

A PASTORAL VISIT

by Laurence Agnew

I find sheep completely fascinating, perhaps because they're mentioned so often in the Bible. So I was really pleased to be able to spend a fortnight on a hill farm called Y-Budran in Gwynedd, as the guest of the farmer, Gwynfor Bishop. I expected that the life of a shepherd would be fairly tough, with all the problems he'd find in any part of the world: finding pasture for the flock, staying out late away from his family, looking out for the strays, arranging visits from the vet, outwitting thieves, laying down his life for the sheep, etc.

But I soon found Mr Bishop had a whole range of problems which you'd never see in a sheep farm round here, because those half-wild mountain sheep seem to be a law unto themselves. I'd never have believed it before I arrived, but in the course of my stay I saw some of the strangest behaviour you could ever imagine in animals I'd always imagined to be docile and tractable.

For example, there were the *suicidal sheep*. Now all sheep have a tendency to get their feet stuck in crevices and have to be got out by the shepherd. But these would repeatedly wait until they knew the shepherd was busy elsewhere, and then throw themselves into the nearest gully and complain loudly that the shepherd never bothered to rescue them.

Equally odd were the *sweet-toothed sheep* who refused to eat the grass the shepherd led them to, but instead hung around the nearby National Trust centre eating crisps and Mars Bars out of the dustbins. Then they complained to the shepherd that they weren't growing properly and felt sick.

Some *sullen sheep*, rather than eat the grass at their feet, spent their waking hours gazing over the wall at the next farm, and bemoaning the fact that "Bishop never gives us grass like that."

Some of the sheep betrayed what can only be described as neurotic behaviour of various sorts, almost as if they had forgotten they were sheep and thought they were Gwynfor Bishop himself. There were a few *soliciting sheep*, who were just as discontented with the pasture as the sullen ones, but who seemed to think it more becoming to keep butting the shepherd in the hope that he'd lead them off over the fields to where *they* thought the best pasture was.

One sheep was so mixed up that, somehow or other, he thought he would make a better shepherd than Mr Bishop - a sort of *sheep in shepherd's clothing*. He had managed to learn how to stagger on his hind legs for a few steps, clutching on to a branch that looked a bit like the shepherd's crook. But one always got the impression that he was keener to make the others think he *looked* like a shepherd, rather than to find better pasture for them.

I pretty soon got to understand why my friend Gwynfor wore a perpetually harassed look. All the effort he had to put in to deal with the sheep-that-refused-to-get-on-with-being-sheep made it twice as hard to keep up with the difficult enough job of keeping the rest of the flock fed and healthy. I came away from Wales rather wiser about the work of a shepherd, and rather glad that I live in Essex, and that I don't have to look after sheep for a living. §§§