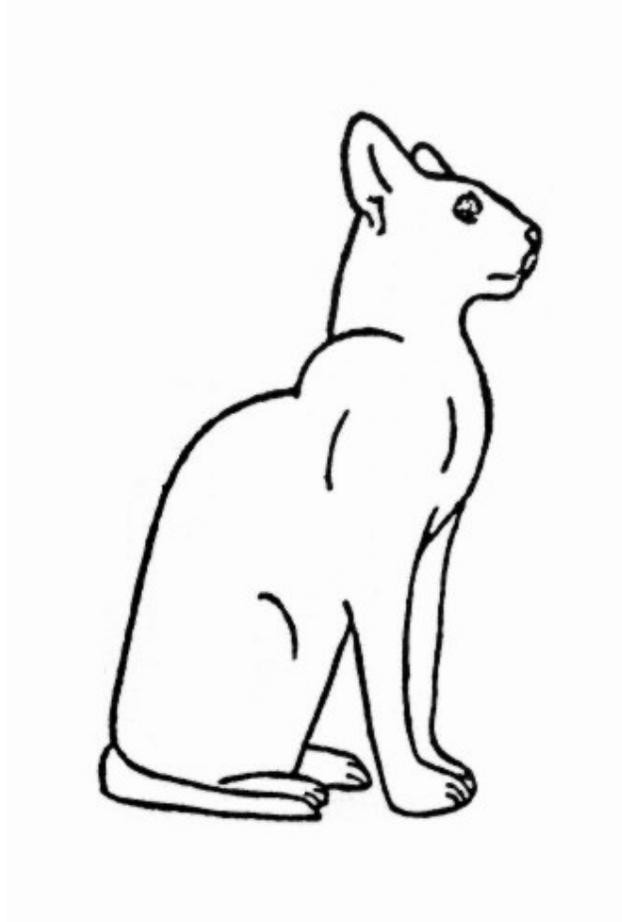


# CHILD OF THE GODS



NOTES ON THE ABYSSINIAN CAT

Today And Yesterday

by

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To

[TIA MARIA](#)

without whose help this would have

been written in half the time but without whose inspiration it would not have been written at all.

Sitting asleep at our feet as we write is a cat registered with the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy as Breed Number 23 - Abyssinian. But chronologically she is breed Number 1, for 3,000 years ago when our own ancestors were still savages in England, her ancestors were being worshipped as children of the gods by the people of the Pharaohs. True, the journey of her breed from ancient Egypt to modern Britain has not been made without skeletons being left in cupboards and blots appearing on the tribal scutcheon, and since the first of her kind made the journey from the shores of the Red Sea to the shores of the North Sea, men as well as the Gods have had something to do with shaping Abyssinian cats. But the portraits of her ancestors in paint and bronze at the British Museum suggest that if Abyssinian cats are not the only ones whose ancestors were honoured as children of the Goddess Pasht in Ancient Egypt, they remain closest in form and colouring to the cats worshipped beside the Nile at a time when the only cats known to our ancestors in Britain were savage wild animals, untamed even today. "But what is an Abyssinian cat like?" This question, asked a hundred times by friends or correspondents seeking a kitten, led us to believe an account of the Abyssinian cat might help to popularise a breed almost unknown to the general public. This booklet is not intended for the expert, although he may find something new in it, but rather for the members of the catloving public who are discovering in increasing numbers the attraction of purebred cats. We found there had only been one previous publication on the Abyssinian cat, a pamphlet by the late H.C. Brooke, written more than twenty years ago, and now out of print. Mr. Brooke complained that he had been "unable to discover any really satisfactory facts about the history of this beautiful and interesting breed in this country". None of the many published books on cats throw any real light on the history of the Abyssinian. Many of the authors quote from each other and there is some danger creating a mythology which would eventually be accepted as fact. Such references as appear in the newspapers frequently contain absurdities. For instance, we have before us an article on the Olympia Crystal Cat Show, 1950, which says of the Abyssinians: "They do not take kindly to captivity and perhaps that is why there are still comparatively few in this country." Of course, they are not kept in "captivity", but are domesticated. We will describe the appearance and character of the Abyssinian before

discussing its origin, for it is probable that some readers have never seen a specimen and that many will never have lived with one, an experience comparable to sharing a house with a Siamese. The Abyssinian Cat Club's Standard of Point's, recognised by the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy, is as follows: Colour: Ruddy brown, ticked with black or dark brown, double or treble ticking, i.e. two or three bands of colour on each hair preferable to single ticking. No bars or other markings except that a dark spine line will not militate against an otherwise good specimen. Inside of fore-legs and belly should be of a tint to harmonise with the main colour, the preference being given to orange brown. Head and Ears: Head long and pointed, ears sharp, comparatively large and broad at base. Eyes: Large, bright and expressive; colour, green, yellow or hazel. Tail: Fairly long and tapering. Feet: Small, pads black; this colour also extending up the back and hind legs. Coat: Short, fine and close. Size: Never large or coarse. Note: Absence of markings, i.e. bars on head, tail, face and chest, is a very important property of this breed. These places are just where, if a cat or other feline animal shows markings at all, they will hold their ground to the last with remarkable pertinacity.

