

The Bones

The aim of this essay is to address through history, the term 'Black Dog' used to describe the mental illness known in medical jargon as Depression.

Numerous definitions on the Internet describe 'Black Dog' as meaning depressed, having the blues, being melancholic or with ill humour.¹

'Depression' can be defined as a state of morbidly excessive melancholy, mood of hopelessness and feelings of inadequacy, often with physical symptoms.²

Therefore, it can be said Black Dog and Depression are expressions for similar dispositions with the former applying to perhaps the milder end of the continuum.

According to the essay writing competition guidelines, the Black Dog Institute may use this piece of writing "for any purpose whatsoever including for promotion and research".³ I ascertain, thus, the judges are seeking not only historical but also clinical information. Similarly, the work is to be based on "knowledge"⁴, which according to the Oxford Dictionary includes "familiarity gained by experience",⁵ i.e. first-hand knowledge or personal experience. Therefore I will submit a potted history of my own Depression to be labelled, for the first time ever, the Black Dog. While not ignorant of this epithet in connection with the crippling disease of Depression, previously I have never considered the benefits of giving my all too regular and unwanted visitor a pet name.

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The launch of this writing competition is promoting the Black Dog Institute, publicizing its role and existence. Evidence of this trails across the World Wide Web with writers' sites announcing the most generous pickings. All manner of wannabe winners are plying cyber space with queries, chasing the tale of the elusive *Schwarz Hund*. The avalanche of interest in researching this topic may even lift the roof off the kennel of this stinking illness formally known as Depression. Such is my hope as one who fell foul of the Black Dog more than 20 years ago.

Presumably the illustrious directors, who head the research body, are well informed and know why Black Dog was chosen as the name for their institute. Perhaps they sat around a table and brainstormed it themselves. Are they seeking to shed new light on the history of the Black Dog, have new material dug up? In our technological age of infinite information at the push of a button, I doubt this. Is the Black Dog Institute seeking confirmation on its appropriate choice of moniker? Possibly, but surely there is more to this challenging and rewarding essay competition than merely to promote and publicize a name.

Therefore, would I be barking mad to assert that Black Dog is a mongrel tag for Depression? Before this essay, Depression seemed to be *the* most apt name for this crippling disease to me. For when depressed I slide into a great

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big hole with a massive grey, foggy, weight pressing down on me. Many people who have suffered from Depression described it as the Black Dog, according to Mr Ian Dose, Black Dog Institute spokesman.⁶ My experience, which is considerable, differs markedly. However, now I am chafing at the collar to explore this Black Dog epithet. I will fall in line behind Mr Dose and let sleeping dogs lie. The organizers, in their infinite wisdom, may regard the competition as bait to entice those who have a large Black Dog still slumped over their shoulders to take a bite. In so doing, these Depression sufferers will indulge in a self-help exercise however unwittingly. Dog gone! I am one of those.

To proceed! Every dog has its day in this dog eat dog world and one has to be in it to win. So I will go fetch. This Black Dog and owner, who's leading depends on the state of the leash, will take the reader back to the beginnings of humankind to when the bond with canines, tamed and wild, was first established. It is my understanding that the Black Dog has been with us from the start. After a romp around the early civilizations from India to Egypt we drop in on the old and new worlds of the superstitious Celts with their pack of horrid, hairy hounds. Just before the birth of Christ and the start of a long association of the Black Dog with the devil, we find Horace, a Roman poet, who also found evil associated with the cur.⁷ Clear references to the Black Dog of Depression, as opposed to nasty, black dogs, which threaten, harm or

kill people, (a somewhat depressing notion), increase steadily from the Middle Ages. Paw prints of the *chien noir* dirty the pages of history via nursery rhyme, myths and fables.

