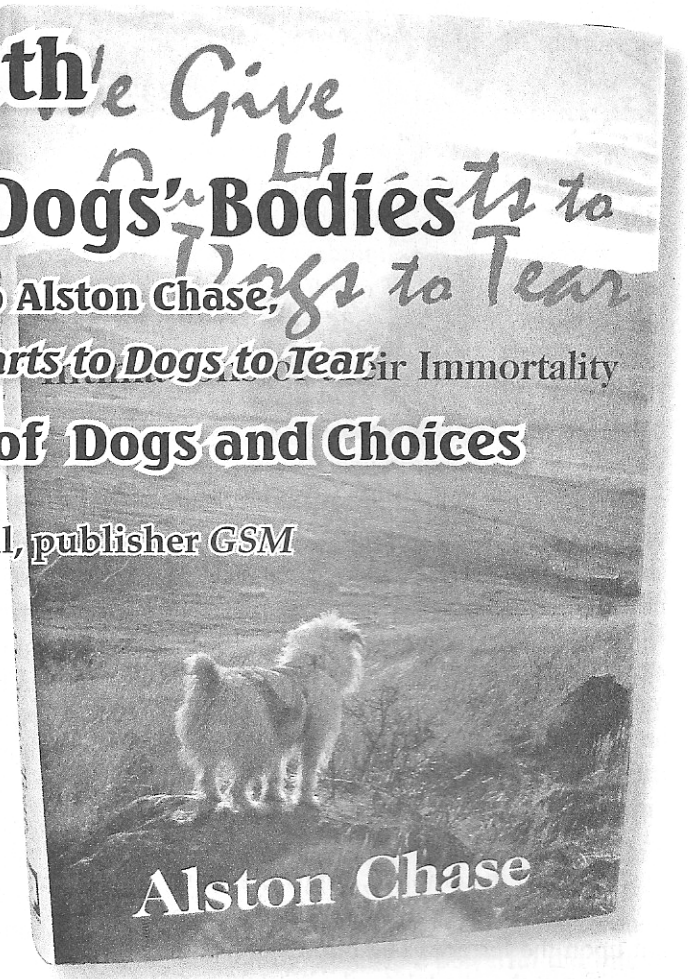
Big Truth in Little Dogs' Bodies

Response to Alston Chase, *We Give Our Hearts to Dogs to Tear*

PART ONE: Ghosts of Dogs and Choices

Joseph Harvill, publisher *GSM*

W. H. Auden once remarked that an important book is one that reads us, not the reverse. In this sense I was read by Alston Chase's, ***We Give Our Hearts to Dogs to Tear***, for I discovered myself in its pages and my own footprints in his journey. Since such reflexive reading is far from ordinary literary experience, Chase's book, his quest, and his ideas merit attention and response from this sojourner.



Alston Chase's book. GSM's publisher says, "It's as good as it gets for tracing stretch marks on the heart left by much-loved dogs! It's a keeper." Photo: J. Harvill.

In the November/December 2008 issue of ***GSM*** Laurie Haight Keenan shared her reflections on Chase's book in a memorable article, *These Are Our Dogs*, in which she focused on parallels between Chase's life with beloved Jack Russell terriers and our companionship with Scottish Terriers to remind Scottie lovers we as 'consumers' must take responsibility for our breed's issues—and take action! Keenan's insights are important and worthy of re-reading by everyone concerned over Scottish Terrier health and genetics. Chase's book 'read' me along these and other lines and it is these other lines I wish to explore.

I found myself and my own soul in these pages: in Chase's chronicle of life-long dog love, in his anxieties over line-breeding and diversity-reducing canine breeding traditions, in his lament over the demise of working terriers in the U.S., in his perceptions of urbanization as cultural and societal and environmental devolution, and in his discoveries as a trained philosopher and academic that dogs embody intimations of immortality. Indeed, I found this book so nearly my own memoir it is difficult for me to know where to begin my reflections and appraisal. I propose first a look at Chase's quest and journey largely in his own words, and then a response to his discovery regarding terriers as 'indicator species' pointing beyond themselves to large issues of time and eternity.

