

BEST IN SHOW MAGAZINE

THE LITERARY DOG

Interview with Mario Canton

By Anne Tureen



A: Mario Canton, you devote yourself to dogs, your studies and writing (16 books, 20 + contributions in anthologies, and numerous articles) with the time you are able to set aside from your paying job, home and family. Your efforts remain outside the box of 'official dogdom', not participating officially in breeding, showing, grooming, judging or in fact, in any organization, disciplines within which the rest of us battle for achievement, yet you are emblematic of all that is passion, curiosity, and the appreciation of the canine species.

You exist in a parallel world which is in many ways larger than any kennel club could compass. Your current publications examine only a limited scope of subjects including morphology, function, biometrics, structure, conformation, classification, movement, and soon to arrive, the new trilogy on terminology. You have limited your study to canine literature from Aristotle to current publications in Latin, Ancient Greek, Italian, French, English, German, Spanish, Dutch, Portuguese, and Russian. Which book is the best introduction to the work of Mario Canton?

MC: I would recommend a new reader begin with Canine Technology. The most well known trilogy, Dogs and Canine Breeds is a complex work, it took about 20 years to gather the material, another 10 to find a publisher, the format is difficult because after all that time I had only 10 days to put it together. That was a memorable challenge. In mid December I obtained financing from Hills to publish the volumes, but they had to be out before the end of the year. I was working day and night, what a scramble! My newer publications also have larger characters, no more headaches.

A: That's the advantage of an e-book, the text can be altered. Even if they say that a book is the most advanced technology of all, it never breaks, needs no electricity.

MC: Ergonomically the book has 600 years of history, it's pretty well developed. The e-book has its advantages, you can use search, and get right to the material you are looking for. Books used to have a similar function in an analytical index, but publishing houses don't have the budget for that sort of detailed work nowadays.

A: I have a copy here of that excellent interview between yourself and Antonio Crepaldi, it's a bit depressing because he asked all the most interesting questions concerning your collection of books on dogs, about 2000 volumes, some as old as 1700, right up to recent publications. How did it all start?

MC: I grew up in the countryside, my sisters and I were forever bringing home animals of all sorts, my Mother was wonderful, I found a little canary once and she cared for him for 25 years, the red fish people bring home from carnivals always die within the week but ours lived years, they became huge. However my scientific approach began when I was attending University, it was a question of male pride.

There are some public gardens in Padua along the Via Jappelli, and I used to skip class to meet a young woman who later became my girlfriend and wife. We had our bench in the park, she was from the countryside too, and she was a big cat lover. Well, the city people used the park to walk their dogs which were generally purebred dogs, not the mutts that populate the countryside, and she'd say, 'Oh which breed is that?' and 'Which one is that?'. I could hardly look the fool, so I obtained a big book with all the 300 breeds approved at that time and I studied it at night, I still have that volume at home.

So the thing started, and one day we went along to the dog show in Padua, then another, and so on, and we each had a favorite breed, hers was the Borzoi and mine the Greyhound. We wanted more information but there were really no technical books on dogs in Italy. We'd write to publishing houses in England or the States, the letter would take 15 days to get there and 15 days more for the reply. When we'd find something interesting we had to wait in interminable lines at the Post Office to place an international money order, not a very common thing then, and there was inevitably someone new at the window who didn't know how to make this payment. The book would be sent by sea, it took months to arrive, and when it did, it always had a good bibliography, true to the efficient Anglo Saxon tradition, so we'd find something else we wanted to read and the whole process started over again. There are few such catalogs left, Dogwise in the States, Our Dogs in England.

I suppose the first scientific studies on dogs I found were published in about the 60's, before that there were the historical texts, a tradition rooted in the 1700's.

A: What does a dog book from the 1700's talk about?

MC: Basically it describes the various breeds, those they had at the time, and there are ink drawings, and information on nutrition, medical care, don't forget there were no bags of dog food or even antibiotics. One thing they didn't write about was, 'My dog pulls on the lead.' They didn't have those issues back then.

A: 'Which toy should I buy for my puppy?', or 'How do I motivate my dog before entering the ring?'

MC: Exactly, the first dog show was held on the 28th and 29th of June, 1859 in the Town Hall of Newcastle on Tyne, it was organized by a group of hunters and it was essentially Setters and Pointers.

A: The Pointer, the symbol of Westminster Kennel Club.

