

The Australian Cat

Lesley Morgan Blythe

We all know that the Australian Mist is the only 'made in Australia' breed of cat, but in various old books, magazines and newspapers and there are tantalising references to something which emerged many, many years earlier – first in the USA and then in England. This was the "Australian Cat" which was known from the late 1890's (USA, and a little later in UK) through to the 1920's (UK and USA) when it died out for reasons which – while attributed to lack of studs - are probably open to speculation. Inbreeding depression may have been one reason, but there also seemed to be physiological peculiarities from the outset.

One can only assume that there was a sound (geographical) reason for calling these rather elongated cats "Australian". There are references to various such cats having been brought to the US and UK by sailors, by a missionary, or being born on ships departing Australia, so it's quite possible that some of the original cats did in fact come from Australia, but there is good reason to suspect that - as suggested by various authors of the time - they were descended from S. E Asian cats.

Given 1800's immigration and shipping to Australia from various S. E. Asian countries, there's very strong possibility of 'foreign' type cats (whether pointed or not) having mixed their exotic genes with good old domestics brought from Europe.

It was said by most authors that they had many of the characteristics of Siamese, (though the first recorded cat of which there is a photo, Tricksey - first mentioned in 1898 - seems much more Siamese/Oriental in type than Siamese of the time) yet I have found no reference to them being or indeed, producing, pointed.

Helen Winslow wrote in "Concerning Cats" (1900, USA): "Dr. H. L. Hammond, of Killingly, Ct, makes a speciality of the rare Australian cats, and has taken numerous prizes with them at every cat show in this country, where they are universally admired. His Columbia is valued at six hundred dollars, and his Tricksey at five hundred dollars. They are, indeed, beautiful creatures, though somewhat unique in the cat world, as we see it. They are very sleek cats, with fur so short, glossy, and fine that it looks like the finest satin. Their heads are small and narrow, with noses that seem pointed when compared with other cats. They are very intelligent and affectionate little creatures, and make the loveliest of

pets. Dr. and Mrs. Hammond are extremely fond of their unusual and valuable cat family, and tell the most interesting tales of their antics and habits. His Columbia was an imported cat, and the doctor has reason to believe that she with her mate are originally from the Siamese cat imported from Siam to Australia. They are all very delicate as kittens, the mother rarely having more than one at a time. With two exceptions, these cats have never had more than two kittens at a litter. They are very partial to heat, but cannot stand cold weather. They have spells of sleeping when nothing has power to disturb them, but when they do wake up they have a "high time," running and playing. They are affectionate, being very fond of their owner, but rather shy with strangers. They are uncommonly intelligent, too, and are very teachable when young. They are such beautiful creatures, besides being rare in this part of the world, that it is altogether probable that they will be much sought after as pets."

The following courtesy of Sarah Hartwell (UK):



From "Concerning Cats" (USA) 1890 ("Tricksey").

"In March 1902, another description of the "Australian cat" appeared in the magazine "Our Cats": (UK) "An interesting little spotted cat from Australia. This animal's peculiarity is a triple-kinked tail and very curious hindquarters. We don't know if it would be right to describe this as kangaroo-like, but certainly we never saw a cat so well furnished for a squatting position, the curve from the heels going deep into the fleshy part of the hind-legs, and suggesting a long, leaping gait. The

kinks are knots in the joints on which it might rest at different angles if employed, and as you pass the hand along the tail it is as if it had been broken and set again." (NB: This was from an American correspondent.)

In "Animal Life and the World of Nature" (Vol 1, 1902-1903), a contributor wrote "There is, of course, no breed of cats indigenous to Australia, but, amongst others, a strain of cats has formed itself exhibiting very marked characteristics which, however, lead us to agree with an American author who asserts the probability that they are derived from imported cats of Eastern origin, possibly Siamese. Very curious is the little grey spotted cat here shown, (see photo next page) though unhappily the position does not bring out his great length of hind leg nor his peculiar rather long and



tiger-shaped nose, which, seen sideways, gives him a queer expression. He has, like his mother and his brothers and sisters, a triple kink in his tail."