Black Dogs are spotted in the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries ever more frequently, in literature, writers' novels and personal correspondence, politicians' writings and biographical material pertaining to them.⁸ Whether this indicates a rise in the incidence of Depression or simply reflects our easy accessibility to information, I'm not sure. In recent times the Black Dog is ripping into popular culture, music, art and comedy not to overlook innumerable emails on the Internet from those who've had experiences with the darkest canine.⁹ By the turn of this century he has achieved such notoriety the Black Dog has a whole book devoted purely to him (and his owners).¹⁰

Finally, after visiting numerous Black Dogs of note through history, I suggest that the Black Dog is here to stay. I recommend he be welcomed in order to bring him to heel, as acceptance is the cornerstone to recovery. In this new millennium, I hope we may have evolved beyond putting a species down. While eradicating illnesses is fine in principle, numbing emotional challenges is not.

The Meat

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According to Leanne Dempsey, “dogs were the first species to be domesticated by humans,”¹¹ traceable to the Paeolithic age.¹² “Dogs; we’re not even sure if we tamed them or they tamed us.”¹³ “Somehow, in spite of the great love humans have for dogs – or perhaps because of it – the sight of an angry or aggressive dog raises a primeval fear. The guardian has become the enemy, the protector the aggressor.”¹⁴ Dempsey concludes, “as long as there is fear of the unknown the Black Dog stalks.”¹⁵ Depression is a condition in which feelings of fear, shame, regret, inadequacy, failure, hopelessness, futility, pointlessness, unworthiness and self-loathing become paramount. Death is often seen as highly attractive way out of the perceived predicament and very real pain. Many times my Black Dog has dragged me along this path and back. No wonder, those who see the Black Dog and believe that the very sight of such a huge, hairy, black wolf-like creature certifies death, gloom or at least, extreme bad luck, become despondent and depressed.¹⁶ Bev Aisbett in her book, “Taming the Black Dog”, claims that people describe their Depression in many ways but for her the Black Dog is like a ‘heavy weight or burden’ and that all depressed people have a sense of HOPELESSNESS, a PESSIMISTIC VIEW of the FUTURE (her caps) and a deep and lonely feeling of isolation.¹⁷ I agree with her assertion though my main gripes these days with the black pooch are my complete lack of energy or motivation to get up to do anything. I simply cannot will myself against his invasion. That does not sit with me though I am willing to try to bring the Black Dog to heel.

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The saying, “he has the Black Dog on his back” when a child is sulking originates from a nursery rhyme first sung in the 1700s.¹⁸ Superstitious people often suppose that bad luck accompanies a Black Dog¹⁹, or in my upbringing, black cats. Another variation, ‘the Black Dog has walked over him’, is sometimes used to describe a sullen or morose person.²⁰ ‘Gone to the dogs’, a common expression in current usage denotes a person who has gone to rack and ruin or is down in the dumps, i.e. depressed. Dog sayings, not specifically black, abound in the English language, highlighting the life-long, intimate relationship with our closest four-legged mate. It would not surprise me to find equivalent expressions in other languages, however, not being multi-lingual, I am unable to confirm this theory.

An authority on Black Dog Mythology, Bob Trubshaw, writes, the symbiotic relationship between people and canines shows in the early literature where dogs are the ‘psycopomps’ or guides on the paths to the Otherworld.²¹ In civilizations across the globe, in numerous mythologies, and in as many guises, the awesome dogs are guardians of the ‘liminal’ zone at the boundaries of heaven and hell.²² In ancient Egypt, Anubis is psychopomp and divine, the “jackal-headed deity (which) presides over the embalming and accompanies the dead to the after-life.”²³ In Mark Lehner’s book, the dog God is also depicted sitting behind the king to protect him.²⁴ Here, again we have the paradox of the dog protector having nasty, depressing, associations.

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Trubshaw claims that when Anubis mythology travelled to pre-Classical Greece, as there are no jackals, the wolf aptly fitted the role. A wolf-headed man, the prototype of werewolves of subsequent folk belief, was struck.²⁵ Temples to Lycian Apollo, that is 'wolfish Apollo' were not rare in Classical Greece.²⁶ Apollo was named 'Lykegenes', meaning 'born from the she-wolf' and supposedly his mother, Leto, was led from the Hyperboreans (a distinctly Otherworldly race) by wolves at the time of her labour.²⁷ The wolf was Apollo's special animal and a fitting sacrificial victim in his worship, Trubshaw maintains.²⁸

