The Black Country

David Horovitz (pp. 25–34)

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ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight

CPNE	*Cornish Place-Name Elements*.
EPNE	*English Place-Name Elements*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN BdHu	*The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire*.
PN Brk	*The Place-Names of Berkshire*, Parts **1**, **2** and **3**.
PN Bu	*The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire*.
PN Ca	*The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*.
PN Ch	*The Place-Names of Cheshire*, Parts **1**–**5**.
PN Cu	*The Place-Names of Cumberland*, Parts **1**, **2** and **3**.
PN D	*The Place-Names of Devon*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN Db	*The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, Parts **1**, **2** and **3**.
PN Do	*The Place-Names of Dorset*, Parts **1**–**4**.
PN Du	*The Place-Names of County Durham*, Part **1**.
PN Ess	*The Place-Names of Essex*.
PN ERY	*The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York*.
PN Gl	*The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, Parts **1**–**4**.
PN Hrt	*The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*.
PN Le	*The Place-Names of Leicestershire*, Parts **1**–**6**.
PN Li	*The Place-Names of Lincolnshire*, Parts **1**–**7**.
PN Mx	*The Place-Names of Middlesex* (apart from the *City of London*).
PN Nf	*The Place-Names of Norfolk*, Parts **1**–**3**.
PN Nt	*The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire*.
PN NRY	*The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire*.
PN Nth	*The Place-Names of Northamptonshire*.
PN O	*The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN R	*The Place-Names of Rutland*.
PN Sa	*The Place-Names of Shropshire*, Parts **1**–**6**.
PN Sr	*The Place-Names of Surrey*.
PN St	*The Place-Names of Staffordshire*, Part **1**.
PN Sx	*The Place-Names of Sussex*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN W	*The Place-Names of Wiltshire*.
PN Wa	*The Place-Names of Warwickshire*.
PN We	*The Place-Names of Westmorland*, Parts **1** and **2**.
PN Wo	*The Place-Names of Worcestershire*.
PN WRY	*The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, Parts **1**–**8**.

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David Horovitz

In the early nineteenth century the expression *Black Country* was applied to a number of places, mainly African countries such as Ethiopia and Sudan ('Soudan'), but whether from the skin colour of the natives or their unfamiliarity with the Christian religion, or both, is unclear. The term was also applied to other places, such as the area on the Belgian border known as Neur-Pai (Noir Pays) 'Black Country' (according to the *Penny Cyclopaedia of the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge*, vol. 1, 1833: 293), because it contained no limestone. Later the term came to be applied in particular to an industrialised area of the West Midlands to the west of Birmingham. The origin of the expression in that context, the date of its coinage, and the extent of the area encompassed by the term, have long been, and indeed are likely to remain, the subject of speculation and debate.

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED s.v. *black a*.19), the expression Black Country is first found in the diary of Charles Mayne Young in 1834. The diary entry (dated 22nd July) compares a village in Lincolnshire with 'the densely populated black country, with its smoke and blasts and furnaces' (Young 1871: 205). However, the diary was not published until 1871, and it is clear that the entries have not been printed verbatim – many incorporate episodes from a later date, and the diary has evidently been edited retrospectively. It would be very unsafe to rely on the entry supposedly of 1834 as evidence for early use of the expression.

The OED also mentions a speech by J. P. Dyott, mayor of Walsall, on 9th April 1849, who used the expression at the official opening of the South Staffordshire railway line. As will be seen, however, there are many examples of the use of the term Black Country predating 1849.

In the first (and, to date, only) volume published by The English Place-Name Society on the place-names of Staffordshire in 1984, J. P. Oakden observed that the Black Country was

> a 19th [century] district name coined in the early part of the century for the heavily industrialized part of South Stafford-shire, including Aldridge, Bilston, Brierley Hill, Coseley,

> Darlaston, Rowley Regis, Sedgley, Smethwick, Tettenhall, Tipton, Walsall, Wednesbury, Wednesfield, West Bromwich, Willenhall and Wolverhampton, all in St[affordshire], but it also included Dudley, Halesowen, Oldbury and Stourbridge in Wo[rcestershire].

