

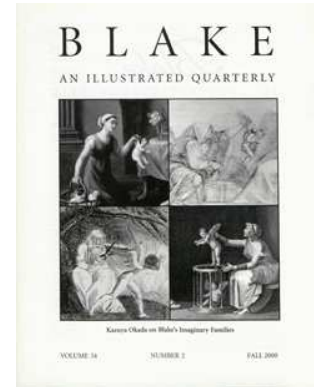
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R E V I E W

Jason Whittaker, *William Blake and the Myths of Britain*

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naturalized; for all we know, it may prove impervious to the formidable cultural forces Siskin associates with the enterprise of "writing." Blake, of all writers, stands to benefit most from the ongoing boom in post-literary technologies, and Blake studies, as an academic endeavor, may have a good chance of surviving, even thriving, in the waning years of print culture. In the millennium just ahead, as discussed at the 1998 convention of the Modern Language Association and in *The Wordsworth Circle* 30 (1999), web-based electronic marvels like the Blake Archive (and its ever more dazzling reincarnations in technologies yet to come) will allow unprecedented numbers of the children of the future age to experience the thrills and threats of Blake's achievement—already, Internet users anywhere in the world can call up images from a wider range of illuminated writings in a shorter span of time than anyone, including Blake himself, has ever seen at one sitting before. For Blake's future readers and viewers, it is possible that the response to this exhilarating experience won't simply be more writing, in the form of yet more work-products. What if some of these readers should forego, however briefly, "the meer drudgery of business," as Blake wrote to Butts on 10 January 1803, and make the difficult choice, with Blake, to "follow the dictates of our Angels" and carry out "the Tasks set before us"? And what if a few, somewhere, someday, should actually heed Blake's call, in the Preface to chapter 4 of *Jerusalem*, to "expel from among you those who pretend to despise the labours of Art & Science" and decide to engage "openly & publicly before all the World in some Mental pursuit for the Building up of Jerusalem"? Where would the work of writing be then?

Jason Whittaker. *William Blake and the Myths of Britain*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999. xii + 215 pp. \$55.

Reviewed by ALEXANDER GOURLAY

This book, an under-revised 1995 dissertation, is not easy to read—or to review. Mr. Whittaker has intelligently considered the resources available up to about 1993, primary and secondary, on the important and complex subject of Blake's use of the poetic and mythic versions of British history and prehistory. Unfortunately, the result is little more than an index of what is already known, and even as such it will not be very helpful, either to beginners or those who have studied these materials extensively.

Part of the problem is that although Whittaker has read other scholars' work with enough penetration to know that not all of it is equally useful, he invariably assembles his discussions—they aren't arguments, exactly—out of contingent assertions culled from his predecessors, as if the

decontextualized sentences of David Erdman, Kathleen Raine, Edward Larrissy, Robert Gleckner and Don Cameron Allen were fully compatible bricks in a wall of Blakean science. As a result, bits from here and there mingle in an arbitrary stew of primary and secondary sources, made all the more bewildering because Whittaker often refers to writers by surnames only: one can easily determine whether "George" on page 170 is M. Dorothy George, Diana Hume George, or our poor George III, but by that time the point of the reference is lost. And because so much of the text is endnoted paraphrase and quotation, the reader must drop everything two or three times per page to examine notes and bibliography to divine what sort of spirit Whittaker is channeling at any given moment.

But the most important problem is that although he has done his homework, apparently understands the criticism he has read, is good at summarizing the main issues in extra-Blakean materials, and has the knowable facts straight, Whittaker doesn't show that he has yet figured out very much about Blake on his own: Blake's words and ideas are almost always seen through critics darkly, and when Whittaker directly addresses a Blake text or, very rarely, a picture, the results are often naïve. This is not a question of a flawed approach, a theory misapplied, or even critical misprision in service of an argument: Whittaker is willing (to a fault) to incorporate ideas from almost any source or point of view, and he does so with both authority and finesse, but never really gets around to creating his own intellectually useful account of Blake's historical mythmaking and mythmaking. This leaves a reviewer very little to praise or even argue with, since there is no explicit or even implicit theoretical position to examine and if there is a novel and coherent argument to debate it is buried somewhere beneath a drift of secondary sources. The book might be helpful as a review of the literature to someone who had not yet done any work on these issues (especially chapter 3, on Druids), but because Whittaker tends to be oblivious to incongruities and uncongenialities in critical arguments he is not an ideal synthesist or guide.

William Blake and the Myths of Britain exemplifies at once why dissertations are often published, and why they usually shouldn't be: most are undertaken as speculative exercises in dutiful plodding, and even if nothing very exciting comes of a given project, the plodder must push on grimly to the end, then polish the voluminous results to a deceptively high gloss. In this case the plodding is of the highest quality, the gloss is very high, and the consequence inconsequential.