

'The Dogs of Windcutter Down'

Shepherd's book highlights dogs and a swiftly vanishing way of life.

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In his second book, David Kennard, who lives on a farm in North Devon, England, takes us once again inside his world of wild countryside, family, hard work, sheep, danger, and his pack of sheepdogs – Greg, Swift, Gail, Fern, Ernie, Jake, and Mist.

"The Dogs of Windcutter Down," published by Thomas Dunne Books, may remind fans of this genre of James Herriot's books, which chronicled the life of an English veterinary surgeon and were later made into the much-hailed BBC series, "All Creatures Great & Small."

This time around, Kennard and his flock face a variety of dangers, the most troublesome of which is foot-and-mouth disease. Devon's harsh, stormy weather makes the sheep more vulnerable to it.

"A wicked blast of Atlantic wind wrenched the gate from my hand and set it crashing shut," Kennard writes to open the book. "The horizontal rain was relentless, stinging my face and forcing my eyes to narrow slits. Violent storms had been blowing for over a week now..."

Since the disease has invaded some nearby farms, Kennard faces daily the fear of its spread into his stock.

His family's way of life is in danger from financial pressures as well. "You wouldn't have a little more of your chutney, would you, Debbie?" asks a visiting friend. "Debbie shot me a sideways glance. 'Actually, Victor, it's only just been made. I'm not sure if it's ready yet,' she said, reluctantly producing a fresh jar from the cupboard. The attempt to preserve the supplies in the larder was in vain. The second jar too soon disappeared from view."

But Kennard's ever-faithful sheepdogs help him keep it all together, rescuing stranded ewes, finding lost lambs, and gathering the flock. Even the newest, and youngest, member of the canine troupe, Jake, turns out to be key to Borough Farm's survival.

At a herding exhibition put together to add much-needed funds to the family's coffers, young Jake finds himself in a difficult position. He must round up some sheep that had already reached a gap in a wall, and were out of view. "Jake, however, was undeterred. As the surprised audience glanced first towards the dog, then towards me, presumably looking for signs of panic, Jake rushed onwards, through the same gap. Then he too was lost from view."

When Jake returns triumphantly with all the sheep in tow, a professional falconer offers to join future Borough Farm exhibitions, which would likely attract an even larger crowd.

Afterward, as Kennard and his wife indulge in hot mugs of coffee, and the kids drag straw bales to their trailer, the dogs surround the couple. "And I bet you don't know how important to us you lot have just become," Kennard says to the pack, closing our second glance into the life of a dedicated shepherd.

"The Dogs of Windcutter Down" is available now.