MC: One of the oldest and biggest. Then there are the clubs that never became a general club, such as the coursing club in England which dates to the 1700's. In Italy, 4 or 5 people, all noblemen who hunted primarily with Bracco Italiano dogs, got together and founded ENCI, which grew and incorporated the various other breeds, and finally federalized with the FCI.

A: Together but separate, and as a breeder in Italy, I say, 'Thank goodness'. I was recently in Sweden for a mount with a magnificent dog, and the kennel was happy to share their male with me because in Sweden

the breed club recommends that one male be registered for only three litters. In Germany just now, I had a mount from a beautiful male, and I saw his son who is almost a year old who was fantastic, so I proposed coming back to him with a female from the mount. 'Lucky you' said the breeder, 'In Germany we need permission to do that!'. Since when is the breeder regulated by the Club?

MC: Eh, they want to avoid what happened with the German Shepherds, which are so riddled with Dysplasia that they may never get rid of it. The Kennel Clubs and breed clubs need to look like they are doing something about it. Don't forget that a kennel club is a political entity. They organize our shows, they worry about budgets, enrollments, not zoo-technical studies.

I wish they would spend more resources on judges and future judges, that's a central issue. In Italy there is very little available for a judge, as far as training, or updating, there are not even any books, they base their theoretical approach on Solaro from the 19th century!

A: Is there a country with superior training for judges?

MC: Beh, in Germany they have a good program, also in Switzerland, In France they have just published an up to date manual expressly to train judges. In the States they have a whole department at the AKC to advise people interested in qualifying. Our new council advertized that they were open to suggestions so I wrote them a letter on this subject. We shall wait and see.

A: Concerning the future of Italy, when I was at the shows in Lucca and Leghorn last year I met a group of young people who were participating as ring stewards, all from the new University program in Pisa on Breeding and Canine studies. They were really well prepared and highly motivated, looking forward to learning about the shows and being a steward.

MC: That program has already been closed down. It closed after only two or three years because the University held that it wasn't very useful. It was the only department in the entire Veterinary section that exhausted the enrollment places in each and every course.

A: What a shame, those were future breeders, exhibitors and judges.

MC: It's sad, Italy has some fine judges who will hopefully do some training, take Barbara Gallicchio.

A: Alberto Marengoni

MC: Antonio Crepaldi, my editor is also a judge and constantly studying. Keeping up with new material is important.

A: Is there a scientific journal in Italy that helps judges keep up, recently the field of genetics is exploding.

MC: A journal? In Italy we don't even have a book on genetics. Our only texts are very basic and general, they discuss Mendel and the color of peas, Breeders need a lot more than that. This December Denis Ferretti published a nice little volume, 200 pages focused on just dogs.

A: Is that why you choose to publish in Italian, because we need more material?

MC: Yes, I could publish in English, I would earn ten times what I do currently.

A: And everyone could read your work.

MC: They don't need me, there are plenty of studies that publish in English.

A: Yes, but those aren't really filtered for the general public, or specifically the dog community.

MC: I'm not sure the general public is interested in scientific information. I do think it contributes to selection in breeding. With the possible exception of group 9, most dogs were bred for some work. Are we going to try to conserve the image of the breed or the breed? In general people are happy if the dog looks well and conforms to the proper outline and what is actually inside the dog, which should be the definition of the breed, is secondary.

At the turn of the 18th century, modern breeding began, and the dogs belonged to hunters or land owners who also understood horses. That's where much of the terminology comes from, it was borrowed from equine sports. But when this link with work and sport was broken, people started breeding who had no idea what exactly their breed was supposed to do, and they focused on the outline, in only a few generations big changes occur. You can't 'Put the best into the best' if you don't know which is the best!

A: You often point out in your work that form follows function. That is almost subversive in the show world. When a Saluki goes into the desert and hunts isn't it the leg length and the chest depth, which our judges can evaluate, that makes the recipe for a good hunter?

MC: Not really, you need a trial. What you see is only 10% of the dog. Can you judge the muscles, the constellation of hormones, the reactivity of the nervous system, his gastric system providing energy to sustain him. You cannot judge his respiratory, or circulatory, systems. I believe it was Galileo Galilei in 1600, one of the first biologists who discovered that form FOLLOWS function.

A: Darwinism in a sense.

MC: It simply is not true that by selecting the shape you get the result. This is a common misunderstanding. We cannot separate showing and breeding from function. Does the winner have a long leg? Are you going to breed a long leg? Ok. A longer leg is going to make a Greyhound go faster. Not true. He must also have the muscle to move that leg. To move a lever with an extension you need a specific percentage of increase in power, can you judge that when a dog is standing in front of you? Moreover, a very long leg cannot be quickly moved, there is a proportion of 1:1,3 of the length of the anterior leg as compared to that from the ground to the sternum after which the dog moves more slowly.

