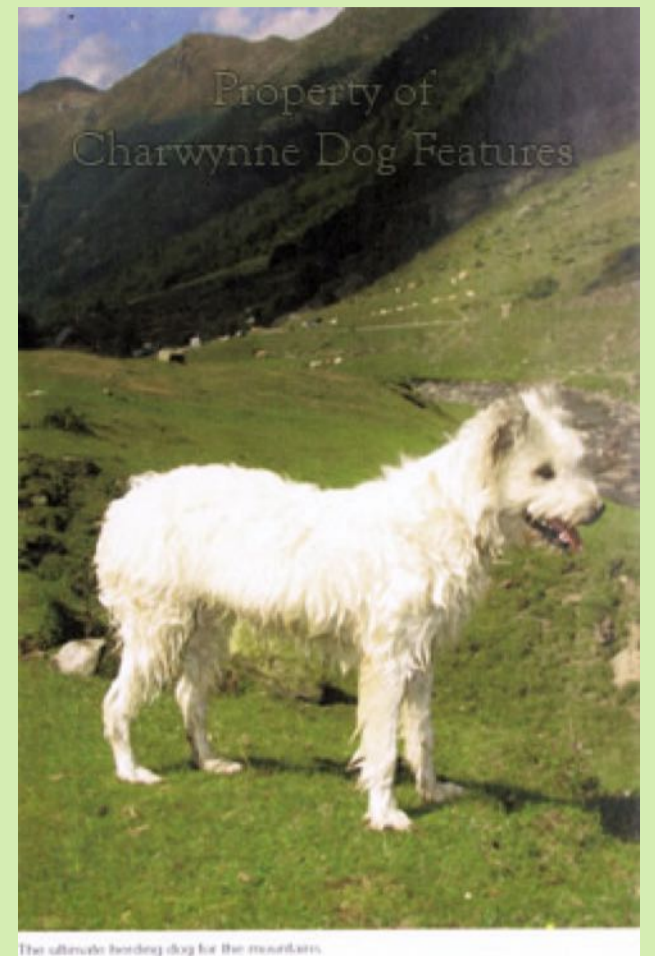


LAUDING THE LABRIT - THE PYRENEAN BEARDIE

by David Hancock



Only comparatively recently have we in Britain come to appreciate and then value the herding or herd-protecting breeds of France. But nowadays, with 11 Pyrenean Sheepdogs (long-haired/rough-faced), 42 Beaucerons and 154 Briards registered with the Kennel Club in 2015, to reinforce the 108 Pyrenean Mountain Dogs, our acknowledgement of their many agreeable qualities is manifesting itself; all the French herding breeds resemble other European breeds too. The Berger de Brie or Briard is like the Schafpudel of Germany, the Berger de Beauce is similar to our own smooth collie, the Berger de Picardie resembles our long-lost Smithfield Sheepdog, the Berger des Pyrenees looks like the Schapendoes of Holland, the Catalan Sheepdog and our Bearded Collie, by type, as function and climate decided form. Lesser known varieties like the Berger des Pyrenees a face rasee or smooth-faced Pyrenean Sheepdog, the Berger du Langedoc or Farou, the Berger de Bresse, the Berger de Savoie



and the Labrit from Les Landes in the south-west indicate the way in which the various areas can produce their own types, rather as the Galway Sheepdog and the Glenwherry Collie of Ireland, the Welsh Hillman, the Black and Tan Collie and the Old Welsh Grey of Wales and the Smithfield Sheepdog of England existed in the British Isles. The show ring has refined each of the surviving pastoral breeds, whilst making those of a type all too similar to each other, almost a standardisation.



FAGOT, CHIENNE LABRIT, NÉE ET ÉLEVÉE A CAPVERN (HAUTES-PYRÉNÉES), APPARTENANT AU COMTE PERNETY.

The Labrit, probably getting its name from the town of that name in the south of France, (although some suggest it comes from de la Brie, since it is Briard-like and there was a tendency in the last century to call all French smooth-haired shepherd dogs chiens de Beauce and all coarse-haired dogs chiens de Brie) has now been embraced by the Pyrenean Sheepdog. The Berger de Bresse is almost certainly now lost to us and the Berger de Savoie, Beauceron-like but drop-eared, may too not have survived. Little is heard of the Picardie Sheepdog. We



GADICHE, CHIEN LABRIT, NÉ ET ÉLEVÉ A MARIGNAC (GIRONDE), APPARTENANT AU COMTE PERNETY.

have probably lost more types of herding-dog all over Europe than of any other group; the pastoral scene has changed dramatically in this century and the advent of the pedigree dog has seen human whim play its part too. But this group of dogs have given man supremely loyal and devoted service over many centuries and whether French in origin or British deserve our gratitude.

