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The Tibetan Mastiff: Canine Sentinels of the Range

Donald A. Messerschmidt

Vigilance and companionship are two fundamental requirements for herdsman and their dogs on the range. A natural temperament of protectiveness combined with devotion to master are two important qualities for dogs bred and raised to protect livestock and other agricultural property. The Tibetan Mastiff, one of the world's oldest and purest breeds, combines these essential characteristics in a large, rugged, but strikingly handsome livestock guardian dog. Against the predatory denizens of the range, and as a faithful and intelligent companion, the Tibetan Mastiff has few if any peers.

Vigilance is the quality of alert watchfulness against danger. It is a fundamental characteristic of the Tibetan Mastiff. The primary role and natural instinct of these dogs is to protect the pastures, animals and compounds of their master. They do so in the original sense of the root word 'vigil.' Webster's Dictionary defines this as "keeping awake at times when sleep is customary" to avoid, or in this case to repulse, danger. A common theme of Himalayan herders' stories and songs (the counterparts to ranchhand tales and ballads) is the mastiff's natural inclination to make frequent "rounds" of the pastures at night, driving away all dangers to the herd. One popular song from Gurung shepherds of Nepal praises their dogs' vigilance:

Thrice in the night,

Our mastiffs make watch rounds of the pastures. . .

Companionship, in the sense of living to serve another, is no less an inborn trait of the breed. Tibetan Mastiffs serve their masters and uphold their responsibilities of protection with a faithfulness and a reserved, dutiful attachment, and native intelligence that reflects the well-earned fame of the breed. One early traveller to Tibet has written that

The sheepdogs kept by the Himalaya shepherds are warmly spoken of by their owners, who say that when the mountain paths are hidden in mist, they are infallible guides.¹

The combination of desired traits found in this breed has been nurtured over generations of life and guardianship on the range. Tibetan Mastiffs were developed in one of the world's most austere and harsh physical environments—the high valleys and mountains of Himalayan Asia, in Nepal, Bhutan, north India, and Tibet. As a result, these dogs are especially well adapted to severe climates, and to high, dry plain, steppe and mountain conditions.

The author is professor, Anthropology Department, Washington State University, Pullman 99164. He is a cultural anthropologist who specializes in the study of Himalayan and rural north American communities. He travels widely, and has lived in Alaska, the Pacific Northwest, Wyoming and Nepal. His interest in agricultural peoples has led him naturally to consider the role played by dogs in livestock oriented societies. He has observed Tibetan Mastiffs in their Himalayan homeland over a period of two decades. At present he is following the progress of their introduction and adaptation among agriculturalists on the north American range and is planning a book on the Tibetan Mastiff in its natural relationship to Man and livestock.

¹Kipling, J.L. *Beast and Man in India*, Macmillan, London, England, 1891.



When it encounters danger, the Tibetan Mastiff typically raises the alarm with a loud challenge bark. This Black-and-Tan mastiff, with a matted tail, stands like the sentinel on a house roof in northern Nepal, silhouetted against the Himalayan peaks.

Tibetan Mastiffs have protected cattle, yaks, sheep and goats for uncounted centuries against formidable predators—wolves, leopards and bears, jackals, wild dogs and foxes and two-legged intruders, as well. Today, on the north American range, they are being used effectively against coyotes, too. They even have been observed driving off birds such as eagles and buzzards soaring overhead. In the Himalayas, mastiffs sometimes wear spiked collars and bells for protection. Tibetans especially like to adorn their



Tibetan Mastiffs have protected livestock on the Himalayan range for uncounted centuries against predators. This unique and handsome cream-colored mastiff stands watch over a herd of sheep in a high pasture in the Nepal Himalayas.

dogs with bright red (dyed) yak hair collars for decoration. One traveller describes these dogs moving proudly with a herd carrying salt over the Hamalayan mountains:

The main body (of the herd) follow in due order, and you are soon entangled amidst sheep and goats each with its two bags of salt: beside these, stalks the huge, grave, bullheaded mastiff, loaded like the rest, his glorious bushy tail thrown over his back in a majestic sweep, and a thick collar of scarlet wool round his neck and shoulders, setting off his long silky coat to the best advantage; he is decidedly the noblest-looking of the party, especially if a fine and pure black one. . .²

