

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

Blake, The Grave, and Edinburgh Literary Society

David Groves

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 24, Issue 1, Summer 1990, pp. 251-252



Blake, *The Grave*, And Edinburgh Literary Society

David Groves

When R. H. Cromek's edition of *The Grave* with Blake's illustrations was published in London in August 1808, its printed title page identified the firm of Archibald Constable as the distributor for the book in Edinburgh. The volume also included a list of subscribers indicating that "12 copies" had been reserved in advance by "Messrs. Constable and Co."¹ Of the sixteen subscribers in Edinburgh, Constable was the only one to order multiple copies of *The Grave*; of over 500 subscribers throughout Britain, none reserved more copies than Constable.

Robert Cromek enjoyed a profitable association with Constable. As a "well-known engraver," he had "done much work" in illustrating books published by the Constable firm.² Writing to Constable after a visit to the Scottish capital in 1807, Cromek informed him that "*The Grave* is going on very well. I shall soon write to [the Edinburgh printer James] Ballantyne [a partner and friend of Constable], about printing it." "I got," Cromek added enthusiastically, "72 Subscribers to *the Grave* at Manchester in less than 3 weeks."³

A review of *The Grave* then appeared in Constable's *Scots Magazine* of November 1808. It does not seem to have been cited by any of Blake's critics or bibliographers. In the table of contents for the November issue (801), the review is listed under the title, "*Blake's Illustrations of Blair's Grave*." After a brief introduction praising the volume as a whole, the reviewer devotes most of his space to a discussion of Blake's contribution. He names eleven of Blake's twelve designs for the volume, leaving out only the figure of the trumpeter on the engraved title page. The article is generally approv-

ing, and at least does Blake the favor of taking his designs seriously. However, the critic raises one objection (which probably derives from his religious beliefs) concerning "the representation of the soul in a bodily form." This anonymous review is now reprinted in full for the first time:

II. *The Grave, a Poem*; by Robert Blair: Illustrated by Twelve Engravings, from Original Designs, by William Blake; engraved by Schiavonetti. 4to. 2l. 12s. boards.

ALTHO' this work, strictly speaking, belongs rather to the fine arts, than to literature, yet as it is employed to illustrate one of the most admired of our Scottish poems, and, from its peculiar nature, has drawn a considerable share of interest, we think a short notice cannot be judged superfluous. We do not recollect to have any where seen so much genius united with so much eccentricity. The author shews throughout a turn of mind altogether his own. A solemn and mystic character, a habit of mind continually dwelling upon the abodes of death and the invisible world, an intimate familiarity with those ideas, which, to common minds, appear the most distant and visionary, appear to fit him peculiarly for the singular task he has here undertaken; and have enabled him to produce a work, altogether *unique*, and possessing high claims to admiration. The strength of the expression, and the lively representation of the different attitudes, have perhaps seldom been equalled. The accuracy of the design, the faithful representation of the different parts of the human form, according to the various postures in which they are placed, are also, we understand, highly admired by connoisseurs. The subject is awful, yet attractive; it is one in which all must feel a deep interest; and though man be a being naturally so bent on pleasure, there is yet a region of mystic gloom, thro' which, in other moments he delights to expatiate.

There is just one circumstance, which runs through many of these pieces, and which we cannot quite go along with; this is the representation of the soul in a bodily form. Such an idea we think is great-

ly too bold; nor is there any thing in the manner which can atone for the defect in the original conception. We could conceive that by representing only those parts of the body in which the soul speaks, as it were, and by giving to these a certain degree of faintness and exility, something might be produced, approaching to our idea of an incorporeal substance. But nothing can be more remote from such an idea, than the round, entire, and thriving figures, by which it is here represented. It would even have been tolerable had the soul been introduced by itself, without its bodily companion, for this the mind might have conceived by a single effort; instead of which they are invariably introduced together; and the body being generally worn down by disease, the soul exhibits often a much more bulky and corpulent appearance.

The following are those which appear to us peculiarly striking and beautiful: "The meeting of a family in heaven—the death of the strong wicked man—the descent of man into the vale of death—the soul exploring the recesses of the grave—the death of the good old man." The "day of judgment" displays great powers, but the multitude and variety of figures on so small a space produce a degree of confusion. The "reunion of the soul and body;" and "the soul hovering over the body reluctantly parting with life," do not, for a reason above illustrated, please in proportion to the genius displayed in them. There are also—Christ descending into the Grave—The Counsellor, King, Warrior, Mother, and Child, in the tomb,—and death's door.

