

# HEAR *my* VOICE

An Old World Approach to Herding

by Lynnette Rau Milleville



Rowe Publishing

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# Contents

Introduction . . . . .	1
<b>One</b>	
The Development and Use of Tending Dogs in European Agriculture . . . . .	6
<b>Two</b>	
Sheep . . . . .	16
<b>Three</b>	
Shepherding . . . . .	37
<b>Four</b>	
Wild Canines . . . . .	56
<b>Five</b>	
Good Herding Dogs. . . . .	77
<b>Six</b>	
Learning . . . . .	107
<b>Seven</b>	
Basic Obedience . . . . .	121
<b>Eight</b>	
Pre-Livestock Foundations . . . . .	137
<b>Nine</b>	
Basic On-Stock Training . . . . .	151
<b>Ten</b>	
Advanced On-Stock Training . . . . .	177
<b>Eleven</b>	
Competitions . . . . .	199
<b>Twelve</b>	
Tending Applications . . . . .	234
<b>Appendix I</b>	
Sheep Breeds. . . . .	249

<b>Appendix II</b>	
Plants Poisonous to Sheep . . . . .	.253
<b>Appendix III</b>	
Dog Breeds. . . . .	.272
<b>Appendix IV</b>	
Breed Contacts. . . . .	.278
<b>Appendix V</b>	
Puppy Aptitude Test Sheet . . . . .	.279
<b>Bibliography</b> . . . . .	.281
<b>Videography</b> . . . . .	.288

# Introduction

I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice. But they will never follow a stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice (*John. 10. 1-5; New International Version Bible*).

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The shepherding abilities of all breeds of herding dogs stem from the same source, the wolf's pack-hunting instinct. Through selective breeding, mankind has modified and molded this instinct in different ways to meet the specific needs of place and time. Over the centuries, three general herding styles have emerged: fetching, as typified by the Border Collie of Great Britain; driving, as represented by the Huntaway of New Zealand; and tending, as typified by the German Shepherd Dog. This does not mean, of course, that Border Collies only fetch, Huntaways only drive, or German Shepherds only tend. Some German Shepherds, for example, make excellent all-around farm dogs with the ability to fetch, drive and tend. It does mean that the best German Shepherd will not show the fetching ability of the best Border Collie. Similarly, a skillful trainer can teach some Border Collies to bark at stock. But their "noise" (to use the New Zealand term) will not have the power of the best Huntaway, a dog bred to use the force of its voice to drive sheep.

This is not to say that any particular herding breed is superior to another, as some have claimed. It does mean, however, that we must know our dogs' herding heritage so we can pick the breed that best meets our specific needs. For example, on a small farm in the hills of New England or on the rolling countryside of the Midwest,

a loose-eyed,<sup>1</sup> all-around farm dog might be the best choice, while a fetching dog might be better on a large sheep ranch in the Rocky Mountains. In the cut blocks and municipal grazing areas of Western Canada, a tending dog might best meet our needs. Only by carefully matching a breed's inherent strengths and weaknesses with the tasks required, can we make the best choice. We will enjoy only limited success if, on the contrary, we require our herding dogs to perform tasks to which they are not ideally suited.

Similarly, we should design our training techniques to maximize our dog's strengths and minimize its limitations. Further, we must keep in mind that strengths and limitations can be defined only relative to the herding tasks at hand. This means that no single training technique or program is best for all breeds in all situations.

Some successful trainers argue that the techniques developed to train Border Collies work best for all breeds with the exception of some very specialized driving breeds like the Huntaway. I disagree. We will train our dog more efficiently and in less time if we develop training programs designed to enhance our dog's unique talents.

