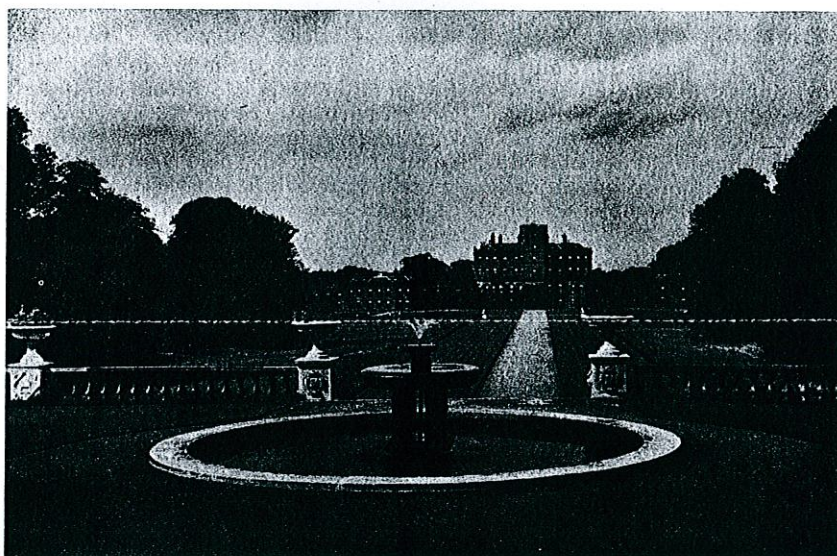


A short history of

THE GORDON SETTER



GORDON CASTLE, FOCHABERS

THE GORDON SETTER

*O wad some Power the giftie gie us
To see oursels as ithers see us!
It wad frae mony a blunder free us,
An' foolish notion :
What airs in dress an' gait wad lea'e us,
An' ev'n devotion.*

This beautiful setter which hails from the land of mountain and heather, has been much written about in the last hundred years, the subject of lengthy discussion and violent differences of opinion since its introduction to England and elsewhere. But from letters written, paintings, photographs, prints, evidence and hearsay evidence, authoritative and far from authoritative opinion, one is enabled to build up an image of the dog as it has progressed through the years.

The Gordon Setter is the only gundog of the native Scottish breeds. We have been able to establish that there were black and tan setting dogs in Scotland about the year 1600, and also following the troubled times in my country of the '45 some were taken back to France. But it is to the 4th Duke, Alexander Gordon, who died in 1827 aged 84 that we refer to the established beginning of the breed. There is no doubt that the Duke was an authority on setting dogs and an extremely clever breeder. There were family Gordon connections — a photo of John Gordon is included — and clever dog handlers at Gordon Castle. Such was the astonishing degree of excellence and fame of the Gordon Castle setters, that in later years when we find black and tan setters in England and elsewhere, all breeders at all times endeavoured to show that their setters traced back to the Gordon Castle setters. The Duke's setters were mainly black and tan, and black, white and tan. There is a story that the Duke found in the possession of a shepherd, a collie which was better at finding game than his own dogs, and he used it for breeding purposes thus introducing the white and establishing the Gordon Castle setters. This story is nonsense for the Duke's setters had been established for forty years previous to this alleged cross. Further the Duke was too experienced a breeder to run the risk of introducing a dog which would produce puppies which would hunt with their heads down. The probable answer is that the Duke had a dog which was referred to in a derogatory sense as a "collie" just as in later years Ch. Kent was referred to as a "bloodhound". There were from time to time, black and white, and orange and white setters from England at Gordon Castle. With the death of the 5th Duke of Gordon in 1835, the Gordon Castle setters were auctioned and dispersed (and later re-established at Gordon Castle by the Duke of Richmond, a cousin of the Gordons), and some found their way to England and elsewhere. In 1842 a brace of Gordon Castle setters, Rake and Rachel, were imported into America by Messrs. Blunt and Webster. Later, coupled with the emergence of shows in England, the breed began to suffer from the diverging interests of show and work. In general, the points offered in argument by show breeders rode rough-shod over the basic conception of the breed, that it was a sporting gundog. The arguments were bitter and in those days the protagonists lost no time at all in their use of straightforward, pungent language. At the Newcastle Show, 28/29th June 1859, of the sixty entries of setters and pointers, the winner was the Gordon, Mr. Jobling's Dandie. At the first field trial held at Southill, 18th April 1863, the first three placed were Gordon Setters.

In 1863 appeared the dog Ch. Kent who was to have such an effect on type, size and heaviness. He sparked off a controversy which carried on for years. The Rev. Pearce (Idstone) had bought him without pedigree, though his pedigree was subsequently established for the record, tracing back to the Gordon Castle setters of course. In face of all opposition, Mr. Pearce maintained that Kent was a good Gordon. However the records show that Mr. Pearce subsequently changed his opinion for he admitted later that Kent did the breed a great deal of harm. He reproduced his characteristic

goose rump, weak hind legs without second thigh muscle, loaded shoulders, pendulous lips and bloodhound voice. He was extensively bred from and it is significant that from this time the criticisms of Gordon Setters at shows became more and more caustic. We also find that Mr. Pearce, who had bred extensively, changed sides in the light type-heavy type controversy, for later in his life he advocated that what had become a heavy and cumbersome dog should be refined at all costs.

