

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

A R T I C L E

## William Muir and the Blake Press at Edmonton with Muir's letters to Kerrison Preston

Keri Davies

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 27, Issue 1, Summer 1993, pp. 14-25



## William Muir and the Blake Press at Edmonton with Muir's letters to Kerrison Preston

by Keri Davies

William Muir (1845-1938) is remembered, if at all today, for the hand-colored facsimiles of the Prophetic Books of William Blake published by "The Blake Press at Edmonton."

Twelve<sup>1</sup> works in Illuminated Printing were issued between 1884 and 1890, printed and coloured by hand at great trouble and with considerable success. These works have, on occasion, been accidentally sold as originals. The size of the editions was small, but their influence was appreciable, and their scope has only been equalled in recent times by the facsimiles of the Blake Trust.<sup>2</sup>

Robert Essick suggests that Muir may have been responsible for the facsimiles of the frontispiece to "Europe" (*The Ancient of Days*) mistakenly included in the 1978 William Blake exhibition at the Tate Gallery.<sup>3</sup> Muir worked with no intent to deceive but the confusion at the Tate Gallery points up the best features of Muir's copies. They maintain a truth to Blake's processes, if not always to his images, by continuing the basic combination of a printed monochrome image with hand coloring. "Muir's productions capture something of the spirit of the originals, their various textures and hand-made craftsmanship, better than any photographic reproductions."<sup>4</sup>

Muir's obituary in the *Oban Times* was subtitled "a man of ability and resource."<sup>5</sup> In the course of his long life, Muir had been a quarry manager on the Ross of Mull, a journalist in Aberdeen, a businessman in London; an author, printer, publisher, and inventor. He was a Blake scholar and collector; and the friend of crofters and Princes.

### Childhood<sup>6</sup>

William Muir was born on 7 May 1845 at 20 Clyde Terrace, Gorbals, Glasgow. He was the eldest child of George Walker Muir and his wife Christina Penman. His father's family came from Kilmarnock, Ayrshire, and G. W. Muir is listed in directories of the time as a "commission merchant." His mother was a native Glaswegian; William was born in the tenement where his mother's family lived for many years.

By the time of the 1851 Census, William had been joined by a brother (Andrew) and two sisters (Christina and Hannah).<sup>7</sup> The fifth child, George Walker Muir junior, was born in November. By 1851, William's father had given up his job as "commission merchant" and enrolled as a student of Law at Glasgow University.<sup>8</sup> He never took his degree. In fact, he changed his occupation again in 1855 when he was granted the first of four patents.<sup>9</sup>

Invention will be a recurring topic in this brief history of Muir and his family. George Walker Muir's patents were granted over the years 1855 to 1858 and are all concerned with heating and ventilating. They have in fact a rather modern concern with energy efficiency. In 1855, G. W. Muir moved with his family to Manchester, where he set up as a freelance heating engineer.<sup>10</sup>

Around 1860, William Muir was apprenticed in a stockbroker's office in Glasgow, where he was to remain for some years. But 1860 also saw the death of his brother Andrew Penman Muir, aged just 14. This death seems to have affected Muir deeply. It was not until 1917 that he was in a position to arrange for an inscription on his brother's tomb. "Grief endures," it says.<sup>11</sup>

Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, 'Pictor Ignotus' was published in 1863. One can only speculate about the impact it would have made on the 18-year-old Muir, but I am tempted to suggest that he would have reacted particularly strongly. Blake too had lost a younger brother and as with Muir the loss of his brother was an enduring grief.

There is another possible reason for Muir's interest in Blake. Muir was great-nephew of the journalist, inventor, and biblical controversialist Alexander Tilloch.<sup>12</sup> Blake was one of the signatories in 1797 to a testimonial in favor of Tilloch's process for preventing the forgery of banknotes.<sup>13</sup> Could some family tradition have led Muir towards Blake? Certainly Tilloch's sisters Rabina and Margaret were residents of Clyde Terrace in 1841 along with Muir's mother and grandmother.<sup>14</sup> Rabina Niven was Muir's great grandmother. Margaret Tilloch (she never married) had kept house in London for Tilloch after his wife's death in 1783 and could conceivably have met Blake.

