

The Outing Magazine. Sport – Adventure – Travel - Fiction
January 1912 (v. 59): 404 – 411.

This essay was printed with an image, not reproduced here, of Sir Edwin Landseer's *A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society* above the title. This article also included several photos of the author's dog which is the subject of the story. I have included those photos, with their captions, in the approximate location they appeared in the original publication.

“The Quest of the Newfoundland” by J. Earl Carlson

“A Dog Whose Origin Is Wrapped in Mystery and Whose Very Existence Many Fanciers Deny”

“There is only one place where you can get a pure-bred Newfoundland dog,” said my traveled friend. “That is Ile aux Chiens¹ — the Isle of Dogs, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” I replied. “But where is Ile aux Chiens, and how does it happen to have the only pure-bred Newfoundlands?”

My friend entered upon a patient explanation. “I can't tell you where Ile aux Chiens is,” said he. “Latitude and longitude alone would locate it, and even if I remembered them, which I don't, you wouldn't be any the wiser. Ile aux Chiens is a spot — a freckle on the troubled face of ocean. The best I can do is to tell you how to get there.”

“For the smallest favor, thanks. But explain,” I insisted, “why there and there only may pure Newfoundland stock be found.”

He explained at length. From the chaff of his eloquence I gleaned that the dwellers upon Ile aux Chiens had received the Newfoundland stock as a sacred trust from their forefathers, and that their holy mission was to guard against contamination. As he went on my mind's eye pictured wonderful clean runs in which splendid dogs were segregated from the rest of the canine race. I felt the loving labor which went into feeding and bathing and combing, and the meticulous care bestowed upon keeping family records, and it was borne in upon me that life would be an empty bauble without the possession of one of these marvelous creatures from the Isle of Dogs. I am not sure even but that I conjured up a vision of a shrine, with candles perpetually burning in front of the Newfoundland ideal. I do know that in that hour my resolution was born to pursue these delectable animals to their ultimate retreat, and by such methods as it became necessary to employ obtain one from its vestal guardians.

“Of course, they get big prices for pups from this stock?” I ventured.

“Not so much,” the traveler answered. “Four dollars at the outside. You might find a pup for two.”

Two weeks later, after five days' travel, my feet pressed for the first time the gravel beach of Ile aux Chiens. The journey thither proved neither intricate nor unpleasant. A steamer lands the seeker after Newfoundlands comfortably at Halifax, where he transfers to a stubby French mail steamer, the *St. Pierre-Miquelon*, and on the third day thereafter debarks at St. Pierre, the metropolis of France's only North American colony, a little archipelago a few miles south of Newfoundland.

¹ The Isle of the Dogs, officially known as the Isle of the Sailors since 1931, is a now-uninhabited island that is part of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, an archipelago of eight small islands that are French territory, several miles off the coast of the island of Newfoundland. See also the entry here at The Cultured Newf for Frederic K. Arnold, “Islands Adrift” (1941) for more on Newfoundlands and Saint-Pierre and Miquelon.

In the United States the Newfoundland has gone to join the snows of yesteryear. It is difficult even to guess at the reasons for its disappearance. A quarter of a century ago the average boy's dearest ambition was to own a Newfoundland. To that end he hoarded his pennies, conscientiously performed his allotted tasks, and employed his holidays in whatever gainful occupation might enable him the sooner to realize his dream.

Nor was the Newfoundland by any means only a boy's dog. You found him reigning as the farmer's favorite, the ornament of rich men's lawns, and the pet of the wage-earner, who boasted of the animal's loyalty to his children and its prowess in the water. Yet so nearly has the breed been wiped out in the region where once it ruled first favorite that at the last Westminster Kennel Club show at Madison Square Garden, New York, there were only two among the more than two thousand dogs benched. Further, to emphasize the situation, it is one of the few recognized breeds no standards of which are kept by the American Kennel Club.

This, it should be remembered, is the fate, not of a freak strain, but of one which had held its place in work and play for a matter of centuries. It is the fate of a strain whose devotion and reliability had commanded praise of pure gold, a strain immortalized by a great painter — Landseer — and a great poet — Byron. To-day in the United States, it is, after a manner of speaking, one with Nineveh and Tyre.²

Whence Came the Newfoundland?

