

Letters to the editor

A comment on “A Lleyn sweep for local sheep? Breed societies and the geographies of Welsh livestock”

Dear Editor

Writing in volume 38 of this journal, Yarwood and Evans (2006) present a paper which first explores human and farm animal relationships. The paper goes on to develop this theme through a case study of Welsh livestock and its associated breed societies. Whilst this work discusses different farm animal types, significant concentration appears to be on sheep and sheep farming in the UK, and it is on this area that this comment is principally focused. There are a number of difficulties and inaccuracies with the paper in this respect that deserve redress.

The first part of the paper, which utilises Bordieu’s concept of habitus to provide “insights into the relational identities of livestock and people in networks of farming practice” (Yarwood and Evans, 2006, page 1308), undoubtedly has value in recognising the multifaceted nature of animal geographies. However, the picture of UK sheep farming they present to illustrate the habitus concept, in part through reference to Gray’s (1996; 1998) work, is a highly idealised one of genetically closed flocks, hefting, and in-bye and out-bye land.

Dealing with each of these phenomena in turn, whilst most modern commercial farmers producing butchers’ lambs will follow the breeding of their stock with care, especially when selecting terminal sire tups⁽¹⁾ for carcase conformation, few are likely to “build an association... with a specific line in sheep whose characteristics embody the natural qualities of the ground on which they graze” (Gray, 1998, page 351); at least not a strong one. The reality of the matter is that for most lamb meat producers (and let us not forget that meat production is the main *raison d’être* for the UK sheep farming industry) breeding ewes are often bought in from outside sources as lambs or shearlings, worked until no longer economically viable at about six to eight years of age, and then sold into the cull ewe trade. It is only producers of highly regarded pedigree breeding stock who are likely to be forming the very close association with the genetic probity of their animals which Gray describes, and Yarwood and Evans support. Turning to the practices of in-bye and out-bye land and hefting: these refer exclusively to extensive hill sheep farming in remoter parts of the UK, typically mountainous and open moorland areas. Gray’s longitudinal ethnographic study, for instance, focused on one upland valley in the Scottish Borders. Many UK sheep are not farmed on this basis; their natural hefting instinct being subdued by fixed field boundaries.

Thus, the facts on which Yarwood and Evans have built their case for habitus in sheep farming are somewhat amiss and, whilst this does not necessarily undermine their thesis *per se*, a rethink is certainly needed. In particular, that rethink will need to take into account that farming is more complex and has greater geographical nuances and local variation than is often credited. Indeed, they themselves have recognised that when efforts have been made to study farming in a more animal-centred manner, geographical studies of animals and farming “have oversimplified the farming regimes

⁽¹⁾ Terminal sire tups (or rams) are selected from breeds characterised by faster growth and higher lean meat content. These can be used to produce cross-bred lambs that yield extra saleable meat and greater profit.

of which they are part” (page 1308). One illustration of such local variation is that sheep farming in certain parts of the UK has a tradition of overwintering. Thus, sheep are taken from more upland environments (such as the Peak District) and transported down to lowland arable and dairy/beef farms (on the Cheshire Plain) to graze land lying fallow or empty over the winter period on a per head per week rental basis—a kind of transhumance on a massive scale. Practices such as this erode that special bond between farmer, animal, and land; indeed they even make the definition of ‘the farm’ as a spatial entity a contentious one. The reality here is one of sheep grazing in characterless fields at the sides of busy motorways throughout the winter, far away from the farm where they spend their summer months, and for most of the time, apart from occasional visits to count numbers, largely out of sight and mind of the farmer who owns them. Such practices do not seem to fit the *habitus* concept so well.

