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Mr. Anthony Killykeen-Doyle (IRL)

The History and Development of the Irish Wolfhound

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by

Anthony Killykeen-Doyle

I am honoured to have been asked to deliver a short treatise on the history and development of our beloved breed, but feel a justification of my authority to do is in order.

I can truly say that Wolfhounds are in my blood. Examination of my own pedigree will show that my maternal line traces to Catherine Fitzpatrick Richardson-Smith – a grand-daughter of Capt. Hugh D. Richardson who did so much for the breed in the 1840's and published the first dog book to be printed in Ireland. My Great-Grandmother worked tirelessly to keep the breed going through the famine, and even to her death in her 100th year, Grandmother referred to the breed as "Irish Wolfdogs". Both knew Captain Graham and have been photographed with him.

I was given my first hound as a birthday present when I was eleven years old, and was fortunate enough to receive much help and encouragement from my peers – Delphis Gardner, Mrs Groverman Ellis, Florence Nagle, Miss Harrison and of course Dr. May and Sheelagh Seale in whose kennels I spent so much time. From these breeders I learnt so much and have since tried to remain faithful to the old bloodlines in my own breeding programmes.

I consider myself fortunate to have spent my early years immersed in Wolfhound "lore" and it is with interest, and not a little despair and sadness that I have watched the breed develop in some quarters, into the "chocolate-box" show specimens of today.

I hope the following address will give pause for thought and re-awaken the desire and determination to breed to the old ideals of correct type and soundness. I have also taken this opportunity to correct many important dates and facts that have previously been inaccurately published. I make no apology if an Irish bias is detected, as I hope to show how deeply and inextricably this Great Hound is interwoven in Irish history and legend.

Ireland is an island in the Atlantic Ocean on the western edge of Europe. It was known to the ancients by many names – The Secret Isle, the Isle at the End of the World, Ogugia, Hibrazil, Tir Na n'Og, the Land of the Ever Young, Hibernia, Scotia, Erin.

The antiquities and romance attached to the breed we now call Irish Wolfhound are well known, but in the past, it has also had many names – Irish Wolfdog, Irish Greyhound, Irish Deerhound and in ancient Ireland it was Cu – the Great Hound. The breed has been closely associated and identified with the Celts, but the Celts were rather late arrivals in Ireland where the breed was already long established.

Irish myths, sagas and folk tales had a long oral tradition before being written down and Ireland has the oldest vernacular literature in western Europe. Tradition has classified the early myths into four groups or cycles according to "Lebor gaba la Erenn" the Book of Invasions of Ireland. The mythological cycle records the five successive groups who ruled Ireland before the coming of the Celts. The chief characters of this cycle are the Thuata de Danann – a race of hero-divinities later worshipped as gods. They are described as being physically beautiful, tall in stature, red-haired and fair-skinned, powerful, aristocratic beings who mingled with mortals yet remained aloof and superior to them. They were accompanied by great hounds. Their main residences were in and around Brun na

Boinne, the Boyne Valley – the Irish Valley of the Kings which was dominated by the great megalithic tomb of Newgrange. The latest radio-carbon dating trace this to 32000 BC – older than the pyramids of Egypt and older than Stonehenge by a thousand years. Newgrange has been described as the oldest man-made building in the world.

The hounds were famed for their great size, beauty, strength, courage and loyalty to their owners. They were used for hunting large game – boar, wolf and deer and also went into battle where they were trained to pull a man from horseback or from a chariot.

This I hope will give an insight into how important the breed we now call Irish Wolfhound has been to the Irish psyche, myth and legend.

The fame of the breed spread throughout the known world. They appear in Greece, all over the Aegean and in Rome where they were valued very highly for their great size, beauty and hunting ability. They were sent out as greatly prized gifts to Roman Consuls, to Kings of England, Scotland, France, Spain, Sweden, Denmark; to Emperors, Ambassadors, French Princes and Dutch Noblemen.

The history of the breed is tied to and runs parallel with the history of the Irish nation. In the twelfth century, Nicholas Breakspere became the only English Pope – Hadrian IV (4th) and granted Henry II (Plantagenet) of Britain, a Papal Bull allowing him to take the land of Ireland as His “inheritance”, establishing the quasi-legal basis for conquest and occupation which was to last 800 years. After the Battle of Kinsale in 1602 the Irish Chieftains O’Donnell and O’Neill sailed from the harbour of Rathmullen in Loughswilley to France. Known as the “Flight of the Earls”, this exodus marked the end of Celtic Ireland. With the earls and their families went their faithful followers and their hounds.

The breed became so rare that Ireland was actually becoming depleted and Cromwell made an order at a parliament held in Kilkenny on April 27th of 1652 which prohibited the export of hounds to foreign countries, for fear of the increase of wolves.

