

The Canine Herding Heritage

Jim Engel



Shepherd with Flock and Dog Painting by Anton Mauve (1836 – 1888)

The police breeds as we know them today emerged from among the indigenous herding dogs of north central Europe in response to the need for enhanced law enforcement in rapidly expanding industrial cities in the latter 1800s. The question for the canine historian, and the key to unlocking the essence of these breeds, is why this latent foundation was among these herders, why these dogs rather than the Airedales, Mastiffs, other Molossers – or any other breed or type – became the working partners of the police officer worldwide. The answer lies in the evolution of our common agricultural heritage.

For several million years man and the hominoids he evolved from had subsisted by hunting, scavenging and gathering in competition with other predators and herbivores. Very late in this process, only a few thousand years ago, a moment in time on the evolutionary scale, rather than simply seeking out the bounty of nature we began to domesticate our food sources, that is, gradually began to plant and tend

crops and to take active control of game animals. This was in response to increasing human population and the consequent scarcity of naturally occurring food, an alternative to population control through starvation. Population reduction by less productive breeding, starvation or migration had always been the natural way of reigning in growth, but eventually local human populations evolved means of enhancing food supply through intervention and management in natural food production. As game animals became more scarce and neighboring bands increasingly put pressure on supply we evolved a process of controlling and restraining them and fending off other predators, including other humans, so as to provide sustenance in hard times when nature did not. Once the process reached critical mass, that is as populations increased more and more beyond the capacity of nature to provide, crops and domestic animals became the social foundation rather than strategies for transient hard times. The world would never be the same.

Although there was enormous variation in the evolution of pastoral existence according to climate, terrain, natural vegetation and the nature of the animals to be tamed dogs were in many instances crucial partners in the process. Dogs may not always have been necessary, and domestication would eventually have come forth without them, but some pastoral traditions would have been much more difficult or impossible without the use of herding dogs. Sheep and goats were the first to be tamed and controlled, followed latter by cattle and swine. Dogs were useful both for controlling movement, that is, for keeping the herd together and moving it in search of forage or for convenience and also in discouraging predation, that is keeping wolves, lynx or other human beings from harvesting the livestock for their own benefit.

In the centuries following the fall of Roman domination in the north of Europe the land was held by the nobility and the church, and the common man was tied to the land. This was generally a sparsely populated world vastly different from today, where predators such as the wolf, lynx and bear still contested man for the benefit of his livestock. The Romans had come with domesticated animals, cattle and sheep, and their own herding and droving dogs, which remained even as direct Roman domination waned and then vanished.

For twenty centuries these herdsman tended their sheep and cattle, aided by their dogs. This was an era before cities and with larger distances between villages, with vast open lands, much of it forest or of use primarily for grazing. Because of this sparse population, the herds tended to be in large, open grassland where the primary function of the dog and the stockman was to keep the flock or herd together and to protect them from predators such as the wolf. Many herds moved great distances yearly to take advantage of the lush grass and cool temperatures of the highlands in the summer, retreating to lower elevations to avoid the snows of winter. This continues even today in areas such as Greece, Spain and Turkey, although in recent years trucks have augmented some of the long migrations. And the predators were always present, alert for the opportunity to take down a wandering animal, even today in many regions of the world.

Gradual increases in population caused favorably situated villages or trading outposts to emerge into towns and eventually cities. In time this process, and the increasingly onerous bondage of those working the land, built up the societal pressures leading to the French Revolution, in the 1790s, which spilled across Europe and then the world as a whole. This was the focal point of a process that over time would transform agriculture and thus the age-old role of the herding dogs. This revolution was at root about land, about wresting it away from the nobility and the

church of the ancient regime and allowing it to pass into the hands of the men and woman who actually worked it.

