

## “Churchill’s Black Dog?: The History of the ‘Black Dog’ as a Metaphor for Depression”

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The dog and man have a long and complex history of interaction, full of ambivalent and contradictory significations. Both classical and contemporary iconography and symbology — as represented in art, literature, popular culture and the images of ancient mythologies — feature a myriad of canine incarnations, figures whose presence resonates with a significance beyond the contours of their physical form. In the competing and complementary representations of classical mythology, dogs menace, defile, and patrol borders, both earthly and supernatural, but also heal, protect, purify, and act as symbols of loyalty and fidelity. In modern parlance, we let sleeping dogs lie; we go to the dogs or die like a dog; we dog someone at every turn, or compete in a dog-eat-dog environment. And when we put a name to our depression, increasingly it is that of the black dog, lurking behind us, or clinging tenaciously to our backs. The statesman and politician Winston Churchill drew upon this image to conceptualise his own struggle with depression, and it is with him that the metaphor is generally associated. Indeed, so firmly linked are the man and the image in contemporary usage that some references make the man an integral part of the metaphor. When an Australian band sang about fighting depression, they talked of making peace with ‘Churchill’s Black Dog’, and the phrase became the title for a popular song.<sup>1</sup> In a similar process, The Black Dog Institute of Australia takes as its logo Churchill’s famous ‘V for victory’ sign casting a shadow in the form of a black dog. Contemporary representations such as these both reflect and perpetuate the popular belief in Churchill as the originator of the phrase, solidifying the association in the minds of the public.

In a strictly historical sense, this understanding of the phrase is clearly misleading. The black dog is *not* Churchill’s, at least not originally. That he referred to his own

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<sup>1</sup> Greg Arnold, *Churchill’s Black Dog*, (1993). Robert Carter’s poem ‘Black Dog’ also begins, ‘Bitten by Churchill’s black dog...’ (*Southerly*, 54(1)).

depression in these terms is indisputable. However, 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. To this readily accessible textual evidence, 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 and Roman mythologies, and a growing body of literature in which black dogs featured as harbingers of death, or emissaries of the Devil. The popular contemporary association of the black dog with Winston Churchill obscures a complex process of evolution whose investigation brings together not only the classical and the contemporary, but also the fields of mythology, literature, symbology and psychology.

Because of the nature of this evolutionary process, the language historian who embarks on a kind of join-the-dots quest for the definitive origins of a term is likely to be thwarted. Tracing and describing the development of images and symbols, those aspects of language which tap into the creative complexities of the human psyche, is an endeavour far less certain than the simple pursuit of a trail of historical breadcrumbs. Inevitably, there are gaps between one signpost and the next, points at which the historian is obliged to make a leap of assumption, weaving together apparent connections to somehow arrive at a conclusion which arranges these unruly breadcrumbs in a satisfyingly tidy order. To explore the evolution of what has become Churchill's Black Dog is to attempt to cross some of these gaps, remaining mindful of the leaps, the absences, the in-many-cases sheer impossibility of making definitive claims. To track the Black Dog from a modern vantage point requires a movement increasingly away from certainty, from readily available documentation, and into the areas of myth, folklore, and speculation.

For the purposes of this investigation, to begin with the contemporary and move backwards chronologically is to begin with the figure of Churchill himself, the touchstone to whom modern usage of the phrase is inevitably linked. Notwithstanding popular belief, authoritative reference works such as the *Oxford English Dictionary* and *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* make it clear that the metaphor pre-

dates Churchill. The *OED* points us towards a generic popular usage, indicating that the phrase ‘the black dog is on his back’ is used of sulky children in some rural areas,<sup>2</sup> but stops short of providing further details or speculating as to the origin of the usage. The first of the two literary references it cites quotes a passage from Robert Louis Stevenson’s *New Arabian Nights* in which a morose character is described as having ‘the black dog upon his back’.<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, this 1882 passage suggests that the phrase is already in relatively common usage by this point, claiming that it is drawn from ‘terrifying nursery metaphor’,<sup>4</sup> perhaps referring to the aforementioned popular usage.

