Today I Baled Some Hay *to* Feed *the* Sheep *the* Coyotes Eat

BILL STOCKTON

Sheepman Bill Stockton is considered perhaps the finest artist Montana has produced since Charlie Russell, and he is also the celebrated author of this classic illustrated memoir—a wise, humorous, and sometimes shocking glimpse into what he termed "the problems of being a sheep and a few of the problems of people who care for them." But "this book will do more than amuse you or give you moments of enjoyment or teach you about sheep," observed Sue Mathews of Eastern Montana College in Billings, in her foreword to the original 1983 edition. "It will teach you something about yourself."

This new edition, which features Stockton's beautiful illustrations, is a must for all Western art aficionados, as well as residents of and visitors to Montana.

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SECOND EDITION

Text & Drawings by Bill Stockton

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To my wife Elvia, who has "licked" her share of lambs . . .
and scrubbed my muddy footsteps from the kitchen floor . . .
and washed my slimy coveralls . . . and above all,
simply put up with me during all these years.

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FOREWORD

Ostensibly a glimpse into the lives and personalities of the sheep Bill Stockton raised on his central Montana ranch, *Today I Baled Some Hay to Feed the Sheep the Coyotes Eat* offers an astonishing portrait of both the four-legged creatures of the field and the artist-sheepman himself. First published in 1983 and based on Stockton's sketches and observations as a sheep rancher, the insights contained within these pages reveal a tender heart for his sheep and for the landscape where he raised them. But, as the title suggests, this notebook of sketches and thoughts alone reveals much about the wry sense of humor and acute awareness of the ironies of life possessed by its creator and developed over more than eight decades of life in the western countryside.

Born in Minnesota and raised in Montana, Bill Stockton grew up on the family homestead in Fergus County but left at the age of seventeen to work in Minneapolis before serving in the military during World War II. Returning to Montana with his French wife, he then studied art both in the United States and in Paris before permanently settling on the family ranch near Grass Range, Montana, in the 1950s to raise sheep and to paint and to sculpt. The former was a time-and-energy consuming business, as the essays and descriptions contained in this book convey in graphic detail, but his closeness to the land and its dependents inspired remarkable abstract paintings of the country around him derived from the images of wildflowers to weeds to rocks, and even from the materials at hand—when he put livestock markers to use with his oils and watercolors.

Bill Stockton's wide-ranging art legacy runs the gamut from light fixtures and furniture to abstract-expressionist paintings in various media and sculpture—and these remarkable sketches of sheep and his insightful observations about them.

As Sue Mathews of Eastern Montana College in Billings said in her original foreword to *Today I Baled Some Hay*, "There is a lot of information in this book about sheep; there is even more information about people—about the men like Bill who battle the elements, the animals, and themselves to provide all of us with food and clothing; and about the rest of the human population—the 'dudes,' who take so much (and take so much for granted) from the farmer and rancher—and give so little, even in the way of understanding, in return."

Stockton's works are displayed in private homes, museums, and art galleries around the world. Many of his works now reside at the Yellowstone Art Museum in Billings, Montana.

PREFACE

I dedicate this book to all those people who have never experienced the commonness of death, birth, and the uncommonness of life; to all those people who have never been out in ten-below weather extracting a rotted fetus from a mother ewe.

The snow is a foot deep; the wind continues to blow, and the sheep have given no sign that the weather will break soon. The storm is not usual or unusual for April; it, like death, is part of the sheep business.

The ewe has used up all the lubricants of birth, but I manage to dig out the lamb by ripping off one front leg. The brown, rotted slime is all the way to my elbow. I wipe some of it away in the snow and I go in after the other twin, hoping it might be alive. It isn't.

Ironically, in all this, the only parts of my body that remain warm are my hands and the forearms. The pressures inside the vagina are such that they weaken one's arm within seconds, and it is necessary to alternate—what the right hand can't manipulate, the left hand manages.

Welcome to the terrible, wonderful life of raising sheep.

. . . I wrote this preface to my notebook several years ago with no plans of it ever being printed. It all started as a notebook of drawings with observations and comments thrown in. The comments just kept on growing; some to chapters, others to newspaper articles.

Anyway, this book is about sheep. Oh no, it is not about the lonely shepherd, his wagon and dog, or the exotic Basque trailing his flocks to the mountain. No, it is

about sheep: the "cleft-footed locust" as former Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall called them.

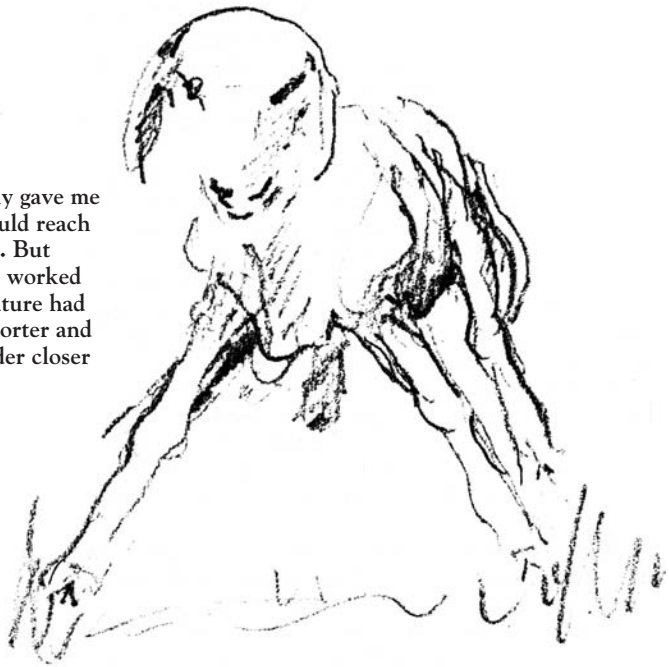
It is about a soft-dispositioned, pacific mammal that so many people hate (because they are pacific, probably) and very few understand. It is about a beautiful, timid animal who, for centuries, has clothed and fed millions and millions of human beings; an animal that has now become one of the diminishing species in America.