If you study portrayals of the Labrit over the last century, you can soon spot a perennial type but also mini-types within the breed-range. In 1898, the breed could be both more Briard-like and more shepherd dog-like, perhaps more variation because the working element was still there ahead of a show standardisation. A few years later, a merle short-haired or smooth-faced variety was exhibited, almost a shepherd dog version. In 1928 a distinct Briard look emerged, and, a year later, some exhibits displayed a type near to the Smithfield Sheepdog of England, some of whom went to France as service-dogs in the Great War. In the 1930s some exhibits showed similar features as distinguished the Old Welsh Grey Sheepdog phenotype. But today, the Beardie look, whether bred for or just in the genes, has surfaced, without producing the more extreme size of overcoat now spoiling so many of that type. When I first saw the Labrit, on the French side of the Pyrenees, and working not in the show ring, in the early 1960s, it was comforting to see how workmanlike they were, with no exaggerations of coat or anatomy but in show rings since then I have seen some worryingly thin coats and frail structures. Just like the sporting breeds, the pastoral dogs really have to relate to their working past; function made them and function can protect them.

The breed was first registered with our KC in 1988 and I have some good specimens on display. At around 18 inches at the withers, they are a good size for a family pet but I have concerns about colour restrictions and coat length. The KC Breed Standard states that a predominance of white is undesirable; my French farmer contacts tell me that their best dogs are mainly white. Colour restrictions in breeds of dog have long been shown to be against the best interests of the breed, often narrowing the gene pool quite needlessly. The coat texture too is laid down as long or semi-long, enough ammunition for the dreaded groomers to ply their trade. Working sheepdogs do not need long coats, they need waterproof coats. And, why oh why, expect a pastoral breed able to operate on the foothills of the Pyrenees, to have a lean body, lean rather flat feet, short hindquarters, a head that is almost triangular, a rather long neck and lean forelegs. I invite the fanciers of this admirable breed to go to our Lake District or Snowdonia and see if any of the sheepdogs working there display such physical features. The wording of this breed's word picture is seriously wrong.



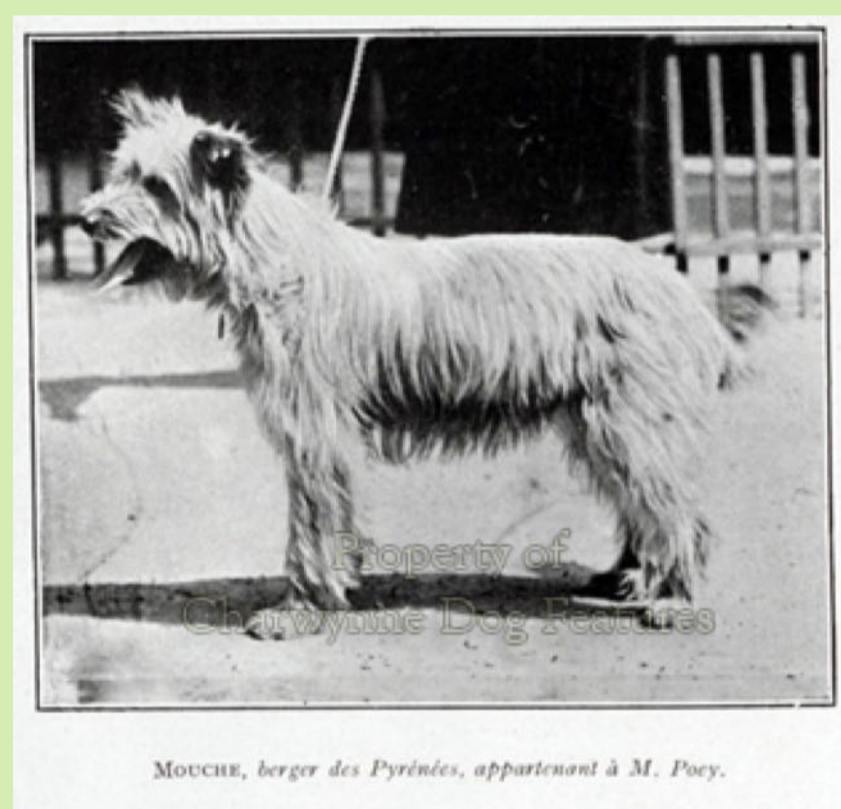
Numbers too are disappointing in the UK, only 11 in 2015, whereas the sister breed the Catalan Sheepdog from the other side of the Pyrenees mustered 38 new registrations here. The harsh-haired or goat-haired group is represented in most areas of Europe: the Cao da Serra de Aires and the less well-known Barbado da Terceira (a Bobtail look-alike) from the Azores but seen too in Portugal, the Briard and the Picardy from France, the Pyrenean Sheepdog, the Gos d'Atura of Catalonia, the Fonna Sheepdog of Sardinia, the



