

# 'Black dog' as a metaphor for depression: a brief history

*Paul Foley*

*Winston Churchill had a black dog  
his name was written on it  
It followed him around from town to town  
It'd bring him down  
took him for a good long ride  
took him for a good look around*

Reg Mombassa: *Black dog*

'Black dog' is a powerfully expressive metaphor that appears to require no explanation. The combination of 'blackness' with the negative connotations of 'dog', noun and verb, seems an eminently apt description of depression: an ever-present companion, lurking in the shadows just out of sight, growling, vaguely menacing, always on the alert; sinister and unpredictable, capable of overwhelming you at any moment. Further, the 'dark hound' is an archetypal object of fear, with a long tradition in folklore and myth. Black dogs in dreams are interpreted negatively, often representing death; from all over the world come tales of nightmares caused by oppressive black dogs crushing the sleeper's chest.<sup>1</sup>

Winston Churchill famously referred to his gloomy periods as his 'black dog', and many assume that it was another original contribution to English by the 1953 literature Nobel Prize laureate, succinctly characterizing his relationship with depression. But he was, in fact, citing none other than his beloved childhood nanny, as related by his private secretary, John Colville:

*Of course we all have moments of depression, especially after breakfast. It was then that [Lord] Moran [Churchill's doctor] would sometimes call to take his patient's pulse and hope to make a note of what was happening in the wide world. Churchill, not especially pleased to see any visitor at such an hour, might excuse a certain early-morning surliness by saying, "I have got a black dog on my back today." That was an expression much used by old-fashioned English nannies. Mine used to say to me if I was grumpy, "You have got out of bed the wrong side" or else "You have got a black dog on your back." Doubtless, Nanny Everest was accustomed to say the same to young Winston Churchill. But, I don't think Lord Moran ever had a nanny and he wrote pages to explain that Churchill suffered from periodic bouts of acute depression which, with the Churchillian gift for apt*

---

<sup>1</sup> Adler SR (1991) Sudden Unexpected Nocturnal Death Syndrome among Hmong immigrants. Examining the role of the "nightmare". *Journal of American Folklore* 104: 54-71.

*expression, he called "black dog." Lady Churchill told me she thought the doctor's theory total rubbish...<sup>2</sup>*

Whatever the truth about his state of mind, the young Churchill evidently inherited 'black dog (on your back)' from Mrs Everest (born in the 1830s), albeit as a designation for ill humor in general, rather than depression.

#### *'Black dog' in 19th century dictionaries*

This is consistent with 19th century dictionary definitions. James Murray noted in the *New English Dictionary* (1888), precursor of the *Oxford English Dictionary (OED)*, that "*in some country places, when a child is sulky, it is said 'the black dog is on his back'*";<sup>3</sup> in other places, the sulky child was the 'black dog'.<sup>4</sup> Farmer and Henley's respected dictionary of slang (1898) noted that "*black dog is a frequent figurative expression dialectally for depression of spirits, and melancholy*";<sup>5</sup> and the abridged version also mentioned the "*sulky child*";<sup>6</sup> while the English Dialect Dictionary (1898) recorded "*a fit of bad temper*".<sup>7</sup> At about the same time, the American Century Dictionary (1889) described 'black dog' as "*Hypochondria; the blues*";<sup>8</sup> expressions employed at this point to describe a spectrum of phenomena ranging from 'moodiness' to what we call 'clinical depression'. Finally, Chambers' *Book of Days* (1864) included an article on 'Spectre-dogs' which commented that 'to have the black dog' on the back was a common phrase (without defining it), "*though perhaps few who use it have an idea of its origin.*"<sup>9</sup>

At this juncture I should mention that 'black dog' has been used in many contexts irrelevant to our discussion: to describe guns, miners' lamps, prisons (the infamous Newgate 'Black Dog') and counterfeit silver coins; in unrelated phrases ('like butter in the black dog's house': Scottish = beyond all recovery); and as a general term of abuse. And to avoid another misunderstanding: 'black dog' has nothing to do with having a 'monkey on one's back', a more recent phrase which referred to mortgage debt, and more recently to

<sup>2</sup> Colville J (1995) The personality of Sir Winston Churchill (= Crosby Kemper Lecture, 24 March 1985). In: Kemper RC (ed.) *Winston Churchill: Resolution, defiance, magnanimity, good will* (Columbia: University of Missouri), pp.108-125. See also Gilbert M (1994) *In search of Churchill. A historian's journey* (London: Harper Collins), pp.209f.

<sup>3</sup> Murray JA *et al.* (ed.) (1888) *A new English dictionary on historical principles...* (Oxford: Clarendon), vol. 1/2, p.892. This definition is retained unchanged by the current edition of the *OED*.

<sup>4</sup> Cole RE (1886) *Glossary of words used in south-west Lincolnshire* (London: English Dialect Society); cited in Haber (see note 61); here: p.91.

<sup>5</sup> Farmer JS & Henley WE (1890-1904) *Slang and its analogues, past and present* (London: private print), vol. I (1890), p.212.

<sup>6</sup> Farmer JS (1905) *A dictionary of slang and colloquial English. Abridged from the seven-volume work entitled Slang and its analogues...* (London: Routledge), p.48.

<sup>7</sup> Wright J (ed.) (1898-1905) *The English dialect dictionary: being the complete vocabulary of all dialect words still in use, or known to have been in use during the last two hundred years* (London: Oxford University), p.280.

<sup>8</sup> Whitney WD (ed.) (1889) *The century dictionary: an encyclopaedia lexicon of the English language* (New York: Century Co.), vol. I, p.572.

