

“A Wolfhound Myth Melts with the Ice Age”

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This article is going to annoy a good many Irish Wolfhound owners and fanciers. If you are one, be warned that a long cherished breed myth is going to be debunked. However, before you cry “Heretic!” and call for tar and feathers, know that Irish Wolfhounds were my first breed and I still have a warm place for the great hounds in my heart.



That the Irish Wolfhound was bred to hunt wolves by the ancient Celts is indisputable. Eyewitness accounts of hunting date back to the 4th century AD and continues up to the breed's near extinction in the 18th century. Breed literature also commonly states the Wolfhound hunted the giant Irish Elk - which stood six feet at the shoulder and had an antler spread of 9 to 12 feet. The Irish Elk (*Megaloceros giganteus*) is actually a member of the deer family and was by no means exclusive to Ireland - it is just that the best and most fossils are found there. *Megaloceros* used its immense antlers for sexual display and shed them every year, just like the fallow deer - its closest living relative. The belief that the Wolfhound was used to hunt the Irish Elk is a fallacy originating from Edwardian pseudo-science. It is analogous to saying that German U-Boats used to torpedo Viking longships.

That's right, it is a fallacy. The Irish Elk became extinct during the Ice Age and never saw anything remotely resembling a domesticated dog, much less an Irish Wolfhound. For that matter, they never saw a human either, as Ireland was uninhabited at the time. Changes in vegetation caused by cooling climate caused *Megaloceros* to vanish from Ireland around about 12,000 to 10,000 years ago.¹ The huge deer existed in Ireland during a brief warm spell between two long arctic periods. Ireland's first evidence of man

(the Toome Bay and Early Larnian cultures) date only to 8,000 years ago.² To put it plainly, man and his dogs were at least 2,000 years too late to hunt *Megaloceros* to extinction. End of story.

If you are in a hurry, you can stop reading now - I've made my point. But if you are interested in the denouement - the detective's summation of the motives and facts, read on.

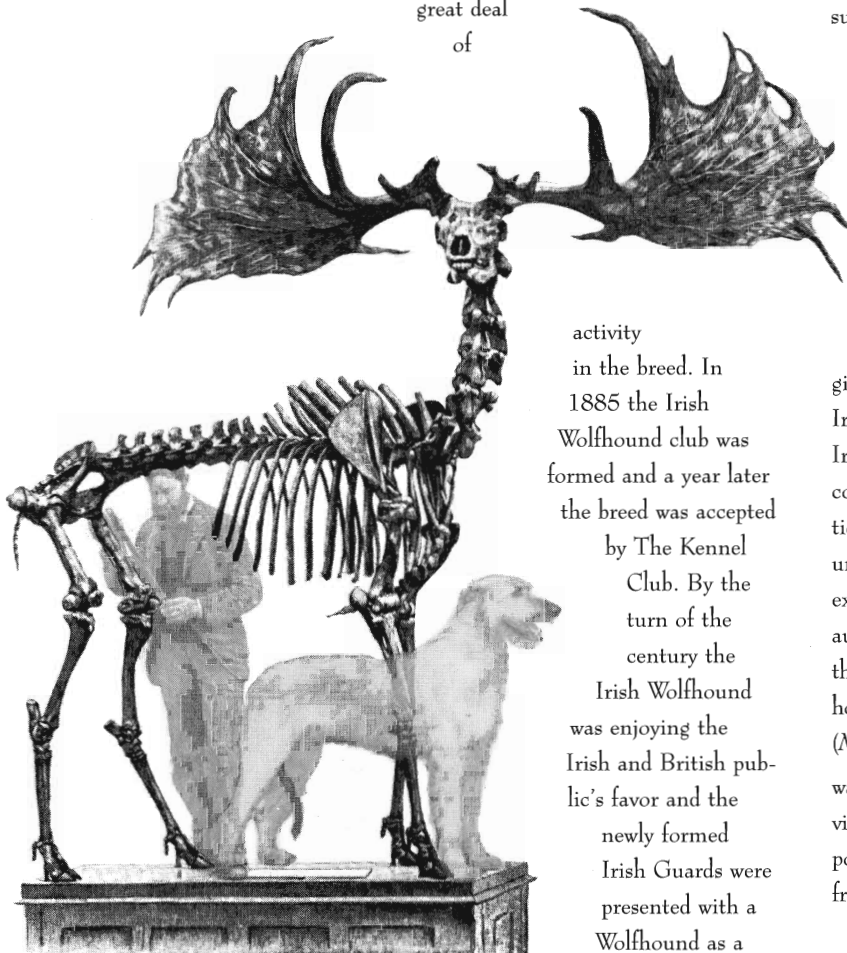
So how did this myth come about? My first clue that something was wrong with the story came when I visited the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History a few years ago. I spotted a mounted skeleton of the Irish Elk and read the information about its extinction on the display placard. The huge elk was displayed along side the skeletons of Giant Sloths, Woolly Mammoths, Saber-Tooth Tigers, and Dire Wolves. At the time, I could not recall when man is believed to have first domesticated dogs, but I knew that anything that lived during the Ice Age never saw a purebred dog. Proving that the Elk and Wolfhound never saw each other was quite simple. Tracking the origin of the myth was the real problem.