The Quest

Alston Chase's narrative is an eloquent testimony to dogs deeply loved, but also to missteps of social progress, as well as a reflection on mortality and the final triumph of the spirit. As a dog lover of keen sensibilities he is haunted by Rudyard Kipling's tough question "Why in heaven (before we are there) should we give our hearts to a dog to tear?" in his classic poem "The Power of the Dog":

> There is sorrow enough in the natural way
> From men and women to fill our day;
> And when we are certain of sorrow in store,
> Why do we always arrange for more?
> Brothers and sisters, I bid you beware
> Of giving your heart to a dog to tear.

For Chase, the answer to Kipling's question came, not with a sudden rush but through thirty year's dawning. When his first beloved Jack Russell Terrier died, he and his wife embarked on a search to see if Phineas might survive death. As Chase explains:

> "Our desire to believe in their immortality intensified as we lost, one by one, Nobie, Ifrit, Finn, Bungee, Panda, and Daisy. We thought that if we knew they hadn't really died, they wouldn't still tear our hearts so; and the sting of loss would fade.
>
> At first, we sought to ensure their 'genetic immortality' through breeding, but this inevitably failed. Inbreeding, as practiced by the purebred industry, leads not to genetic immortality but to genetic death. And out-crossing, while producing healthier results, does so by promoting diversity, not replication.
>
> Eventually we realized the answer to Kipling had lain at our feet all along. Every day our dogs show us another reason why we give them our hearts. And all these reasons spring from the same source. We love them because they embody the triumph of spirit over mortality. And being spirits, they never die. It is through the window of their brief lives that we glimpse eternity" (p. 221).

Chase's quest is deeper than dogs, deeper than career, deeper than enculturated middle-class upward mobility. A philosopher in the oldest and deepest sense of the term, his quest is for enlightenment, a quest for what is real and lasting in a world of ephimera and decay and death. Like many before him, he sought his truth on a mountain top, in his case, in the high country of Montana. There he discovered his most apt teachers were not the great minds of the ages, but rather nature made real and personal through grand Montana vistas of canyons and pine forests framing snow-covered meadows which he made his own by friendly familiarity of frequent treks and hikes, and nature made most real and personal by his dogs who shared his world and his heart. Like each of us in our heart of hearts, Chase was chasing the meaning of life.

The Journey

Chase's journey is a captivating read beyond his narrative's glow over great dogs in his life. Unlike David Wroblewski's fictional ***The Story of Edgar Sawtelle***, this is a 'Sawtelle' story of real dogs in this author's life. But as the late Roger Caras once said, "Dogs are not the whole of our lives, but they make our lives whole," so here in this dog man's book, Chase's narrative is larger than his dogs. Even so, to Chase's mind the beginnings and endings of Jack Russell terriers in his life punctuate not only chapters in his journey, they mark deepening life-lessons that form the residual value of his book. "The animals we love frame our lives," he writes:

> "Their arrival into the family as pups, kittens, or foals signals a joyous new beginning and their death marks the end of one period and the beginnings of another."

It was restlessness for more than philosophy as academic discipline, restlessness for actual reflection, that drove this professor of philosophy at Macalester College, St. Paul, Minnesota, to do what friends and relatives called crazy: he jumped from the security of an established academic career in Minnesota into debt and without sure income into the Montana wilderness.

Chase's journey began with the goal to find a small place in Montana to spend summers away from the turmoil of Vietnam era campus tensions. Over spring break in 1972 he and his eldest son traveled to Montana's high country, not knowing exactly what they were looking for, but confident they would recognize the 'right' place when they saw it. Everything realtors showed them was either too expensive or insufficiently remote.

