

## Black Dog': The history of an expression

It was the victim-sickness. Adrenalin howling in my head,  
the black dog was my brain. Come to drown me in my breath  
was energy's black hole, depere of the predawn show  
when, returned from a pee, you stew and welter in your death  
Les Murray<sup>1</sup>

Like Winston Churchill, Australian poet Les Murray uses the phrase 'black dog' to describe his depression, to personify a wretched mind-space that stands at the border between human and animal, day and night, life and death.

Dog lovers might find it surprising that 'black dog' is used to refer to depression, yet part of its meaning comes from our close companionship with dogs. As the oldest domesticated animal, the dog seems civilised, almost human. In Murray's poem, the poet *is* the black dog. While sufferers often express such familiarity with their illness, at the same time they fear the savagery of depression, and see the 'black dog' as attacking or oppressing them from outside. This is the other side of the dog, an animal with a particularly contradictory symbology. A long-standing association with death is a legacy of its flesh-eating, scavenging habits and oft-noted sense of the uncanny.

This essay will trace the historical development of the phrase 'black dog' from classical to modern times in literature, letters and folklore. According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the phrase means 'melancholy, depression of spirits' and 'ill-humour'.<sup>2</sup> It has travelled a circuitous route to arrive at this meaning, and continues to draw its metaphorical power from old demonic and supernatural associations. Though some of its earlier uses do not directly refer to depression – instead elaborating on the relationship of the black dog with the Devil – it will become clear that even archaic associations continue to resonate for writers. 'Depression' itself is a notoriously vague term, 'a wimp of a word',<sup>3</sup> and the phrase 'black dog' provides a rather richer vein of meaning and allusion. Of course the word 'black' alone has myriad cheerless associations, and contributes to the overall tenor of the expression.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Les Murray, 'Corniche', stanza 3, in *Killing the Black Dog: Essays and Poems*, intro. and ed. by Christine Alexander, Federation Press, Sydney, 1997. p. 34.

<sup>2</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, second ed., Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1989.

<sup>3</sup> William Styron, *Darkness Visible: A Memoir of Madness*, Picador, London, 1990, p. 37.

<sup>4</sup> It would be the subject of another essay to discuss the relationship of the colour 'black' with depression. Suffice to say that the word 'melancholia' means black bile, and is described in the earliest defining texts as cold and dry, black, thick and sluggish. One example: "Tainteth and brandeth with blackenes [the animal spirit], which passing from the braine to the eye, and from the eye to the braine backe againe, is able to move these blacke sights, and to set them vncessantly before the minde". Indeed, if the spirit "be blacke and ouercooled also", it troubles the mind's "most noble powers, and principally the imagination, presenting vnto it continually blacke formes and strange visions", as cited by Lawrence Babb, in his *Elizabethan Malady: A Study of Melancholia in English Literature from 1580 to 1642*, quoting Andre Du Laurens, *A Discourse on the Preservation of the Sight: of Melancholike Diseases; of Rheums, and of Old Age*, trans. Richard Surphlet, London, 1599, Shakespeare Association Fascimiles 1938, p. 29.

In a strange quirk of history, the phrase ‘black dog’ is first used to describe depression in a work by the Roman poet and satirist Horace (65–8 BC), thereafter seeming to be used in a more general way (often associated with the Devil, death or disaster of some kind) until half a millennium later, when its various meanings gather and cohere into the expression we know today.

Horace makes a surprisingly (2nd use already) direct association between the black dog and depression. In his *Satire VII*, the slave Davus says:

Then too you cannot spend an hour alone;  
No company's more hateful than your own  
You dodge and give yourself the slip; you seek  
In bed or in your cups from care to sneak:  
In vain: the black dog follows you, and hangs  
Close on your flying skirts with hungry fangs.<sup>5</sup>

The idea that melancholia is not easily shaken off is given life by the image of the faithful, though menacing, dog. This image accords with the divided attitude towards dogs in ancient Greece and Rome, where they were ‘considered both loyal and treacherous, intelligent and stupid, vigilant and negligent’.<sup>6</sup> As philosopher Lucius Apuleius (c. 124–180 AD) put it: ‘the dog... his face alternately black and golden, denotes the messenger going hence and thence between the Higher and Infernal powers’.<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, the most famous hound in Greco-Roman literature was Cerberus, the guardian of Hades. In Dante’s *Inferno* (c. 1300) he has an insatiable appetite for souls, which he ‘claw’d’ and ‘flays’ and ‘tears’, such intimate violence later attributed to the ‘black dog’ of depression.<sup>8</sup> Hecate was the goddess of witchcraft and the crossroads (domain of the folkloric black dog), and was often regarded as having a dog’s head or invoked as a black dog.<sup>9</sup>