A: Clear, so in a Utopia, what would be the proper way to judge a dog?

MC: The dog must do what it was bred to do. There must be a controlled trial.

A: So in many cases we need to actually hunt?

MC: Where is the catch? We have an ethical problem. We must make a substitute for the real thing. But keep in mind that the dog sees no ethical problem. We can take our dog to lure coursing and ensure that his cardio-circulatory systems, and his muscles are all working, but only a hare can determine the true hunter.

So we must decide. Do we want to maintain the breed or the semblance of the breed? In many cases today, one of the most important things is a nice temperament, not even a Dogo Argentino or a Caucasian Shepherd can show aggression. It doesn't seem to matter that he was bred for that.

In many cases not even the standard can save the breed. Judges make a solemn oath to uphold the standard and be guided by it, but what if there is clearly an error in the standard? Let's take an extreme example. Several of the American standards include phrases referring to acceleration, or extension. Now a

trotting dog functions well because his anterior and posterior are designed not to superimpose one another. He can maintain an even stream of movement allowing him to save energy and cover great distances over long periods of time. To ask for acceleration or extension is a contradiction. A good galloper will have acceleration when he launches. Some dogs must keep up for miles all day, it is ridiculous to look for extension.

A similar absurdity we commonly find is expecting the dog to 'cover ground'. Again requiring fore and rear extension. It has been over 50 years that science has demonstrated that the more you bring the leg forward the more you slow. That is wasted energy. The muscles do not have leverage when the leg is off axis. Inertia works on the leg until it returns to the perpendicular. All of that spectacular extension means bringing up generations of dogs who, from the functional point of view, do not function. Yet we very commonly find this requirement.

A: Of course no one would expect a Fox Terrier to have extension, but don't Gundogs naturally have extension? Look at the Irish Setter!

MC: Look, you take one of these breed or group winners out to the field. After one hour, he's a goner.

A: Come on.

MC: I'm telling you, Moreover, it's the same with Humans. Runners who do 5,000, 10,000 yards or the Marathon, They will put their foot down right under their barycenter because beyond that is wasted energy. It's instinctive. I discussed this concept in my volume. Principles of Locomotion. I go through the dogs first by group and then by breed, and many of these standards do not hold water. However in the show ring we have a different set of objectives, it has nothing to do with what the dogs were bred for.

A: It is exclusively our esthetic sense at work?

MC: It's a pagent, what are the criteria of Miss. Italy? I suppose symmetry counts in that, otherwise it's a question of taste. Look at Afghans, A short time ago no Afghan ever made it to BIS, why? They couldn't trot 'well', no extension. The racing groups thought they were doing something to uphold the function of this breed, but there is no point in putting Afghans on a loop designed for Whippets. He was born in the mountains and has more than a 30° angle to the pelvis to give him drive underneath. If we want a trial, let's do an up and down one.

None of this business with extension and firm toplines, and the silky mantle making waves – give me a real Afghan, who can face a canyon descent of sand and rocks, making hairpin turns around brush all at top speed, this is the type of reactivity we need to maintain.

A: In the Italian Terrier Club we recently lost Manuela Mariani, our Secretary, and a great supporter of working trials, that, as well as the coursing we've already mentioned, could be more integrated into judging. I don't think we are done for quite yet, I spent all of yesterday chasing after my Border Terrier who escaped the fencing to go after wild boar in the hills.

MC: If we are talking about Border Terriers, that's one thing, but consider the really massive breeding like what is going on with Labradors, a breed so affected by dysplasia that they could never swim.

We cannot be content with our Best of Breed, there must be more to it.

A: That brings us to the purpose of this column since books, especially well written ones, deepen our knowledge of our dogs, even our pleasure in having them. It's sort of like the film Matrix.

MC: Ah yeah, and Keanu Reeves puts the plug in his head and presto!

A: That's how a book works: read *Principles of Locomotion*, and- Boom- you are prepared!

MC: I always write in my prefix, that I am stating nothing new. I'm just bringing together other people's information, and dusting off what has been around since about the 19th century. I've actually had some bad reactions to my work, people who refuse to change what they have believed for a lifetime. But we must maintain a scientific approach, what I believe in this moment is what best explains the facts we have, but if someone else comes along with new facts, and that is supported, I must substitute my theory with a new one, nothing is static, nothing is eternal.

A: That's really exciting.