In Frances Simpson's 1903 "Book of the Cat" H C Brooke (UK) wrote "There are, of course, no cats indigenous to Australia. An American writer gives it as his opinion that a certain strain of Australian cats is derived from imported Siamese cats. A specimen we possessed last year, which was born on a ship during the passage from Australia, and which exactly resembled its dam, certainly had every appearance of being of Eastern origin. It had the marten-shaped head, and a triple kink in the tail; its voice also resembled that of the Siamese. In colour it was grey with dark spots."

H C Brooke commented in 1926 "The white Australian short-hair cats which, it is said, will be seen at the Southern Counties (cat show), will no doubt arouse much interest. From the description of them given me by the owner of the original specimens, they would seem to be of a decidedly Oriental type, slender legged, long in build, with big ears, arched noses, and rather pointed face. In Helen K Winslow's book "Concerning Cats" (1900), there is a very good photo of an Australian cat (of course, no cat species is native to Australia), owned by Dr H L Hammond, of Killingly, Connecticut. This was apparently a very fine-coated cat, beautifully "mackerel-striped," with very big ears and arched face. It says there: "Some authorities claim that the cats known in this country (America) as Australian cats are of Siamese origin". About 1900 or 1901, I think, I owned a cat brought by a sailor from Australia. He was a small cat of decidedly Oriental type, a grey, 'spotted tabby,' thin-legged, with large ears, arched forehead, pointed small face, and a tail of normal length, but with three kinks or breaks equidistant down its length."

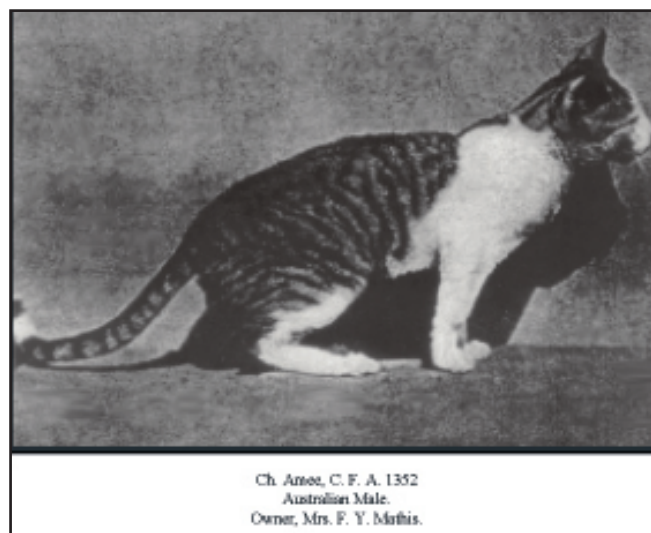
H. C. Brooke: "The white Australian cats were owned by Miss Katharine Wilson (UK) who explained 'Our original cat was given us by a sailor who brought her over, and, we are told these cats are known as Australian Squirrel Cats.' Miss Wilson had bred this cat resulting in three kittens, of which only a single male survived. This male was mated to his mother, resulting in more kittens, all of which were "very long in body, ears and tail, of decidedly Oriental type, and with the exception of two, have amber eyes. Of these two the male has blue eyes, and the female one blue and one amber. They have a peculiar cry, akin to that of the Siamese." These cats were described as excellent climbers and more at home at a height than on the ground, one of

them having climbed to the top of a wireless aerial pole. The females bore their litters in a nest in a dark corner and were apt to desert the youngsters if they were touched. They never had more than three kittens of which they only ever reared two. Another oddity described by Wilson was: "They sit up on their back legs and hold their food between their front paws and eat it in much the same manner as a squirrel eats a nut." They were also quarrelsome at mealtimes, were excellent hunters and had a fondness for raw meat. Like the Siamese, they had considerable personality and Miss Wilson believed Dr H L Hammond to be correct in suggesting a Siamese (or possibly Malay) origin for the Australian cat."

The following information sourced from CFA Yearbook 1959: Ed comment and further info in italics.

The Australian Cat was recognized as a breed in the USA at CFA's AGM in December 1910. They were apparently very small cats with velvet-like fur, resembling moleskin. Their whiskers were extremely short and they had no ear tufts.

