

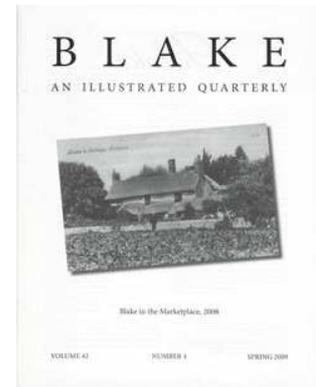
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The Man Who Married the Blakes

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BY MORTON D. PALEY

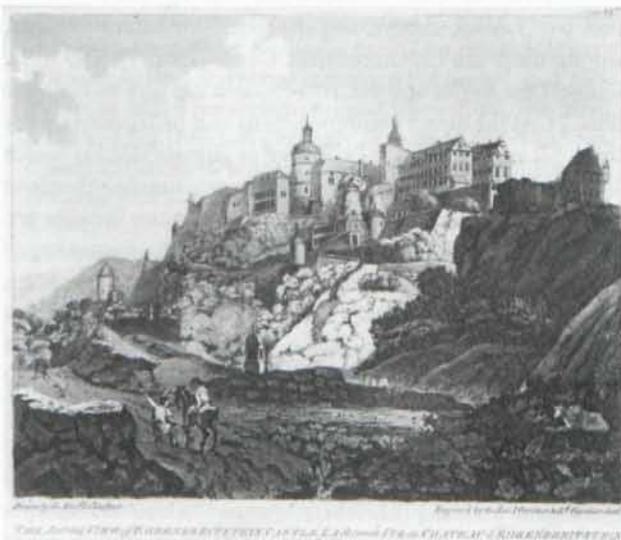
ON 18 AUGUST 1782 William Blake and Catherine Boucher were married in St. Mary's Church, Battersea, an event that is commemorated by a stained glass window in the church today. The clergyman officiating was the Rev. John Gardner, who in the words of Alexander Gilchrist "was also an amateur artist of note in his day" (35). Gilchrist treats Gardner's artistic career with considerable irony, but Gardner was actually a competent landscape artist and engraver who also had some interesting educational, political, and literary associations.

John Gardner (b. 1728 or 1729) kept a drawing school at 13 Kensington Square from c. 1763 to 1770, evidently a successful one because it expanded into the adjoining numbers 12 and 11. From 1763 to 1767 and again in 1769 he exhibited at the Free Society of Artists, showing a total of more than two dozen paintings and drawings of landscapes and of such popular subjects as Windsor Castle and Chepstow Castle, Monmouthshire.¹

After taking holy orders he gave up his drawing school and became curate, then vicar of Battersea, becoming vicar in 1778 and remaining until his death in 1808. He was the only ordained clergyman of the Church of England who was also a practicing artist at that time, for although he had given up his school he had not given up painting. He began exhibiting at the Royal Academy in 1778 with two landscapes in oil, and exhibited every year, with the exceptions of 1792 and 1794, through 1796 (Graves, *Royal Academy* 3: 203). He also hoped to become chaplain to the Royal Academy upon the resignation of the incumbent, the Rev. Matthew William Peters (Williamson 201). In 1789 and again in 1790 Gardner applied for the position, but unsuccessfully; it went to the Rt. Rev. Thomas Barnard, later Bishop of Limerick, in 1791.²

The subject matter of Gardner's exhibited pictures changed after 1787. Through that year his locales had been in England and Wales, but in 1788 his two entries were *The Castle of Rheinfels at St. Goar, on the Rhine* and *The Castle of Ober Lahnstein, near the River Rhine*. These pictures were among the products of a trip to the Continent earlier that year, as were, with one exception, the fourteen works Gardner showed in the exhibitions of 1789-91. They were among the origi-

nals for aquatints, the planned publication of which was announced in a booklet published in 1788: *Proposals for Publishing by Subscription, a Collection of Views, Taken on and near the River Rhine, at Aix la Chapelle, and on the River Maese; By the Reverend John Gardner: To Be Engraved in Acqua [sic] Tinta, by R. Dodd*. Here it was stated that "the picturesque Beauties of the River Rhine, have long been subjects of admiration, though never produced to the public by the Painter or Engraver." There were to be eight numbers, each containing four prints 20 x 17 in. in size, and accompanying text. The price was one guinea per number to subscribers, colored cop-



1. (above) *The Second View of Ehrenbreitstein Castle*. John and Richard Gardner after John Gardner. *Views* (1791), print opposite 106. California History Section, California State Library.

