

WILLIAM BLAKE'S
LIFE & WORKS



JASON WHITTAKER

ZOAMORPHOSIS ESSENTIAL INTRODUCTIONS

1. BLAKE'S LIFE & WORKS

FORTHCOMING

2. SONGS OF INNOCENCE AND OF EXPERIENCE

3. THE MARRIAGE OF HEAVEN AND HELL

WILLIAM BLAKE'S
LIFE & WORKS

JASON WHITTAKER

ZOAMORPHOSIS ESSENTIAL INTRODUCTIONS



RINTRAH BOOKS

Rintrah Books, Redruth, Cornwall



2010

This book may be shared freely under a Creative Commons licence so long as the author is attributed, but it may not be used for commercial purposes or modified without the author's consent.

For full details of this licence, go to: <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/2.0/uk/>.

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS	4
CHAPTER 1: EARLY LIFE	5
CHAPTER 2: ILLUMINATED PRINTING & REVOLUTIONARY LONDON	9
CHAPTER 3: FELPHAM AND THE RETURN TO LONDON	13
CHAPTER 4: LAST YEARS	17
SELECTED READING	20

ABBREVIATIONS

- BR G. E. Bentley, Jr. *Blake Records*. Second edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Life* Alexander Gilchrist. *Life of William Blake*. Edited by Ruthven Todd. Revised edition. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1945.
- Stranger* G. E. Bentley, Jr. *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.

All quotations are from David V. Erdman's *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Revised edition. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Doubleday, 1988. Citations are indicated by the letter E followed by the page number in Erdman's edition.

CHAPTER 1: EARLY LIFE

William was the third son of James and Catherine Blake. James Blake had been apprenticed as a draper, and is typically held to have been a Dissenter with liberal political sympathies (*Stranger* 3). Catherine Blake (née Wright) had previously been married to Thomas Armitage before she married James Blake.

Blake's parents were married on 15 October 1752 at St George's Hanover Square, and James Blake took over the hosiery and haberdashery shop previously run by the Armitages. Recent research (Davies 2006, Schuchard 2006) indicates that Catherine Blake had previously been allied to the Moravian church, a pietist tradition that emphasised love between its members and others. Despite previous assertions that Blake's family may have had links to the Muggletonians (Thompson 1993), the Moravian connection is currently held to be the strongest possible source for some of Blake's radical religious ideas in later life.

The Blakes were living at 28 Broad Street, Golden Square when Catherine gave birth to William, who was christened at the parish church of St James, Westminster. The area where the Blake was born had only recently been developed in what Bentley (*Stranger* 33) describes as a 'solidly bourgeois' neighbourhood, and by all accounts *William's* childhood was a happy one, his parents taking the enlightened view that such a boy would not benefit from education at school and so teaching him what they could at home.

In letters and accounts recorded by his earliest biographers, Blake spoke of visions from an early age, such as seeing God put his head to the window or angels in the trees at Peckham Rye. What few stories and incidents survive from this period are largely drawn from Alexander Gilchrist, including the vision of the Peckham angels (*Life* 6). He early demonstrated an aptitude for art as a young boy and at the age of ten was enrolled in the Drawing School of Henry Pars. Training mainly consisted of copying plaster casts of Greek and roman models (thus shaping Blake's neoclassical tastes in the form of art, if not his politics), as well as prints of famous paintings. The young William was also given an allowance to build up a collection of prints and books, developing a taste for literature that was to affect his later career.

APPRENTICESHIP TO JAMES BASIRE

At the age of 14, William was apprenticed to the engraver James Basire at 31 Great Queen Street, near Covent Garden, his father apparently having heeded a warning from his son that an earlier potential master, William Wynne Ryland, had a face that “looks as if he will live to be hanged” (*Life* 11-12). Ryland was indeed hanged for forgery in 1783.

Blake was apprenticed to Basire from 1772 to 1779 and lived at Basire's home during that period. Basire was engraver to the Society of Antiquaries, and the style of line engraving that he taught Blake was considered old fashioned in the late eighteenth century in comparison to innovative techniques such as stipple engraving and mezzotint.

