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The National Gallery & Blake's "Spiritual Form of
Pitt Guiding Behemoth"

Raymond Lister

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a public ceremony on Primrose Hill every autumn equinox by the spiritual heirs of Williams' small group of Welsh Bards, The Ancient Druid Order/The British Circle of the Universal Bond. One of their pamphlets is entitled *The Ceremony of the Autumn Equinox (Primrose Hill Ceremony)* (London, n.d.).

What is Blake's relation to this ceremony? The Ancient Druid Order itself claims that Blake was their "Chosen Chief" from 1799 until his death³ but, alas, no evidence of this is visible in their literature or elsewhere. Blake apparently did, however, know of the Primrose Hill ceremony, and his words even indicate the possibility that he attended one of the rituals. He may have known Edward Williams, who was a close friend of William Owen. Even if he didn't, the enthusiastic Owen may have interested Blake in seeing a ritual of the original "Patriarchal Religion."

¹ J. Marrs, Jr., ed., *The Letters of Charles and Mary Lamb* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1978), III, 36.

² G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969), pp. 313-14.

³ In a pamphlet history of their order, *The Ancient Druid Order/The British Circle of the Universal Bond* (London, n.d.), p. 19.

The National Gallery & Blake's "Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth"

Raymond Lister

I recently acquired a small group of letters written by George Richmond and Samuel Palmer to William Boxall, director of the National Gallery, concerning the proposed sale of Blake's tempera, "The Spiritual Form of Pitt Guiding Behemoth," then owned by Palmer. They have not, so far as I am aware, been previously published or even recorded.

The idea that the work ought to be acquired by the National Gallery apparently came from Richmond, a close friend of Boxall, who a little later was to suggest that on his own retirement, Richmond should become director of the Gallery, a proposal rejected by Richmond.¹ The first letter is undated, and appears to be a confirmation of a discussion as to the quality and importance of the Blake, perhaps for Boxall to show his committee.

Saturday
10 York St

Dear Boxall,

As I knew Blake and saw his works at his own house this of Pitt among the number I venture to say there is hardly to be found now another picture in such good preservation as this one, and certainly no more characteristic one of his wayward and wild *but true genius*.

That the illustrations of Dante, the Book of Job &c. &c and another of the Songs of Innocence and Experience

should be unrepresented in our national collection seems a *reproach* to us and I cannot but hope and believe that you will have the honour of removing it.

ever affy ys

G Richmond

The price asked for this picture is Five hundred guineas
G.R.

Richmond's next letter takes the matter a little further, and suggests that Boxall should deal direct with Palmer. The reference in the postscript to a "friendly and most liberal offer" perhaps means that Boxall had suggested that he should buy the work for the Gallery himself, or that he should perhaps make a donation towards its acquisition. This would also explain what is said in the third and fourth paragraphs.

In Palmer's short letter of the same date the picture is offered at the greatly reduced price of 300 guineas. But in his next (undated) letter Richmond raised the price to 350 guineas as he thought 300 guineas were not enough. The short note in Palmer's hand following this was apparently sent with this letter.

10 York St
Portman Sq
July 7 1870

My dear Boxall

As there was no minute made about the Blake, and I had stated to Palmer in writing on your authority that there was one, I felt it my duty to go to Reigate personally, and explain to him.

I also desired him to put himself into communication with you as in your note to me you say "I shall be happy to hear from Palmer as to the price &c". I therefore now leave the matter wholly in his hands.

With regard to a subscription to purchase the picture and present it to the National Gallery I could take no part in that.

I would willingly have given £50 to see the Blake in the National Gallery of England, upon such terms as other great works find entrance there that is by National purchase through the responsible officers, but after it had been submitted to them and refused at the price I put upon it (I am sure you must see upon reflection) that it would be highly impertinent in me to take any part in bringing it again before the Trustees, who if the attempt were made, might finally say, and I hope they would say, "What we have refused as a *purchase* for the Nation we cannot accept as a *gift*."

The picture is either worth buying for the Nat. Gal. or it is not. If I asked too much for it the Possessor may ask less but when I had made the offer of it in the spirit of a publick ^xduty and the offer was rejected my function in the matter was at an end and now, I shall do no more, and try to think no more about it although of course it has distressed me a good deal.

Ever dear Boxall

faithfully yrs

Geo Richmond

*P.S. I quite appreciated your friendly and most liberal offer but should be extremely grieved to see it carried out for I am sure it is not right.

