

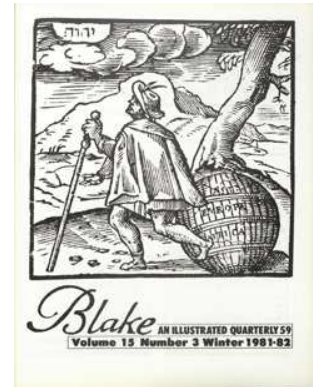
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R E V I E W

Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *The Letters of William Blake with Related Documents*, 3rd ed.

G. E. Bentley, Jr.

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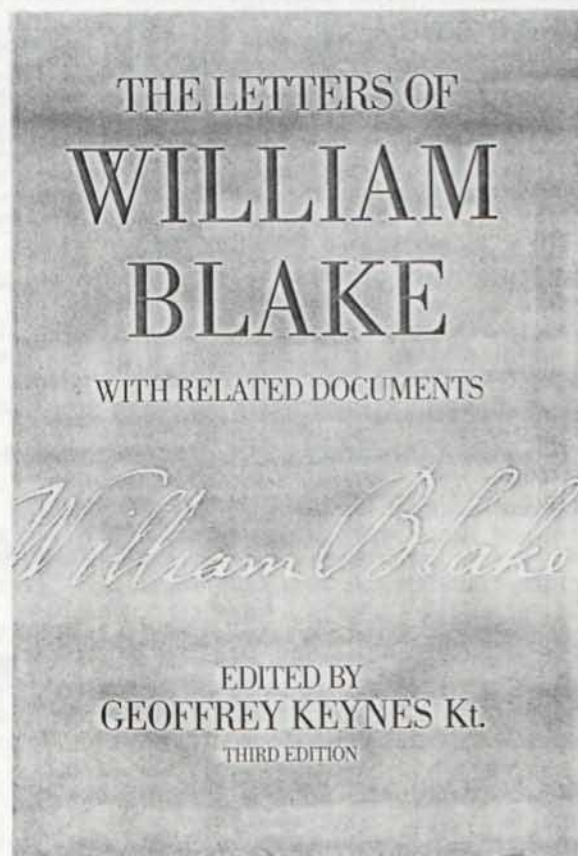


REVIEWS

BLAKE'S LETTERS AND LITERALS

Geoffrey Keynes, Kt., ed. **The Letters of William Blake with Related Documents**. Third edition. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980. xxviii + 235 pp., 28 reproductions (including 6 of Related Documents). £18.50, \$55.00.

Reviewed by G. E. Bentley, Jr.



There have been separate editions of William Blake's letters edited by A. G. B. Russell in 1906 and by Geoffrey Keynes in 1926 (facsimiles of those to Butts), 1956, 1968 (second edition), and now 1980 (third edition), and of course all the letters are printed in *Writings of William Blake*, ed. Geoffrey Keynes (1925 ff.) and *William Blake's Writings*, ed. G. E. Bentley, Jr. (1978).

What are the differences among the Keynes editions of the *Letters*? Well, the 1956 edition had 261 pages, 13 plates, and 151 numbered related letters and documents; the 1968 edition had 224 smaller, denser pages, 13 plates, and 151 letters etc.; the 1980 edition has 235 yet denser pages, 28 reproductions, and 183 numbered letters etc. In each there are Blake's surviving receipts as well as his letters, plus an elaborate Register of Documents (pp. 181-227 in 1980), giving, normally, address, date, description ("A single leaf, written on one side. No watermark"), size (occasionally), location, where printed, and source of text, though the edition omits the postmark and whether sealed with wax or a wafer, and missing letters are alluded to (e.g., 1980 p. xix) rather than identified or listed. The 1980 edition adds to that of 1968 two letters from Mrs. Blake to the Earl of Egremont first printed in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1978, a letter from Blake to Flaxman of 31 July 1801 first printed in *Harvard Library Bulletin* in 1972, a receipt of 29 June 1809 recorded in a Sotheby catalogue of 19 December 1932, and 25 more Related

Documents than there were in the 1956 or 1968 editions.

The chief addition in the 1980 edition is thus in the related documents, which are all valuable, though most have been printed previously; almost all are in *Blake Records* (1969), and a number derive directly from it. In a few cases, Sir Geoffrey has given a whole document, whereas only the part relating to Blake had previously been printed. One of the documents reproduced though not reprinted is the lines by R. B. Sheridan copied for unknown reasons by Blake and previously referred to only (I believe) in Sir Geoffrey's *Bibliotheca Bibliographica* (1964). The additions in the 1980 edition are thus small in novelty but of distinct interest to Blake students and scholars.

