

# The Irish Ancestry of the Rough Collie

By Iris Combe

The early dog shows scheduled Setters and Pointers only but at a show in Birmingham in 1860 both Sporting and non Sporting dogs were catered for with a class for 'Sheep dogs' which included all the herding breeds. It was not until 1867 that shows scheduled classes for Collies, Coleys or Scotch Sheepdogs according to the popular name of these dogs in different districts at that time.

Two collies dominated these classes between 1871 – 73, Cockie or Cocksie and Mec later known as 'Old' Cockie and 'Old' Mec, a title at that period given to dogs that had progeny registered in the same name. As the pedigree of both these dogs was unknown their progeny faded from the show scene and their place in show history was taken by Trefoil, Stud Book No.4523.

In her book 'The Popular Collie' first published in 1957, the late Margaret Osborne states the following:-

*"Mr Shirley founder of the Kennel Club, can lay claim to having also had a very big hand in the founding of the Collie as a show dog, for he bred and owned the great Trefoil, the dog to which every one of our present day C.C. winners traces his or her ancestry in direct tail male. Can any other breed claim this descent of all its dogs from one male line only?"*

This claim has never been challenged and has been repeated by all modern authors of books on the Rough Collie, yet except for an American book, none have given a pedigree or any other details to substantiate this claim, which I found very surprising for a dog credited with being the founder of the Show Collie dynasty, but from his pedigree, given here, his connection with Ireland goes back a long way.

## Pedigree of TREFOIL

Breed; Rough coated COLLEY / SHEPDOG  
Sex; Male  
Breeder; Mr Smith for Mr Shirley.

Kennel Club Stud No 4523 Vol 2.  
Date of birth; 19.3.1873  
Owner; Mr Shirley, Lough Fea.  
Carrickmacross. Ireland.

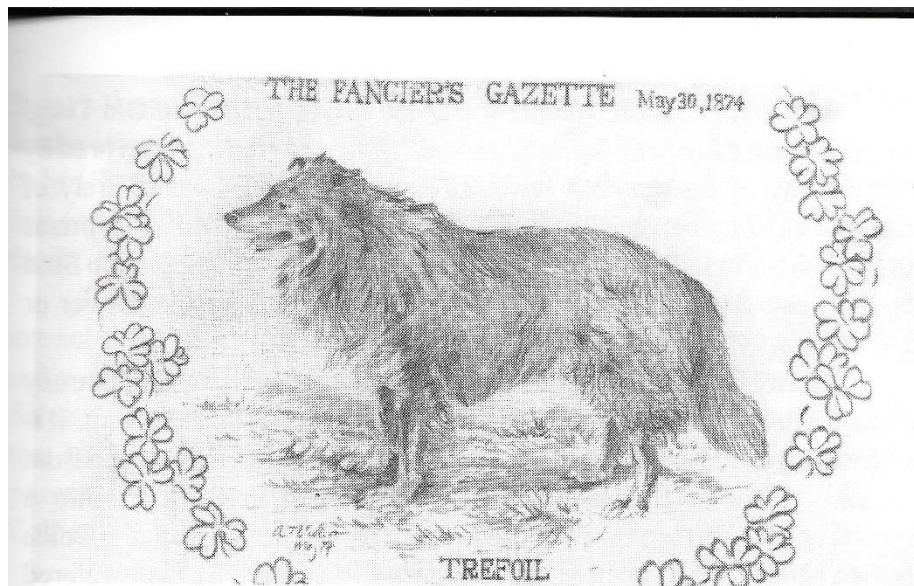
Parents	Grand parents	Great Grandparents	Great Great Grandparents
Sire Mr Smith's ( Shepherd to Mr Shirley) TWIG	Sire OLD TWIG	Sire Breeder Mr Glasby ? SHAMROCK 289% Vol 1: Dam ? Born 1870 Owner Mr Shirley.	Sire Mr Mc Call's SHEP Dam Mr Glasby's BESS.*** Sire Dam Sire Dam
Dam Mr Glasby's BESS *** also Gt Gt Grandmother	Dam HELP	Sire Dam Unknown "	Sire Dam Sire Dam Sire Dam
	Sire Mr Byrne's RATTLE	Sire Dam Unknown "	Sire Dam Sire Dam Sire Dam
	Dam Mr Watt's BESS	Sire Working colley of Mr Smith Dam Working colley of Mr Johnson, Steward at Longfield, Carrickmacross.	Sire Dam Sire Dam

?? It has never been established if SHAMROCK was a dog or bitch. Entries in Vol 1 of K.C. StudBook were not under separate headings and the gender of each was not always given.

Although not named all the sires and dams of the fourth and fifth generation in this pedigree were well known local working colleys/sheepdogs (the spelling of the day)

While he was successful in the show ring his real fame was as a sire and one of his impressive offspring was Ch Charlemayne, born 1879. It is also claimed that from 1900 all American Show Collies can trace their pedigree back to a great grandson of Trefoil, Ch Christopher whose pedigree on the dam's side also goes back to Trefoil. Born April 16<sup>th</sup> 1887 and belonging to Mr Megson who used him successfully at stud before

selling him to Mr Mitchell Harrison of the Chestnut Hill Kennels in Philadelphia for £1,000 (a princely sum in those days). From that point all the early imported Collie lines faded out.