This dog has created an essential place for itself in loyal service to some of the toughest and most respected men of the range—Tibetan nomads, Sherpa, Gurung and Bhotia herders of Nepal, and various other highland peoples of the Himalayas. Mastiffs have been kept also to protect monastery grounds, military camps, farmsteads and other compounds in town and countryside. Although principally a livestock protection dog, a few mastiffs have been seen assisting their masters to drive yak and sheep. But to my knowledge, no one has deliberately or systematically trained them to herd. Protection, not herding, is their principal instinct.

What makes the Tibetan Mastiff especially good as a livestock protection dog is its 'style,' or manner, of vigilance. Its inclination to make the 'rounds' of a herd or other property of pasture has already been mentioned. Often the mere presence of one or more of these big dogs is sufficient to repulse intruders. When it encounters danger such as a livestock predator the Tibetan Mastiff typically raises the alarm with a loud challenge bark. That bark "is most peculiar; not sharp and crisp like that of most European dogs, but with a sepulchral and 'far away' sound as if each dog kept his own ghost in his stomach and it was only that ghost that barked."³

If the bark is not enough, the dog proceeds to 'rush' the intruder, barking all the more fiercely. These defensive actions are an essential characteristic of the breed. This account of a young Tibetan Mastiff, 'Shilo' of Antelope Valley, California, is typical:

"At eight months he had already established his territory with a morning routine checking of his charges (hogs, piglets, a calf and several prize Pygmy Goats). . . Shilo had already discovered that his usual 'scare tactics,' so typical of the livestock guardian breeds, worked well in keeping predators away. Coyotes (have) become a scarce commodity around the ranch."⁴

If the intruder is not driven off by such 'scare tactics,' the dog will advance swiftly and confidently to meet it. Usually the various forewarning behaviors, the bark and the rush, are sufficient deterrent. If not, the dog will press his advantage—massive size, strength and intelligence. Tibetan Mastiffs are a formidable force. They have been known to drive off or kill even the most cunning and obnoxious predators. Tibetan Mastiffs are especially good against wild cats, wolves, coyotes, and bears.

In Tibet they are known as *do-kyi*, or 'tied-dog.' There they are often tied short during the day and loosed at night. Sometimes they are deliberately and inhumanely tied for long periods of time simply to instill ferocity. Meanness in most dogs is usually traceable to bad handling, from constant tying, teasing, or other abuse. Tying is not necessary and it is not recommended that these or any well-bred dog be tied. When given a modicum of training and encouraged to



Tibetan Mastiffs are especially good with children, and they endure with great repose the rough handling of play with youngsters. Here, 'Saipal Baron' is seen with his best friend, the author's son Hans.

develop their natural instincts for protection, Tibetan Mastiffs will quickly demonstrate their usefulness and importance to the agriculturalist. Tibetan Mastiffs take easily to verbal or silent signal training and they are most effective in their duties when handled with average care and attention. They are especially good with children and they endure with great repose the rough handling of play with youngsters.

At its best, the Tibetan Mastiff is

a courageous animal with strong protective instincts. He has spirit, initiative and courage, with no trace of timidity, although he does take the time to size up a situation before acting. He possesses an excellent memory and is receptive to obedience training. He is intelligent, with ability to anticipate. Even though he is strong-willed, he has a desire to please. Aloof with strangers, he is faithful and gentle with children, a good-natured family companion, playful on invitation.⁵

The archtypical Tibetan Mastiff is usually described as a heavy-boned, heavily built, well balanced, alert (but reserved) dog with a noble expression. Alexander the Great was given presents of Tibetan Mastiff dogs, and Aristotle, on seeing them, commented on their lion-like character. Their size has always caused comments. Marco Polo thought they were as large as donkeys. The standard size of an adult male is 25 inches or more at the withers, and upward of 100 pounds or more in weight. Females, of course, are slightly smaller. Some exceptional specimens grow even larger, like the chief's dog in this traveller's account from 19th century Tibet:

The chief had a huge dog. . . a very heavily built black and tan, the tan of a very good colour; his coat was rather long, but smooth; he had a bushy tail, smooth tan legs, and an enormous head that seemed out of proportion to the body. . . His blood-shot eyes were very deep-set, and his ears were flat and drooping. He had tan spots over the eyes, and a tan spot on his

²Hooker, J.D., *Himalayan Journals*, J. Murray, London, England, 1854.

