The Dark Companion: The Origin of ‘Black Dog’ as a Description for Depression
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Introduction

Winston Churchill was so accustomed to visits by depression that he had a nickname for it—his ‘Black Dog’. Other sufferers of depression have since found Churchill’s ‘Black Dog’ to be an apt description of their condition. The expression has also become popular among authors, doctors, poets and musicians. In 2002, the term, and Churchill’s famous victory sign, were adopted by the Black Dog Institute, a centre in New South Wales that provides treatment, education and community programs for depressive and bipolar disorders.[1]

Although the term ‘black dog’ is commonly attributed to Churchill, he was not the first to use it. An 1869 English book of stories and proverbs mentions ‘to have the black dog on the back’ as a common phrase describing a sullen mood or a bout of melancholia, as depression was known then. The expression appeared in eighteenth century England, although, as the book goes on to state, ‘perhaps few who use it have an idea of its origin.’[2] What then is the origin of a black dog as a symbol of despair and sorrow in the English language? To answer this, we must begin by examining the symbolism of dogs and the colour black in earliest religion and folklore.

Pets and Gods

Dogs were the first domestic animals. The earliest civilisations trained dogs to hunt and to guard their flocks and homes. They also kept them as companions and friends.[3] People noticed that dogs would eat anything, including carrion. Dogs’ readiness to consume human corpses led societies across Europe, the Middle East and Asia to associate them with death.[4] Some people believed that dogs consumed souls and transported them to the afterlife and therefore wielded considerable power over both life and death. They were seen as guardians of the gateways into life and the afterlife.[5]

The symbolism of colours was established similarly early in human history. Black is the absence of all colour, the shade of night, storm clouds, animals’ lairs, closed eyes and rotting wounds. It was first associated with sorrow, fear, death, famine, mourning and injury. As spiritualism developed, societies associated black with evil, sin and Hell.[6]

Given the powerful connotations of dogs and the colour black, it is not surprising that both appear as symbols in early religions. Just as dogs guarded the afterlife, some temples used sacred dogs as guards. Shiva, the Hindu god with great destructive and creative powers, was symbolised as a black dog, while in Egypt, Anubis was the jackal-headed god of the dead.[7] The goddess Artemis (or Diana) was a huntress who led a pack of hounds, though it was Hecate who was the goddess most associated with dogs. She was worshipped in the Middle East in the centuries before Jesus's birth and also in classical Greece and Rome. Hecate was deified in popular folk religion as the triple goddess of earth, moon and underworld. As the goddess of the underworld, she was thought to hold the keys to the afterlife and was often portrayed as a black dog or in the company of dogs. Sometimes referred to as the 'black bitch', Hecate was also the goddess of birth, death, magic, witches, ghosts, demons and cemeteries. Dogs, particularly black puppies, were sacrificed in order to gain Hecate's favour.[8]

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[1] G Parker, ‘The Black Dog Institute’, *Australasian Psychiatry*, vol. 10, 2002, pp. 232–5.

[2] R Chambers, (ed), *The Book of Days: A Miscellany of Popular Antiquities in Connection With the Calender*, W&R Chambers, London, 1869, vol. 2, p. 433.

[3] K Armbruster, ‘“Good Dog”: The stories we tell about our canine companions and what they mean for humans and other animals’, *Papers on Language and Literature*, vol. 38, 2002, p 351; Ad de Vries and Arthur de Vries, *Elsevier’s Dictionary of Symbols and Imagery*, 2nd edn, Elsevier, Amsterdam, 2004, p. 170; D Colin, *Dictionary of Symbols, Myths and Legends*, Hachette Livre, London, 2000, p. 150.

[4] DG White, ‘Dogs Die’, *History of Religions*, vol. 28, 1989, pp. 285–6; R Trubshaw, *Black Dogs: Guardians of the Corpse Ways*, viewed 22 September 2004, <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/bdogs.htm>, 2001; LP Day, ‘Dog Burials in the Greek World’, *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 88, 1984, pp. 21–32; R Strelan, ‘“Outside Are the Dogs and the Sorcerers…” (Revelation 22:15)’, *Biblical Theology Bulletin*, vol. 33, 2003, pp. 148–157; EE Burriss, ‘The Place of the Dog in Superstition as Revealed in Latin Literature’, *Classical Philology*, vol. 30, 1935, p. 36.

