

Notable Dogs of the Chase
II. - The Irish Wolfhound
St. Bernard
(From *Good Words*, 1896)

Once upon a time there existed in Ireland a dog of exceptional size, but what kind of dog it was there is now unfortunately nothing to assure us, except that it was used for the destruction of wolves. So, too, "once upon a time," in Scotland, a great dog was used for hunting wolves.

In Scotland, when wolves became extinct, the same dog, having deer to hunt, was called the deerhound, and continued to be bred with great care. But in Ireland, wolves were common long after they were got rid of in Scotland, so the "wolfhound" as such continued to exist there to a later date than in the Highlands. But the difference after that was this, that when the wolves were extirpated in Ireland, there was nothing left for the great Irish hound to hunt, and so the breed was neglected and ultimately became extinct.

What manner of beast, then, this giant of his race really was no one knows, but opinions are divided into three camps. One holds that the Irish wolfhound was a shaggy-coated dog, a larger edition, in fact, of the modern Scotch deerhound; the second maintains that it was a smooth-coated animal, and rather resembled what we call the Great Dane, except that it was longer in the muzzle and lighter in build; while the third asserts that there never was any such dog at all. Each of the first two sets of disputants has so convincingly demolished the other that it seems quite certain that neither can be right, while the third is most assuredly wrong.

As for the first, it is sufficient to ask how could the Irish dog have been the same as the Scotch, when we find Irishmen bringing their dogs over to Scotland as "presents for the king"? Or why should James I. have let his favourite Buckingham send to Ireland for two of these dogs, when he had only to send to Scotland to get as many as he wanted? As for the second theory, how could it have been a Great Dane, when Buffon compares it as to size with the Dane; when Ray (1679) says, from personal knowledge of the Irish greyhound, "It is, as regards shape of body and general character, similar in all respects to the common greyhound;" when it has been for centuries called by writers a "greyhound" except when it is called a "wolfdog"?

As for the third, it is hardly worth contesting. For there evidently was an Irish dog which was highly valued both at the English and the Scotch courts. But what was it? I shall not attempt to answer the question, as the controversy on the subject is as voluminous as it is futile. But one or two of the points raised are of more than controversial interest, and deserve a word.

For instance, great store is set by the expression used by Taylor, the Water Poet, (1616) of the "strong *Irish* greyhounds," two hundred of which the Earl of Mar used at a great deer hunt. Now, why should a Scotch nobleman hunt his deer with Irish hounds? And if his king had to send to Ireland for a couple, how came it that an earl could

muster a couple of hundred? An explanation of the seeming anomaly is that in Taylor's day "*Irish*" meant *Highland Scotch*. Both Holinshed and Pitscottie, for instance, say that the Highlanders spoke "Irish." So the Earl of Mar's "strong Irish greyhounds" were simply Highland ones.

Again, it is worth noting that the famous picture of a wolfhound by Reinagle, A.R.A.—in which it is represented as rough-haired and very much like a deerhound, and on which so much stress is laid by one of the factions—was drawn from fancy, and oddly enough accompanies text (in the "Sportsman's Cabinet") which does not support the illustration, and moreover assumes that the breed was then extinct. So that Reinagle evolved the dog from his inner consciousness and in complete disregard of the earlier pictures of Ridinger and Schreber, who lived when some big Irish breed was really in existence, and who, both of them, depict it as smooth-coated, and not the least like a deerhound, nor, indeed, any other sort of dog.

Again, Heraldry is appealed to and Ulster-King-at-arms states it as his conviction that "the Irish wolfdog was a gigantic greyhound, not smooth-skinned but rough and curly-haired." And yet in the only coat-of-arms I know of that has an Irish wolfdog for supporter—Lord Dartrey's—the animal is most positively not a greyhound of any sort at all, but simply a wolf, as will be seen by comparing it with Lord Lucan's wolves. There is really no difference, not even heraldic difference, between the two beasts.

