

PROFILE

Mrs. Helen Fottrell

Prefix Tailteann

Irish Wolfhounds, Kerry Blues, Boston Terriers

Mrs. Helen Fottrell, the first lady of Irish Dogdom, and an Irish patriot, died recently at the great age of 93 years. A legend in her own time, Mrs. Fottrell personified Ireland and the Irish at their best. Her passing marks the end of an era. Survival in the modern world has decreed that our generation become Europeans, yet we cannot but mourn the end of our long history as an individual and Celtic people and the glory of Irish tradition which, for me, was reflected in Helen Fottrell. In all aspects of her life she was truly a 'Duinne-usal' – a noble person.



Mrs. Fottrell chatting at the Clubs 50th Anniversary Show with Kathleen Kelly and friend from France.

Helen was born in Co. Kilkenny in 1896. Her maiden name was Murphy. Her mother died shortly after she was born and

her father, a doctor, died when she was only four years old. Helen was given a happy home with relatives, Kate & Edward Murphy in Paulstown, Co. Kilkenny.

Dogs were very much part of life in the Murphy family. Not only did they love, own and breed dogs but showed them as well – unusual in the late 1800s. The catalogue of the Royal Zoological Society Fourth Annual Dog Show in 1886 shows that they had three dogs entered: a Setter, a St. Bernard and an Irish Wolfhound! The Irish Wolfhound was named Oscar, date of birth 21st August, 1885, parents: Brain x Maida. Breeder, W. Leigh-Clare. It was interesting to learn that this 1886 Show, which was held in the Phoenix Park in Dublin, was a four day show and that all dogs had to stay for the four days. There were 564 exhibits and 326 exhibitors, 46 of whom were from England, Scotland and Wales.

The Murphy Family owned at least two Irish Wolfhounds. It is interesting that Oscar is not mentioned in Capt. Grahams Publication "Irish Wolfhound Pedigrees 1859–1906". Mr. Murphy's "Brian" born in 1885 is entered as number 53.

It is easy to see how Helen's love of dogs was fostered in this dog-loving, country home. Even as a child she always insisted that her own dogs accompanied her wherever she went. On one occasion, she was about 12 at the time, the hotel where she was staying on holiday had a litter of Pointer puppies. Helen fell in love with one of them and refused to leave without him. This Pointer lived for many years and appears frequently with her in photographs.

In her early 20s, Helen became actively involved in the republican movement which led to Ireland's independence. Her family home, then Gothe House in Co. Kilkenny, gave shelter to Irishmen on the run from the notorious "Black-and-Tans". The Republican movement of that time attacked institutions,

not the people in them. They should NOT be confused with the present day perpetrators of atrocities.

Gwen, Helen's daughter, told me that she remembers as a child when she and her father were driving through Paulstown, in Kilkenny, he commented on the new barracks. Idly, Gwen asked what had happened to the old one, and was very surprised at the reply – "your Mother blew it up". A minor explosion was placed outside to bring all the occupants rushing out, then the barracks itself was blown up! In later years, when I came to know and admire Mrs. Fottrell, it was a great surprise to me to hear that this charming and gently lady had ever been active in combat. It was interesting to hear it had been just as much of a surprise to her own daughter.

Helen had Kerry Blues since the early 1920s. Gwen thinks that she probably got them from Henry Fottrell whom she married later, in 1926. Meantime, being actively involved in the rebirth of a nation, they lived through times of great change and challenge. It was fascinating in later years to hear from Mr. & Mrs. Fottrell a first-hand account of these events. It was history in the making.

Henry Fottrell, who was a solicitor, was one of the main people involved in setting up the Irish Kennel Club. He formulated the rules, and indeed his prefix Tailteann was the first prefix to be registered. His Kerry Blue, Rog Tailteann was the very first Irish champion. Rog was bred by Con O'Herlihy, father of Bill O'Herlihy, Chairman of the Irish Kennel Club who died recently. Mr. Fottrell was Chairman of the Irish Kennel Club for over 40 years. He retired in 1978.

Helen and Henry Fottrell's home bred Irish Wolfhound, Desmond Tailteann, parents, (Felixstowe Kilcooly x Joanna of Clonard) was also among the first Irish champions. Desmond and his brother Thomand Tailteann were bred in 1927. A year later Joanna of Clonard was bred to Sulhamstead Demon, their offspring Knockmaroon Tailteann appears in an 1930 show catalogue.

In the early 1930s, Ch. Desmond, went to the USA to the Bishop of Buffalo, in New York. He does not appear in the US registrations of that time so apparently he was not used for breeding. Mr. & Mrs. Fottrell bred only a few Irish Wolfhound litters throughout the late 1920s and 1930s.

Although Kerry Blues and Irish Wolfhounds were their main breeds, Fottrells have always had room in their lovely home in Castleknock, Co. Dublin for a few representatives of other breeds as well. Helen had her first Boston Terrier in 1928 and before too long Bostons became her own special breed. She was still active as a breeder and exhibitor until her death – a span of 60 years. She bred and made up many Irish and International champions. Gwen also remembers Griffons and Pointers. Gwen herself bred and showed West Highland White Terriers, she had her first one when she was 12 years old.

In 1934, The Irish Wolfhound Club of Ireland held its "First Exclusive National Championship" Dog Show. The Judge was Mrs. Helen Fottrell. There were 46 Irish Wolfhounds, making up 51 entries. Both Mr. & Mrs. Fottrell became International All-breed Judges. When Chairman of The Irish Kennel Club, Mr. Fottrell did not accept judging appointments in Ireland but he did judge abroad. He judged Irish Wolfhounds at Crufts in 1950, his winners were Sheelagh Seale's Int. Ch. Artel Ballykelly Sandy and Ch. Boroughbury Casino of Spean. He judged Irish Wolfhounds at Crufts again in 1960 when his Best of Breed Ch. Sulhamstead Merman went on to win Best in Show.



Mrs. Fottrell cutting the cake at our 50th Anniversary Club Show in 1984. Also in the picture are Mr. Ben Simpson (Judge) and Miss Sheelagh Seale our Patron.



Ben Simpson and Helen Fottrell, Club Show 1984.

In 1982, The Irish Wolfhound Club of Ireland were privileged to have Helen Fottrell as judge for their National Breed Championship show. Even at 86 years of age Helen Fottrell was a fast and competent judge. Judging was finished at 5 p.m., the earliest finish in recent years. In 1984, the 50th anniversary of the first Irish Wolfhound Breed Championship show, Mrs. Fottrell was there as our honoured guest. Our Club felt very privileged to have the original judge present at the 50th anniversary – she was voted as an Honorary Life Member of our Club.

Strangely, one was never conscious of her marvellous age when chatting with Mrs. Fottrell, maybe it was because she was always so alive and interested. She maintained her interest in Irish Wolfhounds and Kerry Blues and indeed in all the Irish Breeds. She loved attending dog shows and enjoyed chatting with people as much as they enjoyed her company. It was noticeable how there were always one or two people on either side of her, they chatting earnestly, she nodding with interest and joining in occasionally. Her lovely character and warm personality seemed to transcend age.

On the morning she died, having read "THE TIMES", Helen slipped away as she slept. We were sad at her passing, yet thankful to have had the privilege of knowing this charming, exciting, yet unassuming, lady of Ireland. Ar dheis Dé go raibh a anam.

Elizabeth C. Murphy