Upon the whole, we think this is a work which can be contemplated by no artist, or man of taste, without extreme interest. We are glad to see that the list of subscribers is numerous and respectable, tho' we observe with mortification that, of these, Edinburgh has furnished a very small proportion indeed.⁴

It was probably Cromek's name, more than William Blake's, which spurred most of the interest in this edition of *The Grave* in Edinburgh. As well as his association with Constable, Cromek was rapidly gaining a reputa-

tion for his editions of Scots poetry. In the same year, he published a well-received and important edition of *The Reliques of Robert Burns*, which contained new information about Burns, and new poems by him.⁵ *The Grave* was itself a Scottish poem, and in 1810 Cromek would also publish a collection of *Select Scottish Songs* (with commentaries by Burns), as well as a collection of Scottish verse (mainly written by Allan Cunningham) entitled *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*.⁶ Yet according to Walter Scott in 1809, Cromek was "a perfect Brain-sucker living upon the labours of others."⁷ On the other hand an Edinburgh writer in the 1850s could remember Cromek as being "much esteemed" in the city for the "enthusiastic attachment to the Fine Arts," which he displayed by publishing his "large and splendid edition of Blair's *Grave*, with original designs by Blake."⁸

At least one of the contributors to Constable's *Scots Magazine* had a "mania for Blake" which lasted many years. Robert Scott (1777-1841) was an engraver whose illustrations of Scottish architecture, scenery, and persons regularly appeared as frontispieces to that journal from 1804 to 1817. His name appears in the Edinburgh section of the list of subscribers to the 1808 *Grave*. Apparently Scott frequently tried to impart his high estimate of Blake's designs to others in Edinburgh. The editions of "Blair's *Grave* and Young's *Night Thoughts*" containing Blake's designs were "the only two books" Robert Scott "seemed to know," according to a later recollection by his son: "the most important of all the illustrated books" in Robert Scott's library "was perhaps *The Grave*, with Blake's inventions admirably engraved by Sciavonetti." Blake's designs for *The Grave*

had impressed the paternal mind in the profoundest way: the breath of the spirit blown through the judgment trump on the title-page seemed to have roused him as well as the skeleton there represented. The parting of soul and body after the latter is laid on the bier; the meeting of a family in heaven—indeed nearly every one of the prints he looked upon as almost sacred, and we all followed him in this, if in little else. . . . Would it not be really thus after death?

Robert Scott's son could still recall, in later life, the "raptures" he experienced when his father showed him "Blake's Designs for 'The Grave,'" with their "Dread truths" and "Inspiration."⁹

One other Edinburgh writer entertained a high opinion of Blake and his work for *The Grave*. Thomas De Quincey frequently paid extended visits to the city from 1814, often in connection with his work for *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, and his friendship with its editor John Wilson. From 1827 until his death in 1859, De Quincey lived almost entirely in the Edinburgh area. He probably knew of Blake from at least 1821 through his "special interest" in Allan Cunningham, and his knowledge of Cunningham's links with "Mr. Cromek."¹⁰ In 1840, De Quincey was quoting from Blake's poetic dedication to *The Grave* when he described death as being, "in the words of that fine mystic, Blake the artist, 'a golden gate.'"¹¹

¹ The two title pages and the list of subscribers are unpaginated. See Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley, *Robert Blair's The Grave, Illustrated by William Blake; A Study with Facsimile* (London: Scolar, 1982), and G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977) 525-34, for relevant information on *The Grave*. The present article was made possible by a grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada.

² Thomas Constable, *Archibald Constable and his Literary Correspondents*, 3

vols. (Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1873) 2: 419. Archibald Constable is mainly remembered today for publishing his major journal, the *Edinburgh Review*, and as the friend and publisher of Sir Walter Scott and James Hogg.

³ Letter, 17 Nov. 1807, National Library of Scotland MS 670, ff 635-36. Cited by kind permission of the Trustees of the NLS.

⁴ *Scots Magazine, and Edinburgh Literary Miscellany* 70 (1808): 839-40.

⁵ Substantial extracts from Cromek's *Reliques of Burns* appeared in the January 1809 *Scots Magazine* (30-33), and a laudatory review in the March issue (198-203).

⁶ See Dennis M. Read, "Cromek, Cunningham, and *Remains of Nithsdale and Galloway Song*: A Case of Literary Duplication" (*Studies in Bibliography* 40 [1987]: 175-87). Further new information on the publisher will be found in Aileen Ward, "Canterbury Revisited: The Blake-Cromek Controversy" (*Blake* 22 [1988-89]: 80-92).

⁷ Letter to John Murray, 3 Dec. 1810, printed in *The Letters of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. H. J. C. Grierson, 12 vols. (London: Constable, 1932-37) 2: 409.

⁸ William Stenhouse, appendix to *The Scots Musical Museum*, ed. James Johnston, 4 vols. (rev., Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1853) 4: 456-57.

⁹ See *Autobiographical Notes of the Life of William Bell Scott*, ed. W. Minto, 2 vols. (London: Osgood, McIlvaine, 1892) 1: 21-24 and 68-69. See also the *Dictionary of National Biography* for information on Robert Scott. His design "Cawdor Castle" appears in the same issue of the *Scots Magazine* as the review of *The Grave*.

¹⁰ See "London Reminiscences," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, December 1840, rpt. in *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey*, ed. D. Masson, 14 vols. (Edinburgh: Black, 1889-90) 3: 146. The Scottish poet Cunningham knew Blake, and discussed his poetry and designs in his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols. (London: Murray, 1829-33).

¹¹ "Society of the Lakes," *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, March 1840, rpt. in *The Collected Writings of Thomas De Quincey* 2: 400.