

border sheepscapes: learnt through sheep-walks

envionmental artwork by Kate Foster
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Having been enlisted to make land productive, sheep 'scape' their lot as they can - developing walks, favouring pastures, and finding shelter. In turn, people have adapted land for sheep, and we have absorbed the result into ideas of what the countryside should look like.



sheep-walks as lines of enquiry - encompassing the activity of sheep making walkways - other creatures following these steps - gathering and departure - compression of earth - congregation - lines of exit and transformation - incompletd patterns

Moving to hill farming country made me pay attention to the daily and seasonal movements of sheep. It all seemed familiar, but what did I know about sheep? Precious little - rehearsed ideas based on received information, complicated by a carnival of sheep-images: pastoral and romantic painting, religious references, postcards, calendars, toys, animation, clichés, jokes. Rarely eating meat, I had paid little attention to the butcher's trade. Wanting to learn, I went drawing in the field and met knowledgeable people whose livelihood depends on sheep. This highlighted the resources of knowledge, skill and design which underlie workaday 'pastoral' scenery.

Sheepwalks - hill country shaped by human and animal appetite over the centuries, where livestock, people, plants and wildlife co-exist in all weathers, through life and death. These are spaces with massed volume and contrast that yield views of where we humans place ourselves, within shifting tones of darkness and light. Uplands have been wrought by rivers, balladeers, shepherds, and are newly cast as sites of 'biodiversity' and 'carbon sequestration'. Hefted ewes tread their own paths, but in due course are gathered and shed from their lambs. No longer walking to southern markets, the lambs are now driven, standing in reconstituted flocks of twenty.



Our use of the word suggests one 'sheep' is just like another, singular or plural. It takes an experienced eye to see how they differ. Each domesticated breed has its specific standard, and individuals can be judged on how well they conform. All sheep in the European Union have unique identifiers - electronic tags - to make them traceable. But sheep also supply their selves to the situations they find themselves in.

Discarding preconceptions and learning sheep-ways took time, it meant giving up habits of thought. It brought some surprises – for example, the degree that sheep take humans into account, and their attachment to each other. Now it all now seems more obvious, but I had to start to think what sheep might be responding to, what they were interested in, and to see differences between breeds and individuals.



Much skilled activity surrounds shearing, spinning, dyeing, knitting, weaving – patterns that reflect seasons on the sheepwalks as well as globalised markets. Laid flat, the sheep and their wool map out sharp shifts in taste, and subtle repeating colours.

The project generated sketchbooks full of quick annotated outline drawings, seeking the mood of a moment. I drew something for only as long as I could see it, sometimes using notes to record what took me by surprise or how my viewpoint was changing. I thought about what I focussed on - and also what I tended to overlook.

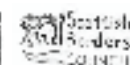


Some things I preferred not to see, to do with suffering and slaughter; departure for market and the abattoir. Admitting fascination was mixed with denial, I made myself ask questions – for example, the local abattoir was inaccessible and I could only read about what might happen there.

Spring brings great liveliness to the sheepwalks, shaping animal and human work alike with themes of nurture, love, pain, differential loss and gain. Transformations of shape and texture are acute as life and death absorb themselves to each other.

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With grateful appreciation of all help with fieldwork
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