

Scotland's Gundog

The History of the Gordon Setter

BY LEE CONNER

I was fourteen when my mum first bought me a copy of *Dog World* to keep me quiet. I remember being fascinated by one particular article and that concerned the appearance of 'liver' colored puppies in litters of Gordon Setters. I think some voices at the time were calling for the inclusion of these pups into breeding programs.

If my memory is correct, I believe the article was in two parts; of course, I had to have the next instalment and then, of course, I became thoroughly hooked on the 'dog press' (well, there are worse addictions!).

If I were to ask you to name the very first thing you think about when I say, Gordon Setter, I think many of you would reply, 'color'. That combination of jet black coat and those rich, bright, chestnut markings are so distinctive and such a hallmark of the breed. But was the Gordon Setter always black and tan? This is a subject that has been debated through the ages.

The history of the very handsome Gordon Setter is, like most breeds, veiled in obscurity, myth and legend, however it does possess several interesting artistic markers (etchings, portraits and paintings)

that can help us chart its progress through time.

Shaw, writing in 1881, gives the most commonly found account of its beginnings.

'Its very origin is obscure, though all authorities agree in bestowing the honour of its production upon the Duke of Gordon, hence the name by which this breed is recognised in the present day. It is certain that in the early part of the century (1820) the then Marquis of Huntly, who was afterwards, Duke of Gordon, possessed a strain of Setters which he was anxious to improve. The story runs that when looking for a judicious cross, the rumour reached his Lordship that there was an incredibly clever sheepdog bitch belonging to a shepherd in the neighbourhood. This bitch had been taught to set birds by its owner, and her staunchness was said to be remarkable. On hearing of this wonderful bitch, the Marquis of Huntly is said to have immediately obtained her from the shepherd, and put her to one of his most successful sires. It is to this collie bitch that many hold that the modern famous Gordon Setter owes its origin, and certainly the presumption seems a very fair one.'

continued on page 350



SCOTLAND'S GUNDOG – THE HISTORY OF THE GORDON SETTER

Shaw supports this theory by presenting a list of prices obtained for his Gordon Setters when his kennel was broken up after his death in 1836. The list shows the colors that predominated and the prices paid.

1. Duke, 5 years, black and tan
... .. 34 guineas
2. Young Regent, 4 years,
black/white and tan
72 guineas
3. Juno, 5 years, black and white
... .. 34 guineas
4. Satan, 2 years, black 56 guineas
5. Crop, 3 years, black and white 60 guineas
6. Duchess, 11 months, black and white 37 guineas
7. Random, 10 months, red and white 35 guineas
8. Princess, 11 months, black and white 25 guineas
9. Bell, 11 months, black and white 34 guineas
10. Brace of puppies, black and white 30 guineas

As can clearly be seen, the majority of dogs at this sale were black and white or black, tan and white, and Shaw uses this to back up the theory of the early collie cross.

'We confess ourselves to have difficulty in explaining how the white could have been introduced into the Gordon Setter, assuming that they were originally black and tans only, otherwise than by the reputed sheepdog cross.'

Without a doubt these auctioned dogs formed only a small part of the kennel for it was also said that a brace of 'black and tans, with white frills, went to the Duke of Abercorn,' and that nine others went to the Duke of Argyll. Another was presented to Viscount Bolingbroke shortly before the Duke of Gordon's death.

It was widely believed that these very early dogs were indeed black, white and tan until the appearance of an engraving from 'Cynographia Britannica' (published in 1805) which clearly depicts three setters - the top one of the group is clearly black and tan. This seems to confirm the existence of a black and tan setter in 1805 (before the Gordon Castle kennel is mentioned in history).

Delving even further back into the past, to prove the black and tan color existed in very remote times in this Setter, Gervaise Markham describes 'the setting dog' in his *'Hungers Prevention or the Whole Art of Fowling by Land and Water'* (1620). The colors of these dogs are described as *'black and fallow and these dogs are esteemed the hardest to endure labour.'*

Another book that also supports the antiquity of this Setters color is *'A Treatise on Field Diversions'* (1776) which states, *'a gentleman of Suffolk, a staunch sportsman, tells us that fifty years ago (1726) there were two tribes of Setters, the black-tanned and the orange/lemon and white.'*

The author 'Youatt' (writing in 1850) certainly knew of a breed he called *'the Scotch Setter'*, placing it in levels of importance below the Irish and the English. Sadly he made no mention of its color.