Alby Stone in his article, "Hellhounds, Werewolves and the Germanic Underworld", supports Trubshaw's findings that there is a strange link between dogs and travel to the realm of the dead.²⁹ He says it echoes in the mythologies of India and Europe, Egypt, Siberia and north America. Stone cites how the deceased must pass the four-eyed dogs of Yama, king of the dead, in the Vedic mythology of ancient India; Greek mythology has the dog, Cerebos, which had three heads and guards the gates of Hades. Egypt has Anubis. However, Stone maintains the Underworld watchdog appears to have its fullest and most complex expression in Germanic/Scandinavian mythology.³⁰ These references to werewolves and dogs that guard the gates to the realms of the dead conjure for me the lonely, depressed, isolated man

who stalks the streets at night, in Herman Hesse's Nobel prize winning novel, "Steppenwolf". This dark, tortured and glorious character with whom I strongly identified in my late teens, was a precursor to what I became in the not too distant future. When the werewolf visits there is nothing in my depressed world. It is void of all senses, colours, tastes, smells, and sounds. I am mute; any sluggish thought is bleak, dark and extremely pessimistic. Naming my Depression previously has never entered my mind for I have no creative processes when in the doghouse. I barely breathe, totally immobilized, prone, to nothing, on my bed, staring at paint peeling off the wall. After a few days of this paralysis I may be able to drag myself up to turn around to the window ledge, find my reading glasses and attempt to lose myself in an inevitably dreary novel. Overall there is exhaustion, utter fatigue, hopelessness, futility, pointlessness, negativity and gloom. Stone asserts all the names for the black beasts stem from the same root and mean, "growling, ravenous and inarticulate"³¹ the devourer of corpses, one who is hungry for death. My Black Dog can turn vicious too and I have hungered for death.

To come closer to home, to English origins, to find evidence why people with Depression should refer to their crippling illness as the Black Dog I dip into Celtic myths. Here, huge black hounds with wide-eyes glowing red ravaged the moors, terrorizing the locals, cursing and bedevilling all those who were unfortunate enough to come upon them. Hauntings, curses,

precursors to death, instant death and all manner of ills were associated with sightings of the Black Dog. All over the Celtic countryside and into Scandinavia and Europe there are local names for large black, shaggy pooches, which are the harbingers of doom and calamity.³²

The Black Dog of ancient English or Celtic tradition is reputed to appear at places associated with death. Many churchyards and isolated graves claim a Black Dog in local superstition and believers fear its howling. Sightings have been reported where murders have been committed. Descriptions of the Black Dog vary with some having huge eyes while others lack a head.³³ The creature lurks in graveyards, roads and moors throughout Britain and Europe. Images of the Black Dog abound in folklore and popular literature.³⁴ They have many guises, names and versions of names: Galleytrot, Hell Hound, Padfoot, Snarleyow, Trash, Wish or Whist Hound, Yell or Yelp Hound to name but a few Celtic varieties. However, in all accounts the dogs terrify their beholders.³⁵ Dempsey maintains the huge black Barghest roams the gloomy snickleways of York, the tiny narrow alleyways between the ancient buildings as well as the hills and moors of Yorkshire. She says it seeks human prey and if one meets a Barghest one will surely die. Even to see the Black Dog from a distance is extremely bad luck. The Suffolk/Essex Shuck,³⁶ (dubbed “Old Shock” in Trubshaw’s treatise³⁷) and the Lancaster Striker signal impending disaster or death.³⁸ Hence, the expression, ‘shucks’

perhaps? Stories of the ghost Black Dog, known as the Grim span the Atlantic, stretching from graveyards in the UK to cemeteries in the USA, particularly in slave burial grounds.³⁹ Dempsey asserts that visitors who linger in these graveyards after sunset are chased off by the resident angry Black ghost Dog. These hounds are thought to be spiritual guardians protecting the dead from the living⁴⁰, an interesting twist on an old ghost story theme. Trubshaw supports Dempsey, stating that the idea of dogs as spiritual guardians fits the separate folklore of 'Church Grimms'. He adds that it was customary to sacrifice a dog, specifically one without one white hair, in the foundations of the church.⁴¹ The roles of the Black Dog range from prophecy, revenge, bloodlust, to the hunt or a warning; they are all dark, dangerous and deadly.⁴²