### Quarry Manager

In August 1867, when just 22, Muir moved from Glasgow to the Inner Hebrides to become the quarry manager at the Tormor Quarry<sup>15</sup> on the Ross of Mull just across the Sound from Iona. The quarry at that time was operated by G. & J. Fenning. Following the Fenning's bankruptcy, the quarry was taken over by the Shap Granite & Concrete Co.<sup>16</sup>



He lived at Fionnphort where the ferry now sails for Iona (his sister Hannah kept house for him); and there he made the acquaintance of the MacCormick family. Their father Neil MacCormick was quarry foreman and of his 8 sons, two also worked in the quarry. The family preserve to this day memories of Muir's friendship.<sup>17</sup>

Muir left his post as quarry manager in 1875.<sup>18</sup> (The *Oban Times* obituary refers to a period spent in Aberdeen as editor of an agricultural newspaper but I have so far been unable to verify this.) He seems to have spent a year or so in Manchester before moving to London. He left his foreman, Neil MacCormick, as quarry manager. The 1881 Census shows Muir at 9 Angel Row, Edmonton (now 191 Fore Street, London N9).<sup>19</sup> His sister Hannah joined him in Edmonton a couple of years later.

The 1881 census gives Muir's occupation as "granite agent." Ross of Mull granite had been used in a number of engineering projects of the 1860s and 1870s, such as the piers of Blackfriars Bridge, docks in New York, parts of the Thames Embankment, and bridges in Glasgow. In later years the decorative qualities of the granite (it has a distinctive pink color) were exploited by architects and sculptors. It was presumably as supplier of granite that Muir made the acquaintanceship of Count Gleichen.

