

PREFACE

The genesis of this book goes back more than thirty years to a casual dinner party in the country. My host had recently returned from an audience with His Holiness The Dalai Lama in Dharamsala, India. Somewhere in between passing the potato salad and quietly feeding their Portuguese Water Dog under the table, pictures from his trip began to circulate, and I saw the most magnificent goat with horns that spiraled like vines up a trellis and long white hair coiffed by the wind.

“What kind of goat is this?” I asked.

“Cashmere” he replied. And to my great embarrassment, I had no idea cashmere came from a goat—much less the Himalayas. And so began more than just a fascination with natural fibers, but ultimately a complete change in lifestyle, moving five hundred miles from my home outside of Philadelphia to become a cashmere goat farmer in the mountains of Maine where I would eventually launch a magazine called Wild Fibers.

Prior to becoming a farmer, I believed wool came in two flavors, itchy and super itchy. I had little understanding of alpacas beyond the shaggy ponchos friends brought back from Peru. And if you had shown me a picture of a musk ox, claiming its undercoat was softer than cashmere, I would have smote you with my knitting needle.

But a discourse on fiber types is only a fraction of the story. The fiber industry extends to every continent on the planet (yes, including Antarctica) not only providing a livelihood for shepherds, but also the basis for international commerce and conflict, and further complicated by a changing climate. Many are familiar with the near boundless reaches of The Silk Route, but far fewer know about the “gifting” of a Merino flock from Spain’s King Charles II to his cousin, King Louis XVI of France. The Merino was so vital to Spain’s economy that anyone caught trying to take one out of the country was put to death. The Spanish Merino (whose roots are squarely in North Africa) morphed into the French Rambouillet, and eventually crossed the pond to become the modern day stronghold of the American wool industry.

The fact that American wool has French roots is further enhanced (complicated?) by the Trailing of the Sheep Festival, an annual celebration of sheep herding in the west, featuring performances by Peruvian singers, Basque dancers, and Scottish bagpipers, each representing an integral part of the American wool story. When US athletes paraded into the stadium in Sochi, Russia for the 2014 Olympic Games wearing sweaters made of “American” wool, some would rightly argue their sweaters should have been made of wool from the Navajo Churro, an ancient breed historically raised by American Indians. (It too, has roots in Spain.) Or, to be truly American, the sweaters should have been made from American Buffalo!

The Eye of Fiber is designed to provide a unique perspective on the myriad of ways natural fibers have developed and are celebrated throughout the world often succumbing to political dictates and environmental mutations. Above all, *The Eye of Fiber* underscores not just a thread of humanity, but the interdependence between man and animal, and nation to nation. It is a dynamic that has endured for millennia—and will continue for many more.