



A review of
**Black Dog
Folklore**

Jacqueline Simpson

This book by Mark Norman is the first full-scale study of the recurrent figure of the Black Dog in British traditions, though the phenomenon had roused the curiosity of several previous folklorists, notably Theo Brown, who wrote a seminal article about it in *Folklore* in 1958. She also wrote various drafts of a book on the topic, and amassed a considerable amount of material, but never completed the work; after her death in 1993 all her archives on Devon folklore were deposited in the Exeter University Heritage Collections, where Mark Norman came upon them while researching local ghost-lore. Among them was a large box containing the drafts of her projected Black Dog book, plus a catalogue of more than 250 eyewitness accounts she had collected over the years. Fascinated, he decided to follow in her steps, and now, some twenty years later, he offers us the results, combining Theo's material with further archives from Janet Bord, and the results of his own research.

His book consists of two parts: ten chapters of analysis and discussion, followed by a catalogue/gazetteer of 719 Black Dog sightings and traditions throughout the British Isles – though the latter can only be a provisional record, since new examples could occur at any time. This catalogue is fascinating, but will constantly frustrate the serious researcher, since it has no source-notes; it is an indiscriminate mix of undated but apparently modern eye-witness accounts (e.g. 'A man returning from a fair is followed by a black dog with red eyes'), equally undated local legends ('an evil spirit in the shape of a black dog is said to have appeared at Midsummer Eve festivities at Kennick Farm . . .'), and occasional dated items presumably taken from books or press reports ('A report in 1930 of a man who sees a dog on the way to a bridge . . .'). However, Mark Norman offers (p.184) to supply more detailed information on the entries if requested.

The absence of source-notes sometimes also causes difficulty in assessing the value of statements in the chapters of discussion. For example on p.100 I found myself querying three points: that Odin 'kept two dogs'; that Thor 'had a dog named Shukr'; and that the Viking Guthrum, Alfred's opponent, was nicknamed 'the great Black Dog

of Langport'. So I investigated them. The first is a simple misunderstanding: Odin had two *wolves*, but in the kennings of skaldic verse they are occasionally referred to as his dogs. The second is not found in Viking-age or medieval sources, which never mention dogs in connection with Thor; however, since Thor is currently enjoying a vigorous afterlife as a superhero in comics and computer games, he may now have acquired one. And as for Guthrum's alleged nickname, the only relevant information to be found by googling is that a Somerset wassailing song contains the apparently nonsensical line that 'The great dog of Langport has burnt his tail', which Cecil Sharp speculatively suggested might refer to the repulse of some Viking raid, though he did not mention any leader by name.

However, these minor flaws do not diminish the usefulness of Mark Norman's main chapters. He has demonstrated that in the vast majority of cases the image of the Black Dog is of a benign protective force or a neutral presence, not a demonic being nor a death omen. This is a more striking fact than he himself realises, since the devil-as-dog is a widespread motif in continental Europe, and did occur in earlier times in Britain: in 1450 the rebel Jack Cade was accused of practising magic and 'raising the divell in the semblance of a black dogge'; during the Civil War it was widely rumoured that Prince Rupert's pet Boy was a demonic familiar; and there is the well-known incident of the Black Dog of Bungay, a 'hellish monster' that attacked the church and villagers during a thunderstorm in 1577. Yet in more recent superstitions and tales it appears to be only *groups* of dogs that are regarded as sinister – spectral air-borne packs such as the Whisht Hounds and Gabriel Hounds for instance, and the ghostly hounds accompanying or pursuing the evil dead in some local legends.

In other chapters, Mark Norman explores such topics as the localities where Black Dogs are most commonly seen, which not surprisingly turn out to be roads and bridges – places you might expect to see real dogs; the canine 'bogey beasts' variously known as barguests, shucks, or padfoots; the Church Grim; and 'the Black Dog in the landscape'. He has written an entertaining and thought-provoking survey, for which we must be grateful.

Author: Mark Norman.

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