

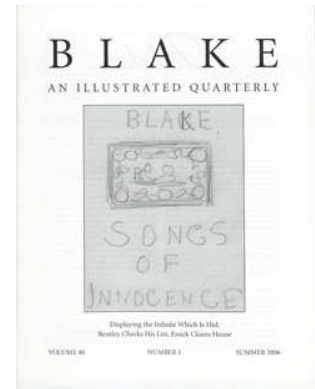
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“This Class of Impostors”: Robert Cromek’s View
of London Booksellers and Engravers

David Groves

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"This Class of Impostors": Robert Cromek's View of London Booksellers and Engravers

BY DAVID GROVES

Robert Hartley Cromek's brief friendship with William Blake around 1805-06 is well known to readers of *Blake*. So, too, is Blake's deep resentment of Cromek, after Cromek hired Luigi Schiavonetti (rather than Blake himself) to engrave Blake's designs for Robert Blair's *The Grave*, which Cromek published in 1808. But no scholar has ever cited Cromek's jaundiced account of London publishers, which he wrote at about the same time in his edition of the *Reliques of Robert Burns*. As Cromek himself had been an engraver in London, and was now making a living in publishing, his observations have some weight.

Cromek's account occurs in a footnote to Robert Burns's letter of 2 February 1790 to the Edinburgh bookseller Peter Hill. In that letter, the Scottish poet is asking the bookseller to look for "Banks's new and complete Christian's Family Bible," printed for C. Cooke, Paternoster-row, London," which was then coming out in installments. "He promises," Burns explains, "to give ... I think it is three hundred and odd engravings, to which he has put the names of the first artists in London."¹ Here it is interesting to recall that William Blake did some engraving in his early years for similar works like the *Royal Universal Family Bible* and the *Protestants Family Bible*.² Burns's interest in the *Christian's Family Bible* provoked the following caustic comment from Cromek:

Perhaps no set of men more effectually avail themselves of the easy credulity of the public, than a certain description of Paternoster-row booksellers. Three hundred and odd engravings!—and by the *first artists* in London, too! No wonder that Burns was dazzled by the splendour of the promise. It is no unusual thing for this class of impostors to *illustrate the Holy Scriptures* by plates originally engraved for the *History of England*, and I have actually seen subjects designed by our celebrated artist [Thomas] Stothard, from *Clarissa Harlowe* and the *Novelist's Magazine*, converted, with incredible dexterity, by these Bookselling-Breslows, into *Scriptural embellishments!* One of these vendors of "Family Bibles" lately called on me, to consult me professionally, about a folio engraving he brought with him.—It represented MONS. BUFFON, seated, contemplating various groups of animals that surrounded him: He merely wished, he said, to be informed whether by *uncloathing* the Naturalist, and giving him a rather more res-

1. *Reliques of Robert Burns: Consisting Chiefly of Original Letters, Poems, and Critical Observations on Scottish Songs, Collected and Published by R. H. Cromek* (London: Cadell and Davies, 1808) 103-05 (103).

2. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969) 609.

olute look, the plate could not, at a trifling expense, be made to pass for "DANIEL IN THE LIONS' DEN!"³

Without mentioning his former friend Blake, some of these details in Cromek's account come remarkably close to William Blake's early experiences as a London engraver. In 1782-83, Blake engraved eight of Thomas Stothard's designs for the *Novelist's Magazine*, including four that were illustrations to Samuel Richardson's *Clarissa*.⁴ Quite possibly, then, Blake's engravings of Stothard's designs were among the ones that Cromek saw "converted ... into *Scriptural embellishments!*" In view of the ease with which (according to Cromek) London publishers turned illustrations of English history into Bible pictures, it may be relevant that Blake's Prospectus of 1793 lists, among his engravings, "a Series of subjects from the Bible, and another [series] from the History of England."⁵

3. Note, signed "E." (for editor), in Cromek's *Reliques of Burns* 103-04n. I cannot explain Cromek's term "Bookselling-Breslows," unless perhaps it refers to eastern European publishers in London. "Mons. Buffon" was the famous French naturalist, Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707-87).

4. Bentley 610-11.

5. Bentley 423n.

Blake's Advent Birthday

BY W. H. STEVENSON

After long debate, the dating of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* has been firmly laid to rest by Joseph Viscomi; *Marriage* can safely be dated 1790.¹ The opening words are well known, and the coincidence, but not accident, of Swedenborg's proclamation in 1757 of the New Age:

As a new heaven is begun, and it is now thirty-three years since its advent ...

One detail, I believe, has not been previously noted. Consider the words "now" and "advent." Advent Sunday, the fourth Sunday before Christmas Day, ranges between 27 November and 3 December. Blake, a lifelong nonconformist, would largely ignore the church year, but there is no reason for him not to notice that, in 1790, it fell on 28 November: his 33rd birthday.

Just another coincidence, this time quite accidental? Blake is already set to associate his own age, Christ's age, and Swedenborg's New Age, and to elide nativity and resurrection, in a total inversion of tradition—the marriage of heaven and hell. In his conviction that he was the man to bring all this before a world ready for revolution, why should he not also, in the same cheeky mood, point to the Advent significance of his birthday?

1. "The Evolution of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 58.3-4 (1997): 284, especially note 7.