The earliest named person to have referred to the horrors of the Black Dog is Horace, the Roman poet and satirist, who died in 5BC. He is attributed with writing a fable that claimed seeing a black dog, some say with pups, is an omen, which brings the observer bad luck.⁴³ The next direct mention appears in the Middle Ages when people believed the devil often assumed the form of a Black Dog, as in Goethe's "Faust". Hence, one who has the 'Black Dog on his back' or just the Black Dog may be depressed because of the devil's influence.⁴⁴

Tracking the beast of Depression, which chases its victims relentlessly, we now find famous people in history forced into perpetual motion to escape the Black Dog's ravages. Dr Samuel Johnson, scribe of the first English dictionary, was a victim. The Black Dog also plagued James Boswell, Johnson's 18th century companion. Johnson (1709-84), critic and poet, was known for his metaphorical use of the Black Dog in describing his bouts of melancholia, today's Depression.⁴⁵ In a letter dated, June 28, 1783, Johnson wrote, "The Black Dog I hope always to resist, and in time to drive, though I am deprived of almost 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 restlessness and confusion bring me again to a day of solitude. What shall exclude the Black Dog from a habitation like this?"⁴⁶

For me the Black Dog starts scratching at my door as I feel tiredness take over after about a fortnight of busyness. Within two or three days total lethargy sets in. It usually lasts a week or two. If I submit I usually recover faster but it has to run its course. There is no way my Depression could be kept at bay in the manner adopted by various outstanding politicians and writers, such as Johnson, by driving themselves harder to keep it at bay. While Johnson was dreadfully afflicted from age 20, becoming most irritable,

fretful, impatient then gloomy and despairing, he strove to overcome it by “forcible exertions”.⁴⁷ He would walk great distances in an attempt to shrug off his Black Dog.⁴⁸ My Black Dog is a werewolf triggered by Full Moon. He strips me of all energy virtually prohibiting any physical exercise. Pre-menstrual tension correlates with my upswing and the approach of Full Moon.

Johnson writing to his friend and colleague, James Boswell in 1791, asks him, “But what will you do to keep away the Black Dog that worries you at home”.⁴⁹ That is a sound question indeed. Australian contemporary writer, Aisbett, believes she has the answers.⁵⁰ Her tips for sending the cur packing include: a) action – do anything but do something; b) remember you have choices the most important of which I have found is to accept the situation as it is and try to stay in reality, difficult as that is when the Black Dog is panting at the end of the bed.⁵¹ Training a Black Dog involves a high degree of self-honesty and self-awareness, a desire to get well, a willingness to take risks, make life changes and to continue to grow, change and persevere along the recovery path.⁵² I’ll be taking a leaf out of Aisbett’s book next time the Black Wolf drops by for a feed to see if I can tame him further. Exploring this topic has been surprisingly interesting and at times a challenging voyage of discovery. Soon, maybe, I will be able to bring my wild, hairy lupine to heel,

sit, lie down, roll over and fetch at my command not vice versa. Perhaps we will learn to share the bed with greater mutual affection.

Aisbett writes that sometimes, even now, I surrender to pain, spend a day or two in the miserable company of the Black Dog – DEPRESSION. I allow him to seduce me, for he offers me the temptation of giving up, of saying ‘Too Hard’. He extends to me the luxury of being absolved of all responsibility to address, repair or change my life.”⁵³ Aisbett states her Black Dog can ‘entice’ her into thinking Depression is a relief, retreat or sanctuary from life, like the comfort a loyal pet may provide.⁵⁴ Further, she is occasionally duped into thinking she has no say in when her furry beast comes or goes or how long he stays. While I agree with her final introductory remark, that each bout of Depression will pass;⁵⁵ I would never intentionally invite such a horrid condition into my life if I had the faintest notion of another way to deal with it. As a person diagnosed with bipolar disorder I am told that a brain chemical deficiency, a genetic pre-disposition, along with a difficult upbringing, has caused this chronic condition. It is not going to go away, it is progressive and I will be on medication for the rest of my life. Also suicide is a strong possibility if I do not get a grip on it. As I am not yet ready to give up my resting time, my Black Dog is okay to stay for a short period strictly on my terms. My experience of Depression differs from Aisbett, and some other notable users of the nickname, in that my Depression is not fear-based. It