The first Australian Cat registered in the Stud Book was Ch Amee. He was born in August 1909 and was owned by Mrs F.Y Mathis, of Greenwich, Connecticut.



1352. AMÉE. (Ch.)

Registered under Rule 8.

(Rule 8. When a cat shall have won a full championship under the rules of this Association.)

Australian male. Tabby and white. Eyes, yellow.

Born August 1909.

Bred by Mrs. Grisley.

Owner, Mrs. F. Y. Mathis, Greenwich, Conn.

Sire, Australia.

Dam, Stella.

Prizes Won: First, Empire 1911. First, Philadelphia 1911. First, and Best S.H. Male, Atlanta 1911. First, Empire 1911.

The colour (and patterns) of these cats varied. "Australie" reg # 970, (a number pre-dating Amée's, which is odd, if Amée was in fact the first registered) was a tortie and white female, belonging to Mrs Mitchelson who was also listed as the owner of "Kangaroo" (a tabby/white female), "Opossum" (tabby female), "Orama" (an odd eyed white female), "Sealskin" (seal brown female) and the first Australian Cat in the register, Lady Grey – CFA reg # 967. (Ed: another contradiction of Aimee's status as first to be registered.) Lady Grey was a tabby/white with yellow eyes.

Miss J McIntosh was another pioneer breeder, with Sidney (blue tabby male with green eyes) and Victoria I (blue female with orange eyes).



From Cover of OUR CATS December 17, 1910, Mrs. J. C. Mitchelson's winning Australian Cat SEALSKIN

The Australian Cat was sometimes called the Kangaroo Cat. Miss Richard's article in the April 1910 issue of Cat Review says that this "evidently comes from the peculiarity of the tail, which was long and close-coated, and when the cat jumped or leaped, it curved in a peculiar way suggestive of a kangaroo."

Frances Simpson (UK) says in a chapter entitled 'Cats in America' in her famous "The Book of The Cat" (1902) that the first authentic Australian Cats were believed to have made their appearance in the USA in about 1900 or 1901. The American correspondent notes: "On one or two occasions we have had Australian Cats exhibited and they were funny little beasts, sitting up like a squirrel, and with much the same shape of head." No definite information is available regarding these early Australian Cats or the shows at which they were exhibited.

(Ed: That is, but for the photo of "Tricksey", which is featured in two American books on cats which pre-date Miss Simpson's; "Angora Cats" (Robert Kent James, 1898) and "Concerning Cats", (Helen Winslow, 1900)

According to the CFA article, the first appearance of an Australian Cat at a show (other than the reference to 1900/1901) was at Boston, Jan 17 – 19th 1906, when Teddy Roosevelt, a male owned by James Anderson, was exhibited. Miss A K Richards showed her Australian Cats for many years, beginning in 1909. Her female, "Budget", was a consistent winner.



Australian Female

By 1925 the breed was rapidly becoming extinct due to the lack of males. (End of CFA article.)

(Ed note: I'd suggest the photo bottom of page, circa 1920, of the apparently deformed tabby/white female might also provide a clue or two as to the demise of the breed, especially given the constant contemporary references to multiple kinks and odd posture.)

Extracts from New York Times with mentions of Australian Cats (researched by Amanda Bright, Canada):

Dec 30, 1909 - New York Times:

**ARISTOCRATIC CATS
AT POULTRY SHOW**

Nicely Groomed Felines Look
Their Best at Madison
Square Garden.

AUSTRALIAN KITTEN NOBBY

Kept Late Hours Once, but Has Re-
formed, and is Now Considered
a Glazy Pious Pet.

— —

The aristocratic evening cats, with soft patches of yellow under the silken ruffs, are taking life easy at the 44th Street Cat Show at Madison Square Garden, where the best-looking, handsomely groomed felines are an added attraction to the Poultry Show. These are not the kind of cats you see on the back fence, but are sleek and have jibb noses and soft fur. There is one kitten from Australia: homely and small, which one may purchase for \$50. It is the only Australian kitten in this country, and has a distinguished pedigree, but it has never heard of Bob Fitzsimmons, another Australian. It belongs to Mrs. M. J. Mathis of Newark Heights, Ohio, who is manager of the show. She also is owner Alice Arise, and was brought from the antipodes by a missionary who didn't like it because it was so homely and insisted on sneezing at any hour of the night. But Alice Arise has reformed and taken on cultured manners and a distinguished air.

