species from which both sheep and goat descended, rather than being classified as one or the other. Once again, a Buddhist belief emerges, that of oneness. So here, we see Matthiessen setting out to deal with some basic questions in relation to his spirituality, such as those that deal with awareness of the self; remaining present and outside of fear; and ambiguity and oneness. In each of these cases, his pursuit and observation of the bharal not only echoes this search—they inform it as well.

Nature writing can be seen, perhaps too simplistically, as an exploration of the relationship of human beings to nature. And indeed, the three books seen here do reflect that dichotomy. There is Muir and his need to get away from anything tainted by civilization in order to arrive at the true religiosity of nature “untouched;” for Ehrlich, there's the healing power of nature's open spaces and the work that can be done there; and for Matthiessen, there are answers to grief induced spiritual searching beyond every peak and in each being with which he has contact.

It is true that there is much more going on in these works besides the way in which nature relates to the author’s own enlightenment. But this transformation is often, as it is here, a key component in tying naturalist observation to personal narrative. Thus, the way in which these beliefs are achieved is an important way of understanding the narrative as a whole. With these three texts, one can achieve an understanding of the transcendence contained within, by examining a key character featured by all, that of sheep. From Muir, one need only examine his opinions about the flock of sheep with which he is charged, to understand his attraction to the energetic wildness of nature and distaste for the stain of man that is so central to his writing.

With Ehrlich, the entire idea of transforming and rearranging her life among the new, open spaces is gleaned by paying attention to the role which her sheep and shepherding play in her rebirth. Finally, in Matthiessen's text, a multitude of spiritual questioning is mirrored in the author's experiences with the wild bharal of the Himalayas, including issues of oneness and ambiguity; the difference between perception and being; and the search for the self and self-awareness. In each case, the sheep may seem, merely a means to an end. However, even if the author herself would agree with this assessment, careful inspection shows that they are much more closely linked to the actual, transformative, end itself.

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