The next generations were a time of great hardship for the native Irish, the hounds were kept for the chase as the country swarmed with wolves, but when these were extirpated, the number of hounds decreased and were kept chiefly as symbols of status.

In 1695 Penal Laws were enacted to crush the native Irish and their religion. Holocaust has become a household word in the last 50 years, but Ireland suffered a continuous kind between the Penal Laws and famine of 1845-1850 which was brought about by the failure of the potato crop which was the staple diet of the poor. Due to British ineptness, and cruel landlordism, the famine raged out of control – our eight million population was reduced to only two and a half million. That we have any Native breeds at all is remarkable under the circumstances.

Before the rebellion of 1798 all unmuzzled dogs were destroyed, and after the Rebellion, the English government offered an equal reward for the head of either an Irish Catholic priest or a Wolfdog.

The hounds fell on bad times – their work done they became scarce, and were kept only by a few families “more for ornament than use” and we now hear of “the last of their race”, that they are “reduced in size” and, finally, that they are “extinct”. The old families who kept them, and the dispossessed Irish Chieftains who had parted with practically everything managed to keep a few under the most difficult circumstances so it is little wonder they were reduced in size.

The Celtic Revival 1830-1930

Irish cultural life in the 19th century was marked by a growing sense of National identity and linked to the Celtic past. The most obvious way nationality could be expressed was by the use of emblems, and those in most common use were the round tower, the harp, the shamrock and the Irish Wolfhound – usually accompanied by a figure of Hibernia or Erin.

1841 can be said to mark the turning point in the history of the breed. Capt. H. D. Richardson wrote in the Irish Penny Journal of May 1841, an article on the Irish Wolfdog illustrated with a portrait of

Oscar and Beada. He said “many assert the Irish Wolfdog to be no longer in existence; I hold he, and the highland deerhound are one and the same”. In proof he says: “the Irish conquered and colonised Scotland, and of course, took their great dogs with them. Both breeds share a history which is so intertwined, that the two breeds are difficult, if not impossible, to separate”, Richardson says: “The breed although very scarce has existed in Ireland until within a few years, and that in well-authenticated purity. Why will not some of our Irish gentlemen and sportsmen turn their attention to this splendid breed and seek to prevent, ere it is too late, its total extirpation?”. Richardson is not particularly known today, but he is on par with Captain Graham in this, the first resuscitating the breed.



The Irish Wolfdog

1841 article. Richardson’s opinions have great impact on wolfhound type as we know it today, and he was profoundly influential on Captain Graham.

Mr. A Whyte Baker, Jnr. Of Ballytobin Castle, Co. Kilkenny, acquired hounds from Richardson and devoted the rest of his life to sustaining and restoring the breed. He was active from 1843 until his death in 1867. He spared no effort, regardless of cost, in building up a kennel of superb hounds, the best being Old Donagh of Ballytobin, who came into Captain Graham’s possession after her breeder’s death. She can be said to be the mother of the breed today.

Sir John Power of Kilfane knew Rowan and was a friend of Richardson and had stock from both kennels. He and Mr. Baker were close friends and lived nearby. Both gentlemen co-operated in breeding towards the old type of hound, and both men knew Captain Graham and provided him with stock.

The Ballytobin and Kilfane hounds were much bred into, and were re-enforced with deerhounds of the Glengarry strain, which were chosen because of their large size and heavy build, as compared with the rest of their breed at that time.

Hamilton Rowan (1757-1834) was a contemporary of the Irish Wolfhound for 40 years. He would seem to be an important link, as all present day wolfhounds can be traced back to his hounds. His strain descended from Oisian – the hound depicted by Reinagle in 1800. This famous hound on which the standard was based was given to Rowan by the Fitzpatricks in 1798. The strain was carried on after Rowan’s death by Mr. Carter of Loughlinstown House. Bray, from hounds bred from Rowan’s most famous and important bitch “Bran”.

From Mr. Carter, Richardson had a number of bitches, and by using Lady Blessington’s (née Sally Power of Kilfane) hound, produced dogs of great size and quality. The best known being Oscar and Beada which he used to illustrate his



Old Donagh: a painting from a Phyllis Gardner woodcut.
Courtesy of A Killykeen-Doyle.

The task Graham set himself was not an easy one. At the time when he first began to breed what he described as “my Irish Wolfhound type”, the material available to him was almost all in the form of hounds bred out of known deerhound parents, but exceeding the general run of most deerhounds of their day in both height and substance, and, as Graham thought, “more resembling their distant ancestors”.

