

# Citizen Canine

*It is often said that people come to resemble their dogs, and dogs their masters. But we humans do not stop at searching for reflections of our individual qualities in our canine companions, the author writes. We are also eager to find the representative virtues of entire nations and ethnic groups—and therein lies a tail.*

*by Edward Tenner*

Often I walk or run around a half-mile path near my apartment, a simple asphalt loop encircling soccer and baseball fields, playgrounds, and basketball courts. Morris Davison Park is the green of a global village. Professional urbanists and cultural critics may deplore our landscape of garden apartment complexes (like mine), housing tracts, and shopping centers, but my neighborhood travels show that families from all over the world love it. People with origins throughout Europe, in East and South Asia, in the Middle East, in the Caribbean and Central America all happily gather to walk, talk, play, and rest here. To see their cosmopolitan soccer teams on a spring or summer afternoon is to witness the beginnings of a fresh transformation of American identity.

Bigotry and ethnic tensions are not dead, and Plainsboro, New Jersey, is no utopia, but the congenial scene at my local park is confirmation of what modern genetics has revealed, the unity of the human species. The dogs that accompany my fellow citizens are also conscious that they form a single species. They vary far more in size, color, and temperament than we people do, but in their vivid and seemingly indiscriminate interest in one another they betray no apparent breed consciousness. (Chihuahuas are said to prefer their own kind, but it is more likely that they are simply, and sensibly, most interested in other small dogs.)

Many of my foreign-born neighbors are already Americans, and still others are well on their way to Americanization. Already

the children speak to their parents and among themselves in English. We say that these families are becoming “naturalized.” Their dogs are newcomers, too; indeed, so are all dogs with owners, even if the dogs’ ancestors have been on American soil for a century or more. The dogs, however, will never be entirely naturalized. They are, in a sense, perpetual newcomers.

For all their emotional intimacy with owners and their families, dogs remain conditional citizens. Americans without criminal records need not register with the authorities, as Europeans often must, but in most places they do have to register their dogs. It would take a four-legged Foucault to anatomize our elaborate regime of surveillance over dogs—the taxes, the tags, the inoculations, and above all the human control of reproduction that has made possible the profusion of canine physical and mental traits.

The dog’s conditional legal status is only the beginning. Like any greenhorn, it must learn, often painfully, the ways of its hosts. It may be spared the need for table manners, but it must learn human conceptions of appropriate behavior. It is expected to modify its innate concepts of territoriality to suit the human propensity toward sociability, to refrain from jumping on dinner guests, and to respect the otherness of the postal carrier’s uniform instead of considering it a provocation. When we pet some adorable puppy, we are also educating it. Reared in isolation, many dogs become aggressive or shy, or indeed both at once.

The burden of learning does not, however, fall only on the dog nation. Children equally learn the ways of an alien folk. Children must come not to fear dogs, yet they also must learn rules of caution, such as not approaching an unfamiliar dog without asking the owner. They must avoid running from a dog. When they are older, they may learn the disconcerting fact that the sight of a running child may trigger a hunting response in dogs, including some small, cute breeds. Of course, they may also learn how much cleaner a dog's mouth is than a human mouth. The worst bite is a human bite, my mother said. Science has proved her right, as usual.

Humanity, unlike dogdom, has not been satisfied with the distinctions between the two conjoined species. In the last hundred years or so, it has increasingly mapped its own political and ethnic identities onto the nation of dog. Out of the variegated world of dog breeding and training, it has extracted symbols of history and character.

A cultivated, telepathic dog might give an amusing interview. It might quote David Starr Jordan, the ichthyologist who was Stanford University's first president: "When a dog barks at the moon, then it is religion; but when he barks at strangers, it is patriotism!" But human politics, it might remark, is, was, and will remain meaningless to its kind: *ubi bene ibi patria*. Where my kibble is, there is my fatherland. Dogs indeed have special human loyalties, but these precede the rise of nation-states by hundreds of years. They have been specially bred by different kinds of groups—classes, occupations, and trades—for particular uses: sight hounds, retrievers, herding dogs, watchdogs, even draft animals, are attached respectively to nobles and hunters, sheep raisers, property owners, and small tradespeople. How can a dog trace geographic affiliations, it might well ask, if human beings are so confused?

