

A review of Retrievers (Labrador). Kennel Gazette. 1907

By F.E.Schofield

(Interesting paragraph 5 – in bold)

To write the review of Labradors is not by any means plain sailing. A breed which has been recognised by the Kennel Club for two years, and which is provided with classes at only two important shows and two or three local, cannot be said to have been influenced by the show system to any extent. Among sporting dogs the Labradors are in this respect probably unique. In the evolution of the ubiquitous Flat-coated Retrievers they played an all-important part, yet they themselves remain to-day very much as they were when the former was neither defined nor definable. When in 1859 Joseph Jobling was winning with his Black and Tan Setter Dandy at the first dog show he had Labradors in his kennel at home equally excellent of their kind. The most famous bitch he ever had either for appearance or work was Midge. Retrievers at that time being decidedly in the ascendant, Midge was once mated to one of them. Of the produce, Eske was one, who in turn mated with Major Allison's Retriever Sailor, produced T.H.Jobling's Sailor 5, 176. Sailor was a big handsome dog, who won many prizes, and did his full share in the making of Retrievers as we now know them. I poisoned Midge for Mr. Jobling when she was over 18 years old, and for that once saw "the strong man bowing himself". Which brings me to the point. A few years ago I saw for the first time Mr F.P.Barnett's Squib, the dam of his well-known Stag, sire of Mr Portal's Field Trial winner, Flapper. It was like a resurrection, for Squib was an exact reproduction of the Midge of long ago. Nay, more: so little have opinions changed that either Midge or Squib might have been pictured as typical Labradors for either period or the long interval between.

So then we have Labradors now just as we had them fifty years ago - just as we had, in fact, all Sporting Dogs fifty years ago. That is to say, we have a distinct breed maintained by a comparatively few enthusiastic individuals, primarily for its sporting qualities, according to a recognised, unwritten type, and modified in a few non-essential points to individual taste.

The problem is, what will be the effect of the new departure! It is not too much to say that many old breeders view the idea of Labradors becoming Show Dogs with positive alarm! Quite recently. one of them said to me with all the emphasis he could command "If these showmen get hold of them they will put heads like crocodiles upon them as they have already done with Retrievers". I smiled and did my best to reassure the old man but, all the same, felt he had "touched the spot". The superlative degree is the main motive power in dog showing. What was it but the idiotic phrase "longest and lowest" which was rapidly converting our Field Spaniels into absolute monstrosities a few years ago? What but "the longest head on any dog living" has ruined, - Hold! Time is precious with me and I have none for answering letters! Suffice it to say that the continual endeavour to produce animals of abnormal development in one feature or other does, not only Incalculable mischief to the breed operated upon, but leads astray young breeders - and many old, for that matter - into utterly wrong ideals as to true type!

It is difficult to say in what direction the Labradors might be attacked, but all the same, I feel it my duty to warn breeders to "beware of the leaven of the Pharisees". Some mischief has already been done in another direction. Not so very long ago the awards were so extraordinary in a class with several dogs familiar to me in it that I wrote privately to the judge, whom I know well. His reply came straight. "I know nothing about them, but they made me judge them, and I went for the ones nearest to Retrievers". Two or three small owners of good dogs were unnecessarily disappointed at that very show, and the owner of the winner got a wrong type into his noddle, which I am not sure that he has got rid of yet.

Let it not be thought for a moment, however, that I share the dread. The fact that there were 73 Labradors registered in 1906 is in itself sufficient proof of the filip given to them through the recognition of the Kennel Club and consequent attraction drawn to their merits. Many good dogs have not yet got beyond Hexham - which was the first show to give a class for them - or Alnwick, but they will assuredly come in time when the breed gets better known and its distinctive features better understood.

The performance of Mr Portal's Flapper at the Field Trials was distinctly meritorious, and we Northumbrians are rather proud of it. To get second in a stake of 20 competitors at the Kennel Club Trials and second in a stake of 17 at the International clearly stamp him as a first-class working dog. At the same meetings, the Hon. A. Holland-Hibbert's Munden Sandfly and Munden Something won a second and Certificate of Merit respectively. The success of these dogs, it is to be hoped, will induce other owners of good Labradors to patronise the trials. If they do, I have no doubt they will take their full share of the prizes.

Having so recently written in these columns my opinion of the comparative merits of the Labradors exhibited at the Crystal Palace, it is no good going over the ground again. Unfortunately Twinkle and Solomon, the 1st and 2nd at Southampton, were both absent from the Palace, though entered, and I have not had another opportunity of seeing them. Three Northumberland shows, Hexham, Alnwick, and Bellingham, had very good classes. Of good dogs in them which did not find their way to the Palace may be specially mentioned Parker's Duchess, Bell's Dusk, Parmley's Rimside Nell, and Liddel's Warwick Collier.

Brayton Swift, the winning dog at the Crystal Palace, has a dark eye, which in my opinion improves him greatly. This is precisely one of the points where opinions differ. Several devoted breeders look upon a dark eye as almost a disqualification. No doubt from the time of their earliest Introduction the majority of them have been light in the eye.

Their intimate relations, the Newfoundlands, despite all endeavours to eradicate it, in many of the best breed specimens show the light eye to this day. If breeders were unanimous to-morrow, therefore, as to the desirability of the dark eye, it would take years of careful selection before anything like uniformity could be obtained, in this respect. On the other hand, one has seen occasionally dark-eyed specimens all along the line and will continue to see them.

On one point let there be no mistake, we want no Retriever crossing to darken eyes! In judging I would not for a moment consider colour of eyes if I felt the Retriever coat in a Labrador. Therein lies the real danger of attaching too much importance to a dark eye. It is largely a matter of individual taste, of education, if you like to put it so, and I am willing to admit that mine has been sadly neglected. But according to my light, I have a right to say while I like a dark eye in a dark dog, you must give me a pure, distinctive Labrador first, and afterwards preferably that one with a dark eye.

One other point needs attention. From the first the weakness of Labradors has been in shoulders and a slackness behind them. That is to my mind the prevailing fault to-day. It is not, of course, to any great extent visible in the select specimens of the show ring, but breeders generally require to devote more attention to it.

Colonel Cane lately drew my attention to a breed of yellow Labradors in the possession of Captain Radclyffe at Wareham. They are not to be confused with the yellow Retrievers we have had for long enough on the Borders, but are pure Labradors bred and selected with great care. Captain Radcliffe has kindly written me particulars of them which are most interesting. It is to be hoped we shall have an opportunity of seeing a team of them at some important show during the ensuing season.