The second part of Yarwood and Evans’s paper, which explores the *habitus* theme through an examination of Welsh livestock and breed societies, also presents a number of difficulties. The most major of these is the supposed geographies of individual breeds that they discuss. In the case of sheep, these ‘geographies’ appear to be using breed society registered ewes, and in some cases breed society members, as a surrogate for the total number of sheep of that given breed. This is spurious because all sheep breeds have unregistered examples,⁽²⁾ and the numbers of these tend to rise in relation to breed commerciality. (Related to this, the authors’ lack of acknowledgement of the different manifestations of economic capital and how these feed into farming practice—for example, the commercial versus hobby farmer; the part-time versus full-time farmer—and breed popularities and geographies, is also problematic.)

Thus, with rare and less commercially favoured breeds, such as Llanwenog or Kerry Hill sheep typically favoured by hobbyists and specialists, a reasonable proportion (though not all) of the breed are likely to be registered with their respective breed societies, and hence the numbers and geographies of breed society registered stock have some utility as an indicator for the numbers and geography of the breed as a whole. However, if we take Yarwood and Evans’s suggested numbers and geography of Welsh Mountain sheep, a more commercially favoured breed used in Welsh Mule⁽³⁾ production, both are problematic.

A telephone discussion with the Secretary of the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Hill Flock Section (HFS) for the purposes of this commentary piece has suggested that there are around one million Welsh Mountain (HFS) ewes in existence, not the 3000–4000 Yarwood and Evans’s map implies. The approximate nature of figures here is deliberate, as there is no accurate national census of sheep which records their population and breed make-up. Because Yarwood and Evans’s breed numbers are awry, then it comes as no surprise to find that their geographies are too. Undoubtedly, as their map suggests, the vast proportion of Welsh Mountain sheep (HFS) are to be found in North and Mid Wales, but they have a geography outside this area too which takes in other parts of Wales as well as scattered UK locations outside Wales. Indeed, the primary author of this response is aware of several score of Welsh Mountain sheep (HFS) within walking distance of his Derbyshire home.

There are further problems with Yarwood and Evans’s work where Welsh Mountain sheep in particular are concerned. First, no Welsh Mountain sheep, in what they refer to as the ‘Hill Flock’ of the breed (page 1313), are actually registered by the

⁽²⁾It could be argued that an unregistered example of the breed X means it is not actually an example of breed X, but this would be a hair-splitting argument.

⁽³⁾The Welsh Mule is a crossbreed produced out of the Welsh Mountain Ewe and Bluefaced Leicester Ram. Welsh Mule ewes are typically crossed with heavier terminal sire breeds for butchers’ lamb production.

organisation known as the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Hill Flock Section (HFS). This begs the question how Yarwood and Evans have been able to develop a map depicting the numbers and distribution of such registrations when they do not exist. The reasons for this absence of registration are because Welsh Mountain sheep (HFS) represent a breed largely, but not solely, confined to the remoter upland areas of the UK discussed above, where extensive husbandry still remains the norm. Under such conditions, pedigree registration, which requires highly accurate recording of tugging and lambing, is regarded as impractical by the society in question. In addition, even if registration was a possibility, it is unlikely many Welsh Mountain sheep (HFS) farmers would undertake it due to the largely commercial nature of their operations; a point also discussed above. In short, there would be little to be gained from pedigree registering stock used to produce Welsh Mule ewes for subsequent use in butchers' lamb production.

Importantly, the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Hill Flock Section was established in the early 1970s following a split within an earlier organisation known simply as the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society. The other half of that split now exists as a separate organisation called the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Pedigree Section (PS). This body represents what are sometimes referred to as 'Improved Welsh Mountains', which, as this name suggests, are a heavier Welsh Mountain variant with better conformation than their HFS cousins (45–48 kilos for a mature ewe as opposed to 35–40 kilos). Welsh Mountain sheep from the Pedigree Section are commonly (though not always) registered by their owners, and their numbers, at present, may be somewhere approaching 5000 according to the Secretary of the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Pedigree Section, who was also consulted for this commentary piece. One wonders whether Yarwood and Evans have conflated this pedigree variant of Welsh Mountains with the Hill Flock Section in their mapping attempts.

