

# Our Debt to the Dog

*How the Domestic Dog  
Helped Shape Human Societies*

Bryan Cummins



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For Tricia,  
who wanted me to write  
*Our Debt to the Dog.*

I love you, Sweetheart:  
then, now, forever.



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# Preface

This is an absurdly ambitious book. It is so because it attempts to capture a 15,000-year relationship that has existed throughout virtually the entire world. Moreover, it is a relationship between two species—a relationship that has not always been amicable and, in many cases, has been exploitative and tragic. Tricia, my partner of 25 years, first had the idea and the title for *Our Debt to the Dog*. When I started writing, I was thinking in the sense of “acknowledgment” or “gratitude” for the contributions the dog has made to human societies as hunter, herder, guardian, draught animal, soldier, police dog and so on. But I have also come to see “debt” in the sense of apology. We have done horrific things to the dog, intentionally and inadvertently, and we continue to do so. And so *Our Debt to the Dog* is both a statement of gratitude and an apology.

The relationship between our species—*Homo sapiens sapiens*—and what anthropologists like to call “The Other,” in this case a very different “Other”—*Canis lupus familiaris*—seems improbable, despite what biologists, veterinarians and those who work closely with other species might think. Biologists will argue, quite rightly, that dogs and humans share a number of traits. We are relatively large, social, intelligent mammals. Our societies are (mostly) hierarchical and we work—generally—co-operatively. In fact, it was these shared traits, some argue, that allowed the dog to be domesticated (or, as many people are now beginning to believe, that allowed the dog to domesticate itself).

At the same time, however, people and wolves are large, social, intelligent mammals that are also *competitors*. And, at one time, this competition was near-global. Wolves and people were once (until the latter started waging incessant war on the former) the most widely dispersed mammals on the planet. Both are—or, in the case of humans in the early days of the relationship, *were*—hunters, especially of large game, making for an especially acute competition between the species. Today, in the areas where both wolves and hunters still exist, the prey species are, in many cases, the same for both: deer, caribou, moose and other large ungulates. In some instances, where we no longer hunt but herd livestock, the prey species for wolves has sometimes become large, *domestic* ungulates, once again putting us into competition. And, especially in areas where wolves are being reintroduced after being eradicated, the old competition between “sports” hunters and wolves rears its head as the hunters charge that the wolves are killing all the deer that the former want to kill in the name of “sport.”

For this reason, the fact that wolves and humans were able to establish an amiable, cooperative, mutually beneficial relationship that has persisted for millennia is remarkable. Quite simply, *Canis lupus familiaris* is the wolf in the living room. Thousands of years ago, one species—the wolf/dog—looked into the eyes of the other (us) and said “If I share your hearth, I trust you will not spear me” while the other looked into the eyes of the wolf/dog and said “If I share my hearth, I trust you will not savage me or my family as we sleep.” That, to me, remains one of the great wonders of our history, as remarkable and improbable as the first moon landing.

Unfortunately, every year, we read about tragic instances in which a dog (the media like the dramatic, so it is usually a Pit Bull Terrier, a Rottweiler, or similar large, powerful canine) maims or kills a child or a senior citizen.<sup>1</sup> These are, beyond the shadow of a doubt, horribly tragic. But what I find even more remarkable is that *more* such incidents do not occur. Visit a dog show and notice the number of exhibitors who put their infants and toddlers in a pen with their Mastiffs, Great Danes, and Pyrenean Mountain Dogs without any fear that their children will be killed. That is incredible trust and, more important, speaks volumes about the dog. The Staffordshire Bull Terrier—the fighting dog of Britain—is known as “the nanny dog” because mothers would place their children in the back garden with the dog, knowing they were safe and well taken care of. And this is the breed specifically created to wage battle, to the death if need be, with other dogs. How truly amazing it is, then, that we trust a comparatively large carnivore with defenceless babies and not think twice about doing so.

Perhaps one might suggest that we are placing too much emphasis on the *lupus* and not enough on the *familiaris*. And, it must be said, much has happened over the last 15,000 years to suggest that today’s domestic dog is not the same as his wild brother. Indeed, the horrific statistics surrounding attacks by wolf hybrids suggest that there are significant differences between the two (<http://www.2keller.com/library/dangerous-dog-alert-wolf-hybrids-more-likely-to-bite.cfm>). Nonetheless, it is remarkable that, millennia ago, one of the world’s most successful and most widely distributed predators moved into our homes and stayed.

When I was in high school, I acquired my first Airedale, Rogue. When he was mature he weighed 87 pounds and had the jaws of an alligator. He had immense presence and demanded respect from all—people and dogs—who met him. My sister, Karen, had twin boys. She was visiting one day with her sons who, at the time, were just under a year old and learning how to walk. We had been sitting in the living room and then made our way to the dining room for dinner, leaving the boys on the floor with their blankets and other paraphernalia. Rogue would always follow me from room to room. When I noticed he was not with me, I returned to the living room and saw him standing there, looking quite bewildered and humiliated as the twins, one on each side of him, were holding on to the hair on his belly, pulling themselves up. It was a remarkable scene and one that was all the more so because these were not *his* children, as he saw them perhaps once a week or so. Decades later, the image still resonates with me as testimony of the human/canine bond and trust that each species places in the other.