German Sheep Poodle, the Lowland Sheepdog of Poland, the South Russian Owtcharka, the Tibetan KyiApso or Humli Dog, the Schapendoes of Holland and, from the British Isles, the Bearded Collie, the Old English Sheepdog and the now-extinct Old Welsh Grey, Blue Shag and Smithfield Sheepdogs. This group of dogs is also represented in the Egyptian Sheepdog, the Armant, and the Patagonian Sheepdog, which may be an offshoot of the Old Welsh Grey, introduced by migrating Welsh settlers.



I can find neither evidence nor any credibility in the stories that the longer-haired herding dogs all originated in one country and spread out from there. I believe it is likely that the herding dogs brought south by the migrating Indo-Europeans roughly four thousand years ago had the prototypal dogs and since then they have gradually evolved into the types and with the physical features demanded by location, function and local preferences. In Britain, Bearded Collies have been interbred with the Old English type and the working



sheepdogs of the Border Collie type for centuries. This is not to say of course that in some areas a definite type was not preferred and kept distinct. I believe it is likely that the shaggier sheepdogs were called Beards (or Hirsels) in Scotland, Haggards in Ireland, Greys in Wales and Shags in England, where the bigger ones were used as drovers' dogs and dubbed Bobtails and if in a blue-grey coat, Blue Shags.

The Pyrenean Sheepdog or Labrit comes in two varieties: smooth-faced and rough-faced. But as with so many herding breeds, this one could vary from one valley to the next. The Azun dog was more like a Schipperke of Belgium, the St-Beat dog like a miniature Old English Sheepdog and the Ariege dog much more muscular than either. Eventually the Arbazzie and Bagneres dogs were considered to be the type to be standardized. The rough-faced Pyrenean Sheepdog is of the Beardie type, a breed-type also found in Catalonia as the Gos d'Atura, in Portugal as the Cao da Serra de Aires, in Egypt as the Armant, in Holland as the Schapendoes and in Poland as the Polski Owczarek Nizinny or Polish Lowland Sheepdog. This type could be described as 'the common dog of Europe', so widespread is its form – a tribute to its earned value. The Labrit is a 32lb dog, 18 inches high, dark fawn with black hairs or light grey with white markings, with a harlequin factor too; the long haired variety has the thick, wavy, harsh-haired coat of the beardie type; the smooth-muzzled variety has the flatter coat – longer on the tail. The Picardy Sheepdog is heavier, taller, with a more wiry coat in fawn or shades of grey, with its prick ears assisting breed recognition, for all these continental beardie types come from a common mould.



The sheep-herding dogs quite often went with flocks of sheep when these changed hands, and sometimes countries too. It is, in my view, quite absurd to claim that the different herding breeds, especially when they occur in the same country, are completely unrelated. It is entirely fair however to state that line-breeding for distinct 'type' has been practised for several hundred years in a number of areas. This has in the past not been done to perpetuate breed points but to meet



local demands of climate and temperature, as well as role – whether herding or just protection dogs. Nowadays, more sophisticated Western dog-breeders, and, especially, those in North America, have elected to place breed differences high on their list of breeding priorities; for shepherds in remote, testing

conditions such an approach would be more than a luxury. Their dogs were bred for performance not prettiness. To take just one example: length of coat would support the dog's function **not** inhibit it. Similarly, the texture of coat was for weatherproofing not glamour. Breeding away from functional need always penalizes the dog. The Labrit is a working dog in appearance and instinct or it is nothing. There are many more glamorous breeds; there are many more exotic breeds; this one is the epitome of the working pastoral dog and should be preserved and valued for just that, a canine worker of immense service to man.

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