

AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

R E V I E W

Peter Marshall, William Blake: Visionary Anarchist

Michael Ferber

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 24, Issue 1, Summer 1990, p. 262

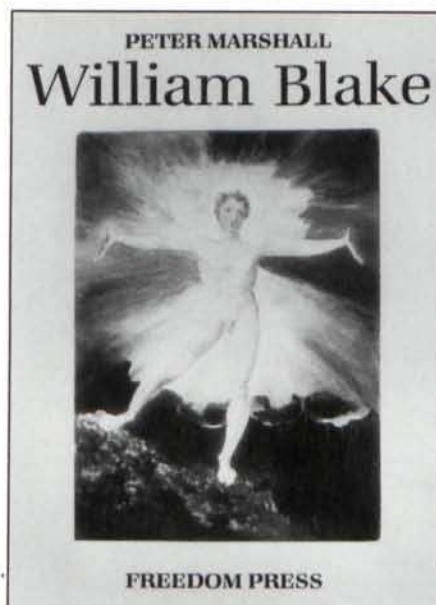


Peter Marshall, *William Blake: Visionary Anarchist*. London: Freedom Press, 1988. 69 pp. 7 illus. £2.00.

Reviewed by
Michael Ferber

Freedom Press has been in existence since October 1886, when a small group of British anarchists, with the inspiration and support of Peter Kropotkin, began publishing their journal *Freedom*. *Freedom* still appears regularly, along with occasional other journals and dozens of reprints of anarchist classics by Kropotkin, Bakunin, Proudhon, Malatesta, Goldman, and others. Having discovered the Freedom Group's monthly journal *Anarchy* when I was in high school, I visited their office in 1966 on my first trip to London, in Angel Alley, Whitechapel High Street. There I was delighted to meet an elderly woman who kindly answered all my questions and told me stories about the origin of the group. She remembered sitting on Kropotkin's knee.

So it is pleasing to report that Freedom Press has published an attractive little book on Blake. Once I saw it, in fact, I wondered why such a book had not come out long ago, for the anarchists certainly have as good a claim to Blake as anyone else, and better than that of Marxists, Jungians, or gnostics. It is easy to show that Blake's many denunciations of kingship, tyranny, law, taxation, war, and the draft are tantamount to an anarchist stance,



though it is hard to find general statements of the case like William Godwin's. Peter Marshall, author of a major scholarly study of Godwin (Yale UP, 1984), knows his anarchism well, and clearly brings out Blake's opinions on the relevant topics—politics, the state, the church, "existing society," and the like—quoting extensively from poems and letters throughout his life. There is nothing new here, but little to quarrel with, given the length and purpose of the book.

But there are also some problems. It is not enough for Marshall that Blake (with Godwin) was "a founding father of British anarchism": Blake must be an "ecological" anarchist of the best modern sort, like Murray Bookchin. We hear that Blake believed in a society "in harmony with nature" and adopted a "holistic approach" to nature. Who among us is not guilty of assimilating Blake to our own cherished beliefs? But this is too easy. Similarly we hear a lot about Blake's dialectic and synthesis of contraries, as if he were Hegel.

And we are told we can discover "the key to his mythology," though we are not told what it is.

There are also a surprising number of mistakes or long-superseded legends, such as that Blake "allegedly helped Tom Paine escape to France" (in 1782), Britain declared war on France in 1794, and Blake and Mary Wollstonecraft were "close friends." Marshall has Blake echoing Wollstonecraft rather than Jesus when he writes, "In Eternity they neither marry nor are given in marriage." A caption to the Nebuchadnezzar water color in the Tate, reproduced as plate 5, reads, "Nebuchadnezzar, symbol of reason, authority and oppression, being banned from Jerusalem." Kathleen Raine is Kathleen once and Mary once. "Soul" gets printed "soil" (though Blake might have liked that one).

Nonetheless this book will probably do more good than harm to those who first meet Blake in its pages, if that is conceivable. It makes Blake sound wonderful, and it places him historically in a stream of thought still flowing today. Blake would have liked Kropotkin and his modern successors. Maybe Angel Alley will change its name to Devil Alley in Blake's honor.

CORRECTION

The original copy of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* used for the Swedish edition reviewed in *Blake* 23 (1990): 209-10, should have been identified as copy H, which was also used for the Oxford University Press edition of 1975.