Over the years, I have witnessed other examples of this type of counter-intuitive behaviour. Herding dogs have an incredibly high prey drive that must click off at the optimal moment or they would kill their sheep. Livestock guarding dogs, rather than romp and play with others of their species, will kill them if they approach their flocks of sheep. It is easy to imagine they would say to an approaching dog, “Sure, let’s have mutton tonight” but they don’t. A dog attacking their flock will be a dead dog. Police patrol dogs likewise attack a perpetrator and then cease their attack (most of the time) on command. And we are all familiar with stories of canine fidelity, Greyfriar’s Bobby being the classic example.

Anthropologists have been reluctant to examine this relationship, in part, I think, because we do not know where to place the dog. Is the dog of “nature” (historically and

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1. In truth, this happens far more often than we think but, because it happens in non-Western countries, usually by stray or feral dogs, these incidents are not reported (see Chapter 12: When the Bond is Broken: ferals and strays).





Tributes to Greyfriar's Bobby in Edinburgh, Scotland: 1) the statue and 2) its inscription.

generally speaking beyond the purview of anthropology) or of “culture”? This ambiguity is reflected in how some Australian societies view the Dingo. There is a distinction made between bush dogs, or wild Dingoes, and “camp dogs,” which historically were Dingoes taken as pups from lairs. While the same species, bush Dingoes represent one end of the spectrum: they are independent, make their own decisions, and are natural. Camp dogs are dependants and given names and personalities.

This, then, is a book about our relationship with our most intimate non-human companion. After moving in with us about 15,000 years ago, dogs have been revered, loathed, indulged, maligned, and put to every conceivable use imaginable—and some not imaginable. They have hunted alongside with us, helped herd and protect our livestock, allowed us to survive in the most inhospitable climates in the world, conquer new lands (and their rightful inhabitants), cure and cope with disease and debilitation, maintain the peace and, ironically, at times, further subjugate the already oppressed. They have hauled our loads and guarded our homes and possessions. We have shot them into space in our quest to conquer yet another new frontier, and sent them scurrying deep into the Earth to rout foxes and badgers. They have accompanied us on our ships and entertained us on the streets and in circuses. We have turned the dog against our fellow human beings in war time and peace time, and we have pitted the dog against every possible adversary—from ducks to donkeys—for our amusement.

A final story: many years ago I attended a dog training seminar and demonstration. One of the trainers came out with a lovely little Collie bitch (we could imagine she was television’s Lassie, except TV’s Lassie has always been a male—larger, more impressive looking and with more luxurious coats) and a big, handsome Doberman. People “oohed” and “aahed” over the Collie and kept a respectful—if not fearful—distance from the Doberman. After a demonstration of basic obedience, the trainer said that he was going to demonstrate personal protection and guarding work. Such demonstrations are always impressive. He asked the audience to stand back and announced that he would momentarily bring out the “bad guy,” known as the “aggressive stranger” or “aggressor” or, simply, “the decoy.” He put the Collie bitch and Doberman in a “down/stay” and called for the decoy who came out in the prescribed manner. At the appropriate moment, he gave the command for the dog to “attack.” The Doberman did not move a muscle. The little Collie bitch came out of her “down/stay” like a shot and hit the decoy like a missile, seeking her teeth in his (padded) arm and savaging it. The trainer gave the “out” command and she ceased her attack.

The audience, including yours truly, was suitably impressed and surprised.<sup>2</sup> We all, of course, expected the protection dog to be the big, tough Doberman, not “Lassie.” The trainer made his point: not all popular media depictions (like ethnic or racial or sexual stereotypes) are true, and dogs can be trained for virtually anything. The dog is malleable as are human cultures. *Our Debt to the Dog* is an attempt to show how we—humans and dogs—have shaped each other over the millennia.

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2. In a sense, we should not have been surprised. Why? Because the Collie (from Scotland) is the British version of the Belgian Shepherd (of which there are four varieties, including the Malinois), the Dutch Shepherd, and the German Shepherd Dog (see Chapter Three: The Wolf in the Fold: the dog and pastoral societies). The Malinois and the German Shepherd Dog are the two most popular police, military and personal protection breeds in the world, while the Dutch Shepherd is increasingly common for these types of work. One of the reasons the British did not adopt the Collie is because one man, Colonel Richardson, preferred Airedales for the police and military (see Chapters Seven and Eight). Admittedly, today’s Collie is a much softer dog than its Dutch, Belgian and German counterparts (one can hardly imagine Lassie subduing muggers) but these four European herding breeds historically were not dissimilar.

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