A story by orator Philostratus (c.170–244 AD) animates the widespread belief in the association of dogs with the Devil in classical times. Apollonius of Tyana, who lived in the first century AD, prophesied a terrible pestilence, which came in the form of plague for the people of Ephesus. When they asked for his assistance, he instructed them to stone an apparently defenceless beggar, who when stoned, cast on the crowd ‘glances, fearful,

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<sup>5</sup> Horace (Quintus Horatius Flaccus), ‘Satire VII’, *The Satires, Epistles and Art of Poetry*, trans John Conington, eText no. 5419, released April 2004, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com). Note that all texts on this site are unpaginated, but searchable.

<sup>6</sup> C. Mainoldi, *L’image du loup et du chien dans la Grece ancienne d’Homere à Platon*, Association de Strasbourg, Paris, 1984, cited in Menache, S. (1997) Dogs: God’s worst enemies? *Society and Animals*, vol. 5, pp. 23–44 on <http://www.psyeta.org/sa/sa5.1/menache.html> (accessed 30/01/05)

<sup>7</sup> quoted in J. C. Cooper, *Symbolic and Mythological Animals*, The Aquarian Press, London, 1992, p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Inferno*, Canto 6, on [http://www.gurdjieff-internet.com/ebooks/christianity/dante/inferno\\_canto6.html](http://www.gurdjieff-internet.com/ebooks/christianity/dante/inferno_canto6.html) accessed 30/01/05

<sup>9</sup> See Erwin Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality Among the Greeks*, Books for Libraries Press, Freeport, New York, [1972]. trans 1925, p. 324, Note to Ch. IX.

and indeed diabolical'. Recognising him then as 'the genius of the plague', the crowd killed him, covering him with stones that left a mound where he had stood:

After a time Apollonius commanded them to take away the stones, that they might discover what sort of an enemy they had destroyed. Instead of a man they now saw an enormous black dog, of the size of a lion, and whose mouth and jaws were covered with a thick envenomed froth.<sup>10</sup>

This horror carries though into the current use of the phrase 'black dog' to mean depression or melancholia, an illness which itself has been explained as the result of the 'nefarious doings of any number of demons, devils, the Devil, Satan, witches ... and so forth'.<sup>11</sup> The 'Devil' might now appear too literal or loaded a figure, but there is no doubt that to many sufferers of depression, their illness is the devil itself. As Sir Walter Scott writes in 1890:

I did not get to composition till nine; work on with little interruption...until seven and then walked, for fear of the black dog or devil that worries me when I work too hard.<sup>12</sup>

From Classical times on, dogs had another powerful, if debatable, association with melancholy, which no doubt feeds into the various streams of meaning that join together to lend emotional force to the 'black dog' image. This is the 'spectacular form of melancholy which provides the source for some of the grimmest reading in classical, medieval and even Renaissance medical writing. Some doctors call this disease *lycanthropia*, others use the term *melancholia canina*'.<sup>13</sup> A fourth-century text by Aëtius describes its victims going out at night during the month of February,

everywhere imitating wolves and dogs and until daylight they spend much of their time opening tombs... they are pale, their vision is weak, they have dry eyes, and they don't shed tears. You will see also that they have hollow eyes and a dry tongue and that they do not produce saliva at all.... But you should know that this is a species of melancholy.<sup>14</sup>

Much later, the Manic Street Preachers' song *Black Dog on my Shoulder* (1993) lists similar symptoms for the experience of depression, loosening any distinction between madness and melancholia (*lycanthropia* having often been described as the 'wolf madness'<sup>15</sup>).

My mouth is so dry my eyes are shut tight

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<sup>10</sup> William Godwin, *Lives of the Necromancers*, 1834, eText no. 7082, released March 2003, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

<sup>11</sup> Stanley W. Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression from Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*, Yale University Press, New Haven; London, 1986, p. 326.

<sup>12</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 1, David Douglas, Edinburgh, 1890, p. 400.

