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Charles Parr Burney as a Blake Collector

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

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Charles Parr Burney (1785–1864), the grandson of Charles Burney (1726–1814) the musicologist and nephew of Fanny Burney (1752–1840) the novelist, was a wealthy schoolmaster and Archdeacon successively of St. Albans and of Colchester. He is not known to have had any connection with William Blake, except for a letter which he wrote on 29 September 1862 to D. P. Colnaghi the print dealer asking about

a Volume of 'Blake's' eccentric, but very interesting Drawings, accompanied by Verses, written with great care and in very minute characters, — which is now in my possession, — was purchased from you¹

This "Blake" can only be the artist-poet (despite the quotation marks round his name), but no such "Volume" of "Drawings, accompanied by Verses, written . . . in very minute characters" by Blake is known to survive.

On the other hand, the work may not be a manuscript at all. In the nineteenth century Blake's etched works in illuminated printing were sometimes referred to as drawings. For instance, in 1818 Coleridge wrote of "the Drawings" of that "strange publication" *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.² If Charles Parr Burney was similarly casual in confusing drawings and engravings, the volume he owned might be one of Blake's works in illuminated printing. Few of these have "Verses, written with great care and in very minute characters," but *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* seems to fit the description fairly well. Perhaps Burney owned a copy of the printed *Songs*. Or he could have had a copy of *For the Sexes: The Gates of Paradise* (?1818) which has eighteen printed designs and some verses in a small hand. But no copy of either work can be traced to Burney.

It was also common to consider Blake's works in illuminated printing primarily as books of designs. Allan Cunningham speaks of the "wild verses, which are scattered here and there" among the powerful designs of *The Book of Urizen*, and he refers to *America* and *Europe* as being "plentifully seasoned with verse" (*Blake Records*, pp. 487, 500).

But the most likely candidate seems to be a "Volume" of "Drawings, accompanied by [Blake's] Verses, written . . . in very minute characters" which is neither a printed work nor a manuscript by Blake. It may be a facsimile of Blake's *Songs* made by a contemporary of the poet. There are two such manuscript copies, the first (Alpha) apparently copied from *Songs* (P) and the

second (Beta) copied from Alpha by 1825.³ Alpha is known to have stayed in the same family throughout the nineteenth century, but the history of Beta is known only from recent times. It may have been Beta (or another, as yet untraced, contemporary facsimile) which C. P. Burney owned. Beta is colored with considerable imagination and skill, but the text was somewhat carelessly transcribed and was extensively covered by the coloring. These facts may explain why Burney describes it as primarily "a Volume of . . . Drawings" and why he puts "Blake's" name in quotation marks; the designs and words are Blake's but the hand that held brush and pen was not his.

It would be pleasant to think that such a Blake volume as Charles Parr Burney acquired from Colnaghi about 1862 had remained in the family, but C. P. Burney's direct descendant Mr. John R. G. Comyn, who has a number of Burney treasures including C. P. Burney sketchbooks, tells me that he has nothing of the kind, and Professor Joyce Hemlow of McGill University, the editor of Fanny Burney's letters and journals, who has given me generous advice, can throw no more light on the subject. Of all the possibilities among surviving "Blake" works, the contemporary manuscript facsimile of the *Songs* (Beta) seems to me most plausible.

¹ Quoted from the manuscript in Beinecke Library, Yale University. Colnaghi's does not have records which extend back to this period. The firm sold *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* (B) to the British Museum on 12 January 1862.

² *Blake Records* (1969), pp. 252, 251.

³ See "Two Contemporary Facsimiles of *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*," *Publications of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 64 (1970), 450–63. In 1982, copy Alpha belongs to Mr. Paul Mellon and Copy Beta to Mr. Justin Schiller.

An Emendation in "The Chimney Sweeper" of *Innocence*

Alexander S. Gourlay

A curious variant in the text of "The Chimney Sweeper" (*Songs* 12) in *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, Copy AA (Fitzwilliam Museum), appears to have gone unremarked in spite of the wide distribution of transparencies of this copy by EP Microform. Blake's etched text of line 20 of the poem reads, "He'd have God for his father & never want joy"; in Copy AA, however, the contraction "He'd" has been replaced by the word "But." Though I have not examined the original, the EP transparency appears to reproduce the plate accurately.

The transparency shows no evidence of erasure, but the inking of the plate was uneven; in consequence, letters are obscured by overinking and by underinking. The large area washes further reduce legibility. Someone ap-