The second of the two literary references cited here is intriguing for another reason. The reference to ‘the black dog which would have worried me at home’, from Sir Walter Scott’s diary entry for May 12, 1826,<sup>5</sup> is an almost verbatim quote of a phrase used by Samuel Johnson in correspondence to James Boswell in 1779, almost half a century earlier. Johnson writes, in response to a letter from Boswell which has not been traced by historians: ‘...what will you do to keep away the *black dog* that worries you at home?’<sup>6</sup> We will turn our attention to Johnson and his correspondents shortly; the point to note here is not only Lockhart’s almost wholesale adoption of Johnson’s phrase, suggesting an inter-textual process at work in the evolution of the metaphor, but also the failure of the *OED* to identify this earlier and well-documented usage. Turning to *Brewer*, we see the phrase in a different form, and with no specific reference to children:

*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.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *OED*, s.v. black dog, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *New Arabian Nights* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1882), p. 111.

<sup>4</sup> *ibid*, p. 111.

<sup>5</sup> J. G. Lockhart, *Memoirs of Sir Walter Scott, VIII* (Edinburgh: Black, 1869), p. 335.

<sup>6</sup> R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, II: 1775-1782* (hereafter, *Letters, II*) (London: Oxford UP, 1952), p. 314 (italics in original).

<sup>7</sup> E. Cobham Brewer, *Brewer’s Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* (Philadelphia : Henry Altemus Company, 1898), DOG, 8.

*Brewer's* shortcomings are not those of the *OED*. The entry at least recognises that the Black Dog pre-dates Lockhart and Stevenson; however, the wholesale leap from the contemporary phrase to the Horace reference seems rather gratuitous. In the first place, there is no direct connection between the two, other than the fact that they both contain references to black dogs. To be sullen or depressed is not at all the same as being 'unlucky', and at any rate, the Horace citation insists on the presence of pups, shifting the emphasis away from the figure of the black dog itself. Moreover, while it may be tempting to claim the *Brewer* citation as at least having located the earliest instance of the usage, this is not necessarily the case either. Earlier black-dog references from the Greek classics, which might as readily be linked to the contemporary form of the phrase pre-date Horace by several centuries. Plutarch, for example, writes that in around 450 BC, some 400 years earlier, a black dog appeared to the prominent Athenian, Cimon, to announce his impending death.<sup>8</sup> Earlier incarnations of the figure of the black dog in classical mythology will be discussed in more detail as we continue our historical backtracking; for now, the point is that while these canonical reference works are less than reliable on the subject, their authoritative tone has the effect of shutting down further enquiry. Assessments which are essentially partial and subjective naturalise their own version of history in much the same way that contemporary linkage of the phrase with Churchill does. We can no more accept at face value the pronouncements of these references than we can accept the popular belief that Churchill is the originator of the phrase.

A notable omission in both of these citations is the importance of the aforementioned Johnson, Boswell, and Thrale. Almost a century before Churchill's birth, these three correspondents were using the phrase amongst themselves to represent a persistent state of melancholy. Among the published letters, the earliest use is found in October, 1778, in a missive from Johnson to Mrs Thrale, where the former writes in reference to the low spirits of her husband, Henry Thrale, referred to by both of them as 'the master':

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<sup>8</sup> as cited in Wade Baskin, *The Dictionary of Satanism* (Philosophical Library, 1972; p. 111.

I hope he will soon shake off the black dog and come home as light as a feather.<sup>9</sup>

Despite earlier correspondence between both Johnson and Thrale and Johnson and Boswell being liberally peppered with references to melancholy and ill health, both direct and metaphorical — phrases such as ‘black fumes’, ‘black melancholy’, ‘the melancholy fiend’, and ‘these black fits’ occur at points throughout<sup>10</sup> — this is the first time that the figure of the black dog is used to represent it. It is interesting, then, to note that no explanation or context is provided for the usage, and it is not foregrounded in any way; rather, it appears to be part of an already shared language, a phrase Johnson expects Mrs Thrale to understand. It is from this point in the correspondence that the metaphor begins to recur with some regularity. A month later, Mrs Thrale writes from Brighton that:

... the black dog shall not make prey of both my master and myself. My master swims now, and forgets the black dog<sup>11</sup>

to which Johnson replies:

I shall easily forgive my master his long stay, if he leaves the dog behind him.<sup>12</sup>

The metaphor appears regularly after this point in exchanges between Johnson and Mrs Thrale through 1778 and 1779.<sup>13</sup> In late 1779, the dog appears for the first time in correspondence between Johnson and Boswell, in the form that recurs so notably half a century later in Lockhart’s *Memoirs*, and there is then a substantial gap before

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<sup>9</sup> *Letters*, II, p. 262.