<sup>9</sup> Chambers R (ed.) (1864) *The book of days: a miscellany of popular antiquities in connection with the calendar...* (London: Chambers), p.433.

any depressing burden, especially addiction.<sup>10</sup> All this noted, we can now investigate the pedigree of our 'black dog'.

### *Roman origins?*

Brewer's authoritative *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* included the following entry:

A black dog has walked over him. *Said of a sullen person. Horace tells us that the sight of a black dog with its pups was an unlucky omen.* (1894)<sup>11</sup>

But what we actually find in Horace (65-8BC) differs somewhat from Brewer's reading. In his *Carmina* (III, 27), Horace lists a number of unpleasant omens, including the sight of "a pregnant bitch (praegnans canis) ... or a vixen with young".<sup>12</sup> It has also been suggested that Horace referred to the 'black dog' while discussing the illusion of freedom in one of his satires (II, vii):

*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>13</sup>

Horace is not speaking here of melancholy, but more importantly the Latin text does not mention a 'black dog', but rather *comes atra*, or 'dark companion'. A more appropriate translation would thus be: "the dusky companion presses upon you, and follows you in your flight."<sup>14</sup> Horace would thus appear to be a red herring.

Both the standard reference on all aspects of antiquity, *Paulys Realencyclopädie*, and its recent revision, *Der neue Pauly*, include extensive discussions of dogs in the ancient world, including the belief that encountering a black dog was inauspicious,<sup>15</sup> and that howling, black or pregnant dogs could also be significant.<sup>16</sup> The comprehensive discussion of canine superstitions in Latin literature by Eli Edward Burriss<sup>17</sup> also records a fascinating range of beliefs, but nothing relevant to our term; the same is true of other authoritative accounts

<sup>10</sup> Wright *op. cit.* (note 7), p.150; entry for 'monkey' n. (definitions 24 and 33) in current *OED*.

<sup>11</sup> Brewer EC (1894) *Dictionary of phrase and fable...* (new, enlarged ed.) (London: Cassell); p.365.

<sup>12</sup> In the 17th century, it was reported that a "Bitch with whelps, a Fixon with cubs" were also evil omens in Athens, and that a black dog entering the house was inauspicious, but the information appears to derive from Roman sources; Rous F (1654) *Archælogiæ Atticæ* (4th ed.) (Oxford: John Adams and Ed. Forrest), pp.74, 369; Sammes A (1676) *Britannia antiqua illustrate...* (London: the author), p.366; Potter J (1697) *Archælogiæ Græcæ: or, The antiquities of Greece* (Oxford: A Swall), p.130.

<sup>13</sup> Conington J (transl.) (1863) *The satires, epistles, and Art of Poetry of Horace* (London: George Bell & Sons), p.90.

<sup>14</sup> Smart C (1767) *The works of Horace, translated into verse, with a prose interpretation... Vol. 3* (London: W Flexney, Mess. Johnson and Co. and T Caslon), p.277. The verse translation was: "for sticking to your back/he is your constant friend in black."

<sup>15</sup> Orth F (1913) 'Hund'. In: von Pauly AF (ed.) (1894-1980) *Realencyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler), vol.8, col. 2539-2582 (here: 2578).

<sup>16</sup> Hünemörder C (1998) 'Hund'. In: Cancik H & Schneider H (ed.) (1996-2003) *Der neue Pauly: Enzyklopädie der Antike* (Stuttgart: Metzler), vol.5, col. 755-758 (here: 757).

<sup>17</sup> Burriss EE (1935) The place of the dog in superstition as revealed in Latin literature. *Classical Philology* 30: 32-42.

of the animal symbolism in the ancient world.<sup>18</sup> Further, I have been able to locate only two other places in Latin literature even faintly relevant to our 'black dog': In *Phormio*, Terence (190-159BC) lists amongst other prodigies "*a strange dark dog (ater alienus canis) entering the house*" (IV, 4), while his fellow comedian Plautus (250-184BC) wrote in *Casina* (V, 4) of a "*dog omen (canina scaeva)*", from the Roman idiom 'between the wolf and the dog', equivalent to our 'rock and a hard place'.

There are certainly many classical references to black dogs as underworld denizens (Anubis; Cerberus; Hecate's hounds), but black dogs were also highly prized by our Roman forebears as guard dogs and for their healing powers.<sup>19</sup> None of this, however, explains our 'black dog', nor do beliefs concerning the Dog-Star (Sirius) and the languid 'Dog days' of high summer. It is interesting, however, that 'lycanthropy', the ability to assume the shape of a wolf, was long regarded as a form of melancholia.<sup>20</sup>

#### *Medieval and early modern periods*

During the Middle Ages, the dog represented a variety of qualities, including melancholia – hence the dog in Dürer's *Melencolia I* (1514)<sup>21</sup> – but primarily more positive characteristics: companionship, faithfulness, bravery, intelligence.<sup>22</sup> Although it is true that they often figured as companions of devils or witches, as malevolent apparitions ('fetches') projected by practitioners of the black arts, and the "*Devil [was] frequently symbolized by a black dog*";<sup>23</sup> medieval dogs were generally seen in a positive light. At the end of the 16th century, however, dogs do appear in proverbs as melancholy creatures:

*... as malinchoy as a curre dog, according to the Bysshopricke proverb. (1592)*  
*I'll be very melancholique, i' faith. – As a dog, if I were as you, sir Iohn. (1616)*<sup>24</sup>

But this association is probably less symbolic than reflective of real dogs, as we read in Robert Burton's monumental treatise, *The Anatomy of Melancholy* (1621):

*Of all other [animals], dogs are most subject to this malady, in so much, some hold they dream as men do, and through violence of melancholy, run mad. I could relate*

<sup>18</sup> Jenkins F (1957) The role of the dog in Romano-Gaulish religion. *Latomus* 16: 60-76; Toynbee JMC (1973) *Animals in Roman life and art* (Ithaca: Cornell University), pp.122f.