Of the hounds bred by Graham throughout his career, an examination of the pedigrees shows the constancy with which he adhered to the principle expressed in his brochure – that it had always been his “steadfast endeavour to get crosses from such dogs of acknowledged Irish Wolfhound blood as were to be found, in preference to simply crossing opposite breeds to effect the desired object”. Except for one or two at the beginning, in which nothing but deerhound blood is discoverable, nearly every hound he bred carries at least one strain from the Ballytobin bitch – the one par excellence – Old Donagh who was said to be the only true-bred wolfhound bitch, or indeed perhaps the only true-bred wolfhound of her day. At any rate she was the only true-bred bitch available to Captain Graham. Other notable hounds were Ch. Sheelagh, Ch. Dhulart and Ch. O’Leary.

Ch. Sheelagh has been noted as the only wolfhound of HER day – about twenty years later than Old Donagh – possessing what the critics describe as “that wonderfully distinctive character which marks the true breed from all others”. She and her son Ch. Dhulart and their immediate descendants were bred amongst themselves in a manner that could hardly have been different had she been the sole existing specimen. Ch. O’Leary, though but briefly noted by Graham, really represents the beginning of a new era, about twenty years later than Ch. Sheelagh, in which hounds of 32 inches or over (on Graham’s very severe measurements) were no longer the exception. Ch.O’Leary’s pedigree lines converge on the Old Donagh blood in nearly the same manner as the pedigree lines of certain of his present day descendants converge upon him.

In 1879 the Irish Kennel Club was courageous enough to establish a class for the breed at their show in Dublin, and Captain Graham said that “it was strenuously to be hoped that this step in the right direction will be followed on the part of other shows”. In that same year he had failed to get the English Kennel Club, itself only six years old (founded in 1873) to put on classes for Wolfhounds, despite the fact that he had been working on the revival of the breed for seventeen years, and wrote that: “it has been ascertained beyond all question that there are a few specimens of the breed still in Ireland and England that have well-founded pretensions to be considered Irish Wolfhounds, though falling short of the required dimensions. This blood is now in my possession”.

Although some of the specimens at that first show should now be jeered at, yet this was the turning point in the great struggle to re-establish the breed.

The judge at that show was Mr. Hugh Dalziel, a Founder Member of the Kennel Club, a renowned dog expert and writer. He reported that the class was composed of dogs differing very widely in character and that he considered his duty to select for honours the elements out of which the old race could be rebuilt.

A prize was awarded to Captain Graham’s Scot, whom Mr. Dalziel described as “being a dog with more authentic Irish Wolfhound blood in him than anything shown, and in shape and style correct but wanting in coat”. Graham’s record of Scot’s pedigree shows him to be line-bred back to Old Donagh four times in three generations.

Irish wolfhounds were first exhibited at the English Kennel Club show of 1886, and there, Graham’s Sheelagh was awarded Best of Breed.

In 1885 Captain Graham founded the Irish Wolfhound Club, and continued his work fostering and developing the breed until his death in 1909. The plea made by him in his final article on the breed is as pertinent today as it was then, and it behoves us all to remember it clearly when passing judgement on present-day specimens, if his work is not to have been in vain.

He wrote – “a firm stand must be made against awarding prizes to hounds that are not absolutely sound, as the breed is essentially a galloping one and meant for rough as well as fast work, and therefore coat, soundness of limb, and freedom of action, must be insisted on. Girth is also most essential, as without it, the necessary lung and heart action is impossible. It therefore behoves all Judges of this breed to see that the unsound hound never receives a place in any class, it being much better to make no award than to give a prize to a hound that may be largely used for perpetuating cripples”.

A widening interest had now been awakened in the breed and with the guidance and advice of Captain Graham, the breed prospered in the hands of conscientious people such as Mr. Everett of the Felixstowe Kennels; Mrs. Shewell with the Cotswold hounds; Mr. Compton – Wolfe Tone Kennels; Mr. Crisp, the breeder of Champion O’Leary, and in Ireland: Mr. Baily, the O’Brien brothers and the O’Mahony, Knight of Kerry. Before his death, Graham had the pleasure and satisfaction of seeing what he describes as his ideal of what an Irish wolfhound ought to be, in Mrs Percy Shewells’s Champion Cotswold who stood 34,75 inches at the shoulder and weighed 155 lbs. Described by Graham as a wheaten colour with long head and body, great bone and girth, and absolutely straight on his legs, this most typical hound had beaten everything shown against him; he won 18 Championships and innumerable firsts and special prizes as well as having won outright the Cup, given at the Kennel Club Show, for the most typical Wolfhound.

He also greatly admired Champion Cotswold Patricia who won some eight Championships and numerous firsts and specials,. And had beaten every bitch shown against her. She was a light brindle, of enormous bone, with wonderful feet and legs, and great freedom of movement. She stood 32.5 inches at the shoulder and weighed 135 lbs.