The less markings visible the better; at the same time the judge must not attach such undue importance to this property that he fails to give due importance to others. For instance, it does not follow that an absolutely unmarked cat, but of "cobby" build, failing in ticking and colour, is on account of absence of marking better than a cat of slender build, well ticked, and of nice colour, but handicapped by a certain amount of "barring" on legs and tail. Scale of Points; Colour: Body colour, 30; ticking, 20. Type: Head and ears, 15. Eyes, 5. Body, shape, tail, feet, coat, carriage, 20. Condition, 10. Total, 100. Note: Although imperfect cats may be awarded prizes according to the merit of the entry, no Abyssinian should be awarded a champion certificate that has distinct bars and rings on legs and tail. A white chin is not desirable, other white markings not permissible. This standard of points is, of course, invaluable to breeders and judges, but it probably does not conjure up a vivid picture of a particular kind of cat to anyone who has never seen one. The Abyssinian is a difficult cat to describe and is not flattered by the camera, whose monochrome rendering cannot show the subtle gradations of colour which are one of its attractions. A good Abyssinian strikes the experienced eye immediately as foreign. There is a complete absence of the roundness of head and "cobbyness" that marks British shorthaired breeds. Its eyes are large and lustrous, and its ears large and alert, sometimes with hairs that recall the lynx. Its whole build is extremely elegant. Mr. Brooke wrote: "Any person capable of appreciating truly graceful lines and sinuous and

elegant shape in the cat will admit that in this respect the Abyssinian has but one rival, to wit, the Siamese." It is a pity that although points are awarded for carriage, modern show conditions do not really permit of this being judged, for an Abyssinian watching a bird or retrieving is the perfection of purposeful grace. The appeal of the Abyssinian, both physical and psychological, is subtle. Its colouring does not strike you instantly like that of a Siamese, nor is its grace so immediately apparent as that of a Long Hair reclining on a sofa. We must admit to hearing friends, on seeing our Abyssinian for the first time, exclaim "But it's not very different from a tabby, is it?" We have excused them on the grounds that they were people whose acquaintance with cats was limited to saying "puss, puss" and either putting them out or getting them in for the night. When we have pointed out the ticking on the hair, the complete absence of "tabby" markings, the extreme softness of the coat, the pointed head and the loping walk, suggesting jungle ancestry, they have agreed that she is no more like a "tabby" than a Chinaman is like a Greek. They then generally remark that her coat is like that of a wild rabbit, and there is truth in this, although the wild rabbit lacks the glowing ruddiness of a good Abyssinian. The ticking of the rabbit is single, that is to say, each individual hair is of only two colours. Further, the hair of the rabbit shades to grey at the base instead of to the rufous colour of the Abyssinian. If we must make comparisons, the colouring is more like that of the Belgian hare. Writing nearly 60 years ago in *Domestic or Fancy Cats*, Jennings says: "Those who are familiar with the Belgian hare will have no difficulty in recognising the catyclept Abyssinian."

The fur on the stomach and the inside of legs shades to a lovely soft ochreous-red, and is of surprising silkiness. There is some variation in colouring between individual cats. We believe that, at the moment, there is no "perfect" Abyssinian in Britain, i.e. one that could not be faulted on the Standard of Points given above. The commonest faults are white on the chin and chest and "barring" - dark marks, especially on the legs and as a "necklace" round the chest. At the 1951 meeting of the Abyssinian Cat Club the standard of points was amended to make the white chin "permissible" although not desirable, and there is no doubt that all breeders are anxious to eliminate this blemish. The white patch on the chin in Abyssinians is "dominant". It is therefore not only very difficult to eliminate but likely to reappear unless there is very careful breeding. Probably the only way in which the patch can be bred out is by selecting cats showing the least white. This may be a long process if the "type" and other characteristics are to be retained, but should be successful eventually, as it has been with other breeds of self-colours. Absence of white undoubtedly enhances the beauty of the cat.

Attractive as is the colouring and appearance of the Abyssinian, the difficulty of breeding cats with a high show standard is such that we do not think it would have been persevered with if the Abyssinian had not an unusual and enchanting character. When we come to speak of the character of cats, we know we are on delicate ground. Every true cat-lover believes that his cat is exceptionally attractive and every real cat-lover is as certain that his own cat has unusual character and intelligence as the average parent is certain of the same about his child. We have long suffered from this weakness ourselves, but in our more objective moments we have thought that not only does "character" and intelligence vary greatly from cat to cat - quite as much as in human beings - but that it depends more on relationship between the cat and his "owner" than on the particular breed. In other words, we thought that the unusual sweetness of disposition, great intelligence and companionability of our first Abyssinian was due to our own understanding of cats. But we flattered ourselves - or else all Abyssinian owners are remarkable for their charm, intelligence and understanding of cats. For we have not yet met an Abyssinian without the same sweetness of disposition and gift for companionship as our own. We have never met an Abyssinian breeder who was not a devoted cat lover. This, regrettably, is not true of all breeders of other varieties. We take it as a testimonial to the exceptional gift for living with humans which the Abyssinian possesses. In their letters to us Abyssinian owners in all parts of the world have said the same thing in different ways. They may have been critical of the white chins, the necklaces, the colour and even the barring of their Abyssinians. But not one but has remarked unasked that their cats are enchanting, unique in their sweetness of disposition and companionability. Dr. Wildeboer, from Hull, told us of the physical faults of his first Abyssinian, but added: "She was one of the sweetest cats I have ever owned (but then which Abyssinian isn't sweet?)" ; and after writing of five years' effort to breed an Abyssinian without faults, ended: "I shall go on breeding and trying whilst at the same time enjoying the companionship of these most lovable and intelligent cats." Miss Alice Archibald, from California, put it another way. "The true Abyssinians are absolutely fearless as they have been pets for centuries"; and by "fearless" she meant not the aggressiveness of the stray tom when facing another cat - or even a dog - but the lack of fear that comes from the certainty the whole human race is friendly. This can be seen in Abyssinians even in show pens.