³Johnston, R.F., *From Peking to Mandalay: A Journey from North China to Burma through Tibetan Souch Uan and Yunnan*, J. Murray, London, England, 1980.

⁴ATMA, The Tibetan Mastiff Club Newsletter, August 1982.

⁵The Tibetan Mastiff Standard (TTMC, 1981).

breast. He measured four feet from the point of his nose to the root of the tail, and two feet ten inches in height at the shoulder. He was three years old, and was the true Tibetan breed.⁶

Tibetan Mastiffs come in many colors. All black or black-and-tan are common. The tawny markings of the latter are distinctive; spots over the eyes, on the muzzle, forelegs and hindlegs, and under the tail. (Tibetans believe that the eye spots are strong medicine against evil spirits.) Sometimes the dog's coat has a frosted look, of silver, blue or grey, or mahogany. Some dogs are bred to be pure sable, red, or cream in color. The tail should be curled and full, arched proudly up over the dog's back. The thick ruff, heavy shoulders and massive head, with pendant ears and slightly pendulous lips (flews) are diagnostic. The coat is medium length, straight and dense, moderately coarse but not curly. And, as an added protection against the winter cold, Tibetan Mastiffs grow a unique, soft, woolly undercoat.

The Tibetan Mastiff has an ancient heritage, described here by two of its historians, Rohrer and Larsen:

... history has established a special place for Tibetan Mastiffs. They are considered to be the basic stock from which most modern large working breeds have developed. Earliest written accounts have placed a large mastiff-type dog around 1100 BC in China. Mastiff-type skulls have been dated from the Stone and Bronze Ages. Ancestors of today's Tibetan Mastiffs are believed to have accompanied the armies of the Assyrians, Persians, Greeks and Romans and later to have travelled with Atilla and Ghengis Khan on their travels as far west as Eastern Europe.⁷

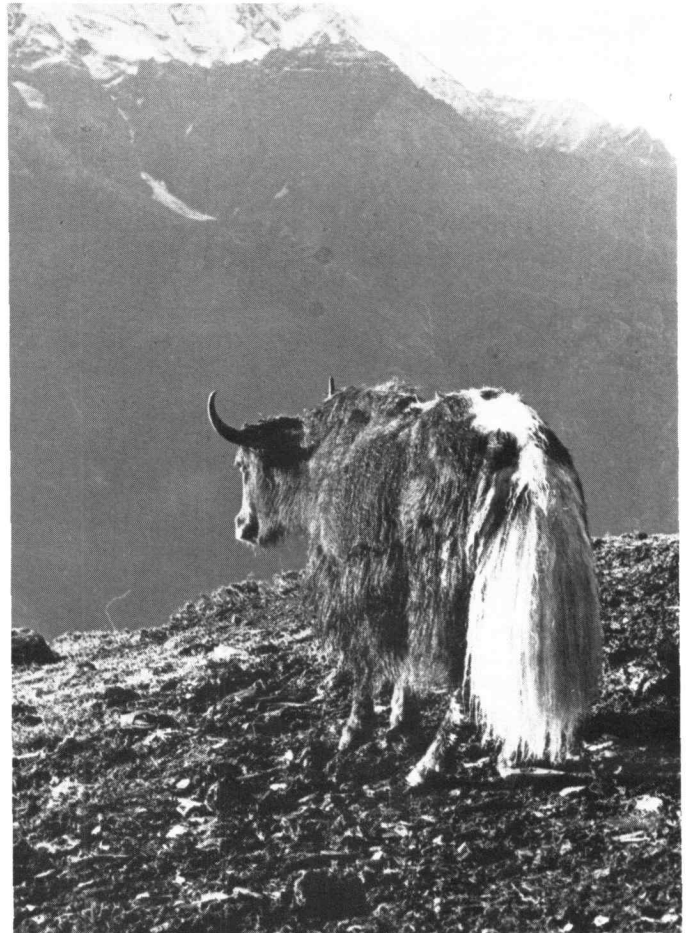
However, due to economic and political changes in the countries of their Asian homeland Tibetan Mastiff numbers have dwindled alarmingly in recent years. For example, as finer quality textile from India steadily replaced roughspun wool on local markets, the Gurungs of Nepal tend to cut back on sheep herding; hence, fewer dogs. Even more seriously, Tibetans report that the Chinese authorities in Lhasa forced locals to kill the big dogs of Tibet during the Cultural Revolution. Consequently, the Tibetan Mastiff in its natural setting has become an endangered breed.