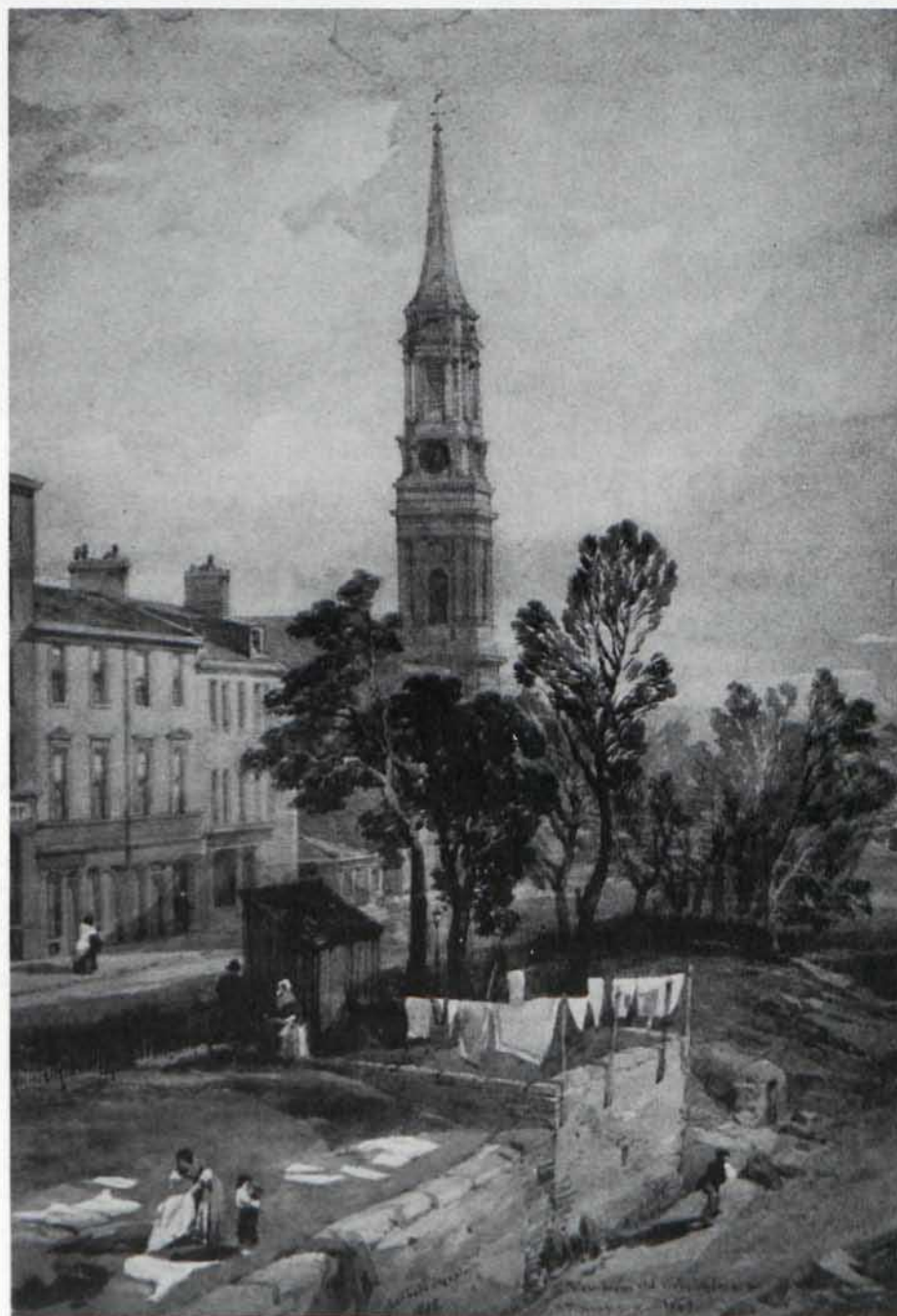
#### Count Gleichen<sup>20</sup>

Count Gleichen, or Prince Victor of Hohenlohe-Langenburg to give him his proper title, was a nephew of Queen Victoria. Prince Victor had a successful naval career, seeing service in the Baltic, the Crimea, and in China, but retired from the Navy in 1866 because of ill-health and devoted himself to an artistic career, taking up sculpture as a serious profession. Queen Victoria granted him a suite of apartments at St James' Palace where he set up his studio. His best known work is a colossal statue of *Alfred the Great* in the

market square at Wantage in Oxfordshire.

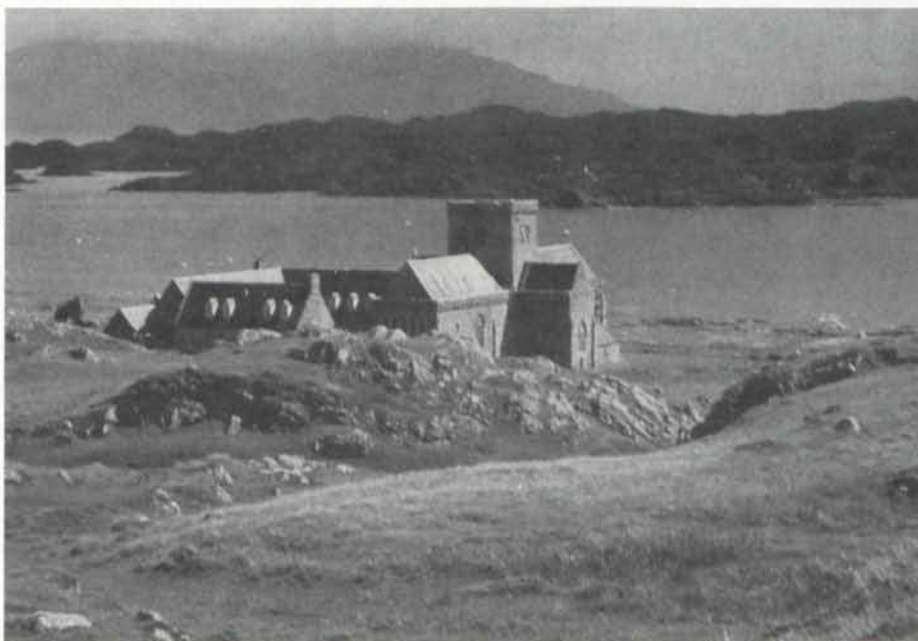
At Woolwich, just off the Repository Road and not far from the Rotunda, stands the Afghan and Zulu War Memorial by Count Gleichen. It consists of six blocks of pink granite assembled to form a simulacrum of a giant boul-

der. The granite was supplied by the Shap Granite Company.<sup>21</sup> Also at Woolwich, Gleichen's statue of Louis Bonaparte, the Prince Imperial, was unveiled in January 1883. It too had a pink granite plinth.<sup>22</sup> I suggest that Muir may have been the agent for the granite used in these works.



1. Clyde Terrace and Gorbals Parish Church, Glasgow, in 1845. Number 20, where Muir was born, is the five-story tenement just visible on the left-hand side. (From a watercolor in The Mitchell Library Glasgow Room. Reproduced by permission of Glasgow City Libraries.)





2. In 1867, Muir became quarry manager at the Tormor Quarry on the Ross of Mull in the Inner Hebrides. This is the view from Iona looking over the fifteenth-century Abbey towards the island of Mull—it would be hard to imagine a location of greater contrast to his childhood in Glasgow and Manchester. (Photo: Ted Ryan.)

### Blake Press

Muir remained associated with the granite trade to the end of the century, but friendship with Count Gleichen must have encouraged his own artistic ambitions, and in 1884 he began the work for which he is now remembered: the production of hand-colored facsimiles of the Prophetic Books of William Blake.

Muir's facsimiles were dedicated to Count Gleichen, whom he terms his "Patron." For example, the Preface to Muir's facsimile of *Thel* is dedicated

To his serene highness, Prince Victor Hohenlohe-Langenburg, Count Gleichen &c. Your Serene Highness and my kind Patron ... I have to thank your highness for the interest that you have been pleased to take in this enterprise. Blake is pre-eminently an Artist's artist. He has created for himself a realm of pure Imagination in which he works alone, and his results are most stimulating to the imaginations of those who study them. I am your Highness Humble servant, Wm Muir, Edmonton 1885.<sup>23</sup>

In a "Programme" attached to that same facsimile, he spells out the intentions behind his edition:

My desire and intention is to reproduce ALL the important works by Wm Blake that exist in book form and also some of his finest designs and this by methods of working as nearly the same as Blake himself used as the need of maintaining fidelity to his results will allow. I will not use either photography or chromolithography. All outlines are drawn and all the colouring is by hand. I produce fifty copies only of each book and each of them is numbered.