In 1875 the late Robert Chapman joined the breeders of Gordons, though it was later that he used the famous prefix "Heather". Mr. Chapman maintained that the Gordon had become far too heavy in the bone, overburdened with weight and too thick and short in the skull to compete successfully with its English and Irish cousins, either in work or at shows. That he was successful in his task of breeding Gordons with quality the late Mrs. Ingle Bepler was in no doubt for she says the "Heather" dogs appealed to her much more than the Gordons she saw in later years at shows. Many of the "Heather" dogs went to Scandinavia, some to David Baillie whose "Garbet" dogs became very well known, and to Isaac Sharpe whose kennel dwarfed even the two hundred of the "Heather" kennels. The "Heather" dogs all worked and were hired out. I have seen paintings and photographs of the "Heather" dogs and their immediate predecessors and although I agree they were a great improvement, there is no doubt in my mind that the modern basic conception of the Gordon shows still further improvement in type and soundness. In this assumption one could imagine Robert Chapman agreeing, for he stated late in his life that although he had progressed he still felt that there was room for improvement. The late John Ramsey saw Ch. Dellfort Gay Gordon and Ch. Dignity of Cairlie just before he died and he was very much impressed. Old John, the practical man, was a fund of Gordon history. He was in the breed at a time when central Scotland was a hotbed of Gordons in training, and we had such men as David Baillie and James Duncan working with Gordon Setters.

David Baillie of Garbethill Farm, Castlecary, had a number of good Gordons. His Ch. Garbet Nap and a few others followed the "Heather" exports to Scandinavia. Garbet Muir, despite the rapid housing and populating of the area between Glasgow and Edinburgh is still shot over, and it is quite easy walking, the heather being kept knee-high.

The show interest of Gordons was gradually declining and in 1912 there were only 21 registrations with the Kennel Club, though they were still being bred in their native Scotland for work. During this period we had the rise of the biggest kennel of gundogs this country has seen, the "Stylish" kennel of Isaac Sharpe. He won the Kennel Club Derby in 1901 with Stylish Ranger, and till his death he had Gordons in exceptional numbers. He had a tremendous fund of gundog knowledge and although he ran a business of supplying good gundogs he was a fancier first and foremost. He was a kindly and humorous man and the last time my wife and I visited him he kept us laughing all the time. He was a champion shot and very proud of his 1897/1898 trophies for this sport. His pet hate seemed to be people arriving at Keith with measuring tapes in their pockets. He had far too many Gordons to detail even the number of the best, but Ch. Stylish Scorchers with his powerful quarters and hind legs which moved so freely at the stifles and hocks, could be taken as a model of what a setter should be.

In 1914 was born the dog Burnvale Ranger which had such an influence on the modern Gordon. His pedigree contained Ch. Redruth Colonel, Ch. Duke of Edgeworth and Barbon Manor which traced back to the Gordon Castle setters. He ultimately passed from Andrew Baird who lived in central Scotland to Professor Turton Price in Angus. Turton Price had a considerable success with his Gordons, although it was as a producer (with George Crawford in the background) of outstanding show English Setters that he established his fame. He acquired a lovely bitch in Ch. Janet of Crombie who was an excellent brood. He also acquired Ch. Crombie King, a dog of unknown pedigree who is today the main stem tail-male of Gordon breeding. Mr. Crawford tried but could never establish his breeding.

Mr. W. Murray Stewart joined the breeders of Gordons in the late twenties, and although he was not able to remain in the breed very long, his "Bydand" prefix remains established in most of the present pedigrees. He was the mainspring of the re-establishing in 1927 of the Club which had remained dormant since Mr. Manning's time of the early nineties. He passed on to Mrs. Bilton Ch. Painters Nancy, the proud of carriage, swashbuckling bitch which always remains in my memory. He bred from Nancy, Miss Sadler's first brace Bydand Braw Lass and Blue Bonnet. Mr. Wright who had become Secretary of the Club was very successful as a breeder with his Winsdon's. Mrs. Bromley was exhibiting with considerable success, the powerful "Dalnaglar" kennel was established in Scotland, Mr. T.E. Davies produced many winners including Barnlake Brutus, Mrs. H. Hall with her "Davens", Miss Farne (Mrs. M.K. Adams) in her second litter produced Great Scot, all were helping to swell the numbers at shows. Although all the outstanding dogs cannot be mentioned here, Ch. Bouncer of Ardale and his son Ch. Bang of Swindle were two of the outstanding dual-purpose dogs of the period and successful sires.

The immediate post-war period has been most heartening, for in addition to figuring more prominently in gundog groups at shows, there have been three field trial champions (the first ever) and a continual appearance of Gordons in field trial award lists. We have F. T. Ch. Rowney of Crafnant finishing fourth in the Setter and Pointer championship, and Lady Auckland going even nearer with Wanderer of Cromlix being second. Today you must have a very good dog or you will not win in either sphere. The Gordon Setter is very fortunate, for it is one of the few gundog breeds which does not have a complete schism between the show dog and the working dog. There is controversy within narrow limits over the interpretation of the standard, this you will always have, but the basic conception of the breed, a sporting gundog possessing a calm equable temperament is, I feel sure, the goal of all breeders. Of one thing I am sure, the writer in the publication "Modern Dogs" 1897 who had nothing good to say of the breed at that time, would have been much more circumspect in his criticism if he had been attempting it today.

One cannot condense a thousand pages into three pages, and my apologies to those who think that this short history should have been not quite so short.

H.E. TAYLOR.