

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY
BLAKE

N O T E

Blake's Donald the Hammerer

John Beer

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 5, Issue 3, Winter, 1971-72, pp. 165-167



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WORKS IN PROGRESS

Hoover, Suzanne (Sudbury, Mass.): a group of essays on unexplored aspects of Blake's reputation in the nineteenth century. Mrs. Hoover will be in England as an NEH Fellow for the academic year 1972-73 to study British art and literature with particular reference to Blake.

Mills, A. C. (Newnham College, Cambridge): a detailed study of the illustrations to *Jerusalem*, their imagery and their relation to the text and to other of Blake's works.

Paley, Morton D. (University of California, Berkeley): a book on *Jerusalem*. Paley has been named a Guggenheim Fellow for the academic year 1972-73 in order to enable him to complete his book.

Peterson, Jane E. (Dallas, Texas): a Ph.D. dissertation, "William Blake: Experimentation in Form and Structure in the Works of 1788-95, Excluding the Manuscript Poems," directed by T. C. Duncan Eaves at the University of Arkansas.

AULT LEAVES NEWSLETTER

After this issue, Donald Ault leaves our editorial board in order to devote more time to his own work. We are grateful for the help he has given us as Assistant Editor during the past two and a half years.

NOTES

JOHN BEER: PETERHOUSE, CAMBRIDGE

Blake's "Donald the Hammerer"

In *Blake Newsletter* 15 (Winter 1971, pp. 75-77) Robert Essick describes the pencil-and-ink drawing known as "Donald the Hammerer" in the UCLA Library, and states that he has been unable to trace its subject, though he thinks that Blake might be illustrating a scene in a book.

I think that Donald himself is to be identified with a character mentioned very briefly in Scott's *The Abbot* (1820), ch. xxxiv. Roland Graeme, explaining how he comes to have the skills of a metal worker, says,

My patron the Knight of Avenel used to compel the youth educated in his household to learn the use of axe and hammer, and working in wood and iron--he used to speak of old northern champions, who forged their own weapons, and of the Highland Captain, Donald nan Ord, or Donald of the Hammer, whom he himself knew, and who used to work at the anvil with a sledge-hammer in each hand. Some said he praised this art, because he was himself of churl's blood. . . .

The appearance of two hammers in Blake's design reinforces the identification with "Donald of the Hammer."

What was not at first clear to me was whether Scott had here created a character for his own purposes or was adding a touch of veracity to his narrative by referring to an actual historical figure. Reference to Scottish records failed to solve the mystery. In the end, however, I consulted Dr. James Corson, Honorary Librarian of Abbotsford and an authority on Scott, to whom I am most grateful for looking into the matter and discovering that Donald the Hammerer was in fact a real person. I quote from his letter to me:

Donald nan Nord was Donald Stewart of the Invernahyle family, a younger branch of the Stewarts of Appin.

In 1817 Joseph Train presented to Scott a manuscript called "An authentic account of the Stewarts of Invernahyle." The manuscript is still at Abbotsford. In 1818 Gale and Fenner, the London publishers, asked Scott to edit a new edition of Edward Burt's "Letters from a gentleman in the north of Scotland." This book was one of Scott's great favourites and he used it extensively in *The Lady of the Lake* and in *Waverley*. He declined, however, to edit it and passed the task on to Robert Jamieson. This edition was called the 5th and was issued in 1818 and also in 1822 when it was still called the 5th. To this edition

Scott contributed the story of Donald the Hammerer taken from the manuscript presented by Train. To Scott's annoyance the publishers put on the title page: "The history of Donald the Hammerer, from an authentic account of the family of Invernahyle; a MS communicated by Walter Scott, Esq."

If Blake was using Scott he would be more likely to use Burt (either 1818 or 1822) rather than *The Abbot*, where there is only a brief reference.