The bookseller John Pearson, who sold the first of Muir's facsimiles, retired from business in 1885.

Mr Pearson sold the first twelve copies [of the *Songs of Innocence* facsimile] between Jany and May 1885. Then he retired from business "Because he had made £20,000 and was content" - He introduced me to Mr Bernard Quaritch who continued the work. He received and sold the remaining 38 copies between May 1885 and August 1886. So completing the Edition.<sup>24</sup>

The firm of Bernard Quaritch remained Muir's agent for the Blake Press facsimiles for the next 50 years. Prices for Blake Press titles ranged from one guinea for the single sheets to 8 guineas for a lengthy work such as *Milton*.<sup>25</sup> Quaritch's commission was the usual one-third of published price.



3. The remains of the quarry tramway at Tormor. Iona is visible in the distance. (Photo: K. Davies.)

Blake had printed his prophetic books from etched copper plates and the printed image was then decorated in color. Muir had first to reverse this process. Working from an original lent him by Pearson or Quaritch, he had to reconstruct the printed image that lay under the painted decoration. His careful outline drawing was then transferred to a zinc plate.<sup>26</sup> The zinc plate in turn was used directly as a lithographic printing plate (as with the *Songs of Innocence* facsimile) or etched in relief (for the facsimile of *There is No Natural Religion*) or even etched in intaglio (for the *Gates of Paradise*). Multiple copies of each page of these outlines would then be printed in ink matching as closely as possible the ink of the original. One of these printed copies would serve as the basis for a fully hand-colored copy made after the original; this was Muir's master copy from which his assistants would work. ("Fidelity ... is obtained by each of my friends working on every copy, thereby obliterating each other's mannerisms."<sup>27</sup>)

Muir was in full-time employment as "granite agent" until at least 1902. I



assume that he and his friends gathered together on just one or two evenings each week to work on the facsimiles. I interpret the evidence of the letters as implying that just a sufficient number of copies of each title were hand-colored to keep ahead of demand, and that Muir had printed monochrome outlines in excess of the stated limitation to allow for any wastage in the coloring process.

Some modification of his methods was required in later years when he had fewer collaborators or did not have an original at hand. Each copy then took some six or eight weeks to complete.<sup>28</sup> It is clear that production of the facsimiles extended over a much longer period than their printed dates would indicate. A facsimile of *America* was completed as late as 1929 despite bearing a publication date of 1887.<sup>29</sup> Muir's increasing age and infirmity would supply ample reason for the noticeable variation between copies.

Muir's principal collaborators were his sister Hannah and Emily Druitt. Emily was the daughter of Jabez Druitt, a monumental mason in East London, and presumably a granite trade connection. Emily was a watercolorist of considerable accomplishment and shared Muir's enthusiasm for Blake. In 1866 Muir married her sister Sophia. After her marriage, Sophia too joined the Blake Press team.

#### A. H. Mackmurdo<sup>30</sup>

During the 1880s a number of artists were exploring the possibilities of new expressive means in the graphic arts—what would eventually be termed *Art Nouveau*. Designers such as A. H. Mackmurdo tried to incorporate in their own work some of the vitality and expressiveness they found in Blake.

Mackmurdo and Herbert Horne (Mackmurdo's pupil and later partner in his design firm, the Century Guild) sought to spread their ideas by publishing a magazine which they called the *Century Guild Hobby Horse*.<sup>31</sup> It reprinted texts by Blake and its illustrations included facsimiles of



4. 9 Angel Row (home of the Blake Press) is the second house from the right. (From a photograph in the Local History collection of Enfield Libraries and used by permission.)