It is to be welcomed that Yarwood and Evans draw attention to farm animal breed geographies in their paper, but what they perhaps need to make more of is how each of these geographies has its own unique drivers and fascinating (and sometimes disputed) histories. They begin to acknowledge this with their insights into various Welsh farm breeds, including sheep varieties such as the Brecknock Hill Cheviot, Clun Forest, and Lley (see pages 1318–1319). We suggest that the geographical dispersion of a farm animal breed is usually one involving pioneering individuals and their appreciation of that breed for its special qualities, which sometimes, though not always, relate to how well that animal adapts and performs to the surrounding spatial environment. This, perhaps, is where Yarwood and Evans needed to begin their discussion of habitus.

Dominic Medway

Manchester Business School, The University of Manchester, Booth Street West, Manchester, M15 6PB, England; email: dominic.medway@mbs.ac.uk

John Byrom

School of Management, University of Tasmania, Locked Bag 1316, Launceston, Tasmania, 7250, Australia; email: john.byrom@utas.edu.au

References

- Gray J, 1996, "Cultivating life on the Borders: Scottish hill sheep farms and the European Community" *Sociologia Ruralis* **36** 27–50
- Gray J, 1998, "Family farms in the Scottish Borders: a practical definition by hill sheep farmers" *Journal of Rural Studies* **14** 341–356
- Yarwood R, Evans N, 2006, "A Lley sweep for local sheep? Breed societies and the geographies of Welsh livestock" *Environment and Planning A* **38** 1307–1326

Lambs' tales and sheepish comments: a response to Medway and Byrom

Dear Editor

We would like to thank Dominic Medway and John Byrom (2006) for their interest in our article (Yarwood and Evans, 2006) and their support for our efforts to draw attention to the significance of specific livestock breed geographies. We welcome the issues introduced in the first part of their letter and the opportunity to debate different theoretical approaches to agricultural geography with them. However, the second part of their letter uses some very hurried observations to make some rather negative observations about our empirical work. We will respond to these points in turn but, first, we will reemphasise the aims of our work.

Our paper does not claim to present a comprehensive atlas of livestock in the UK. Its focus was on the "roles that breed societies play in the imagination of farm animals and the creation of different capitals in farming" and the contributions they make to farming practice (Yarwood and Evans, 2006, page 1309). We realise the impossibility of addressing all practices and all farming institutions in one paper and, as the title reveals (Yarwood and Evans, 2006), chose to focus on breed societies in order to provide a window into *some* human–livestock relations. Further, we note that the concept of habitus provides *one* approach to theorising farming as a cultural activity and we used the opening paragraphs to celebrate the recent progress made by animal geographers using an exciting range of different theoretical ideas. Although we focus on breed societies, we are careful not to overplay their role and set them in context with other institutions and practices affecting farming that we argue deserve more attention (Yarwood and Evans, 2006, page 1311).

Medway and Byrom make comments about the theoretical basis of our paper and also use it as an opportunity to criticise John Gray's work (Gray, 1996; 1998). Their concerns are based on a misconception that we view farms as contained, localised units that rely upon a specific set of localised farming practices. However, we are at pains to point out that a farm is not a fixed spatial entity (Yarwood and Evans, 2006, page 1308) but instead that it is part of a technological and geographical network (Holloway, 2002). Gray's work is a skilful analysis of farming that combines commentary on the ways that political and economic structures at the international scale impact on local, traditional farming cultures, and vice versa. We use his theoretical ideas, in this case Gray's inspiring application of Bourdieu's concept of habitus to farming, to guide our work and our use of his study does not imply that we think that sheep hefting forms the basis for UK farming (although it certainly does in many areas, including the farm he spent so long studying). Medway and Byrom seem to imply that the idea of habitus can only be used at a local level (perhaps they are conflating the term with habitat?) but we aim to take the analysis of habitus in farming 'beyond the farm gate' and are careful to acknowledge many of the structural issues affecting farming (Yarwood and Evans, 2006, pages 1311–1312). Indeed we use many different examples of breeds, as Medway and Byrom acknowledge, to trace the economic, social, cultural, and symbolic influences on farming at a national level. We further refer Medway and Byrom to Gray's (2000) work, as well as some of our own (Yarwood and Evans, 2003), that examines the impact of European policy on the keeping of specific livestock breeds.