Prior to the French Revolution the stock largely grazed on what is referred to below as untilled land, what in America we would call open range. Although the ancient role of the dog was largely that of guardian against the predators, times were changing, the wolf was disappearing. The last known wolf in Belgium was killed in the Ardennes in 1847. (Vanbutsele, 1988)

Von Stephanitz mentions bears as so prevalent in Prussia as late as the 1750s as to occasion school closings. He further notes that the last known lynx was killed in Westphalia in 1745 and lynx were being shot regularly in the mountains of Thuringia up to the early 1800s. The wolf is mentioned as the most serious predator, and numerous instances of large-scale killings and serious economic loss are cited; predators were a very serious problem for the continental stockman until relatively recent times. Even today a few wolves have reappeared in remote areas of Germany. (von Stephanitz, 1925) p106

This way of life went on for many hundreds of years, and only began to change with the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which took increasing population from the country side to emerging cities and began to mechanize the farm, reducing the need for agricultural labor. One consequence of this was the evolution of formal police service commencing in rapidly growing cities, which in time led to the evolution of the police dog. In the early years the canine function was primarily aggression, that is, crowd control and providing security for the patrol officer, particularly at night. In light of this the most obvious candidates would have been drawn from the larger estate guardian breeds and similar dogs, and in fact Great Danes and similar dogs were among the earliest recruits in Germany and other places, long before the herders were established as formal breeds. But over time the Molossers, Airedales and other candidates fell aside; and modern police dogs evolved from the herding breeds, specifically the tending style dogs of Belgium, Holland and Germany.

This revolutionary process – long, difficult and violent though it was – went hand in hand with incessantly expanding populations to transform the way of life of the herdsman and his flocks and dogs. This transformation, of the entire social order, was for the herdsman from open land grazing to increasingly controlling the flocks in more crowded circumstances, in close proximity to cultivated fields and over actively used roads. As the predators were gradually pushed back and the livestock was coming into closer proximity to expanding farm fields the canine protection role was diminishing and the tending style herding dog was emerging.

In the decades following the French Revolution the expansion of crop farming to fill more and more land, driven by and contributing to expanding populations, put pressure on the herdsman, for now he had to find food for his herds and flocks in close proximity to actively tilled land, which meant he and his dogs had to keep them out of the tempting fields. This gradually altered the role of the dog, putting increasing emphasis on herd control and less emphasis on the waning predation threat. The larger and more fierce guardian dogs gradually gave way to the more mobile, more agile working dogs of the stockman and shepherds, the progenitors of the tending breeds of today such as the German and Belgian Shepherds.

The Industrial Revolution was a process of expanding industry in ever-larger cities and mass migration from the country to industrial work in the cities. This greatly accelerated the changes in an agricultural way of life that had been evolving slowly. The handwriting was on the wall for these sheep and cattle tending breeds, and for the shepherds and stockmen themselves.

In the words of Dr. Adolphe Reul, founder of the Belgian Shepherds:

"There was a time when Belgium possessed, according to its relatively small territory a considerable number of dogs used for the guidance and guard of the flocks of sheep, and even flocks of geese, because in the whole country sheep were bred and used for their wool.

"As a result the price of wool and mutton fell, an inevitable consequence of the ruthless competition that Argentina and Australia offer our own producers, as a result of the given extension to the production and the use of cotton and of the realized progress in the agricultural domain that has brought it the suppression of the out of date system of untilled land, the decrease of the number and the importance of the flocks is emphasized." (Vanbutsele, 1988)

In another commentary Reul pointed out that the widespread use of chemical fertilizer meant that the long term custom of leaving fields periodically fallow, without a crop, was greatly reduced, further reducing the grazing land available to the shepherd and his sheep.

Similar trends were taking place in other regions, such as Germany. Vanbutsele goes on in his own words:

"Following the general counting, 969,000 sheep were enumerated in 1836, 583,000 in 1856 and 365,000 in 1880. The sheep were mainly bred in Campine and the Walloon provinces." (Vanbutsele, 1988)

The Industrial Revolution was driven by technology, especially the steam engine for mining, railroad and industrial use. Technology would continue to transform the pastoral and agricultural world as the nineteenth century emerged into the twentieth, with barbed wire, the tractor, combine and other novel inventions further reducing the need for farm labor. The railroad, paved roads and eventually the truck were transporting the stock to market, making the drover and his dogs relics of the past. The horse went from the foundation of agriculture and transport to amusement, racing and recreational riding, in a few short decades. The replacement of the sailing vessel by the steam ship meant that foreign agricultural products from places such as Argentina and New Zealand could be economically transported to Europe, relentlessly driving down prices of products such as wool and mutton.