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, *Letters*, II, pp. 82, 145; John Wain, ed. *The Journals of James Boswell, 1762-1795* (London: Heinemann, 1991), pp. 92, 93.

<sup>11</sup> cited in James Boswell, *Life Of Johnson, Vol. 3, 1776-1780*, ed. George Birkbeck Hill, accessed online 17/12/04 at: <http://www.fullbooks.com/Life-Of-Johnson-Vol-312.html>

<sup>12</sup> *Letters*, II, p. 268.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, correspondence in November, 1778; March, 1779; June 1779 (*Letters*, II, pp. 270, 281, 290).

what seems to be its final appearance, in a 1783 letter from Johnson to Mrs Thrale. Here, he writes:

The black Dog I hope always to resist, and in time to drive ... When I rise my breakfast is solitary, the black dog waits to share it, from breakfast to dinner he continues barking ... What shall exclude the black dog from a habitation like this?<sup>14</sup>

From the particular sequence and content of these letters, it seems clear that, among the three correspondents, it is most likely Mrs Thrale with whom the phrase originated. Although the first epistolary use is attributed to Johnson, it is as a term with which he clearly expects Mrs Thrale is familiar. Moreover, in the initial occurrences, it is used exclusively to refer to Mr Thrale; although Johnson refers frequently to his own melancholy and low spirits, he does not use the black-dog metaphor with regard to himself until 1783, almost six years after it first appears in the correspondence. In the case of Boswell, it is clear from his journals that it is not a term he himself favours, referring instead to his 'black melancholy and 'the melancholy fiend', as noted previously.<sup>15</sup> Moreover, a comprehensive study of Boswell's use of the imagery of melancholy makes no reference at all to the metaphorical Black Dog.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the conclusion that the term as used in the correspondence likely stems from Mrs Thrale is also supported by her own observation that:

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 ...<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> R. W. Chapman, ed., *The Letters of Samuel Johnson, III: 1783-1784* (London: Oxford UP, 1952), p. 41.

<sup>15</sup> *The Journals of James Boswell*, pp. 92, 93

<sup>16</sup> See Allan Ingram, *Boswell's creative gloom: a study of imagery and melancholy in the writings of James Boswell* (London: Macmillan, 1982).

<sup>17</sup> Katharine C. Balderston, ed., *Thraliana: The Diary of Mrs. Hester Lynch Thrale (Later Mrs. Piozzi), 1776-1809*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1942), p. 785, cited in Arthur Sherbo, 'Earlier than in OED: The Black Dog and Crap', *Notes and Queries*, 45(2), 186-87.

Two points are made clear by this statement. Firstly, that in terms of the Thrale-Johnson-Boswell correspondence, the 'Black Dog' seems to have originated from Streatham, from the Thrale household, to which Johnson was a frequent, and Boswell a sometime, visitor. The fact that the first epistolary occurrence of the phrase assumes understanding on the part of the recipient suggests that it may well have been introduced during conversation on one such visit. Secondly, Mrs Thrale's description of a variation on the phrase as being 'a common saying' points to an existing and generalised currency for the usage, which requires that the historian move further back in the quest for origins.

Mrs Thrale herself seems to point the way, telling us in the following passage that:

Few People however seem to recognize its true Original; which may be found in Dr Henry More's Philosophical Works.<sup>18</sup>

Mrs Thrale goes on to cite More's account of Appollonius Tyaneus telling the Greeks that the spirit

which was the Scourge of the City where he dwelt ... appeared to him in the form of a large *Black Dog*: & leaping *on his Back* sometimes; — filled him with Melancholy for many Days after.<sup>19</sup>

This is certainly a compelling similarity; however Mrs Thrale gives no evidence as to the link between the phrases, or that More was in fact the first to document the use of the saying. The historian would be as ill-advised to accept this conclusion on face-value, as to accept the proclamations of *Brewer*, or the *OED*, or contemporary belief which associates the phrase with Churchill. The only definitive conclusion to be drawn from Mrs Thrale's claim is that the origins of the phrase lie much earlier, and so the search must continue.

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid*, p. 785.

<sup>19</sup> *ibid*, p. 785.