<sup>13</sup> Carol Falvo Heffernan, 'That Dog Again: Melancholia Canina and Chaucer's Book of the Duchess', *Modern Philology*, Vol 84, no. 2, November 1986, p. 187.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. Heffernan's translation of Aëtius, *Aetii Medici Graeci Contractae ex veteribus medicinae tetrabilso*, in *Medicae Artis Principes* (Geneva, 1567), 2, tetr. 2, sermo 2, cap.11.

<sup>15</sup> See a chapter regarding the changing historical relationship between melancholia and *lycanthropia* in Jackson, *Melancholia and Depression from Hippocratic Times to Modern Times*.

there's a black dog a coming tonight

my dilemma but not my choice  
Winston Churchill can you hear my voice<sup>16</sup>

After Greco-Roman times, use of the 'black dog' is difficult to trace, except to note that it persisted into the Middle Ages in folklore and superstition, and was the inspiration for later fictional works. Black dogs were sometimes accused of being 'familiars', hellish imps that assumed the form of animals to assist witches in their deeds – an obsession during the witch trials of the Middle Ages. The very faithfulness and protectiveness of the dog was turned into a negative quality – part of the image that haunts the present-day use of the phrase. Thus, although an attendant of the renowned occultist and philosopher Cornelius Agrippa (1486–1552) testified to the perfect innocence of Agrippa's pet dog, this dog was blamed for the supposed sins of his owner, whose writings ran counter to received theological opinion. For example, historian Paulus Jovius (1483–1552) wrote that the Devil, in the shape of a large black dog, accompanied Agrippa wherever he went. This convenient projection of evil was ultimately forced on Agrippa himself, who on his death-bed said to his dog: 'Begone, wretched animal, which hast been the cause of my entire destruction'.<sup>17</sup>

Agrippa's shadowy countryman and fellow alchemist Johann Georg Faust (c. 1480–1540) – also accused of practising black magic and being accompanied by a black dog – was the historical source for Marlowe's *Dr Faustus* and later Goethe's *Faust*. In Goethe's story, Mephistopheles (the Devil) is sworn to challenge God in an attempt to win Faust's soul. He first appears in the form of a black poodle that circles around Faust and his friend Wagner as they take an Easter walk, ultimately joining and following them to Faust's study, wherein he swells up and changes shape to reveal himself as Mephistopheles.

Interestingly Wagner sees only a black dog, whereas Faust is full of foreboding:

Dost mark how round us, with wide spiral curves,  
He wheels, each circle closer than before?  
And, if I err not, he appears to me  
A line of fire upon his tract to leave.  
[...]  
Methinks a magic coil our feet around,  
He for a future snare doth lightly spread<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Manic Street Preachers, 'Black Dog on my Shoulder', from *This is My Truth Tell Me Yours*, 1993, lyrics by Nick Jones, publisher Sony/ATV Music Publishing Ltd, on [http://www.staybeautiful.net/index.php?mode=lyrics&view=get&type=track&lyrics\\_id=00098](http://www.staybeautiful.net/index.php?mode=lyrics&view=get&type=track&lyrics_id=00098) (accessed 30/01/05)

<sup>17</sup> Godwin, *Lives of the Necromancers*

<sup>18</sup> Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust, Part 1*, 1808, translated by Theil, eText no. 3023, released January 2002, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

That only Faust can see the evil dog, suggests that the dog (or Mephistopheles) is part of Faust himself, taking external shape in the interests of the story, but actually an internal character that, unreconciled, contributes to his melancholy: 'in me there are two souls, alas, and their / Division tears my life in two'.<sup>19</sup>

Faust's perception of the encircling dog, and its subsequent transformation in his study into a 'spectre.../ Huge as a hippopotamus, /With fiery eye, terrific tooth!' owes a lot to widespread folklore about black dogs. Commonly reported as ghostly apparitions whose appearance generally portends death or disaster, such dogs are described in great detail in British lore and are known by many names: Gytrash in Yorkshire, Padfoot in Leeds, Barguest in Lancashire and Yorkshire, Yeth or Whist hounds in Devon, Shuck in Norfolk or Suffolk.<sup>20</sup> An early mention of such 'A Straunge and Terrible Wunder' is made by clergyman Abraham Fleming (1552–1607), who describes the visit of a black dog to the church in Bungay, Suffolk, on 4 August 1577:

there appeared in a most horrible similitude and likenesse to the congregation then and there present a dog as they might discerne it, of a black colour; at the site whereof, together with the fearful flashes of fire which were then seene, moved such admiration in the minds of the assemblie, that they thought doomesday was already come. This black dog, or the divil in such a likenesse... passed betweene two persons, as they were kneeling upon their knees, and occupied in prayer as it seemed, wrung the necks of them bothe at one instant clene backward, in so much that even at a moment where they kneeled, they strangely died...[etc.]<sup>21</sup>

