

ELIZABETH C. MURPHY

I have been asked to provide an obituary for this extraordinary woman, who died suddenly on 25th June 2021. Known to all as “ Betty”, her contribution to the world of dogs in Ireland and internationally was probably greater than most of her peers. Yet she was always modest, tried her hardest to give credit to anyone else. Her devotion, firstly to the Irish Wolfhound, then to Irish native breeds, made her a leading figure amongst Irish owners, breeders and judges.

Betty was the only daughter of her parents, living first at Primrose Park outside Dublin then moving to Ballyhagan House at Carbury, an hour or more’s drive from the city. She knew that her role in life was to support her parents as they aged and because of this responsibility she never married. Her brother was responsible for Ballyhagan after the death of their father. She gained some amusement in later life when telling of the various local farmers who tried to court her, stopping in their tracks when they realised she didn’t own the lush acreage and huge Georgian house.

Betty would never drink - she said her attitude to good food and cigarettes showed her she might overdo it and she suspected she had better be careful. Betty had a wonderful sense of humour and she could usually find something to laugh about. She was a font of interesting stories and was well able to draw people out where they knew things about anything she was interested in.

On the other hand, this mild and agreeable woman could be a tigress when it came to defending the breed standard . An early battle was one with the F.C.I. where for a while they seemed to be looking to change the standard. She and her allies maintained that the country of origin should be providing the breed standard to the International Federation. They won. Of the three breed standards for the Irish Wolfhound, many still think the one used by the (U.K) Kennel Club has watered down what Captain Graham and the founders of the breed had wanted. The USA standard differs in some areas, mainly height. The Irish, now F.C.I, standard is the closest in it’s wording to the original and via the FCI is the benchmark across the world of pedigree dogs, excepting the UK and USA.

The Irish breed standard was sacrosanct to her, drawing as it did a line from the breed founders through to the present day. Betty did not think our present generation was correct in changing the standard and stood firm for it. She constantly advised that we should be wary of the word’ type”. There is one true type and that is the one described in the breed standard, she warned me if I started to drift into saying something like “ Sanctuary type”. We had to always remember that kennels (possibly more so in the older days of large establishments) developed a look of their own, as breeders exercised their own prejudices towards better heads or better rears. Yet we needed to set this aside and look how closely each dog fitted the breed standard, rather than changing the standard to fit the dogs currently in competition.

After training as a photographer, younger Betty first came across the Irish Wolfhound when (famously) reading an article about them in a flight magazine aimed at Americans. The article suggested the Wolfhound was of poor quality within its country of origin and anyone seeking a hound should look to purchase elsewhere. Betty loved her country, always a patriot, she could not bear to see it denigrated. She determined to improve the breed despite never having owned one. She began her research, visiting Irish breeders and corresponding with others outside the country. Dr May was still alive and not living too far away, she learned much from him and from Sheelagh Seale (Ballykelly) and others exhibiting the breed. She held Noreen Twyman (Nendrum, Ruth Jenkin’s sister) in high regard. When Dr May died she encouraged a farming couple to take on two of his last breeding bitches. This was John and Kathleen Kelly, who this way gained fabulous foundation stock. Betty’s stud dogs were used at Nutstown and before too long John’s racing greyhounds were outnumbered by a large population of wolfhounds.

Betty also met a teenager who was working for Dr May, looking after his hounds. The teenage Jim Behan (Bearnabui) also had a life long love of wolfhounds and helped Betty later on by taking

puppies to live with his young family. Well socialised to life in a town and with dog loving children, they went back to their quiet country life with Betty as bombproof youngsters who could be taken anywhere. Moving forward to recent years, it was the habit of Kathleen, Jim and Betty to go to lunch annually at the Limerick dog show, which is held in the grounds of a splendid country house hotel. They then adjourned to watch the groups and best in show, never ceasing to marvel at the good roads which, thanks to the EU, had cut the journey time to cross the country of Ireland to a little over two hours. It used to take most of a day on the little roads of the seventies.