Captain W.H. Powell, an experienced judge of many breeds, wrote in 1938: "There is no other breed of cat against which nothing can be laid in the way of disparagement. The coat of the Persian requires constant attention and the shortness of his nose liable to snuffles. The

Siamese is immune from the coat trouble, but even its most ardent admirer must sometimes wish its (her!) vocal powers were less well developed. The quiet, unassuming Abyssinian combines all the good points and none of the failing of his more widely advertised relations." Mr. Brooke wrote of the Abyssinians' gentle character and great affection, but surprisingly suggested it was "rather shy, not taking readily to strangers", a statement copied by other writers. Our own experience and that of many others is exactly the contrary. You cannot frighten an Abyssinian because she expects only kindness, and we are sure that if you hit her she would regard your blow as only an over-hearty caress. Far from being shy with strangers, Abyssinians generally welcome rather than tolerate them. Like Siamese, Abyssinians need human company and much appreciate being taken for walks. We have not ourselves tried them on collar and lead, but we imagine they would respond readily. Our walks are conducted on the "at heel" principle, although, of course, unlike a dog, a cat does not maintain a constant pace but proceeds at ease, tail erect and eyes automatically noting cover for use against an emergency. The placid appearance of the Abyssinian can be deceptive, as dogs have discovered, although in the case of our own they are "seen off" with a gaiety that suggests sport rather than vindictiveness. A garden is not essential, but it is certainly very much appreciated, especially if its owner will take a twenty minutes' walk in it, preferably at dusk. Commenting on an article we wrote on Abyssinians in THE CAT FANCY, Mrs. Christina Bently said that her [Hapi Barclay](#) is "of good shape, with a very sharp tail, broad at the base, like an otter; is this because they are such good water cats? He has a fine thick short coat which looks as if it is completely water proof when he goes into the River way to catch fish, water rats and -once- a snake." Mrs. Judy Smith, who has a half-sister of our own queen in the U.S.A., remarks that all her Abyssinians "like to play with water and do not mind getting their feet wet as the Siamese do". Mrs. Gladys Taber, of Connecticut, tells us her Abyssinian loves water and gets into the shower with her unless the door is shut against him. Mrs. Smith mentions, incidentally, that all her kittens like retrieving, a characteristic we have noted in our own. It is certainly interesting to note that the Ancient Egyptian drawings show the Abyssinians' ancestors retrieving and putting up water fowl. Where the Egyptians found their first cats to domesticate is a mystery we are never likely to solve. Mr. H.C. Brooke went into this question in some detail and in the illustrations in his pamphlet showed what he believed had been the process of the development of the African Wild Cat from the faintly spotted form to the faintly mottled, well ticked, modern Abyssinian type. He had at one time an Egyptian or African Wild Cat and the similarity to the modern Abyssinian is unmistakable. That is was the Caffre or Kaffir cat which the Egyptians domesticated seems probable from

the similarity between the skulls of the Caffre cat and the skulls of the "sacred" cats excavated in Egypt.