In his book, *'Field and Fern or Scottish Flocks and Herds'*, 'The Druid' (otherwise known as Mr. H.H. Dixon) gives a very interesting account of his journey (in 1862) to the Border and Scotland, where



he visited the estates and breeders of livestock. Particularly interesting is his narrative about the Setters found at Gordon Castle. Having described his arrival at the castle (with its 800 acres of land) he states that, having had a look at the horses, he and Mr. Jubb were going to the cows and heifers in the park and he continues...

'We beguiled the way by a chat with Jubb, the headkeeper, whose seven and thirty black-and-white tans were spreading themselves out like a

fan in the kennel meadow. Originally the Gordon Setters were all black and tan. Now all the Setters in the Castle Kennel are entirely black and white, with a little tan on the toes, muzzle, root of the tail, and around the eyes. The late Duke liked it, as it was both gayer and not so difficult to spot on the hillsides as the dark colour. They are light in frame and merry workers and as Jubb says, 'better put up half a dozen birds than make a false point.'

Renowned dog writer 'Idstone' also writes about the early Gordon, he said it was a bigger and courser dog than others of its race, and its color, the dewlap it carried, and the haw it showed suggested, *'a not very remote dash of bloodhound blood.'* This 'hound' influence would also be picked up and used by another commentator (and Gordon Setter detractor) of the period...

In *'Dogs of Scotland'* it is stated that when these Setters first began to stand out as a strain apart, they were of different colors, black and tan, black, white and tan, black and white, and even lemon and white. The black and tans were said to be the most common, but the tan was much lighter than today's dogs and they often had white breasts and feet.

These early dogs were said to have 'spaniel-type ears', beautiful heads and very profuse coats and feathering.

Another writer on the breed, Harry Malcolm, said that when introduced into England (about 1859) the Gordon Setter was of immense size - too big in fact to please the majority of English sportsmen (confirming the Bloodhound cross?). He goes on to mention a famous dog called *'Kent'*, whose grand head and rich color drew a considerable amount of attention. He did a lot of winning at early dog shows, not without running the gauntlet of some pretty hard name calling, such as 'cur,' 'mongrel' and 'half-bloodhound.' However, his owner, Mr. Pearce, was so convinced of the purity and working ability of his strain, that he offered to place a whelp with Mr. Malcolm, to be brought up where he could not possibly see game, and at the age of nine or ten months to be introduced to it, when he prophesied the Gordon would do him credit. The arrangement was carried out, and when it came to the test, the puppy not only beat his ground in fine style, but at the end of a few hours began to stand his birds *'as only a well-bred Setter will do.'*

This pup was by *'Kent'* and the 'Mr. Malcolm' referred to went on to become president of the American Gordon Setter Club!

Interestingly, one of the first Gordons to be exported to America - 'Rake' - was from Gordon Castle; he was black, white and tan but his type was said to be 'grand'.

In complete contrast to the glowing experience of the inborn work-

SCOTLAND'S GUNDOG – THE HISTORY OF THE GORDON SETTER

SETTERS IN 1805.

(Facsimile of Coloured Plate by Sydenham Edwards.)

The upper dog in the original is coloured black and pale tan.

The middle one red with white blaze up face.

The lower one white.

Showing apparently the three leading varieties as known at the present day.

ing ability of the breed is this account of Mr. Rawdon B. Lee (who clearly wasn't a fan of the Gordon and thought there was far too much hound blood in them) said:

'Not very long since I was given a Gordon Setter, said to be of the best blood, and it had cost thirty guineas in Scotland as a broken dog. Never look a gift-dog in the mouth; but its breaking was a myth and its value in shillings! The first day I had him out, the parish was not big enough to hold him. He chased everything, and got into a plantation where, with nose down and a whimper every now and then he cheived the hares and rabbits to his content – and my disgust. I was sorely tempted to shoot the brute. When tired he came to my whistle, a five mile walk home along a hard road tamed him a bit, and as he had a sensible look about him I gave him another outing the next day, over the roughest land I could find. Here, after a long trudge of some eight hours or so, he became amenable to discipline – hunted and found birds by their ground scent and worked far more like a hound than a Pointer or Setter. Had he done like 'Idstone's' Gordons (crossed with his Collie) and gone around his birds as his ancestors would have done around a flock of sheep, I should have noticed it. He did not do so. His head was always down. A third day he worked well within range, answered to the whistle and his old training had come back to him. He was, however, no use to me, so I gave him away. Now, this Gordon Setter was good looking, and from a strain that bore a reputation of being 'pure even amongst the pure,' but his manners and appearance were too houndlike to please me.'