As the sheep disappeared and the shepherds turned to work in the fields or in the cities, the way of life of these herding dogs was it its own turn disappearing. In order to preserve these dogs, and to meet the emerging social needs of urbanization, men such as Louis Huyghebaert created new sports, the so-called dressage or obedience, which with new emphasis on practical police style application quickly evolved into the Belgian ring sport. The evolution of these sport activities and the invention of the police dog were part of the same process, for amateur breeding and training was from the beginning an essential part of the European canine police and civilian defense work.

Animal husbandry varies over time and region immensely according to the climate, terrain, social structure, state of technology and the animals herded, that is, sheep, cattle or others. The function and thus the physical and working attributes of the herdsman's dogs have varied according to time and region. Many times a differentiation is made between the herding of the sheep or other animals, controlling and directing their movement in the pasture, countryside and along rural roads and the guardian breeds whose function is solely to challenge and drive off predators. But this is not a realistic way to think, for this division really includes only

the extreme ends of a wide spectrum of functionality, for over time and region the vast majority of pastoral dogs have had roles that involved elements of each.

Furthermore, the distinction is often made between the drover's dogs, as exemplified by the Smooth Collie or the Rottweiler, who help transport the cattle or sheep to market, and the more general herding dogs that tended or herded the sheep in the fields and meadows. These are all broad generalizations, and in reality any particular herdsman or farmer is likely to have dogs that perform several of these functions in ways appropriate to his situation and needs, and the man himself would probably tend to regard such arcane discussions of terminology as just plain silly. Much of this has been invented and popularized by the citified, middle class breed creator hobbyists, seeking to identify, differentiate and justify their newly discovered show dog breed, something the stockmen in their fields and meadows would no doubt regard as humorous or outright absurd.

Nevertheless, in common usage today these pastoral dogs are by convention broadly classified as herding or gathering dogs, livestock guardians or tending dogs. Each of these shall be discussed in some detail in the following three sections.

Herding or Gathering Dogs

The stereotypical herding picture that most quickly comes to mind is the intense Border Collie crouching and giving the eye; that is staring intensely as does a stalking predator, from whence the behavior emanates. In the lowlands of the British Isles, on the border of Scotland and England, the Border Collies do not deal primarily with sheep in massive herds, but with sheep which generally roam free, exist on their own, semi wild, to find sufficient grazing in a sparse and generally rough environment with rocky slopes and deep gullies. This is of course only possible in regions where predator pressure is very low, and the wolf has been extinct in the British Isles for centuries. Because the sheep spend much of their lives essentially on their own, roaming free, they are especially challenging for the dogs, who must quickly gain control when the time comes for sheering or other interaction. These dogs will bite or grip, preferably to the face or legs, to gain discipline. Breeding and training the herding dog to grip or bite with enough intensity, and in the right way according to the animals being worked, is fundamental to all herding. Herding is controlled aggression, derives from the basic hunting and chasing instincts modified by man through breeding and training to stop short of the kill or injury yet elicit enough of the fear response in the herd and individual animal to gain and maintain discipline. Such dogs generally work silently, circling the herd and then going to the eye and stalk posture to control, with a quick run forward or to the side to direct or cut off a sheep.

This style of herding and herd dog no doubt evolved concurrently with the eradication of the predators such as the wolf and the increasing population density and the resulting need to utilize ever more sparsely vegetated grazing land. Thus the herding role evolved from keeping the animals in a compact group for effective control and defense to one of locating and retrieving generally free ranging sheep. When the sheep are gathered together, the dogs of the different shepherds must often coexist in close proximity during the ordinary course of their herding work, for semi wild sheep feeding and living on their own must be gathered and separated for sheering, harvesting or breeding.