As a draughtsman with a degree of skill, Blake was trusted to make accurate copies and within two years was preparing sketches in Westminster Abbey for a commission on Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments of Great Britain*, amongst his earliest surviving drawings. In the second year of his apprenticeship, he also produced his first known engraving, entitled “Joseph of Arimathea among the Rocks of Albion”. During this time Blake also continued to write poetry and met James Parker, another of Basire's apprentices. Although the two did not get along to begin with (Parker, aged 22, was the junior apprentice), they later became friends and partners in a print shop.

After completing his apprenticeship with Basire, Blake applied to be a student at the Royal Academy in June 1779, submitting “The Death of Earl Goodwin” the following May for exhibition. It was during this time that Blake made some of his most long-lasting and important friendships with other artists, including John Flaxman and George Cumberland.

1780 was a year of turbulence: following an Act of Parliament in 1778 to ease conditions for Catholics, Lord George Gordon, President of the Protestant Association, stirred up sentiment against the Act which erupted in nearly a week of rioting in June. The rioters defied the authorities, looting the city and attacking Newgate Prison, and Gilchrist reported a story of Blake being caught up in the events:

That evening, the artist happened to be walking in a route chosen by one of the mobs at large, whose course lay from Justice Hyde's house near Leicester Fields... bound for Newgate. Suddenly, he encountered the advancing wave of triumphant Blackguardism, and was forced (for from such a great surging mob there is no disentanglement) to go along in the very front rank, and witness the storm and burning of the fortress-like prison, and release of its three hundred inmates. (*Life* 30)

The houses of rich catholics as well as churches were attacked, as were the Bank of England and home of the Lord Chief Justice, and Newgate Prison was largely destroyed. The army was called out on 7 June and, at the end of two days of restoring order during which soldiers killed about 285 and injured many more, the ringleaders were arrested. Twenty-five of them were hanged and Gordon was charged with high treason but found not guilty.

During the violence that took place on those days, it appeared for a brief period that the authorities had lost control over the city, and even the former radical, John Wilkes, lost support after he ordered his men guarding the Bank of England to fire on the crowd.

MARRIAGE TO CATHERINE & POETICAL SKETCHES

After an encounter with a young woman who called him a fool when he complained after seeing her with another man (which incident, according to Gilchrist, cured him of jealousy), Blake lodged for a time in Battersea at the home of William Boucher (or Boutcher, according to Frederick Tatham). There he met Catherine Sophia Boucher, the youngest of nine daughters and four brothers, who later claimed to have instantly recognised her future partner as soon as she saw him (*Stranger* 63-4).

William and Catherine were married on 18 August, 1782, a marriage that was to last for almost forty-five years. As a member of such a large and poor family, Catherine's formal education appears to have been largely non-existent (she marked the parish register with a cross). Blake taught her to read and write, as well as drawing, engraving and the preparation of colours to help him in his work: during his working life, Catherine was to provide invaluable help in preparing the printed works, and during the early 1780s Blake was starting to receive his first commercial commissions. After the death of his father in 1784, he started a print business with his former fellow apprentice, James Parker.

It was about the time of his marriage that Blake was introduced to the Reverend Anthony Stephen Mathew and his wife, Harriet Mathew, who held regular salons at their home. Here Blake sang many of his songs, and in 1783 the Mathews were amongst the group that helped print his first collection of verse, *Poetical Sketches*.

Some 50 copies were probably printed, without binding and little in the way of proof-reading, for distribution among friends. Eleven copies bear corrections and revisions made by Blake. The collection is divided into sections: "Miscellaneous Poems" consists of lyric poetry in the form of songs, eulogies and ballads, while the second part is dominated by an unfinished drama in the style of Shakespeare, "King Edward the Third", and also includes prologues

to two further dramas, "King Edward the Fourth" and "King John", as well as several prose poems, "The Couch of Death", "Contemplation" and "Sampson".

In these early pieces, Blake displays strongly the influence of contemporaries such as the poetry of Ossian, the gothic style, and James Thomson's *The Seasons*. However, the strong sense of Elizabethan rhythms and sensibilities in much of the lyric poetry, as well as his confident handling of some of the cadences of Shakespearian blank verse, marked *Poetical Sketches* as possessed of original talent. As Bentley observes, "had he written nothing more, Blake would deserve our remembrance" (*Stranger* 46).

