

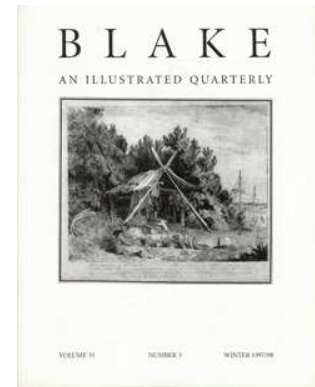
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Blake's First Arrest, at Upnor Castle

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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MINUTE PARTICULARS

Blake's First Arrest, at Upnor Castle

BY G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

William Blake was a notably peaceable citizen, for all his radical, antinomian views. He may have believed that "One Law for the Lion & Ox is Oppression,"¹ and that "All Penal Laws court Transgression & therefore are cruelty & Murder,"² but he lived quietly within the laws. Only twice, so far as we know, did he offend the majesty of the law, and both times he was released without a stain upon his character—though some scholars suspect that on the second occasion, when he was tried for sedition in 1804, he may have escaped through a technicality rather than through genuine innocence.

The second arrest, in 1804, is moderately well known because Blake himself wrote about it and a good number of documents survive.³ The first however, is more slightly known, the facts are altogether sparser, and a new fact has recently appeared which allows us for the first time to set it firmly in context.

When Blake was in his early twenties, he made friends with number of rising young artists such as Thomas Stothard, the book-illustrator, John Flaxman, the sculptor, and George Cumberland, the inventor and artist. It was perhaps about September 1780 that this first incident occurred. According to Stothard's daughter-in-law, Stothard would occasionally spend a few days with his friends in sailing up the Medway, landing and sketching as they pleased. In one of these excursions he was accompanied by his old friend Mr. Ogleby,

and Blake, . . . Whilst the trio were one day engaged with the pencil on shore, . . . some soldiers . . . very unceremoniously made them prisoners, under the suspicion of their being spies for the French government; as this country was then at war with France. . . . There were they detained, with a sentinel placed over them, until intelligence could be received from certain members of the Royal Academy, to whom they appealed to certify they were really peaceable subjects of his Majesty King George, and not spies for France.⁴

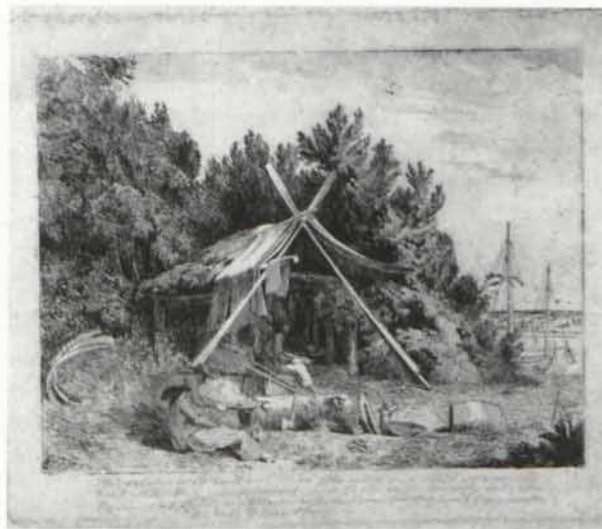
Stothard made an etching of his sketch which is very rare. One copy is in the Balmanno Collection of Stothard in the

¹ Marriage (?1790), pl. 24 (*William Blake's Writings* [1978], 27).

² Annotation to Watson (*William Blake's Writings* [1978], 1419).

³ *Blake Records* (1969), 121-149, and *Blake Records Supplement* (1988) 24-28.

⁴ Mrs. [A.E.] Bray, *Life of Thomas Stothard, R.A.* (London, 1851), 20-21, reprinted in *Blake Records* (1969), 19-20.



1 Thomas Stothard's etching of his own design representing occasion when he, Blake, and another friend were arrested while on a sketching expedition on the Medway. This copy, from the collection of Robert N. Essick, emphasizes that the incident took place at Upnor Castle.

British Museum Print Room,⁵ another is in the Rosenwald Collection of the U.S. National Gallery of Art,⁶ a third is with a collection of prints and drawings by Stothard formed by George Cumberland in the Fitzwilliam Museum, and a fourth was recently acquired by Robert N. Essick.⁷ This last previously unknown copy has an inscription of some importance, though its authorship and authority are unknown:

This relates to Stothard and Blake who went on a sketching ramble and while they ... [illegible] Upnor Castle on the Medway were taken Prisoners as spies and detained by the garrison till they heard from London the truth of the story [see pl. 1].

This is, of course, a much abbreviated account but it emphasizes the vital detail of where they were arrested, and this in turn helps to explain why they were arrested. Until we knew where the incident took place, it seemed a somewhat wanton abuse of military power, that such peaceable artists should have been so rudely accused and confined.