I have looked at the 1818 edition and agree with Dr. Corson that Blake must have come across Donald in Burt rather than in Scott's novel. The actual phrase "Donald the Hammerer" was used only by Burt; in addition there is an incident in the account as communicated to him by Scott which corresponds to Blake's design. Donald was the only surviving child of Alexander, the first Invernahyle (called "the Peaceful"), who had been basely murdered by Green Colin and his men. He has been rescued by his nurse, the blacksmith's wife of Moirdart, and brought up secretly as one of her own children. The account continues:

When young Donald had acquired some strength, he was called to assist his supposed father in carrying on his trade; and so uncommon was his strength, that when only eighteen years of age, he could wield a large fore-hammer in each hand, for the length of the longest day, without the least seeming difficulty or fatigue.

At last the blacksmith and his wife resolved to discover to Donald the secret they had so long kept, not only from him, but from the world. After relating the mournful tale of his parents' death, the smith brought a sword of his own making, and put it into Donald's hand, saying, "I trust the blood that runs in your veins, and the spirit of your fathers, will guide your actions; and that this sword will be the means of clearing the difficulties that lie in the way of your recovering your paternal estate." Donald heard with surprise the story of his birth and early misfortune; but vowed never to put the sword into a scabbard until he had swept the murderers of his parents from the earth. (lxvi-lxvii)

The rest of the account is concerned with the consequences of his vow. Donald became a man of blood and plundered the Highlands from end to end. He ended by quarreling with his own son, Duncan, who had settled with his wife at the smithy where Donald had been brought up and was cultivating the land as a man of peace. The account concludes:

Once, as Donald was walking upon the green of Invernahyle, he looked across the river, and saw several men working upon the farm of Inverfalla. In the mean time Duncan came out, and took a spade from one of the men, seemingly to let him see how he should perform the work in which he was employed. This was too much for the old gentleman to bear. He

launched the *curraich* (a wicker boat covered with hides) with his own hand, and rowed it across to Inverfalla. As he approached, Duncan, being struck with the fury of his countenance, fled from the impending storm into the house; but the old man followed him with a naked sword in his hand. Upon entering a room that was somewhat dark, Donald, thinking his degenerate son had concealed himself under the bed-clothes, made a deadly stab at his supposed son; but, instead of killing him, the sword went through the heart of his old nurse, who was then near eighty years of age.

After this unfortunate accident Donald became very religious; he resigned all his lands to his sons, and went to live at Columkill, where he at last died at the age of eighty-seven.

Blake's drawing is fairly clearly intended to illustrate the incident in which the smith and his wife come to the young Donald to tell him his secret, and in which the smith urges him to revenge. But certain elements in the drawing encourage one to approach it in terms of Blake's own ideas and imagery, as expressed in other works. The gestures of the woman, who is holding up one hand outstretched and pointing downwards with the other, correspond very closely to those of the central woman in the Arlington Court Picture (apart from the fact that right and left are reversed). The male looks like one of Blake's figures of energy: his left hand is held up like the woman's right; his right hand is pointing outwards--in the direction (though not with the sweeping spread) of those of the male in the Arlington Court Picture.

In *Blake's Visionary Universe*, I argued that the Arlington Court Picture represents Blake's interpretation of the last chapter of Revelation, and in particular of the phrase "The Spirit and the Bride say 'Come'"--the Spirit being the spirit of organized Energy and the Bride the Jerusalem who stands for Blake's concept of vision. A related interpretation may be traced here, except that the blacksmith, the figure of energy, is shaded, and seems to be more ambiguous than the "Spirit" of the Arlington Court design. For a fuller interpretation, it is better to go to a story which would naturally be brought to mind by Donald's career as a Scots man of blood--that of Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. In my book I also suggested that Blake read Shakespeare's play as a play about the ambiguity of energy, the weird sisters presenting to Macbeth a destiny which in his visionless state he accepts as one of ambition and destruction, but which could be interpreted at a nobler level as an invitation to assume the sovereignty of his own human nature. According to such a reading, the nobility of Macbeth's own heart and blood-consciousness is constantly expressing itself through his imagery while his deeds are carrying him further into a sea of shed blood.