Scholarship and scientific research on dog origins remain in their infancy, with

years of archaeology, genetic analysis, and documentary research still needed. Specialists question many of the assertions of breed histories, such as the close kinship of the Tibetan Mastiff and the Neapolitan Mastiff, or the Egyptian ancestry of all greyhounds and other sight hounds. (Independent origins are more likely.) The Peruvian Inca Orchid, a nearly bald variety said to have been kept in luxury and protected from the sun by the rulers of the Inca Empire, appears similar enough to the Xolo, or Mexican Hairless, that Mexican fanciers do not recognize it as a separate breed. Both in turn are closely related to the Chinese Crested, but it is not clear when and in which direction the ancestors of these breeds were transported.

Some breeds are of more recent, and more reliably known, origin. The Teutonic Dachshund has Gallic Basset Hound blood. The Australian Shepherd was developed by Americans, possibly from the stock of Basque herdsmen. (Ironically, the "native" dingo, which long ago crossed to Australia from Eurasia, is reviled by European Australians as a livestock pest, accused in one celebrated case of stealing and killing an infant.)

Our canine informant might continue that dogs are most comfortable when they enjoy a close working bond with people in a given terrain performing a certain job—patrolling and defending a territory, hunting—or simply sitting in a human lap. Each of the dozens of types of herding dogs in the world is accustomed to a certain landscape and specific sizes of sheep or cattle. Industrialization indirectly promoted still other breeds. Factory workers of the River Aire in Yorkshire bred large terriers for chasing rats and pursuing (often forbidden) game, creating the ancestors of today's gentrified Airedales. (English gamekeepers, in turn, crossed bulldogs with mastiffs to create a new breed, the bull mastiff, that could take down a poacher and hold him without devouring him.) The high spirits prized by today's Airedale breeders and trainers reflect

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*“Venus” the bulldog was the ship’s mascot of a British destroyer during World War II.*

the raffish culture of the dog’s original blue-collar enthusiasts.

When European settlers in the New World and other outposts began creating new varieties around the 18th century, they were not exercising their fancy but blending the structure and behavior of existing breeds to suit new conditions: thus the Newfoundland and Chesapeake Bay retrievers and such distinctively British legacies as the Rhodesian Ridgeback and the New Zealand Huntaway. Folk breeders paid no attention to borders. Mark Derr, a leading dog writer, speculates that the Catahoula Leopard Dog descends from colonists’ curs and indigenous dogs, with traces of red wolf and Spanish Mastiff mixed in. But while it is found along the Gulf of Mexico from Mexico into Florida, Louisiana has claimed it as its state dog since 1979 and pointedly employs Catahoulas as guard dogs on state property.

Today, even as the cult of national dogs flourishes, geography imposes fewer limits than ever on how far a breed may range.

The upper classes of Europe and North America have been transporting dogs for centuries—George Washington ordered a Dalmatian from England—but few people could afford to do so before efficient transportation by rail, road, and air was generally available. Our cultivated guide dog might conclude its remarks by reminding us that the same pathways helped make heartworm a national rather than a southern problem.

**E**ven the most learned poodle probably could not analyze the subject further. It is one thing to recognize that people have changed dogs and quite another to understand what these changes had to do with human self-consciousness. And even to people, the beginnings of national dogdom were gradual. The literary scholar Harriet Ritvo has studied how the abolition of bullbaiting in the 1830s led fanciers to begin the bulldog’s transformation to house pet and competitive show animal. The viselike jaws were turned into stylized jowls, and polygenic traits such as large

heads and short legs were maintained generation after generation. The early breeders were not trying to make a national statement. Nevertheless, their kinder, gentler bruiser proved the perfect canine complement to England's existing cartoon emblem, the beefy, foursquare yeoman John Bull. The bulldog was more a creature of enthusiasts than a common companion, and it was never accorded any official status, yet it became an indelible national emblem of tenacity, applied to doughty Englishmen from Thomas Henry Huxley ("Darwin's bulldog") to the plainclothes policemen of Oxford University.

