

# Blessed are the cheese-makers<sup>1</sup>



BY PENELOPE HANLEY (Book Excerpt)

'I am going to make my farm pay, whatever it costs,'<sup>2</sup> Winston Churchill told Lloyd George at Chartwell, his home in Buckinghamshire. Churchill had tried beef cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens. According to Churchill scholar Richard M. Langworth, 'all proved disastrous, but [when] he proposed to build a dairy and acquire a milking herd, Clementine wrote him a seven-page letter to dissuade him; apparently it worked'.<sup>3</sup>

In the following section we meet some Churchill Fellows who gained the relevant knowledge to make their farms prosper. The capacity of animals to provide us with food extends beyond their having to die to do so: animals that give us milk and cheese, for example, need to be bred and looked after, and some Churchill Fellows have put their skill into these species and attempting to improve the products they give humankind.



To make the geographical move from Queensland to Tasmania and a professional shift from financial planning and law to raising dairy sheep for cheese-making puts new meaning into the phrase 'sea change'. This is what Alan Irish and his then partner Diane Rae did, aiming to establish an Australian breed of dairy sheep suited to the Tasmanian climate and conditions. Were they being enterprising, or simply foolhardy?

They bought a flock of East Friesland sheep for their Birch's Bay property 35 kilometres south of Hobart. It seemed a positive first step: these sheep had the reputation for being the best milking sheep in the world. To have a vibrant sheep dairying industry requires sheep that are able to produce large quantities of milk during each lactation. Genetic disposition to multiple births was another advantage. The plan was for each animal's potential to

produce an annual gross income of about \$2,000 over a productive life of six or seven years. With the size of their flock this would produce an adequate income. So far, so logical.

However, it soon became clear that the East Friesland breed had weak lungs, making them highly susceptible to colds and pneumonia. Invariably the latter was fatal. Tasmania's cold, damp climate did not help. They realised that this congenital weakness of the breed would result in unsustainable stock losses.

But they did not give up. When Alan gained a Churchill Fellowship in 2007, he and Diane had the opportunity to travel to the United States, Canada, Israel, Italy, France, England and Ireland to examine the operation of dairy sheep farms abroad. It was in Ireland where they learned that the propensity for their breed of sheep to develop pneumonia was not limited to Australia. An Irish dairy farmer said to them, 'The East Frieslands love to die – all they need is the opportunity!'

In Roquefort, the area in France renowned for the outstanding blue cheese made from raw sheep's milk, the breed developed is the Lacaune, which are multiple-birthers, exceptional milk producers, and well adapted to the local conditions. In Sardinia, where the local breed is the Sardi, they had the same felicitous traits. In these areas sheep breeding and yoghurt and cheese production are large, successful industries.

Viewing thriving dairy sheep farms such as these, it became clear to Alan and Diane that they needed to expand the breeds of milking sheep available in Australia or develop a breed suited to Australian conditions. Both options proved too expensive, difficult and time consuming because of quarantine requirements and other complications. The only alternative was to breed up a strain of dairy sheep using the breeds already available in this country, while assessing them over time to determine their suitability for local conditions.

Research both at the University of Wisconsin's Spooner Agricultural Research Station and later at the Israeli Department of Agricultural and Animal Science confirmed that it would be necessary to keep

1 A line from *Life of Brian*, 1979, a satirical film directed by Terry Jones, starring members of the Monty Python comedy troupe, about an imagined contemporary of Jesus Christ

2 Langworth, 2008, p. 517

3 *ibid*

the proportion of East Friesland genetics in a cross-bred sheep to 50 to 75 per cent of the overall genetic material.

In 2007 Diane Rae bought Alan out of his share of the farm and now runs it on her own with a farm cellar door tourist facility, which continues to be successful.



Norfolk Island, 1,000 miles from the coast of Australia, has a population of 1,800. Tourism is its main industry. For Emily Ryves, Norfolk Island is 'not only my home, but my passion ... a unique little gem in the middle of the South Pacific Ocean'.

Emily believes that Norfolk Island, already possessing beautiful beaches, picturesque walks and stunning scenery, would make an ideal gourmet tourist destination. During her 2011 Churchill Fellowship, Emily visited gourmet tourist places in Australia, such as Victoria's Yarra Valley, and was inspired to adapt some ideas to her island home.

Goat milk is more easily digested than cow's milk. Emily's Fellowship enabled her to travel to Australia to explore the introduction of a dairy goat industry on Norfolk Island. She aimed to produce a high quality farmhouse cheese made from goats' milk to offer as part of a gourmet treat for tourists.

Emily summed up in her report:

*A vital lesson learnt during my travels is that the process of building my dairy is going to be a long, hard and expensive road. However, I am more determined than ever now that I have the knowledge to begin the process. I have a very exciting time ahead and I thank the Trust for providing me with the first stepping-stone of my journey.*



Nick Haddow, a 2012 Churchill Fellow, also lives on an island: Tasmania. 'Islands have always held a strong place in the world's imagination,' he writes in his report. 'Their isolation makes them alluring and fascinating.'

Island communities are creative, independent and resourceful, writes Nick, who wanted to build on these strengths to reinforce the identity of islands to bring economic prosperity and strengthen communities – particularly on his own island. He asks if it is possible for islands 'to be green and clever ... bold and beautiful? Can quantity co-exist with quality?'

Nick observed on his Fellowship travels to Canadian islands, the Shetland Islands and Iceland the importance of innovation, which he saw was crucial to create and continuously enhance new products and services that respond to niche markets. Nick perceived the increasing role that universities play in retaining youth and providing relevant skills and career development opportunities.

Nick is the Managing Director of the Bruny Island Cheese Company. He sees innovation as essential for the economic prosperity of islands, in areas such as eco-tourism, niche agriculture, high value food production, marine science and renewable energy.

Read more about the achievements of Churchill Fellows and the 50 year history of the Trust in a new book available for purchase from our online shop ([www.churchilltrust.com.au/shop](http://www.churchilltrust.com.au/shop)) from October 2015.



Alan Irish, 2007; Emily Ryves, 2011; Nick Haddow, 2012