In his excellent book, “Ever Since Darwin”, Stephen Jay Gould devotes a chapter (“The Misnamed, Mistreated and Misunderstood Irish Elk”) to the history of the Irish Elk with respect to science.

Certainly by the early 1800s the bones of the Irish Elk were known to be fossils. The renowned French paleontologist, Georges Cuvier, had estimated the time frame of its extinction and confirmed that it was not like any other living animal in 1812. Armchair theorists proposed that the *Megaloceros* had been killed off by the Celts, the bloody games of the Roman Coliseum, or even drowned in the Great Flood. By 1846, Europe's scientific community knew the Irish Elk had become extinct long before man came to Ireland.

In the early 1860s, Captain George Augustus Graham began to reconstruct the breed from what he considered to be the last two reasonably pure Irish Wolfhound bitches, Borzoi, and Scottish Deerhounds. After twenty years he was successful in establishing a type based on his interpretation of eyewitness accounts and historical depictions of large, greyhound style dogs. As Graham's efforts began to bear fruit,

there was a
great deal
of



activity in the breed. In 1885 the Irish Wolfhound club was formed and a year later the breed was accepted by The Kennel Club. By the turn of the century the Irish Wolfhound was enjoying the Irish and British public's favor and the newly formed Irish Guards were presented with a Wolfhound as a

mascot. Not surprisingly, the surge of popular interest and national pride in the Irish Wolfhound occurred during the Celtic Revival – a period of renewed interest in the art and culture of the ancient Irish Celts.³

During the last decade of the 19th century, Anglo-Irish gentry were unearthing more and more bones of the Irish Elk from peat bogs on their estates (as indeed people had been doing for hundreds of years). Letters about these amazing pre-historic finds appeared frequently in newspapers and magazines. Archeological efforts had discovered Irish Elk bones in caves together with those of large canines, but whether wolf or dog could not be determined. What could be more natural than to imagine a link between these two prestigious Irish mammals? Wolfhound fanciers at the time leapt to the erroneous conclusion that the giant Irish Wolfhound must have hunted the giant Irish Elk. Despite all scientific interest to the contrary, the Wolfhound fancy reasoned that what else but the Irish Wolfhound could have brought down such huge prey? It was of course, a false conclusion but not the only example of flawed thinking and pseudo-science regarding the Irish Elk. At the time, laymen believed that in order to attain a 10' rack, the Elks must have lived to be hundreds of years old!⁴

While there are many historical accounts of hunting wolves, in none of these first hand descriptions is there any mention of the giant Irish Elk. Father Hogan's exhaustive catalog of Irish Wolfhound citations is completely devoid of the Irish Elk – and Capt. Graham was closely involved in compiling the invaluable reference. Indeed, no mention of the Irish Elk in wolfhound literature occurs until well *after* the breed's revival. In 1907, breed expert Fred Gresham stated adamantly but with no authority, "The Irish wolf was probably no larger than the wolf of any other country: but it is certain that the hound was a contemporary of the extinct Irish Elk (*Megaceras hibernicus*), and that this immense animal was commonly hunted by these dogs".⁵ He was convinced that the wolfhound and giant Elk were contemporaries – and that the size of the former developed from man's need to hunt the latter.