According to Theo Brown, who has made several studies of the folkloric Black Dog, it takes several major forms. The first, like the dog described above, is a monster from another world that takes 'no one definite form – though it favours the black dog – and is malevolent in character'.<sup>22</sup> Its indefinite shape accords with the shadowy nature of the melancholic 'black dog'. The second is an individual dog, normal-sized or gigantic, often associated with a person or family. Such a personal link between the dog and an individual becomes increasingly important to writers using the phrase to identify their depression, their own 'black dog'.

Sir Walter Scott referred to these folkloric superstitions in his poem 'The Lay of the Last Minstrel':

His blood did freeze, his brain did burn,  
'Twas fear'd his mind would ne'er return;

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> See numerous texts on the black dog in folklore, including Theo Brown, 'The Black Dog in English Literature', in Joshua Porter and William Russell (eds), *Animals in Folklore*, Cambridge, Eng, 1978, Theo Brown, 'The Black Dog', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 69, 1958, pp 175–192 and Bob Trubshaw, 'Black Dogs: Guardians of the Corpse Way', on <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/bdogs.htm> (accessed 19/01/05)

<sup>21</sup> Abraham Fleming (1552–1607), *A Straunge and Terrible Wunder wrought very late in the Parish Church of Bungay*, pamphlet, n.d, quoted on <http://nli.northampton.ac.uk/ass/psych-staff/sjs/Bungay.htm> (accessed 28/01/05)

<sup>22</sup> Theo Brown, 'The Black Dog', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 69, 1958, pp. 176, 178.

For he was speechless, ghastly, wan,  
Like him of whom the story ran  
Who spoke the spectre-hound in Man.<sup>23</sup>

And the incredulous narrator in Charles Dickens' *The Uncommercial Traveller* (1860), describes hearing ghost stories from a woman who maintained they had occurred to her own relatives:

There was a narrative concerning an unearthly animal foreboding death, which appeared in the open street to a parlour-maid who 'went to fetch the beer' for supper: first (as I now recall it) assuming the likeness of a black dog, and gradually rising on its hind-legs and swelling into the semblance of some quadruped greatly surpassing a hippopotamus...<sup>24</sup>

Innumerable anecdotes of such encounters possibly contributed to a shift in the association between black dogs and the Devil. Though this connection had considerable longevity, over time it is transformed so that the Devil becomes an internal being, a creature of the mind. In 1621, the play *The Witch of Edmonton* has the murderer, Frank Thorney, committing his crime after he has been touched by the Devil in the shape of a black dog.<sup>25</sup> In that same year, Robert Burton, in his prodigious *Anatomy of Melancholy*, quotes three Renaissance scholars who also include mention of the black dog. However, while superstition remains crucial, here it turned into a quality of the melancholic mind. Under the heading 'A Digression of the nature of Spirits, bad Angels, or Devils, and how they cause Melancholy' Burton quotes the doctor Girolamo Cardano (1501–1576):

They will make strange noises in the night, howl sometimes pitifully, and then laugh again, cause great flame and sudden lights, fling stones, rattle chains, shave men, open doors and shut them, fling down platters, stools, chests, sometimes appear in the likeness of hares, crows, black dogs, &c.<sup>26</sup>

And physician Montanus (Giambattista da Monte, 1488–1551) is quoted describing signs of melancholia:

one ... durst not walk alone from home, for fear he should swoon or die. A second fears every man he meets will rob him, quarrel with him, or kill him. A third dares not venture to walk alone, for fear he should meet the devil, a thief, be sick; fears all old women as witches, and every black dog or cat he sees he suspecteth to be a devil...<sup>27</sup>

Most evocative is a quote from Johannes Sleidan (1506–1555) in support of Burton's characterisation of 'Religious Melancholy in defect: Symptoms of Despair, Fear, Sorrow,

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<sup>23</sup> Sir Walter Scott, *The Lay of the Last Minstrel*, Canto 6, part 26, reproduced on 'Poets Corner - Bookshelf', <http://www.theotherpages.org/poems/canto06.html> (accessed 28/01/05)

<sup>24</sup> Dickens, Charles, *The Uncommercial Traveller*, 1860, eText no. 914, released May 1997, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

<sup>25</sup> cited in Nathan Johnstone, 'The Protestant Devil: The Experience of Temptation in Early Modern England', *The Journal of British Studies*, vol. 43, no. 2, April 2004.