<sup>19</sup> See footnote 15 and Toynbee in note 18.

<sup>20</sup> For example, Galen's *On melancholy*: Kuhn CG (ed., transl.) (1821-33) *Claudii Galeni opera omnia* (reprinted Hildesheim: Olms, 1964-1965), vol. XIX, p.719.

<sup>21</sup> Panofsky E & Saxl F (1923) *Dürers „Melencolia I“: Eine quellen- und typengeschichtliche Untersuchung* (Leipzig: Teubner).

<sup>22</sup> Jászai G (1991) 'Hunde'. In: Auty R *et al.* (ed.) (1977-1998) *Lexikon des Mittelalters* (Munich: Artemis), vol. 5, col. 213f.; Gerlach P (1970) 'Hund'. In: Kirschbaum E (ed.) (1968-1976) *Lexikon der christlichen Ikonographie* (Rome: Herder), vol. II, col. 334-336.

<sup>23</sup> Evans IH (ed.) (1970) *Brewer's dictionary of phrase & fable* (centenary ed.) (London: Cassell), p.329.

<sup>24</sup> These and further examples in Tilley MP (1950) *A dictionary of proverbs in England in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan), p.163.

*many stories of dogs, that have dyed for grief, and pined away for loss of their masters...*<sup>25</sup>

Burton's tome, a thorough consideration of the various forms of melancholy but also a masterpiece of English literature, included a few other pertinent passages:

*Montanus... speaks of one that... 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>26</sup>

*The last main torture and trouble of a distressed minde, is... Gods heavy wrath, a most intolerable pain and grieffe of heart seizeth on them... they smell brimstone, talk familiarly with divils, hear and see chimeras, prodigious, uncouth shapes, bears, owls, antiques, black dogs, fiends, hideous outcries, fearful noises, shrieks, lamentable complaintes...*<sup>27</sup>

[Papal Legate] *Cardinal Crescence died likewise so desperate at Verona [after the Council of Trent, 1552], still he thought a black dog followed him to his death-bed, no man could drive the dog away.*<sup>28</sup>

The latter story was well-known via reports in compilations of historical wonders and books on dream interpretation. A large black dog with flaming eyes had entered the cardinal's chambers, but could not be detected by his servants; the cardinal thereupon fell into a 'melancholy', and died shortly afterwards.<sup>29</sup> This 'black dog' was thus associated here more specifically with pangs of conscience and fear of divine punishment than with melancholia itself. Not that the depressed are strangers to fear and guilt, but the 'black dog' at this stage was more a harbinger of doom than a long-term companion.

As late as the second half of the 18th century, beliefs that black dogs (like black cats) were evil omens were still pervasive, as reported in a magazine article concerning rural superstitions:

*... but a pin with the head turned towards you, or to be followed by a strange dog, I found were very unlucky.*<sup>30</sup>

But we find little trace of the gloomy hound in other literature. Shakespeare portrayed many memorable melancholics, but his only reference to a 'black dog' involved the metaphor for shamelessness (1594):

*First Goth. What! canst thou say all this, and never blush?  
Aaron. Ay, like a black dog, as the saying is.*<sup>31</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Democritus Junior (= R Burton) (1621) *The anatomy of melancholy* (Oxford: Henry Cripps); preface, p.44. I have cited the 16th edition (London: P Blake, 1836), based on the authorized 1651 edition, as the spelling is more familiar to modern readers: p.44.

<sup>26</sup> Part 1, sect. 3, mem. 1, subsect. 2 (p.233 (1621)/254 (1836)).

<sup>27</sup> Part 3, sect. 4, mem. 2, subsect. 6 (not in 1621 edition/p.733).

<sup>28</sup> Part 3, sect. 4, mem. 2, subsect. 4 (p.781/722). Original source: Sleidanus J (1555) *De statu religionis et reipublicae, Carolo Quinto Caesare, commentarii* (Strassburg); end of ch. xxiii (no pagination).

<sup>29</sup> Wanley N (1678) *The wonders of the little world, or, A general history of man* (London: T Basset, R Cheswel, J Wright and T Sawbridge), p.611; Burton R (= N Crouch) (1729) *Wonderful prodigies of judgment and mercy discovered in near three hundred memorable histories* (London: A Bettesworth and J Batley), p.62; Artemidorus (1755) *The interpretation of dreams. First written in Greek... and now made into English* (London: J. Bew), p.156.

<sup>30</sup> Mr Village to Mr Town. *The Connoisseur*, 13 March 1755, pp.109-112.