National dogs seem to fall into two groups: mascots and monuments. The former is a natural greeter, a goodwill ambassador; the latter is a stern standard bearer. (Whether mascot or monument, few of these breeds enjoy *official* recognition as national dogs.) A similar distinction between the familiar and the distant applies among

the human celebrities who embody national qualities—think of Benjamin Franklin and George Washington. But where Franklin was a wise if eccentric uncle, mascots are metaphorical children, loved as much for their foibles and mild misbehavior as for the positive side of their character.

The distinction is not absolute. The Irish Wolfhound, for example, despite the imposing size and aristocratic bearing that make it so much a classic monument dog, is part mascot. Centuries of breeding after the disappearance of wolves and other large predators from Ireland have given it such a sweet temperament that it is no longer fit to hunt wolves or defend sheep, just as few bulldogs would be eager to jump at the nose of an enraged longhorn. As a symbol of Irish culture the wolfhound still retains impeccable credentials; according to tradition, Saint Patrick himself worked with wolfhounds during his youthful period of captivity among the Irish and thus was able to call them off in

Gaelic when he returned as a missionary many years later. Wolfhounds are features of Saint Patrick's Day parades in the United States, but it is unlikely that an IRA cell would have any use for one.

Conversely, a mascot is not held to a high performance standard. Tony Blair swept Britain's 1997 general elections with a campaign ad featuring a bulldog rejuvenated after years of Tory torpor by the prospect of New Labor. (The spokesdog, Fritz, was only three, so it was no great feat.) The breed's alleged health problems and distant heritage of blood sport could equally have made it the sym-



*Hitler called his beloved shepherds "my only perfect friends." As a breeder, he sought to emphasize the dog's wolf-like qualities.*

bol of all that Blair and his associates sought to purge from a “re-branded” Britain, but it had a nationalist subtext that Labor’s official red rose could not match, even if some Scots thought the bulldog was too English a breed.

**T**he poodle, especially the miniature poodle, is an unofficial mascot dog of France, even more childlike than the bulldog. In the early 19th century, the standard poodle was as much a German as a French dog, fit to serve in Goethe’s *Faust* as an incarnation of Mephistopheles. As more people moved to Paris and provincial cities, the *Pudel*’s French cousin, a duck hunting dog, or *caniche*, was selected for compactness and trainability. It was not only a favorite performing dog, and the earliest dog of the hunter’s blind, but the signature pet of bourgeois urban apartment dwellers. Yet the more beloved the poodle became, the less fearsome. Standard poodles are physically and temperamentally excellent protection dogs, yet are disqualified symbolically from such service. Much dog work is pure theater, and a poodle guarding a nuclear missile site, no matter how intelligent and even fierce, is simply miscast. (Even among mascots, it has an awkward position: would you rather be a powerful person’s metaphoric bulldog, or that person’s poodle?)

The dachshund was the third classic mascot of the 19th century and, like the poodle, a citified hunter. The Teckel Society—Teckel and Dackel are the dog’s more *gemütlich* names—was founded in 1888 and is one of the oldest German dog organizations. Some owners continued the breed’s original work of hunting badgers, but for friend and foe of Germany alike the dachshund remained the “wiener dog,” endowed by its distorted anatomy with an eccentric dignity and musculoskeletal problems to match. Even more beloved than other mascot dogs, and often courageous and persistent, it has been sadly unable to defend self or country. With the outbreak of World War I, even native-born British dachshunds faced abuse and death in the early waves of British jingoism. The last dachshund in the international spotlight was the unfortunate Waldi, the emblem of the 1972 Munich Olympics,

who presided over yet another tragedy.

Even before 1914, though, another type of national dog was emerging: the monument dog. Germany had an old monument dog, the *Deutsche Dogge*, another mastiff variant and a fearless protector. A dachshund on a pedestal would be laughable, a *Deutsche Dogge* plausible. But the *Deutsche Dogge* needed a lot of room, indoors and out, had an appetite that could challenge even the average Junker’s bank account, and lived only about a decade. Perhaps even more damning, many foreigners thought it was originally Danish—it is called the Great Dane in the English-speaking world—even if it seemed an unlikely product of such a small, peaceable nation.