<sup>26</sup> Burton, Robert, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, edited by Floyd Dell and Paul Jordan-Smith, an all-English text of the 6th revision, Tudor Publishing, New York, 1927, p. 169.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 328.

Suspicion, Anxiety, Horror of Conscience, Fearful Dreams and Visions’, introduced by a quote from another source in typical Burton style:

Never pleaded any man so well for himself, as this man did against himself, and so he desperately died ... Cardinal Crescence 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.<sup>28</sup>

Melancholy, or depression, was the overt subject for German artist Albrecht Dürer’s famous engraving *Melencolia* (1514), which depicts a dog beside the melancholic angel. In an extensive analysis of this work in relation to melancholy, art historians note that the motif of the dog is not only ‘mentioned in several astrological sources as the typical beast of Saturn but, in the Horapollo [an ‘explanation’ of nearly 200 Egyptian hieroglyphs, a major influence on Renaissance symbolism] it is associated with the disposition of melancholics in general and of scholars and prophets in particular’.<sup>29</sup>

Dürer had illustrated the Horapollo, and the historians note in their account that on a surviving page it was written

that the hieroglyph of a dog signifies among other things the spleen, prophets and ‘sacras literas [holy writ]’ – all notions which, since the time of Aristotle, had been closely linked with the melancholic –, and that the dog, more gifted and sensitive than other beasts, has a very serious nature and can fall victim to madness, and like deep thinkers is inclined to be always on the hunt, smelling things out, and sticking to them.

They also cite Pierio Valeriano, who described the ‘best’ dog as ‘*qui faciem magis, ut vulgo aiunt, melancholicam prae se ferat* [the one who exhibits the most melancholic face, as they say].<sup>30</sup>

The direct use of the phrase ‘black dog’ to refer to depression returns in the eighteenth century, in the extensive correspondence between Dr Samuel Johnson (who reputedly kept a copy of the *Anatomy of Melancholy* at his bedside), his biographer James Boswell, and friend Hester Lynch Thrale. Their correspondence seeds the modern use of the term by a succession of notable English literary figures, including Churchill.

Echoing Horace, Johnson’s ‘black dog’ was inimical to solitude. As he wrote to Mrs Thrale on 28 June 1783:

The black dog I hope always to resist, and in time to drive, though I am deprived of almost all those that used to help me. 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 last, and some hours of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 948. The second sentence of the quote is from Sleidan.

<sup>29</sup> Raymond Klibansky, Erwin Panofsky and Fritz Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy: Studies in the History of Natural Philosophy, Religion and Art*, London, Nelson, 1964, p. 322.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p. 323. Added translation by Heffernan, ‘That Dog Again’, p.190.

restlessness and confusion bring me again to a day of solitude. What shall exclude the black dog from a habitation like this?<sup>31</sup>

Boswell also emphasised this in a letter to Johnson on 27 October 1779:

The ‘black dog’ that worries me at home I cannot but dread; yet as I have been for some time past in a military train, I trust I shall ‘repulse’ him. To hear from you will animate me like the sound of a trumpet, I therefore hope, that soon after my return to the northern field, I shall receive a few lines from you.<sup>32</sup>

However, in tune with present-day ideas about the value of exercise in alleviating depression, Mrs Thrale recognised that the ‘black dog’ can be deterred by exercise:

I have lost what made my happiness in all seasons of the year; but the black dog shall not make prey of both my master and myself. My master swims now, and forgets the black dog.<sup>33</sup>

At this historical juncture, the term ‘black dog’ seems to have generated a few new sayings. As Mrs Thrale recorded in her diary of 1790, she commonly wrote ‘the black dog is on his back’ (incidentally disproving the OED’s assertion that the earliest use of this phrase was 1826<sup>34</sup>):

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.<sup>35</sup>

The saying appears in various texts through to the twentieth century, one of several images that attach the black dog to the body of the sufferer. Sometimes it appears to denote an angry temperament, to identify the link between anger and depression. Walter Scott uses the saying in *The Antiquary*:

“I think Sir Arthur has got the black dog on his back again”, said Miss Oldbuck.  
[...]  
“ Well hast thou spoken – No man should presume to say, This shall be a day of happiness’ .<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Samuel Johnson, Letter to Mrs Thrale, 28 June 1783, in R. W. Chapman (coll., ed.) *The Letters of Samuel Johnson*, Vol. 3, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1952, p. 41.