Almost a century later, we meet the following in a burlesque play, but this, too, was an isolated example:

*Why frowns? my beautious dear,  
Thy Forheads muffl'd in black pouts,  
Like warlike Steed in Fun'ral clouts...  
But strait in black dog'd masters Course  
My dear looks sad as morning Horse.*<sup>32</sup>

*Samuel Johnson and Mrs Thrale*

But then we discover a series of citations which associate 'black dog' with Samuel Johnson, compiler of the first major English dictionary and inveterate letter writer. One correspondent, the colorful Mrs Hester Thrale (1741-1821), appears to have been the first to mention it (16 May 1776):

*Mr. Thrale, thank God, is very comfortable set up again. The last gale blew him almost down though... but he scorns the black dog now: he will swing him round and round soon as Smollet's heroes do...*<sup>33</sup>

Johnson wrote on October 31 1778:

*Long live Sir John Shelly, that lures my master [Mr Thrale] to hunt. I hope he will soon shake off the black dog, and come home as light as a feather.*<sup>34</sup>

Mrs Thrale replied:

*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 is a good man, and a generous, he has made me some valuable presents here; and he swims now, and forgets the black dog.*<sup>35</sup>

This elicited Johnson's dual responses:

*I shall easily forgive my master his long stay, if he leaves the dog behind him. We will watch, as well as we can, that the dog shall never be let in again, for when he comes the first thing he does is to worry my master. This time he gnawed him to the bone.*<sup>36</sup>

*Now the dog is drowned I shall see both you and my master just as you are used to be, and with your being as you have been, your friends may very reasonably be satisfied.*<sup>37</sup>

Several years later Johnson again employed the phrase in a letter to Thrale:

---

<sup>31</sup> *Titus Andronicus*, Act V, scene 1; Aaron is a Moor. 'To blush like a black (or blue) dog' (that is, not at all) was current from at least the end of the 16th century until the 19th century: see also note 6.

<sup>32</sup> Duffett T (1678) *Psyche debauch'd* (London: John Smith), p.60.

<sup>33</sup> Piozzi HL (ed.) (1788) *Letters to and from the late Samuel Johnson, LL.D...* (London: A Strahan and T Cadell), vol. 1, p.331.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p.26.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p.32f. (11 November 1778).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, vol. 2, p.37 (14 November 1778).

<sup>37</sup> Johnson S (1892) *Letters of Samuel Johnson*. Collected and edited by GB Hill (Oxford: Clarendon), nr. 592 (21 November 1778).

*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 restlessness and confusion bring me again to a day of solitude. What shall exclude the black dog from a habitation like this?<sup>38</sup>*

'Black dog' was not simply a code term shared by the pair, for Johnson wrote to his biographer James Boswell:

*In the place where you now are, there is much to be observed... But what will you do to keep away the black dog that worries you at home? ... The great direction which Burton has left to men disordered like you, is this, Be not solitary; be not idle: which I would thus modify;— If you are idle, be not solitary; if you are solitary, be not idle.<sup>39</sup>*

Johnson recommended that his friend divert himself with investigations of Scottish history. Boswell replied about a fortnight later:

*I now leave Old England in such a state of mind as I am thankful to GOD for granting me. 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.<sup>40</sup>*

'Black dog' thus appears to have been a familiar expression amongst Johnson and his friends, although Johnson did not include it in his famous dictionary, perhaps not regarding it as 'standard English'.<sup>41</sup> May we, nevertheless, assume that the 'black dog' of melancholy was a Johnsonian creation? We are fortunate in that Mrs Thrale, at the behest of Johnson, maintained a diary, in which we read for the first time the full phrase passed down by Churchill's nanny (19 October 1790):

*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 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. Few people however seem to recognize its true Original; which may be found in Dr Henry More's Philosophical Works, where he tells us that Appollonius Tyaneus told the Greeks how that Spirit which was the Scourge of the City where he dwelt, (Athens I think,) appeared to him in Form of a large Black Dog: & leaping on his Back sometimes;— filled him with Melancholy for many Days after.<sup>42</sup>*

Apollonius of Tyana (c.AD 3-97), was a neo-Pythagorean philosopher and miracle worker, seen by some as a heathen counterpart to Jesus Christ. Our knowledge concerning him is

<sup>38</sup> Piozzi, *op. cit.* (note 33), vol. 2, p.280f. (28 June 1783).

<sup>39</sup> Boswell J (1887) *The life of Samuel Johnson LL.D.* (3rd edition; ed. GB Hill) (Oxford: Clarendon), vol. 3, p.414. (October 27 1779; emphases all in original). The Burton citation is from the final lines of *Anatomy of Melancholy*.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, vol.3, p.416.

<sup>41</sup> His dictionary did, however, include amongst the definitions for 'dog': "*a reproachful term for a man*", in which sense Johnson also employed 'black dog': see *ibid.*, vol.1, p.284.

<sup>42</sup> Balderston KC (ed.) (1942) *Thraliana: the diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776-1809* (Oxford: Clarendon), p.785.

largely derived from a biography by Philostratus (170-245), but Mrs Thrale encountered the sage indirectly, via the Cambridge theologian-philosopher More; her editor suggested the *Grand Mystery of Godliness* as her source,<sup>43</sup> but she specifically mentions the *Philosophical Works* (which include long discussions of melancholy and its religious significance).<sup>44</sup>

That the intellectually illustrious Streatham circle might adopt 'black dog' from such a source is not implausible, but I have been able to reconcile Mrs Thrale's recollection neither with More nor with Philostratus. What both reported was that Apollonius ended a pestilence in Ephesus by having the townspeople stone to death a demon disguised as an old beggar:

*when they... uncovered the heap, [it] appear'd in the shape of an huge black Dog as big as the biggest Lion. This could be no imposture of Melancholy, nor Fraud of any Priest.*<sup>45</sup>