The British Museum painting shows a tiger-striped cat, but a papyrus painting shows a brown cat with only slight bars on legs and tail of the Abyssinian type. Incidentally, this cat is shown climbing papyrus to "put up" water fowl, so that it must have been small and lithe of the type Abyssinian breeders to-day seek to produce. In general, the ancient Egyptian bronzes and pictures emphasise the liveness, strong jaws, long body and large eyes which are distinguishing features of the best type of Abyssinian to-day. Whatever the exact origin of the first domestic cats, we owe their veneration in Egypt, and thus perhaps their existence to-day as pets, to the chance that the tribe with the cat as its totem eventually triumphed over all others in the Nile basin and founded the Egyptian civilisation. The ancestors of the Abyssinians were mummified and given reverent burial. In 1889 an Egyptian fellah stumbled on an astonishing cat cemetery at Beni-Hassan in Central Egypt. For 3,000 years or more these cats had lain undisturbed, so beautifully embalmed that they were perfectly preserved, so numerous there was no counting them, but certainly running into hundreds of thousands. Anyone interested in this cemetery, unfortunately desecrated before the archeologists could examine it systematically, will find a contemporary article by Professor W.M. Conway in the English Illustrated Magazine of 1890. The cats were dug up like so much earth and sold for manure. A consignment of 19 1/2 tons of this "fertiliser" reached Liverpool in a steamer, and, after enthusiasts and museums had picked out a few of the mummies that had not been destroyed by crude transport, was sold off about \$4 a ton. There must now be quite a number of pieces of English soil that will be for ever Egypt, although Harrison Weir exaggerated when he suggested that "we had all swallowed, a little at a time, part of, if not whole of, a defied cat". Harrison Weir tried to find out from those who handled the "cat fertiliser" whether there was any hair amongst the mass of bodies, but he failed to get any information that would have made it possible to identify the colour of the 3,000-year-old cats. Other authors have confidently stated that hair from cat mummies is of the same colour as that of the wild cat of N.E. Africa. The breed is probably called "Abyssinian" because the first specimen exhibited in England was imported from Abyssinia and not because that country was its original home. Rosita Forbes, writing between the wars, stated she had never seen a domestic cat in Abyssinia, and when the Countess of Liverpool recently had enquiries made there with a view to importing a cat, she was told there had been no pure-bred cats in Ethiopia since the Italian invasion, although whether due to the Italians eating them or to some other reason is a

matter of speculation. At the same time it was stated that a hunter who had been commissioned from the U.S.A. to obtain an Abyssinian had been unsuccessful in finding one. On the other hand I understand "Abyssinians" have been imported to the U.S.A. from Egypt. Some years ago we saw a fine specimen of the breed, without any white or barring, amongst the innumerable half-wild cats that prowl the streets of Ajaccio in Corsica. In considering whether the Abyssinian is really "Abyssinian" or "Egyptian", it is worth noting that fifty years ago when there was still uncertainty amongst judges about the "standard" for the Abyssinian, Mrs. Brooke wrote: "Those who have to judge these cats could do worse than devote half-an-hour to studying the Egyptians at the Zoo. The colour is almost identical; we find the same stamp of head, the slightly marked legs and head, the same colouring of tail."

It is not doubted that there were "Abyssinians" in Abyssinia, but that they were rarities rather than the common cat is suggested by C.H. Ross's statement in his *Book of Cats* (1867) that "In Abyssinia cats are so valuable that a marriageable girl who is likely to come in for a cat is looked upon as quite an heiress." This may have been a "soldier's tale", but if correct the value of the cat probably depended upon its vermin-destroying qualities rather than its colouring. The story of the Abyssinian cat in Britain starts about eighty years ago. Apart from this remark of Ross, the first mention of Abyssinian cats appears to be in a book by Mr. Gordon Stables. This book, *Cats, Their Points, Etc.*, was apparently published in 1874 (not 1882 as Mr. H.C. Brooke states in his booklet on the Abyssinian Cat). The British troops which had fought the war under Napier left Abyssinia in May, 1868, so we may guess that the cat had been in this country for some time even before Gordon Stables's book was published. The book has a fine coloured lithograph of a cat with the following description. "Zula, the property of Mrs. Captain Barrett-Lennard. This cat was brought from Abyssinia at the conclusion of the war, fed on the way home on raw beef and was long very wild. she is now very fond of her mistress, but has a great many eccentricities which other cats have not, and is altogether a wonderful specimen of cat-kind." This rather tantalising description is all there is. How much we would like to know whether the eccentricities are the same as those of Abyssinians we know to-day, such as lifting with the paw anything to be carried to the mouth instead of putting the head down to it! In the lithograph the artist tried to convey an impression of the characteristic ticked coat, and there is a complete absence of "tabby" markings or barring on the paws, face and neck. There appears to be a small amount of white round the nose and chin, and the face is the characteristic long one of the foreign cat. But even allowing for errors in drawing there are certain differences from the Abyssinian as we know it

to-day. The ears are small, the body is coarse and large compared with the head, and the paws seem rather larger than the very neat ones of the best abyssinians to-day. the tail is longer and more whiplike, and the coat gives the impression of being coarse rather than silky. Perhaps too much should not be made of these differences, as it easy for an artist with no knowledge of the "points" of different breeds to miss them entirely -we have seen "portraits" of Siamese by artists showing every fault breeders have been successful in eradicating in the last fifty years. H.C. Brooke remarked that "it is like no Abyssinian" he had ever seen, but it certainly resembles the modern Abyssinian as much as, for instance, the pictures of the Persian and Angora cats that illustrate Buffon's Natural History resemble the modern Long Hairs. If we jump to 1903, when The Book of the Cat by Frances Simpson appeared, we have a chance of seeing what had happened to the Abyssinian in thirty years of breeding and showing. There is a photograph of Sedgemere Peaty, Mr. Sam Woodiwiss's Abyssinian, which Mr. Brooke and other experts considered even thirty years later "the best Abyssinian ever seen in this country". Sedgemere Peaty ended her days in the possession of Mr. Brooke who was entranced by her beauty and wrote that he regretted not having preserved her skin "to at least retain her glorious colour, though her beautiful sinuous form and delicate limbs can hardly be imagined by those have not seen her". Incidentally, her personality enchanted him so much that we find him recalling the anniversary of her death on may 4th in a magazine 26 years later. The photograph of Peaty shows a cat with a very pointed face, almost the shape of that of a modern Siamese, and greatly in contrast to the square face of the manx standing beside her, which makes all the more remarkable the astonishing statement of Mr. Louis Wain in his contribution to Living Animals of the World published a little before, that "The Manx cat is allied to the Abyssinian".