As a field dog, the Gordon Setter has always had its detractors and staunch admirers.

Shaw writes, *'he is stigmatised by his detractors as an old man's dog, as they maintain that he can rarely do more than 'potter about' and is always beaten by lunchtime. This latter opinion is certainly shared by most practical sportsmen, but many of these, even though admitting that he is only a half-day dog, at the same time gladly bear witness to his powers when he is at work.'*

Interestingly there appeared to be a move away from the heavy, lumbering early dogs (evidently those with Bloodhound blood) to a slightly more racier Setter type and this was achieved by crossing with its Irish cousin. This was going on in the time of Shaw (1880) and was still going on and judiciously practiced in 1900. Mr. Robert Chapman (of the famous 'Heather' prefix) succeeded in getting back to a smaller, more active dog and, in doing so, also recaptured the breed's lost (and once celebrated) qualities.

Shaw wrote that the 'black and tan' Setter had unquestionably been crossed with the Irish, *'probably to improve the brilliancy of the tan.'*

He also states that the cross was responsible for *'the appearance in many litters of Gordons of liver coloured whelps. It is also noticeable in the pedigree of 'Old Kent', that the Great-*

Grandfather of that famous dog was a liver and tan dog belonging to Sir Matthew Ridley.'

Twenty years later Mr. Harding Cox writes, *'The race of Gordon Setters has dwindled down, and specimens of the old type have almost disappeared. A cross with the Irish Setter would probably revive a very acceptable type. Such a union would be sure to produce some reds, and some black and tans. In fact I know a case where youngsters of the same litter so bred were shown and won respectively in the two sections.'*

During the Victorian period the breed had reached its peak of popularity, as the Victorians were infatuated with all things Scottish, but with the coming of the 20th century the breed suddenly lost ground. One commentator (writing in 1907) wrote about its shockingly speedy fall from grace;

'It seems almost incredible that with the long rows of benches occupied by excellent specimens which appeared at the Manchester Show in 1900, the number at the present time should have dwindled down to three or four in a class, even when challenge prizes are offered. Surely some enterprising individual will be forthcoming when this exceptionally good opportunity to take up a variety, with every prospect of immediate and very satisfactory results, has been drawn attention to, for there can be no doubt that, with very little effort, the popularity of the Gordon Setter can be resuscitated.'

The Gordon's history has been punctuated with these peaks and troughs ever since. It is quite strange that this handsome Setter has always been more appreciated abroad than in his home country. From 1842 (with the breed's arrival in the States comprising of a dog and a bitch) the buying of famous dogs such as Ch. Duke of Edgworth, combined with further careful importations from both Britain and Scandinavia, has ensured the breed becoming firmly established in America.

Unusually, this breed has now come full circle, from a respected gundog, to almost exclusively a show dog of the Victorian age, now more and more shooting folk are realizing that speed isn't everything and are appreciating the Gordon's power and stamina.

Back in 1900, when people were dismissing the breed's working abilities and labeling him an 'old man's dog' one person, Mr. Malcolm, valiantly (and proudly) fought their corner.

'I have never gone afield with a dog that has given me so much genuine satisfaction in every way as my Gordon Setters. Neither have I seen their equal in nose, obedience, staunchness and speed. When the nature of the ground will permit, he is one of the fleetest dogs of the Setter breed. At his work he is naturally a high headed dog, always seeking for the body scent of his game. When the weather is such as to require it, he is quick to take the foot scent as well. His natural instinct is developed in a marked degree, and it leads him to know where to look for his game without racing over ground, which is so characteristic of Setters of other strains.'

And through the continued hard work of the likes of the 'working Gordon Setters' group here in the UK and the Gordon Setter Club of America, there is now a growing - if somewhat belated - understanding and appreciation of the importance of this dog as a Gundog; these clubs continue to organize field trials and preserve those deeply ingrained (and vitally important) working qualities.

I'm sure somewhere up there, Mr. Malcolm is smiling!