The Medway flows 60 miles east-north-eastward, mostly through Kent and if the sailing artists were "sailing up the Medway" they must have begun at or near the mouth, at

⁵ This is probably the copy reproduced by Mrs. Bray.

⁶ For its very puzzling inscription, see *Blake Records* (1969), 19 n.4; its identification of the third member of the sketching party as "Parkes" may refer to Blake's fellow-apprentice and later partner James Parker.

⁷ Described and reproduced in Robert N. Essick, "Blake in the Marketplace, 1994," *Blake 28* (1995), generously shown me in typescript.

the estuary of the Thames. They had not travelled very far when they were arrested, for Upnor Castle, on Upnor Reach, is only a few miles from the Channel, just east of Rochester, on the north bank of a sharp bend of the Medway. The river here was wide and bucolic, and Upnor Castle was certainly picturesque, but the military significance of Upnor Castle and its neighborhood would have been plainly visible to the most unworldly artist. Chatham Docks, "the chief arsenal of the Royal Navy of Great Britain ... one of the most considerable in the world,"⁸ is just across the river from Upnor Castle, and on occasion as many as 40 men-of-war might be seen moored there together.

UPNOR-Castle, is ... about over against the famous Dock in *Chatham*; it was built by Queen *Elizabeth*, in the Third Year of her Reign [1561], for the Defence of the River *Medway*; where the greatest Part of the Royal Navy usually lye at their Moorings, and for the Security of the aforesaid Dock.⁹

The docks were established in the reign of Charles II, and they were vigorously extended during Blake's youth and early manhood. Anyone reading the newspapers in London a few miles away was likely to have been aware of such developments.

In 1758, when this country was threatened by invasion from the French, the elaborate fortification, called the *Lines*, were commenced, extending from the Medway, above the Ordnance Wharf, measuring half a mile in width and a mile in breadth, extending beyond the limits of the Dock-yard, where they again unite with the river. Within this area, besides the naval establishments, are included the *Upper* and *Lower Barracks*, the church of *Chatham*, and the hamlet of *BROMPTON*; containing about five hundred dwellings. Various important additions have since been made, as in 1782 an Act passed for the purchase of lands, for the further security of this great natural depôt.¹⁰

However, Stothard and Blake were not the only artists to ignore the presence of military power at Upnor Castle, to their peril. In 1791 Samuel Ireland made a series of *Picturesque Views on the River Medway* from the Nore to the Vicinity of its Source, and when he came to Upnor Castle

⁸ Anon., *The Picturesque Beauties of Great Britain: Illustrated by ... Original Designs Taken upon the Spot: Kent* (London: George Virtue ... [1830]) 19-20.

⁹ John Harris, *The History of Kent*, Vol. I (London: D. Midwinter, 1719) 1: 386. According to Harris, "In the Castle are about 37 Guns," and down river are several other batteries, but eighty years later the armaments of the Castle had been allowed to deteriorate to a pathetic state.

¹⁰ Anon., *The Picturesque Beauties of Great Britain: Illustrated by ... Original Designs Taken upon the Spot: Kent* (London: George Virtue ... [1830]) 21.

he had an experience strikingly similar to that of Blake and Stothard some 10 years before. He made a sketch of Upnor Castle with impunity, but his next sketch was fraught with peril.

Upnor castle, considered as a pleasing object of the picturesque kind, on the banks of the river, draws our warmest commendation, but, as a place of natural defence, I fear, has never answered any purpose whatever; yet it must be allowed to have its merits as a place of snug security for the governor, storekeeper, clerk of the cheque, &c. &c. The governor has command of all the forts on the river except Sheerness. ...

Such was the shamefully neglected state of the castle that there were only four guns fit for use, mounted within it, at the time the Dutch made their bold attempt up the river in the reign of Charles II. At present it has no platform, nor yet one gun mounted, which, for the author of this work, was probably a fortunate circumstance, as he had fixed his station very near it while making the annexed sketch of the castle.

Other mischiefs, however, seemed to await him, for, while he was peaceably situated beneath the stern of a man of war, to keep under the wind, he was visited by a person from on board, who claimed the privilege of taking him before the Commissioner in Chatham yard, to answer for his rash attempt on this noble place of defence.

Having satisfied Commissioner Probyn that he had no insidious design against the navy, he was suffered to depart in peace¹¹

It is perhaps little wonder that while Ireland was sheltering from the wind under the stern of a man-of-war his bona fides were suspected.

In Stothard's sketch there is no indication of Upnor Castle, but presumably it is just out of sight. There are only two figures there, one of them apparently still sketching, but of course Stothard himself, who made the sketch, is invisible.