It is curious, when one comes to study the subject, how very seldom historians refer to the Irish as being fond of the chase, especially when we remember that English, Welsh, and Scottish chronicles are so full of hunting, and still more odd that there is no mention made of the gigantic hound that is alleged to have chased, overtaken and killed wolves. Indeed one might almost, if not actually, say that the discovery of the great beast was not really made until it had become extinct! It is true that Holinshed (1506) (or was it Campion?) says "The Irish are not without wolves and greyhounds to hunt them, bigger of bone and limb than a colt." But this magnificent indifference to details of measurement hardly commends the evidence to belief, and it is obvious that the writer never saw with his own eyes any of the greyhounds which he endows with stature beyond the dreams of even Molossian ambition.

It is an established fact in Ireland, that Scotland was colonized from that country; and equally undisputed, in Scotland, that the original Irish were emigrants from Caledonia; and neither nation doubts that each of the colonizing parties took their own dogs with them across the sea; and thus it follows that the Highland deerhound and the Irish wolfhound were each of them the progenitor of the other. This being so, it would scarcely be consistent if Fingal had not had more than one "native" country, and, like a certain distinguished statesman, a choice of birthplaces; and Fingal's dogs, sharing their master's fortunes with proverbial canine fidelity, submitted to hunt and die in two places at once. So it comes about that the immortal Bran chases wolves in County Tyrone (as is proved by his footmarks on a mountain near New Town Stuart, and called "The Track of the Foot of Bran, the Hound of Fingal"), and died after a stag-hunt in the Highlands of Scotland, as the cairn erected between Clyne and Kildonan, and called "Cairn Bran," testifies to this day.

Nor have we any assistance from the “ancients,” for though dogs from various parts of Britain are mentioned as being imported into Rome, they were all of the mastiff kind. However, whether it was the original “wolfhound” or not, there was abundant testimony to the existence of a large “greyhound.” Many documents are in existence that prove the high repute to which the Irish greyhound was held, and, curiously enough, in one of them, a letter from Lord Falkland to the Earl of Cork, the writer, after asking for some greyhounds for the Duke of Buckingham “and others of my noble friends,” says “if you can possibly, *let them be white*, which is the colour most in request here.” But whatever their colour may have been, the old Irish greyhound as certainly existed as the old Irish elk, for did not Cromwell, in 1652, forbid the export from Ireland of “such great dogges as are commonly called Wolfdogges” But whether these were the “wolfhounds” of to-day it is now impossible to say. It is, however, on greyhound lines that the modern Irish Wolfhound Club are working to reconstruct the famous dog; and taking the Scotch deerhound as their model, they are striving to produce an animal that shall excel it in length and stature. As deerhounds measuring thirty-three inches at the shoulder are on record the future wolfhound will have to be a veritable monster, if the average height is to exceed that, and of a perfectly amazing speed, courage and power, if it is to represent an animal that can catch and slay a wolf.

Every writer on the wolfhound takes it for granted that it must have been able to overtake the wolf. But is it certain that wolves were *coursed*? Wales is a notable instance of the rapid extermination of the wolf. How was it done? Certainly not by chasing wolves with dogs. If the Welshmen had tried such a preposterous device, they would still be chasing them. Why, then, should it be confidently assumed that the Irish got rid of their wolves by chasing them? Are there any records of such hunts? Here we give the narrative (very much abridged), taken from a work published in Ireland in 1829, which purports to describe the destruction of the last of the wolves, and it will be seen that there is no “hunting” about it, and that in fact the “wolfdogs” mentioned in it might have been pugs, so far as any speed was required.

In a certain part of the county Tyrone the people suffered greatly from the wolves, and sent for one Rory Carragh, a noted wolf-killer, to assist them. Now, in the place was a large walled-in space, with an opening at either end, in which the people of the county round used to fold their sheep at night. But in spite of all precautions the wolves used to get in at night, and commit great havoc. Carragh arrived, and taking with him two wolfdogs—there was a species of dog for the purpose of hunting wolves, resembling a rough, stout, half-bred greyhound, but much stronger”—and a little boy, the only person he could prevail on to accompany him(!) went about midnight to the fold.

