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Roy Hattersley: How I miss my beloved dog Buster

By [ROY HATTERSLEY FOR THE DAILY MAIL](#)
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Truly, it's the little things that I miss the most. The tinkle of his medallion when he ran to greet me. The smell of wet dog as I dried him after a rainy walk. The rattle of his bowl against the kitchen flagstones during the 30 seconds he took to eat his breakfast.

Then there was his sudden appearance in my bathroom when my shower took longer than he thought reasonable, and the look of deep resentment if he was sprinkled with water as I reached for a towel.

I even miss the old causes of annoyance. These days, I can load the dishwasher without fighting a losing battle to stop Buster licking the plates, and I can leave the morning's letters on the doormat without them being perforated by Buster's teeth.



Roy Hattersley and dog Buster were inseparable for 15 years

Now, I long to be inconvenienced again - to be forced by Buster's persistence to go out in the freezing Peak District rain; to be woken in the middle of the night by his snoring; and to go through the complicated ritual of fastening on his safety harness in preparation for a journey.

In the car he would fall asleep and, if we were driving from London to Derbyshire, wake up with a whoop when we turned the corner into our village.

After he had inspected the house, room by room, he would sit on the first landing, staring out of the window and grumbling at the ramblers who changed into hiking boots sitting on our wall.

We played a game on the landing. Buster had to guess which of my hands - on the stair below him - held the biscuit. He pawed at my fingers without ever hurting me, and always won the biscuit in the end. It is one of the little things that it hurts me to remember.

Most dog owners regard their dogs as special, so I do no more than describe the qualities that I found irresistible.

Thanks to his energy, he imposed himself on all the lives around him. Doors banged open as he marched into the room. A morning rarely passed without him becoming entangled in the wires that connected my laptop to the world.

I could never lay a fire in the drawing room without him helping me by examining every log. When he saw bags in the hall, he sat among them - like a brindle suitcase - to make it clear that he was travelling, too.

A guest who sat on what he regarded as his sofa often found that Buster hurled himself into the next seat and leaned hard

against his new friend, head on shoulder.

He was not so well-disposed towards cats, rabbits and domesticated rodents. But he liked people.

He became a favourite at book festivals. Literary old ladies travelled across country with 'treats' - which he never refused.

While I was speaking, he only barked during the applause or when, by putting my hand in my pocket, I gave the impression that I was about to produce a treat myself.

I have spent long hours during the past ten weeks thinking what it was - apart from the thrall in which I'm held by dogs in general - that bound me to Buster.

I enjoyed the knowledge that he was dependent on me, and I admired his apparent belief that I was dependent on him.

His appeal was increased by what is best described (despite the reputation he acquired after he killed one of the Queen's unfortunate geese in St James's Park, and I was fined for contravening Royal Parks' regulations) as an aggressively affectionate nature.

But, most important of all, he radiated hope.

Whenever I opened the pantry door, he appeared behind me - assuming that I was getting something for him.

I would call him a born optimist, but I never made the anthropomorphic mistake of thinking of him as a little man in a fur coat, and dogs are not capable of thinking about the future.

He was never fed at table, and he slept in his own bed. Treating him like a dog was a mark of respect. Being a dog was enough. I asked for nothing more.

For 15 years, I watched him grow up, grow wise and grow old. His vet predicted he would be happy to the end, but that one day he would just be too tired to carry on.

'When it happens, he will let you know,' I was told.

And so he did. Every step of his brief morning walk was a struggle. Breakfast was eaten with slow determination. Then he lay down with no intention of ever getting up again.

The final decision had to be based on what was best for Buster. So the temptation to put off the fatal decision was resisted.

After a moment of agonising indecision, I made the fatal phone call. The vet arrived within the hour.

Buster died eating a piece of blue cheese - the muchdesired but forbidden food which he usually only tasted when it was wrapped around a pill.

I do not pretend that my grief was unique. Many families, I know, have been devastated by the death of a dog. I merely state, as a matter of fact, that nothing has ever caused me as much pain as Buster's death.

Nor have I ever behaved with such a shameless display of emotion.

I sat in the first floor room in which I work, watching my neighbours go about their lives, amazed and furious that they were behaving as if it was a normal day. Stop all the clocks. Buster was dead.

He left a permanent legacy. Do not underestimate what a dog can do.

I never contemplated teaching him to sit-up-and-beg, shake hands or play dead. And Buster certainly never condescended to carry a rolled-up newspaper in his mouth or retrieve balls.

But he did - perhaps it is a minor achievement - change my life.

Some of the ways, I can describe. I gave up red meat because I could not bear the thought of eating anything that was Buster shape.

But there is more to his abiding influence than that. His real legacy is the memory of the pleasure he provided.

Birth and upbringing - and an almost-labrador called Dinah - made me a dog person. Buster ended the years of deprivation, and made a return to dogless life unthinkable.

Of course, there were times when it seemed that even the thought of another rescued cross-breed in the kitchen was a betrayal. But after ten weeks, the search has begun.

The new dog will not be a replacement. Buster was irreplaceable. His successor will be a dog in his own right.

But he will be a reassertion of all that Buster stood for: the incalculable blessing of possessing a dog.

• *THE fee for this article has been donated to the Blue Cross animal trust.*

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