2. (below) *The Gate of Cologne*. John and Richard Gardner after John Gardner. *Views* (1791), print opposite 122. California History Section, California State Library.



1. This information is from Cust, from Hobhouse, and from Graves, *Society of Artists* 100.

2. For this information I thank Andrew Potter, research assistant at the Royal Academy Library.

ies three guineas, and subscribers were invited to send their names to Mr. Walter, Bookseller, Charing Cross. The folio was issued in parts that year, with aquatints after Gardner's originals by engravers including John and Elizabeth Fletcher, Dodd, J. S. Robinson, Richard Gardner, Jr. (Gardner's nephew), and Gardner himself. The plates were then re-executed by the Gardners in smaller size and published with the text in 1791. An unillustrated volume consisting of text alone also appeared that year, with an impressive list of subscribers, including the Lord Mayor, John Wilkes, Sir William Chambers, Joseph Farington, and Edward Burney.

Gardner's characteristic views are of architecture—for the most part castles, abbeys, and churches—in natural settings. Among these are Ehrenbreitstein Castle (illus. 1), also to be a subject for Byron and for Turner,³ and the gate of Cologne (illus. 2). At the outset Gardner tells us that he traveled on the Rhine because he needed "a change of climate" for his health (1-2), and indeed his health problems are a running theme in his narrative.⁴ He also offers ample reflections on his own art, as when he explains the differences between his two views of Rhinefels Castle according to the light at the time of day when the view was taken. Another theme is political. In connection with *Ruin of the Abbey of Bingen* he wrote in 1788: "It is, I think, impossible, for the most indifferent observer to survey the original, without lamenting its destruction, execrating the ambition of Kings, and deprecating the wanton barbarities of military executioners" (plate 2). This general sentiment is particularized in 1791, where toward the end of the book Gardner says, "Among the wonders of the present period, not the least remarkable is that the army in France has generally and warmly declared for liberty" (153). Gardner had known Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville during Brissot's residence in London during February to November 1783 (Dybikowski 194), and this association may have prepared the way for his pro-revolutionary sympathy.

In 1793 the subjects of Gardner's RA exhibition pictures changed again, to one view of Wales and three of Monmouthshire. He must by then have had in mind the illustrations to be provided for his friend David Williams's *History of Monmouthshire* (1796), engraved by Gardner and J. Hill in 1793. Williams, a prolific writer on religious and political subjects,⁵ was also a supporter of the French Revolution in its early days, and another link between the two men was that both were among the original members of the Royal Literary Fund, set up in 1790 to help destitute writers (and still existing today). Among the thirty-six plates Gardner furnished were views of

3. Powell (21) shows that Turner was familiar with Gardner's *Views* before his own Rhine journey.

4. Unless otherwise indicated, references are to the edition of 1788.

5. Erdman draws a parallel between an aspect of Blake's political thought and Williams's (224). "David Williams ... made diagrams showing no constitution healthy in which the *senses* of the body politic, i.e., the common people from whom all political ideas must flow to the 'head,' were barred from political participation." He cites Williams, *Letters to a Young Prince* (London, 1791) 47, 73.

Abergavenny Castle, Caerleon Castle, and Tintern Abbey, the last unusual in showing the abbey from the north with everyday commercial activities on the river. Williams's voluminous text includes translations from Welsh manuscripts by Edward Williams, a translation of a poem by the bard Gyffyd Llwd, and an excerpt from the "Sabrina" passage of *Comus* headed "Milton's Description of the Severn." Gardner and Williams later had a falling-out about this venture. "Since that work was published," noted Farington, "Williams & Gardner have quarreled about the profits of the work.—Gardner [*sic*] professing to understand that Williams undertook to assist him as a *friend*, the other declaring that He looked for a reward" (*Diary* 4: 1406, 22 June 1800).