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appears to be more hormonal and energy-based. Whether I would ever pack my wolf off to the city council pound I remain undecided. I'm not fond of him. It's more that I've come to see him as having a purpose in my life. It's my down time, to reflect, digest, read, stew, hibernate, and recuperate. Similarly, New England artist, Tony, writes to the Internet, he has rationalised his depression, seeing as it as a "gestation or the process of germination for the creative mind ... I come out of depression bursting with ideas".⁵⁶

In 1826, Lockhart writes regarding the "Memoirs of the Life of Sir Walter Scott, "A great relief from the Black Dog which would have worried me at home".⁵⁷ Doris Kearns Goodman writes of mid19th century American president Abraham Lincoln, "Historians regard a broken off engagement to Mary Todd as the trigger to his famous Depression, but it was his perceived failure as a politician that fed Lincoln's Black Dog."⁵⁸ Highly regarded author, Robert Louis Stevenson quotes from "New Arabian Nights" in 1882 that "He did not seem to be enjoying his luck ... the Black Dog was on is back, as people say in the nursery metaphor."⁵⁹ Sir Arthur Conan Doyle borrowed the Black Dog myth in 1902 for Sherlock Holmes's adventure with "The Hound of the Baskervilles".⁶⁰

But perhaps, formidable British wartime Prime Minister, Winston Churchill nick named the most famous Black Dog of all time.⁶¹ It is plain from Anthony

Storr's essay, "Churchill, the Man", was dogged or haunted by severe bouts of Depression all his life. It drove him to find ways to avoid being caught in its clutches from bricklaying to painting with a vengeance.⁶² To avoid an immobilised state of misery, Churchill denied himself rest or relaxation, thus accomplishing more than most people just because he could not afford to stop.⁶³ The fascinating ABC television series, *Altered Statesmen*, revealed Sir Winston Churchill as a driven, narcissistic individual who needed to be over-occupied to stave off his Black Dog. At times maudlin and drunk, Churchill's tragic last years when he had little to do is a sad conclusion to a great politician's life.⁶⁴

Popular culture is littered with Black Dog paw prints. Mississippi blues artist, Robert Johnson, who was rumoured to have scored his musical talent from the devil, sang about it in the 1930s.⁶⁵ Hugely regarded Australian comedian and writer, Spike Milligan, has oft been quoted talking of his battles with the Black Dog of Depression. American author, Harry Crews, wrote in the 1970s, "The Black Dog's got you chewed to the bone."⁶⁶ Successful rock group of the 1970s, Pink Floyd, wrote its dark, tragic song, "Dogs" on the depressing dog eat dog world of their society, featured on its *Animals* album released in 1977. A television documentary run on the ABC in 2004, promoting, "Beyond Blue", the Australian Federal Government initiative to combat Depression, featured a young artist depicting her Depression as a large, stark Black Dog.⁶⁷

Aisbett, of the new millennium concludes, “I have looked into the eyes of the Black Dog and seen ... ILLUSIONS. And an illusion, once exposed, can never really exert the same power again.”⁶⁸ She takes full responsibility for letting the Black Dog into her life and for sending him on his way.⁶⁹ In her simple book of cartoons she promises to teach fellow Depression sufferers ‘tricks’ to enable them to take control of their Black Dogs.⁷⁰ To curtail the predicted proliferation of Black Dogs in Australia in the future I strongly recommend that Self Esteem Development classes together with mental health studies be taught in all primary schools. Aisbett and I concur that there is a close link between a healthy self-esteem and an ability to resist Depression.⁷¹

