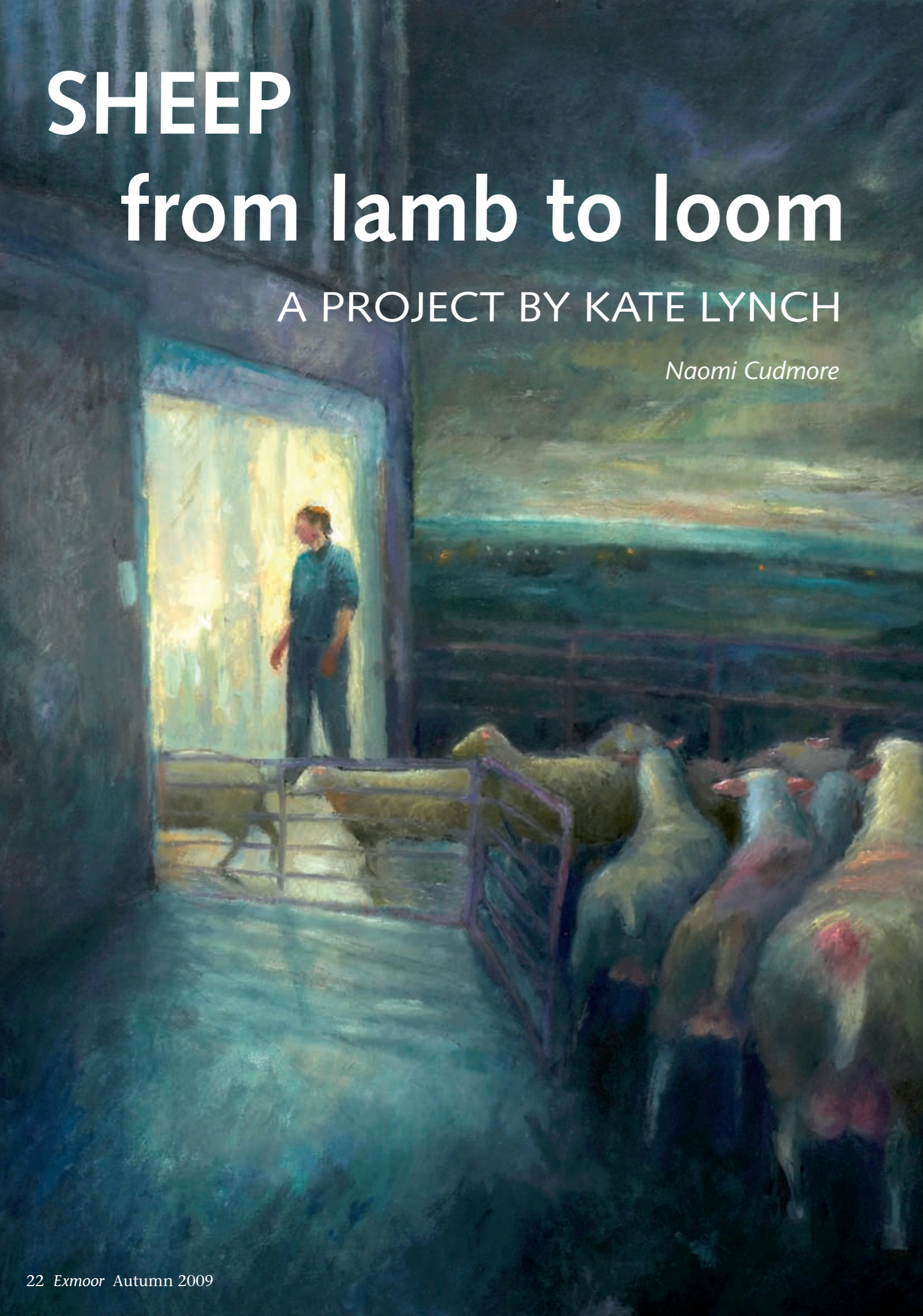


# SHEEP from lamb to loom

A PROJECT BY KATE LYNCH

Naomi Cudmore



“The sheep’s brown woolly coat becomes a velvety chocolate cloak as it peels away... Sheep after sheep, acquiescent partners in the arms of the shearer who runs through this ancient dance, turning and rolling them seamlessly this way and that with his sizeable shears.”

Kate Lynch’s new book – and forthcoming exhibition – ‘SHEEP from lamb to loom’ is a documentary of Somerset sheep in subtle shades and the breathing essence of the ovine year, accompanied by a commentary in spare, earthy, odorous prose. The paintings encapsulate the all-describing gesture whilst Kate’s written descriptions are full of voices softly speaking the raw facts of the land in animal-filled barns and frosty pockets of open ground.

This is Kate’s second ‘land-life’ journey, following on from her exploration of the Levels willows in 2002-03. “I had become interested in documenting what was happening out there, meeting people who were farming the landscape. In a way I think I had thought this might not happen again, falling – as I wanted to do naturally – into another journey, because I wanted to *discover* not devise my journey. Then I met a farmer in my local village, John Vigar, and started to ask questions about sheep. He told me that the year starts not with lambing but with raddling in October, when the sheep’s briskets are painted ready for mating.”

