

English Setters  
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### **“He hath founde the byrde”**

One of the things I like best about purebred dogs is the way they tell the story of our human history. You always find people and their dogs together throughout the world, dating back millennia. Scientists keep pushing back the years as they uncover DNA evidence for the origin of dogs and how they became domesticated.

English Setters might not be thousands of years old, as some breeds are, but they certainly have a long and distinguished history. Setters are discussed in the first extensive book on British dogs, *De Canibus Britannicis* (1570; translated in 1576 as *The Dogs of Britain*) by Dr. John Caius (also Kees, Keys or Kaye), physician to Edward VI, Mary I, and Elizabeth I. Dr. Caius was also the founder of Caius College, Cambridge. Caius's book is online at the Gutenberg Project in Latin and in English, though the English is Elizabethan and a little hard to follow in places.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/27050/27050-h/27050-h.htm>

For dog lovers, the great thing about Caius's book is that he describes all the dogs of the time (mid 16<sup>th</sup> century Tudor Britain) in wonderful detail. Caius also had a definite talent for organization and he divides dogs into different categories such as dogs that “chase the beast” and “take the bird,” that is, dogs for hunting and fowling. It's obvious that dogs were already very specialized even in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. After spending many pages on dogs that hunt hare, wolf, fox, badger, and other land animals, Caius turns to Spaniels (land and water) and then, finally, to the Setter. The language is old but I think you can decipher it.

#### ***The Dogge called the Setter, in Latine Index.***

*Another sort of Dogges be there, seruiceable for fowling, making no noise either with foote or with tounge, whiles they followe the game. These attend diligently vpon theyr Master and frame their conditions to such beκες, motions, and gestures, as it shall please him to exhibite and make, either going forward, drawing backward, inclining to the right hand, or yealding toward the left, (In making mencion of fowles, my meaning is of the Partridge & the Quaile) when he hath founde the byrde, he keepeth sure and fast silence, he stayeth his steppes and wil proceede no further, and with a close, couert, watching eye, layeth his belly to the grounde and so creepeth forward like a worme. When he approacheth neere to the place where the birde is, he layes him downe, and with a marcke of his pawes betrayeth the place of the byrdes last abode, whereby it is supposed that this kinde of dogge is called Index, Setter, being in deede a name most consonant and agreable to his quality. The place being knowne by the meanes of the dogge, the fowler immediatly openeth and spreadeth his net...*

The doctor's description is so appropriate that we still recognize it today in our English Setters. You can picture the dog silently stepping forward, scenting the bird, always biddable. He creeps forward and freezes into the point with his paw lifted to mark the spot. Some dogs today still crouch toward the ground in the old way which was useful with nets; while other dogs are more upright which became popular after firearms became common. In either case, the English Setter at work in the field is a beautiful sight and our breed's birth right.

If you want to try out your Elizabethan, Caius's book is highly recommended. It's a classic among dog books with early information about many British breeds.

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