Then, in the high country outside of Cascade, wildly remote under ideal conditions, impassable in the snows of winter, he found an abandoned homestead of 3,000 acres consisting of dilapidated log structures including a barn, blacksmith's shed, bunkhouse whose windows had never known glass, a granary with a roofless outhouse attached, and the original, packrat-infested 12 x 12 homesteader's cabin, its log exterior covered with plywood siding. It was too expensive, too primitive, and too remote: fifty-five miles from the nearest town, ten from the closest neighbor, and thirty-five miles from the nearest maintained road,

Alston Chase is not alone in being haunted by ghosts of much-loved dogs. Pictured here is my Willie, who died of liver cancer a week after his 9th birthday in 2005. Charlotte believed he was "an old soul" whose eyes and character intimated past lives and deep experiences. One thing for certain: he was a kindred spirit and soul-mate to me and I cannot today hear noises from hot-air balloons, or drive near a certain "jack rabbit patch" of once fallow ground in Albuquerque, or think of railroad steam engines without seeing Willie's face and re-connecting with his larger-than-life spirit. Photo: J. Harvill (2003).

without either telephone or electricity.

Against all logic he said "This is it!" and with giddy excitement the family did what many others might wish for courage to do—they followed their heart and pursued their dream. They bought the old Ben Dunn place, moved to their wilderness home in the no-place settlement known as Millegan, Montana, and vowed to stay forever.

Alston and his wife, Diana, were such devoted animal lovers that their married life began accompanied by two Great Danes and a pet ocelot, "Hobbididence," who went along on their honeymoon! So it isn't surprising that Chase's narrative of life in Montana is woven around beloved dogs, in this case a breed of dog previously unknown to the family but which came into their lives soon after they bought the Ben Dunn place. Animals were always Chase's "psychic capital," he tells us, providing a reservoir of emotional support against a growing sense of desperation. But more than any other, the animals at the heart of this heart-story in the Montana wilderness are the generations of feisty Jack Russell terriers who one by one owned Chase's heart and came to symbolize the very spirit of the Chase family's audacious venture.

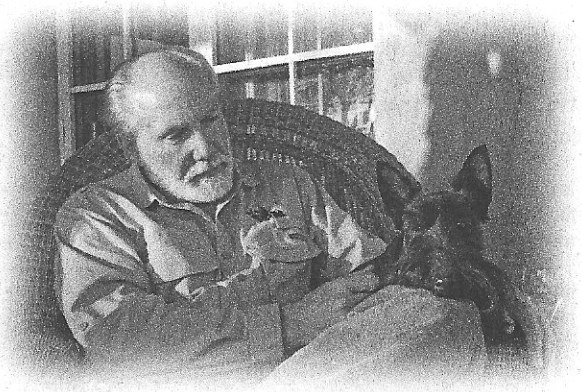
For nine years Alston and Diana kept their Montana homestead dream alive but economically they couldn't survive. A second mortgage line of credit with the Federal Land Bank only made them more aware they were in financial quicksand over their heads. Despite their dream of living at the 'Ben Dun' place forever, and despite leaving behind graves and ghosts of eight beloved dogs cherished and buried over the years in the land that became part of them, they had no choice; they put their dream up for sale and to their grief it sold for the asking price almost immediately.

Big Truth in Little Dogs' Bodies

Perhaps every ***GSM*** reader can see something of themselves in Alston Chase's journey, if nowhere else, in his openness to share his soul with the dogs he loves. Our breed is different, but our passion and devotion are the same. I also believe many of us know the lure of listening to our heart in life decisions when our head pronounces it irresponsible. So, too, I believe many readers who share my admiration for terrier attitude and can-do spirit will connect with Chase's choice to test his courage and will and self-sufficiency as a modern 'homesteader.' In these and other ways Chase's book 'reads' us by exposing us to ourselves.

The old Scotch terrier survived the cold and brutal dangers of his native Scotland but he didn't stand a chance against the glitz of modernity.

At deeper levels I find three of Chase's ideas in this book important in their own right and worthy of further reflection: (1) his perceived correlation between urbanization and the ruin of terriers in America; (2) his intimation that the cure for modernity's ills lies in new and deep connection



A contemplative moment at Las Golondrinas with Burnsie. The late Roger Caras once said, "Dogs are not the whole of our lives, but they make our lives whole." I'm daily learning fuller depths of his meaning. Photo: Susan Hamman, 2008.

to the land and to our dogs; and (3) his conclusion that the triumph of our dogs' spirit over death is why we give our hearts to them for it is intimation of immortality.