[5] JE Larkins, ‘Myth in the *Romancero gitano*’, *Hispania*, vol. 64, 1981, p. 20.

[6] PJ Heather, ‘Colour Symbolism: Part I’, *Folklore*, vol. 59, 1948, p. 169 and pp. 175–6; de Vries and de Vries, pp. 67–8.

As well as sacrificing dogs to the gods, Mediterranean and Middle Eastern people used them as 'scape-dogs' in healing and cleansing rituals. It was thought that by touching a person's body, dogs could absorb diseases and impurities. They licked wounds to prevent abscesses forming or were rubbed across a pregnant woman's belly to purify her and her child. Dogs were also killed after someone's birth, illness or death in order to clean and protect them, either in this life or the next. Frequently the dog used in these ceremonies was black.[9]

Because of the relationship between dogs and the afterlife, they were assumed to be able to tell when death was approaching.[10] In classical literature, the howling of dogs is frequently an omen of some tragedy. Dogs were said to have bayed through Rome prior to the split between Julius Caesar and the general Pompey that led to civil war. Dogs later howled before Caesar's murder and before the death of Emperor Maximinus, among others.[11]

Ancient Greek and Roman writers also refer to the symbolism of the colour black. In Greek medicine, a patient's health was attributed to a balance of the four humours: blood, phlegm, yellow bile and black bile. An excess of black bile was thought to be the cause of melancholia, providing a medical link between black and despair. The theory of humours survived in medicine into the seventeenth century.[12]

While dogs were made into gods and used to purify people, they were also believed by others to be unclean. As well as being carrion eaters, dogs engaged in other anti-social behaviour, such as urinating, defecating and copulating in public. Jewish and Islamic scriptures treated them as particularly dirty animals and dogs were banned from many sacred sites in the Middle East and Greece.[13] In the Bible, the word dog is an insult or censure, or is used as a disparaging term for sinners.[14] The book of Revelation tells of the city of God, inside which are the blessed. Outside 'are the dogs, those who practice magic arts, the sexually immoral, the murderers, the idolaters and everyone who loves and practices falsehood'.[15] Revelation asserts God's power over the souls of the dead and denies the power of pagan gods such as Hecate. Dog sacrifices will not guarantee entry to Heaven. This passage may have been directly aimed at pagans who still worshipped Hecate, potentially the biggest rival to the Christian God in the first and second centuries.[16]

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[7] Larkins, p 20; Colin, p 150.

[8] R Reitler, 'A Theriomorphic Representation of Hekate-Artemis', *American Journal of Archaeology*, vol. 53, 1949, p. 30; MPO Morford & RJ Lenardon, *Classical Mythology*, 7th edn, Oxford University Press, New York, 2003, pp. 209–10; Day, pp. 27–8; Strelan, pp. 149–55.

[9] Burriss, pp. 32–3; Day, pp. 27–8; Strelan, pp. 150–1.

[10] WC Hazlitt, *Faiths and Folklore of the British Isles*, Benjamin Blom, New York, 1965, vol. 1 p. 184.

[11] Ibid; Burriss, p. 35.

[12] C Singer & EA Underwood, *A Short History of Medicine*, 2nd edn, Oxford University Press, 1962, pp. 46–7.

[13] Day, p. 29; Strelan, p. 149.

[14] Larkins, pp. 20–1; Strelan, p. 149.

[15] Revelation 22:15.

From the earliest recorded history, black dogs appeared as symbols of death and the afterlife. They were credited with significant powers and were sacrificed to cure or purify people, while also being kept for more mundane roles as hunters and friends. Classical Greek and Roman writers tell of the ominous nature of dogs, but also reflect the beneficial role that they played domestically and in religion. The symbolism of black dogs was therefore two-fold: faithful servant and terrible omen. The Bible, though, does not make any reference to the positive qualities of dogs, associating them almost exclusively with heresy and sin. People continued to keep companion dogs and working dogs, but it was this biblical treatment of dogs that shaped European superstition and belief through the Middle Ages.