The same principles apply to dogs trained specifically for herding trials. In Canada, Europe and the United States, most of the dogs working livestock are sport dogs, trained for trialing. Relatively few work on ranches or farms any longer. If you wish to train your dog for the sport of trialing, you will enjoy more success if you choose the style of herding and course for competition that best tests the special capabilities of your dog and if you choose a training program that teaches your dog to work the course you have chosen. Specifically, if you own a Border Collie, use a training regimen that prepares you and your dog for the International Sheep Dog Society (ISDS) course. If your dog is a German Shepherd, train to compete on the Verein für Deutsche Schäferhunde (SV) course. If your dog has all-around herding talent, particularly with driving livestock, train for the Australian Shepherd Club of America (ASCA) course.

This is a controversial position; many disagree with it. I urge you to read widely to become acquainted with other points of view, so you can better choose the approach that best suits you. Most sheep herding programs are based on relationships of fear: the sheep's fear of shepherds and their dogs. In contrast, this book is about building trust. The sheep learn to follow the shepherd, not because they must, but because they want to. Over the years, I have trained a variety of working dogs, fetching dogs, all-around herding dogs and tending dogs. I have tried different techniques and programs. The kind of specialized approach detailed in the following pages has worked best for me, as well as for my students. This book is about training dogs to tend sheep in the European style.

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1 A strong-eyed dog shows intense concentration, a stalking approach and a natural tendency to pause or crouch. A medium-eyed dog shows intense concentration, but freer movement, without stalking or pausing. In comparison, a loose-eyed dog has good concentration, but lacks the intensity of the strong or medium-eyed dog. The loose-eyed dog may glance at its surroundings, but this does not signify a lack of attention. The loose-eyed worker is often as effective as one that shows more eye (The American Working Collie Association n.d.:6).

I will never forget my introduction to herding. I was awestruck with the magic of a Border Collie named Roy. The grace and fluidity of his movements, his complete focus on the sheep and his instant obedience to commands was amazing to behold. For most of us who have watched these dogs on TV, the Border Collie is the sheep dog *par excellence*. I have been involved in the breeding, training and trialing of Border Collies for many years and know firsthand the amazing feats that distinguish this remarkably capable dog. Thus, I can understand why some find other herding breeds wanting when compared to the Border Collie.

Yet, the Border Collie, as all herding breeds (indeed, all working breeds) as a product of human technology, was born into the context of specific social, cultural, political and economic developments at a particular historical place in time. Because this book is not about Border Collie training per se, it is not necessary to detail the history of the breed here. The Border Collie is a child of the Industrial Revolution—bred in Great Britain to herd in a particular way to meet the needs of the time.

Specifically, the job of the Border Collie was to gather flocks of sheep pastured in mountainous areas for long periods of time. Natural predators were few in 19th century England and sheep could generally fend for themselves. They needed neither the close supervision of a shepherd, nor the protection of a dog. The close, trusting relationship between shepherd and sheep that remained important in other areas of Europe became obsolete in the border regions of Scotland and England. Before the British Parliament passed the Acts of Enclosure, shepherds were forced to remain with their flocks for long periods of time. After enclosure, this became unnecessary. Consequently, shepherds no longer built close, trusting relationships with their sheep: no longer witnessed the birth and death of each member of their flock. In this new shepherd-sheep relationship, the dog became the enforcer. It ran far and wide, as its wolf ancestors, forcing the sheep to flock together and then drove them to the shepherd's feet through its ability to intimidate.

In contrast, the shepherds of central Europe continued to use their sheep dogs as they had for centuries. To this day, Shepherds in Germany work closely with their flocks to gain their trust (although, on occasion, their dogs must punish sheep for disobedience). In this tending relationship, the sheep must hear their shepherd's voice. The dog in this herding equation does not intimidate the sheep by barking (as does the New Zealand Huntaway) or coerce the sheep with its "eye" (the intense stare of the Border Collie). German Shepherd dogs form "living fences" to protect sheep from predators and crops from sheep. National herding competitions in Germany still feature this inherent ability of the working German Shepherd and other native herding dogs.