*Above is the only known picture of Trefoil which appeared in The Fanciers Gazette, May 30th 1874, with the following report on page 128. "We are so much struck with the superiority of Mr. Shirley's dog Trefoil at Northampton show - the only time he has even been exhibited and where, it will be remembered, he won 1st prize - that we obtained permission to have a portrait drawn from life, which appears with these remarks. Trefoil is quite a young dog, being now just over 12 months old, and is descended from a very old and pure strain that has been in Mr. Shirley's possession for a considerable time. He is larger than his parents, his sire, Twig, being a small black and tan dog, his dam, Bess, black, tan and white. When a young bitch before she lost her feather, a handsomer one it would be hard to find, and also useful for work. Trefoil himself is a dog of great intelligence, and with a most beautiful temperment. We may add that he is worked regularly with a large flock of sheep, and if the time ever comes that prizes are given for combined looks and work in sheepdogs, as for Pointers and Setters, he will prove an opponent of no ordinary pretensions."*

**AUTHOR'S NOTE:**

In the above report I think it should read that it was the first time Trefoil had been exhibited, not the only time, for, as Stud Book entries show, he won several awards in the show ring.

From the Kennel Club Stud Books and with the help of Major John Shirley, a grandson of Mr Shirley and the present owner of Lough Fea, I have been able to research the true story of Trefoil. One name on Trefoil's pedigree attracted my attention, it was just 'Shamrock' Stud Book No.2897 with no indication whether it was the sire or the dam of Old Twig. In the Kennel Club Stud Book Shamrock is given as having been bred by Mr Glasby of Carrickmacross in 1870 and owned by Mr Shirley of Lough Fea, Carrickmacross, Co Monaghan and having won 3 first prizes in English Shows. The gender of the entries in vol 1 of Kennel Club Stud Book is not given, one has to guess this from the name like Rover or Lassie!

From extensive research I can find no evidence to substantiate any claim that our modern Rough 'show' Collies are of Scottish descent. It is of course true that this type of herding dog, first brought to Scotland from Ireland, has over the centuries been developed in Scotland into a remarkably good looking and useful stock dog. The Gaelic name Collie having been retained while herding dogs in England were usually referred to as sheepdogs or drover's dogs.

A Mr Warren, Troy, N.Y. showed a few Collies which he claimed he had imported from Queen Victoria's Balmoral Kennels. The news of the connection with royalty and the highlands was meat and drink to the canine newspaper correspondents on both sides of the Atlantic at a time when anything Scottish was fashionable. However the pedigrees of these dogs could not be traced and nothing further was heard of them.

Mr Shirley was only 29 years of age when he and a few friends founded the Kennel Club but he had already built up a reputation as a breeder and exhibitor of gundogs at his English Estate near Stratford-on-Avon, in particular Flat Coated Retrievers but when he came to reside at Lough Fea he fell under the spell of the Irish working Collies that has been pure bred in that district for several generations. Mr Shirley later became M.P. for Co Monaghan.

He particularly admired Mr Glasby's Bess and when she produced a litter by Mr McCall's Shep he bought one of the pups, called it Shamrock and exhibited it in England with great success. Bess was later bred to Twig, a grandson of Shamrock and produced the great Trefoil in 1873. From a second litter to Twig she produced Tartan and Tricolour, two Irish dogs that also had an influence on the breed.

Bess was not only a beautiful working Collie but she was an outstanding good worker which all her progeny inherited. She was by Mr Byrne's Rattler out of another Bess owned by Mr Watts and who in turn was by a dog owned by Mr Shirley's shepherd J Smith, out of a bitch owned by Mr T Johnson the steward at Longfield, Carickmacross. The 'Shep' line goes back to Collies owned by Sir G Foster, a well known farming family from Co Louth.

I have no real information on Twig or Old Twig except on the extract from the Stock Keeper Journal 1886. "Nearly every winning collie of the hour traces its pedigree back to Trefoil, the pick of Mr Shirley's famous strain." All these collies were descended from a strain that has existed since Celtic times, so have we any need to go further to prove this wise line breeding and the Irish ancestry of our modern Rough Collies?

There I rest my case to prove the Collie's Irish ancestry, but there is one further interesting Irish connection concerning the word 'Collie'. There have been numerous speculations as to its origin but from a study of Celtic history and a grasp of the Gaelic I put forward the following:-

Three distinct Celtic groups occupied Ireland between the fifth and first century BC. Each lived in isolated communities but spoke a common Gaelic dialect known as Q Gaelic, from which the word Collie is derived meaning 'useful'. Therefore the useful dog that circled the small flocks or herds to keep them together and to protect them from predators was the 'Collie' dog.

One group, the Goidels, made their way together with dogs and livestock to the western Isle of Scotland and later when the monks from Ireland brought Christianity to Scotland they too brought their livestock to support the communities they had set up and the versatile or useful collies were trained to protect the communities, carry messages, guard the livestock from wild and human predators and circle the herds and flocks to keep them from straying and many other tasks.

Combe, Iris. Herding Dogs: Their Origins and Development in Britain 1987

Combe, Iris. All Ireland Collie & Sheepdog Society Handbook 1993