Witches and the Devil

The conflict between the Christian church and older pagan religions continued in Europe through the Middle Ages into the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Pagan rituals and alternate beliefs were considered to be witchcraft and the work of the Devil. The role that dogs, and particularly black dogs, played in these rituals, combined with the biblical treatment of dogs as unclean and unworthy, led Christians to relate dogs with evil. A black dog was believed to be one of the Devil's favourite animal forms and numerous folk-tales and books made reference to the Devil appearing on earth as a dog.[17] In 1450, a decree issued by Henry VI of England against the rebel Jack Cade used as evidence the accusation that Cade had 'rered up the Devell in semblance of a blak dogge'.[18] Milton, in the 1674 *Paradise Lost*, tells of Sin and Death, the spawn of Satan, being let loose from Hell to 'waste and havoc' the world. In the story, God calls Sin and Death 'dogs of Hell' and 'Hell-Hounds'.[19] In the eighteenth century, Goethe's version of the story of Faust, who trades his soul for favours from the Devil, has Mephistopheles appear as a large black poodle.[20]

Witches were believed to be servants of the Devil, who would give them a familiar, a demon in animal form who acted as the Devil's representative. People also thought that a witch, like the Devil, could transform into an animal. A black dog one of the more common forms a transformed witch or her familiar might take and witch hunters used a person's pet black dog or a sighting of a black dog as evidence of evil.[21] The presence of black dogs is referred to in sixteenth and seventeenth century witch trials in places as widely separated as New England and Denmark.[22] Cornelius Agrippa, a philosopher of the 1500s, was persecuted for non-conventional beliefs; his pet black dog was presented as evidence of his sorcery.[23]

Black dogs were associated with evil, therefore seeing or being followed by one was a bad sign. In *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, published in 1621, Robert Burton analysed the causes and cures of melancholy, breaking it into several categories. One category—religious melancholy—is characterised by a fear of God's punishment and damnation. The sufferers'

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[16] Strelan.

[17] JB Russell, *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1984.

[18] C Lindahl, J McNamara & J Lindrow (eds), *Medieval Folklore: An Encyclopedia of Myths, Legends, Tales, Beliefs, and Customs*, ABC-Clio, Santa Barbara, California, 2000, vol. 1, p. 233.

[19] J Milton, *The Portable Milton*, ed. D Bush, Viking Press, New York, 1949, pp. 487–8.

[20] JW Goethe, *Faust I&II*, ed. & trans. S Atkins, Suhrkamp/Insel, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1984, pp. 32–5.

[21] JB Russell, *A History of Witchcraft: Sorcerers, Heretics and Pagans*, Thames and Hudson, London, 1980; T Brown, 'The Black Dog', *Folklore*, vol 69, 1958, p. 178; G Henninsen, 'Witchcraft in Denmark', *Folklore*, vol. 93, 1982, p. 134; MA Murray, *The Witch-cult in Western Europe: A Study in Anthropology*, Oxford University Press, 1921, pp 205-237.

[22] WW Woodward, 'New England's other witch-hunt: The Hartford witch-hunt of the 1660s and changing patterns in witchcraft prosecution', *Magazine of History*, vol. 17, 2003, p. 16; Henningsen, p. 134.

[23] M Rudwin, *The Devil in Legend and Literature*, AMS Press, New York, 1970, p. 39.

'childish fear…so much, so continually tortures and crucifies their souls, like a barking dog that always bawls, but seldom bites, this fear ever molesteth, and so long as melancholy lasteth, cannot be avoided'.[24] Victims of religious melancholy frequently imagined the Devil or witches following them in animal form and Burton makes many references to black dogs. One example he gives is of Cardinal Crescence, who 'died so likewise desperate at Verona, still he thought a black dog followed him to his death-bed, no man could drive the dog away'.[25]

It is significant, however, that a black dog was just one animal form that the Devil and witches were thought to take. Popular beliefs and religious writings had difficulty linking the Devil to just one animal form because of other religious or cultural significances. The dog's honourable qualities of loyalty, intelligence, faithfulness and protection of their masters argued against treating all dogs as evil. This is perhaps why a black dog was not the only form thought to be taken by the Devil.[26] Christianity had a strong influence on European beliefs, but the depiction of dogs as both good and evil continued.