The collection received a little attention during Blake's lifetime, with copies being given away by Blake's friends to figures such as William Hayley and some of the "Songs" being reprinted by Benjamin Heath Malkin, though many contemporaries probably agreed with the Reverend Mathew's preface that the "Sketches were the production of untutored youth" (E846). Allan Cunningham praised "King Edward the Third" and wrote that while the non-dramatic poems were "rude sometimes and unmelodious", they were also "full of fine thought and deep and peculiar feeling" (cited in *BR* 629).

For Alexander Gilchrist, by contrast, the poems were a great example of Blake's prodigious talent and originality, writing in the *Life*:

"Tis hard to believe these poems were written in the author's teens, harder still to realize how some of them, in their unforced simplicity, their bold and careless freedom of sentiment and expression, came to be written at all in the third quarter of the eighteenth century: the age "of polished phraseology and subdued thought" - subdued with a vengeance. (*Life* 20)

CHAPTER 2: ILLUMINATED PRINTING & REVOLUTIONARY LONDON

In 1785, the Blakes moved from 27 Broad Street to 28 Poland Street: the house was about the same size, but the couple would no longer be sharing with the Parkers although by this time William's younger brother Robert was living with them.

Shortly after the move, however, Robert began to display the signs of advanced tuberculosis and, by the beginning of 1787 was extremely ill. For a fortnight William tended him and he died in February, aged 24. This made a deep and lasting impression on the older brother (then 29), and biographers such as Bentley have remarked on the change that took place in Blake's outlook from this point onwards - a psychological change that was to be reinforced by the dramatic events of the French Revolution two years later.

Throughout the late 1780s, Blake as a commercial engraver with an interest in publishing his own work was considering ways of producing texts that could be reproduced relatively cheaply and easily. Despite the fact that many of Blake's illuminated books became expensive, hand-finished objects, at least part of the early motivation to experiment with relief etching was to find a wider market for his own poetry.

Whereas conventional intaglio etching burns lines into copper with acid relief etching works by masking out the lines to be printed and then burning away the surrounding copper plate, producing raised lines similar to those in woodblock printing. Its disadvantage was that it could not be used to produce such fine lines as with intaglio, but pages could be designed that included text and image much more easily and rapidly.

Blake began experimenting with one-off plates before producing two short tracts, *All Religions are One* and *There is No Natural Religion*, probably in 1788. His first masterpiece, however, was to appear the following year with publication of *Songs of Innocence*, followed by *The Book of Thel*, a short work that indicated the style of poetry Blake was later to pursue in the so-called prophetic books.

Joseph Johnson was a bookseller based at St Paul's Churchyard, a Unitarian sympathetic to liberal social and political causes who published authors such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Joseph Priestley and Erasmus Darwin. Between 1779 to

1786 he was 'one of the chief employers of Blake's graver' (Stranger 108), and through association with Johnson the young artist came into contact with some of the most important liberal and radical figures of his day although, as Bentley observes, he was unlikely to have been a regular guest at Johnson's weekly genteel gatherings. Johnson was even to have been publisher of Blake's poem *The French Revolution*, although only one of the projected six books survives. Possibly Blake simply failed to complete the commission, or the Government reaction after 1791 made publication too dangerous.

One of the most important acquaintances at this time that Blake did make through the Johnson was Captain John Gabriel Stedman, himself an artist and poet, who had served in Surinam to put down a slave revolt. The journal he kept there, published by Johnson under the title *Narrative, of a five years' expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam, in Guiana, on the Wild Coast of South America* (1796), included plates engraved by Blake, some of which are among the most powerful depictions of the effects of slavery at the time.

Another friend of Johnson was the artist Henry Fuseli (born Johann Heinrich Füssli in Switzerland in 1741). Blake was commissioned by Johnson to produce a series of engravings based on Fuseli's designs, including those for Johann Caspar Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (1788) and Erasmus Darwin's *Botanic Garden* (1791, 1795). Blake admired Fuseli's art and character greatly and was seen by several contemporaries as a more eccentric pupil of the Swiss artist.