Medway and Byrom make some interesting points about transhumance and the movement of livestock. Indeed, these go to the heart of many issues that geographers are trying to explore in agriculture. The UK's recent foot and mouth crisis was caused, in part, by the movement of animals over large distances for economic gain (Ilbery, 2002). Yet farmers mourned the untimely loss of their culled animals on an emotional rather than an economic basis (Convery et al, 2005). Thus farming, as many agricultural geographers realise, is a cultural as well as an economic activity (Morris, 2004;

Morris and Evans, 1999). By contrast, Medway and Byrom reduce farming to a solely economic activity. Thus, they describe farmers' fields as 'characterless' without pausing to consider the symbolic, cultural, and economic values of these places to farmers. We recommend that they examine Rob Burton's (2004a; 2004b) excellent work on the way in which farmers view their fields (and, incidentally, put their best stock next to roads where they can be seen with those for an eye to admire them). In contrast to the economic approach advocated by Medway and Byrom, we support a geographical approach to the study of farming that seeks to take account of cultural as well as economic factors in the performance of agriculture (Morris and Evans, 2004). Our paper was an effort to develop thinking in this area and to resolve these complex tensions. We maintain that the concept of *habitus* provides one way of making sense of them.

That a picture is worth a thousand words is demonstrated by Medway and Byrom's lengthy discussion about one of our maps. Having spent some time undertaking the mapping, we are only too aware of the difficulties entailed in mapping the location of breeds. We repeat the arguments we have made elsewhere:

"[Flock books] are compiled by individual breed societies on a regular, usually annual, basis to record new registrations of pedigree animals... The data are somewhat patchy because the maintenance and publication of flock/herd books is the responsibility of individual breed societies, leading to variation in the way that animals are recorded. Most societies tend to list 'new' animals registered in a particular year, rather than the total numbers of animals of each breed. This avoids the complex and time-consuming task of recording exact numbers of animals in existence. Monitoring a total breed population would require the breed society to trace the birth, sale and slaughter of individual animals from a variety of sources in an exercise that would rapidly become dated. Most societies, given their voluntary nature, do not have the resources to undertake such an exercise, particularly on a regular basis. There may also be problems of non-registration in flock/herd books. Registration is the responsibility of the owner and is required if an animal's pedigree is to be officially recognised. As already discussed, to maintain purity, animals must display the appropriate physical and genetic characteristics appropriate to that breed to be included in a flockbook. Successful registration ensures pedigree and the right to breed as such. There is no guarantee that every keeper will register all of his or her animals, especially as payment of fees are usually involved... Flockbooks remain a vital source of information about individual breeds and offer the best available way of mapping current livestock populations. Like any source, they need to be treated with caution and the drawbacks highlighted must be fully appreciated. However, compared with other sources of agricultural data, they represent a unique and unmatched resource from which to explore the geography of particular breeds" (Yarwood and Evans, 2003, pages 142–143).

Lack of space prevented the full repetition of this material in our paper, although we made it clear that we are dealing with animals recorded by breed societies (Yarwood and Evans, 2006, page 1321). Indeed, one of the main points of our paper was to emphasise that terms such as 'breed' cannot be used uncritically. We spent time in the paper tracing the controversies surrounding the definition, registration, and promotion of breeds by breed societies (Yarwood and Evans 2006, page 1335). Medway and Byrom's response has only served to highlight that livestock breeds and their geographies are highly contested and so we are therefore grateful for their support of our thesis.

