

The New York Sun

September 28, 2004 Tuesday

Shaggy Dog Tales

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SECTION: ARTS & LETTERS; Pg. 16

LENGTH: 817 words

Mark Derr can't be bothered with the "great man" theory of history. People - powerful kings, ambitious generals, revolutionary scientists - are overrated. What really matters when sizing up the progress of a nation, Mr. Derr suggests, is not so much the relationship between bigwigs and their societies but the all-important relationships between them and their dogs.

In his new book, "A Dog's History of America" (North Point Press, 380 pages, \$25), Mr. Derr applies his "average dog" methodology to the progress of North America from the pre-colonial era through the present day. Standard history books often ignore the role of dogs in American history, he notes. To set the record straight, he revisits a dizzying array of people, places, and pooches - some familiar, some obscure - to shed light on human-canine relations through the ages.

It turns out that for much of American history being a dog was no easy gig. In precolonial times, before the arrival of horses, various tribes used dogs as pack animals. Any mutt who shirked his duties risked a rough flogging, or worse yet, a gentle sauteing. Throughout the book, Mr. Derr exhibits a seemingly insatiable appetite for dog-eating stories. If nothing else, "A Dog's History of America" serves as a comprehensive "Who's Who" of American dog eaters. (The Aztecs? Yes. The Apache? No. Meriwether Lewis? Yes. Colonel George Custer? No.)

At one juncture, Mr. Derr even provides a recipe of sorts for "Dogges Porridge," which seems to involve a handful of mastiff and a touch of sassafras. "Among its other virtues," writes Mr. Derr, "sassafras was believed to cure syphilis." Sounds delightful.

When Americans weren't eating dogs, dogs were often eating Americans. Mr. Derr documents in graphic detail how European explorers, from Christopher Columbus to Ponce de Leone, brought ferocious dogs to the New World with the sole purpose of terrorizing the natives. "It is sad enough to say that millions of people died in what can only be called genocide," writes Mr. Derr, "and that dogs had a hand in it."

But exploitation of dogs' capacity for violence didn't end there. Mr. Derr documents the long and sordid history of Americans organizing dog-eat-dog, dog-eat-bull, and dog-eat-

badger fights. New York City passed its first dog fighting ban in 1867, and despite more than a century of crackdowns it remains a favorite pastime for many Americans.

Thomas Jefferson routinely dissected dogs at Monticello, and George Washington regularly drowned undesirable puppies at Mount Vernon. But these days, dissecting dogs and drowning puppies doesn't play well at the poll, and modern presidents tend to be more accommodating with their family pets. George H.W. Bush, for instance, allowed his springer spaniel Millie to collaborate with Barbara Bush on a tell-all memoir. "Millie's Book: As Dictated to Barbara Bush" went on to be a bestseller.

Millie wasn't the first (or the last) dog to achieve fame in the United States. And for anyone who has ever pondered the historical underpinnings of, say, Spuds MacKenzie, "A Dog's History of America" offers a scattershot survey of America's original publicity hounds. According to Mr. Derr, the rise of the celebrity dog in America dates back to at least the 1860s, when San Francisco journalists transformed "two bar-begging street curs" named Bummer and Lazarus into Bay Area heroes.

Various writers, including Mark Twain, lionized the dynamic duo for their unerring loyalty to each other and for their prodigious rat-killing skills. After an early death, Lazarus received the highest honor accorded to dogs at the time: He was stuffed and mounted. When Bummer died, Twain wrote his obituary in the Virginia City Enterprise. "The old vagrant "Bummer" is really dead at last," wrote Twain. "He died full of years, and honor, and disease, and fleas."

Despite nice morsels about dogs like Bummer, Mr. Derr's kibble-and-bits approach towards history rarely leads to satisfying fare. He has failed to organize his vast knowledge of Americans and their dogs into any sort of comprehensible narrative or guiding theory. The result is a sprawling book with all the narrative discipline of a puppy running free of its leash.

The most compelling dog stories, from John Muir's "An Adventure with a Dog and a Glacier" to Jack London's "Call of the Wild" concern the personality, shortcomings, or heroics of a single pooch - Muir's Stickeen or London's Buck. Here and there, Mr. Derr slows down long enough to focus on individual dogs, such as John James Audubon's Newfoundland, Plato, or the aforementioned Bummer. But all too often, he slogs through page after page without mentioning a single dog by name.

Perhaps, there is no other way to cover 10,000 years of history, involving dozens of cities, thousands of towns, millions of people, and even more. But it seems to me Mr. Derr (dare I say it?) has bitten off more than he can chew.