There are many shaggy dogs in More's works, but none which haunted Apollonius in the manner remembered by Mrs Thrale. There may be some confusion about cause and effect, for More, like many of his contemporaries, believed 'melancholy' could cause sufferers to see 'phantasms', particularly black dogs.<sup>46</sup> For example, he employed 'black dog' as a metaphor for the "*shadowy Melancholiz'd imagination*" when he suggested that "*the black dog may be at the bottome*" of certain "*fiery notions and strange Fantasmes*" which purport to represent divine revelation.<sup>47</sup> Further, demon possession was often attributed by sceptical minds to melancholy; in one case a woman who had suffered fits for several years:

*fell on the Floor like a Block, and having lain so a while, cryed out, He is gone, he is gone, the Black Dog is gone, and she never had a Fit after.*<sup>48</sup>

A recent dictionary, dating 'black dog' to the 1700s, argues that the expression derives from the fact that one "*may be depressed because of the devil's influence*".<sup>49</sup> But the reverse relationship was assumed in the 1700s: if he existed, the Devil could exploit minds already debilitated by melancholy. In any case, 'to have a devil on one's back' had quite a different meaning, and there is no evidence that it was ever used for melancholy, so that its relevance to our 'black dog' is questionable. Johnson's 'black dog' certainly did not appear to involve the devil, figuratively or otherwise.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*; More H (1660) *Explanation of the Grand Mystery of Godliness* (London: W. Morden): Apollonius in Ephesus: p.121.

<sup>44</sup> More H (1662) *A collection of several philosophical writings* (London: William Morden), two vol.

<sup>45</sup> More H (1662) *Antidote against atheism* (in *Collection*, volume 1), p.125; Philostratus' account is found at IV, 10 (vol. 1, pp.362-367 of the Loeb edition: London, William Heinemann, 1912).

<sup>46</sup> More H (1662) *Enthusiasmus triumphatus; or, A brief discourse on the nature, causes, kinds, and cure of enthusiasm* (in *Collection* (note 44), vol. 1), pp.8-17; see also Wier J (1563) *De praestigijis daemonum, et incantationibus, ac veneficiis* (Basel: Oporin).

<sup>47</sup> More H (1656) *Enthusiasmus triumphatus, or, A discourse of the nature, causes, kinds, and cure, of enthusiasme* (London: W Morden), p.179.

<sup>48</sup> Baxter, R (1691) *The certainty of the worlds of spirits and, consequently, of the immortality of souls* (London: T Parkhurst and J Salisbury, pp.193-194); see also pp.152-154. There were many 'wonder' reports in which the appearance of a black dog presaged misfortune, especially mental illness; for example, Goulart I (1607) *Admirable and memorable histories containing the wonders of our time...* (transl. E Grimeston) (London: George Eld), pp.176-179.

<sup>49</sup> Urdang L (ed.) (1985) *Picturesque expressions: a thematic dictionary* (2nd ed.) (Detroit: Gale Research), p.176 (87.1: 'Dejection').



In any event, Mrs Thrale later expressed reservations about her first attempt at etymology; having become acquainted with the story of Cardinal Crescence in Burton's *Anatomy*, she suggested that it was probably there that Johnson had discovered the 'black dog' metaphor.<sup>50</sup>

This second explanation is interesting in that Johnson himself suffered from a decidedly oppressive religious melancholia. 'Melancholy' was until recent times more a collective term for a variety of psychological variations, ranging from lethargy to dementia, than a specific complaint;<sup>51</sup> the pioneering brain researcher Thomas Willis defined it as "*madness without fever or frenzy, accompanied by fear and sadness*" (1681).<sup>52</sup> 'Depression' itself was a term not widely used until the 20th century. Interestingly, Johnson was one of the first to employ it in the modern sense (though not in his dictionary), describing himself in 1761 as being "*under great depression*".<sup>53</sup>

Excessive melancholy was long regarded as sinful disregard for God's gracious arrangement of the world ('acedia'),<sup>54</sup> but 'hypochondria' or 'melancholy' had been 'fashionable' in England since Shakespeare's time: "*These pleasures, Melancholy, give/And I with thee will choose to live.*"<sup>55</sup> Unlike many intellectuals and artists of his time, however, Johnson did not regard melancholy as the stylish accompaniment of genius, but rather as an intolerable burden which perhaps presaged the total loss of both his intellectual function and salvation, and which he attributed to perceived personal failings not entirely apparent to others. Johnson's 'black dog' was thus an expression not only of his abject misery, but also of his guilt and fear of damnation. As such, Johnson's complex pain is more familiar to sufferers of clinical depression than the languid melancholia of some of his contemporaries.

Outside the Johnson circle, there is little indication that the 'black dog' was widely invoked, a curious exception being its inclusion by Johnson's friend and fellow Streathamite, Giuseppe Baretti (1719-1789), in his English-Italian dictionary (1790):

*To have the black dog, essere di cattivissimo umore, essere molto maninconoso* [to be in terrible humor, to be very melancholic]<sup>56</sup>

Nor did the phrase appear in contemporary dictionaries of conventional or unconventional English, although the similar 'to walk the black dog on someone' was recorded late in the 18th century:

<sup>50</sup> Balderston, *op. cit.* (note 42), p.870 (18 February 1794).

<sup>51</sup> See, for example: Schipperges H (1967) Melancholia als ein mittelalterlicher Sammelbegriff für Wahnvorstellungen. *Studium generale (Berlin)* 20: 723-36. For an exemplary case study of major depression in the ancient world (Cicero), see: Evans K (2000) *Representations of mental illness in the classical texts* (thesis, University of Queensland), pp.138-161.

<sup>52</sup> Willis T (1676) *De anima brutorum, quae hominis vitalis ac sensitiva est...* (London: Huguetan), pars 2, cap. xi (p.238).