Ruin in the City

One of the compelling theses in Chase's book is his linking of urbanization to the deconstruction of terriers. Dogs such as our Scottish Terrier and the Jack Russell terrier, originally bred to go to ground as vermin exterminators, were rendered functionally obsolete when the 'countryside' which originally defined them turned into suburbs of housing subdivisions and shopping malls.

But change of a far more pervasive kind was at work beyond population migration. Loss of terrier 'jobs' was damage enough for terrier survival but their jeopardy compounded dramatically by the rise of the urban culture of dog shows which began in England in 1859 and in the U.S. in 1877, and quickly rose to popularity and influence. With the organization of the American Kennel Club in 1884, one by one canine breeds were franchised, studbooks were officially closed, and selective breeding based entirely on pedigrees and conformation rather than function in the field was mandated.

What this means for modern dogs is that in the century of major population migration in the U.S. from rural to urban centers between 1850-1950—that is, the period when American culture morphed from agrarian ways and values to urban life-styles and euphemized it as "upward mobility"—we redefined and reshaped not only our communities and families, not only our homes, work and our leisure, but we also redefined and re-made our terriers to suit upscaled tastes. The new professionalized sport of dogs standardized breeds just as we standardized city codes and automobiles and tract neighborhoods, reshaping our dogs, including Scottish Terriers, into 'fancy' versions of what

they once were.

This 'make-over' by the dog fancy goes unnoticed today in Scottish Terrier circles because we've never known anything else. Way before our time the Scottish Terrier came under the rule of the American Kennel Club in 1900, so the working terrier originals behind our dogs are out of sight and out of mind. We forget that the handsome Scottie we have today, complete with genetic link to bladder cancer 20 times greater than any other dog and with rapidly declining longevity, is a modern urban invention, something that never existed in the highlands of Scotland in the days before kennel clubs. What lived and hunted there was not a 'breed' as we know it, but a terrier type sculpted by function without regulations or pedigrees, regularly out-crossed to improve stamina and effectiveness as a hunter, and so, diverse, not uniform, in details of appearance and genetics. Today's Scottish Terrier breed is the ostensive 'improved' version, made handsomely uniform, it's true, but tragically deconstructed, a genetic shadow of the original 'diehard' dogs bred to work. We forget.

We forget, but Alston Chase does not because the same urbanizing forces that 'benched' the Scottie are now making-over his beloved Jack Russell Terrier, the last of the working terriers, and it began less than ten years ago.

The American Working Terrier Association was founded in 1971, devoted to actual field work by terriers—largely the then little known and diverse small dogs called loosely Jack Russell terriers. Five years later the Jack Russell Terrier Club of America was organized (1976), which openly and bitterly opposed AKC closed stud books and diversity-reducing breeding regulations, and openly opposed joining the AKC as a registered breed. But by the late 1990s the public 'discovered' the little mutt with class through television sit coms ("Frasier") and movies ("My Dog Skip" and "The Mask" and "Hunt For Red October") and the AKC decided to add the Jack Russell Terrier to its roles. The "Jack Russell Terrier Breeders Association" was hastily formed, later re-named the "Parson Russell Terrier Association of America," which petitioned for admission of the dogs into the Kennel Club and, despite the protests and objections of the original Jack Russell Terrier Club of America, the breed was admitted in January, 2001, and the little terrier's transformation into a show breed began (for details on the history of this breed in Britain and the U.S., see Chase's chapter, "The Dogs of Devon," pp. 39-49, and Patrick Burns, ***American Working Terriers***, 2005).

Already the dogs are changing. Chase says,

"Already we see ... the transformation of the Jack Russell into

Scottish Terriers at Westminster Dog Show, New York City, 1915—just fifteen years after the Scottish Terrier became a registered breed in the American Kennel Club. Note the absence of furnishings and beard and general appearance differences between these best-of-the-best examples and heavily coated and coiffed dogs exhibited today. What is less apparent, but critically important, is to note the almost cookie-cutter sameness to the dogs being exhibited in this photo after only 15 years of AKC registration and control—the product of breeding to the winner's circle, whereby judges' fancy influences selective breeding and the "matador effect" in the gene pool. Alston Chase argues we citified terriers along with ourselves, morphing from country beginnings to city 'fancies,' to the ruin of the working terrier. Photo from a reproduction vintage postcard.