<sup>32</sup> James Boswell, Letter to Samuel Johnson, 27 October 1779, in *Life of Johnson: Volume 3 (1776–1780)*, edited by George Berbeck Hill, Pembroke College, Oxford, 1791, eText no. 9180, released January 2005, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> As pointed out by Arthur Sherbo in his ‘Earlier Than the OED: The Black Dog and Crap’, *Notes and Queries*, Vol 45, June 1998, p. 243.

<sup>35</sup> Hester Lynch Thrale, later Mrs Piozzi, cited in Sherbo, ‘Earlier than the OED’.

<sup>36</sup> Walter Scott, *The Antiquary*, 1816, eText no.7005, released August 2004, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

Charlotte Mary Yonge (1823–1901) writes in her 1853 novel *The Heir of Redclyffe*:

I do believe the black dog is off his back for good and all.’ ‘I never saw any one more changed’, said Mary. ‘Regularly tamed,’ ...<sup>37</sup>

In his *New Arabian Nights* of 1885, Robert Louis Stevenson, a Churchill favourite, has three people observe of a fellow character:

He did not seem to be enjoying his luck. His mouth was a little to a side; one nostril nearly shut, and the other much inflated. The black dog was on his back, as people say, in terrifying nursery metaphor; and he breathed hard under the gruesome burden.<sup>38</sup>

In later years, several authors modify this saying to express the stoic (or comedic) view that depression, or the ‘black dog’ can simply be brushed aside. Hence James Cabell’s ‘so come now, make yourself fine, and shake the black dog from your back’, in his *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice*, and Balzac’s ‘Make the best of it, shake the black dog, off your back, adjust your petticoats, laugh, ... and let us recommence’, from his *Droll Stories*.<sup>39</sup>

A sufferer of recurrent depression, Walter Scott offers a different slant on this ‘shaking off’, describing it as a simulation, an affectation of good spirits for the benefit of others, which nonetheless results ultimately in a better mood:

Something of the black dog still hanging about me; but I will shake him off. I generally affect good spirits in company of my family, whether I am enjoying them or not. It is too severe to sadden the harmless mirth of others by suffering your own causeless melancholy to be seen; and this species of exertion is, like virtue, its own reward; for the good spirits, which are at first simulated, become at length real.<sup>40</sup>

It is probable that Churchill picked up the expression from reading Scott, one of his favourite authors, who used the phrase numerous times in his *Journal*. Scott, in turn, had read Boswell, and may have borrowed the phrase from him. Another of Scott’s journal entries is particularly eloquent:

I was sorely worried by the black dog this morning, that vile palpitation of the heart – the *tremor cordis* – that hysterical passion which forces unbidden sighs and tears, and falls

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<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Mary Yonge, *The Heir of Redclyffe*, 1853, eText no. 3744, released February 2001, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

<sup>38</sup> Robert Louis Stevenson, ‘A Lodging for the Night: A Story of Frances Villon’, in *New Arabian Nights*, 1885, eText 839, released March 1997, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com). Given the common use in literature of the expression ‘the black dog was on his back’ from the eighteenth century onwards, it is surprising that the 1870 edition of *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* cites the expression ‘a black dog has walked over him/me’ to describe a state of mental depression.