THE BLAKES & SWEDENBORGIANISM

Through his friendship with John Flaxman, Blake was introduced to the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, a Swedish scientist and engineer who, in his fifties, experienced spiritual revelations that he believed enabled him to understand the true nature of creation. In 1788, Blake bought copies of Swedenborg's works and, in April 1789, with Catherine attended a meeting in which a new Swedenborgian church was to be established.

William and Catherine signed a set of thirty-two propositions for the New Jerusalem Church, including the assertion that "The Old Church... is dead" and that "True Christianity exists only in the New Church" (BR 51-2). Blake was clearly impressed, at least initially, by the ideas expressed by Swedenborg, but divisions began to emerge within the New Church around the meaning of marriage. Blake himself became disillusioned with both Swedenborgianism and the discipline of the New Church (there is no evidence that he ever attended a church again), and the results of this disillusionment gave rise to one of his most radical works, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790).

The Marriage almost certainly began as a more limited anti-Swedenborgian pamphlet, reflecting Blake's boisterous rejection of the religious tenets of

Emanuel Swedenborg, but developed into something much more ambitious in its satirical attacks on the foundations of religious and political orthodoxy. Using Swedenborg's writings as his base, Blake inverts the traditional relations of heaven and hell to argue that hell and its devils are the dynamic drivers of a better conception of human spirituality centred on revolutionary energy rather than restrictive reason. After beginning with a series of propositions that appear to echo but also parody those found in *There is No Natural Religion* and *All Religions are One*, the narrator moves through a series of astonishing and daring scenarios and interludes in which important cultural texts and figures such as the Bible and John Milton are read in their infernal, rather than angelic, sense. A series of "Memorable Fancies" offer satirical views of religion, philosophy and politics via the narrators encounters with various angels and devils

Despite his disagreements with Swedenborg, who he came to see as offering merely the same restrictions of old religion in a new form, he retained a long-lasting respect for the Swedish mystic and in later years apparently came to view Swedenborg's writings as having been corrupted by his followers.

THE LAMBETH PROPHECIES

In 1790 the Blakes moved from Poland street south of the river Thames to Lambeth, which at this time was largely open fields, renting a spacious house and garden, 13 Hercules Buildings. It was at this house that the apocryphal story recorded by Gilchrist took place, where visitors to the Blake's found them as naked as Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden (*Life* 97).

Lambeth was also the scene of a period of intense activity resulting in a series of illuminated works that have since become known as the Lambeth Prophecies. While the *Marriage* had been infused with the spirit of revolutionary politics prompted by the outbreak of revolution in France, these books of the 1790s explicitly dealt with social and political upheavals in a new light. In texts such as *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1793), *America a Prophecy* (1793), *Europe a Prophecy* (1794) and *The First Book of Urizen* (1794), Blake also introduced the personal mythology that was to become an important feature of his art, with figures such as Orc, Los and Urizen engaged in titanic struggles in this new form of poetry.

In *America*, after a 'Preludium' in which Orc, the spirit of revolution, encounters the shadowy daughter of Urthona and copulates with her, the main poem proceeds to an account of the American Revolution in a highly distinctive style that was to be typical of Blake's illuminated books. The American revolutionaries, led by George Washington, are confronted by the repressive forces of Britain symbolised by Albion's Angel, also identified with Urizen.

After a conflict during which America would be lost, the fierce actions of Orc drive back the British and the prophecy ends with his fires extending to Europe. These events are continued in *Europe*, which outlines the eighteen hundred years that constitute the “night of Enitharmon’s joy” (5.1, E62), a dream period in which men are given up to female dominion and ‘Woman’s love is Sin’ (E62) and culminating in the events of the French Revolution.

Blake’s best-known work from this period, however, is *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. The addition of *Songs of Experience* transformed the perception of Blake’s original *Songs of Innocence* in order to show “the Two Contrary States of the Human Soul”. Several of the later poems directly reflect those in the earlier collection, sometimes sharing the same title such as “Holy Thursday” and “The Chimney Sweeper”, while others echo their counterpart, such as “The Divine Image” and “The Human Abstract”. The later collection includes some of Blake’s most famous and powerful lyrics, such as “The Tyger” and “The Sick Rose”. Whereas *Songs of Innocence* concentrates on a world of child-like freedom and artlessness, *Songs of Experience* often exposes that view as gullible and limited. Innocence without experience is ignorant and often foolish, but without innocence experience itself simply becomes cynicism that is incapable of making revolutionary change in the world.

