

Recently I have been surprised by how much I have been enjoying a 4 part series on ABC TV called Muster Dogs.

I am not naturally drawn to dogs as many of my friends are. We had dogs and other pets when our children were at home and I made sure they were well looked after but that was as far as it went. Hence my surprise at my pleasure in this series.

Five graziers from across Australia are each given a Kelpie puppy from the same litter and their challenge is to train these puppies into muster dogs in the space of 12 months, a process which normally takes 3 years.

The puppies have totally different temperaments the one from the other, as do their owners. The breeder of these puppies seems to have known the participants in advance and tried to match puppy and owner.

I have learned a lot about mustering. On big stations it's often done with helicopters but it's obvious that this is quite frightening for the animals. The 5 graziers in this series believe that mustering with dogs is better for the stock, the environment and their bottom line.

Every few months the puppies face certain challenges and in the second episode all but one puppy passed all of the four month challenges. For example one failed the criterion of being cooperative at shared meal times.

You can watch this series for yourselves on I-view and I recommend it whether or not you are a dog lover.

Watching this program set me thinking about other activities performed by dogs.

The St Bernard is a large working dog from the Western Alps in Italy and Switzerland. They were originally bred for rescue work by the hospice of the Great St Bernard Pass on the Italian Swiss border. The hospice, built by and named after Italian monk Bernard of Menthon, acquired its first dogs between 1660 and 1670. The breed has become famous through tales of Alpine rescues, as well as for its large size, and gentle temperament.

We all know about Guide dogs for vision impaired people. Dogs are also trained to work with the police in searches, to sniff out drugs etc, to guide the vision impaired, to help preempt hypoglycaemic attacks especially in children, and a recent innovation in Victoria, to calm anxious witnesses in court cases.

As a Scot, it would be remiss of me not to mention one historic example of a dog's fidelity to its owner.

In 1850 John Gray, joined the Edinburgh Police Force as a night watchman.

To keep him company through the long winter nights John took on a partner, a diminutive Skye Terrier, his 'watchdog' called Bobby. Together John and Bobby became a familiar sight trudging through the old cobbled streets of Edinburgh. Through thick and thin, winter and summer, they were faithful friends.



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Friends and Helpers

The years on the streets appear to have taken their toll on John, as he was treated by the Police Surgeon for tuberculosis.

John eventually died of the disease on the 15th February 1858 and was buried in Greyfriars Kirkyard. Bobby soon touched the hearts of the local residents when he refused to leave his master's grave, even in the worst weather conditions.

The gardener and keeper of Greyfriars tried on many occasions to evict Bobby from the Kirkyard. In the end he gave up and provided a shelter for Bobby by placing sacking beneath two tablestones at the side of John Gray's grave.

Bobby's fame spread throughout Edinburgh. It is reported that almost on a daily basis the crowds would gather at the entrance of the Kirkyard waiting for the one o'clock gun that would signal the appearance of Bobby leaving the grave for his midday meal.

Bobby would follow William Dow, a local joiner and cabinet maker to the same Coffee House that he had frequented with his now dead master, where he was given a meal.

In 1867 a new bye-law was passed that required all dogs to be licensed in the city or they would be destroyed. Sir William Chambers (The Lord Provost of Edinburgh) decided to pay Bobby's licence and presented him with a collar with a brass inscription "Greyfriars Bobby from the Lord Provost 1867 licensed". This can be seen at the Museum of Edinburgh.

The kind folk of Edinburgh took good care of Bobby, but still he remained loyal to his master. For fourteen years the dead man's faithful dog kept constant watch and guard over the grave until his own death in 1872.

In the Bible the term 'dog' is usually pejorative but the dogs known then were not domesticated. dogs.

However, it is of note that the future harmony envisioned by the prophet Isaiah brought together wild and domesticated animals - the wolf and the lion with the lamb and the ox.

The faithfulness and help of a pet dog can be wonderful token of the bliss to come.



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