Apart from the trifling matter of tails, it would be difficult to think of two breeds less alike than the manx, so typically "British", and the Abyssinian, so typically foreign. Mr. Louis Wain's aberration may have been due to the fact that Mr. Brooke specialised in both breeds. Mr. Brooke wrote the chapter on "Foreign Cats" in The Book of the Cat, but we feel he can hardly have been consulted over the coloured plate showing the Abyssinian ("from a painting by W. Laker, Jun."). The Abyssinian shown has a white chin, heavily barred front legs, a heavily ringed tail and several "necklaces"! Just how the Abyssinian was bred between its introduction in the seventies and the end of the century when the breed was well-established at shows is now difficult to trace. Search of early stud books and literature has not given us all the facts, but a picture of the evolution of the breed during this period emerges. In the eighties

the "Abyssinian", under that name, was already recognised by cat fanciers, although "ticked" cats had been exhibited under many names including Spanish, Russian, Hare cat and Rabbit cat. Writing in 1889, Harrison Weir gives the "Standard of Points" for the Abyssinian. They appear to be his own standard used in judging, rather than any universally recognised standard. In general, the picture we get from his "points of excellence" is much the same as the Abyssinian to-day. There is the same emphasis on absence of white anywhere and a minimum of "marks", the same emphasis on the "graceful, lithe, elegant carriage". But he calls for a cat that is "large", with fur described rather curiously as "woolly, yet soft, silky lustrous and glossy, short, smooth, even and dense". A note at the end says: "The Abyssinian Silver Gray or Chinchilla is the same in all points, with the exception of the ground colour being silver instead of brown. This is a new and beautiful variety." To show the confusion of ideas about the Abyssinian which existed at this time and which persisted until after World War I, let us quote Harrison Weir from other parts of this same book. He says: "A hybrid between the English wild cat and the domestic resembles it and I do not consider it different in any way, with the exception of its colour, from the ordinary tabby cat. I have but little inclination to place it as a distinct, though often it is of foreign, breed...." Yet a few pages later Weir says: "To breed these (Abyssinians) true, it is well to procure imported or pedigree stock, for many cats are bred in England from ordinary tabbies, that so nearly resemble Abyssinian in colour as scarcely to be distinguished from the much-prized foreigner.... Curiously coloured as the Abyssinian cat is, and being a true breed(!), no doubt of far back ancestry, it is most useful in crossing with other varieties, even with the Persian, Russian, Angora or the Archangel, the ticking hues being easy of transmission, and is then capable of charming and delightful tints, with breadths of beautiful mottled or grizzled colouring, if judiciously mated.... Matched with a silver-grey tabby, a silver-grey tick is generally the sequence." Here we probably have the origin of the "Abyssinian Silver Grey or Chinchilla", recognition of which as a variety probably was responsible for the rarity of true Abyssinians with the characteristic rufus ticking. The grey tabby cross also probably introduced round heads and receding lower jaws. A photograph of a "Chinchilla Abyssinian" in September 1902 shows a cat with a ringed tail, heavily barred forelegs, an "English" head and markings all over its body -everything that an Abyssinian should not be. For a considerable period the larger shows had two classes for Abyssinians, one "brown" and the other "silver".

The Abyssinian Ch. Cup at the Westminster Show in 1909 was awarded to Mrs. Carew-Cox's Silver Abyssinian "Fancy Free", and W. Johnson Wood, reviewing Cats of 1908, comments