<sup>39</sup> James Branch Cabell, *Jurgen: A Comedy of Justice*, 1922, eText no. 8771, released January 2005, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com). Honoré de Balzac, *Droll Stories: Complete Collected from the Abbays of Touraine*, 1932, eText no. 13260, released August 2004, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

<sup>40</sup> Scott, Sir Walter, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, edited by W. E. K. Anderson, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1972, p. 354.

upon a contented life like a drop of ink on white paper, which is not the less a stain because it conveys no meaning.<sup>41</sup>

Perhaps one of the reasons for using the phrase 'black dog' is to provide a counter to this hollow and frightening lack of meaning. Though it has much savage potential, 'black dog' nonetheless comes across as a phrase of familiarity, even warmth. The band Manic Street Preachers sing in a tribute to Churchill, 'there's a black dog on my shoulder again/licking my neck and saying she's me friend'.<sup>42</sup> This 'friend' is able to function as a second self through which one can more easily express the anger and loneliness of depression. As Chris Rea sings in 'Black Dog':

Black dog barking in the cold grey light  
He pulls the chain and he pulls it tight  
This ain't no lonesome wail that boy ain't faking  
He bites the steel and he claws the ground  
He pulls again and he spins around  
His eyes are raging and his burning lungs are steaming

He wanna walk in the sun  
Feel love like anyone  
No one knows that black dog better than I  
I said no one knows that black dog better than I<sup>43</sup>

Here, as in many recent texts, the phrase is charged with some of its earlier meanings, but the 'black dog' has been turned into a character of its own, a fleshed-out version of the literary catch-phrase.

The wondrous lore of the spectral dog has continued to inspire writers. In *The Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902) Sir Arthur Conan Doyle writes

A hound it was, an enormous coal-black hound, but not such a hound as mortal eyes have ever seen. Fire burst from its open mouth, its eyes glowed with a smouldering glare, its muzzle and hackles and dewlap were outlined in flickering flame. Never in the delirious dream of a disordered brain could anything more savage, more appalling, more hellish be conceived than that dark form and savage face which broke upon us out of the wall of the fog.<sup>44</sup>

In a different context, this last sentence could have been written by a sufferer of depression. Such 'delirious' visions must have had their influence on the choice of Churchill's 'image of despair', described by Kathy Cronkite in her book *On the Edge of Darkness* (1994):

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<sup>41</sup> Scott, Sir Walter, journal entry 18 March 1828, *The Journal of Sir Walter Scott*, vol. 2, David Douglas, Edinburgh, 1890. p. 144.

<sup>42</sup> Manic Street Preachers, op.cit.

<sup>43</sup> Rea, Chris, 'Black Dog' from *God's Great Banana Skin*, 1992, on <http://lyrics.net.ua/song/81868> (accessed 30/01/05)

<sup>44</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, 1902, eText no 2852. released October 2001, Project Gutenberg, [www.gutenberg.com](http://www.gutenberg.com)

Would that it were so easy, to sink down into darkness, as if sleeping. But this dog, this dog! It crouches in the corner of the room, waits for me to make a move. Or lies at the foot of the bed, like a shadow, until I try to get up. Growls, and will not let me up. I go nowhere alone; he is at my side. He stands between me and any other, while I'm looking good, staying calm, smiling to disarm his ferocity...<sup>45</sup>

The connection between the folkloric ghost-dog and the actual suffering of an individual – one of many that cement the link between several meanings attached to the phrase – is made by Ian McEwan in his novel *Black Dogs* (1992):

Their blackness, that they should both be black, that they belonged together and were without an owner made her think of apparitions. June did not believe in such things. She was drawn to the idea now because the creatures were familiar. They were emblems of the menace she had felt, they were the embodiment of the nameless, unreasonable, unmentionable disquiet she had experienced that morning.<sup>46</sup>

While Churchill's use of the term 'black dog' may be the best-known today, and he is quoted as saying he heard the black dog 'bark', and coped by keeping the animal 'penned up',<sup>47</sup> he rarely mentions it in his writing. An exception is a letter to his wife in 1911, in which he writes that his cousin's wife had

interested me a great deal by her talk about her doctor in Germany, who completely cured her depression. I think this man might be useful to me – if my black dog returns. He seems quite away from me now – it is such a relief. All the colours come back into the picture. Brightest of all your dear face – my darling.<sup>48</sup>

His doctor Lord Moran recorded Churchill's reluctance to discuss the subject, an attitude common then and still:

I said: "Your trouble – I mean the Black Dog business – you got from your forebears. You have fought against it all your life. That is why you dislike visiting hospitals. You always avoid anything that is depressing.