<sup>53</sup> Hill GB (1897) *Johnsonian miscellanies* (Oxford: Clarendon), vol. 1, p.26 (= Easter 1761). See also: Boswell, *op. cit.* (note 39), vol. 1, p.297 (after completion of his dictionary in 1755, Johnson's mind was "*in such a state of depression*"). 'Depression' referred generally to any decline in physiological capacity.

<sup>54</sup> Jackson SW (1981) Acedia: the sin and its relationship to sorrow and melancholia in medieval times. *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 55: 172-181.

<sup>55</sup> John Milton: *Il penseroso* (1638) = the 'thoughtful', 'pensive'.

<sup>56</sup> Baretti GMA (1790) *A dictionary of the English and Italian languages... Corrected and improved* (London: JF and C Rivington *et al.*), no pagination. A similar definition was listed for "*To have a dog in one's belly*", which, unlike 'black dog', also appeared in the 1760 edition.

*a punishment inflicted in the night on a fresh prisoner, by his comrades, in case of his refusal to pay the usual footing or garnish.*<sup>57</sup>

'Black dog' was employed only infrequently in literature. Walter Scott used 'black dog' for 'ill humor' in the early 19th century:

*"I think [the angry] Sir Arthur has got the black dog on his back again," said Miss Oldbuck. "Black dog! – Black devil! He's more absurd than womankind."* (1816)<sup>58</sup>

*I passed a pleasant day with kind J.B., which was a great relief from the black dog, which would have worried me at home.* (1826)<sup>59</sup>

Somewhat later, Robert Louis Stevenson described Montigny, a "gamester", in the *New Arabian Nights* (1882):

*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>60</sup>

In his exhaustive compilation of "canine terms applied to human beings",<sup>61</sup> the American English professor, Tom Burns Haber, interpreted 'black dog' here as "nervous fit", but was correctly criticized by a colleague who suggested that the context suggested "ill humor".<sup>62</sup> Secondly, the sea-captain is approached at the beginning of Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) by a stranger whom he immediately recognizes with alarm as an old acquaintance, "Black Dog". An altercation ensues; the captain collapses, but eventually recovers:

*... suddenly his colour changed, and he tried to raise himself, crying, "Where's Black Dog?" "There is no Black Dog here," said the doctor, "except what you have on your own back. You have been drinking rum; you have had a stroke, precisely as I told you; and I have just, very much against my own will, dragged you headforemost out of the grave."*<sup>63</sup>

*'Black dog': an English problem?*

It is notable that references to the 'black dog' are most common in England. One of the few American references stems from Cabell in his satanic novel *Jurgen* (1919):

*So come now, make yourself fine, and shake the black dog from your back, for we are spending the evening with the Asmodeuses.*<sup>64</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Grose F (1788) *A classical dictionary of the vulgar tongue* (2nd ed.) (London: Hooper and Wigstead), no pagination.

<sup>58</sup> Scott W (1893) *The antiquary* (London: John C. Nimmo), ch. 6 (vol. I, p.79).

<sup>59</sup> Lockhart JG (1839) *Memoirs of the life of Sir Walter Scott* (2nd ed.) (Edinburgh: Robert Cadell), vol. 8, p.335; Carlyle T (1908) *Sir Walter Scott* (London: Cassell & Co.) (in *Sartor Resartus and essays on Burns and Scott*), p.338.

<sup>60</sup> Stevenson RL (1923) *New Arabian Nights* (London: Heinemann), p.223 (*A lodging for the night*).

<sup>61</sup> Haber TB (1965) Canine terms applied to human beings and human events. *American Speech* 40: 83-101; 243-271.

<sup>62</sup> Moe AF (1969) On Haber's "Canine terms applied to human beings and human events". *American Speech* 44: 33-54.

<sup>63</sup> Stevenson RL (1911) *Works* (London: Chatto and Windus), vol. II, p.20 (part 1, chapter 2).

<sup>64</sup> Cabell JB (1923) *Jurgen: a comedy of justice* (New York: RM McBride & Co.), p.243 (ch. 38).

Nor do American discussions of metaphors for depression include 'black dog'.<sup>65</sup> Abraham Lincoln is occasionally said to have referred to his depression as his 'black dog', but a precise source is never given.<sup>66</sup> Nor is 'black dog' generally employed for depression in non-English speaking countries without reference to its Churchillian origins, although a German reviewer could comment (on a typically melancholic Finnish film, *Juha*):

*a black dog is also again to be seen, now and then, emblem of the melancholic.*<sup>67</sup>

There is no shortage of European references to 'black dogs' (many guarding treasures, or signifying, for example, damnation in Brittany)<sup>68</sup> or evil canines (the Grimms' 'big bad wolf'), nor of canine linguistic allusions (especially in German), but no reference to our 'black dog'. Maybe the English predilection for depression simply demanded a larger descriptive vocabulary, as suggested by the prominent Parisian physician Philippe Pinel:

*One should perhaps admire the unfortunate fertility of the English for vigorous, apposite expressions for the extreme perplexity, depression and despair of the melancholic, even in their medical works, not to mention their novels and poetry.*<sup>69</sup>

Neither this nor Montesquieu's (1689-1755) assertion that the English tended to commit suicide without apparent reason<sup>70</sup> was purely French invective; the English themselves were of similar opinion:

*Melancholy is a kind of Demon that haunts our Island...*<sup>71</sup>

*The Title I have chosen for this treatise, is a Reproach universally thrown on this island by Foreigners and all our Neighbours on the Continent, by whom nervous Distempers, Spleen, Vapours, and lowness of Spirits, are in derision, called the ENGLISH MALADY. And I wish there were not so good Grounds for this Reflection...*<sup>72</sup>

The author of the last lines, George Cheyne, was physician to Samuel Johnson, and advanced many plausible reasons for the prevalence of melancholy in England – the land itself, the climate, the food, the dissolute lifestyle.