One curious aspect of Gardner's career is represented by his *Plan of the Academy, at Battersea, in Surry*, which the British Library catalogue conjectures to have been published in 1790. It is difficult to see how he could have been able to fulfill his duties as a vicar, pursue his artistic activities, and found a school at the same time, but this eight-page pamphlet speaks of the academy not as a theoretical project but as a school "kept by" him. The author begins by saying that it is necessary to have only a small number of students in order for the master "to attend to the Temper, Genius, and Disposition, of every Individual" (1), and more than half the pamphlet is devoted to the importance of "cultivating the Arts of Reading, Writing, and Speaking, our own Language with Energy and Propriety" (5). Greek and Latin are "taught with equal Care and Assiduity," as is French; among other subjects are mathematics, geography, music, and fencing, all taught by resident masters. Did this academy actually exist? Or is it an ideal academy written of as if it did exist?

There is no evidence that William Blake and John Gardner met again after August 1782, although both showed pictures at the Royal Academy exhibitions of 1784 and 1785. Nevertheless, it is both interesting and appropriate that the man who married the Blakes was both an artist and an early supporter of the French Revolution.

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The American Blake Foundation

By G. E. BENTLEY, JR.

THE AMERICAN BLAKE FOUNDATION was founded on 7 July 1970 by Professor Roger Easson and his wife, Professor Kay Parkhurst Easson, to foster Blake scholarship. According to a statement by the Eassons,

As a non-profit educational trust, the Foundation is designed to create an inexpensive reprint series of Blake materials, to host national Blake symposia, to build a research library [the foundation library then contained 178 books], and, ultimately, to award research grants and fellowships. The Advisory Board of Directors currently consists of Stuart Curran, Robert F. Gleckner, John E. Grant, Jean Hagstrum, Joseph Holland, Karl Kroeber, Paul Miner, Edward J. Rose, Rodger L. Tarr, Robert R. Wark, Winston Weathers, and Joseph A. Wittreich, Jr. The Executive Board is made up of Roger R. Easson, Kay Parkhurst Easson, and [attorney] Dale J. Briggs.¹

This was an extraordinarily ambitious program. It was clearly influenced by the William Blake Trust, which had been established with a substantial sum from the Graham Robertson estate and was largely run by Sir Geoffrey Keynes; the trust produced remarkably fine exhibitions and facsimiles but did not attempt symposia, journals, or research grants. The ambition of the American Blake Foundation helps to explain the presence on its advisory board of Blake scholars as distinguished as Curran, Gleckner, Grant, Hagstrum, Wark, and Wittreich. It should also be said that Roger was extraordinarily energetic and persuasive.

Crucial details of the enterprise appear in an essay in the student newspaper at Illinois State University in Normal, Illinois, where the Eassons taught:

The Center for the Study of William Blake is a private, non-circulating library geared toward Blake scholarship and research. It was begun in 1972 and is operated by Roger and Kay Easson, ISU associate professors of English. ... [The library includes] 95 per cent of all critical commentary on Blake in book form ... [and] 1200 slides and graphic illustrations ... The most costly item was ... "Night Thoughts," which ... cost the Eassons \$2,500. ... the Center ... is actually owned by three entities: the American Blake Foundation; the editorial staff of "Blake Studies," ... and of course, the Eassons, who built half of the library from their own money, purchasing all of the expensive rare books. ... the university and the English department do not contribute to the Center, except in providing office space and allowing the pari [pair] three hours release time to work on "Blake Studies." ... Currently, the Center is used mostly by the "Blake Studies" editorial staff²

1. *Blake Studies* 3.2 (spring 1971): 105.

2. Edward Bury, "Mysticism Surrounds Blake Display," *Daily Vidette* (c. September 1976); I have seen only a photocopy of it.