Winston stared at me as if I knew too much.<sup>49</sup>

Yet his use of the term stuck, and has inspired countless contemporary uses. At least two bands pay direct tribute, Australian band Things of Stones & Wood, in their song 'Churchill's Black Dog' (1995), and the aforementioned 'Black Dog on My Shoulder' by

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<sup>45</sup> Kathy Cronkite, *On the Edge of Darkness: Conversations about Conquering Depression*, New York, Doubleday, c1994, cited on <http://www.abilenementalhealth.org/MHM-08-18-04.htm> (accessed 2/01/05)

<sup>46</sup> Ian McEwan, *Black Dogs*, Jonathan Cape, London, 1992, (first ed. 1986). pp. 144–45.

<sup>47</sup> unsourced quotes in Patrick Johnson, 'Dealing with Depression: Recognition and Acceptance', Educational Services Development Specialist, United Behavioral Health, Working Solutions Division, on <http://www.liveandworkwell.com/prevention/depression/article.asp?ID=7259&bucketed=1> (accessed 2/01/05)

<sup>48</sup> Martin Gilbert, *Churchill: A Life*, Heinemann, London, 1991, p. 230.

<sup>49</sup> Lord Moran, *Churchill: The Struggle for Survival 1940–1965*, Constable, London, 1966, p. 745.

the Manic Street Preachers. Numerous other musicians have written about the 'black dog', among them British singer and guitarist Nick Drake, who was victim to a disabling depression that resulted in suicide. And it is a natural subject for the blues: Blind Arthur Blake sings a mournful plaint against the creature in his 'Black Dog Blues' from the late 1920s:

Let me tell you, mama, what that black dog done done to me  
Let me tell you, mama, what that black dog done done to me  
He cheated me from my regular, now he's after my used-to-be

Black dog, black dog, you caused me to weep and moan  
Black dog, black dog, you caused me to weep and moan  
You cause me to leave my, sweet old happy home

[...]

So long black dog, I'm quittin' your hard luck line  
So long black dog, I'm quittin' your hard luck line  
'Cause you got me so blue, keep 'bout to love her sometime<sup>50</sup>

'Black dog' is now used widely to mean depression. It appears in books by doctors, such as *Churchill's Black Dog and Other Phenomena of the Human Mind* by Anthony Storr, and by people writing of their own experience, such as *Killing the Black Dog* by Les Murray, *In the Jaws of the Black Dogs* by John Bentley Mays, and *Taming the Black Dog: How to Beat Depression* by Patrick Ellverton. It has been the subject of many poems and is the central motif in McEwan's novel.

As this brief history has traced, the image of the black dog has shown remarkable elasticity and persistence, from Greco-Roman times to the present. The contradictory nature of canine symbolism is particularly suited to a disorder that is at the same time familiar and disabling. The persistence of the image over centuries suggests more than a tradition. Theo Brown suggests that it is also 'an archetype ... not essentially a dog, but a shapeless monster struggling to present itself in a variety of images, of which the dog is the favourite'.<sup>51</sup> Its potency is similar to that of the indeterminate shapes in Edvard Munch's paintings, external to the figures but clearly representing their innermost feelings, like his overwhelming black shadows drawn behind grieving relatives at a death-bed.

The metaphor holds some hope for mastery over the illness, and for acceptance. According to folklorist Ethel Rudkin, the Black Dog of her native Lincolnshire is 'never feared. The spectator may be startled or annoyed, at first, by finding the huge creature trotting alongside, but fear of the dog never enters into it, *once he is recognised for what*

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<sup>50</sup> Blake, Blind Arthur, 'Black Dog Blues', recording from c.1926–1932, from *Ragtime Guitar's Foremost Fingerpicker* (Yazoo 1068), on [http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/artistswithsongs/blind\\_arthur\\_blake\\_1.htm](http://blueslyrics.tripod.com/artistswithsongs/blind_arthur_blake_1.htm) (accessed 30/01/05)

<sup>51</sup> Theo, Brown, 'The Black Dog', p. 189.

*he is*'.<sup>52</sup> And so also for the 'black dog' of depression, which could surely be tamed through better understanding. This is clearly the hope of medical organisations such as the aptly named Black Dog Institute, 'dedicated to advancing the understanding, diagnosis and management of the depressive disorders'.<sup>53</sup>

**Linda Michael**  
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<sup>52</sup> My italics. E. H. Rudkin, 'The Black Dog', *Folk-Lore*, vol. 49, 1938, p. 130.

<sup>53</sup> home page on <http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/>