Despite Blake’s hopes for illuminated printing as a means of reaching a wider market, these early prophecies were still time-consuming to produce and did not sell particularly well, so that after 1795 he did not return to the format for nearly a decade. Part of the reason for this was almost certainly the obscurity of Blake’s style, but in the middle of the decade London had become a much more dangerous place for anyone with revolutionary sympathies. “Church-and-King” mobs attacked notable radicals across the country, and the government led by William Pitt passed the Treasonable and Seditious Practices Act (which defined as high treason any conspiracy to overthrow the constitution) and the Seditious Meetings Act (whereby any meeting of more than fifty people had to be approved by a magistrate). These two acts, the so-called “Gagging Acts”, became law in 1795 had a severe effect on free speech in Britain during the period of the French Revolution and Napoleonic Wars.

CHAPTER 3: FELPHAM & THE RETURN TO LONDON

By the mid 1790s, Blake had clearly demonstrated his talents as an engraver, but had failed to establish his reputation more widely. Blake hoped that a commission by the publisher Richard Edwards, to engrave a large folio edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* would change this, producing 537 large watercolours by 1796. Unfortunately, by the time this vast project, described by Bentley as "one of the most ambitious and sensational illustrated books of that or any other time in England" (*Stranger* 172), was completed in late 1797 it received no advertising or reviews and was a commercial disaster for Blake. Thus although some of Blake's friends such as George Cumberland were looking after his interests, the late 1790s proved to be a very difficult time for the Blakes.

FRIENDSHIP & PATRONAGE: BUTTS & HAYLEY

In 1799, Blake found what Bentley describes as 'the perfect patron' (*Stranger* 185) in the person of Thomas Butts. Butts, a Joint Chief Clerk in the Commissary General of Musters, recognised the value of Blake's work and commissioned some fifty biblical paintings, paying the artist more than £400 between 1803-10. More than this much valued income, however, Thomas and his wife Elizabeth, or Betsy, provided moral support and friendship, and Blake wrote to them frequently over the subsequent years.

It was also during this time that Blake engaged in relations with another patron who, for the next four years, was to influence his life in much more dramatic ways. Thomas Hayley, a wealthy and liberal squire from Eartham, Sussex, and a popular poet of the day, was first introduced to Blake by John Flaxman in 1784, when plans were devised to try and send the engraver to Rome. Hayley, a generous man for all Blake's later ingratitude, invited the Blakes to nearby Felpham, hoping to help the couple financially and also to calm what he saw as a troubled mind, similar to that of his friend, William Cowper.

Initially, the Blakes were delighted with their new home, William writing that it was "a perfect Model for Cottages & I think for Palaces of Magnificence" (cited in *Stranger* 213). Blake began work almost immediately on commissions for Hayley, beginning with illustrations for the broadsheet ballad of *Little Tom*

the Sailor, and he also discovered an aptitude for miniature portraits. Yet by January 1802, Blake was already finding the work for Hayley tedious, interfering with his own projects including the completion of an epic he had begun while working on *Night Thoughts*, called *Vala*, later revised as *The Four Zoas*, and a new prophetic work based on the life of John Milton. Although the couple were already planning to return to London, in 1803 an incident was to occur that further marred their memories of Felpham.

Vala, or The Four Zoas, was subtitled "The torments of Love & Jealousy in The Death and Judgement of Albion the Ancient Man". This is the most extensive of Blake's Prophetic Books, and he began work on the manuscript probably in 1796 while engraving illustrations to Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, continuing to revise the text until about 1807, although the poem was left unfinished. *The Four Zoas* introduces or expands the role of many principle characters in Blake's mythology, and was conceived as an attempt to provide a more or less coherent account of this mythology, detailing the wars between the Zoas, "Four Mighty Ones... in every Man" (3.4, E300) whose conflict leads to the fall of the Ancient Man, later identified by Blake as Albion. The poem is divided into nine "Nights" (following the schema of Young's *Night Thoughts*) that culminate in a vision of the final judgement.