Ghostly Black Dogs

The belief that some dogs were evil survived into the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in superstition and folk-lore. Throughout Great Britain and Ireland, people told tales of black spectre-dogs that haunted cemeteries, roads, bridges, churchyards and gallows sites. Sometimes the dog would be fixed to one location, but frequently it would follow a person along a dark road. These phantoms often had an immediate and lasting effect on the senses of the viewers, who were struck mute, blind or deaf. They often died soon afterwards, or experienced the death of a close relative.[27]

The Skriker was one spectre-dog said to haunt Lancashire. In the original folk-tale, a young man is walking home on a dark, deserted road when a shaggy black dog appears. The dog spooks him, and he runs in an attempt to lose the animal, but the dog keeps pace with him until he reaches home. There the man faints and it is some time before his wife can revive him and hear his story. A few days later, the couple's eldest child drowns. After the funeral, the wife catches a fever and dies. Subsequently, the man is driven mad by fear and is thereafter found wandering the roads in pursuit of ghosts.[28]

Another spectre-dog of England was the Mauthe Doog, which haunted Peel Castle on the Isle of Man. Soldiers in the castle were accustomed to seeing a ghostly black dog in the guardroom and, though they thought it an evil creature, generally left it alone. A drunken soldier one night decides to test whether it is really a dog or the Devil and confronts it. Instantly, the soldier becomes sober, but is also struck mute and is unable to tell what he saw. He dies in agony three days later.[29] Sir Walter Scott, in *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, refers to this tale:

> For he was speechless, ghostly, wan,
> Like him, of whom the story ran,

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[24] R Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, JM Dent & Sons, London, 1932, vol. 2.
[25] Burton, vol. 3, p. 423.
[26] R Muchembled, *A History of the Devil: From the Middle Ages to the Present*, trans. J Birrell, Polity Press, Cambridge, 2003, pp. 16–17.
[27] Brown.
[28] KM Briggs, *A Dictionary of British Folk-Tales in the English Language*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1970 part B, pp. 18–19.
[29] Chambers, vol. 2, p. 433; WC Hazlitt, *Fairy Tales, Legends and Romances: Illustrating Shakespeare and other Early English Writers*, 1977 reprint, Georg Olms Verley, New York, 1875, pp. 374–6.

> Who spoke the spectre-hound in Man.[30]

Not only spectre-dogs were linked with omens of death. The behaviour of common dogs was also believed to foretell fatal events. Eighteenth century English superstition maintained that the howling of dogs meant that anyone sick in that area would die, echoing the omens of classical Greek and Roman literature.[31]

The sight of a black dog at night was generally a bad sign in eighteenth century England, but not all black spectre-dogs were evil. In the folklore of Lincolnshire, the black dog was not feared, as it only appeared to good people, whom it escorted and protected.[32] In one tale, a black dog leads home a man lost on a freezing night and, in another, the black dog leads a person to a hidden cache of gold and silver.[33] In these stories, the twin symbolism of the dog continues; sometimes a black dog is evil and threatening, but at other times it guards and protects. It is also significant that people who saw black spectre-dogs were generally only hurt if they attacked the dogs or tried to run away. If the dog's existence was tolerated quietly, then the witness was usually safe.[34]

Several millennia of history had given black dogs their association with death and fear. It may be, however, these folk-tales of spectre-dogs that are the direct origin of the English expression 'to have the black dog on the back'.[35] The appearance of a black dog foretold death, illness or the loss of senses. A person suffering melancholy or depression often contemplated death, appeared ill, ate little, was lethargic and shunned conversation[36]—similar symptoms to those exhibited by someone who had seen a ghostly black dog.

Black Dogs in Literature

The first recorded use of black dog as a colloquial term for melancholy is by Samuel Johnson, the creator of the English dictionary, who suffered from what today would be termed clinical depression. Johnson called his melancholia 'the black dog' in conversations and correspondence with his friends. Hester Lynch Thrale, one of these friends, wrote in 1780:

> The Black Dog is upon his Back: was a common saying some Years ago when a Man was seen troubled with Melancholy: we used to make of it a sort of Byword or Hack Joke here at Streatham, and in the Letters I published between Dr Johnson & myself, it is almost perpetually recurring.[37]

In one of these letters, on 28 June 1783, Johnson says:

> The black dog I hope always to resist, and in time to drive…When I rise my breakfast is solitary, the black dog waits to share it, from breakfast to dinner he continues barking, except that Dr Brocklesby for a little keeps him at a distance…Night comes at

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[30] Chambers, vol. 2, p. 433.