At the time of my first visit to Ireland in 1971 I had written to "Miss Murphy" and requested permission to call. In later years Betty told me she was amazed to see such a young girl turn up, she had thought I would be much older from the letter. I remember the visit well. Her first bitch Maeve had had what I think was her last litter, Ch Cara (the top winning older daughter) was there and made a great impression on me. Ch Ballykelly Dalkey was another hound present at the time, there were others of all ages around the stable yard and walled garden. We started a long correspondence, in particular sharing pedigrees. Betty feared Irish pedigrees might be lost if someone didn't preserve them, she had a long search to fill in the gaps between Graham's Pedigrees and the present day. I still have copies of pedigrees which Betty had been allowed to photocopy from Dr May's collection. Pedigrees from the 1880s, when breeders treated pedigrees like secret formulae and would not share their methods of producing better hounds. It was strange and wonderful to look at these Victorian relicts, carefully inked in copperplate handwriting.

Betty had found and purchased a dusty dark old oil painting of a wolfhound in Dublin and researched its origins for years. It was found to be a Ward and is featured in her book and in magazines. Wherever Betty could discover anything about the Irish Wolfhound she purchased, preserved and wrote about it to ensure as many of us as possible shared in the discovery.

She also had something of a hanger-on by now. We corresponded about dogs and pedigrees constantly, I tried to visit her whenever we could arrange it. The hospitality to visitors was always superb. Betty would give time to anyone who loved the breed. She was kind enough to take me to see local breeders, often with a subtext of care for the people being visited. One old and impecunious breeder was taken a lunch for all to share, Betty knew she would be embarrassed otherwise at being unable to provide the sort of spread the Irish wanted to lay on for a visitor.

This person quietly told Betty that she had spent the money someone had sent for a hound's export and couldn't send the dog abroad, no doubt a solution was found. Another visit came with a warning to be sure to go to the loo before we left Ballyhagan, their earth closet at the bottom of the garden should not be asked for as this might give offence - or be offensive, hard to remember which, forty years later.

Being told to say I was Canadian if asked by one old breeder, Mr Donnelly, who was a staunch Republican with a houseful of items commemorating the Struggle. A polite fiction, he never asked. I looked through his old photographs for the Wolfhounds, having scant knowledge of the famous Irish politicians being supported by the hounds in parades. Sometimes the visit was to someone whose wolfhounds fitted their "halls of the kings" background. Belle Walton was another maiden lady living outside Dublin whose wolfhounds had the run of their domain (TOLKA Valley). Her house was full of antiques, I particularly remember the inlaid marble fireplaces. We marvelled over the black puppies she had there, the first I had seen, three weeks old in a deep litter bed of straw. The colour was extremely uncommon then.

Irish dog shows in the seventies. No doubt Betty was on the committee, later she would be Chair and President of the IW Club of Ireland and a member of many other committees within the Irish Kennel Club. Someone would rock up at around twelve with a roll of tape and some stakes to make a ring. Anyone travelling over from outside Ireland would probably have been there since ten am worrying they had gone to the wrong place. The provision of refreshments was concentrated upon. Stewards, a judge and someone to sell copies of the magazine and the catalogue would emerge. It would often rain. Jim Behan would find himself handling something in every class for

someone or another. Often handling a young hound who had discovered the existence of a lead that very day. It all felt very convivial and relaxed yet the focus was always on spotting the best wolfhounds and seeing which hounds had sired the best puppies. We had time for conversations and discussions before putting the hounds in their vans and trailers and having yet another bite to eat. Do I imagine that exhibitors didn't rush off as soon as they had been in the ring? Club shows were treated as important social events.

Did Betty's influence bring the Irish Club magazine into existence? She certainly worked for it, taking photographs of dogs for the magazine and dog papers and articles abroad she was asked to submit copy to. Her focus was on making the Irish Wolfhound look the best it could, to restore its reputation as the Great Hound of Ireland. She sold good dogs abroad and encouraged others to do likewise. She helped newcomers within Ireland to find new dogs of merit. Dick McCoy's famous champion Ch Turlock Morrell was a stud fee puppy to Carrokeel who moved into his ownership as a quality youngster. She imported excellent hounds, notably Ch's Justice and Jolly and their dam Thornwick Aran from Boroughbury when Elsie James gave up her hounds. Justice was a superb sire, and improver who rarely had a litter without something good in it. Possibly the best was Ch Carrokeel Coillte Merlin, young Tim Finney's second champion.