Before we take the next backward step, however, there is an important link to be established, that between Churchill himself and the Black Dog of the Johnson-Boswell-Thrale correspondence. If we are indeed to join the dots to the extent possible, this connection is an important pencil-mark. As Mrs Thrale notes above, the saying was common ‘some Years ago’, and there is no evidence of its currency during Churchill’s time; had there been, his own usage of it would hardly have been as striking as it was. This is the first of our evolutionary gaps: a common usage dies out, and then resurfaces over a century later, rejuvenated by its adoption by a public figure. But is it the same phrase, or a notion Churchill himself came upon independently? It is perhaps not outside the bounds of possibility that what seems a particularly apt metaphor for both the persistence and the darkness of depression might be conceived of independently by one of its sufferers. Nonetheless, there is sufficient evidence to suggest otherwise. Both Johnson and Churchill were famous for their sharp-tongued retorts, and in an essay on Churchill, Anthony Storr notes that he ‘was fond of quoting Dr Johnson’.<sup>20</sup> Reviewing a book on Churchill, Richard M. Langworth quotes Churchill as having said ‘words to the effect that when one is about to be hanged, “it concentrates the mind wonderfully”’<sup>21</sup>, and is subsequently taken to task by a reader who notes that the attribution should originally be to Samuel Johnson, citing another Johnson quote often used by Churchill. In response, the journal’s editor concedes that ‘Churchill had a photographic memory and often ran off his favourite quotes, not always with attribution’.<sup>22</sup> Churchill’s familiarity with the work of Samuel Johnson and documented propensity for ‘lifting’ quotes from that work without citing the source makes it a reasonable assumption that the source of his own usage lies with Johnson, and thereby, with Thrale, and the common saying to which she refers.

Having established the link between Churchill’s Black Dog and what Mrs Thrale claims to have been a common-use phrase around the eighteenth century, the task is then to determine the etymology of the phrase itself. If are to believe Mrs Thrale, the

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<sup>20</sup> Anthony Storr, *Churchill's black dog, Kafka's mice, and other phenomena of the human mind* (New York: Grove Press, 1988), p. 38.

<sup>21</sup> Review of Larry Krysk, *The Churchill Factors: Creating Your Finest Hour* (Victoria, Trafford, 2000), in *Finest Hour* no. 110, Spring, 2001, on-line: <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=318>, accessed 10/12/04.

<sup>22</sup> The exchange takes place on-line at <http://www.winstonchurchill.org/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageid=288>, accessed 10/12/04.



links is via Dr Henry More, to Appollonius Tyaneus in the first century AD. If we are to believe *Brewer*, the phrase is directly linked to a passage from the Roman poet Horace, whose work dates from around 40BC, and interestingly, contemporary translations of Horace's work also seek to make this connection, in a way which can easily mislead the historian without recourse to the original material. In his translation of a key passage from Horace's *Satires II*, John Conington, a Corpus Professor of Latin at Oxford University, cites the character of the slave, Davus, as saying:

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>23</sup>

Were this a literal translation of the original Latin, it would be a useful breadcrumb indeed. Although there is no direct reference to melancholy or depression in these lines, the picture of a person struggling with himself is clearly drawn; at the same time, there is a telling association of the dog with that internal struggle, what might readily be interpreted as a lyrical representation of melancholy or depression. The 'black dog' metaphor, however, is introduced in the process of translation, rather than being extant in the original manuscript, which reads *comes atra* or, literally, 'black companion'.<sup>24</sup> In an interesting inter-textual red-herring for the historian, Conington's translation maintains the spirit of the original, while introducing the figure of the dog, presumably under the influence of its contemporary currency. While Horace warns that the sight of an actual black dog portends bad luck, and uses the figurative phrase 'black companion' for what seems to be a kind of internal struggle or malaise, he does not directly, as Conington's translation would suggest, make the link between the black dog and the melancholic state.

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<sup>23</sup> Q. Horatius Flaccus, *Satires II*, trans John Conington, available on-line via Project Gutenberg and accessed 17/01/05 at: <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/gutbook/lookup?num=5419>

<sup>24</sup> Q. Horatius Flaccus, *Satires II*, Frances Muecke, intr. and trans. (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1993), VII, lines 166.