After noting the examples provided by the OED, Oakden concluded that 'The name is derived from the murk produced by the collieries, blast furnaces and foundries set up in these places during the industrial revolution because of the presence of the South Staffordshire coalfield with its coal, iron ore, fireclays and limestone' (PN St 2).[1]

The 15th edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1986, vol. 11: 253) describes the Black Country as an

> industrial area closely corresponding to the small south Staffordshire coalfield in the Midlands region of England; its name derives from its pollution-coated industrial landscape. The Black Country extends immediately to the west of the city of Birmingham, which itself lies off the coalfield, and makes up the western part of the metropolitan county of West Midlands. The cluster of industrial towns that earned this appellation sprang up in the 18th century with the intense exploitation and local use of coal and iron-ore resources. Collieries, blast-furnaces, and foundries filled the air with smoke and grime …

One of the earliest examples of the expression Black Country (though without capitals), is found in *The Youth's Magazine, Or Evangelical Miscellany for the Year 1846*, where we find the following: 'Who shall count the numbers of the old, and middle-aged, and in the wretched cottages of this black country [an unnamed mining district in the west of England], who know and love their Saviour…' (4th series, vol. 9, 1846: 102). The ambiguous extract does not help us to determine why the term was adopted, since it may refer to the dirt and grime of the industrialised areas, but (from the title of the publication in which it appears) may equally refer to the absence of Christian beliefs amongst its inhabitants.

The most influential publication in promoting the term Black Country, however, was without doubt a volume describing a fictional colliery hamlet in the West Midlands reformed by religious teaching and the construction of a church. Published in 1846, *Colton Green: A Tale of the Black Country, or a region of Mines and Forges in Staffordshire*, by the Rev. William

Gresley (1801–76), an astonishingly prolific author of religious and social tracts (DNB s.n.), proved very popular, enjoyed a wide circulation, and was certainly the first book to use the expression Black Country in its title. It is very likely that the expression was known in the area before Gresley published his work — a review in the *London Morning Post* on 21st November 1846 noted that 'The scene of this story lies in that part of Staffordshire to which the constant exhumation of its mineral riches has long since given the well-known name of the Black Country' — but the popularity of the work ensured that the term soon reached a much wider audience, both within and far beyond the Black Country itself. From the sub-title and context it is clear that the author used the expression Black Country to denote the physical landscape of the region, but it is very possible that he recognised the ambiguity of the term, which could also be applied to areas where the teachings of the gospel were particularly needed.

By 1851 a volume by Samuel Sydney with the title *Rides on Railways leading to the Lake & Mountain Districts of Cumberland, North Wales, and the Dales of Derbyshire, with a glance at Oxford, Birmingham, Liverpool and other manufacturing towns* helpfully provides one of the earliest descriptions of its extent: 'The Black Country – Walsall, Dudley, Wednesbury, Darlaston' (1851: 124), adding that

> The first diverging railway after Handsworth, on the road to the north is what, for want of a better name, is called South Staffordshire, which connects Birmingham with Dudley, Walsall, Lichfield and Tamworth, thus uniting the most purely agricultural with the most thoroughly manufacturing districts, and especially with that part of the great coal-field which is locally known as the 'Black Country'. In this Black Country, including West Bromwich, Wednesbury, Dudley and Darlaston, Bilston, Wolverhampton and several minor villages, a perpetual twilight reigns during the day, and during the night fires on all sides light up the dark landscape with fiery glow. … It would be a useful lesson for any one who is particularly well satisfied with the moral, educational and religious life of his countrymen, to make a little journey through this Black Country. He will find that the amiable enthusiasts who meet every May at Exeter Hall to consider the best means of converting certain aboriginal tribes in Africa, India, and the Islands of the Pacific, need not go so far to find human beings more barbarous and yet more easily reclaimed (1851: 126).[2]

Sydney's description is of particular interest for the statement that the term Black Country was applied to part of the great coal-field,[3] and also for the implication that the term might be understood to refer to the absence of Christian beliefs amongst the inhabitants.

We are accordingly left with three possible derivations for the expression: (i) from the dirt and grime associated with the pits and furnaces of the area, (ii) from the lack of morals and absence of Christian beliefs of those living and working in the area, and (iii) from the name of a coal-field lying beneath the same area. It is possible, if not likely, but difficult to prove, that at least some of those using the phrase in the 1840s and 1850s did so fully aware that it could carry more than one connotation.

