

LIONEL PENNEFATHER

Irish sheepdog breeder of extraordinary coolness.

(The Daily Telegraph, 2002)

Lionel Pennefather, who has died aged 94, was the doyen of Irish sheepdog trainers and breeders. In a career that spanned 60 years, he won five national titles, became the first Irishman to qualify for the Supreme International Championship, and achieved unexpected television celebrity as runner-up on *One Man and His Dog*.

Pennefather (pronounced ‘Pennyfeather’) maintained that coolness was an essential quality in a sheepdog, and it was one that he himself shared. Competing in a trial at Omagh during a period of sectarian violence, he was interrupted by a burst of gunfire close by. When the judges and spectators had picked themselves up off the ground, Pennefather was invited to start his round again, but replied that he was happy to carry on where he had left off. He went on to win first prize, prompting the remark, ‘Mr Pennefather goes much better with the gun behind him.’

Pennefather was no stranger to such incidents, having grown up in an Anglo-Irish family during the Troubles. His childhood memories included an attack on his parents’ house in which bullets shattered the dining-room windows and embedded themselves in the sideboard. But his father did not scare easily: confronted by a member of the IRA who demanded, ‘Are you for the King?’, he replied, ‘Of course I am,’ and sent the man on his way.

George Lionel Pennefather was born on 15th August 1907, into a Tipperary family of such standing that its members held the right to be buried on the Rock of Cashel (his father was the last person to be interred

there). His parents owned one of the first Model T Fords in the county, but this proved a disadvantage at cattle fairs, since farmers buying calves believed that their development would be marred by exposure to such an unnatural machine.

Pennefather's passion for animals was soon evident, and separation from them made his schooldays at Clifton College a trial to him. At 17 his father sent him to work on a farm near the village of Caldbeck in Cumbria, where the legendary huntsman John Peel is buried. It was during his time as a 'farm pupil' (an apprenticeship for which his father paid £2 a week) that he acquired his first sheepdog pup, bicycling 14 miles after work to collect it. The habit of using a Cumbrian accent to command his dogs remained with him for the rest of his life.

Returning to Ireland, he saw his first sheepdog trial – at Clonmel racecourse – in 1926. He was immediately hooked, and within five years had trained a national champion, Spy. Like all his dogs, Spy was a Border Collie – a breed which Pennefather considered 'supreme among the workers of the canine world'. So strongly did he become identified with them that they are sometimes referred to among enthusiasts simply as 'Pennefathers'.

Spy's expertise was such that he was once observed to walk right up to a sheep, mesmerising it with his approach, and lick it on the nose. He was also, Pennefather claimed, one of the best travelled dogs in the world, accompanying his master to trials throughout the British Isles, and in 1936 on a tour of South Africa.

Sheepdogs were a novelty to most South Africans, and Pennefather's demonstrations were enthusiastically received: at the Rosebank Show in Cape Town, Spy and four companions performed in front of a crowd of 35,000. The tour almost ended prematurely when, in the course of a three-day train journey, Pennefather took advantage of an unscheduled

halt in the middle of the veldt to give his dogs some exercise, only to see the train steaming off into the distance without them. Fortunately a guard noticed their absence before they were reduced to herding springbok.

In Ireland, Pennefather's preferred mode of transport was an ancient Humber with wooden artillery wheels, whose dicky seat he converted into a dog box. Accustomed to an enthusiastic reception, he was gratified on arrival at a trial in Sligo to be met by the local marching band, and duly took his place behind it. Not for some time did he realise that it had actually turned out to meet Eamonn de Valera.

A gifted raconteur, Pennefather was much in demand for his fund of stories. The discovery that his sheepdogs could be trained to herd ducks and geese also proved a popular source of entertainment. Once, asked to demonstrate this skill at a luncheon for the Bishop of Derry, he found himself pitting his wits against a flock of turkeys, who defeated his best efforts by flying into the trees.

Away from the trial circuit, Pennefather farmed successively in Tyrone, Wicklow and Derry. When rounding up his flocks he would take as many as five dogs with him, each trained to a different set of whistles so that he could control them individually. He rode to hounds whenever possible, and was also an accomplished showjumper.

Among Pennefather's proudest achievements was persuading the International Sheepdog Society that Ireland should be allowed to compete in its championships, which until the 1960s were open only to England, Scotland and Wales. Having made his point by gatecrashing the society's AGM in Carlisle, he then proved it by qualifying for the first four-nations final with one of his favourite dogs, Bess. In 1983 the society awarded him the Wilkinson Sword Trophy for his outstanding contribution to the sport. He continued to compete into old age, and celebrated his 81st birthday by winning an open trial.

Pennefather was a man of strict ethics, and a confirmed teetotaller. (In this he followed his father, who refused to grow barley on the grounds that it was used to make beer.) It was at a Moral Rearmament meeting in 1948 that he met Heather Newenham, whom he married the same year; she survives him, as do their son and daughter. On his retirement they went to live at Coolmore, the Newenham family's estate in County Cork.

Pennefather held that the making of a good sheepdog lay three quarters in its breeding and one quarter in its training, and he quoted with approval the motto of the French Shepherds' Club: 'There is no good flock without a good shepherd, and no good shepherd without a good dog.'