The Last Lick

Although I found this topic drier than a bone at the outset I challenged myself to grab it by the scruff and get on with the job. What began as a dog day afternoon, when I was coming out of my last Depressive bout for 2004 has become, for me, a fascinating shaggy dog tale. I have worked liked a dog, hounded down numerous texts, articles, countless references and trivial titbits, personal views from the Internet and extended my own frames of reference. I have created from my own 20-year experience with bipolar disorder an almost loveable Black Wolfhound. Keen as I was to write an historical essay tracking the Black Dog as a term to denote Depression I pulled against the lead, at first. I had a bone to pick about this topic. It was

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too hard, too easy, too dull. There was not enough meat on this fillet. There was too much on this bone to pick with anyone who cares to chew the fat but was it tasty or nourishing? What is the point other than to promote the meaning behind the name, “The Black Dog Institute” mental health research body studying Depression, a fair enough reason in itself I suppose, though this was not the directive. Implied perhaps but not spelled out. I wrestled with this conundrum as bitterly as any bull terrier would put up a fight.

Sir Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln, Samuel Johnson and James Boswell, who have opted to dub their Depression the Black Dog, had mere puppies in my humble opinion. There was no dog, black, white or brindle, yapping at my heels or slumped over my shoulder when I was in the depressive vice. I started to wish there was. I never grew up with dogs. True, I fear them if they are large and black ones appear more foreboding than little white ones. I am prepared to change, to adopt a pet canine. Or more accurately train my unwanted, unkempt stray into a loving, loyal domestic pooch of which I can be proud if not caring. In the process of writing this essay my Black Dog has taken a quantum leap out the back door. I am grateful for having had the opportunity to explore this topic at length, unearth much information hitherto unknown to me, and benefit along the journey. I hope all that read this work gain as I did in researching it. I believe

I have traced in depth the tracks of the Black Dog from the earliest days of humankind to now.

Endnotes

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- ¹ http://www.wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=7406 p.1.
 - ² The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Clarendon Press, 1984 , p.257.
 - ³ “Black Dog Institute Essay Competition guidelines”, p.2.
<http://www.blackdoginstitute.org.au/media/eventscal/index.cfm>
 - ⁴ loc.cit.
 - ⁵ The Concise Oxford Dictionary, Clarendon Press, 1984 , p.556.
 - ⁶ “The Suburban News”, December 10, 2004 , p.11
 - ⁷ http://www.wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=7406 p.1.
 - ⁸ Ibid. pp.1-2.
 - ⁹ “Summary of emails about Black Dogs”, <http://www.indiogroup.co.uk/edge/bdemails.htm>
 - ¹⁰ Aisbett, B. Taming the Black Dog, Harper Collins, 2000.
 - ¹¹ Dempsey, L. “The Contradictory Canine” p.1 <http://www.castleofspirits.com/blackdogs.html>
 - ¹² Trubshaw, B. “Black Dogs Guardians of the corpse ways”, p.1.
<http://www.indiogroup.co.uk/edge/bdogs.htm>
 - ¹³ ABC television series, “Stories of the Stone Age”, 2005, part 1.
 - ¹⁴ Dempsey, L. op.cit. p.1
 - ¹⁵ Ibid. p.2
 - ¹⁶ Loc.cit.
 - ¹⁷ Aisbett, B. op.cit., p.12.
 - ¹⁸ http://www.wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=7406 p.1.
 - ¹⁹ loc.cit.
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 - ²² Ibid. p.2.
 - ²³ Siliotti, A. “Valley of the Kings”, Weidenfeld & Nicholson. 1996. p.164.
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 - ²⁵ Trubshaw, B. op.cit. p.2.
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 - ³² Ibid.
 - ³³ Ibid. p.1
 - ³⁴ http://www.wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=7406 pp.1-2.
 - ³⁵ Dempsey, L. op.cit. p.2 <http://www.castleofspirits.com/blackdogs.html>
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 - ³⁷ Trubshaw, B. “Black Dogs in folklore”, p.1. <http://www.indiogroup.co.uk/edge/bdogsfl.htm>
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 - ³⁹ Loc.cit.
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 - ⁴¹ Trubshaw, B. “Black Dogs Guardians of the corpse ways” p.1.
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- 62 Ibid. p.17
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Television Programmes

ABC television documentary "Beyond Blue", 2004
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