TRIAL FOR SEDITION

In the spring of 1803 a troop of the First Regiment of Royal Dragoons was quartered in Felpham in response to the threat of invasion by French troops. On 12 August, one of the soldiers, John Scofield, had come to visit the ostler at the Fox Inn where the troops were staying who at that time was in Blake's garden. After an altercation, Blake asked Scofield to leave, eventually taking pushing him out of the garden. Two days later, Scofield and another private, John Cock (spelt by Blake as Kock and Kox), prepared evidence that Blake had "Damned the King of England - his Country and his Subjects - [and said] that his soldiers were all bound for Slaves & all the poor people in general" (cited in BR 160).

On 16 August, Blake was charged with sedition. The problem for Scofield was that the charge would not hold on the allegation of one witness (hence the involvement of Cock), but despite character testimonies of other villagers in Blake's favour prosecution was set for October. In the meantime, the Blakes left Felpham for London in September, moving into 17 South Molton Street, before returning to hear the prosecution charges on 4 October. The trial itself took place in January 1804.

Hayley volunteered as a character witness (having almost certainly loaned Blake the money for his bail), and arranged for Samuel Rose to serve as at-

torney. The trial took place at Chichester and Blake was acquitted. Initially, he was immensely grateful to Hayley (who served him well in this incident), but later paranoia was to lead him to associate the wrongs he felt he had suffered at the hands of his former patron with the injustices brought against him by Scofield, Cock and others involved in the accusation.

MILTON & JERUSALEM

Returning to a London in the grip of war, the Blakes found life in the capital extremely difficult, although William did record a moment of illumination following a visit to the Truchsessian Picture Gallery in October 1804:

Suddenly, on the day after visiting the Truchsessian Gallery of pictures, I was again enlightened with the light I enjoyed in my youth, and which has for exactly twenty years been closed from me as by a door and by window-shutters. (Letter to Hayley E756)

Despair and depression did not leave him, however, and although Blake engaged in a number of commercial projects over the next decade, most notably illustrations on Robert Blair's *The Grave* in 1808 for John Cromek, Blake always felt he was denied the recognition he deserved. In the case of *The Grave*, although Blake prepared the designs the lucrative engraving work was passed to Louis Schiavonetti after Cromek saw a specimen that Blake had prepared and was shocked at what he believed was its poor quality. Similarly, in 1809, Blake organised an exhibition of his work at his brother's haberdashery shop in Broad Street, producing a *Descriptive Catalogue* to accompany the exhibits: what little response there was generally consisted of hostile reviews and he retreated from public view for some ten years.

Yet this period of disappointment also saw the second great burst of Blake's imaginative work in illuminated printing. His inability to complete *The Four Zoas* to his satisfaction led instead to the composition of his two longest, often most obscure but also most impressive prophetic books. *Milton a Poem* had been begun while the Blakes were resident in Felpham, a critical retelling of Milton's spiritual life that recast the epic poet's religion, politics and sexual ideas. In 1804 he also started to compose a remarkable history centred on the figure of the giant Albion, representative of both England at war and universal man, entitled *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*. For the best part of two decades, Blake worked on these dense and beautiful works of art while he felt himself more neglected by the wider public.

As its title suggests, *Milton a Poem* is a reworking of the work of John Milton, drawing principally on the epic poems *Paradise Lost* and *Paradise Regained* but

also incorporating a wide range of ideas from Milton's prose tracts on divorce, religion and history. Divided into two books (although the original title page suggested that it was to be an epic in 12 books), the poem tells the descent of Milton from heaven into Ulro (Blake's version of hell) to recover his female emanation Ololon. The "Preface" to *Milton* also contained the lines beginning "And did those feet in ancient time" which later became the famous hymn "Jerusalem".

The second of Blake's two final great illuminated epics, *Jerusalem The Emanation of the Giant Albion*, represents the epitome of Blake's art of book making. Work began on *Jerusalem* in 1804 (the date on the title page) and Blake had probably completed about 60 plates by 1807. By 1820, he was able to print three complete copies, and in 1827 two more, including the beautifully coloured Copy E.