Also inconvenient for the historian seeking to link either Horace or Appollonius to the contemporary metaphor, is the fact that there is an enormous chronological gap between their writings and the eighteenth century. We have already noted the apparent death of the phrase in the space of a single century before Churchill revived it; how can it be reasonable to assume that it should have, prior to this, endured stolidly across some seventeen-hundred years? Despite the associative links that can be made between the two black-dog references, there is no real evidence to suggest a more direct link between the two. Another possible connection may be found in the Legend of the Black Dog of Bungay, an account of which was written by a clergyman named Abraham Fleming:

This black dog, or the divil in such a likenesse ... passing by another man of the congregation in the church, gave him such a gripe on the back, that therewith all he was presently drawn together and shrunk up, as it were a peece of lether scorched in a hot fire ...<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding doubts in some circles as to whether the author of the leaflet was an actual witness to the event,<sup>26</sup> this version of the Black Dog's visit in 1577 was widely circulated and remains a key aspect of folkloric narrative in Suffolk, a county proximate to Mrs Thrale's home-town of Streatham, in Greater London. This account, in which a devilish black dog physically attacks a man *on his back*, resulting not in his death, but in him being 'drawn together and shrunk up', is also reminiscent of the phrase 'The Black Dog is upon his Back' which Mrs Thrale cites as being in common usage two centuries later.

The Black Dog which appears in the Bungay Legend is representative of a broader folkloric phenomenon in Britain and Europe at the time. Sightings of devilish black dogs — in a variety of forms and appellations, among them Barghest, Hell Hound, and Whist Hound — were well-documented, and often associated with so-called

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<sup>25</sup> Abraham Fleming, 'A Straunge and Terrible Wunder wrought very late in the parish Church of Bungay', excerpt on-line: <http://nli.northampton.a.uk/ass/psych-staff/sjs/Bungay.htm>, accessed 15/01/05.

<sup>26</sup> See <http://nli.northampton.ac.uk/ass/psych-staff/sjs/Bungay.htm>, accessed 15/01/05.

liminal, or ‘border-spaces’ between this world and the next, such as graveyards, intersections and ley lines.<sup>27</sup> The creature’s appearance was commonly believed to be ominous, to herald some kind of disaster. Theo Brown makes an important distinction in this regard, noting that disaster might be communal or personal, but was usually the latter;<sup>28</sup> that is, popular belief was that a sighting of the Black Dog marked an individual in some way, generating an expectation of personal calamity. It is not difficult to imagine how the internalised sense of foreboding, the pall cast over one’s life by such a sighting might translate into a generalised sense of melancholy, again firming the association in the popular imagination between the Black Dog and a depressed state.

As is suggested by the Bungay account, which notes that the black dog may be ‘the divil in such a likeness’, the association between this creature and the supernatural or otherworldly realm is long-established. This association, which sees the Black Dog appearing as one of the Devil’s guises, a witch’s familiar, as guardian or gate-keeper of the world of the dead, or as a ‘psychopomp’, a creature which enables the transition of spirits to that other world, is both cross-cultural and ancient, a staple of Greek, Roman, Egyptian, Middle-Eastern and Norse mythologies.<sup>29</sup> In a contemporary sense, this representation of the Black Dog emerges in literature in forms such as Goethe’s Mephistopheles, or Conan Doyle’s Hounds of the Baskervilles.<sup>30</sup> In classical texts, we find the dog in Horace, and in Appollonius, cited by *Brewer* and *Thrale* respectively as the likely originators of its use a metaphor for depression. As I have suggested, however, the menacing connotations which are crucial to these representations of the black dog, have much more ancient roots, via their associations with mythological figures such as Hecate, Anubis, and Cerberus. While it is true that the dogs associated with these figures are not necessarily black, they nonetheless establish a relationship

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<sup>27</sup> For a discussion of this issue, see Theo Brown, ‘The Black Dog in English Folklore’, in J. R. Porter and W. M. S. Russell, eds, *Animals in Folklore* (Cambridge: Brewer, 1978), pp. 45-58. A ley line is defined as a kind of energy channel in the nervous system of the Earth; it was believed that spirits used to travel along these ancient paths

<sup>28</sup> ‘The Black Dog in English Folklore’, p. 57.

<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of this issue see, for example: ‘The Black Dog in English Folklore’; Bob Trubshaw, ‘Black Dogs: Guardians of the Corpse Ways’, *Mercian Mysteries*, 20, August 1994; Leslie Preston-Day, ‘Dog Burials in the Greek World’, *American Journal of Archaeology*, 88 (1984), 21-31; and F. Jenkins, ‘The Role of the Dog in Romano-Gaulish Religion’, *Latomus*, 16, 60-76.