"the silver specimens are even nicer than the brown". Mr. Brooke, basing his ideas on the true Abyssinian cats, was against the "silvers" from the first. Judging Mrs. Carew-Cox's "Shamrock" at Brighton in 1903, Mr. Brooke remarked: "It is a ticked cat but not the proper Abyssinian colour." The "Silver Abyssinian" persisted, however, so that the photograph of an Abyssinian in the article on cats in the 14th edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica (published in 1928) is a "Silver Abyssinian". It seems very probable that it was this recognition of the so-called Silver Abyssinian, which was predominantly grey and not ruddy which spoiled the colour, and possibly for a period, the type, of British Abyssinians, and we must agree with Captain W.H. Powell who, writing in 1938, said: "I hope it will never again be allowed in the show pen." Mr. Brooke condemned the silver as "absolutely alien to the breed" and reflected that if these silvers had been kept to themselves no harm might have been done, but they undoubtedly introduced a grey tinge into the true breed and this persists in certain lines to-day. To get back the warmth of body colour H.C. Brooke used a cat he described as a "Red self" which nevertheless was of the right type. Captain Powell described the cat as "more like a chocolate than anything else I can think of". We have not been able to trace this cat. It has been suggested it might have been a "Burmese", but this seems unlikely, and Mr. A.C. Jude, who has made a special study of colour inheritance in cats, points out to us that anyone considering a cross with the Burmese to get colour should remember that Burmese, like their close relations the Siamese, carry the silver gene. A cross with a Red Tabby in an effort to get colour carries the certainty of tabby markings being reintroduced, and by the time these had been bred out again it is probable the colour would also have gone. The Brown Tabby, Mr. Jude suggests, especially one tinged with red, has less definite markings and we understand some work has been done with this cross in France recently. But with the possibility of loss of "type", especially in the shape of the head, involved in a cross, the most satisfactory method of improvement may be selective breeding. The confusion which undoubtedly existed in the early days about Abyssinians probably arose from the fact that ticked cats of various kinds seems to have been native to Britain. These "British Ticks" or "Bunny Cats" were apparently commoner in some parts of the country than they are now. One of the results of the quarrel between the Cat Club and the National Cat Club was that the former dropped the title "Abyssinian" from its Register and inserted instead "Ticks" with resultant confusion. The Abyssinian, no party to this quarrel, was its victim. We feel also that the notions about the Abyssinian entertained by some judges, particularly Mr. Louis Wain, were responsible for increasing the confusion. As an example we quote a letter to the Editor of Our Cats in December 1903, written in reply to a reader who said he wanted to take up

Abyssinians but was completely confused by the contradictory views of judges in their placings. Louis Wain suggested that the Abyssinian was not a distinct breed. "The Abyssinians, so called, seen in our shows of late years are not the Abyssinians which were exhibited occasionally as a rarity some 15 years ago (i.e. about 1888). Those cats were a light brown, with just a suspicion of tick on the body, but not one that I have ever seen was free of tabby markings on the legs, head and the ring round the neck. To call the modern ticks Abyssinians is a misnomer. The tick is the ground basis of most tabbies and the pure tick is a conglomerate of Argentine, Chilean, African and in some cases Eastern Cats.

"I have myself traced the origin of the bunny cats and find them to be of Chilean parentage. They were first introduced to show knowledge by Miss K.M. Bennett, who gave me two kittens, one of which I gave to Mr. Sam Woodiwiss who, however, did nothing with it. I have at present four of them, sire and dam, and two eight months old kittens. These have never been shown and I hope to keep them until I can give them to someone who will perpetuate the breed properly and show them. The toms are great cats, far bigger than any cat I have seen at shows for ten years past. The queens are smaller and very highly strung. The tails of all of them are partly ringed and at the stump are as broad as their backs. They are tabby-marked on legs and heads and ringed round the neck. When born they are nearly black and the first year they are shot with faint thin mackerel markings under the tick marking. The succeeding years the mackerel marking disappears and comes back with age a bit..... The fur is bluish near the skin, then half an inch fawn-coloured; following that is a splash of black then the tick (yellow), and finally tipped with black like a porcupine quill; but please do not call them Abyssinians....." Few breeders, I think, would have dreamed of calling them Abyssinians, for they bore little relation to the Abyssinian as specialists like Mr. Sam Woodiwiss and Mr. H.C. Brooke were attempting to breed them. It is perhaps not unkind to suggest that Mr. Woodiwiss did nothing with the kitten given him for the very good reason that he was not going to spoil the Abyssinians he had bred to a type by crossing them with these English "bunny ticks". Louis Wain urges that classes should be thrown open to "All ticks, including all English and foreign varieties and colours" and not "levelled down to a cat which is not an easy breeding one", i.e. the Abyssinian. "The 'bunnies'," he concluded, "throw both long- and short-haired kittens and many are born dead or killed by the mother; hence the strength of the breed; the ailing kittens are killed off." If his policy had been followed the Abyssinian as we know it would undoubtedly have been lost. The Crystal Palace Show class at the beginning of the century was for "Abyssinian and Tick (Bunny)", but the "bunny cat" like the Silver

Abyssinian" has disappeared from shows and is not a variety recognised by the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy (except possibly under "any other variety"). The inconsistency of Louis Wain on this subject is shown by a quotation from his contribution to *Living Animals of the World*. Apparently forgetting all about Chili and the Argentine, he says: "The sand-Colour Cat, with a whole-coloured coat like the rabbit, which we know as the Abyssinian or Bunny Cat is a strong African type. On the Gold Coast it comes down from the inland country with its ears all bitten and torn away in its fights with rivals. It has been acclimatised in England." The position in a nutshell seems to have been that during the 1880-1900 period there was a certain amount of indiscriminate crossing between the imported foreign cats of the Abyssinian type and native British "bunny" ticks, as well as with grey or silver tabbies. We use the word "indiscriminate" because the breeders were possibly not always clear what they were aiming at and they were not corrected by shows because some judges seem to have been equally hazy about the desirable standard of the Abyssinian.