Mr. Everett originally began his Felixstowe kennels in Ireland, obtaining his first hound in 1893. He went to England where he set up business as a Corn Chandler and continued breeding horses and Irish wolfhounds until his death in 1950. His hounds had an international reputation, many being sold world-wide as companions, and a number were used in hunting big game. The breed owes much to the Felixtowe strain which was characterised by great beauty, size and soundness. Good breeding stock was sent to kennels all over the world, many of whom became established as conscientious breeders of good Irish Wolfhounds in their own right.

In England Miss Noelle Nichols founded the Bradfield kennels; Mrs. Bennett and Captain Hartland-Row in partnership, began the Chulainn hounds; the Rev. C.H. Hildebrand had the Clonard Kennel; Capt. and Mrs Hudson, with the workmanlike Brabyns hounds. The Felixtowe hounds also formed the basis of the very influential Ouborough lines of Mr. J.V. Rank, as well as the Sulhamsteads founded by Mr. James Nagle and so successfully developed by his wife, Florence.

In Ireland The O’Mahony, Knight of Kerry – continued the Dromore line of his father, and together with Mr. Baily and the O’Brien brothers, perpetuated a rare independent Irish strain – untapped by Captain Graham, which later formed the basis of Coolafin hounds of the Gardner family. The O’Mahony’s old bitch, Granua, has been described as “the last of her race” and, according to Phyllis Gardner, does indeed seem to have been the last pure-bred specimen. Miss Gardner was fortunate enough to have obtained a puppy from Granua’s last litter in 1930, and her progeny became an important factor in the Raikeshill, Bournstream and Grevel kennels, who in turn, went on to greatly influence and form the basis of the old Ballykelly hounds of Sheelagh Seale. Miss Seale’s first hound and foundation bitch was Avoca of Coaafin, a line-bred grand-daughter of Granua, and the influence of her descendants is an important element in some of my own Killykeen hounds today. Sheelagh Seale left a great legacy to the wolfhound world in that I doubt there is a kennel anywhere today that does not have a Ballykelly hound featuring in its pedigrees. Dr. May and Fottrell family also kept good kennels going in Ireland at this time.

The second World War almost destroyed the breed. Food shortages and war conditions panicked owners and breeders into putting down valuable stock. The only breeding done at this time was primarily in Ireland, and, being a neutral country, Irish breeders generously opened their doors to take in hounds to safeguard the breed for the future. The Coolafin and Ballykelly hounds returned, as did

Eileen Lait “Of the Fianna”, Mrs Wager with the Devlin hounds and of course Elsie Latchford of Tralee who later, as Mrs. James, became world famous for her Boroughbury hounds.

When the war ended, an out-cross was desperately needed. America in the previous 100 years had imported the very best stock from Ireland and England, which was used by the great kennels of Cragwood, Ambleside, Killybracken and Kihone. Miss McGregor sent as a gift to breeders, Rory of Kihone who incorporated all the best of the aforementioned kennels. His introduction gave great impetus to such as the Sulhamstead, Eaglescrag, and Sanctuary kennels in England and to the Ballykelly, Nendrum, Ballytobin, Killykeen and Carrokeel kennels in Ireland.

The breed seemed safe, and on a firm footing; magnificent hounds of great size, soundness and correct harsh coats were being produced during this, the third golden age.

Now, however, 30 years later, the breed is at another crossroads and showing signs of degeneration and lack of true type due, in part, to commercialisation, and to the will to win at any cost in the show-ring. Litters are being bred from unsuitable stock by people, who lack an in-depth understanding of this unique breed – and its inheritance.

The future lies in our hands, let us continue to remember and work to the legacy of the great breeders of the past. We are only the custodians of this noble breed whose origins are lost in the midst of time and whose very survival has been so precarious.

Let us look forward to the 21st century and strive to breed hounds that conform to the ideals and standards set by previous generations in producing MAGNIFICENT hounds of GREAT SIZE, COMMANDING APPEARANCE and NOBILITY – all the characteristics that have made THE IRISH WOLFHOUND THE KING of the canine world.

The Irish Wolfhound

Behold this creature’s form and state!
Him nature surely did create,
That to the world might be exprest
What mien there can be in a beast;
More nobleness of form and mind
Than in a lion we can find:
Yea, this heroic beast doth seem
In majesty to rival him.

Yet he vouchsafes to man to show
His service, and submission too –
And here we a distinction have;
That brute is fierce – the dog is brave.

He hath himself so well subdued,
That hunger cannot make him rude;
And all his manners do confess
That courage dwells with gentleness.

Catherine Phillips (1660)

Taken from “Anecdotes of Dogs”, by Edward Jesse (1858)