**N**early a hundred years ago, a group of German fanciers made a fateful innovation in the culture of national dogs. In 1899, only a year before the significance of Gregor Mendel’s long-neglected papers on genetic inheritance burst into the awareness of scientists, these fanciers formed a German Shepherd Dog Society, the SV, to develop what they considered the outstanding qualities of one of Germany’s native breeds. The cofounder of the SV, a retired Prussian cavalry captain named Max von Stephanitz, was no Junker. He had grown up in a cosmopolitan, well-traveled Dresden household and was familiar with the breeding customs and dog shows then part of the vogue for all things English among the Continental upper class. Like other dog fanciers, von Stephanitz had noted the elegant lines of the Rough Collie, Queen Victoria’s favorite and the outstanding international luxury dog of the day.

After observing the autonomous herding skills of sheepdogs in western Germany, von Stephanitz (with another former officer) resolved to bring a new spirit to elite dog breeding, emphasizing the folk breeder’s cultivation of character, intelligence, and working ability over mere looks. A fierce nationalist, he promoted these pursuits as a distinctively German alternative to the frivolous and superficial ways of foreign breeders. Realizing that fewer and fewer dogs would ever actually herd sheep, he still insisted on the field trial as the

ultimate test of a pedigreed dog and extolled the loyal and protective character of the shepherd. The shepherd would retain the working virtues that Britain's effete collie had lost. Von Stephanitz's tireless publicity, massive correspondence (up to 17,000 letters logged in a single year), and persuasiveness with police officials brought quick popular recognition, though no official status, for the new breed of German Shepherd Dog. During World War I, the centrally organized SV was able to mobilize so many shepherds for the army that the breed displaced the Airedale terrier as favorite.

Von Stephanitz, a Saxon who had served Prussia and then moved to an estate in Bavaria to oversee his informal network of breeders and fanciers, epitomized German national fusion in his own right. And the breed standard that he and his associates developed merged what they considered the best traits of a number of regional varieties of sheepdog in Central Europe, especially strains from Thuringia and Württemberg. Express crate shipment via a national rail network let breeders combine varieties that could have remained distinct breeds; Belgium alone has three recognized shepherding breeds. Indeed, it is not clear how many of the dogs originated on "German" soil: Glenn Radde, a Minnesota geographer and anthropologist and pioneering student of the breed, believes that much of the foundation stock came from non-German-speaking Central Europe. Nevertheless, by 1938 the leading German encyclopedia *Meyers Lexikon* was proclaiming the shepherd's "pure German descent and pure German breeding."

Despite the use of masquerade names such as "Alsatian" and "police dog," Hollywood only helped confirm the German-ness of the breed during the first decades of the century, when its early canine stars Strongheart and Rin Tin Tin (both the products of German police or military kennels) paraded the shepherd's athletic prowess before international film audiences. The innocent dachshund remained stigmatized, but the shepherd became a token of a valiant foe, and a luxury import item akin to

optics and racing cars. Many American police departments still believe so strongly in the original bloodlines and methods that they pay premiums of thousands of dollars for German-bred, German-trained shepherds, hoping to find dogs that fulfill von Stephanitz's policedog ideal: "joy in work, devotion to duty, loyalty for his master, mistrust and sharpness against strangers and unusual things."

Other peoples have followed the Germans in the manufacture of monument dogs. Whether or not in conscious imitation, Japanese breeders of the early 20th century began to purify the largest of their indigenous spitzlike strains, the Akita, to remove traces of the European dogs to which it had been bred during its fighting days in the 19th century. Japanese breeders, according to one history of the Akita, created a hierarchy of colored leashes and honorific forms of address for the most accomplished dogs. Shepherds and others could earn titles of *Schutzhund* (protection dog) I, II, and III, but Akitas that progressed from *Ara-inu* (beginning dog) all the way to an exalted training title such as *O-hana Shi-inu* (released dog) were honored with a red leather collar decorated in gold with a shogun's crest. By 1919 the Akita was a designated national monument, and other breeds soon received the same distinction.

The German connection helped produce at least one even more surprising monument dog. In his history of the shepherd breed, the fiercely anti-Semitic von Stephanitz denied that Jews could understand the "essence" of the shepherd, but he evidently recognized honorary Aryans. Among the contributors to the magazine of the SV was Dr. Rudolfina Menzel, chief consultant to the Vienna police department and one of the leading specialists of the Shepherd world. Menzel and her husband emigrated to Palestine in the 1930s, where they became dog breeders and trainers for the Haganah, the Zionist military organization. And when shepherds and other European breeds wilted in the Middle Eastern heat, Menzel began to develop a new, desert-hardy dog from the fittest and most intelligent of the

pariahs that followed the Bedouin camps.