[31] J Brand, *Observations on the Popular Antiquities of Great Britain*, rev. H Ellis, Book Tower, Detroit, 1969, p. 184.

[32] EH Rudkin, 'The Black Dog', *Folklore*, vol. 49, 1938, p. 130; Brown, p. 179.

[33] Chambers, vol. 2, p. 434.

[34] Brown, p. 187.

[35] Chambers, vol. 2, pp 433–6.

[36] G Parker & S Hadzi-Pavlovic (eds), *Melancholia: A Disorder of Movement and Mood: A Phenomenological and Neurobiological Review*, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 21; MD Yapko, *Breaking the Patterns of Depression*, Doubleday, New York, 1997, p. 7; B Quinn, *The Depression Sourcebook*, Lowell House, Los Angeles, 1997, pp. vii–xi.

[37] HL Thrale, *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776-1809*, ed. KC Balderston, 2nd edn, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1951, p. 785.

> last, and some hours of restlessness and confusion bring me again to a day of solitude. What shall exclude the black dog from a habitation like this?[38]

It is not clear from where Johnson acquired this expression. He may have been familiar with the stories of spectre-dogs. He was conversant with Greek and Roman classics and frequently read from Burton's *Anatomy of Melancholy*, which 'was the only book that ever took him out of bed two hours sooner than he wished to rise'.[39] It is likely that he knew of all of the references to black dogs listed above.

The English writer, Sir Walter Scott, also suffered from depression. His diary records on 12 May 1826: 'I passed a pleasant day…which was a great relief from the black dog, which would have worried me at home'.[40] As previously mentioned, Scott was familiar with the tale of the Mauthe Doog and used it in his writing. He also refers to the expression 'to have the black dog on the back' in his novel *The Antiquary*, published in 1816:

> Sir Arthur had now got involved in darkness, of which the sedative effect is well known to nurses and governesses who have to deal with petted children…"I think Sir Arthur has got the black dog on his back again," said Miss Oldbuck.[41]

Robert Louis Stevenson also makes reference to nursemaids in *New Arabian Nights*: 'the black dog was on his back, as people say, in terrifying nursery metaphor'.[42] Nursemaids and nannies of the nineteenth century introduced numerous colourful country expressions to their charges. Charles Dickens, who was growing up when *The Antiquary* was published, had a nursemaid who 'brought with her a fantastic budget of weird stories and country superstitions'[43] that later influenced his work. None of these stories involved a black dog, though one was about a spectre black cat that sucked the breath out of children while they slept. W.C. Hazlitt's 1869 *English Proverbs* tells us that the 'black dog Pompey is said to be on a child's back when he is fractious,'[44] reinforcing the use of the phrase in relation to moody children. ('Pompey' is probably a reference to the Roman general linked above to the omen of howling dogs.) It is likely that superstitions introduced by nannies from the countryside introduced English authors to the 'Black Dog'.

Black dogs are linked with melancholy in several other writings of the time. R.L. Stevenson also used the expression in *The Master of Ballantrae*[45] and one of the terrifying pirates in *Treasure Island* was called Black Dog. Black dog also appears in French literature in *The Droll Stories*, written in the 1830s by Honoré de Balzac: 'Make the best of it, shake the black dog, off your back, adjust your petticoats, laugh…'[46]

Churchill's Black Dog

Winston Churchill was born in 1874. As well as being a politician and orator, he was a prolific writer. Despite this, he did not write or speak publicly of his depression. It is through the diaries of Lord Moran, his doctor and friend, that Churchill's use of the term 'Black Dog' has become known. Lord Moran wrote that in Churchill's 'early days…he was afflicted by bouts of depression that might last for months. He called them the "Black Dog"'.[47]

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[38] RW Chapman (ed), *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, Oxford University Press, 1952, p. 41.

