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A Note on William Blake and the Druids of
Primrose Hill

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Checklist," *Blake Newsletter*, 11 (1977), 50-54. Both of these articles have been very helpful to my study of Blake's Russian reputation. (In the present article, all translations are my own.)

³ Konstantin Bal'mont, "Vil'yam Bleik: Praotets Sovremennykh Simvolistov" ["William Blake: Forefather of Contemporary Symbolists"], in his *Gornye Vershiny* [*Mountain Peaks*] (Moscow: Griff, 1904), pp. 43-48; Z. A. Vengerova, "Vil'yam Bleik: Rodonachal'nik Angliiskogo Simvolizma" ["William Blake: Forefather of English Symbolism"], *Sievernii Vestnik*, IX (1896), 81-99, reprinted in Vengerova's *Angliiskie Pisateli XIX Veka* [*English Writers of the 19th Century*] (St. Petersburg: n.p., 1913), n. pag.

⁴ M. N. Gutner, "Blake," in *Istoriya Angliiskoi Literatury* [*A History of English Literature*], 2nd ed. (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1945), vol. 1, 613-22.

⁵ Anna Elistratova, *Naslediye Angliiskogo Romantizma i Sovremennost'* [*The Legacy of English Romanticism and the Present*] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Akademii Nauk SSSR, 1960); E. A. Nekrasova, *William Blake* (Moscow: Iskusstvo, 1960), and *Tvorchestvo Uil'yama Bleika* [*The Work of William Blake*] (Moscow: Izdatel'stvo Moskovskogo Universiteta, 1962).

⁶ Irving Fiske, "Bernard Shaw's Debt to William Blake," *Shavian Tract*, 2 (1951).

⁷ "William Blake v Perevodakh S. Marshaka" ["William Blake in the Translations of S. Marshak"], *Novyi Mir*, 6 (1965), 157-67.

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On the second of January, 1810, Charles Lamb wrote to Thomas Manning that "The Persian ambassador is the principal thing talked of now. I sent some people to see him worship the sun on Primrose Hill at half past six in the morning, 28th November; but he did not come, which makes me think the old fire-worshippers are a sect almost extinct in Persia."¹ Lamb was of course merely being mischievous in pretending that the dignified Moslem ambassador was likely to indulge in ancient Zoroastrian rites on—as it happens—the morning of Blake's forty-second birthday. The rather curious thing about Lamb's bit of humor, however, is the fact that he expected the rites to be performed specifically on Primrose Hill, without giving any explanation as to why that particular site was appropriate. The curiosity of the specification becomes greater in light of the fact that Blake too made reference to Primrose Hill as being in some way sacred to the sun. Blake told Crabb Robinson that

["]I have conversed with the—Spiritual Sun—I saw him on Primrose-hill[.] He said 'Do you take me for the Greek Apollo[?]' ["] No["] I said 'that (and Bl pointed to the sky) that is the Greek Apollo—He is Satan [.'"]²

The sun-worshipping Druid religion as "revived" by Stukeley, Henry Rowlands and other eighteenth-century antiquarians was of widespread and active interest in the latter part of that century. In fact, on the wall of the King's Arms Tavern, very close to where Blake lived in Poland Street, there is a plaque inscribed: "In this Old King's Arms Tavern the ANCIENT ORDER OF DRUIDS was revived 28th November 1781." Something about this day seems to have been very attractive to the Druids—some prophetic insight perhaps—for this date was Blake's twenty-fourth birthday.

Primrose Hill is apparently the highest spot in London, and, in addition to the rather dubious distinction of being the spot on which Judge Jeffries of the Popish Plot was found murdered, it was also the site of a Druid procession in 1792, and every year thereafter. The Welsh poet and lexicographer Edward Williams (Iolo Morganwg, 1747-1826) was convinced that the bardic traditions of his native Glamorgan had preserved the true esoteric lore of the Druids. He accordingly devised a ritual called the Gorsedd of Bards, which involved the ceremonious sheathing of a naked sword inside a magic circle of stones. With a small group of fellow Welshmen that included Blake's friend William Owen, he performed this rite on Primrose Hill at the Autumn Equinox of 1792. There are a couple of contemporary references to the meeting. A lengthy account, giving details of the ritual, was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine*, 62 (October, 1792), 956:

Saturday, Sept. 22.

This being the day on which the autumnal equinox occurred, some Welsh Bards, resident in London, assembled in congress on Primrose Hill, according to ancient usage, which requires that it should be in the eye of public observation, in the open air, in a conspicuous place, and whilst the sun is above the horizon. The wonted ceremonies were observed. . . . On this occasion the Bards appeared in the insignia of their various orders. The presiding Bards were David Samwell, of the primitive, and claimant of the ovation order; William Owen, of the ovation and primitive orders; Edward Jones, of the ovation, and claimant of the primitive order; and Edward Williams, of the primitive and druidic orders. The Bardic traditions, and several odes, were recited. . . .

Williams himself described the meeting in *The Monthly Register*, 3 (January, 1793), 16-19. In this article of "Biographical Anecdotes of Mr. David Thomas, an eminent Welch Bard," age 26, Williams included a poem, "The Banks of the Menai. An Ode. Inscribed to the Druidical Society of Anglesey. Recited at the Meeting of the Welch Bards on Primrose Hill, September 22d, 1792." Williams also says that "It is not a little remarkable that the order, or hierarchy of the *ancient British Bards* has been continued in regular succession from remotest antiquity down to the present day, without any interruption; for some time, indeed, it has been in a languishing state, but is now recovering apace. . . ." (p. 19). Williams was so successful in aiding the recovery of ailing Druidism that his ritual is performed to this day as

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.