

NEWS RELEASE

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BLACK DOG INSTITUTE



HISTORY OF THE 'BLACK DOG'

A medical historian, a teacher in Australian history from Western Australia and a person who boasted of owning a black dog that had bitten visiting former US President Bill Clinton during one of his morning walks in Sydney have won the major prizes in the Black Dog Institute Essay Writing Competition.

Her Excellency, Professor Marie Bashir AC, Governor of New South Wales, tonight announced the prizewinners at a reception at the Black Dog Institute in Sydney.

The essay competition was held to help uncover the history of the term 'black dog' as a description for depression. (The Institute's name derives from Sir Winston Churchill's reference to his melancholic depression, which he called his 'black dog')

The \$5,000 first prize in the Essay Writing Competition was awarded to Paul Foley, a medical historian from Croydon in NSW.

The \$3,000 second prize was awarded to David Musgrave from Glebe (whose dog had bitten former US President Bill Clinton) and the \$1500 third prize went to Megan McKinlay from Fremantle who teaches Australian literature and creative writing part-time at the University of Western Australia.

Ten Highly Commended Certificates for outstanding essays were also presented to M.G. Martine Raphael (Broadbeach Waters, Qld) Seth Richardson (Surry Hills, NSW), Linda Michael (Elwood, Vic), Chris Huet (Merewether, NSW) Sue Hanley (Darlinghurst, NSW), Fred Curtis (Aspendale, Vic), Joan Webster (Hamilton, NSW), Gillian Rose-Schwab, (Nightcliff, NT) Harriet Sawyer (Medina, WA) and Bernadette Hince (Ainslie, ACT).

A three-person independent judging panel with expertise in assessing historical and literary writing chose the prizewinners from 266 entries. According to the judges, they were extraordinarily impressed by the high quality and intrinsic appeal of so many of the entries, including a number that reflected personal experiences of depression.

(The winning essays appear on the Black Dog Institute Website www.blackdoginstitute.org.au)

The winner, 43-year-old Paul Foley, was born in Katoomba and lived most of his childhood in Penrith. He is now working at the Prince of Wales Medical Research Institute as a medical historian.

He graduated from Macquarie University with a Bachelor of Science degree with First Class Honors and more recently (1996 to 1999) worked as a Research Officer in the Department of Clinical Neurochemistry at the Clinic and Polyclinic for Psychiatry and Psychotherapy, University of Wurzburg, Germany and concurrently studied history at the same university.

In his research to uncover the history of the term 'black dog' as a description for depression, Paul forms the opinion that it was ultimately unlikely that 'black dog' was a specific term for depression before being used by Churchill.

"It was rather a vague reference to anything which rendered someone less than congenial, whether ill temper, fear, guilt or, indeed, melancholy," Paul writes in his essay.

"Adoption of black dog by Churchill (and by those who write about him) thus represented a turning point for the beast.

"Once the adoption became public, whatever it was exactly that Churchill meant, 'black dog' could now assume its secure place in the English language as a metaphor for depression."

David Musgrave, from Glebe, who was awarded second prize, traced the origins of the term 'black dog' and also added a personal story about his black dog Oscar and the former US President Bill Clinton.

It was Oscar that had bitten the world's then most powerful man at Rushcutters Bay in Sydney early one morning.

David takes up the story.

"I was interested to learn, after reading about Bill Clinton's quadruple bypass, that depression is one common side-effect of open heart surgery.

"Although he is someone who seems never to have been subject to bouts of depression before, it would be interesting to know if, sitting up in his hospital bed, chatting with Hillary, about how he was going to give up fried chicken and hamburgers for lentil-burgers and skinless, boiled chicken (and feeling, as he speaks, a small, unfamiliar pit of depression forming in his stomach), whether he caught a fleeting glimpse out of the corner of his eye of something that reminded him of that piebald, rascally pup that nipped him on the ankle in Australia two years before."

Third-place, Megan McKinlay, from Western Australia, states in her essay that 'black dog' was not Churchill's phrase – at least originally.

"That he referred to his own depression in these terms is indisputable," she said.

"Also indisputable is the fact that Hester Thrale, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell all used the phrase to refer to a similar state in their prolific eighteenth century correspondence.

"We might add the fact that the menacing connotations of the 'black dog' had been established well before this point, via the folklore of Britain and Europe, the influence of Greek mythologies, and a growing body of literature in which the term featured as harbingers of death or emissaries of the devil."

Megan concludes that the 'black dog' we know today is Churchill's and it is against Churchill's own personal history that it takes on its contemporary dimensions.

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