In 1851 the *Minutes of the Committee on Education* include the words '… round the "black country", as the iron basin between Wolverhampton and Dudley is called …' (1851: 617), and in the same year *The Civil Engineer and Architects' Journal incorporated with The Architect* (vol. 14, 1851: 185) mentions 'the coal and iron district so appropriately termed the "Black Country"'. Evidently the term Black Country is used in both cases to describe the physical landscape.

Writing from Wolverhampton on 3rd November 1854, Charles Dickens recorded in a letter to his sister-in-law and his eldest daughter that 'we came through a part of the Black Country that you know, and it looked at its blackest. All the furnaces seemed in full blast, and all the coal-pits to be working' (1938: 68). It seems safe to assume that the second sentence explains the use of the expression Black Country in the first.

In 1855 a letter from a D. Griffiths was published in *The Christian Witness and Church Members' Magazine* which included a helpful reference to 'what is called "the black country", including Oldbury, Greatbridge, Walsall, Tipton, Gornal, Wolverhampton, and Bilston …' (vol. 12, 1855: 537). Whilst the boundaries of the area are not mentioned, we are given a useful indication of some of the places included in the expression.

W. J. Lake, in *The Book of Object Lessons, A Teacher's Manual*, published in 1858, writes of 'Iron-works generally situated on or near coal-fields [...] e.g. in South Wales (Merthyr Tydvil); South Staffordshire, "the black country" (Wednesbury, Dudley, West Bromwich, Tipton) …' (1858: 6).

In the following year Hiram Fuller records in *Sparks from a Locomotive; or Life and Liberty in Europe*, a book published in America:

> The whole region round about [Great Malvern] is classic and historic ground; and the very atmosphere redolent of poetic associations. We approach it by passing through Stafford,

Wolverhampton, and what is generally known as the "Black Country" – where the smoke from the manufactories (and flames too) from myriads of tall chimneys ascendeth up forever, blackening the face of heaven, and blotting out the light of day (1859: 34).

By 1860 Walter White, in his *All Around the Wrekin*, could include a section 'To the Black Country', noting that 'The name is eminently descriptive, for blackness everywhere prevails: the ground is black, the atmosphere is black, and the underground is honey-combed by mining galleries stretching in utter blackness for many a league' (1860: 6). In the same year Charles Dickens published *The Uncommercial Traveller*, in which he felt compelled to comment on '… the moral blackness of the Black Country … Light is much wanted in the Black Country. O we are all agreed on that … the Blackness of the Black Country' (1861: 244). Clearly Dickens was ascribing the epithet Black Country to what he saw as the base morality of the inhabitants.

A description of 'A Saturday Night in the Black Country', published in *Dublin University Magazine*, 1861, noted of the Black Country that '[i]ts entire length, from north to south, is a little more than twenty miles, extending from Stourbridge in Worcestershire, over Cannock Chase, to Beverton, near Badgeley, and its breadth is about ten, Walsall and Wolverhampton being its opposite boundaries' (vol. 58, July 1861: 114). Neither Beverton nor Badgley have been identified. Written by 'H.H.B.', *Black Diamonds; or, The Gospel of a Colliery District*, published in the same year, tells us that

> The name – 'The Black Country' – is eminently descriptive of the South Stafford coal-field, for blackness prevails everywhere throughout the district, from Birmingham to Wolverhampton, and from Walsall to Dudley. The ground is black, the atmosphere is black, the houses are black, the water is black, the people are black. So black, in fact, that the visitor will find it difficult to spend an hour or two in it without having black hands and a black face (1861: 6–7).

In 1862 a contributor identified only as D. P. could write in *Once a Week, An Illustrated Miscellany of Literature, Art, Science & Popular Information* under the caption *The Ten Yard Seam*:

> If the reader will take a geologically coloured map of England, and placing one leg of a pair of compasses upon the town of

Dudley, describe a circle having a radius of about three miles, its circumference will be found to include the darkest tinted patch throughout the whole country, — a district not dark upon the map alone, but densely and detestably black in actual dirt reality. This is the south Staffordshire coal-field, commonly known as the 'black country', and certainly no region could better deserve the characteristic sobriquet it bears, for, compared with its foulness, even Sheffield is pure, and Leeds embodies cleanliness. The whole area of this the finest and most valuable of the British coal-fields lies under a perpetual cloud of smoke; the landscape is barren, treeless, and wretched beyond all description … seen under its worst aspect, with a low sky and driving rain, the black country is almost Dantean in its horribleness … (1 February 1862: 148).

