

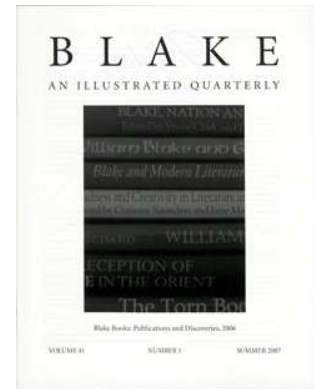
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“Visions of Blake, the Artist”: An Early Reference
to William Blake in the Times

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This magnificent work, which has hitherto been confined, owing to its size and costliness, to the libraries of persons of opulence, has just made its appearance in a form and at a price which place it within the reach of the most moderate means.

The reviewer goes on to commend the value of biography:

We are desirous of knowing the particulars of the domestic lives, the personal habits, and daily customs of men whose names are as familiar in our mouths as household words, and of whom, although they had become dust before we drew breath, we have as distinct and individual a notion as if we had personally talked with them. Biographical history satisfies this natural craving; separates the man from the events which he controlled or was controlled by, and holds his character up to an exclusive consideration. The lesson which his life teaches is then felt in its full force; it comes home to the business and bosoms of men, because every human being perceives that the same impulses that have governed the actions of the object of his contemplation, throb in his own heart, and influence his own conduct; and he learns, by a practical example, whether their issues are of good or of evil.

He adds:

Closely associated with the desire of knowing the exclusive history of such personages, is the wish to be acquainted with their external appearance, and the fashion of the human form they wore. Nothing is more natural than to covet the power of calling them up

"In their shapes and state majestic,
"That we may wonder at their excellence,"

and verify or correct the images which fancy has formed by the true copy which the art that confers immortality has preserved of them.

The quotation is from Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, act 4, scene 2, in which Faustus and Mephistophilis conjure up the shade of Alexander the Great for the German emperor.

We then get the following comment on Blake:

The late Mr. Blake, the engraver, whose genius was subject to a kind of morbid excitement, was so possessed with this notion, that he had contracted a belief that he could, almost at will, bring before his actual physical eyesight the forms of the great men of this and other countries, whose existence he could only know by means of history. Under this delusion, which, however, was of no kin to madness, and could not have happened to any but a person of exalted imagination, he had frequent interviews with his distinguished buried acquaintance, and used to relate his imaginary conversations with them in perfect conviction of their truth and reality.

This review appeared during the editorship of Thomas Barnes (1785-1841), whose view was that anonymous journalism, subordinating the personality of the journalist, "was the only kind that would be read seriously."⁷ The anonymous re-

7. Gordon Phillips, "Barnes, Thomas (1785-1841)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

viewer (and, of course one would still like to know his identity) gives us a much more sober account than Dibdin's nonsense about Blake "shaking hands with Homer."⁸ The *Times* persisted with anonymous reporting as late as January 1967, when the first staff bylines appeared. In this review, it is the *Times* that, corporately, is expressing a view of Blake that is surprisingly friendly and well disposed. It is assumed that the *Times* readership will know, at least vaguely, of "Mr. Blake, the engraver," and perhaps of the imputation of madness, which is then denied, admitting no more than that his "genius was subject to a kind of morbid excitement." By way of comparison, the search string "keats the poet" calls up a death notice in 1821, but nothing equivalent to the Blake comment until a concert review in 1868.⁹ What the article thus suggests is that Blake was part of what the average reader of the *Times* was expected to know about without explanation, that he was by no means *pictor ignotus*, at least for the reviewer and his editor. Moreover, all this precedes Allan Cunningham's account of Blake in the second volume of his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1830.¹⁰ It raises some interesting questions about public acquaintanceship with Blake's work in the years immediately following his death in 1827.

8. Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *The Library Companion, or, The Young Man's Guide and the Old Man's Comfort in the Choice of a Library*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for Harding, Triphook and Lepard, 1824) 2: 334.

9. *Times* 23 March 1821 (issue 11201): 3, col. F "Deaths"; 5 October 1868 (issue 26247): 10, col. E "Crystal Palace Concert."

Sarah Jones tells me that the search string "john keats" retrieves an 1848 *Times* reference to Monckton Milnes's biography of Keats. I would suggest that this further bears out my argument; the Blake reference is both early (within a few months of his death) and is in a casual, almost irrelevant context. Knowledge of "Blake the engraver" is part of the common currency of the well-educated *Times* reader.

10. Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1830) 140-79.

"VISIONS OF BLAKE, THE ARTIST": An Early Reference to William Blake in the *Times*

BY ANGUS WHITEHEAD

John Clark Strange, the nineteenth-century collector and prospective biographer of William Blake, recorded in his manuscript journal that on 6 April 1859, following a conversation with Samuel Palmer's brother William at the British Museum, he "pursued inquiries abt Blake in various books in the Library and made extracts therefrom viz. Stothards Life—Songs of Innocence & Experience by Blake—B's illustrations to Dante—Hayleys Life—Times Newspaper."¹ In an annota-

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) [hereafter referred to as *BR*(2)] 717.

tion to this journal entry G. E. Bentley, Jr., observes that “no account of Blake in *The Times* is known before 1901.”² In fact an account of William Blake had appeared in this newspaper 70 years earlier. On Wednesday 27 January 1830 the *Times* printed an extract from Allan Cunningham’s “Life of Blake,” recently published in the second volume of Cunningham’s *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (1830).³ In this extract, which the *Times* titled “VISIONS OF BLAKE, THE ARTIST,” Cunningham describes Blake’s drawing of the Visionary Heads of William Wallace and Edward I:

VISIONS OF BLAKE, THE ARTIST.—He was requested to draw the likeness of Sir William Wallace—the eye of Blake sparkled, for he admired heroes. “William Wallace!” he exclaimed, “I see him now—there, there, how noble he looks—reach me my things!” Having drawn for some time, with the same care of hand and steadiness of eye as if a living sitter had been before him, Blake stopped suddenly, and said, “I cannot finish him—Edward the First has stepped in between him and me.”⁴

The article ends: “*Family Library: Lives of the Artists.*” Perhaps the *Times*’ excerpt from Cunningham’s biography was the account of William Blake that Strange encountered “and made extracts therefrom” at the British Museum in April 1859.