Blake's works prepared by Emery Walker & Boutall. The volume for 1886 lists "the names of those workers in art whose aim seems to us most nearly to accord with the chief aim of this magazine"; the names include "Mr Muir, The Blake Press, Edmonton."<sup>32</sup>

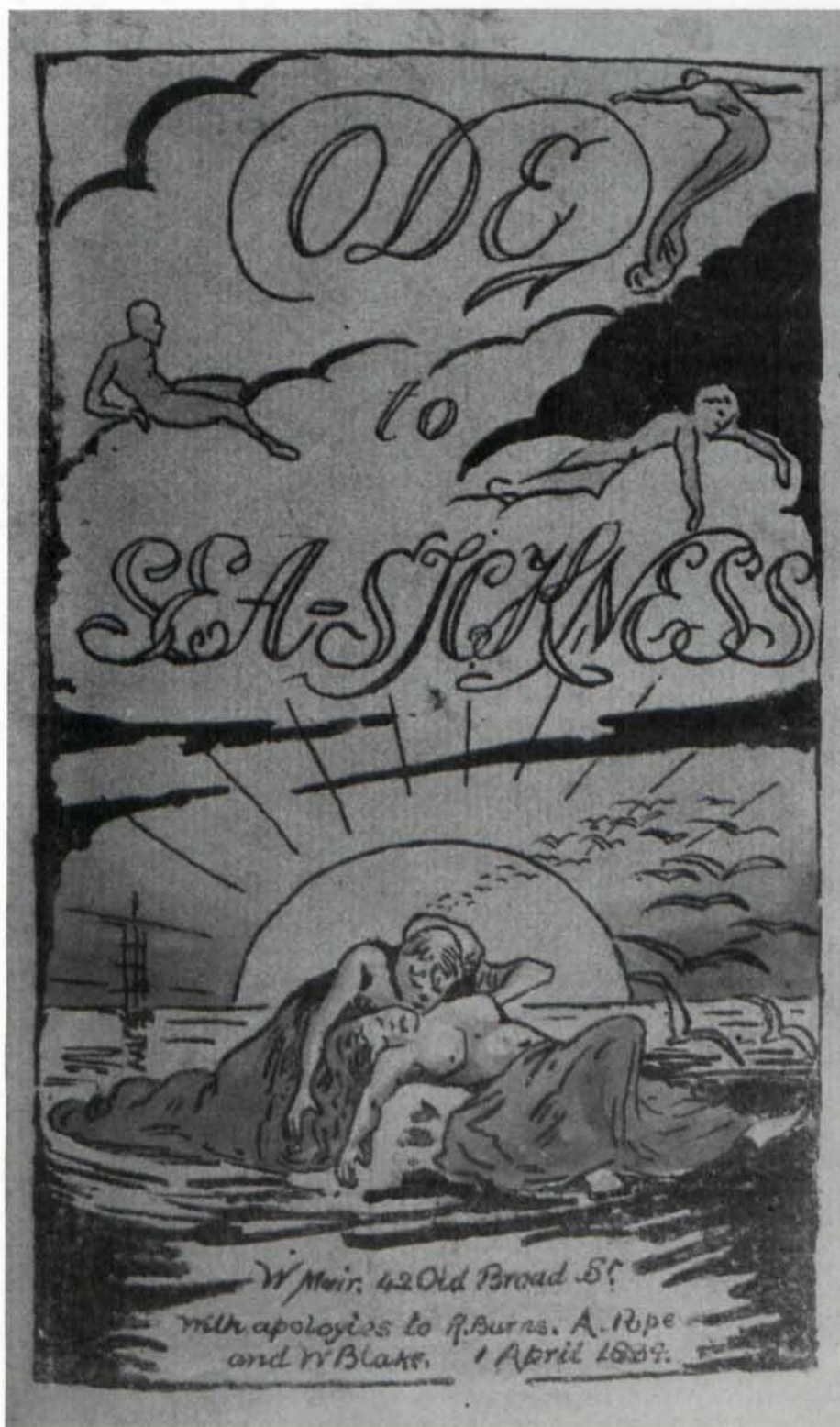
That 1886 volume reproduced Blake's broadsheet *Little Tom the Sailor* with an article on Blake by Herbert H. Gilchrist.<sup>33</sup> Muir had assured purchasers that neither photography nor chromolithography would be employed in his facsimiles.<sup>34</sup> He may have breached this promise with his facsimile of *Little Tom*. Presumably this required a larger printing plate than he could handle; he seems to have bought in a stock of prints from Walker & Boutall and incorporated the *Hobby Horse* reproduction into his Blake Press edition.<sup>35</sup> However, he eschewed making use of another *Hobby Horse* facsimile, the so-called "Sybilline leaf," *On Homers' Poetry; On Virgil* and prepared his own outline for printing.<sup>36</sup>

Incidentally, Muir and Herbert Horne seem to have planned a working colla-



5. Prince Victor of Hohenlohe-Langenbourg, Count Gleichen. Muir's "Patron." (Caricature published in *Vanity Fair* 5 July 1884. From a print in the possession of Ted Ryan.)