Jerusalem is Blake's most extensive Prophetic Book and the most lavishly designed (using gold in one copy) but which, after high hopes, he despaired of getting a buyer for, as he wrote in a letter to George Cumberland in 1827. It is also one of the most complex and dense of Blake's books, almost entirely lacking in a linear structure but rather presenting a cycle of motifs from Blake's mythology to depict the fallen state of Albion and the struggle of Los to return him to a state of eternity. The book is divided into four chapters with a frontispiece that explains how on his couch of death Albion separated into his spectre, reason, and his emanation, Jerusalem; to bring him back from this state, Los enters through death's door out of friendship to save Albion.

CHAPTER 4: LAST YEARS

In the years between his 1809 exhibition and 1818, Blake lived in considerable obscurity. Most of those who met him or knew of him during this period, such as Robert Southey or Henry Crabb Robinson, tended to view him at best as eccentric, at worst insane. However, a few old friends such as Flaxman did succeed in obtaining some commissions, such as a series of engravings based on Flaxman's designs for an edition of Hesiod's works between 1814 and 1817. He also made seven plates for Abraham Rees's *Cyclopaedia* between 1815 and 1819.

Blake also continued on his own works, such as illustrations to the poetry of Milton as well as the large prophetic books. He also hoped to resume book publishing, although by the Summer of 1819 his commissions had been more or less exhausted and he was in considerable financial difficulty. It had been forty years since he had completed his apprenticeship to Basire, and in that time nearly all his projects had ended in failure.

FRIENDSHIP WITH JOHN LINNELL

Changes in both the appreciation of Blake's work and his material circumstances was to begin with a friendship that started in 1818, when the painter and engraver John Linnell was introduced to the older artist by George Cumberland Jr, son of Blake's old acquaintance. Linnell, like Blake, was a Dissenter but, unlike him, had made considerable success in the world through portrait and landscape painting. By introducing Blake to a number of artists and potential patrons and customers, he enabled the older artist to live in relative security in his final years, while being very clear as to the nature of Blake's personality:

I soon encountered Blake's peculiarities and [was] somewhat taken aback by the boldness of some of his assertions[.] I never saw anything the least like madness for I never opposed him spitefully as many did but being really anxious to fathom if possible the amount of truth which might be in his most startling assertions I generally met with a sufficiently rational explanation in the most really friendly & conciliatory tone. (Cited in *Stranger* 367)

Linnell commissioned, or introduced him to patrons who would in turn commission, the most important works of Blake's later artistic career, including his engravings for the *Book of Job*, illustrations to Dante, and a series of woodcuts for a new edition of *The Pastorals of Virgil*, edited by Dr Robert John Thornton. Thornton, who was the family doctor of the Linnell's, was disturbed by the unconventionality of Blake's illustrations, and was uncertain as to whether they should be included until a chance meeting with several artists at a dinner party who warmly praised the woodcuts.

It was at about the time that the woodcuts appeared in 1821 that the Blakes moved into their final residence, 3 Fountain Court, off the Strand. Their rooms, as Henry Crabb Robinson and others were to note, were extremely poor, and yet, despite this, Blake appeared to live his final years in considerable happiness.

THE ANCIENTS AND THE VISIONARY HEADS

As well as his friendship with Linnell, Blake befriended a number of young men who referred to themselves as the Ancients. Meeting once a month in London and Shoreham, Kent, they included Edward Calvert, Samuel Palmer, George Richmond and Frederick Tatham, and they often referred to the Blake residence as The House of the Interpreter in reference to John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress*.

Impressed by Blake's powers of concentration and vision, the Ancients espoused a more archaic form of art than was fashionable in painting of the period, although in some respects their pastoral vision may often seem to have more in common with features of the poetry of William Wordsworth and other Romantic poets than Blake's work. Peter Ackroyd is probably right to remark that "It is not at all clear that they properly understood him" (1995 339). Nonetheless, after decades of neglect they provided an artistic community for Blake that helped to sustain him in his final years, being particularly influenced by his woodcuts to *The Pastorals of Virgil* and incorporating some of his techniques and approaches to art in their own work that, in turn, became influential on the Pre-Raphaelites.