When the original research for this paper was conducted, we received some very helpful correspondence from the secretary of the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Hill Flock Section (HFS). We have it in front of us as we write. Contrary to Medway and Byrom's assertion, the Welsh Mountain Sheep Society—Hill Flock Section (HFS) do

record the numbers and location of these animals. They are based on voluntary declarations by farmers about the size of their flocks. In 2002 a total of 163 523 ewes were listed in this way and provided the basis of our map. We have checked the records provided by the breed society and confirm that no animals are listed near Manchester! However, we accept, and always have, that these are not pedigree breeds and that not all animals are registered. Our original work, on which our paper is based, was conducted for the Countryside Council for Wales and aimed to identify Welsh breeds with low numbers. The maps are deliberately more sensitive to variations at the lower rather than upper end of the scale and, consequently, we accept the banding of 'over 500' could be more specific. Medway and Byrom's discussion of our figures serves to support our broader call for more research in this area and for state agencies to take more responsibility for this matter. Animals are not, of course, fixed in one place and, indeed, this is one reason our maps are drawn at a broad, county level. For all their criticism, Medway and Bryrom confirm the general patterns revealed in our map: "undoubtedly, as their map suggests, the vast proportion of Welsh Mountain sheep (HFS) are to be found in North and Mid Wales" (page 2366).

The accusation that we have confused or conflated different breeds is entirely unfounded. We have faithfully mapped all Welsh breeds, including Welsh Mules and the Welsh Mountain Sheep Pedigree section, using the best available data supplied by their respective societies. We also refer them to our recent paper in *Applied Geography* for further clarification of what we understand by a Welsh breed of livestock (Yarwood and Evans, 2003).

Medway and Byrom conclude by offering us advice on how to improve our work. They argue that we should start our discussion of habitus by examining how well an animal performs in its spatial environment, yet their own use of the term 'environment' is woolly (their use of the term again hints at a conflation of habitat and habitus). They appear unfamiliar with our early work where we examined the role of livestock, landscape, and enthusiasts (Evans and Yarwood, 1995; Yarwood and Evans, 2000). Similarly, they mention the geographies of rare breeds and criticise us for failing to mention hobby farmers. We suggest they read our earlier work on these topics (Evans and Yarwood, 2000; Yarwood and Evans, 1998; 1999; 2000) as well as the work of Lewis Holloway (2001; 2002; 2004; 2005). They also seem unaware of existing work on pioneering breeders and their influence on geographies of livestock (Ritvo, 1987; Simpson, 1958; Walton, 1984). Given its publication in a research journal, it is unusual that the views expressed in Medway and Byrom's letter are unsupported by references to existing academic literature.

We have always held the view that the idea of publishing original research is to build on existing literature and to offer new theoretical or empirical insights into a topic. It was therefore disappointing that Medway and Byrom chose not to develop a theoretical framework of their own that might help geographers to conceptualise livestock farming. It was also surprising that, given their considerable knowledge of the breed, they decided not to publish an improved version of our map showing the distribution of Welsh Mountain Sheep. We wholeheartedly welcome constructive improvements to our work and encourage Medway and Byrom to publish an original piece of work that builds on existing research in this area.

Richard Yarwood

School of Geography, University of Plymouth, Drake Circus, Plymouth PL4 8AA, England; e-mail: R.Yarwood@plymouth.ac.uk

Nick Evans

Applied Sciences, Geography and Archaeology, University of Worcester, Henwick Grove, Worcester WR2 6AJ, England; e-mail: n.evans@worc.ac.uk