[39] M Waingrow (ed), *The Correspondence and other Papers of James Boswell: Relating to the Making of the* Life of Johnson, Heinemann, London, 1969.

[40] JG Lockhart, *The Life of Sir Walter Scott*, TG and EC Jack, London, 1902, p. 309.

[41] W Scott, *The Antiquary*, ed. D Hewitt, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 1995, pp. 51–2.

[42] RL Stevenson, *New Arabian Nights*, Eveleigh Nash & Grayson, London, n.d., pp. 314–5.

[43] H Stone, *Dickens and the Invisible World: Fairy Tales, Fantasy, and Novel-Making*, MacMillan, London, 1979, p. 33.

[44] B Stevenson (ed), *Stevenson's Book of Proverbs, Maxims and Familiar Phrases*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London, 1949, p. 611.

[45] RL Stevenson, *The Master of Ballantrae: A Winter's Tale*, William Heinemann, London, 1938, p. 138.

[46] H de Balzac, *The Droll Stories of Honoré de Balzac*, Blue Ribbon Books, London, 1874, p. 98.

Like Johnson, where Churchill acquired black dog as an expression is unknown. Churchill was also raised by a nanny, Mrs Everest, who remained his friend until she died when he was twenty.[48] One biographer attributed Churchill's use of 'Black Dog' to Mrs Everest, commenting that in the nineteenth century, 'all sorts of folk expressions embedded themselves in the thought and language of children brought up by nannies'.[49] The biographer's nanny also had a name for a sullen mood: 'the hump'.

The black dog, by the time Churchill spoke of it, had become well established as a symbol of fear, despair and evil. Dogs were a universal symbol of death and were thought to have a unique connection with the afterlife. For this reason, the sight of a dog or the sound of a dog howling were omens of death and illness. Superstition maintained that black dogs, in particular, were ominous creatures. The appearance of modern religions, especially Christianity, added to these beliefs. Black dogs were seen as evil, dirty animals, popular with the Devil and witches. Folktales spoke of ghostly black dogs, the sight of which could cause madness, loss of the power of speech or even death. From these beliefs, story-tellers associated the image of carrying a black dog on the back with melancholy and low moods.

On the other hand, dogs have been friends of people since earliest civilisation, demonstrating admirable qualities of loyalty, sacrifice and protection. While black dogs were related to evil and the Devil, not all black dogs harmed people or damned them to Hell. This paradox was maintained throughout history. Dogs could attack, but they could also protect. They could heal wounds, but they also carried disease.

Why might Johnson, Scott and Churchill used a metaphor to describe their melancholy? There was, and remains, a stigma associated with mental illness. This, combined with an inability to describe their condition, may have led these men to search for a euphemism for depression.[50] Giving a nickname to the affliction may also have been their way of giving it an identity and downplaying the control it had. The nickname they chose was 'Black Dog'. The colour black is commonly related with low moods, and many sufferers speak of only be able to see colour when they recover from depression.[51] The symbolism of the dog is not, however, as immediately clear. Other than people, dogs are our oldest companions. They can be threatening, snapping at our heels and relentlessly following us. But, at other times, they can be locked up or bribed with a treat.[52] The use of 'black dog' as a metaphor reflects this dual symbolism of dogs. Depression is a constant, dark companion that can hopefully be controlled and eventually mastered.

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[47] Lord Moran, *Winston Churchill: The Struggle for Survival 1940-1965*, Constable, London, 1966, p. 181.

[48] E Longford, *Winston Churchill*, Sidgwick & Jackson, London, 1974, p. 194.

[49] ibid.

[50] L Wolpert, *Malignant Sadness: The Anatomy of Depression*, Faber, London, 2001, pp. 2–7.

[51] Parker, 'The Black Dog Institute', p. 235.

[52] S Chance, 'Churchill's Black Dog', *Chance Thoughts*, viewed 13 December 2004, <http://www.mhsource.com/exclusive/chanceth0196.html>, 1996; A Storr, *Churchill's Black Dog, Kafka's Mice, and Other Phenomena of the Human Mind*, Grove Press, New York, 1988, p. 5.

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