The origin of the Newfoundland none can discover. Low³ gives its probable descent as from the native wolf-dogs of Labrador crossed with some larger breed from Europe. Wood, the naturalist, classes it with the spaniels.⁴ H. W. Huntington, writing in 1900, offers the apparently incompatible theories that Newfoundlands are indigenous to the islands whose name they bear, and that they are probably a cross of European dogs,⁵ while James Watson,⁶ who one might suspect was not partial to the breed, concludes that they are modifications of offspring of mongrel ships' dogs carried to the British colony from Europe by early fishermen. Still another writer hazards the guess that they are a cross between the St. Bernard and the native Labrador type, a theory not difficult of acceptance in view of the animal's build and general appearance.

That authorities should differ even more widely as to standards, however, is somewhat remarkable. You may find a sponsor of reputation for your dog whatever his size, conformation, or color. Reinagle,⁷ an animal painter of a hundred years ago, depicted the Newfoundland as all white, and as recently as thirty-five years ago an expert wrote that "the predominant color of the Newfoundland proper is white. His marks are nearly invariable—namely, a black head or face mask, a black saddle mark, and the tip of his stern also black."⁸

Ten years later, in 1886, the Newfoundland Club of Great Britain decided that the typical

² Nineveh was, in ancient times, the capital of the Assyrian empire, long ago fallen into ruins. Tyre was once the capital of the Phoenician empire, now a modest-sized city in Lebanon. "One with Nineveh and Tyre," a catchphrase meaning no longer in existence or of any consequence, is a quote from Rudyard Kipling's 1897 poem "Recessional."

³ This may refer to Sampson Low, Jr., the publisher of *The Book of Quadrupeds*, for juvenile readers (1850) and of the two-volume *A Picture Book of Natural History for Young People* (1858). I have not been able to access the former, which is rather rare; the latter book mentions Newfs (and is discussed at The Cultured Newf) but does not speculate on their origins.

⁴ J. G. Wood, author of the multi-volume *The Illustrated Natural History* (1859 -1863).

⁵ Harry Woodworth Huntington was an author and dog fancier (he seems to have had a particular interest in Borzoi and greyhounds). The reference here is to his book *My Dog and I*, which is treated separately here at The Cultured Newf.

⁶ Watson was author of *The Dog Book* (2 vol., Doubleday, 1906).

⁷ Philip Reinagle (1749-1833), a British painter whose depiction of a Newfoundland dog for the *Sportsmen's Cabinet* (1803) is an early important landmark in the history of Newfoundland representation in the arts.

⁸ The quotation is from an article published under the *nom de plume* "Otterstone" in *The Country* magazine, 6 January 1876.

color is black, although a splash of white on the chest and toes is not objectionable. In deference to some differing opinions the club authorized a sub-division of the class for “dogs other than black.”

Stonehenge,⁹ always a liberal, thought that the color should be black, but admitted that it is sometimes black and white, or white with little black, or liver color, or a reddish dun, or sometimes a dark brindle not well marked. But Frank Townsend Barton,¹⁰ less catholic in his tastes, declares that the ideal Newfoundland shows no white.

Confusing, is it not? But wait until you get down to more particular details. Is your dog long of nose or short? Is his coat flat, curly, or shaggy? Is his eye light hazel or dark brown? For each and all of these features you will find backing.

In despair at the contradictions of our dog experts, I fortified myself with Miss E. Goodall's¹¹ description of her choice, which certainly sounded good enough for me. “Royal in mien, gentle in manners, docile, yet full of dignity, true as steel and faithful unto death, my ideal Newfoundland dog looks as noble as the work for which he was born — the work of rescue. My ideal Newfoundland must be great in body as well as soul, with a grand and massive head, broad, benevolent brow, small, dark, very intelligent eyes, ordinarily soft with affection but capable of flaming with anger on occasion; small ears hanging close to his head, deep muzzle not too long, and the whole head and face covered with short hair which feels like velvet to the touch.”

“A dog like that,” thought I, “will come close to filling the bill — and Ile aux Chiens is the only place to find one.”

It was, after all, William Miller, my fortuitous St. Pierre friend, who made possible the success of my mission, and to him the incense of my gratitude shall always burn. The busiest man along the St. Pierre water front, William Miller — Beel to his St. Pierre friends, with their European *penchant* for turning a short “i” into a long “e” — can always spare an hour to giving the traveler a pleasant impression of the colony. How I should ever have obtained one of the priceless treasures of Ile aux Chiens without him it is hard to guess.

For — here's the truth, since it must come out some time — Dog Island does not look upon the preservation of the Newfoundland stock in its original purity as its principal *raison d'etre*. There are no beautiful clean runs filled with magnificent specimens of the breed on the island. There is no shrine, there are no jealously preserved pedigrees, there are no vestal guardians. In short, Dog Island cares about as much about the lineage of its dogs as a New York flat dweller cares about the ancestry of the cats which tune up at night in the areaway.