Although American and British people are typically familiar with this Border Collie style of herding, this is a very special case, for in reality unattended sheep have suffered significant loss from predation over most of history and most of the world even today. In general the continuous presence of a shepherd and his dogs, or the

larger, more aggressive single purpose livestock guardian dogs, has been necessary to protect the sheep.

Livestock Guardians

Guardian dogs are those which live permanently with the herd as surrogate members, driving off or engaging predators, such as wolves, bears, lynx or jackals. They are exemplified by the larger, sheep guardian dogs from the Pyrenees to the Himalayas, such as the Komondor, Anatolian Shepherd Dog, Kuvasz, or Maremma Sheepdog of Italy. These breeds are predominantly white today to match the color of the sheep, but in much earlier times, prior to the Romans, when the sheep were of varied colors encompassing black, grey to brown the guardian dogs also tended to these colors, instances of which occur today. One explanation given is that the dogs come to match the color of the sheep, with white becoming predominant in Roman times because white sheep became desirable and common in that this facilitated the dyeing of the wool. Others speculate that the color was more a matter of fashion, and that the instances of northern European hobbyist breed creators with money to spend encouraged some shepherds to select for white, by culling pups of other colors, in order to supply this novel market.

Sheep and goats were the earliest domestic animals, beginning about 8000 years ago; and there is every indication in the earliest writings and existent art that guardian dogs were essential from the very early stages in order to keep domestic animals in a world where natural predators were ubiquitous. Over time the breeding of the sheep and the dogs gradually evolved together, more by happenstance than specific, premeditated human decisions, continually according to the evolving human social and agricultural circumstances.

As Coppinger points out, until recently, before the advent of trucks for transport, sheep, dogs and shepherds were continually on the move, often covering several hundred miles in a yearly cycle. In these circumstances, on the move year round with the sheep, it would have been impractical to confine a bitch in season to insure a specific stud dog. The female was no doubt serviced by whatever dogs were present and capable, perhaps several males. Coppinger points out that this is the typical situation, even today, in some remote areas. (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001)

Thus the sheep herd guarding dogs are a continuum from the Himalayas to the Pyrenees in Spain, with local variation according to climate, terrain and local husbandry practice. Under such circumstances men do not generally make breeding selections, for the female will generally mate with the dog or dogs available, and those dogs that work stay and those that do not move on or die out. The various formal breeds are a modern creation, often at the instigation of European and American hobbyists, who love to discover a new breed and make it fashionable as a pet and show dog. Such dogs usually lose their real working potential and character by the time they wind up in the dog show ring, and certainly shortly thereafter if any vestige remains, for the fundamental fact is that such dogs were created to live with the sheep rather than man and by their nature tend to make poor human companions and pets.

Livestock dogs are the product of natural selective breeding and then imprinting and socialization at a very young age rather than training; human contact is generally minimized at this critical time. Although the dogs need to relate to the herdsman to some extent, the fundamental and deepest loyalty is to the herd, of which they are from birth virtual members. These guardian dogs are primarily sheep dogs, although they are sometimes also used with cattle. The initial imprinting is

species specific, that is, dogs raised with sheep will in general not develop a strong enough affinity for cattle to be effective.

Most authorities regard these dogs as while perhaps exhibiting regional types or variations fundamentally a breeding pool contiguous across the region, the breed distinctions being the creation of dog show hobbyists. Of course, similar observations also are relevant to the herders, for in the broad view the difference between the German, Belgian and Dutch shepherds has more to do with national and regional pride than fundamental differences in the indigenous herding dogs spread across north western Europe.

Least one think of these livestock guardian dogs as specific to Europe or Asia, Charles Darwin reports dogs working in exactly this way in Uruguay in 1833 in his famous *The Voyage of the Beagle*. (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001) Indeed, guardian dogs have enabled sheep raising for centuries and throughout the world, while the Border Collie style of herding is very recent and very local, a peculiarity of circumstances in the modern British Isles. Wherever men raise sheep, they either bring the dogs along with the initial stock and adapt them to new circumstances or quickly adapt local dogs to the guardian role, often evolving appropriate dogs through interbreeding.

