

THE GORDON SETTER



Gordon Castle near Fochabers, Scotland

Note: As early as 1621 Gervase Markham refers to “black and fellow setting dogs.” in *Hungers Prevention or The whole arte of fowling by water and land*. “Fellows” being fallow, pale red or tan. Despite these early beginnings it is Alexander, 4th Duke of Gordon (1743-1827) and his son George, the 5th Duke (1770-1836) that are credited with the development of the Scottish black and tan Setter breed which bears the family name – the Gordon Setter

The text of this article was written and edited by Herbert Compton in the Twentieth Century Dog Vol 11 Sporting Dogs published in 1904. Included in this text are appraisals by judges of the breed and an early breed standard. This text has been embellished with relevant art portraiture of the period for reader’s further enlightenment and enjoyment of these early writings. **Bridget Simpson**



Portrait by Richard Reinagle of the George 5th Earl of Gordon
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This variety of setter gained its title from having been first bred by the Duke of Richmond and Gordon at Gordon Castle, and has sometimes been called the “Scotch”, as well as the black and tan setter. Idstone: dates the year of its appearance back to 1820, when the Duke of Gordon of that day interested himself in the breed. It was a bigger and coarser dog than others of its race, and its colour, the dewlap it carried, and the haw it showed suggested a not very remote dash of bloodhound blood. In *Dogs of Scotland*. it is stated that when these setters first began to stand out as a strain apart, they were of different colours, black and tan, black, white and tan, liver and white, black and white, and sometimes even lemon and white. The black and tans were the commonest, but the shade of tan was lighter than today, and the dogs often had white breasts and feet. They had somewhat of the spaniel type of ears, beautiful heads, and very profuse coats and feathering. Another writer on the breed, Mr. Harry Malcolm, says that when first introduced into England about 1859, the Gordon setter was of immense size – too big, in fact, to please the majority of English sportsmen. He mentions a famous dog called *Kent*, whose grand head and rich colour drew a considerable amount of attention to him. He did a lot of winning at early dog shows not without running the gauntlet of some hard names, such as “cur”, “mongrel,” and “half bloodhound,” but his owner, Mr. Pearce, was so convinced of the purity and working ability of his strain, that he offered to place a whelp with Mr. Malcolm, to be brought up where he could not possibly see game, and at the age of nine or ten months to be introduced to it, when he prophesied the Gordon would do him credit. The arrangement was carried out, and when it came to the test, the puppy not only beat his ground in fine style, but at the end of a few hours began to stand his birds as only a well-bred setter will do. The pup was by *Kent* out of a bitch called *Regent*, and the *Kent* strain runs strong in the breed to this day. Mr. Malcolm, I should mention, is President of the American Gordon Setter Club.



"The end of the day" 1881 by artist James Hardy Jr



“The days catch” portrait by artist James Hardy Jr. 1877



“Waiting for the guns” 1888 portrait by John Emms

The Gordon strain no longer exists at Gordon Castle, and it is probable that the old type is entirely lost. Indeed the variety has fallen upon evil days, Mr. Rawdon Lee writes: "There is no doubt a screw loose somewhere in the Gordon setter, else he would be more popular than he now appears to be. With the earlier field trials he had much to do; with the later ones next to nothing. Some dogs are slow and stupid, others fast and disobedient, and as a fact I have seen very few Gordon setters performing at field trials during the past dozen years or more, and I think this absence must be taken as proof positive that he is not as good as either the English or the Irish strains." In a contiguous passage Mr. Lee gives a most amusing account of his own experiences with a Gordon setter that was made a gift to him. It had cost 30 guineas in Scotland as a broken dog. "But its breaking was a myth, and its value in shillings..... He was no use to me, so I gave him away. This Gordon setter was good-looking, and from a strain that bore a reputation of being 'pure even amongst the pure'; but his manners and appearance were too hound-like to please me."



The Keeper's Boy by artist James Hardy Jr.

On the other hand, there are those who greatly fancy the breed, and in America and France it has become exceedingly popular. Mr. Malcolm says: "I have never gone afield with a dog that has given me so much genuine satisfaction in every

way as my Gordon setters. Neither have I seen their equal in nose, obedience, staunchness, and speed. When the nature of the ground will permit he is one of the fleetest dogs of the setter breed. At his work he is naturally a high-headed dog, always seeking for the body scent of his game. When the weather is such as to require it, he is quick to take the good scent as well. His natural instinct is developed in a marked degree, and it leads him to know where to look for his game without racing over ground, which is so characteristic of setters of other strains.”



This portrait of Gordon Setter “Dun” owned by Comte Alphose de Toulouse Lautrec was painted in 1881 by the famous impressionist French artist Henri de Toulouse Lautrec

The following are the opinions of my (Herbert Compton’s) contributors on the type of Gordon setter as it exists to-day (1904):-

MR. HARDING COX – The race of Gordon setters has dwindled down, and specimens of the old type have almost disappeared. A judicious cross with the Irish setter would probably revive a very acceptable type. Such a union would be sure to produce some reds, and some black and tans. In fact I know a case where youngsters of the same litter so bred were shown and won respectively in the two sections.