One of the difficulties the Abyssinian had to encounter in its early days in the show world was competition with the strangest varieties of foreign cats, notable Mr. Brooke's own interesting Indian and Geoffrey's cats. These seem always to have beaten the Abyssinians, although how judges discriminated between the merits of Abyssinians and of a scarcely domesticated and unique imported cat for which no standard of points existed it is difficult to know. The "Any Other Variety Foreign Cat" class at the Crystal Palace in 1902 saw Mrs. Heslop's Greek Maiden (bred by owner's Old Greek and Greek Maid) beaten by Felis Geoffreys. Third and fourth were an Indian and a Japanese cat! These unusual cats must have added to the interest of the show, but it was unfortunate that the Abyssinian had to bear the brunt of their competition! We owe the Abyssinian breed as we know it to-day to a handful of fanciers who appreciated what was desirable and continued to try and breed good specimens to the standard they visualised as ideal, regardless of the eccentricities of some judges. The names of Mr. Sam Woodiwiss, Major Sydney Woodiwiss, Mr. H.C. Brooke, Mrs Carew-Cox and later Mrs. Basnett will always be associated with the Abyssinian. The first appearance of Abyssinians in the Stud Book of the National Cat Club in 1896 lists only two Abyssinians -Sedgemere Bottle, born 1892, and Sedgemere Peaty, born October 1894. Both of these were owned by Mr. Sam Woodiwiss; the previous owner, and presumably breeder, is given as Mr. Swinyard. Strangely Sedgemere Peaty is listed in the 1900-1905 stud book, after she had passed to Mrs. Brooke, as "Breeder and pedigree unknown". Of the twelve Abyssinians listed in this book six have one or both parents "unknown". The number of Abyssinians exhibited did not increase

greatly, probably because litters are inclined to be small, with a preponderance of males. It has been suggested to us that the comparative scarcity of females may be due to a genetic factor associated with the colouring. In 1904 a writer in an article on "Uncommon Cats" said "The Abyssinian cat has lately been creeping into popularity, as many as eleven having been exhibited at the Crystal Palace Show." We read exactly the same statement, that the Abyssinian was "creeping into popularity" in an article a few months ago! Amongst foreign cats the Abyssinian was completely overshadowed by the Siamese whose numbers increased probably a hundred-fold in the first half of the century. We suspect this was due not only to the attractive character of the Siamese, but also to the insistence of its calling, its large litters, and the fact that it has been much written about and publicised by eminent men. The Abyssinian still awaits a biographer with the skills and affection shown by Mr. Michael Joseph in Charles. By 1929 the number of Abyssinians and agreement about the desirable standard was sufficiently great to justify the formation of an Abyssinian Cat Club and the late Major Sydney Woodiwiss set about the task energetically. The club soon had between thirty and forty members. Through the years the club has been able to encourage the breed by guaranteeing classes and offering special awards. The following Challenge Cups and Trophies are offered at shows: President' Cup, presented by the Lady Barnard for the best Abyssinian Female Adult Cat. Gretta Bowl, presented by the late Cyril Yates, Esq., for the best Abyssinian Cat. Nancy Richardson Cup, presented by Miss N. Richardson for the best Abyssinian Cat with no white chin or bars. [Charmian](#) Memorial, presented by Miss M. Wrightson for best Kitten bred by Exhibitor.

The Club's object is primarily to encourage breeding Abyssinian cats to the standard of points it has carefully drawn up. It elects a delegate to the Governing Council of the Cat Fancy and is instrumental in bringing together owners of Abyssinians. The subscription is a modest 5s. a year. President of the club is the lady Barnard whose Abyssinians have had considerable success in both Britain and the U.S.A. Hon. Secretary and Treasurer is Mr. H.W. Basnet of 222 City Way, Rochester, Kent, and any Abyssinian owner will find that even if there is no intention of showing, membership of the club is worth while. The early Registers of the Club show a fairly constant 30-40 cats in the ownership of members until 1937 when no less than 92 cats were listed. This sudden popularity of the Abyssinian was probably due to the outbreak of war between Italy and Abyssinia. The club secretary reported "a marked effect on public interest" and "enquiries for kittens have increased considerably since Abyssinia has so much prominence in the daily newspapers." It is strange that a breed known in Britain for 70