Without understanding the interdependent relationship between shepherds and their sheep, attempts to train dogs to tend sheep in the European style will enjoy only limited success. In the tending equation, the shepherd is the leader and the dog his

helpmate, while the sheep look to both for food, shelter and protection. To grasp the dynamics of this equation, we must explore not only the perspective of the shepherd and his dog; we must understand the sheep's point of view, as well. This book differs from others about herding stock with dogs in content and in order of presentation.

The book is divided into twelve chapters dealing with topics such as the history and development of tending dogs, shepherding, choosing a herding dog, learning, obedience, and stock training. Undoubtedly, many readers will want to skip the early chapters and get right to the fun stuff—training dogs to tend sheep. I certainly enjoy that the most. But the order is important, for each chapter is a bridge to the next. Moreover, many of the techniques described in this book are specific to the training of tending dogs, and some are controversial. To understand the reasons why these techniques work, and to make them work better for you, it's necessary to put them into context.

The book begins with the dogs themselves and views the ways in which they developed in particular social and ecological contexts. It then moves on to a discussion of sheep. In order to move sheep efficiently, (or any livestock, for that matter) you must first know something about both their behavior and their nature. For example, you must know what they fear, how far and from what direction they can see, how they move and what they eat.

To become good at herding, you must become a good shepherd. You cannot do that until you know something about the art of shepherding itself. As we shall see in Chapter 3, this knowledge comes from a surprising source, the Bible's 23rd Psalm. Through reading and analyzing it carefully, we can learn the basics of becoming a good shepherd; it is a flock care checklist.

Once you understand good shepherding, you must learn herding from your dog's perspective. Dogs are descended from wolves; canine herding is rooted in the wolf's powerful instinct to hunt and kill prey. Although human beings have modified and molded the dog's hunting behavior and suppressed the instinct to kill, the herding instinct remains extremely powerful. Because the line between herding and hunting-killing is so thin, once the instinct is awakened, it must be carefully channeled and controlled. You must decide whether or not you want this, for once awakened, the predator/herding instinct can become a driving force in your dog's behavior.

Now you are ready to choose your dog. In order to make the best selection possible, you need some way to evaluate potential choices. Chapter 5 discusses how best to approach this seemingly daunting task. It includes guidance about how to test for the traits you desire in a dog and information on the techniques of structural characteristics assessment.

The way dogs learn to obey commands is the subject of Chapter 7. Here, we look at the principles of operant conditioning, for they provide the foundation on which learning rests. However, the principles of operant conditioning must be put into practice.



Without achieving a balance between your control of the dog and the dog's control of the stock, you will be unable to move the sheep from place to place or to keep them where you want them. You will certainly never get them back into the barn after they have been in your neighbor's garden. This chapter deals with basic obedience, which is the foundation for herding training.

We are at last, ready for the part you have been waiting for, how to train dogs to tend sheep. We begin with a short chapter on pre-livestock foundations. In Chapter 8, you will learn, among other things, how to build a training area, how to teach your dog to jump and how to condition your flock.

Now we move to actual work on stock. The next two chapters cover the main elements of tending—on-off lead training, moving your flock within a given boundary area, gripping, and passive and active control of your flock. In addition, you will learn about penning and road and bridge work, including how to herd sheep in traffic.

For those who wish to pursue stock tending as a sport, Chapter 11 discusses trailing and judging. It describes the levels of difficulty in tending competitions, the skills needed by shepherds and their dogs, and the basic guidelines for performance herding. The smart handler is also a judge, and in this chapter, you also learn how judges evaluate you and your dog's performance.

We finally turn to tending applications—how to use the tending method in real life situations. In particular, Chapter 12 discusses tending for American farm operations. In it, we learn to think of sheep as both tools to use and as livestock to raise.

So, if you are a farmer who wants to use his dog as a living fence while rotationally grazing his stock, or a person who simply wants the fun of working with his or her dog in competitions, this book is written for you. This book also contains helpful information for instructors and judges.