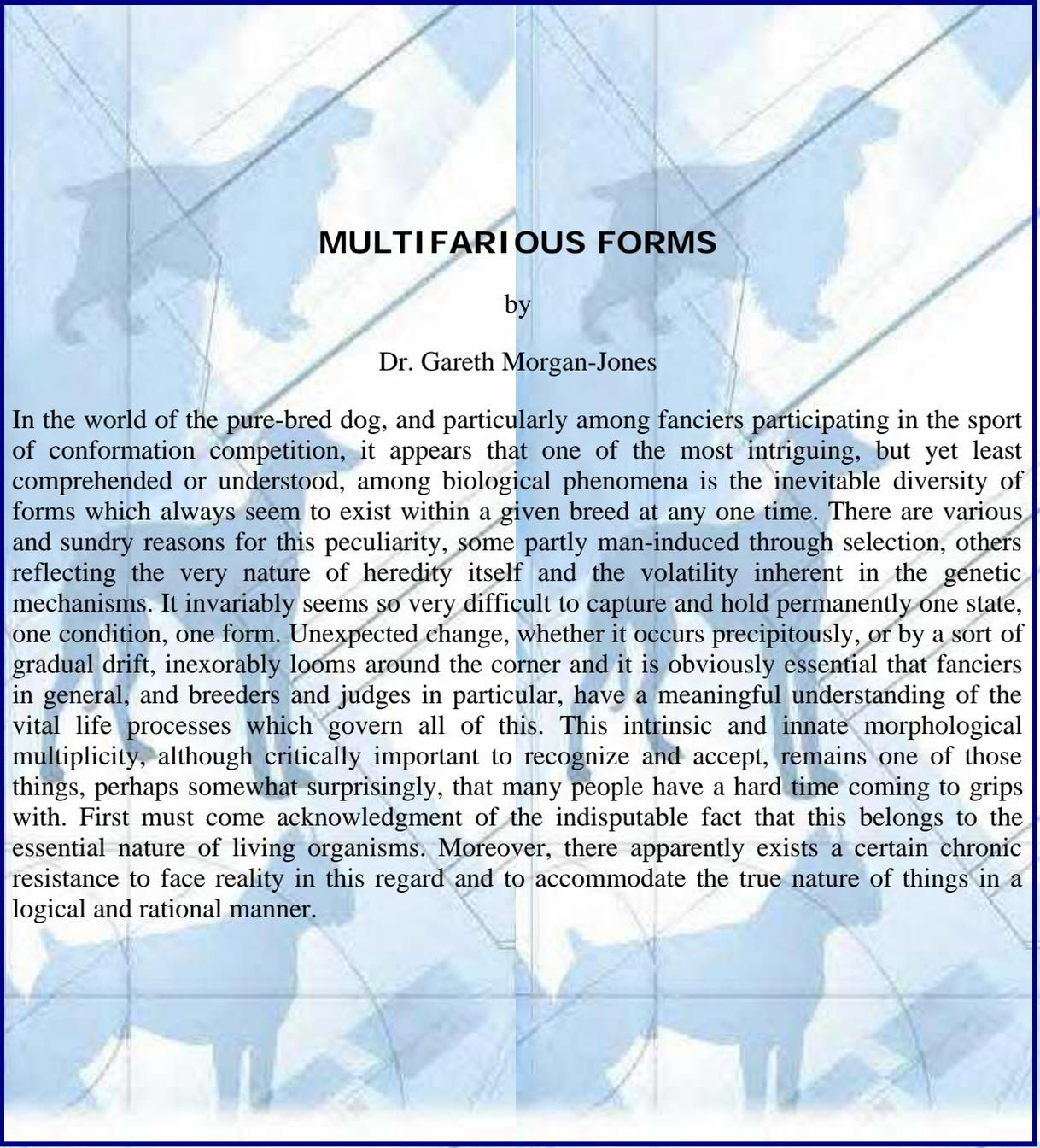


Multifarious Forms
by Dr. Gareth Morgan-Jones
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In the world of the pure-bred dog, and particularly among fanciers participating in the sport of conformation competition, it appears that one of the most intriguing, but yet least comprehended or understood, among biological phenomena is the inevitable diversity of forms which always seem to exist within a given breed at any one time. There are various and sundry reasons for this peculiarity, some partly man-induced through selection, others reflecting the very nature of heredity itself and the volatility inherent in the genetic mechanisms. It invariably seems so very difficult to capture and hold permanently one state, one condition, one form. Unexpected change, whether it occurs precipitously, or by a sort of gradual drift, inexorably looms around the corner and it is obviously essential that fanciers in general, and breeders and judges in particular, have a meaningful understanding of the vital life processes which govern all of this. This intrinsic and innate morphological multiplicity, although critically important to recognize and accept, remains one of those things, perhaps somewhat surprisingly, that many people have a hard time coming to grips with. First must come acknowledgment of the indisputable fact that this belongs to the essential nature of living organisms. Moreover, there apparently exists a certain chronic resistance to face reality in this regard and to accommodate the true nature of things in a logical and rational manner.

There is a question of verisimilitude here. The notion that every exhibit of every breed should, ideally, look more or less exactly alike, in other words be of precisely the same so-called type, is one which many folks seem to subscribe to without giving due thought to what this really means. Even if this desirability were biologically possible, which, because of fundamental genetic vicissitudes, it is not, would breeds necessarily be in better condition? Does uniformity in this context perforce have some sort of axiomatic, connate, elemental, self-evident advantage? I think not! In fact, on the contrary, quite the opposite is true. With diversity and variability comes what

can best be referred to as a certain biological safety-net. This is not to say, however, that the concept of type itself is moot and inapplicable, that the characteristics by which individual breeds are recognized cannot be specified, at least in broad terms. Where the danger lies is in attempting to define the morphology and structural peculiarities of breeds too restrictedly, thereby failing to accommodate reality.