References

- Burton R, 2004a, "Reconceptualising the 'behavioural approach' in agricultural studies: a socio-psychological perspective" *Journal of Rural Studies* **20** 359–371
- Burton R 2004b, "Seeing through the 'good farmer's' eyes: towards developing an understanding of the symbolic value of 'productivist' behaviour" *Sociologia Ruralis* **44** 195–215
- Convery I, Bailey C, Mort M, Baxter J, 2005, "Death in the wrong place? Emotional geographies of the UK 2001 foot and mouth disease epidemic" *Journal of Rural Studies* **21** 99–109
- Evans N, Yarwood R, 1995, "Livestock and landscape" *Landscape Research* **20** 141–164
- Evans N, Yarwood R, 2000, "The politization of livestock: rare breeds and countryside conservation" *Sociologia Ruralis* **40** 228–248
- Gray J, 1996, "Cultivating life on the Borders: Scottish hill sheep farms and the European Community" *Sociologia Ruralis* **36** 27–50
- Gray J, 1998, "Family farms in the Scottish borders: a practical definition by hill sheep farmers" *Journal of Rural Studies* **14** 34–356
- Gray J, 2000, "The Common Agricultural Policy and the reinvention of the rural in the European Community" *Sociologia Ruralis* **40** 30–45
- Holloway L, 2001, "Pets and protein: placing domestic livestock on hobby farms in England and Wales" *Journal of Rural Studies* **17** 293–308
- Holloway L, 2002, "Smallholding, hobby-farming, and commercial farming: ethical identities and the production of farming spaces" *Environment and Planning A* **34** 2055–2070
- Holloway L, 2004, "Showing and telling farming: agricultural shows and re-imagining British agriculture" *Journal of Rural Studies* **20** 319–330
- Holloway L, 2005, "Aesthetics, genetics, and evaluating animal bodies: locating and displacing cattle on show and in figures" *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* **23** 883–902
- Ilbery B, 2002, "Geographical aspects of the 2001 outbreak of foot and mouth disease in the UK" *Geography* **87** 142–147
- Medway D, Byrom J, 2006, "Letter to the editor: A comment on 'A Lleyn sweep for local sheep? Breed societies and the geographies of Welsh livestock'" *Environment and Planning A* **38** 2365–2367
- Morris C, 2004, "Lost words, lost worlds? Cultural geographies of agriculture", in *Geographies of Rural Cultures and Societies* Eds L Holloway, M Kneafsey (Ashgate, Hants, Aldershot) pp 241–262
- Morris C, Evans N, 1999, "Research on the geography of agricultural change? Redundant or revitalized?" *Area* **31** 349–358
- Morris C, Evans N, 2004, "Agricultural turns, geographical turns: retrospect and prospect" *Journal of Rural Studies* **20** 95–111
- Ritvo H, 1987 *The Animal Estate: The English and Other Creatures of the Victorian Age* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA)
- Simpson E, 1958, "The cattle population of England and Wales: its breed structure and distribution" *Geographical Studies* **5** 45–60
- Walton J, 1984, "The diffusion of the improved Shorthorn breed of cattle in Britain during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers, New Series* **9** 22–36
- Yarwood R, Evans N, 1998, "New places for 'Old Spots': the changing geographies of domestic livestock animals" *Society and Animals* **6** 137–165
- Yarwood R, Evans N, 1999, "The changing geography of rare livestock breeds in Britain" *Geography* **84** 80–87
- Yarwood R, Evans N, 2000, "Taking stock of farm animals and rurality", in *Animals Spaces, Beastly Places* Eds C Philo, C Wilbert (Routledge, London) pp 98–114
- Yarwood R, Evans N, 2003, "Livestock, locality and EU agri-environmental policy in Wales: new directions for applied animal geography" *Applied Geography* **23** 137–157
- Yarwood R, Evans N, 2006, "A Lleyn sweep for local sheep? Breed societies and the geographies of Welsh livestock" *Environment and Planning A*, 1307–1326

Conditions of use. This article may be downloaded from the E&P website for personal research by members of subscribing organisations. This PDF may not be placed on any website (or other online distribution system) without permission of the publisher.