6. To mark the start of his publishing career, on 1 April 1884, Muir issued this little jeu d'esprit: "Ode to Sea-Sickness." It bears the address 42 Old Broad Street where D. D. Fenning, granite merchant and W. Muir, agent occupied offices on the second floor. Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

boration. A note in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* for 1886 stated: "During the new year, Mr Muir hopes to publish engraved work from the designs of Mr Herbert P. Horne." Nothing seems to have come of that particular project.<sup>37</sup>

Mackmurdo's circle included Mrs. Anne Gilchrist, widow of Blake's biographer, herself a writer and the English friend of Whitman. He was also acquainted with her son Herbert, the painter, and her daughter Hannah. (When, in 1844, Mackmurdo organized the Enfield Art Exhibition, Hannah Gilchrist lent Blake prints and drawings from the family collection.<sup>38</sup>)

Mackmurdo's collaborators included Selwyn Image, designer, lecturer on Blake, and later Slade Professor of Art at Oxford; Christopher Whall, the stained glass designer (Whall was a great admirer of Blake's art); and of course, Herbert Horne, who wrote on Blake and his followers, and collected drawings by Blake.

The *Hobby Horse* ran, in one form or another, for 10 years. "During this period Mackmurdo himself was operating as a patron of the arts. He maintained a large house in Fitzroy Street in which he accommodated most of the inner circle of the Century Guild as well other artistic strays ..."<sup>39</sup> Herbert Horne had a room there, as did the poet Lionel Johnson. Laurence Binyon and W. B. Yeats, both of whom would make important contributions to Blake studies, were frequent visitors.

It was into this milieu with its passionate interest in the art of Blake that Muir introduced the facsimiles of the Blake Press. Muir's facsimiles not only made Blake's works in "Illuminated Printing" accessible for the first time in reliable copies and helped establish Blake's reputation as visual artist alongside his reputation as poet, but I feel must also have contributed to the most advanced ideas in English art of the 1880s. Mackmurdo and Horne helped create the artistic climate in which the Blake Press could flourish. Muir through his Blake facsimiles provided a design resource on which the artists of the 1880s and 1890s could draw.



Iona Press<sup>40</sup>

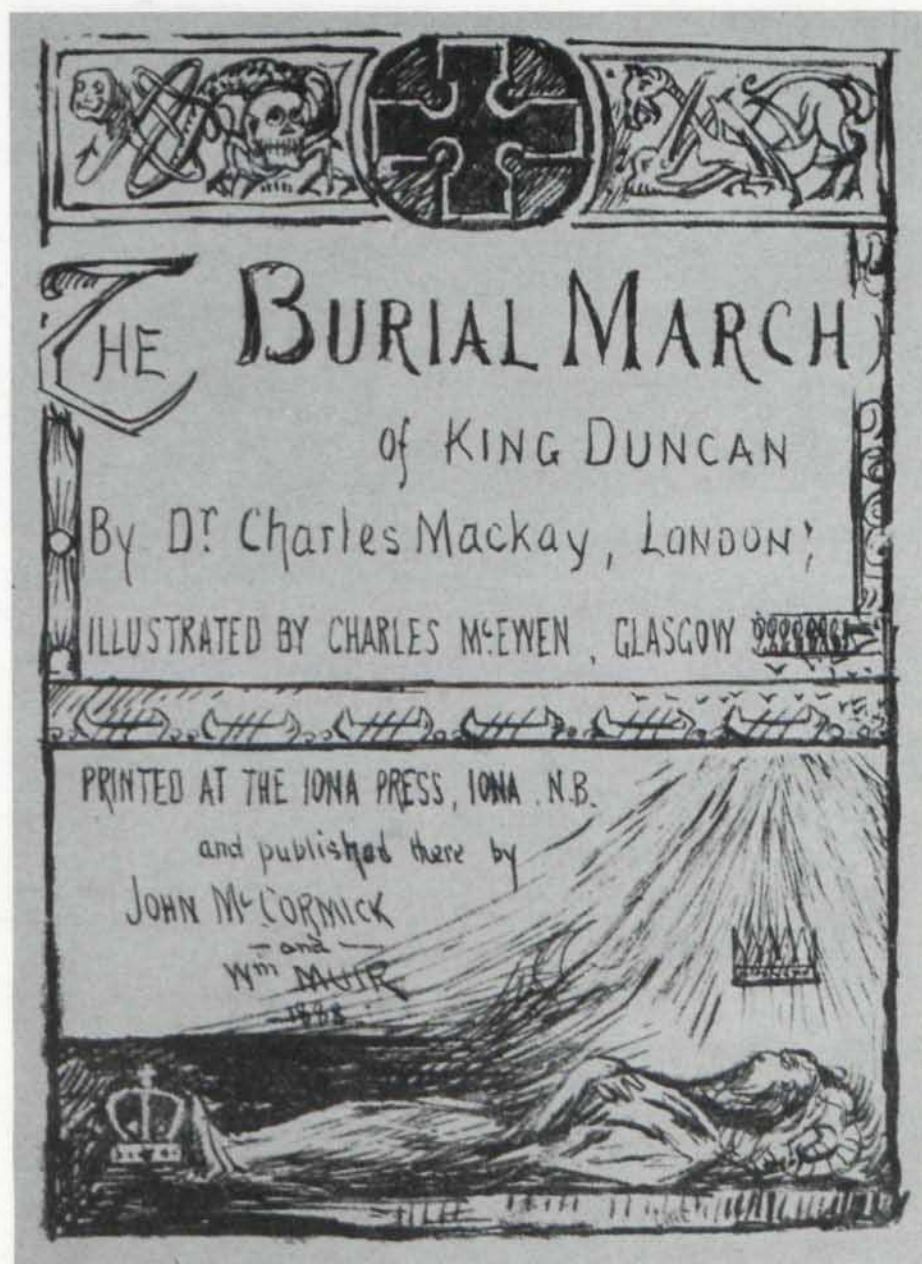
With the Blake Press underway, Muir began a second publishing venture: the Iona Press—producing small lithographic editions of Gaelic poetry in the design of which the style of Blake's prophetic books was followed closely. Muir in Edmonton was proprietor, manager, editor; John MacCormick (son of the quarry foreman at Tomor) at Fionnphort initially worked the press and bound the booklets issued.<sup>41</sup> The designs in the "Iona Press" publications were painted by girls on the island, under the instruction of Muir and Miss Flora Ritchie, whose father was proprietor of the St. Columba Temperance Hotel on Iona.