A failure to accept and recognize the fact that the pure-bred dog represents a highly complex and seemingly inexhaustible store of genetic diversity and variability can certainly lead to a much too narrowly-conceived perspective on how individual breeds are, or should be, viewed and defined. It has happened. Hence the attempts, in many instances, to highly particularize breed standards and to do so to such an extent as to become, to some degree at least, counterproductive. The variabilities existing among populations of individual breeds of the pure-bred dog are not, after all, going to go away just because someone, or a group of individuals, sees or see fit to produce a very narrow and ultra-restricted blueprint of what a breed should be like. An ample, all-embracing perspective is surely required here, rather than a limited, myopic one. The form of the dogs came and evolved, after all, before the standards were even written but we sometimes seem to conveniently forget that fact. Repeat; the dogs came first, their description came subsequently, afterwards! Is there some fundamental or dire disadvantage to having considerable latitude in terms of specifying the precise form, in order to accommodate variation, in an open standard such as is exemplified by that of the Greyhound? The standard of that breed is one of the broad perspective, of the big picture, of the harmony of parts, with strength and flexibility being the essential and key elements of the breed's very essence. There is a certain outline and a capacious chest, as the English standard so very well describes it. Is there anyone out there with the chutzpah or temerity to venture an opinion to the effect that this breed's spare but wonderfully concise and succinct standard, in which there are certainly no wasted words, is inadequate and has not served it well all through the years? I sincerely hope not!

There is, of course, a message here for all those within the fancy intent on tampering habitually and incessantly with breed standards. Pray tell, what real purpose is being served? I am told, incidentally, that someone, somewhere, wants to describe the Pekingese as having reach and drive; I'm serious! My goodness, I wonder what the legendary Dowager Empress Tzu Hsi would think of that? Did she not say that let its forelegs be bent, so that it shall not desire to wander far or leave the imperial precincts? What does it need these facilities for; running rapidly up and down and around American Best in Show rings in the manner of the Shih Tzu in order to be additionally competitive? Is there, one sometimes wonders, an ever-increasing trend toward this desire to unceasingly modify standards occurring within pure bred dogdom today? Has this now become an end in itself, so to speak, the in vogue thing to indulge in? What could be the cause, the motivation? Don't fanciers have more important things to preoccupy themselves with? The question which must surely be asked goes something as follows; is repeatedly attempting to refine breed descriptions to the extent of making them cumbersome, unwieldy, and narrowly restrictive serving any useful purpose? The intent may certainly be altruistic and meant to be beneficial but overkill is overkill. When the descriptions become overly detailed there is always the danger of the fanciful overtaking reality and when that happens breed integrity can well become compromised. There has to be some discipline exercised in the apparently compulsive obsession to particularize in an unrealistic and unreasonable fashion.