Until comparatively recently, Jews shared some of Muslims' cultural misgivings about dogs. In the Eastern European shtetl, dogs were suspect as the guardians of the gentry's estates and as the fighting companions of an often hostile peasantry. The Zionist dream of a Jewish state in Palestine changed aversion into enthusiasm. The local dogs of the Middle East, with whom the Bedouin could be alternately affectionate and harsh, were the survivors of rigorous natural selection, and close to their uncorrupted, spitzlike ancestors. Despite their nomadic history, the dogs turned out to be fiercely territorial as well as intelligent and self-reliant, able to signal an outsider's approach with two distinct barking tones.



*The Akita*

Were these not the dogs of ancient Israel, ready to emerge from centuries of neglect and to defend a land of their own at last?

The Canaan Dog, like the shepherd, has no official status in its homeland, yet it also is used widely by public authorities in Israel, and even as overseas celebrities adopt the breed, locally and internationally it continues to represent national values.

Native residents and settlers are not the only creators of national dogs. Peoples all over the world may be skillful practical owners of regional varieties, but shaping a breed demands familiarity with the biological, legal, and social aspects of dogdom—a body of knowledge that arose little more than a hundred years ago in Western Europe and North America. Just as the system of Scots clan tartans was elaborated by English textile manufacturers, just as Captain von Stephanitz appropriated the craft skills of working shepherds, Western



*The Kangal*

sojourners have been adopting and fostering what they perceive as “native” breeds in various corners of the world.

In Afghanistan, it was British diplomats and military officers serving under the British pro-

teCTORATE that prevailed from 1839 to 1921 who began to put together narratives of the Afghan Hound as a breed—this at a time when Afghanistan was still a tribal, nomadic society with no fixed political identity. Mary Amps, the wife of an English major stationed near Kabul after World War I, bought valuable specimens of the dog from tribesmen. Her writings and letters not only defined much of the breed's history but helped create a national consciousness of the Tazi Hound, as it is called locally.

Some foreigners have gone a step further, promoting breeds that were not yet recognized locally. Another English overseas couple, the husband in this case a diplomat on Malta, recognized in a large local rabbit-hunting dog the descendant of animals painted on the walls of the tombs of ancient Egypt. They christened it the Pharaoh Dog, worked with other breeders and fanciers in the United Kingdom and then in the United States, and ultimately helped it achieve recognition by the American Kennel Club in 1983. It is now the official hunting dog of Malta.



*The Canaan Dog*

Yet another diplomat, an American named David D. Nelson, and his wife, Judith, delighted their Turkish hosts in the mid-1970s by recognizing among the diverse herding and guarding dogs of east-central Anatolia the Kangal dog, named for a leading family and town of its region. As the Nelsons note on their World Wide

Web site devoted to the dog, “the Turkish villager has little concept of ‘breeds.’” In the absence of a Turkish national kennel club, and despite the preference of urban Turks for imported breeds, the Nelsons succeeded in raising Turkish government consciousness. Now there are two state kennels in the dog’s home province. Today the Kangal appears on a Turkish postage stamp and, like the Akita in Japan, is one

of breed wardens organized by von Stephanitz saved the shepherd from ruin through commercialization in the 1920s.) Yet narrow as the biological base may be, it still supports a monument.

The creation of national animals by cosmopolitan enthusiasts has not ended. The Inca Dog of Peru, for example, follows a breed standard developed by fanciers in Bremen. The Fila Brasileiro, with the build of a mastiff and the nose of a bloodhound, the unofficial monument dog of Brazil, is prized by owners there for its fierce territoriality and suspicion of strangers. But one of its chief promoters is a Brazilian-born breeder and writer named Clelia Kruel, who lives in Texas, where he manages a Fila Web site. Urban Brazilians may prefer shepherds and Dobermans, but, according to the site, the Brazilian Center for Jungle Warfare has judged the Fila “the *best* dog for jungle work.” “Faithful as a Fila” is a Brazilian proverb.