In popular conception the livestock guardian dog engages in nightly battles with the wolves in a desperate struggle to preserve the herd. But Ray Coppinger makes the point that in reality the simple presence of the dogs generally disrupts the predator mode of operation, and that actual physical engagements are uncommon. Just as wolf family groups or packs separate themselves spatially in a region, with each group marking its own territory and tending to respect that of other groups, thus minimizing physical violence, the existence of the guardian dogs within the herd establishes the grazing area of the herd as the territory of a separate canine group, which in the normal course of events is respected by the local canine predators. Just as the best outcome of the police officer's career is many years of side arms training without ever a shot in anger, the guardian dog as a deterrent rather than an active combatant is the optimal mode of livestock husbandry.

In a similar way, for many years it was the common belief that the wolf and the mountain lion were not natural predators on man, that there were no known examples of attacks on human beings. In recent years, mountain lion and even wolf attacks have become increasingly common because of restrictions on hunting and the use of guns has gradually reduced the communal memory, a learned behavior of man avoidance, in these predator species. Little Red Ridinghood was generally safe from the wolf in North America because her father, grandfather and uncles for generations shot at wolves at every opportunity.

By communal memory I mean that the fear and avoidance of man passed on from the mother or within the pack. In a similar way, each generation of wolves brought up in a social environment where sheep herd predation was not part of the learning experience would tend to carry on the existing modes of hunting. Hard times would of course lead to pressure for new means to survive, overcome social inhibitions against sheep predation even in the presence of the guardian dogs.

The Coppinger book relates their experiences in an extensive project over many years bringing old world livestock guarding dogs to America and introducing them to American stockmen. This book became upon publication an immediate classic, which everyone seriously interested in dogs of any type should not only obtain and read, but seriously study. Even when not referenced directly, much of the material presented here was first publically available in this source. (Coppinger & Coppinger, 2001)

Tending dogs

Dogs that control and direct the movement of the herd as well as protect it – as exemplified by the German and Belgian Shepherd dogs – are generally referred to as tending dogs. Such breeds work with large groups of sheep, which by nature and breeding selection maintain the flock structure, rather than dispersing to feed as do the sheep in environments served by the Border Collie. These dogs, often working in pairs under the direction of the shepherd, move the flocks from place to place, along roads as needed, to find continual access to new grazing and a safe place to rest the flock in the night, when the dogs patrol the perimeter to prevent straying and drive off predators. These tending dogs do not exhibit the eye and stalk behavior of the gathering breeds, but rather push and grip the sheep as necessary to maintain discipline.

Sheep in the larger herds of the tending style breeds live their entire lives under the close control of the dogs and thus will naturally to stay in the herd and not usually challenge a dog one on one, that is the dogs train the sheep continually and the lambs grow up in an environment with basically trained sheep. This is in contrast to the gathering breeds mentioned above, where the sheep often have only sporadic interaction with the dogs, which thus must continually be able to assert discipline over an animal used to living on its own.

Regional herding trials are generally popular and reflect the work of the various breeds according to local circumstance and tradition, with those in the British Isles involving the dogs working with a half dozen to a dozen sheep while the HGH German Shepherd trials involve two dogs working several hundred sheep.

As we have seen, the herding dogs in general, and the continental tending breeds in particular, needed the endurance to be in the fields for long periods of time, the olfactory capability to seek out and identify lambs born in the fields or strayed from the herd, the willingness to work with the handler combined with the initiative to take action on their own as needed and the ability to exert control by biting and gripping with minimum viciousness and damage, that is, contain the hunting and killing instinct short of the full natural cycle.

This is also an excellent job description of the modern police dog, and the underlying reason why the vast majority of police breeds evolve from these tending style herding dogs, developed over hundreds of years of service in the fields and meadows and then consolidated into our police breeds at the turn of the twentieth century.

Copyright 2014 James R. Engel

[Angel's Lair All Breed](#)

[Angel's Lair Schutzhund](#)

[Police Dog Book](#)