

I was a cat person, before we had Maya – I will miss this wonderful dog

I can no longer disparage Prime Minister W.L. Mackenzie King's devotion to his dog. (I did not, however, take it upon myself to give Maya messages to take heavenwards to great deceased personalities, as King gave Pat for Sir Wilfrid Laurier, W.E. Gladstone, his own parents and others)

by Conrad Black



Former prime minister Mackenzie King sits with his dog

This is about a terribly sad event in our home. The senior of my wife's two magnificent dogs, Kuvaszok, Maya, has died. They are a large (80-125 pound) all-white Hungarian breed,

originally mountain livestock guardians, somewhat wolfish in their physique and feline in their gait. All kennel clubs advise they are “not for first-time owners.” She was named Maya after the widow of our late friend and Barbara’s former husband, a formidable columnist in this newspaper, George Jonas. She died on Wednesday aged 12, a long, “silver whiskers” life for the breed.



Maya Courtesy Conrad Black

She was a wonderful dog, and charmed and manipulated everyone she encountered. When she wanted her dinner, an elaborate, multi-ingredient gourmet feast, she had an astonishingly original sequence of escalating agitation, starting with histrionics worthy of Sarah Bernhardt, and including heart-rending sighs and limpid vulnerable eyes, and moving on to paw-prods, and direct kisses and tongue-tickles launched if necessary from her hind-legs. When she wanted to go out, she took post at a 45-degree angle, nose to the door handle and looking back at increasingly short intervals with barking accompaniment and a wronged expression that demanded to know why the door was not opening. She was inevitable and irresistible, and much of our home gradually became a luxury doghouse of canine waterbeds and cushy mats.

I was traditionally more a cat than a dog person, as cats are so much less trouble, are such splendid physical machines and are generally more intelligent than dogs. It has always intrigued me that domestic cats retain the same mannerisms and movements of the great jungle and African plains cats. I became so attached to my former wife’s cat Sidney, a Siamese so clever he figured out how to travel between floors in our house on the dumbwaiter for laundry, that when he died in a road accident, we buried him in our garden and I did something that I would have sworn I would never do: put down a marble plaque bearing a couplet from Matthew Arnold: “Composed and bland, Imperious and grand, as Tiberius would have sat, had Tiberius been a cat.”

Maya and her nephew, who happily remains in robust health and good voice and appetite (like the Hound of the Baskervilles), altered my perspective. From when she first arrived as a puppy, Maya was always self-possessed, dignified, had a splendid sense of humour and was startlingly intelligent. She intervened when anyone was intemperate or became exasperated with the less genteel behaviour of her rambunctious nephew. She constantly patrolled the perimeter of our extensive property and nothing happened in her domain, no creature moved, without her knowledge.



Barbara, centre, with Arpad, left, and Maya.

After two encounters she learned to make sure not to allow a skunk to aim its apparatus at her. All other creatures she regarded as trespassers to be deterred: foxes, coyotes, raccoons, possums and, while rabbits and squirrels were inextinguishable, they were always on their nimble toes or paid a mortal price for their overconfidence. One triumphant day, she returned home with a Canada goose that had honked too belligerently.

Through all the travails of my encounter with the U.S. prosecution service and its local Quislings, she was, with her nephew, a magnificent and irreplaceable guardian and companion to Barbara. The two dogs ran noisily beside joggers just in front of our front fence and became well-known local personalities, subjects of conversation with total strangers and, so splendid in appearance, popular subjects of media photographers. When television crews came to the house Maya frequently entered camera range and nonchalantly stole the scene. In all weather and at all hours she took up strategic positions around our property and sat regally and alertly like the lions at the base of the monuments of Trafalgar Square or the two lions at the main entrance of the New York Public Library (popularly named Patience and Fortitude).

She was brilliant, beautiful, poised and unflappable, but her health was never good. When she was two we learned that she had lesions in her lungs that led to a perforation and surgery at the magnificent animal hospital at the University of Florida at Gainesville. A nearby patient was a groggy full-grown tiger. Though a splendid beast, he was no more majestic nor apparently self-confident than Maya. Many times in the last 10 years she has had to go to a veterinary hospital and stay for several days when her survival was in doubt, but her indomitable spirit and tenacity of life never deserted her. The principal problems were successive mutations of the original pulmonary difficulties and she needed extensive medication to keep pneumonia at bay, and pain and weakness of hind legs gradually came on. To prevent scratching of neck and ears, which had many problems, she often had to wear Perspex bonnets – large funnels that must have been insufferable. But she never showed any impatience when they bumped into the edges of doors or other obstacles. As always, she bore up with perfect stoicism and no trace of embarrassment. No matter how unwell or laboured her breathing, even when mired in a quagmire in a neighbouring ravine, she was unruffled and elegant, like a grandame expecting a hand from a footman while getting out of her carriage, aristocratic but never pompous or helpless.



Maya Courtesy Conrad Black

She never gave any hint of embarrassment, demoralization or indignity. Until the veterinarians knew her well and knew her indestructibility, we were always cautioned that she might not survive. But she always did. Three months ago, after a scan, we were told that she had cancer of the spleen that had widely metastasized. There was nothing to be done except wait, a process no less painful than with a family member, an agony most people of at least middle age have known. Even in this deteriorating condition she was never ungraceful, or even reluctant to go on lengthy walks though she was very tired at

the end of them. As I watched her being driven away with Barbara to the vet for the last time on Wednesday, as she regally occupied the back seat of a commodious van that Barbara bought years ago to convey her dogs about in comfortable display like the Infant of Prague, it was a piercing sadness to realize that I would not see her again. I stayed behind with her nephew and about 90 minutes later, Barbara emailed, "She has gone." The vet wept. I almost wept, something I have not done since 1963, other than from laughter.

Those who have not experienced it cannot imagine what a strong emotional attachment a person can develop with a four-legged companion. I used to be somewhat critical of Canada's longest serving prime minister, W.L. Mackenzie King, for spending 17 pages in his diary describing the death of his dog Pat, an Irish terrier, I think, to whom he attached almost mystical powers. I even thought that if the prime minister had not cradled Pat in his arms for the last several hours of his life singing, "Safe in the arms of Jesus" (which could not have been sonorous), the dog might have lived longer. I can no longer disparage King's devotion to his dog. (I did not, however, take it upon myself to give Maya messages to take heavenwards to great deceased personalities, as King gave Pat for Sir Wilfrid Laurier, W.E. Gladstone, his own parents and others.) I was reminded of a famous eulogist of 30 years ago who referred to a statesman's death as "so long expected but so hard to accept ... (someone who) achieved greatly, suffered deeply, but never gave up." The departure of this truly wonderful dog has left a great vacuum in our lives. She has gone but she will remain in what George Jonas called, quoting St. Ambrose of all people, "the generous atrium of our memories," and no one who knew Maya will ever forget her or fail to remember her with fondness and with admiration. She was always impressive, often inspiring, and unforgettably so as she struggled uncomplaining with her final illness.

First published in the