<sup>30</sup> Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von, *Faust* (2<sup>nd</sup> edn., London: Macmillan, 1909), Part I, Scene 2.

between the canine and the underworld to which later representations of the black dog owe a debt.<sup>31</sup>

The question, then, as to how a few lines from Horace and Appollonius could have evolved across so many centuries, persisting until their appearance in the form Mrs Thrale notes, might be answered in a number of ways. Perhaps this did not occur at all. Perhaps the phrase to which she refers comes directly from the incident at Bungay; the link certainly seems a more direct one in many ways. The history of language and symbol, however, is never straightforward. To this point, I have attempted to follow an at-times somewhat tenuous trail of breadcrumbs to examine the history of the Black Dog metaphor, to uncover its point of origin. I would contend, however, that ultimately, such a point does not exist, and that the evolution of the metaphor is better conceived of as a process of cross-pollination, a circulation of complementary discourses which feed into and inform each other, culminating in the specific image we have today, rather than as a linear process in which a single, identifiable 'original' usage develops and evolves over time. Horace's associations of the black dog with both 'bad luck' and an internal struggle with self may be the first direct references of this kind, but they are predicated on an existing broader discourse which associates the figure of the dog with death and decay. The Black Dog of Bungay makes the direct reference to the Black Dog being on a person's back, which Horace lacks, but there is no explicit reference here to either bad luck or melancholy. The spectral Black Dogs of British folklore combine associations with the devil and their ancient positioning as gatekeepers of the Otherworld to act as earthly omens of disaster. Each of these constructions emphasises a different aspect of the creature, and the combination of these operates in an inter-textual process to give the image of the Black Dog the range of associations it has acquired across its long history. To speak of a point of origin becomes moot, since the metaphor as we know it is the sum of all these parts, in complex relationship with each other over time.

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<sup>31</sup> For a discussion of the relationship between these classical dog-figures the spectral Black Dogs of British folklore, see, for example, 'The Black Dog in English Folklore', and 'Black Dogs: Guardians of the Corpseways'.

To this point, I have referred largely to the Black Dog as a compound phrase, without considering the individual elements of the image. As I mentioned earlier, for a phrase, or a symbol to enter common usage, it has to capture the popular imagination, proving itself equal to the task of representing, in this case, melancholy or depression. I have argued that the composite image of the Black Dog itself has been subject to an inter-textual process by which a range of different references combine to add weight to its currency; to this, I now add that each part of the image, taken separately, also has a role to play in this process. As Robert Burton notes, the very word ‘melancholia’ stems in part from the Greek word *melaina*, meaning ‘black’.<sup>32</sup> The longstanding symbolic associations of blackness with the supernatural, and with negative emotions are indisputable, and as Allan Ingram observes, ‘From the earliest writers onwards, melancholy is rarely discussed without attendant images of blackness and obscurity’.<sup>33</sup>

Less obvious, perhaps, but no less compelling, are the canine associations with melancholy. Burton contends that of all other animals, dogs are most subject to melancholy, ‘insomuch as some hold they dream as men do, and through violence of melancholy run mad’.<sup>34</sup> Early medical writers documented a phenomenon they dubbed *melancholia canina*, in which sufferers were observed to go out howling at night,<sup>35</sup> and a number of early texts make explicit associations between the dog and a state of melancholy. The figure of the dog in ‘Melancholia I’, a sixteenth-century engraving by Albrecht Dürer, has been described as ‘a fellow-sufferer with melancholia’, and the same scholars cite a range of sources which are unequivocal as to the link between the canine and the melancholic.<sup>36</sup> Of particular relevance to the present investigation is the claim by the eleventh-century Hebrew astrologer Ibn Ezra that the *canes nigri* — or black dog — is the beast of Saturn, the melancholy god.<sup>37</sup> That both key elements in the image have direct associations with depression in their

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<sup>32</sup> Robert Burton, *The Anatomy of Melancholy, I* (London: George Bell & Sons, 1896), p. 193

<sup>33</sup> *Boswell’s Creative Gloom*, p. 15

<sup>34</sup> *The Anatomy of Melancholy, I*, p. 87.