Betty self published a book on the breed, still in print today and full of valuable information. This took her years, many were the discussions about type and the best photographs to use. I remember the long dining table at Ballyhagan was full of notes and proof pages from the book for some time before it was ready. Not too many years ago Betty told me she had found a batch of copies in an old sideboard after telling people it was no longer in print, she was delighted to sell these to those who wanted them. Later there was the paperback version. She was surprised that people would think the person on the cover was her, she was too modest to put herself on the cover of her own book, however she had wanted to use the Irish native costume, so someone modelled for her. She went on to use her pedigree research in producing "Irish Wolfhound Pedigrees" some years later. In the meantime she had realised that dogs exported from Ireland to the USA didn't live so long as the hound in its native country. In Ireland breeders were used to eight or more for males and ten or more for females, USA hounds would be lost at six or eight. Betty wondered if it might be diet related. She was the first to ask for age at death when she researched her pedigree book. Betty was a good twenty years ahead of us on longevity research.

By now a judge, Betty was in demand across the wolfhound world. In the early 1990s I went over to watch her judge the Rhode Island IWCA national speciality, where in a gigantic entry Betty found littermates Ch Fitzarran Jubal and Jade as her top winners. She judged in pretty much every country with a wolfhound population, including South Africa. She corresponded endlessly. Help, advice, recommendations and articles plus lots of putting people in touch with each other where she could see mutual benefit. She became the wise woman of our Wolfhound tribe, not only in Ireland. I never thought to ask her how many honorary club presidencies she held. The leading role within the EIWC showed the respect in which she was held across Europe.

"Betty of the bones". She used parts of the skeleton of a wolfhound to describe how construction fitted together, how the bones were shaped and in turn shaped the muscles and body laid upon them. She had some wired together and had plenty of explaining to do at airports as she travelled with the bones to deliver lectures on the breed. I don't think anyone ever forgot these lessons. In life the dog was Llegus, a dog by Ch Fintan of Eaglescrag who was used as the mascot for the Irish Olympic team of whatever year that was. There was a good story about how the dog came to be used for his skeleton years after his death which involved Betty and her vet, which some of you may remember.

Betty was a lady of many talents. I remember walking around Ballyhagan in the early nineties when she knew the farm was to be sold. We had walked the estate countless times over the years, all of her overseas visitors were taken for a look at the spring where the origins of the Boyne were to be

found, Betty knew her Irish history well. Checking fences and looking across stock in Betty's case, opening gates for wolfhounds and talking dogs in mine.

Then the move when Ballyhagan was sold, out to Lucan, where Betty opened a dog grooming and boarding business. Within short order she had brought people together to create the first Irish organisation of groomers and was promoting grooming to the population of Irish dog owners. She owned one or two of most of the Irish breeds across the years I knew her, to learn about them and sometimes to work with others as a preservation breeder. In this too she was ahead of her time. You really could not give away some of the little known (scruffier?) Irish breeds back in the day. They needed popularising and sometimes good grooming to bring them to the attention of the public. Tony (Anthony Killykeen Doyle) was an early advocate of the Soft Coated Wheaten Terrier, I remember the pair discussing the breed in depth on one of my visits to Killykeen with Betty. She had an eye for a dog across all breeds.

Some of the important parts of Betty's collection of old wolfhound memorabilia has been digitalised and can be found at "Irish wolfhound archives", which I hope will go forward and be given a new custodian. An Australian film crew did a video which is still on YouTube to this day. You can hear Betty's voice within the commentary, her warmth and love for the breed are evident. Look for it under "Conn, tallest dog, Irish Wolfhound Club". I think Betty's dog of the time was one I sent her, from the Ch Eaglescrag Justin x Fey Feralia litter. In the eighties she gave me Erin (Carrokeel Mochras Grainne) as a wedding present, she grew up to be a superb coursing hound.

My last visit to stay with Betty was in 2018, the night before the Irish Ladies Kennel Association show, at which I was judging. This was the year of the drought, the first time I had ever seen the grass in Ireland yellow instead of green. The boarding kennels were closed by now, Betty could be described as retired but she was always busy. Aunt Betty was in the centre of her family of nieces and nephews and their children in turn, well loved in a close knit group. She was in good touch with her friends and maintaining her website, following social media and giving wise advice.

We had little notice of her death, which I am sure is what Betty would have wanted as she would never have allowed anyone to make a fuss over her. She followed her eldest brother by one month. Because of pandemic regulations the world could not come to her funeral but was able to follow the Mass via Zoom. Members of the IWC of Ireland acted as pallbearers and her friends within Ireland were allowed to attend the grave at the conclusion of the Mass. The importance of the breed to her was not forgotten. Three Irish Wolfhounds were brought to the graveside to say their farewells.

Elizabeth Thornton