Something else peculiar to the British isles is the prominence of legends concerning black dogs, such as the Dartmoor Black Dog, adapted by Conan Doyle for his *Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902). Similar stories are also reported in America, but are not as widespread. The British Isles, in comparison, are infested with ghostly hounds, many dating back to traditions and practices of Celtic times: from the Barguest of Yorkshire to the Mauthe Dog of Man, from the Sliab Mis hound in Kerry to the Whist Hounds of Devon – monstrous black

<sup>65</sup> For example: Jackson SW (1986) *Melancholia and depression. From Hippocratic times to modern times* (New Haven: Yale University), pp.395-399. Nor, surprisingly, is it included in: Palmatier RA (1995) *Speaking of animals: a dictionary of animal metaphors* (Westport: Greenwood).

<sup>66</sup> Churchill, incidentally, is said to have had his childhood labrador taxidermically prepared.

<sup>67</sup> Jürgens C (1999) Er liebt sie, liebt sie nicht. *Die Zeit* (Hamburg), nr.13.

<sup>68</sup> Chevalier JC (1969) *Dictionnaire des symboles: mythes, rêves, coutumes...* (Paris: Laffont), p.199.

<sup>69</sup> Pinel P (1809) *Traité médico-philosophique sur l'aliénation mentale* (Paris: JA Brosson), pp.104f. (§119).

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, §166 (pp.168f.)

<sup>71</sup> Addison (1712) No.387. *The Spectator*, Saturday May 24 1712 (in: Morley H (ed.) (1888) *The Spectator: A new edition, reproducing the original text...* (London: Routledge), p.564.

<sup>72</sup> Cheyne G (1734) *The English malady: or, a treatise of nervous diseases of all kinds; as spleen, vapours, lowness of spirits, hypochondriacal, and hysterical distempers, etc.* (London: Strahan), opening lines!

dogs, alone or in packs, seen at night or, with luck, only heard while passing, shaggy and with eyes that glow like coals, render the countryside unsafe. Some house unquiet souls, others the Devil himself.<sup>73</sup>

With these legends firmly embedded in British consciousness, it is not surprising that, in some areas, the dark hound is emblematic for disquiet of one's own soul:

*In my Scots-Irish family, dealing with depression is called "wrestling with the black dog." I thought it was peculiar to us – both the experience and the phrase for it – but then in my early thirties I read a biography of the 19th Century Anglo-Irish explorer Sir Richard Burton [1821-1890]... after a great achievement (like translating "1001 Nights" or being the first non-Muslim to penetrate Mecca) Burton would feel a loss of purpose and fall into deep depressions that could last for months on end, periods where he would say he was "wrestling with the black dog"... [In] a number of Irish folk tales, the devil appears in the form of a black beast or hound that runs alongside a traveler at night, with glowing red eyes and an air of implacable menace. Sometimes the dog must be wrestled, and beaten, if the traveler is to survive. It struck me that these tales must be pre-Christian, and that we all have our devils running alongside of us.<sup>74</sup>*

As mentioned above, Chambers had implied in 1864 that the expression 'black dog on the back' was related to British "spectre-dogs", but did not further elaborate.<sup>75</sup> A connection between the ghostly hounds and the 'black dog' of melancholy would appear, however, more than plausible.

#### *'Black dog' in the 20th century*

'Black dog' began to appear in dictionaries at the end of the 19th century, as discussed above, but in the early 20th century it was defined primarily as 'delirium tremens',<sup>76</sup> a meaning it had carried since the mid-19th century.<sup>77</sup> Interestingly, American expressions for melancholy and delirium tremens overlapped to some extent, including, for example, the use of 'blue devils' and 'jim jams' for both, but here 'black dog' referred only to delirium tremens.<sup>78</sup>

As suggested by Colville in his comments on Churchill, it seems that 'black dog' survived into the 20th century within certain families, even where they were unaware of its use

<sup>73</sup> For literature, see: Bord J & C (1980) *Alien animals: a worldwide investigation* (London: Elek); Simpson J & Roud S (2001) *A dictionary of English folklore* (Oxford: Oxford University); Trubshaw B (1994/2001) Black dogs in folklore. <http://www.indigogroup.co.uk/edge/bdogfl.htm> (viewed 20 January 2005); Harte J (1998) *Alternative approaches to folklore. A bibliography 1969-1996* (Loughborough: Heart of Albion).

<sup>74</sup> Contributed by Miller WH (hojo2x@aol.com) to newsgroup [rec.music.makers.guitar.acoustic](http://www.music.makers.guitar.acoustic), 3 July 1999; thread *Re: Catharsis (maybe long)*.

<sup>75</sup> Chambers, *op. cit.* (note 9).

<sup>76</sup> For example: Farmer & Henley, *op. cit.* (note 5): "(common) delirium tremens, the horrors, 'jim jams'."

<sup>77</sup> For example: Hughes T (1861) *Tom Brown at Oxford: "D. T., sir. After one of his rages the 'black dog' comes, and its awful work..."* (ch. xxxiii; in undated reprint (London: Thomas Nelson): p.391).