Cat fanciers crowd around the cage and look in profound admiration at what they say is the best cat show ever seen in America. Rose Ransom, Miss, and Abyssinian cats are there, all their white and black shag-haired kittens with the smooth or velvet and eyes that sparkle like diamonds.

Ed: Above: Nobby – is this our "Amee", also born in 1909, who was bred from known parents in the USA, or another cat altogether? I think there's a great deal of journalistic licence taken in declaring that a kitten brought into the USA by a missionary has a 'distinguished pedigree', but perhaps

the owner is mis-quoted – it's perfectly possible that the first Australian Cat imported came under those circumstances (Tricksey?), and "Nobby" was a descendant.

Dec 29th, 1910 – Madison Square Gardens show:

"The only white Australian kitten ever shown in this country is "Orama", owned by Mrs J. C. Mitchelson of Tarrifville, Conn. There are nine valuable Australians benched this year; the largest number ever brought together at a show here."

Dec 18 1913 – Atlantic Cat Club, Astor Hotel

"Another rare species of cat which is seldom shown was the Australian pair owned by Mrs Clifford B. Harmon of Greenwich and shown by Mrs F. Y Mathis. They are George Washington and Martha Washington. Like the Siamese cats, this breed never changes, and its colour is a brownish blue." (Ed: Someone tell that to Tricksey, Amee and co!)

Jan 1st, 1914 (Madison Square Gardens)

"Two playful little kittens, Sapphire Grace, a blue female, and George Washington, an Australian grey, earned their spurs with victories in the "Best Kitten". Sapphire Grace, a winner in an earlier class on the opening day, scored in the class for the best shorthaired, and George Washington won in the longhaired division." (Ed note: I suspect this is a journalistic mistake and George W was in fact Best SH kitten, though given Victoria - above, referred to in CFA information – was blue with orange eyes, then maybe there might have been a bit of outcross

hanky panky involving blue Persians? However, this is the only reference I've found to anything but a shorthaired Australian Cat, so we should probably blame the journalist.)

The Cat Review –

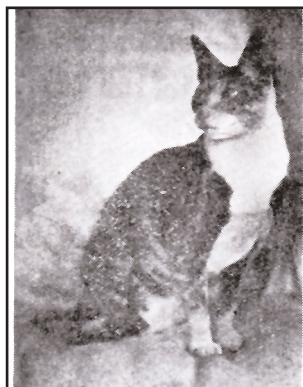
1) Boston Cat Club 16th Championship show at Hotel Vendome, Boston, Mass. Jan 13-14, 1921 under CFF rules judged by Miss J R Kroeh. In the Australian female class First and Winner was "Bronnda" owned by Mrs Elma A Burns. In the Australian kitten class First was "Cherzo" owned by Mrs Annie S Greeley.

2) Atlantic Cat Club & The Silver Society, Waldorf Astoria Hotel NY Jan 11-12 1922, judges Mrs Warriell and Mrs Sidney R Kelf: Australian Cat Female First: "Greenwich Phoebe Snow" owned by Mrs FY Mathis.

And they were still about in 1926: in the Official Premium List for the 7th cat show - Michigan State Fair and Detroit Persian Society Sept 5-7 1926, the Boston Cat Club Challenge Cups include: "209 Blue Australian Trophy. Donated by Miss Richards. Four wins. Two in Boston."

What a shame that there is such sparse information on the Australian Cat. The snippets we've been able to turn up are so tantalizing!

With heartfelt thanks to Amanda Bright, Sarah Hartwell and Barb Brush for providing details, photos and references from ancient publications. Thanks also to Pam DelaBar for authorizing the use of material from CFA yearbooks.



From OUR CATS December 17, 1910 p. 165, Australia. Owner: Mrs. J. C. Mitchelson, Tarrifville, Conn.

Ed: This pic and caption from CFA yearbook 1957.

If this is a tortie / white, this may be "Australie" and the name above a typo (See page 49).