Dogs of the Isle of Dogs

The mile or so of Ile aux Chiens which stretches across the easterly side of St. Pierre's harbor and forms its wall affords a place of residence to some three hundred French fishermen and their families. They constitute a political division quite distinct from St. Pierre, possessing their own mayor, church, shops, and cafes. And the fortunes of the community are in the keeping of the codfish.

“But there are dogs there — yes,” said my friend, Mr. Miller. “Big, black ones. How many do you want?”

“One,” was my prompt reply. “When shall we go over?”

⁹ Stonehenge was the *nom de plume* of John Henry Walsh (1810 – 1888), a British writer and editor on sporting subjects; his discussion of Newfoundlands is in his *The Dog in Health and Disease* (Doubleday, 1906).

¹⁰ Barton was a veterinarian and author of sporting animal and livestock texts.

¹¹ E. Goodall – no further information yet known – owned a well-known champion Newfoundland named “Gipsy Duke,” who is mentioned, along with a photo, in A. Croxton Smith's *Everyman's Book of the Dog* (1909), discussed here at The Cultured Newf.

“Any time — to-day — now, in the tuff-tuff — the gazzolene boat.”

My attention was attracted as we landed at the fishermen's wharf to four big black dogs standing in an expectant semi-circle in front of a couple of men who were dressing cod. Unkempt and gaunt though they were, there was distinction in their looks and appeal in their evident need. I watched with fascination the eagerness with which they snapped up fish heads and offal as rapidly as the fishermen provided them.



THE MOST ENGAGING BLACK BALL OF FLUFFY FUR IT HAS EVER BEEN MY FORTUNE TO SEE

Our time was too limited, however, to linger here. We passed between fish houses and fields spread with drying cod to the island's main thoroughfare, where everyone knew my companion, and readily gave him such information as they possessed about the year's dog crop.

“It is not a time well chosen,” he said to me at last. “The bankers' (schooners which trawl on the banks) have taken most of the pups. Also the French cruiser which left the other day. But now we shall go to the cafe where Mademoiselle Ernestine will give us some Normandy cider and show us the little dog she has.”

Mademoiselle and the cider proved all that the heart could desire, but toward Mademoiselle's sole remaining pup I felt cold. It was of the undesired sex, and it impressed me as weedy.

“But do not despair,” said Beel encouragingly. “We shall now pay a call on Madame Bechet.”

Madame lived in a typical fisherman's cottage half a mile down the graveled walk which serves horseless Ile aux Chiens as its main thoroughfare. Disentangling herself from a knot of small children, she listened gravely to Beel's message. Then she stepped to the door and whistled.

In quick response to the call there bounded around the corner of the house the most engaging black ball of fluffy fur it has ever been my fortune to see. When it caught sight of strangers it dropped the raw codfish head, as large as its own, on which it was feasting, gave voice to a couple of puppy barks and picked up the head again with a little growl.

“A good pup, yes?” said Beel, noting my admiration. “See the big feet. He will grow very

large. And his mouth, black inside, means pure blood. He is webbed to the end of his toes, so he will be good in the water, and he will have a fine coat. How much, madame?"

It appeared that madame had to consult her husband, whom she called. Monsieur was wholly a fisherman of the French type, in wooden sabots and waist encircled by a scarlet sash which gave him quite a brigandish appearance. After a moment's consultation with his wife he turned to Beel and poured on his head a flood of French. When he had finished, Beel turned to me.

"He will not take money for the dog," he began. My heart sank. "But," continued Beel, "he will sell for two dory loads of secondhand salt, which he needs for curing his fish."

To my inexperience, two dory loads of any kind of salt seemed a large order. With trepidation I asked Beel how much it might cost.

"Four dollars," he said promptly. "I will show you where to get it."

I breathed freely again, and the next day came into possession of the pup.



'THIS DOG YOU HAVE LOOKS LIKE A SMART PUP, HE WON'T NEVER BE A NEWFOUNDLAND "

To the American visitor pretty nearly the most striking feature of St. Pierre, with a population of five thousand, and its environs, including Ile aux Chiens, is the dogs. Both on land and at sea they possess an economic value quite disproportionate to their price. They are for the most part big, black fellows, whose weight, of a hundred pounds and upwards, enables them to do most of the draft work of the colony, and whose disposition is retiring. This is attributable to the indifference with which their owners treat them when they are not wanted.