It will be noted that 'D. P.', like Samuel Sydney in 1851, believed that the term Black Country derived from the grimly damaged landscape of the area which lay above the South Staffordshire coal-field, a belief that has survived to the present day (e.g. Beaver 1945).

The following year it was said in *The Edinburgh Review* that 'the "Black Country", [is] the name popularly given to those portions of the Midlands district from which verdure has retreated before the encroachments of the manufacturer' (vol. 239, January 1863: 210).

In the late 1860s the expression was in widespread use, and reached an even larger audience with the publication of Elihu Burritt's well-received *Walks in The Black Country and its Green Borderland* in 1868.[4] Burritt was American Consul in Birmingham, and took a particular interest in the social and industrial environment of the West Midlands and the history and development of the towns and villages of the area.

To demonstrate how the notional boundaries of the Black Country expanded over less than three decades it is only necessary to note that included under the heading Black Country in *The Commercial Directory and Shipper's Guide* of 1872 are Bilston, Bromsgrove, Cradley, Darlaston, Dudley, Kidderminster, Oldbury, Redditch, Smethwick, Stourbridge, Tipton, Walsall, Wednesbury, West Bromwich, Willenhall, and Wolverhampton (4th edn, 1872: 98a–101a).

It is clear that inclusion within the area known as the Black Country was not necessarily seen as a badge of honour. Frederick J. Willmore, who wrote a carefully researched history of Walsall published in 1887, was anxious to emphasize to his readers that '[Walsall] lies some distance outside the limits of the "Black Country", a fact for which it is indebted to a wide range of

green fields, pleasant walks, and a healthy, bracing atmosphere' (1887: 6).[5] In his history of Bloxwich, published in 1955, E. J. Homeshaw merely noted Willmore's observation, adding that 'The periphery of the Black Country extends from Bloxwich through Willenhall and Wednesfield to Wolverhampton, turning south and east of Sedgley to Stourbridge, then east to the outskirts of Halesowen, and north north east through Oldbury and West Bromwich back to Walsall [including Birchills and Leamore]' (1955: 1).

As if to emphasise the difficulty in delineating the extent of the Black Country, J. Wilson-Jones resorts to quixotic whimsy in his 1940s volume *The History of the Black Country*, writing, 'in my opinion the "Black Country" is defined as the lovely Mercian rural England ruined by the nineteenth century Iron Age and distinguished by a Chaucerian dialect' (n.d.: 1), but later takes a more sober approach to record that

> The true Black Country lies between the Great Bentley fault near Walsall, the Eastern boundary fault, California through Oldbury towards Walsall, and the Western Boundary fault through Hayes and Dennis Park towards Wolverhampton. Within this area the dominant geological feature is the Carboniferous or Coal Measure; near Rowley stands the outcrop of igneous rock, and north of Dudley, towards Wolverhampton and near Walsall, the Silurian rocks. Outside this area are the Pirmean beds upon which West Bromwich stands, the pebble beds and Keuper sandstone (n.d.: 9).

In the 1990s Richard Trainor perceptively observed that Black Country is 'a term which has caused considerable confusion as it has evolved from a slang phrase into a geographer's label' (1993: 1), a statement well illustrated by a paper titled 'The Black Country 1800–1950' by Johnson and Wise, published in 1950, who had observed that

> Definition of the extent of the Black Country is an exercise attempted by many writers. By some the boundary of the Black Country is considered to coincide with the limit of the outcrop of the Middle Coal Measures. The extent of the Black Country, to others, is related simply to the distribution of heavy industries. Mr S. H. Beaver has classified carefully the essential ingredients of the cultural landscape and used these as a guide to assist in defining the boundaries of the district. All these are useful criteria; none of them is in itself sufficient, and all of them together may still not give a true picture of the

extent of this region. The Black Country is a true region …
bound together still by its mining and heavy industries, and by
the common ingredients of the landscape resulting from the
industrial development [of the mid-nineteenth century] …
bound together also by a complex series of social factors …
The Black Country may, therefore be recognised as a region,
within whose borders are contained a number of existing sub-
regions, smaller areas which exhibit their own special
peculiarities. The most important single sub-division of the
Black Country, whether on relief, geological, historical or
purely social grounds, is that into south-western and north-
eastern sectors, separated by the higher central limestone ridge
… Towns on the central ridge, more exclusively residential in
character, stand aloof from either of the two main sectors …
(1950: 247–8).