But what are these artists doing making landscape-sketches at all? Stothard was a figure painter, whose forte was (or became) charming book-illustrations on a small scale, and Blake is scarcely known to have made landscapes. How curious that these young men whose penchant was so strongly for the human figure should have been out sketching landscapes at all.

But perhaps they were carrying out a student assignment for the Royal Academy Schools. It is striking that when Ireland was haled before the authorities he talked himself out of his difficulty but that Blake, Stothard, et al. had to have their stories verified by members of the Royal Academy. If they had claimed that they were sketching for the Royal

¹¹ Samuel Ireland, *Picturesque Views on the River Medway from the Nore to the Vicinity of its Source* (London: T. & J. Egerton, 1793) 36-37.

Academy Schools, it would have been natural for the story to be confirmed from the Royal Academy itself. And indeed the military may have wondered why the Royal Academy was sending its students to represent military installations.

Of course the Academy had not done anything of the kind. But the unworldliness of these young men, blithely making careful sketches (like that in Stothard's etching) of military fortifications of the greatest naval base in the world in time of war, almost surpasses comprehension. At least it might appear so to naval intelligence, if that is not an oxymoron.

Blake's Meheux?

BY VINCENT CARRETTA

Among the plates executed by Blake after designs by other artists is Robin Hood & Clorinda, "J. Meheux delint.," published by T. Macklin in London on 30 March 1783. Robert N. Essick, in *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) 133, observes that "[n]othing is known of 'J. Meheux, other than his designing 'Robin Hood and Clorinda,'" and notes that "Samuel Redgrave, *A Dictionary of Artists of the English School*, 2nd ed., London, 1878, p. 292, gives the artist's name as 'John Meheux.'" The John Meheux in question was probably the John Meheux (1749?-1839) who corresponded during the 1770s with Ignatius Sancho (1729-80), the black Westminster grocer whose posthumously published *Letters* (London, 1782) I have edited: *Letters of the Late Ignatius Sancho, an African* (Penguin Putnam Inc, 1998).

Meheux's obituary in *The Gentleman's Magazine* (December 1839) 662, says, "In his 90th year, John Meheux, esq. of Hans Place, formerly many years Secretary to Board of Control. He has bequeathed 5000£. to Indigent Blind School, 200£. to Deaf and Dumb Institution, and 100£. each to St. George's Hospital, Westminster Lying-in Hospital, and Society of Arts, all duty free." During the 1770s, Meheux was an amateur writer and artist, submitting essays to the newspapers and designs to print sellers through Sancho. Sancho had many contacts in the art world. His portrait had been painted in 1768 by Thomas Gainsborough, and his friends included the artists John James Barralet, William Henry Bunbury, Matthew and Mary Darly, Daniel Gardner, John Hamilton Mortimer, Joseph Nollekens, and William Stevenson. Besides Mr. and Mrs. Darly, who frequently etched and published prints after the designs of amateurs, Sancho also knew the print and booksellers John Ireland and John Wingrave.

In a letter misdated 21 March 1770 but written in 1776, Sancho sends Meheux "a proof print"; in one of 4 January 1776, Sancho asks about Meheux's sketches; and on 3 September 1777, Sancho asks Meheux,

How do you like the print?—Mr. D[arly] says, and his wife says the same, that you are exceedingly clever—and they shall be happy to do any thing which is produced by the same hand which did the original—and if Mr. D[arly] can be of any service to you in the etching, you may command him when you please.

Given the history of Sancho's John Meheux as an amateur artist providing designs for prints executed and published by others during the late 1770s, he is probably Blake's "J. Meheux" of 1783 as well.

R E V I E W S

Marvin D. L. Lansverk, *The Wisdom of Many, The Vision of One: The Proverbs of William Blake*. American University Studies, Series IV, vol. 142. New York: Peter Lang, 1994. 215 pp. \$38.95.

Reviewed by NELSON HILTON

Unknown gnomes mine. pro-verbal proverbs. but, ah! men, Wisdom's awful theopanatives love her. language bombs

Or so one might imagine from recent, stimulating work by Marvin D. L. Lansverk. Beginning with "the puzzle that Blake would use proverbs at all" (2), given the oppressing conformity often found in such "wisdom of the many," Lansverk traces a path to Blake's invention of "a new type of proverb" (3) or prophetic performative in which speech acts. Along the way he revives for us an image with profound implications for Blake's emanations, the figure of the divine female consort in the "Wisdom Books" of Hebrew scripture.

The first part of his book, a literary history of Blake's relations to proverb literature, opens with a comparison of the themes, forms, and functions of the Book of Proverbs and of Blake's "Proverbs of Hell." Timely criticism this, for "the only major English writer himself to have composed a