The author's late-Willie in non-standard grooming trim suited for his rural life in New Mexico's high desert sand, mud, burs, and stickers (2002). Like Alston Chase, I count my dogs among the best teachers of timeless truth I've ever known. Photo: J. Harvill (2003).

spidery 'Parson Russells' that all look the same. Inbreeding is widespread. Blencathra Badger, a show Parson Russell that won Best of Breed at the 1991 Crufts Dog Show (England), sired 174 pups in America alone and another 79 since returning to the UK and has been touted to have had 'no foreign blood (in his line) for fourteen generations.' Not surprisingly, given this trend, genetically transmitted diseases that had once been rare among Jack Russells are showing up more frequently. And if the JR succumbs, can any sporting dog survive?"

Patrick Burns, a modern practitioner of old-time terrier hunting, author of a definitive book ***American Working Terriers***, and bitter opponent of the AKC's deleterious showring influence, draws the same conclusion:

"While it is true that individual dogs were not changed by admission to the Kennel Club, the AKC goal—right from the beginning—was to get rid of the wide sweep of variation that existed in the working world of Jack Russell Terriers .... Now called the 'Parson Russell Terrier,' the AKC dog is quickly getting too big in the chest to work—not that many of the dogs are actually taken out into the field to try .... The bad news is that the politics of the show ring has a tendency to invade the world of the working terrier. Schisms within the world of show dogs, and resentments made at ringside, have a way of eroding what should be a fraternal community built on shared knowledge and common goals" (***American Working Terriers***, pp. 61-63).

This ought to stab awake those of us who love Scotties because this contemporary case of the Jack Russell Terrier lays bare what is hidden like archaeology in the dogs we love—a century of urbanizing influence. Like an indiginous tribe 'discovered' in the Amazon and 'modernized' for no better reason than that we in our consumer addictions believe our lives are superior to theirs, the Jack Russell Terrier is morphing before our eyes from rustic to showpiece as the old Scotch terrier did starting in 1900.

There is no time machine for going back to undo the fateful trajectory our dogs were set on 113 years ago but we can see, perhaps for the first time, from the Jack Russell case before us the chauvanism buried in the 'new' Scottish Terriers in our lives. I wish we could recognize that 'urban sprawl' blights dogs as fatally as it blights family farms and wilderness.

It's worth asking why we changed the old Scotch terrier formula, why we thought details of appearance should occupy our official attention, and why we thought we knew more about what these dogs should be than his originators? The answer is simple, if arrogant: to urban values appearance and show are everything ... and since power and money reside in the city, 'they know best'!

I'm not shy to say this chauvanism is little more than a conquistador spirit turned loose in dog circles. It is arrogant, exploitative, and self-absorbed, and has no place in the ethics of stewardship and husbandry. Stewardship and husbandry first and foremost, require deep reverence and deeper ties of blood, sweat, and tears. They require these virtues because stewardship and husbandry are fundamentally not about us, our wishes and tastes, our will, but about safeguarding, preserving, and faithfully passing on a gift received that transcends us. Faithful stewardship is not license to re-write the book of the Scotch terrier. That is piracy, or in modern urban parlance, a hostile takeover.

Reflecting on our beginnings in 1900 and the trajectory of deconstruction set in motion at that time, I see tragic irony in the fact that today the 'blood, sweat, and tears' being mentored among our breed's gatekeepers is not to the terrier who was our gift-in-trust from the Highlands, but faithfulness to the arbitrary standard that changed him.

I say arbitrary because our problems today in the Scottish Terrier gene pool are not because we have a standard; our problems exist because *we set the wrong standard*. We chose form over fitness, glamor over genetics, and thus trivialized ourselves and this dog by reducing him and our stewardship to show rather than substance. And because we spent the first 95 years of our breed's history officially fixated on gathering accurate show records without even the first health record—blind to health records essential to track and to correct what our inbreeding was doing to

the health of our dogs—we deconstructed the 'diehard' as surely as urban 'developers' in the 1970s bulldozed the classic, landmark Fred Harvey *Alvarado Hotel* in downtown Albuquerque because it was old and didn't fit city planners' ideals for urban renewal.