Recently, this bold and ancient livestock dog has attracted serious attention in north America. The knowledge and promotion of the breed throughout the United States and Canada is due to the efforts of dedicated mastiff breeders and owners, an increasing number of whom are actively engaged in agriculture. The efforts to establish the breed here are, however, barely a decade old.

The first recorded Tibetan Mastiffs imported into the United States came as a pair, given as a gift from the Dalai Lama of Tibet to President Dwight Eisenhower. Since they were not quite what the President expected (he was hoping for smaller Tibetan Terriers), these two black dogs were sent to live on the farm of a U.S. Senator in Kansas.

Other Tibetan Mastiffs were imported in the late 1960's and early 1970's to serve as foundation stock for several breeders. Good breeding stock is continually sought and imported as it comes available through contacts in Nepal.

One of the most famous imports was "Kalu," a fine black dog sent to the U.S. in 1969 by Barry Bishop of the National Geographic Society. Kalu came from the remote Nepalese



The Himalayan yak (*Bos grunniens*) is a magnificent beast, equal to the grandeur of the mountains that form the backdrop to the high pastures. Tibetan Mastiffs are used to protect great herds of these bushy-tailed beasts in Nepal and Tibet.

mountain region of Humla-Jumla where he was credited with protecting the village of his master against leopards. Once in the United States, he became well known as a strong and faithful companion and protection dog. A great many Tibetan Mastiffs here today trace their pedigree to Kalu. He was owned and bred in California by founders of the breed in America. Kalu died in 1981 at the age of fourteen.⁸

Excellent Tibetan Mastiffs have also been introduced to North America recently with pedigrees originating from Jay N. Singh's Saipal Kennels in Kathmandu. These dogs trace their heritage to Tibetan borderlands above the Trisuli river in northern Nepal and to the high Khumbu region near Mt. Everest. Mr. Singh and his colleagues, who have Saipal-originated stock, carefully select their dogs to preserve the original good temperament, disposition and character of this renowned breed.⁹

The Tibetan Mastiff association founded in North America is The Tibetan Mastiff Club (TTMC). It has branches in Texas and California, and affiliated dog owners in many states, especially in the West. TTMC was incorporated in 1974, originally as the American Tibetan Mastiff Association (or ATMA). Its newsletter, "ATMA", is published in Wyoming.●

⁶Gill, W., *The River of the Golden Sand: The Narrative of a Journey Through China and Eastern Tibet to Burmah*, J. Murray, London, England, 1880.

⁷Rohrer, Ann and Linda Larsen, *The Tibetan Mastiff Book: A Short Comprehensive Study of the Tibetan Mastiff in the United States*, Anlin Associates, Llano, California, 1981.

⁸ATMA, The Tibetan Mastiff Club Newsletter, April 1982.

⁹For more information on the breed qualities of Tibetan Mastiffs see Al Lindan, "Qualities of a Tibetan Mastiff," *Dog World* magazine, September 1982, p. 136-137; Donald A. Messerschmidt, "On Tibetan Mastiff Color, Coat and Collar," and "On Tibetan Mastiff Size and Sound," *Dog World* magazine, 1983, In Press.