Unfortunately, there also exists the problem of many breed standards, and even individual opinions regarding the particular peculiarities of breeds, being derivative. There are so very many examples of this. Take the 45 degree shoulder angulation bit, for instance. If the notion of this being an ideal and commonly-occurring condition across a whole range of dog breeds, including members of the sight hound complex, is pretty obviously unreal, or even hair raisingly ignorant, it has at least the excuse most of the time of not being original to its promulgator. It really is rather amazing how certain generic generalizations take hold in the mind and are rather indiscriminately and uncritically applied across a wide cross-section of breeds without due

regard to what is real and what is imagined. This sort of mindless spillover is very unfortunate. Once ingrained in the common consciousness this sort of false notion seems well nigh impossible to eradicate. The supposed occurrence or existence of parallel head planes in many breeds is, oftentimes, likewise an example of the fanciful taking precedence over reality. The matter of shoulder layback in sight hounds has been a veritable bone of contention for many years but if more attention was focussed on the actual condition of the dogs and less on someone's opinion of what is imagined to be ideal, an accurate assessment of their correct form could be achieved. At least we would be nearer the truth. Thereby much of the undisciplined reasoning as to what are or are not the proper structural peculiarities in this or that breed could, perhaps, be eliminated. Please let's not continue to maintain that a 45 degree shoulder angulation is an ideal to be aimed at in, say, breeding an Ibizan Hound or a Pharaoh Hound! In reality, in their original and present condition, these breeds and all others in the extensive sight hound complex, including the Azawakh, Saluki, and Sloughi, have a much more open angle.

In the larger scheme of things it has to be realized that all of the segregating and mixing and selecting and recombining, over numerous generations, has resulted in a veritable cornucopia of genetically-controlled morphological expressions and multitudinous variations thereof. The genetic material, that which we now commonly refer to as the genome, of all dogs is the same but yet there is this almost incredible range of form, of structure, of morphology. Think of all the shapes, the proportions, the sizes, the colors, the various type of coats, etcetera. Biological science tells us in no uncertain terms that variability is a critically important feature of all living organisms. It makes possible, for one thing, adaptability. Fanciers of the pure-bred dog should always bear this in mind. Although the primary aim of conscientious, dedicated breeders is to maintain, preserve, and perpetuate the unique and peculiar characteristics of breeds according to the strict dictates of their respective standards some allowance must always be made for the phenomenon of variation. In this context absolute uniformity surely has no particularly intrinsic value or virtue, in and of itself. What has to be looked out for, however, and assiduously guarded against, is a significant drift away from that which is considered typical.

In the process of attempting to improve breeds, to enhance the quality of the dogs being bred and shown, there is always the risk of losing, to various degrees, that totality which we commonly refer to as type and thereby violate a breed's integrity. It happens in parts of the populations of different breeds at different times. This is surely happening, for instance, in Rhodesian Ridgebacks, among others, currently. Some of the exhibits of that breed seen in today's show ring are certainly very different in form from that which must be considered typical and I'm not just talking about those rather frequently-encountered exaggerated rears. The essential message in all of this has to be as follows. A balance has to be set and adhered to. Allowance has to be made for variation whilst at the same time a breed's integrity must be protected. In the case of many breeds, of which the Irish Wolfhound is perhaps a very good example, their rather complicated and composite background in terms of ancestry, makeup and development in some part accounts for the degree of existing variability. It is most interesting to note that the parent club of that breed has struggled mightily with the task of coming up with an acceptable illustrated standard and has finally elected to employ pre-1970 photographs in order to try and effectively convey to judges what they should be looking for! Great size and commanding appearance, after all, comes in animals of rather different form. This is a breed in which considerable diversity remains quite evident. Fortunately, it also, in common with the Greyhound, has a rather economical, lean standard. Some judges might think this excessively exiguous but it surely serves its purpose.