Between 1887 and 1893, around a dozen small booklets<sup>42</sup> were produced on a lithographic press shipped from Edmonton and housed in a bothy (now the Iona Bookshop) opposite the St. Columba Hotel. Muir and MacCormick stated that their aim was to give tourists to Iona "an opportunity of carrying back with them literary as well as geological mementoes of the sacred isle."<sup>43</sup>

A travel book of the time carries the following account of the press:

A special feature of Iona is its printing press, which was commenced in 1887 by Mr William Muir, Mr John M'Cormick, Miss Muir, and Miss Ritchie, and stands within a few hundred yards of Reilig Odhrain and the Cathedral. The Iona Press is quite a unique and interesting little establishment, superintended personally by Miss Muir, a clever, active, intelligent maiden lady, assisted by a tall, handsome, dark-eyed, native damsel hardly out of her teens, whom I have seen with her well-formed arms working hard at the press.<sup>44</sup>

By the end of the century, production of the books had ceased, although postcards were printed under the name of the Press and sold in a souvenir shop run until the 1920s by Hannah Muir.



7. *The Burial March of King Duncan* (Iona Press, 1888). Outline before hand-coloring. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Trustees of the National Library of Scotland.)

## Inventor

If the 1880s had been the decade of Muir's activity as publisher, the following decade found him devoting a lot of his energies to chemical experiment. In 1892 he was granted a patent for a process for extracting tin from slag.<sup>45</sup> And then in 1902 a patent described as "Improvements in or relating to Igniting Material for Matches, Cartridge Fuses and the like."<sup>46</sup> The patent describes how matches may be made

using the red allotropic form in place of the highly dangerous white phosphorus. He sold his rights in the patent for £900 to R. Bell & Co., who had a match factory at Bromley by Bow.<sup>47</sup>

In 1901, Muir and his wife had left Angel Place and had moved to 97 Church Street, Edmonton.<sup>48</sup> In October of that year he issued a short religious tract: *The Greatest of All Visions*—a brief commentary on some verses from the Apocalypse of St. John.<sup>49</sup> Like



the Iona Press titles it consists of the lithographic reproduction of a hand-written text. Though with the printing-press now with his sister on Iona, he had to make use of a commercial lithographer. One hundred copies were printed.

In 1907 the Muirs moved again—to 153 Church Street, Edmonton. And again in 1908 to Claremont, Bury Street; always to surprisingly large houses considering there was just himself, Sophia, and a servant. He and his wife would move four times in 10 years. I imagine his neighbors complained about the chemical experiments.

Finally, in 1912, and after 30 years in Edmonton, the Muirs moved for the last time, to Romford Road, Forest Gate, from where all the letters that follow were written.

#### Blake Society<sup>50</sup>

The inaugural meeting of the Blake Society took place in 1912. Muir, along with Mrs. Muir, and his sister-in-law, Emily Druitt, were active members. In 1917 he gave a paper to the society on an appropriately Scottish theme: "Blake's view of Wallace."<sup>51</sup>

In April 1920 the annual meeting of the Blake Society was held at the Hampstead home of Thomas J. Wise. Muir was chairman at that meeting. In 1920, his host, Wise, was at the height of his reputation as bibliographer, collector and scholar. Many years later, Wise was to be exposed as a forger and a thief.<sup>52</sup> It is tempting to speculate if Wise or his accomplice Harry Buxton Forman had a hand in any Blake forgeries.