It will noted that although concluding that the Black Country is a true region
with borders, no attempt was made to define those borders.

The OED (s.v. *black a.*19) was prepared to define the Black Country as
'Parts of Staffordshire and Warwickshire grimed and blackened by the
smoke and dust of the coal and iron trades', an extraordinarily bland
definition of little help to anyone hoping to identify even the vaguest extent
of the area — the definition includes unnamed parts of Warwickshire but
excludes any part of Worcestershire. In its defence, the definition may relate
to the area at the date of publication (1933), but even then the area is
difficult to recognise as what was then known as the Black Country.

From the available evidence it seems likely that when first found in the
1840s, the expression Black Country was already seen as a convenient and
apt descriptive shorthand term for the nebulous area of mines and furnaces
to the north-west of Birmingham notorious for its resultant dirt and grime.
The expression was also understood to reflect in a secondary sense the
barbarous, uncouth and unchristian ways of at least some of the population
(though whether it was used deliberately with that ambiguity in mind is
difficult to determine), and it was soon noticed that the area coincided
geographically more or less with the great ten-yard coal seam, which seems
by some to have defined the extent of the Black Country itself.[6] So far as
precise boundaries are concerned, it seems fair to conclude that the term was
almost certainly

a generalised expression … for the nebulous and indeterminate
industrialised district to the west of Birmingham, the extent of

which has been, and assuredly will continue to be, the subject of much debate, even though it is certain that when first coined the expression was not used with specific boundaries in mind, so that no definitive area can ever be drawn (Horovitz 2005: 125).

What is clear is that many have long known exactly where the Black Country is, but, quite sensibly, few have deigned to say where its boundaries lie.[7]

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Notes

1. It is curious to see an association with the industrial revolution of the eighteenth century when the expression was coined in the nineteenth century. It is also surprising to see Tettenhall, in the nineteenth century a genteel outpost with a number of grand houses and villas built by wealthy ironmasters and merchants in the clean air to the west of Wolverhampton, but no industrial processes, included in the list of places within the Black Country; but it should be remembered that Oakden was from North Staffordshire and based in St Andrews, his health was not good, and he was not familiar with places in South Staffordshire. See also Horovitz 2005: 125.
2. A detailed description of the harsh lives of the inhabitants of the Black Country (undefined) is to be found in an anonymous account, 'The Black Country' in *The English Woman's Journal* 8 (1862), 83–7.
3. The statement in Horovitz 2005: 125 that no evidence has been traced to support popular folklore that the expression was associated originally with the extent of a particular coal-seam must be corrected.
4. It is worth noting that a review of Burritt's book by 'The Methodist' in *The Friends Intelligencer: A Religious and Family Journal*, 25 (1869), says that the title 'refers to that portion of England, with Birmingham at its centre'. It is generally accepted that Birmingham has never formed part of the Black Country, see e.g. Wilson-Jones (n.d.) 1.
5. See also 'Rambles About Town', *The Walsall Observer: and Repository of Local Literature*, 1, No. 4 (September 1862), 73–6.
6. VCH I (1908: 16) observes cryptically: 'The scenery of the South Staffordshire Coalfield is aptly described under the name "Black Country". The original surface features over wide areas are not only entirely obliterated by refuse heaps and grimy manufacturing towns and villages, but over all there rests, day and night, a canopy of black smoke'.
7. One notable exception being Richard Trainor whose map of the Black Country (albeit as in the later nineteenth century, by which time the term was commonplace and widely recognised) shows a roughly playing-card shaped area encompassing Bloxwich, Walsall, Sandwell, Smethwick, Halesowen, Stourbridge, Kingswinford, Himley, Wolverhampton, and Wednesfield (1993: 2).

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