Even in some of the older breeds, such as the Saluki, which, as we know it in the conformation show ring today, is a conglomerate of slightly differing forms with many local variations, diversity of form is, not unexpectedly, of common occurrence. There has been a long history in this breed of intermixing dogs originating from disparate populations and the results are there for all to see. Added to this the attempts to so-call improve the breed, whatever that actually means,

and you have a veritable potpourri of exhibits, some of which must surely approach being caricatures of what the breed was originally like. The desert-bred Saluki, that which is still bred in countries recognized as historical places of origin, serves to remind present-day fanciers of the essential physical attributes of the native hunter although it must be said that even some of these have in their ancestry animals imported from elsewhere, including the United Kingdom.

During the course of the past several decades concern has repeatedly been voiced about the condition of many of our breeds and what we are doing to them. Although generalizations are rarely ever valid there is, of course, every reason to believe that breeding over many generations for the specific purpose of American conformation dog show competition has resulted in substantial changes occurring. These undoubtedly continue. It is in the nature of things. Who can dispute the fact that the Pembroke Welsh Corgi of today's show ring is appreciably different from the comparatively short bodied, higher on leg little red dog that so energetically worked the verdant hills of my beloved Wales half a century and more ago. I know, I grew up with them in the small village of Rhostryfan in Snowdonia. My first ever show dog was a Pembroke Welsh Corgi. He won Reserve Best Puppy in Show at the Anglesey Canine Society Open Show at Llangefni with myself, as a teenager, handling. The Best Puppy in Show award went to a black English Cocker Spaniel. The year was 1956. In those days this 40% longer that tall thing hadn't entered anybody's mind, at least not in my neck of the woods, and the dogs were not so proportioned. Would he be competitive today? I'm afraid not. He was, nevertheless, a beautifully made dog, I have the photographs to prove it, but different. So what of it? We have to put such thoughts as these in some sort of acceptable context. The changes that have occurred and continue to occur in all breeds are a thing that we have to contend with, one way or other. In breed after breed we have to accommodate change, within limits. The most important thing in all of this, it seems to me, is to be aware of and realize what we are dealing with and to accept that a certain dynamic exists which is difficult to control. As Kurt Vonnegut would say, and so it goes.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Dr. Gareth Morgan-Jones was born and brought up in Wales. Educated at the University of Wales and the University of Nottingham, England, he earned a Doctor of Philosophy degree from the latter. His alma mater conferred the degree of Doctor of Science upon him by decree in recognition of his internationally-recognized contribution to knowledge in mycology, the branch of biological science involving the study of fungi. He has held faculty positions at universities in four countries; Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom, as well as the United States. He currently holds the rank and title of Distinguished University Professor at Auburn University, one of only seven individuals to do so in a faculty of over twelve-hundred. At Auburn he has, for many years, headed a research program focussing on plant disease inducing microfungi funded at various times by the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, the United States Department of Agriculture, and Abbott Laboratories. He has owned, bred and exhibited a number of breeds, including Afghan Hounds, Basset Hounds, English Cocker Spaniels and, in recent years, Pekingese. As an owner-handler during the 1990s he piloted two dogs of the latter breed to a combined total of twelve all-breed Best in Show awards and seventy-eight Toy Group Firsts. He contributed monthly essays to 'The Canine Chronicle' for nine years (1992 2000), an activity which he is now resuming, and is currently approved by the AKC to judge the Hound Group, English Cocker Spaniels and Pekingese. Other than his involvement with the pure-bred dog, his main avocation is growing and hybridizing camellias in his four-acre southern garden.