The St. Pierre dog is never allowed in the house. Summer and winter he sleeps out on the stony streets or in the lee of a snowbank; his food he picks up from garbage thrown into the streets, and his toughness is amazing.

Not less compelling than his strength and intelligence is his devotion to duty. On a foggy afternoon I was strolling along the Route Savoyard, which stretches from the village to Savoyard Point and the end of the island, when my attention was attracted by shouts beyond the veil of mist. Presently there came into sight two handsome black dogs drawing at a gallop a couple of sturdy

Frenchmen, who were urging the animals on by their cries of “*Va, donc! Vite, vite!*”¹²



“WHATEVER HIS LINEAGE, MY DOG FROM ILE AUX CHIENS PROMISES TO TURN OUT THE BEST I EVER OWNED”

“*Bons chiens, hein?*”¹³ they called to me as the cavalcade flew past.

Before I had had time to reply they were out of sight in the fog.

Half an hour later, strolling back toward the town, I met the same pair of dogs. This time they were driverless. The weight of their former passengers had been replaced by a couple of kegs of bait, which the faithful beasts were carrying home at a trot, while their owners doubtless took their ease in a café. So intent were the dogs on discharging their duty that they never even turned their heads when I called to them.

Even the blasé native never tires of watching their performances in the water, where no mammal less aquatic than an otter is more at home. Besides swimming on the surface for hours at a time without manifesting fatigue, they dive like seals, and can swim under water for considerable distances. Apparently, the water never touches their skin, a thick outer coat protecting the under coat absolutely.

You hear some marvelous stories about the achievements of these dogs as you sit of an evening in a St. Pierre café, which is the rallying point of the town. They serve the “bankers” in a hundred ways during the long weeks passed on the cod-fish grounds. They can smell land half a mile away through the fog, and have the wit to give notice of their knowledge by running to the side of the vessel nearest the land and barking. If a dory is approaching through the fog they go through a similar performance.

“Then there was that dog on the *Kleber*,” remarked my friend Borrideau on one of these evening sessions. “A fine, big dog that. But best of all, he saved his owners the cost of a barometer. How? I shall tell you.

“When bad weather was yet twenty-four hours distant the dog began to get busy. First, he

¹² Roughly, “Let’s go, you!; hurry, hurry!”

¹³ “Good dogs, eh?”

would run up and down the ship, smelling the wind and whining, very uneasy. By and by he would start to collect his fish-heads. Here and there they were, scattered all over the vessel, but before long he would have them all gathered and stowed away under the capstan. Then the captain knew bad weather was coming and got ready for it. Never did the dog deceive him.”

“How long could one of these dogs swim?” I asked.

“Nobody knows,” said Borrideau seriously. “Perhaps until he died of starvation – what? I tell you only what I believe to be the truth when I speak of the dog on *La Morue*. He was a grand dog and very useful. When the dories brought in their catch and threw them aboard the schooner he would stand beside the men, and if a fish slipped between the dory and the vessel, before it touched the water he was after it, and would bring it back to the dory. They never had to tell him what to do.

“But one day while *La Morue* was sailing this *chien magnifique* got careless and fell overboard. It was foggy—on the banks it is generally foggy. When the absence of the dog was observed the captain wore ship and tried to find him, but it was useless. That night the crew of *La Morue* was very sad.

“In the morning the men started out in their dories to set the trawls. At half-past eight one of the dory crews caught sight of something black on the water, which they thought at first might be a porpoise. But presently when they got closer they found it was the dog that had been lost overboard at four o'clock the afternoon before. He was still swimming, and within a day after they picked him up he was as good as new—better, maybe, because you may be sure he would never fall overboard again. Sixteen hours and a half is not a bad swim for a dog, hein?”

“Great in body as well as soul,” I quoted to myself as I listened to these tales or watched the plunging leaps of the water front dogs when I threw sticks into the sea for their diversion. “Perhaps these are not real Newfoundlands; perhaps there isn't any such thing as a Newfoundland. But these St. Pierre dogs measure up to somebody's ideal, anyway.”

It was with a more kindly eye that I looked on my own pup after hearing the yarns of Borrideau. Suspicion had not been absent when I acquired him that his muzzle was just a little too long for the best type, yet does not Stonehenge¹⁴ declare for a muzzle of average length and width, as against the bulldog face? And with memories of Landseer's great painting, “A Distinguished Member of the Royal Humane Society,”¹⁵ I would not have objected to a splash of white on the breast. But Watson, Barton, Huntington, and others demand a jet black coat, and my pup's was as black as midnight in a thunderstorm.