*Stubbie the pit bull, wounded while serving in World War I and greeted as a hero by three U.S. presidents, made a strong but unsuccessful bid for national dog status.*

of a number of breeds prized as a national asset for a combination of beauty and courage in the face of fierce predators.

Some academic biologists dispute the Nelsons’ claims and are skeptical that there are any real distinctions among Turkish breeds, but, as interest in the Kangal grows in Turkey and the West, the standard is becoming a self-fulfilling phylogeny. Turkish scientific opinion seems to support the Nelsons’ view that the Kangal is a long-established breed. Like other newly recognized breeds, it will need careful management and selection to retain the qualities that attracted owners to it in the first place. (Only a rigorous new system

While the Chihuahua, unlike the Xolo with its proud Aztec ancestry, began as the darling souvenir of Anglo tourists, it has proved surprisingly popular among Hispanic Americans, to judge from their favorable reaction to opinion polls on a controversial Spanish-speaking dog in a Taco Bell commercial. Nor is this the only welcome addition of humor to the formerly hard-bitten world of canine nationalism: Cobi, the mascot of the 1992 Barcelona Olympics, was officially a Gos d’Atura Catala (Catalan Herding Dog) but existed mainly as an unrecognizably stylized cartoon figure by the local artist-designer Javier Mariscal. No Catalan seemed to mind that foreign journalists regularly misidentified the breed as a Pyrenees.

As with most technologies, there are glaring paradoxes in dog breeding. When a mascot or monument dog becomes a global success, as the shepherd did, its country of origin may lose much of



its control over selection and quality. (This has been a serious issue among Akita breeders in Japan.) Though most people distinguish between individual animals and the images associated with their breed, dogs are sometimes made to suffer for atrocities committed by totalitarian or racist police employing the breed. Residents of Kinshasa, Zaire, took violent offense at the German Shepherd Dog that accompanied George Foreman for his 1974 world championship match with Mohammed Ali; it recalled the dogs of the hated Belgian colonial police. And military mobilization, which initially promoted the shepherd in its homeland during the First World War, nearly wrecked it in the second. Though Hitler was an SV member who exalted the shepherd as a quasi-official national totem through the 1930s, he also requisitioned thousands of the finest breeding dogs for war service, and many or most never returned. (Today, the overwhelming majority of German military and police dogs are shepherds.)

The ultimate national-dog paradox may be that Americans, so receptive to the mascot and monument breeds of other nations, have never had a pure-bred candidate of their own. Just as we have a succession of presidential libraries across the land supplementing our national archives, we have a trail of presidential dogs, from Warren Harding's Laddie Boy (an Airedale) to Bill Clinton's chocolate Labrador retriever Buddy, and a diverse lineup of military and police dogs. Few traces remain of our native American dogs, at least outside Alaska. Enthusiasts have only a slender basis for a truly autochthonous breed on the Canaan Dog model. One biologist, I. Lehr Brisbin, has found and bred a wild strain near the Savannah River

nuclear plant that he has identified as descended from the earliest native dogs, but these Carolina dogs, as he has called them, do not have American Kennel Club recognition yet, let alone a postage stamp.

Americans seem to reserve their affection and enthusiasm for mixture itself. In 1990, the chairman of Japan's Toyota Motor Company caused an international uproar when he declared that Americans built inferior cars because they were a "mongrel race." Americans may have been embarrassed by the quality of their Fords and Chevies at the time, but they never wavered in their commitment to the glories of crossbreeding. Around the same time, when Robert Dornan, then a Republican congressman from California, used a talk show to propose a bill to designate a national dog, the winner of the show's poll was the "great American mutt."

My neighbors in the park don't necessarily want to merge their cultures or their genes into a vast, old-style melting pot, but neither are they happy with ideologies of purity. The pluralism reflected in the mutt cult has, at least for the time being, suspended the search for a national culture and purpose that was so prominent in the 1950s and '60s. But there is an equally unforeseen side of the pedigreed dog fancy. As sites on the World Wide Web suggest, the establishment and maintenance of "pure" bloodlines is a national and international sporting activity. It brings together people of the most diverse backgrounds in new communities, just as the assorted dogs of Davison Park are giving older and newer Americans occasion to meet each other. Animals are not only good to think with, as Claude Lévi-Strauss wrote. They are good to link with.