A similar interpretation may be applied to "Donald the Hammerer." The lineaments of Blake's Donald are those of a good character, but one who

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Fifty Additions to Blake Bibliography:
Further Data for the Study of His Reputation
in the Nineteenth Century

is still innocent and unformed. If he were fully to understand his own nature, the smith's words, "I trust the blood that runs in your veins, and the spirit of your fathers, will guide your actions . . ." would be interpreted as a call to peace, not to war, to imitate his father rather than to avenge him, but the smith also calls him to use the sword, and Donald's hand is already resting on it. In a few years, therefore, he will be a complete "man of blood" in the ignoble sense, his energies fully devoted to destruction. Following the smith's misdirection, indeed, he will end by murdering the smith's own wife--the nurse whose mercy and care had originally preserved him from the effects of war and whose gestures in Blake's design are still inviting him to a more visionary and merciful view of humanity.

Study of Burt's book suggests, in other words, that Blake found in the story of "Donald the Hammerer" an echo of his interpretation of *Macbeth* (as also of his own smith-figure, Los) and a fitting emblem of the misapplications of energy in his own industrialized and war-obsessed civilization. Just as the Spirit and the Bride of the Arlington Court picture were seen calling humanity to a fuller exercise of energy and imagination than that offered by self-imprisonment in a world limited by generation and death, so the inner lineaments of the male and female of the design suggest a better sphere for the energetic man; those of the male indicating a world which would benefit from works other than those of weapons of war, those of the female indicating the larger world of imaginative vision which he might enjoy as an artist.

In his letter to me Dr. Corson also points out that Scott returned to Donald in his *Tales of a Grandfather* (ch. xxxix); but this, as he points out, was after Blake's death. It follows, of course, from the date of Burt's fifth edition that Blake's design was executed in or after 1818; and it is by no means impossible that the line of thought which gave rise to it also played its part in the gestation of the Arlington Court picture, which is customarily dated about 1821.

Bibliographies, like other books, may be made for many reasons. But whatever may have moved the compiler to his labors, the bibliography of a single author provides, among other things, the raw materials for the study of that author's reputation. Thus, the historical account of Blake's reputation began officially in 1921 with Sir Geoffrey Keynes's splendid, pioneering *Bibliography of William Blake*. Wide-ranging and filled with new material as it was, the *Bibliography* may be seen now, not surprisingly, to have been fairly incomplete. For example, its census of Blake's Illuminated Books was expanded by Keynes himself in a later work,¹ and its list of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century biographical and critical items has since been multiplied several times over. And yet, Keynes was able, through his numerous--and, one would say, strategic--discoveries, to reveal both a breadth of interest and a lack of interest in Blake during the nineteenth century that had not previously been suspected.

The manner of publication of Keynes's bibliography is itself a paragraph in the history of Blake's reputation. This useful volume was not published in a regular edition. It was, instead, printed for New York's Grolier Club in a "sumptuous"² edition limited to two hundred and fifty copies. Of these, fourteen were given to Keynes to distribute among the great libraries of England and Scotland; the remaining copies were offered to Club members at the price of seventy-five dollars. Thus, the *Bibliography* was accessible, outside the Club, only to more or less determined scholars: a limitation due, surely--even if only in part--to the fact that interest in Blake was at a rather low ebb in the second decade of this century.

But that was about to change. Within a few years of the *Bibliography* (approaching the centenary of Blake's death), several very important books on Blake were published; in the fifty years since, appreciation of Blake has grown to an almost alarming degree--especially in the last ten years. With so many people newly attuned to Blake's original and prophetic voice, we have at last become properly curious about the way in which Blake was regarded--and disregarded--in the past. Partly to answer this need, the bibliographical study of Blake was resumed in the 1950's by G. E. Bentley, Jr. and Martin K. Nurmi. Their *Blake Bibliography* was published in 1964 in a regular edition by a university press.³ It aspired to exhaustiveness in every area it dealt with except that of commentary on Blake after 1863 (i.e., after the publication of Alexander Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*). By thus aspiring, and particularly by making some further strategic discoveries of early commentary on Blake, the new bibliography made a detailed history of