A Few Expert Opinions

With confidence, therefore, I took my new pet via tugboat to St. Lawrence in Placentia Bay, and there caught the coastal steamer *Portia*, having been routed home through Newfoundland. Before I was fairly settled on board a passenger came up to pet my dog.

“That's the first real Newfoundland I've seen this trip,” he said, “and I have been all along the coast.”

“You know them then?” I asked.

“I should say I did. Why, I bred them for years, when I used to live in Newfoundland. Haven't been back here before for twenty years, but I know a Newfoundland dog when I see one, and that pup is fine.”

¹⁴ “Stonehenge” was the *nom de plume* of John Henry Walsh (1810 – 1888), a British writer and editor on sporting topics.

¹⁵ Landseer's 1839 painting is in fact entitled *A Distinguished Member of the Humane Society*, although the Humane Society had indeed become the “Royal Humane Society” in 1787.

“Not too sharp in the muzzle?”

“Not a bit. These people who think they ought to have a pug dog's face make me tired. You needn't worry any but what that dog of yours is the real thing.”

Naturally enough, my chest protruded a few inches when I led the dog up to the cook's deck galley to get him a handout. As that functionary collected some scraps he asked:

“What kind of dog is that, mister?”

“That is a Newfoundland,” I replied with conviction.

He glanced at me quizzically. “Newfoundland, hey? Why, say, the last trip over I bought a Newfoundland pup from Rose Blanche for one of our officers. Only two months old, but he'd make three of that pup of yours. Rose Blanche is the only place where you can find pure Newfoundland stock nowadays.”

He proceeded to tell me the story of the dogs of Rose Blanche, where it appears some man possesses a noble pair of animals whose offspring he sells once a year at ten dollars apiece.

“Those are the dogs,” said he. “Why, when they get their growth they take their meals off the top of an upright piano. This dog you have looks like a smart pup, but he won't never be a Newfoundland.”

Somewhat depressed, I dragged my *Ile aux Chiens* product away, and was standing disconsolately on the forward deck when one of the crew engaged me in conversation.

“Nice little dog you've got there,” he remarked. “Might be a sort of retriever, I suppose.”

“That dog is a Newfoundland, from Dog Island, over at St. Pierre, which is the only place on earth you can get real Newfoundlands,” I asserted positively.

“Is it, now? Well, I've fished over there, and they sure have some great dogs. He's going to be big, too — look at them feet.”

“He'll be as big as an ox,” I rejoined, and turned off to hunt for the man who used to breed Newfoundlands, thankful for the presence of one congenial soul on board.

I was on the *Portia* three days. In that time I learned all that the colony knows and suspects, and a great deal that she is unaware of, about the race of dogs to which she has given her name. There were passengers aboard from Pointe aux Basques, Rose Blanche, and other west coast settlements who declared that the wreck of the Newfoundland strain has been carefully salvaged in that district. There was a priest, a most discerning man, who had spent his life on the island and congratulated me on possessing so promising a specimen of a noble race. There was a ship's officer who indulged in a cynical smile whenever he saw the pup and myself together on the deck.

All these people, and many others, insisted that I should listen to the difficulties encountered in finding a suitable Newfoundland to present to the Prince of Wales. Several years ago the heir to Great Britain's throne paid a visit to the oldest English colony. It was decided that a high-class Newfoundland dog would be a suitable present for him. But good dogs are scarce. The island was dragged from end to end, and at last somewhere on the west coast was found a monster which stood more than thirty inches at the shoulders, and soon after passing into the possession of his royal master developed an insatiable appetite for human blood.

Repetitions of this story and aspersions on the descent of my Newfoundland got on my nerves to such a degree after a time that I hardly felt a thrill at meeting in a St. John's hotel an intelligent man who said he had bought and reared many a Newfoundland and saw at a glance that I had picked a prize winner. Soon after my return home the traveled friend who had told me of the jealously guarded creatures on *Ile aux Chiens* paid me a visit.

“Hello!” he chirped. “Got a dog, have you? What kind is he?”

“Honestly, old man, your ignorance makes me ashamed,” I replied. “Do you mean to say you don't know a Nova Scotia fish hound when you see one. That's what he is — a fish hound. Goes into the water after them and bites their head off.”

“Excuse me,” said my visitor. “I didn't notice him carefully at first.”

Nevertheless, and whatever his lineage, my dog from Ile aux Chiens promises to turn out the best I ever owned. I yet entertain the hope that he will live up to the Newfoundland ideal: “Royal mien, gentle in manners, docile yet full of dignity, true as steel, and faithful unto death.”