

February 19, 2006  
Our Towns

## And You Thought a Black Cat Was Bad Luck

By [PETER APPLEBOME](#)

Meriden, Conn.

THE most famous account of the mysterious Black Dog of the Hanging Hills hinges on this portentous declaration: "It may seem strange that a man of science should believe a thing of this kind — an idle tale for the ignorant and superstitious, you will say — but I do believe it. And if you would know why, listen:"

And thus commences a tale told more than a century ago by one W. H. C. Pynchon. It concerns a dog, the color of "an old black hat that has been soaked in the rain" that wanders the craggy volcanic hills and valleys around Meriden. Meet it once, the legend goes, it shall be for joy. Meet it twice, it shall be for sorrow. Meet it a third time, you're dead.

So it might also seem strange that on Friday, a thoroughly modern man of science, a natural science blogger, author, and energetic bundle of enthusiasms named Brendan Hanrahan was excitedly prowling the West Peak of the Hanging Hills, the very spot Pynchon had visited more than a century ago.

"What a beautiful day to be up here," he shouted over a howling wind, the fog, drizzle and chill giving the scene a sort of "Wuthering Heights" effect. "It's just like the weather must have been when Pynchon was here."

Or maybe it's not so strange at all. Tell it in a 19th century journal, post it on a 21st century blog, throw in sundry wispy mysteries and who could resist the black dog's spell?

In truth, the black dog, sometimes with fiery red eyes, is a persistent figure in folk tales around the world, like the hound that entered a church during a violent storm on Aug. 4, 1577, in Bungay, England, where it killed two people and injured another. Or so it's said. I wasn't there.

The best known account of Meriden's entry in the black dog sweepstakes was written in the Connecticut Quarterly in 1898 by Pynchon, a geologist who earned a master's degree from Harvard, and taught at Trinity College in Hartford for many years. (He was also the grandfather of the novelist Thomas Pynchon).

He described a short-haired black dog of moderate size that barked but made no sound and roamed the hills but left no footprint in dust or snow.

His account concludes with a horrible accident suffered by a fellow geologist who encounters the dog for the third time. The geologist sees the dog, breath steaming from his open jaws but no sound coming out, and blurts out: "I did not believe it before. I believe it now; and it is the third time." Then the rock collapses beneath him and he falls to his death.

Since then almost any fatal accident has been attributed to the black dog.

MR. Hanrahan, who writes guidebooks on the natural wonders of Connecticut, a place, it turns out, of dizzying geological complexity, and has a blog called Connecticut Wonders of the Natural World (<http://cttrips.blogspot.com>), first heard about the legend in a talk given at the site by an eminent geologist, Dr. Jelle Zeilinga de Boer of Wesleyan University.

Mr. Hanrahan posted an account on his blog. Sure enough, a reader soon responded with a black dog sighting at Castle Craig, the tower visible atop the Hanging Hills.

"Things just don't sneak up on me without me being aware of them, but I swear this dog just appeared," the reader reported. And soon there was his photo of a black dog at the site.

Now this could be an amazing coincidence. It could be "Twilight Zone" stuff. It could be a reminder than any middle school student with an Internet connection can now place a black dog atop [Dick Cheney's](#) head. It could be the black dog himself with a modem and a sense of humor.

Alas, Mr. Hanrahan didn't catch a glimpse of the dog Friday. Still, in the tale of the black dog the play has always been at least part of the thing. So in many tellings Pynchon returned to the site for a third time and was found dead at the same location where his friend died, a tale marred slightly by the fact that he died on Jan. 2, 1910, in Oyster Bay, N.Y.

But then, any reader of Pynchon the younger would know not to be too smug about what we think we know. So maybe there's an evil black dog atop the Hanging Hills and maybe it's just fodder for scary campfire tales. But if you see one there, it might be a good idea not to go back.

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