Furze Hill, Red Hill
July 7, '70

My dear Boxall,

Understanding from Mr. Richmond that you wish me to communicate with you as to the price of Blake's Picture of "Pitt guiding Leviathan [*sic*]", I may mention three hundred guineas as the lowest price I should be likely to take. So far as a landscape painter can judge, I think it one of his very finest works.

Believe me to be,

Yours most sincerely,
W. Boxall Esq. R.A. Samuel Palmer

Saturday morning

Dear Boxall

Since I saw you I have not been able to hold up my head and obliged to put off all engagements and hide myself from everybody—my brain such as it is, is quite overdone. but I leave word with Mr Chance to take the Blake and send the description along with it.

The price for such a picture cannot be dear at 350 guineas. I think 300 is too little.

I send a note of Palmers for you to see.

ever affy yrs

G Richmond

Please return Mr Palmers note by Post

[written on a separate sheet by Palmer]

"The spiritual form of Pitt guiding Behemoth"

by William Blake,

signed, & dated 1805.

Quotation from Blake's catalogue of his pictures exhibited 1809. (This picture was No 2 in the catalogue)

"The spiritual form of Pitt guiding Behemoth: he is that angel who, pleased to perform the Almighty's orders, rides on the whirlwind, directing the storms of war. He is ordering the reaper to reap the vine of the earth, and the ploughman to plough up the cities and towers."

See Gilchrist's Life of Blake,

Macmillan, 1863.

Vol 2, page 120

In the last letter of the group, again undated, Richmond laments the unsuccessful outcome of the negotiations.

Half past twelve
Monday night
10 York St

Dear Boxall

I have desired Mr Chance² to fetch away the Blake, and have written to Palmer to tell him what price I put upon it and that the Trustees refused it at that price.

I have done my best both towards the National Collection and to the holder (as I conceive) of a precious, and perhaps unique work and my best efforts for both have failed.

But what I have done does not compromise Palmer in the least as the price I put upon the picture was put upon it, without concert with him, and while I am writing this note, he is wholly ignorant that the picture was sent to the National Gallery at all, for my note to him is not yet posted and you will remember also from the statement in his letter to me, that it was in deference to my earnest wish only, that the picture was ever laid before the Trustees.

so that if you and they desire to see the works of Blake in our National Collection and think this picture of Pitt worthy of that honour

you can treat with Palmer upon the subject as freely as if nothing had transpired between yourself and me.

Of course I can have no more to say to it, and when I have forwarded to Palmer the minute which you kindly offer to send to me, I shall make my bow with the feelings of one who having intended well, has yet utterly failed,

Palmers address is

Mead Vale

Furze Hill

Reigate Surrey

and mine will be bed in 5 minutes for the dinner seemed heavy to me and the air most dreadfully close and hot.

I run away in haste to call at Dr Ogles³ as since Jones told me just before dinner that he was very ill, and I found that he had been in bed since Wednesday and the doctors think him seriously ill

ever dear Boxall

affy yrs

Geo Richmond

The possibility of the National Gallery acquiring "The Spiritual Form of Pitt" was again raised in 1874, as Palmer indicates in a letter to Richmond, written in June of that year.

Should the Right Hon. William Pitt . . . be invited to join the new ministry at Trafalgar Square, we should both be glad, as it would in a manner consolidate Blake's identity in our archives . . . As to the Pitt, I can truly say that I have scarcely thought of pounds, shillings, and pence in connection with it; yet it is the farthest from my thoughts, as a political economist would say, to "pauperize" the British Lion by making him a present of what he might think scarcely worth a wag of his tail if he took it in alms.⁴

Again this came to nothing, and indeed the picture was still in Palmer's possession when he died in 1881. It was inherited by his son A. H. Palmer, on whose behalf it was offered for sale by Christie's on 20 March 1882, but was bought in. At last, later in 1882, it was acquired by the National Gallery, "from the Executors of the late Mr Samuel Palmer, the landscape painter, for £100,"⁵ and in 1931 it was transferred to the Tate Gallery where it remains.

¹ R. Lister, *George Richmond* (London, 1981), pp. 99-100.

² James Henry Chance (1810-?), picture framer, related to Palmer by marriage.

³ Probably John William Ogle (1824-1905), physician and writer on medicine.

⁴ R. Lister, ed., *The Letters of Samuel Palmer* (Oxford, 1974), pp. 896-97.

⁵ I am indebted to Miss Britt Harrison, Research Assistant at the National Gallery, for this information. Cf. M. Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (New Haven and London, 1981), p. 473.

