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Sheep breeds in New Zealand

By Dr Clive Dalton

Early arrivals in NZ

On 22 May 1773, Captain James Cook dropped off a couple of Merino sheep in Sheep's Cove in the Marlborough Sounds. He had potted them up during his stopover at the Cape of Good Hope, and had great hopes for them in their new home. But they didn't last 24 hours and probably died of eating tulip.

It was Samuel Marsden who really got the New Zealand sheep industry going by introducing Merinos from Australia, to his mission station at Wairarapa North in 1814. The first Merinos arrived in Australia (13 of them) in 1797 from the floor of King George III ('Farmer George').

Governor Hobson brought in another importation from Australia in 1838.

The Merino has the most amazing history of any sheep in the world. These Merinos nuggets are on Ivelastah Station in NO, Australia

Mana island

The first major shipment of Merinos were landed on Mana Island in 1834 and later transferred to the Wairarapa. Importations increased from Australia as more land was taken up for grazing after 1840. Farmers soon found that Merinos were ideally a dry-country sheep thriving better in the South Island high country whereas the wetter North Island hills caused wool faults, footrot, internal parasites and dags.

Later British immigrants brought sheep with them, and for a number of years just about every British breed of sheep came to New Zealand, many of them like the Scottish Blackface failing to survive for a variety of reasons.

Dual purpose breeds – meat & wool

Later in the 19th Century demand for meat increased, first locally but with refrigeration after 1882, meat became a major export to Britain. So 'dual-purpose' (meat and wool) breeds became popular, and the Merino retreated into the role of a specialist fine-wool breed for the drier South Island high country.