This book is about the problems of being a sheep and a few of the problems of the people who care for them. It is about the sheep's enemies: the predators, the weather, and man.

Bill Stockton
Grass Range, Montana, February, 1974

HOW IT ALL STARTED

THE LITTLE LAMB WAS QUITE UNAWARE OF HIS GROUND-level protrusion into this world; nor was he able to see, even from the height of 15 inches as his mother stood up to drop him, through the translucent membrane that enveloped him. His mind was not activated until he gasped his first breath of air.



Nature purposely gave me long legs so I could reach my mother's tits. But wouldn't it have worked just as well if nature had made my legs shorter and my mother's udder closer to the ground?

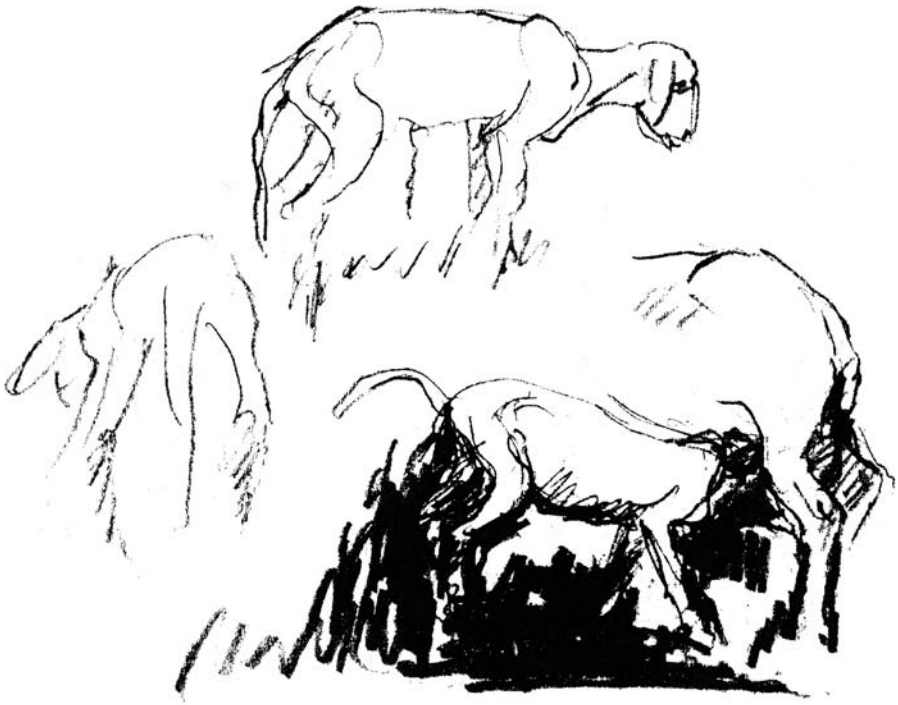
The lamb's head flopped from side to side as his mother hurriedly licked away the membrane. He now felt for the first time the temperatures of spring and saw the few square feet of his first place on earth. What thoughts he might have had deep within his mother were now forgotten as his new intelligence awakened him to the obligations of survival.

For the first minutes, his long legs refused any of the normal commands of this mind; but he kept on trying, aided by the licking and bunting of his mother. Soon he managed to support himself on one hind leg, and then the other. For him this was a great achievement, so he rested a while and surveyed that part of the world he could see from a vantage point of six inches above the earth.

His front legs were a bigger problem, since they bent in different directions; when he did manage to get them straightened out, the hind legs collapsed, and he had to start all over. But, at last, propped up by his mother's nose as she licked his navel, he negotiated his first four-legged stand in the world.

The trip to the tit was now the big task ahead for the little lamb. Guided by the intelligence given him a few seconds after birth, he understood that there was a source of life-giving milk somewhere near his mother's leg—which leg, he was not sure. But he knew that it was about 14 inches from the ground and that he would have to raise his head to find it. This is all he really knew, but it would prove to be enough.

The little lamb bunted and tasted all of the areas beneath his mother's brisket and between her front legs. Once, he was sure he had found the tit, but it turned out to



be nothing but a wet strand of wool. “Strange,” he mused to himself, “it could have been there as well as any other place.”

The mother now came to the lamb’s rescue; with her nose she gently pushed and guided him on the wobbly journey back to her rear. He stopped from time to time to examine all the likely places on his mother’s underneath and to gaze out at that vast environment called world. But the driving instincts within him reoriented any notions he might have had to explore that strange country out there, and the search for the nourishment continued. It