

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

N O T E

J. S. Deville's Life Mask of William Blake

David Bindman

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 3, Issue 3, December 15, 1969, pp. 55-56



4. J. S. DEVILLE'S LIFE MASK OF WILLIAM BLAKE

David Bindman
Lecturer in the History of Art
Westfield College, University of London

This bust, in slightly yellowed plaster measuring 11 1/2 x 7 1/4 inches, is one of the two known life-masks of William Blake. The other, from the Linnell Collection, is now in the National Portrait Gallery², which also owns a modern bronze cast of it. The Fitzwilliam version is relatively little-known, but it has some claim to primacy over the National Portrait Gallery example, which is more highly finished and signed as follows: 'A 66 / PUBd. AUG. 1. 1823 l. DEVILLE / 67 Strand, London'. The present bust was discussed by two writers while in the possession of George Richmond, who had, of course, known Blake in his last years. According to Herbert P. Horne, 'Much of the forced expression of the nostrils and more particularly of the mouth is due to the discomforture which the taking of the cast involved, many of Blake's hairs adhering to the plaster until quite recently'³. If this were so, then the present bust was presumably cast directly from the original mould. This is confirmed by a remark by George Richmond quoted by Anne Gilchrist: 'The first mask that the phrenologist took: he wished to have a cast of Blake's head as representative of the imaginative faculty'⁴. The Linnell cast may have been intended for sale in Deville's shop in the Strand: Deville 'kept a lamp shop at 367 Strand, at the west corner of Burleigh Street, where he exhibited and sold casts and examined heads phrenologically'⁵.

The authority of the life-mask as a likeness of Blake is confirmed by H.H. Gilchrist's account of his visit to George Richmond, presumably in 1887: 'Before bidding adieu to Blake in the present volume it will not be out of place if we give the reader the chat that we enjoyed the other day with Mr. George Richmond; the only living man who has conversed with William Blake -- when a student, closed the poet's eyes and kissed William Blake in death, as he lay upon his bed, in the enchanted work-room at Fountain Court.

'The Academician showed us a cast of Blake's head and face, taken by Deville, when Blake was about fifty years old.

"The first mask that the phrenologist took: he wished to have a cast of Blake's head as representative of the imaginative faculty."

'Deville's wish was not surprising; (when regarding the mask) we ask if any man ever possessed a fuller temple or a more finely packed brow? -- the quivering intensity in the closed eyes and dilated nostrils is wonderful; and when we pass our hand over his stubborn English chin, we understand Hayley's surprise, when calling at the cottage at Felpham, at finding Blake grinding away, graver in hand, during a hot day in August; and the quiet pluck with which he always buckled to etching (for Bookseller Johnson) when Mrs. Blake placed the "empty plate" upon the little round oak table.

'Mr. Richmond drew our attention to the position of Blake's ear, which is low down; away from the face near the back of the neck, showing an immense height of head above: - "I have noticed this relation of ear finely characterized

in three men -- Cardinal Newman, William Blake and Henry Hallam." Mr. Richmond pointed out an engraving after his portrait of Newman, which instanced the noble characteristic happily. "I told Mr. Gladstone that I never understood his character, until the day when I sat in church behind him; that I saw the tremendous bulwark of the statesman's neck".

"That is not like dear Blake's mouth, such a look of severity was foreign to him -- an expression of sweetness and sensibility being habitual: but Blake experienced a good deal of pain when the cast was taken, as the plaster pulled out a quantity of his hair. Mrs. Blake did not like the mask, perhaps the reason being that she was familiar with varying expressions of her husband's fine face, from daily observation: indeed it was difficult to please her with any portrait -- she never liked Phillips's portrait; but Blake's friends liked the mask".⁶

Lit.: Herbert P. Horne, *Century Guild Hobby Horse*, 1887, p. 27; H.H. Gilchrist, ed., *Anne Gilchrist: her life and writings*, 1887, pp. 258-260; A.M.W. Sterling, ed., *The Richmond Papers*, 1926, p. 26; Geoffrey Keynes, *A Bibliography of William Blake*, 1921, p. 479, no. 1 (described as replica or copy of the Linnell version).

¹J.S. Deville was an amateur phrenologist, who 'when a young man was employed by Mr. Nollekens to make casts from moulds'. (J.T. Smith, 1828, p. 371). Despite his French name, Deville was described as a cockney who talked of 'wirtues' and 'wices'. There is an account of a visit to him in Lord John Russell ed., *Memoirs, Journal and Correspondance of Thomas Moore*, 1854, V, p. 70.: 20th May, 1826: (Deville's) 'explanations of the principles of his art, and some of the facts he produced, very striking to us all: instances where the organ was considerably increased by the exercise of the faculty connected with the organ, etc.; but his guesses at the characters of the new subjects I brought him (none of whom he knew) egregious failures. For instance said that Lord Lansdowne gave his opinions without deliberation! In Sydney Smith the chief propensity he discovered was a fondness for natural history, and for making collections of the same. Altogether this was the worst exhibition I have seen him make, though very amusing from Sydney Smith's inextinguishable and contagious laughter which I joined in ever, to tears.'

Deville exhibited busts at the Royal Academy in 1823, 1824 and 1826.

²Inventory no. 1809. Purchased by the National Portrait Gallery following the Linnell sale in 1918. For a reproduction see Wilson, 1948, pl. VI opp. p. 304.

³op. cit. 1887, p. 27.

⁴see note 6 below.

5.

J.T. Smith, *Nollekens and His Times*, 1920, I, 322n.

⁶H.H. Gilchrist, op.cit., pp. 258-60.