Articles about the breed in the second decade of the 19th century do not always mention the Irish Elk in connection with the Wolfhound and it was not a universally accepted part of breed folklore at that time. In 1922, an article in *The Field* suggested that the Irish Wolfhound and Elk might have been contemporaries and then proceeds to build on this shaky foundation – essentially repeating Gresham’s premise regarding Wolfhound size and prey.⁶ Interestingly enough, the article audaciously suggests that based on the size of the Irish Elk bones, Wolfhounds were originally much larger, but after the extinction of the Elk, the Wolfhound was possibly reduced in size to better hunt wolves (it was commonly believed at the time that Wolfhounds had been much larger during their Halcyon days). It is important to remember at this time, the author was talking about the breed’s *reconstructed* size, as there was no fossil or medieval skeletal record of Irish Wolfhounds sufficient to establish accurate heights of the breed prior to its decline in the 18th century. Obviously, the accepted argument of the day was that size came not from the need to overpower Irish wolves, (which were no bigger than those in England or on the Continent did) but from the need to bring down the huge elk.

The Irish Elk myth was one that clearly appealed to the fancy. By 1928, Mr. L.O. Starbuck (Ambleside Kennels) had reinforced the myth in his articles about the breed and said that the disappearance of the wolf and Irish Elk caused the decline of the Wolfhound.⁷ It had become an established fact in the Irish Wolfhound fancy. Yet in 1949, the scholarly “Dogs of Ireland”, by Anna Redlich, made no such claim regarding the breed and its supposed prey. Redlich noted only that elk, reindeer, and mammoth remains had been found together with bones of a “dog-like carnivore” which was indistinguishable from a pre-historic wolf.⁸ These finds obviously helped to reinforce the tantalizing fable. In 1963, Alma J. Starbuck finally sealed it into breed history in “The Complete Irish Wolfhound” where she re-stated the myth and further implied that both the wolf and elk became extinct in the 17th century due to the prowess of the wolfhound.⁹

family had Wolfhounds, we firmly believed the Irish Elk myth as well. After all, it was published in Starbuck - for many years the only book available to students of the breed and which continues to be a primary source for breed researchers. There are other books and articles now and the myth continues to be repeated – even in the AKC’s “The Complete Dog Book”.

It was a great bit of blarney during its century-long life span, but it is now time to reverently lay the myth to rest.

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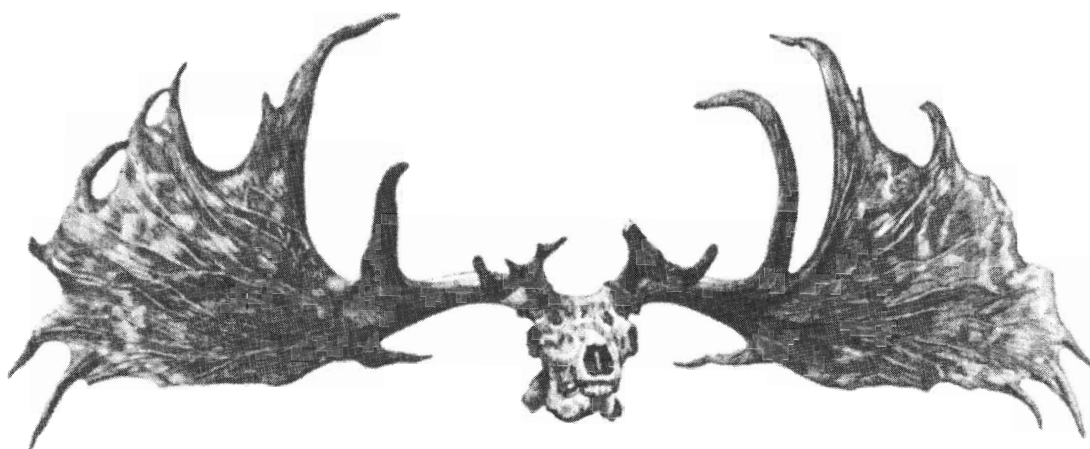
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¹ Stephen Jay Gould, "Ever Since Darwin", W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. New York, 1977, p.91.

² Antony J. Sutcliffe, "On the Track of Ice Age Mammals", Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1985,

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³ Roughly spanning 1880 to 1930 but the beginnings were seen as early as 1840.

⁴ *Country Life Magazine*, "A Grand Head of the Irish Elk", London, June 18, 1901, p.924.

⁵ Robert Leighton, "The New Book of the Dog" Cassell & Co. Ltd., London, 1907, p.162. Gresham uses one of the early scientific names for the Irish Elk.

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