Another figure introduced to Blake by Linnell was the painter John Varley, who was deeply interested in occult matters such as astrology, as well as being a serial debtor, approaching the matter with a cheerful manner: "If it were not for my troubles I should burst with joy!" he is once meant to have said (cited in *Stranger* 369). Although Blake was sceptical of Varley's arcane interests, in 1819 he began to draw a series of visionary heads for the younger artist, images of figures such as the man who built the pyramids, Wat Tyler and King David, as well as the ghost of a mass murderer reincarnated as a flea. Varley himself

was convinced of the occult nature of these visions, although Blake's own understanding of his visionary experiences was much less materialistic and there is some evidence, as Linnell pointed out, that he was gently mocking the other artist at times. At the time of his death, these encounters with 'spiritual' guests comprised one of the best known stories about Blake, feeding greatly into speculation that he was mad.

REPUTATION AT THE TIME OF HIS DEATH

Blake died on August 12, 1827. At the time of his death, he had been working on a coloured print of his famous illustration, "The Ancient of Days" and, according to Tatham, declared: "There I have done all that I can[;] it is the best I have ever finished" (cited in *Stranger* 436). He was buried in Bunhill Fields on the 17.

Blake was not completely obscure at the time of his death. Obituaries appeared in the *Literary Gazette* and other periodicals, and brief biographies were published by John Thomas Smith in *Nollekens and his Times* (1828) and Allan Cunningham in *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, And Architects* (1830). Yet Bentley is correct to refer to the decades after Blake's death as that period when he became a "fading shadow": during the nineteenth century he had remained on the margins of the London artistic and literary scene, and while many contemporaries were more generous in their estimation than the early Victorian public, which if it knew of Blake at all considered him mad, most of them outside his immediate circle of friends and acquaintances believed his work obscure and frequently untutored.

By the time that Alexander Gilchrist came to write his *Life* of Blake in the 1860s, his work was almost unknown, and those few who remained alive such as Samuel Palmer and John Linnell were now becoming old men. Gilchrist's biography transformed Blake's reputation spectacularly, transforming the *pictor ignotus* into the most important artist of his generation. Supported by emerging figures such as the Rossetti brothers (who edited selections of his poetry for a new readership) and Algernon Charles Swinburne (who produced an extremely influential critical work on Blake's poetry), the shadow became one of the brightest stars of Romantic art and literature, an inspiration not only to the Pre-Raphaelites who greatly admired his works but subsequent generations of writers, artists and readers.

SELECTED READING

- Ackroyd, Peter. *Blake*. London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995.
- Bentley, Jr, G.E. *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001.
- *Blake Records*. Second edition. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2004.
- Bronowski, Jacob. *William Blake, 1757-1827: A Man Without a Mask*. London: Penguin, 1943.
- Davies, Keri. "The Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family: Snapshots from the Archive". *Literature Compass*, 2006. *Literature Compass*.
- Erdman, David V. *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*. Revised edition. New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Doubleday, 1988.
- Gardner, Stanley. *The Tyger, The Lamb, and the Terrible Desert: Songs of Innocence and of Experience*. London: Cygnus Arts, 1998.
- Gilchrist, Alexander. *Life of William Blake, Pictor Ignotus*. Edited by Ruthven Todd. Revised edition. London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1945.
- King, James. *William Blake: His Life*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1991.
- Margoulith, H. M. *William Blake*. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1951.
- Schuchard, Marsha Keith. *Why Mrs Blake Cried: William Blake and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision*. London: Century, 2006.
- Thompson, E.P. *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Wilson, Mona. *The Life of William Blake*. London: Nonesuch, 1927.

W*illiam Blake's Life & Works* is a clear and elegant introduction to one of the most remarkable poets and artists ever to have lived and worked in the British Isles. This concise book, first in the Zoamorphosis Essential Introductions series, provides an account of Blake's biography and his major works that draws upon some of the most recent scholarship on Blake, presenting that material in an accessible fashion.

Jason Whittaker is Professor of English and Media Arts at University College Falmouth, and the author and editor of a number of books and articles on Blake, including *William Blake and the Myths of Britain* (Macmillan 1999), *Radical Blake: Influence and Afterlife from 1827* (with Shirley Dent, Palgrave 2002), and *Blake, Modernity and Popular Culture* (with Steve Clark, Palgrave 2007).



RINTRAH BOOKS