“Now,” said Carragh to the boy, “as the wolves usually attack the opposite extremities of the sheepfold at the same time, I must leave you and one of the dogs to guard this one, while I go to the other. He steals with all the caution of a cat; nor will *you* hear him, but the *dog* will, and will positively give him the first fall. If you are not active, when he is down, to rivet his neck to the ground with this spear, he will rise up and kill both you and the dog.”

“I’ll do what I can,” said the boy, and he took the spear from the wolf-hunter’s hand.

The boy immediately threw open the gate of the fold, and took his seat in the inner part, close to the entrance, his faithful companion crouching at his side, and seeming perfectly aware of the dangerous business he was engaged in. The night was very dark and cold, and the poor little boy, being benumbed with the chilly air, was beginning to fall into a kind of sleep, when at that instant the dog, with a roar, leaped across him, and laid his mortal enemy upon the earth. The boy was aroused into double activity by the voice of his companion, and drove the spear through the wolf’s neck, as he had been directed; at which time Carragh made his appearance with the head of the other.”

Only two individual “wolfdogs” are known to fame, the one being Bran, which Oliver Goldsmith tells us saved his mother’s life when she was a girl. She had taken a walk one winter’s day to visit a relative, and fortunately Bran went with her, for on her way back she found herself at a very lonely spot suddenly confronted by a wolf. Bran at once attacked and killed it.

The other is the more celebrated Gelert, claimed by “wolfhound” enthusiasts to have been an Irish wolfdog presented by “Royal John” to Llewellyn. Everybody knows that story, and though sufficiently absurd to the grown-up mind, which of us has not as a child loved all dogs a little better because of brave Gelert’s sad end? We are now told that Baring Gould, with other strong men to help him, has demolished the legend. This may be. As a story it did not take more demolishing than the little piggy’s house which was built of grass, and at which the wicked old wolf luffed and puffed, and puffed and luffed, till he blew it in. Llewellyn goes out one morning a-hunting, leaving his castle door open, and a baby—his only son—asleep in it cradle inside, without a soul to look after it. His faithful hound refuses to go hunting with him, and by-and-by, when the coast is clear, the wicked wolf comes to eat the baby, and there is a tremendous fight. For when the Welsh prince comes home in the evening, he finds blood everywhere; blood, blood, blood, from the front door to the bedroom. Then he sees the cradle is empty; searches for the child, but in vain; calls to it, but without response. So he jumps to the conclusion that the blood-dripping hound has devoured the child, and straightaway stabs it. Gelert’s dying yell wakes up the baby, and then Llewellyn finds the dead wolf, and the truth all comes out and they give Gelert a grand funeral.

Nor, historically, is it difficult to demolish a story of anachronisms. But I scarcely think that the fact that the legend is common to many countries and of a great antiquity is any argument at all against its authenticity, and indeed I have no doubt that the very same series of events has occurred over and over again all the world over, and prefer to maintain that the existence of Sanskrit, Chinese and Arabic variants of Beth Gelert do not militate against Mr. Spencer’s poem.

It was only a few weeks ago that I read of a terrier which was left in a room with some ducklings, and when its master returned, the ducklings’ basket inside the fender

was found to be empty, and yellow duckling-fluff was sticking to the dog's lips. Llewellyn at once proceeded to whip Gelert for devouring the ducklings; but at the noise of the whipping

“Some slumberers wakened nigh;
What words the owner's joy can tell
To hear his ducklings' cry!”

Then it was discovered that, the fire having gone out, the faithful little terrier had carried the ducklings into the corner next the oven for warmth. And instead of a grand funeral Gelert had a grand banquet of bones.

But the story is just the same and will go on happening over and over again to the end of time.