years should have required a war to publicise it. We must hope that the equally deserving and neglected Russian Blues are not publicised in the same way! The war in 1939 brought trying conditions for breeders. Food shortages apart, transport difficulties made it impossible to send queens to stud. At least one breeder in a very vulnerable area sent his best Abyssinian to America because of the danger of bombing. By 1945 it is doubtful if there were a dozen known Abyssinians in the country. But since the war membership of the Club has increased again and the quality and number of cats penned at shows is improving every year. We hope that the Club may again be able to hold a "Club Show" as in 1931 when nearly all the known Abyssinians are apt to be overlooked by the public because of their small numbers. A club show would be educative and secure the breed the attention it deserves. In 1908 a reporter of the U.S.A. Cat Review went to the Crystal Palace Show and said: "The Abyssinians were to me simply curiosities", so the Abyssinian was then probably quite unknown to the American fancy. The first Abyssinians were sent to the United States from Britain in the 1930's. They were [Woodrooffe Ras Seyum](#) and five females - [Yeshe Imabet of Newton](#), [Croham Isana](#), [Justina](#), [Woodrooffe Mira](#) and [Woodrooffe Moya](#). These cats appear to have been the foundation stock of all Abyssinians in the United States until early in 1949 when Mrs. Warren, of California, imported two females bred by the Lady Barnard - [Raby Nefertari](#) (best Abyssinian in America in 1950 and a double champion) and [Raby Aida](#) (champion). Later in 1949 Lady Headlam sent [Pussner Pride](#) and [Pussner Paragon](#) to Mrs. Judy Smith, and Mrs. Warren imported a sister and brother from the Countess of Liverpool. In 1950 two males and five females were imported. It will be seen that in the last few years the Abyssinian has made considerable headway in the United States. Mrs. Judy Smith, of Staten Island, N.Y., tells us there are probably twenty-five or thirty owners of one or more Abyssinians breeding this year. There is no U.S. Abyssinian Cat Club, but efforts are being made to form one. Some judges in that country have interpreted the ruling "white chins not permissible" more severely than British judges. The result seems to have been that some breeders have sought to eliminate the white chin at any cost and with some judges paying scant attention to "type" curious placings have resulted. It is to be hoped U.S. judges will not spoil the breed by awards to Abyssinians with round heads, short ears and cobby bodies, whatever their merits in lack of markings. France first became interested in Abyssinians in 1927 when Madame Guyot imported a pair bred in England by Mrs. Carew Cox, but the first Abyssinian actually exhibited in Paris seems to have been champion [Ras Tafari](#) shown by M. Lesti, of Vienna, who returned to show again in 1930 when Mr. H.C. Brooke was the judge. In the thirties Madame Guyot showed a number of Abyssinians, and in 1937, [Adowa](#), bred from [Woodrooffe Zeus](#) and [Croham Sheba](#),

won the Prix du President de la Republique. Unfortunately, with the war and the death of Madame Guyot, the most successful line appears to have disappeared. Interest has revived and there are now more than a dozen Abyssinians in France, all but two bred by Madame Rose Meyer and descended from the very successful Woodrooffe Zeus. For the last three years Madame Meyer has been carrying out a programme of selective breeding which promises to have good results. A new interest in the Abyssinian is growing in Denmark where the first Abyssinian was imported from England in 1950. More correctly this was the first Abyssinian imported as a pet and for breeding. Fifty years ago Mr. H.C. Brooke sent an Abyssinian queen to the Zoo at Copenhagen and this was exhibited at the Cat Show in the Danish capital at the end of that year. In 1935 Madame Guyot, who pioneered the breed in France, took [Woodrooffe Zeus](#) to Denmark to show him, but we understand Miss Basnett's [Croham Zara](#), flown to Copenhagen in September 1950, was the first Abyssinian to become Scandinavian-owned. Her intelligence and charm apparently immediately struck the Danes, and Mrs. Ingemarie Hansen, editor of the Dansk Race Katte magazine, has bought [Frensham Zagazig](#), bred by ourselves, as a mate for Zara in Copenhagen.

The care of the Abyssinian requires no special notes. Being short-haired, grooming is reduced to a minimum. The cats keep their silky coats in good condition by indefatigable washing. Abyssinians are not delicate and do not require coddling. Although foreign in origin, they are completely acclimatised and perhaps because of their denser double coats (a type of coat found otherwise, we believe, only in the Manx and the Russian Blue) they do not seem so warmth-loving as Siamese. The breed is not particularly susceptible to any illness and losses from enteritis seem to be less than with Siamese. The general care and management of this breed is the same as for any other Short Hair. There are so many admirable books available on care of cats that we do not propose to offer advice to novices except that they should not imagine any Abyssinian during a lifetime catches all and every one of the diseases for which remedies are suggested in handbooks! Abyssinians can be talkative, but the sound level of their voices is about 50 decibels less than that of the Siamese. This is a distinct advantage in managing a queen. "Calling" is not so insistent as with Siamese. The maternal instinct is strongly developed and we have found it necessary to keep our Abyssinians away from other cats' litters or she will "kidnap" the kittens, carry them to some quiet cupboard, feed and completely monopolise them. In 1900 Mr. Brooke's Abyssinian queen Chelsworth Peaty reared a young hybrid ferret although there is usually the strongest dislike between members of the cat and weasel tribes. The hybrid, a cross between stoat and ferret, remained friendly

with its foster-mother even when full-grown, and the pair were admired at the Royal Botanic Gardens Show by Princess (afterwards Queen) Alexandra. These Abyssinians lived amicably with Mr. Brooke's other strange pets, including a white she-wolf. In 1870 the Hon. Lady Cust ended her book *The Cat* - one of the first on the subject published in Britain - with the words: "I have now written all that would be interesting or useful on the subject of cats."

Remembering the hundreds of books on cats that have since been published, we resist any temptation to make the same claim for this little book on Abyssinian cats. But we hope that it will serve its purpose in bringing together the observations of many experts and of introducing this fascinating breed to newcomers to the Cat Fancy as well as members of the general public who, even if they are not interested in showing, will find an Abyssinian can be an enchanting member of the household.