Bentley observes that Cunningham’s *Lives* “had an extraordinarily powerful effect in bringing the poet-artist’s name before the public”⁵ and “provoked a spate of comment upon Blake . . .”⁶ *Blake Records* cites six reviews published during February and early March 1830 which featured discussion of

Blake and excerpts from Cunningham’s life of Blake.⁷ The extract from Cunningham’s *Lives* published in the *Times* in January 1830, ten days before the *Athenaeum* and the *London Literary Gazette* reviews of the same work, must have introduced the name of “Blake, the artist” to an even wider audience.

The article may also have assisted Blake’s widow, Catherine Blake. The first edition of Cunningham’s “Life of Blake” concludes:

The affection and fortitude of this woman [Catherine Blake] entitle her to much respect. She shared her husband’s lot without a murmur, set her heart solely upon his fame, and soothed him in those hours of misgiving and despondency which are not unknown to the strongest intellects. She still lives to lament the loss of Blake—and feel it.⁸

By January 1830, Catherine lived independently in lodgings (according to George Cumberland, “at a Bakers”) at either 17 Upper Charlton Street, 17 Charlton Street, or 17 Upper Charlotte Street, Fitzroy Square.⁹ Catherine’s move from Frederick Tatham’s residence to this address approximately nine months earlier may have been facilitated by a small legacy from her brother-in-law and former landlord at 3 Fountain Court, Henry Banes.¹⁰ G. E. Bentley, Jr., suggests that Catherine Blake’s sale of Blake’s large watercolor drawing of “The Characters of Spenser’s *Faerie Queene*” to his former patron George O’Brien Wyndham, third Earl Egremont, in late July 1829 “is likely to have kept Catherine out of want for the rest of her life.”¹¹ However, on 25 February 1830 the collector Haviland Burke showed John Linnell a letter from Rev. Dr. John Jebb, Bishop of Limerick “enquiring | how he c.^d best serve M.^{rs} Blake.” Linnell advised Burke “to recommend to the B—[ishop] | to purchase the works of M^r B— | from M^{rs} B.”¹² Catherine’s sale of her stock of her late husband’s works therefore continued after July 1829, ensuring that she could continue to live independently. The *Times*’ excerpt from Cunningham’s “Life of Blake” of January 1830 must have served to advertise extensively *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* and make known to a wider audience the life and work of William Blake. It may also have been indirectly responsible for drawing wider attention to the plight of Blake’s widow and therefore for an increased number of inquiries from potential buyers regarding Catherine Blake’s remaining stock of her husband’s paintings, drawings and engravings.

2. BR(2) 717fn.

3. *Times* Wednesday 27 January 1830, page 3, column E. This reference was discovered with the assistance of *Palmer’s Full Text Online* <<http://historyonline.chadwyck.co.uk/info/pfto.htm>>, which contains a reference to “Blake, the Artist, His Visionary Portraits? 27? 1830 (page 3 col. e) [full date/reference not supplied].” The article was traced to the 27 January 1830 edition of the *Times* using a microfilm of the newspaper for that year. The passage is exactly the same as that printed in the first edition of Cunningham’s *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, 6 vols. (London: John Murray, 1829-33) 2: 140-79, except for three minor details: the *Times* prints “stopped” instead of Cunningham’s “stopt”, “stepped” instead of “stept”, and places a comma and dash after “The answer was” instead of a colon. Cunningham’s life of Blake (2nd ed.) is reprinted in BR(2) 628-60.

4. The excerpt in the *Times* continues:

“That’s lucky,” said his friend, “for I want the portrait of Edward too.” Blake took another sheet of paper, and sketched the features of Plantagenet; upon which his majesty politely vanished, and the artist finished the head of Wallace. “And pray, Sir,” said a gentleman who heard Blake’s friend tell his story—“was Sir William Wallace an heroic-looking man? And what sort of personage was Edward?” The answer was,—“There they are, Sir, both framed and hanging on the wall behind you, judge for yourself.” “I looked (says my informant) and saw two warlike heads of the size of common life. That of Wallace was noble and heroic,—that of Edward stern and bloody. The first had the front of a god, the latter the aspect of a demon.”

Blake’s companion was almost certainly John Varley, for whom Blake drew numerous Visionary Heads (c. 1819-25) (BR[2] 346-69 and pl. 54).

5. BR(2) 504.

6. BR(2) 503.

7. BR(2) 503-10.

8. BR(2) 657.

9. See BR(2) 754, 498, 546, 495.

10. See Angus Whitehead, “I also beg Mr Blakes acceptance of my wearing apparel: The Will of Henry Banes, Landlord of 3 Fountain Court, Strand, the Last Residence of William and Catherine Blake,” *Blake* 39.2 (fall 2005): 78-99.

11. BR(2) 499.

12. BR(2) 509. In a paper currently in preparation, I will explore Catherine Blake’s marketing (as well as finishing and reprinting) of her late husband’s works still in her possession, March 1829-October 1831.