And this is where the paintings and the story begin, with the autumn raddle, explored on Yarner Farm with the Richards family above Porlock Hill, whom Kate encountered after an introduction through the Exmoor Horn Society. “I was aware that I needed to get up onto the hills and once I got to know the Richards through a series of visits

it gave me more confidence. They were extremely welcoming but I do not think that I had realised, even then, the extent to which Exmoor is such a distinct region. I started to see that people feel they actually belong to this place. It’s similar on the Levels, this sense of belonging to the landscape, but I sensed it more strongly on Exmoor.”

Kate met up with representatives from the National Park Authority, with Jan Ross and a handful of others and asked who else she should meet. “Because how was I to know? I wanted to find out about what was here in these distinct landscapes – in the salt marshes, by the sea, in the valleys and on the moors.” Her enquiries led her to shepherd Dave Takle who runs shearing teams, teaches shearing and has his own flock. For Kate shearing is wonderful to sketch because it is the same movement over and over again, giving plenty of opportunity to capture gesture and form.

“There is some artistic licence involved but it is important to me that the person I am painting gives me their approval; I do not want them to be just a painting – I am celebrating the work being depicted and I need my subjects to feel that I am being truthful. They have to feel that I have described what is going on.”

Kate has worked on some of her paintings in sheds with the sheep but mostly they are based on drawings and photos, on notes and compositional sketches worked on in pencil, Somerset willow charcoal and sometimes oil. The final paintings – created in her studio at High Ham on the Levels – are all oil on paper, board or occasionally canvas.

“I work with a very low-key palette – there is no yellow, only earth colours and blues as I love greys and shadows. I do not put faces on my figures and it is no good asking me



why! I am more interested in gesture, in trying to create someone without their face. We can all recognise someone from gesture, like when you know someone at the far end of the road when they are just a blob in your vision – just from the way they stand.”

Kate's journey is enriched with noise, voice and vocabulary. At Briddicott Farm, Carhampton, from where Andrew Speed and his family supply sheep's milk to the Bakers at Styles Farm, ewes bang impatiently at the metal parlour door in the dawn. And at Ash Farm, in the back of a dimly-lit barn, John Richards' father Tony is quietly combing his best ram in the golden gloom ready for Blackmoor Gate Ram Sale.

In every timeless, perfected action, there is an instinctive language. In South Molton's busy wool depot Kate listens to Brian Cottrell as he describes the process of assessing each fleece: “The tuft is the staple, see this one, it's strong. If it breaks when you pull it, it's 'cast'. If the wool is matted we call it 'cott-tied' and if it has arable matter in it – straw, seeds and the like – it's moiety.”

Kate's subjects encapsulate and vocalise in wonderfully matter-of-fact terms the beauty of things which are cyclical – like Christine Harvey knitting a sweater: “I like wool. For a start it's second-hand, the sheep don't want it, they'd shed it if they weren't shorn. Then, when it's knitted and outgrown, you can unpick it and knit it up again, and, when you've worn it to death you can compost it, grow your tomatoes in it. Waste not, want not.”

The sound element which is so central to Kate's book will be captured in the forthcoming art show at Dulverton's Guildhall Heritage and Arts Centre. The event, which runs from 5 - 17 October, includes an installation by Alastair Goolden who accompanied Kate on her travels, recording

the sounds and voices which play such a pivotal part in the project.

“Another element of the exhibition is the work which was carried out with children from Dulverton Middle School. They did some wonderful big charcoal drawings of Exmoor Horns when we visited the Bawdens' Cloggs Farm at Hawkridge and these will be shown too.”

For Kate, painting and describing the cycles, from October to October, in barn, in field and in industrial settings – from the magical cauldrons of the tannery to the cottage armchair – is to step back and throw a brush over the bigger picture.

“What I have seen through this journey is the way that all of these people are so connected to the land in a way that I envy. I could never be a farmer and I have no real way of connecting myself to the landscape, to the weather and the wildlife. This journey is my way of looking through a window and being let in and told about it. People's generosity has been amazing and I feel very privileged.”

### The paintings shown here

Page 22: *Ewes going into the milking parlour at dawn, Briddicott Farm, Carhampton, oil on canvas.*

Page 23, top left: *Exmoor Horn mother watches her Mule lambs (at Yarner Farm, Porlock Hill), oil on paper;* top right: *Hand-loom weaving in Staplehay, oil on paper.*

Page 24, top left: *Andy Wear blade-shearing on the Mendips, oil on canvas;* centre: *The lambing shed, High Ham, oil on board;* bottom left: *Rob leads raddled ewes back to pasture, Pitney, oil on canvas;* bottom right: *John and Tony Richards with their Exmoor Horn rams, oil on board.*

This page, bottom left: *Brian grading wool, South Molton, oil on paper;* bottom right: *Chloe and Adelaide eat Styles' ewes' milk icecream at the Low Ham Steam Rally, oil on paper.*

*All of these paintings appear in Kate's book, SHEEP from lamb to loom.*



You can catch the exhibition 'SHEEP from lamb to loom' at the Guildhall Exhibition and Arts Centre, Dulverton, from 5 - 17 October. Kate will have a range of prints and paintings on sale. Tel: 01398 323818; [www.exmoorevents.co.uk](http://www.exmoorevents.co.uk)

Kate's book is available from her website [www.katelynch.co.uk](http://www.katelynch.co.uk), at the exhibition itself or from local bookshops, ISBN 978-0-9544394-2-2

The project won a 2008 Wessex Watermark Award.

