

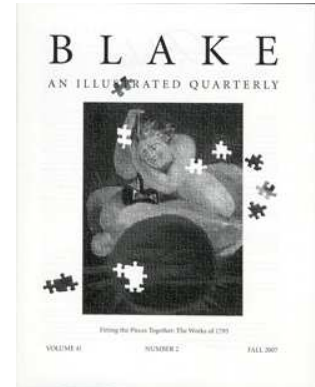
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

R E V I E W

Michael Bedard, *William Blake: The Gates of Paradise*

Elizabeth B. Bentley

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 41, Issue 2, Fall 2007, p. 91



The Folio Society edition does not constitute a facsimile in the truest sense of the word. Any scholar wishing to complete work on the drawings will still have to consult the originals in the British Museum. Nonetheless, the Folio Society has given us a beautiful edition of Young's poem with reproductions of pictures by Blake and an important commentary. Together, the three volumes do constitute a major publishing event.

Editors' note: The Folio Society edition may be purchased by calling the society; the telephone number depends on your location, but is listed at <<http://www.foliosoc.co.uk>>.

Michael Bedard. *William Blake: The Gates of Paradise*. Toronto: Tundra Books, 2006. vi + 192 pp.; 89 reproductions. Can. \$28.99, US \$19.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Elizabeth B. Bentley

FORTY years ago Michael Bedard was introduced to the work of William Blake by his high school English teacher, and he has continued to live with Blake ever since. He knew he had to write a biography which would assist adolescent readers, and nine years ago he started writing it. During these years he established himself as a poet and as an author of books for children.

My first experience of this book was hearing it read. My reader and I agreed that it is eminently suitable to be read both aloud and silently. It is also a book that is accessible for browsing. Furthermore, it is visually pleasing, with 89 well-chosen reproductions, including a plate from *For Children: The Gates of Paradise* as a heading for the prologue and each of the 16 chapters.

In the first two chapters, Bedard points out the effect on the small William Blake of his long solitary walks in the country where he could create his own songs about "Englands green & pleasant Land." Here he experienced some of his first visions. In the city he observed the poverty and suffering brought about by the "dark Satanic Mills" of the Industrial Revolution. Bedard skillfully tells us what fine parents William Blake had. They provided enough security and recognition of his gifts to support him in becoming a richly developed human being who

was not simply an engraver; he was a poet and a painter. He dreamt of uniting the arts of writing and painting, as the artists of the Middle Ages had in their illuminated manuscripts. He discovered a way to write and draw on the copper plates he used for engraving, and create a raised image he could print from on his wooden press and then color by hand.

He called his discovery Illuminated Printing, and in the books he created with it, he confronted all systems of power that confined the human spirit. He announced a gospel of

freedom and fellowship founded on the exercise of the creative imagination. In a world impressed with the great and powerful, he celebrated the small. He delighted in the innocence of the child. He showed us "a world in a grain of sand, and a heaven in a wild flower." (2)

Bedard presents Catherine as the wife William needed. She worked by his side and did not complain when project after project did not bring the income they had expected. One despairs over the years when William was forgotten. We can be grateful that Thomas Butts remained a faithful commissioner of paintings by Blake, especially the Bible illustrations. The formation of a group of young admirers, who called themselves the "Ancients" and ranged in age from 15 to 25, was a godsend to the childless Blakes in their old age. The Ancients came for advice, they came to admire, they went off for excursions into the country to paint and draw, taking William with them.

William Blake had said on more than one occasion that death was not something to fear. It was like passing from one room to another. Bedard describes Blake's passage with a sure pen which leads us to admire his biography of Blake.

I recommend this book to adolescents and to anyone teaching them, first and foremost for its compelling portrait of Blake and his time. In an age like ours that is experienced as apocalyptic, it is well for youth to be introduced to a human being who does not turn his back on that condition but can become an inner counselor and guide.

I look forward to giving this book to my 12-year-old grandson and hope to be able to read it with my granddaughter when she turns 10. I hope that they will find both Michael Bedard's and William Blake's *Gates of Paradise* as rewarding as I do.