The standards of the edition are those which Sir Geoffrey has made his own since he first began publishing Blake seventy years before: extraordinary industry, a wonderfully shrewd instinct for discovering new materials, and a deep respect for his subject. In the transcriptions of the letters, the substantive features of meaning are very reliable; I have carefully proofread the letters of 12 September 1800, 14 September 1800, and 12 April 1827 and have identified no reading with which I disagree substantially. As to accidental features such as punctuation and capitalization, Sir Geoffrey has allowed himself rather more latitude:

I have followed Russell [1906] in supplying punctuation where it seems to help the sense, even though Blake so frequently omitted it. To humour him in this respect seemed to place an unnecessary obstacle in the way of his readers. . . .¹

When a sentence seems to require a full stop, Sir Geoffrey capitalizes the next word as well, even if Blake left it lower-case. He has both added punctuation extensively and changed it, added apostrophes ("arriv'd"), lowered some but not all superscript letters ("M^s"), and generally normalized the accidental features of Blake's text. For instance, in the poem in Blake's letter of 14 September 1800 Blake offers not a single mark of punctuation, and Sir Geoffrey has supplied twenty-four. In no case, it seems to me, does the added punctuation significantly alter Blake's meaning, and for many general readers it will be a real convenience. But the apparatus of the edition² is aimed at scholars, and the best practice of scholars, today and for many years past, has been to let the author's punctuation stand or to identify *in detail* where and how it has been changed. Judged by the standard of the general public, the 1980 edition is considerably richer than that of 1968 (though at \$55.00 it should be very rich indeed--its English price of £18.50 is a good deal cheaper). For the scholar, most of this material is easily available elsewhere, though some is new.

The work is handsomely produced and a pleasure to handle, and the typographical blemishes are rare.³

Many of the footnotes are improved commendably from the earlier editions, but some of the information is rather out of date. For example: (1) Blake's transcript of Tasso, said to be "now in private hands in America" (p. 43), was given by Grace Lambert to Princeton University in 1960. (2) The 1 April 1800 letter, which is here last traced in 1934 (p. 185), has been for years in The British Library (see *Blake Books* [1977], 275). (3) The letter of 16 July 1804, said to be "Now in the collection of Prof. F. W. Hilles" (p. 201), was bequeathed by Professor Hilles to Yale in 1976. (4) The prospectus for Blair's *Grave* "presumably naming Blake as the engraver" (which is referred to in Blake's letter of 27 November 1805) is "not . . . known" to Sir Geoffrey (p. 119 n. 1), though he cites (p. 208) the article in *Modern Philology* (1971) in which this prospectus was reprinted. (5) The receipt of 9 September 1806, said merely to have belonged to Ruthven Todd "In 1942" (p. 207), was sold at Parke Bernet on 23 May 1979, lot 1 (\$2,500) and offered in 1980 in The Rendells Catalogue 152, lot 3 (\$25,000.00). (6) The untraced (indeed, unmentioned) address leaf for Blake's letter to Ozias Humphry [May 1809] has been in the Huntington Library since 1926. (7) The letter of 26 July 1826 "Now in the possession of Mrs. Edward L. Doheny" (p. 221) was given by Countess Doheny to St. John's Seminary, Camarillo, California, in 1940. (8) George Richmond's eloquent letter of 15 August 1827 about Blake's death is scarcely traced since 1928 (p. 226), but it has long been in the collection of Mr. Joseph Holland (see *Blake Records* [1969], 347 n. 1). (9) Parts of "John Linnell's Cash Account Book"

(printed on pp. 147-150) are said to be "now first printed" (p. 218), but all are in *Blake Books* (1969), pp. 584-97. Further, the readings here from the Cash Account Book are sometimes rather approximate. The entries for payments to Blake in 1818-1821 are omitted, as are a number of receipts from customers for *Job*; "M^r Behnes" (p. 149) should be "M^r Bohnes", i.e., John Bohn, who offered the copy of *Job* he bought here in his *Catalogue* (1829) for £3.3.0; the entry for 5 May 1825 ("of coals to be sent to M^r Blake") should read "to M^r Palmer for one chaldron of Coals to be sent to M^r Blake.--" (and a similar entry for 27 January 1826 is omitted entirely). In sum, there is valuable information here, but its currency and completeness are sometimes uncertain.

No edition of Blake's letters is ever complete. The letter (or rather sentence of gift) from Catherine Blake to C. H. Tatham [of ?4 August 1824] is omitted here (see *Blake Records* [1969], 288). And of course each new edition of Blake's letters appears on the eve of the discovery of more letters; Dr. Stanley Gardner has recently found an important letter from Blake's brother James which he will publish in his new book on Blake's *Songs*.

Sir Geoffrey has been publishing editions of Blake for almost three quarters of a century, and each has added something to our knowledge. For such endless labor, no praise and honor can be enough. For at least fifty years his name has been synonymous with Blake scholarship. Long may they both flourish.

¹ P. xviii. Indeed, in a letter from Hayley about Blake, "omissions and . . . misspellings . . . have been silently formalized" (p. 94).

² The index leaves a great deal to be desired; most of the proper names checked in the Register of Documents were not in the index.

³ E.g., p. 31, n. 1 ("This refers o t water-colour painting"); p. 207 (No. 99: "rperduced"; No. 100: "BLAKE [letter] to THOMAS BUTTS" for "BLAKE [account] with THOMAS BUTTS"), p. 209 (No. 106, the leading has risen type-high); pp. 209, 210 n. 1 ("J. R. Smith" for "J. T. Smith").