DR. CHARLES REID – The breed, as a whole, shows an improvement in the last twenty years, and at exhibitions the type is more even. There has been rather a tendency of recent years to produce too small dogs, and at the present time there are few dogs of outstanding merit. There is also too great a tendency in my opinion to breed for length of head, especially from eyes forward, with corresponding sacrifice of cranium proper, and therefore loss of brain power. I fancy points are of little value, but if they are to be used, then a greater number should be given to shoulders and chest; twelve points for these, compared with

thirty-five for head, is much too low when you consider the importance of these in a dog used for sport. I find them hardy, good dogs, and good stayers. Their bright affectionate disposition and their beautiful colour attract. In recent years a cross with the Irish setter has been introduced.

MR. JAMES EMERY – I consider many Gordon setters of the present day are bearing too much on the Irish setter side, and not big or heavy enough. Judges at shows should not forget that Gordons should be much heavier dogs than English or Irish setters. I prefer a Gordon setter to any other breed for sporting purposes; my dog always answers the purpose of retriever as well as setter. They are the most deadly dog a man can shoot over.

The following essay, description, and Standard of Points is issued in the book published by the *Gordon Setter Club*:-

There seems to be little authentic information as to the origin of the Gordon setter. Authorities, however, agree that the original colour was black, white and tan, and, in the opinion of the late Dr. Walsh ("Stonehenge") that the dog is a compound of collie, bloodhound, and English or Irish setter, and that the foundation of the breed was derived from a mixture of these. This is to a large extent borne out by the general character of the dog as exhibited in the best specimens. Of late years no doubt the breed has been tampered with for show purposes, and crosses, more particularly with the Irish setter, with the idea of improving the colour, have been resorted to, to the detriment of the dog, both for show-bench and field purposes. Probably the pale buff in the place of tan frequently verging on stone colour, and the diffusion over the body, instead of being developed on the recognized points, is mainly due to this cause; if so it will require careful breeding through many generations to eradicate. In the best Gordons we almost invariably find the leading features of the collie, the bloodhound, and the setter, and perhaps in about equal proportion, giving what we call type. The head of the Gordon is much heavier than that of the English setter, broad at the top between the ears, the skull slightly rounded, the occiput well developed, and the depth from the occiput to the lower jaw much greater than in the Laverack or English setter. The width between the eyes should perhaps not be too great, speaking with caution; the nose moderately long and broad across the top, giving room for the nerves of scent; in fact, the opposite of snipeyness; the nostrils well distended, making this the widest part of the nose; the shape of the under jaw is perhaps a matter of fancy; old *Kent* had a very heavy muzzle and under jaw, with remarkably bright and penetrating eyes; in these his likeness has been transmitted to many of his descendants in a remarkable degree. Many Gordons show slight haw and dewlap; a proper developments of these is probably true type. The ears vary considerable, some being long, silky, and hanging close to the face; others much shorter; these are also matters of fancy, and therefore of minor importance. The body of the Gordon is also much heavier than that of the English setter, but may be judged on the same lines. The tail is often long, giving bad carriage; this does not interfere with good work. The great beauty of this dog is his lovely colour, and as this in

perfection is in no way antagonistic to his working qualities, great prominence should be given to it in judging. Formerly, without doubt, the prevailing colours were black, white and tan, but of late there has but little white been seen on the bench; this, too, is a matter of fancy. The black should be jet, not brown or rusty; the tan should be a rich, dark mahogany colour, and should be exhibited on inside of thighs, showing down front of stifle to the ground and on the front legs to the knees. The muzzle should also be tan, the spots over the eyes well defined, not blurred, and on the points of the shoulder also. Blurring and diffusing over the belly and other parts of the dog probably indicate contamination with other blood. It is of the highest importance, if we are to get back the real hunting qualities of this breed and the show qualities also, that purity of blood should be the chief aim in the breeding; a first cross may sometimes appear to answer, but succeeding generations will certainly show the cross, and ill deteriorate qualities in all the qualities we prize. A splendid intelligence, fine scenting powers and great endurance are the main characteristics of the Gordon breed. If purity of blood is maintained we may not only recover the qualities which some gear we have partly lost, but also develop their natural power to an extent hitherto unknown. A well formed head is of the first importance if we are to develop and maintain the intelligence which is the great charm and usefulness of the dog.

POINTS VALUES –

Head and neck	35
Shoulders and chest	12
Loin and quarter	12
Feet and legs	16
Colour	10
Coat, feather and quality	10
Tail	5

TOTAL.....100

HERBERT COMPTON (Editor)

Not having been able to reach my correspondence the Honorary Secretary of the Gordon Setter Club, I have extracted this Standard of Points from Mr. Rawdon Lee's article on the breed; and a very remarkable standard it seems to me, and decidedly original in comparison with other similar pronunciamientos. About this breed and its requisite qualities and their values there has existed a great difference of opinion, as may be gathered from the following two scales of point values, the first from a dog book published about thirty-three years ago, and the second from the scale adopted by the Gordon Setter Club in America:-

Scale of 1870 – Head and nose, 20; ears and neck, 5; legs and feet 12
Elbows, hock and stifles 8; shoulders and chest, 15; back and hindquarters 18;
colour, coat and symmetry, 10; quality and flag 12. Total 100

American Gordon Setter Club – Head, muzzle, and nose, 15; ears, eyes, and lips 5; neck, 5, shoulders and chest, 15; back, loins and thighs, 15; legs, feet, elbows and hocks, 15; stern and flag, 8; colour and markings, 8; texture of coat and feather, 6; symmetry and quality 8. Total 100

Such variations as are here shown on the appreciation of individual points are confusing and leave the impression that the breed wants its actual type laid down with more exactitude to bring it to a stricter “standard”

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