<sup>35</sup> Carol Falvo Heffernan, ‘That Dog Again: “Melancholia Canina and Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*”’, *Modern Philology*, 84(2), 185-90 (p. 188).

<sup>36</sup> cited in Heffernan, p. 189.

<sup>37</sup> cited in Heffernan, p. 190.

own right adds more inter-textual layers to the image of the Black Dog itself, making its resonance as a metaphor significantly more compelling and multi-dimensional.

The way in which the metaphor has evolved in terms of usage and connotations is reflected in a concomitant evolution in the particular language of the expression. In Horace, 'the black dog follows you and hangs/close on your skirts with hungry fangs'; in Mrs Thrale's common-use phrase, 'the Black Dog is upon his back'; in *Brewer*, 'a black dog has walked over him'; for Johnson, it was the black dog which 'worried him' and 'continued barking'; for Churchill, it became the 'black dog on [the] shoulder'; and in more contemporary usage, we find it referred to often simply as 'the black dog'. What is visible in this process is a gradual stripping away of the oppressive actions, until only the figure of the dog itself remains, in much the same way that, in Australian culture, the entire complex narrative of the Ned Kelly story has come to be distilled into the iconic armour, into a single, dark eye-hole. Here, the black dog itself comes to be associated with depression, the layers of inter-textual associations that make it such a compelling metaphor rendered largely invisible.

It should be clear, then, that in terms of its historical origins, the Black Dog is not Churchill's, but rather an image whose history likely extends back to classical mythology, and whose endurance in a range of forms owes itself to a plethora of literary, folkloric, psychological, and linguistic factors. The Black Dog is Johnson's and Thrale's and Horace's and Saturn's and many others' besides; there is no single point of origin, no tidy trail of evidence to be followed in a satisfying linear fashion, but rather a complex and untidy multi-layered process of evolution. I have argued that in a historical sense, the image is not Churchill's, but I would like to conclude by arguing that, in every other sense, it most certainly is. This investigation began with Churchill, and must end with him, because while its central proposition has been to move the Black Dog further and further away from Churchill, to locate its earliest origins, the fact is that it is he who is directly responsible for its contemporary currency.

As previously mentioned, it was Churchill who revived the phrase, almost certainly from his reading of Samuel Johnson. Many others, of course, have read Johnson; many others are familiar with Horace and More and Thrale and the Black Dogs of Britain. But it is because of who Churchill was, and the particular way in which he returned the Black Dog to popular consciousness, that it has evolved into the symbol we have today. He recognised his own suffering in it, and adopted it, and because of his public profile and the unique circumstances of his life, added dimensions to the metaphor that gave it a broader appeal. In association with Churchill, depression becomes something one can struggle with, but not be overcome by, something that can be associated with a figure who is successful and celebrated, a statesman able to inspire a nation. It is a combination of his high profile, and the striking juxtaposition of his public achievements and personal struggle, that have rejuvenated and returned the Black Dog to common parlance as part of the next stage of its evolution. The contemporary Black Dog is in evidence in music, art, literature, and film,<sup>38</sup> taking on a new life of its own, a life prefigured by the myriad of early incarnations discussed in this essay, but which is made possible in its current form, in contemporary culture, only via Churchill's intervention. Historical breadcrumbs aside, the Black Dog we know today is Churchill's, and it is against his own personal history that it takes on its contemporary dimensions, re-configuring depression as something from which one can separate oneself, something to be named, lived with, transcended. Although history may deny that it is Churchill's Black Dog, on the most important of levels, it most certainly is.

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<sup>38</sup> In the music of bands such as Led Zeppelin (*Black Dog*), The Manic Street Preachers (*Black Dog on My Shoulder*), Things of Stone and Wood (*Churchill's Black Dog*); the poetry of Les Murray, who devoted a collection containing an essay and a series of poems to his own struggle with depression (*Killing the Black Dog*, [Sydney: The Federation Press, 1997]); the film *Black Dog* (1999, dir. Lou Birks, UK, BBC); and recent fiction and memoir by writers such as Ian McEwan, (*Black Dogs* [New York: Doubleday, 1992]), John Bentley Mays (*In the Jaws of the Black Dog* [London: Penguin, 1993]), among many others.

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**\* Creative work mentioned only in passing, as in n.38, has not been cited here. Full citation details may be found within the footnotes. Reference work not directly cited but used as background reading has been included in this list.**