

THE IRISHMAN'S WAY BACK

By Henry L. Betten

Henry L. Betten was the author of an article in the AMERICAN FIELD which attracted the attention of the men who would be the founders of the NRSFTC and set them to thinking about restoring the Irish Red Setter to its old place in the field in North America. The following article was written expressly for THE FLUSHING WHIP and is reprinted from the December 1955 issue.

I am glad to note the fine group of fanciers comprising the National Red Setter Field Trial Club is intent on bringing the Irish setter back to its early high status as a gunning and field trial breed.

If the Irish setter champions in America will attack the problem of the breed's restoration in a bold and practical manner, without undue stress on bench show qualities and exaltation of ancient and inert show strains, there appears to be no reason why the Irishman cannot attain a solid place in the sun in the above named capacities. It seems that the NRSFTC is avoiding the pitfalls of the past.

Some time ago I told Bill Brown (Editor of the American Field) that in the future I would write nothing more on genealogical subjects pertaining to gun dogs and fully meant to stick to that determination; such activities in the past have seemed largely a waste of time. But if The Flushing Whip feels there is any merit in my thinking and if it might in any way benefit the Irish setter cause, let's go ahead and print it. But my observations of the past fifty or sixty years lead me to expect a storm from the show fancy. And—if bigotry and snobbery is put aside, the Irishman's half brother, the English setter, is available to lend a hand and shoulder in putting him over the top again.

The experience of pointer fanciers and likewise English setter fanciers in the past indicates how difficult it becomes to restore decadent breeds. The pointer is now triumphant, particularly relative to so called major trials, after passing through two bitter experiences. And with overloads of bandwagon riders it is apt to hold the lead. The Llewellyn is practically defunct and but for the good offices of one Eugene M, a lowly grade with an Irish cross, the English setter would be in a very bad way today. But it is a long way back to Eugene M and it may require some additional fortunate injections of "cold blood" - save the name- to aid the breed as in the case of the Irish setter.

I am a believer in the potency of occasional dashes of outside blood of proved quality when a breed begins to lag and take no stock in the belief certain breeds have been kept immaculately pure throughout the centuries; or that they originated in a spontaneous manner, from a kind of immaculate conception and that their genealogy has remained ever spotless, It seems sensible to believe that the theory and practice of pure breeding can be over done to an extent it leads to inevitable mediocrity. So perhaps it might be well for some rebels within the ranks of Irish setter

breeders to form a limited cult and experiment with this matter of prepotent outside setter heaven; it might be the short road to rapid improvement of the red breed. I should not, however, wish to lead the fancy to false hopes. I don't profess to believe there is any exact pattern, prescription or breeding formula whereby restoration may be accomplished miraculously, right now. By rare judgment or great good fortune this might occur, but the odds are tremendously against it.

You only have to review past efforts of a half century or more in the Irish setter's instance through the medium of pure breeding, the Llewellyn setter's decline to the point of vanishment, the English setter's lesser deterioration and the pointer's several cycles of ineptness to realize that this job of rebuilding can be a difficult task. Yet in instance of the pointer, the Chesapeake and the Brittany, also other sporting breeds, and such breeds as the St. Bernard, outside blood was successfully employed in bringing them to a peak and also in regenerating them.

The history of the Campbell's, of the modern Llewellyn-Irish strain bred by Llewellyn himself and exemplified by National Ch. Eugene M with his Irish cross, out standing pillar of the English setter breed whose dynasty is the greatest in modern setter history, all carry precedents and lessons for setter breeders, whatever the color. And I personally recall an era when combinations of the blood of English, Irish and Gordon setters were employed by many important fanciers and produced splendid dogs. Practically all of the old time handlers of my acquaintance freely admitted there were many exceptional gun dogs among those crossbred native setters. But it was more fashionable and profitable to tie to the so-called "blue bloods", even though a considerable proportion turned out to be duds.

My most active interest in Irish setters dates back some sixty years to the era of the O'Callaghan reds, notably Finglas and George Gray's Irish dogs. But I knew them well even before that as gun dogs of high merit and greatly regretted to note their decline. I am too old to concern myself actively in their regeneration. But in a sentimental way my heart is with the breed whether they be all red or a somber, deep mahogany, or a legitimate red and white as were legitimate colors in the old days, and are today. And I cannot help but feel a yielding to a senseless show demand in the matter of color was largely responsible for the breed's loss of popularity as a gun dog.

Irish setter fanciers have two lines of action to choose from in their efforts to restore the breed. They can confine themselves to pure breeding—or they can resort to outcrossing. Neither system should' be condemned and the advocates of both should work harmoniously for a common successful end. Why even as late as the August 27, 1955 issue of the American Field, Elmer Simpkins makes mention of Frank Reilly's old cross bred setter, Jim, the apple of his owner's eye, although Reilly owned the illustrious Ch. Eugene M and other outstanding gun dogs and field trial performers. I suggest that a check of volumes one and two of the National American Kennel Club's Stud Book will reveal how many esteemed crossbreds were registered by representative sportsmen of the late eighteen seventies.

In breeding, it will be most important to remember that perhaps thousands of purebred gun dogs are bred each year. Of these only a small percentage develop into competent gun dogs, and of these last only a very few show prepotent qualities. So I would say that unless both the sire and the dam are exceptional performers and well proven producers of such, a test mating would be,

by no means, conclusive. Moreover if a dam had previously produced high-class progeny to more than one sire, her worth in such a test would be even more satisfactory; this assuming the sire possessed high prepotency. Mediocrity gives no promise of relighting the once bright Irish flame.

Whatever the remedies to be applied to full restoration of the Irish setter, they should be based, I believe, upon a heavy groundwork of prepotent gunning and field trial blood—and without too much attention to show history and conformation standards. Show standards have done nothing beneficial for such eminent breeds as the English setter and the pointer, which have flourished in trials and served remarkably well as gun dogs regardless. Breed top-flight field performers among the rosy red and red and white. Perpetuate such field qualities through prepotent individuals and show qualities may well be forgotten to a resurgent breed's advantage.