This mind-set has to do with the whole conundrum of 'progress' which breezily presumes that whatever is new is to be preferred, whatever is 'modern' is superior, whatever is 'upscale' is better, whatever is quick and convenient and easy is the path to follow, and above all that money and winning define the good life. The old Scotch terrier survived the cold and brutal dangers of his native Scotland but he didn't stand a chance against the glitz of modernity.

We could have chosen a different trajectory for the modern Scottish Terrier back when it all began if our eyes had been on substantive not superficial measures as breed standard. We didn't choose substance because, frankly, we had our own life-as-sport agenda. There existed, after all, a model we could have followed—the old one prizing work and fitness that produced the tough terrier type in the Scottish highlands that caught our urban fancy in the first place.

These consequences, ghosts of shallow thinking and reductionist standards, rise up as witnesses against us, haunting our stewardship and killing our dogs.

But our self-centered modernity had no grace for rustic highlanders dictating the shape of dogs to come. They may have created the rugged, lovable terrier, but just as today in Jack Russell Terrier circles, we knew we could vastly improve upon crude beginnings. What, after all, could folk ways contribute to a modern sport of dogs? Our new blueprint for urbanizing their cobby little dog into 'best in show' would be success for all in every way!

And so we made facile choice of breed standard without realizing that eclipsing health by handsome would in time ruin the dog we love. In fairness, ignorance of genetics chose that superficial appearance-based standard in the beginning. The graver sin is our blindly clinging to that destructive choice a century later, long after we know better. "*We came with vision but not with sight. We came with visions ... but not the sight to see*" (Wendell Berry, *The Unsettling of America*).

The rest, as they say, is history—leading straight to present National Institutes of Health bladder cancer research using the Scottish Terrier as worst case canine gene pool.

We forget there were options at the beginning, even as we have choices now in our stewardship over our dogs, and as we also have options over wilderness and 'development' and urban sprawl. We forget our options ... but the dogs we love cannot escape consequences we embedded in their DNA. These consequences, ghosts of shallow thinking and reductionist standards, rise up as witnesses against us, haunting our stewardship and killing our dogs.

Conclusion

I share Alston Chase's sensitivity to the plague of urbanization. To see it, not top down but to see it from the bottom up, from the perspective of nature and the land and perhaps most pointedly, from the perspective of the rough and ready terrier of the old Scottish highlands we manicured for show, is to see it for the ecological cancer it is, not merely to the land and our dogs, but more so to us as it has bulldozed values important to our lives.

Chase witnessed and writes about the disappearance of the old ranching families from his beloved Montana displaced by bi-coastal, trust fund cowboys with urban values buying up land and inflating real estate prices intent on "ranching the view" while changing communities and the land in their wake. He worries over the Jack Russell Terrier's future as it clocks a decade down the same road traveled by the old Scotch terrier a century ago.

I'm daily seeing similar drama unfold in my historic area of the Rio Grande Valley, older in colonial history than Plymouth Rock, where developers have been buying up family farms and turning them into subdivisions intent on remaking this unique agrarian corridor of Tomé-Adelino by the standard of Everyplace, USA.

And even as I share Chase's lament over consequences to the land and our dogs, I am haunted by ghosts of Native Americans over my shoulder with pain-filled eyes that say better than words, *"you don't know half of the ruin your conquistador ways will bring on the earth!"*

The truth is, each of us carries conquistador blood. We are the sons of Coronado. It has been too easy for us to look the other way so long as it made us laugh or rich.

We distance ourselves from that fact until we see the parallel between our lives for show, upscaled unsustainably, and our urbanization of the old Scotch terrier. As we went uptown with our ambitions, we remade him into our new image, too. Today as networked economic markets around the world crash as never before in our lifetime maybe we're ready to see the unsustainability of superficial standards on Wall Street as well as Main Street. A higher standard of living at a lower standard of life is not sustainable for us or for the little black terrier at our feet.

How do we live so we don't repeat the razing of the *Alvarado* or the deconstruction of the 'diehard'?

Chase offers a clue in his book, a clue I am discovering in my own life contains seeds of hope. To that path forward and those seeds of hope I turn in Part Two.

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