<sup>78</sup> Berrey LV & Van den Bark M (1942) *The American thesaurus of slang* (New York: Thomas Y Crowell); pp.157 (130.9: 'delirium tremens'), 290f. (283.2-7: 'sullenness'). 'Les papillon noirs' was apparently employed in France for both delirium tremens and hypochondria: Farmer & Henley, *op. cit.* (note 5), vol. III (1893), p.105.

outside their own circle. It was never widely employed in published material, seeming instead to be part of the spoken vernacular. A number of (mostly British crime) writers used 'black dog on the back' from the 1930s onwards for 'bad mood' or 'annoyance' ("*If I don't talk to somebody soon... I shall get a black dog on my back*").<sup>79</sup> Robert Mitchum remarked to Teresa Wright in the western *Pursued* (1941) that their lives had been marked by "*a black dog riding my back and yours too*", but this appears to be more akin to 'devil on the back' than our 'black dog'.

It is ultimately unlikely that 'black dog' was a specific term for depression before Churchill used it, but was rather a vague reference to anything which rendered someone less than congenial, whether ill temper, fear, guilt or, indeed, melancholy; as recently as 1956, it was defined simply as 'peevish fit', especially in children.<sup>80</sup> Other terms which also began their ascent in the 18th century – the 'blue devils' (1780s), 'the blues' (1740s)<sup>81</sup> and more general descriptions of depressed spirits – were more frequently recorded, at least in published texts, and generally retained a more specific relationship with 'depression'. Adoption of 'black dog' by Churchill (and by those who write about him) thus represented a turning point for the beast; and once the adoption became public, whatever it was exactly that Churchill meant, 'black dog' could assume its now secure place in *English* English as a metaphor for depression.<sup>82</sup>

But how secure? Eric Partridge (1894-1979), well respected for his books on language, and particularly interested in historical slang, wrote (1961):

*black dog (sitting) on one's back, have (got) a. To be depressed: coll[ocual]: late C. 19-20; ob[solescent]*<sup>83</sup>

He thus regarded 'black dog' as being of quite recent origin, but also almost obsolete – none of which concurs with what we have discussed. Interestingly, he also mentioned an expression which I have not otherwise encountered:

*Pompey (or the black dog Pompey) is on your back! a c[atch]-p[hrase] (~1869) addressed to a fractious child: provincial coll[ocual], and dial[ectic].*<sup>84</sup>

Regardless: since Churchill inadvertently popularized the term, 'black dog' has not only been adopted by sufferers of depression and their physicians, but also by literary<sup>85</sup> and

<sup>79</sup> This (from Ngaio Marsh, *A wreath for Rivera*, 1949) and other examples (1932-1976) in: Whiting BJ (1989) *Modern proverbs and proverbial sayings* (Cambridge: Harvard University), p.178.

<sup>80</sup> 'To have a black dog on the shoulder': Henderson LK (1956) *Dictionary of English idioms* (London: J Blackwood), vol. II, p.71

<sup>81</sup> See entries in *OED* for 'blues' and 'blue devils'.

<sup>82</sup> Green J (2000) *Cassell's dictionary of slang* (London: Cassell & Co.), p.100. This volume also lists 'black rot' as a 19th century American expression for intense depression: p.102.

<sup>83</sup> Partridge E (1961; repr. 1970) *A dictionary of slang and unconventional English...* (5th ed.) (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul), p.59; also in Partridge E (1972) *A dictionary of historical slang* (abr. J Simpson from Partridge, 1961) (Harmondsworth: Penguin), p.77. Partridge cited Lyell TRG (1931) *Slang, phrase, and idiom in colloquial English and their use* (Tokyo: Hokuseido Press) as his source. Strangely, Partridge E (1973) *The Routledge dictionary of historical slang* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul), also described as the abridgement by Simpson of Partridge's 1961 work, records on p.77 that the term dates from 1825, citing Scott as source.

<sup>84</sup> *Dictionary of historical slang* (note 83), p.711. Apart from the fact that 'pompey' was dialectic in parts of England for 'small boy' or 'imp', I have not been able to further track this expression.

musical circles.<sup>85</sup> It is also interesting that, despite the century-old *OED* definition of 'black dog' cited above, the *Concise OED* defined it until 1971 only as "sulks"; the 6th edition added the less negative "*melancholy mood*", perhaps reflecting a changed attitude towards the nature of depression.

And why is 'black dog' ultimately such a popular term? Perhaps because it reflects a certain attitude to the experience of depression: it externalizes the dark feelings as a companion, albeit an unwelcome companion; it expresses some of the oppression not heard in 'depression' (in contrast, for example, to the German *Niedergeschlagenheit* and *Gedrücktheit*); it emphasizes, in contrast to earlier romantic-intellectual interpretations of melancholia, that depression may be distinct from the underlying personality. In this sense, it is a metaphor of hope: the 'black dog' may be to some extent a friend, but he is a bad friend; and as with anyone who renders life miserable and restricts interactions and possibilities, he needs to be left behind, no matter how persistent his pursuit.

*Come over here black dog  
and I'll pat you on your head  
you've been following me for a good long time  
I guess you must be my friend  
I guess you must be my good friend*

*I don't want you to be my friend no more black dog:  
I don't want you to come around*

---

<sup>85</sup> For example, Les Murray (1997) *Killing the black dog* (Annandale: Federation); poems dealing with his handling of depression.

<sup>86</sup> Bob Dylan (1966) *Obviously Five Believers* – "I got my black dog barking..."; Jesse Winchester (1971) *Black Dog*; Nick Drake (1974) *Black-Eyed Dog*; Mental as Anything (1998) *Black Dog*.