In 1920, Muir produced a new facsimile of *The Book of Thel* (32 copies completed), and in 1927 (the centenary of Blake's death), new facsimiles of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* (100 copies planned; 55 completed). In 1928 he began work on a new *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (50 copies planned; 11 completed).<sup>53</sup> His collaborators in these last facsimiles included Frederick Hollyer, the portrait photographer.<sup>54</sup> Forty years



8. The Iona Press printing house. Today the building has been refurbished by the proprietors of the St. Columba Hotel as a second-hand bookshop. (Photo: K. Davies.)

earlier, Hollyer like Muir had been listed in the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* among "the names of those workers in art whose aim seems to us most nearly to accord with the chief aim of this magazine."<sup>55</sup>

Thomas Wright summed up Muir's career in his *Life of William Blake*:

Numerous and important have been the services to Blake students rendered by Mr William Muir. It was in 1884 that he began his admirable series of reproductions of Blake's books. Copies of the British Museum *Thel*, the Flaxman *Songs of Innocence*, and the Beckford *Songs of Experience* done by him then, now command prices comparable with those paid sixty years ago for the original Blakes. The *Milton*, *Europe*, *America*, *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion*, and all the others have maintained the high standard of the enterprise, and the Beaconsfield *Songs of Innocence* and *Songs of Experience* now being executed show no falling off in love and fidelity. For any one to find himself in Mr Muir's company, and to hear him talk about Blake, is a liberal education.<sup>56</sup>

Not until 1935, when he was 90 years old, did failing eyesight cause him to give up work on Blake facsimiles. It may have been at this time that he disposed of the master copies of four

of his facsimiles to the John Rylands Library, Manchester.<sup>57</sup> The lithographed outlines have been colored with great care and occasional marginal drawings of details have been added as a help to Muir's assistants.

William Muir died on 2 January 1938, aged 92. He is buried alongside his in-laws in the City and East London Cemetery. Sophia survived her husband another five years. She died on 30 January 1943 at Helston in Cornwall, at the home of her niece Winifred Catling.<sup>58</sup>

Muir long outlived the Victorian world in which he grew up; he seems to us today very typical of that world—typical in his enthusiasm, his energy, his confidence and his piety. But let Kerrison Preston have the last word

... there was a remarkable refinement about him, such as I imagine one might have noticed about Blake himself.<sup>59</sup>

#### Letters to Kerrison Preston

The collector Kerrison Preston was born in 1884 and practiced as a solicitor in Bournemouth from 1909 to 1949. Until October 1953 he lived at St. Julian's, 22 Knyveton Road, Bournemouth, and then moved to The Georgian House, Rockshaw Road, Merstham, Surrey. He issued a catalogue of his collection in 1960.<sup>60</sup> In 1967, Preston donated his collection of books by and concerning Blake to Westminster City Libraries. He died in 1974 and his papers, including five letters from Muir, were deposited in Westminster City Archives.<sup>61</sup>

These letters, with the letters to Quaritch edited by Bentley, both groups dating from the last 20 years of Muir's life, yield considerable insight into the productions of the Blake Press and clarify a number of features of the facsimiles commented on by previous writers.<sup>62</sup> But Muir's letters are not just a business correspondence; they record the growth of a friendship that Preston was to value highly.

... I mention certain vitalising experiences of friendship which have brought me into closer contact with Blake.



Thirty years ago Graham Robertson introduced me to his Bogey Room containing the most stupendous Blake pictures, and I have never been the same since. He let me slowly browse upon these and the rest of his wonderful Blake collection in London and the country, and I gained a whole new world of thought and feeling...

Many years after and many miles away, I spent a memorable afternoon at the charming home in America of Mr Robertson's friend Mrs William Emerson, who showed me the famous *Rossetti Manuscript*, that well-filled note-book of writings and designs used by Blake himself for thirty years, revealing him intimately at work. The Nonesuch Press has done well in issuing a photographic copy of the complete book, but it does not quite convey the thrill of the original pages with the very writing of Blake and Rossetti together.

In the meantime the late William Muir, who was in many ways a Blake-like character himself, had lent me some of his facsimiles to copy, and I had followed the excellent example of both Blake and Rossetti and got my wife to colour them.<sup>63</sup> These brought home to me the necessity for studying Blake's words in their original form of decorated pages, in which the meaning is often suggested by the little pictures no less than by language.<sup>64</sup>

-Letter 1<sup>65</sup> -

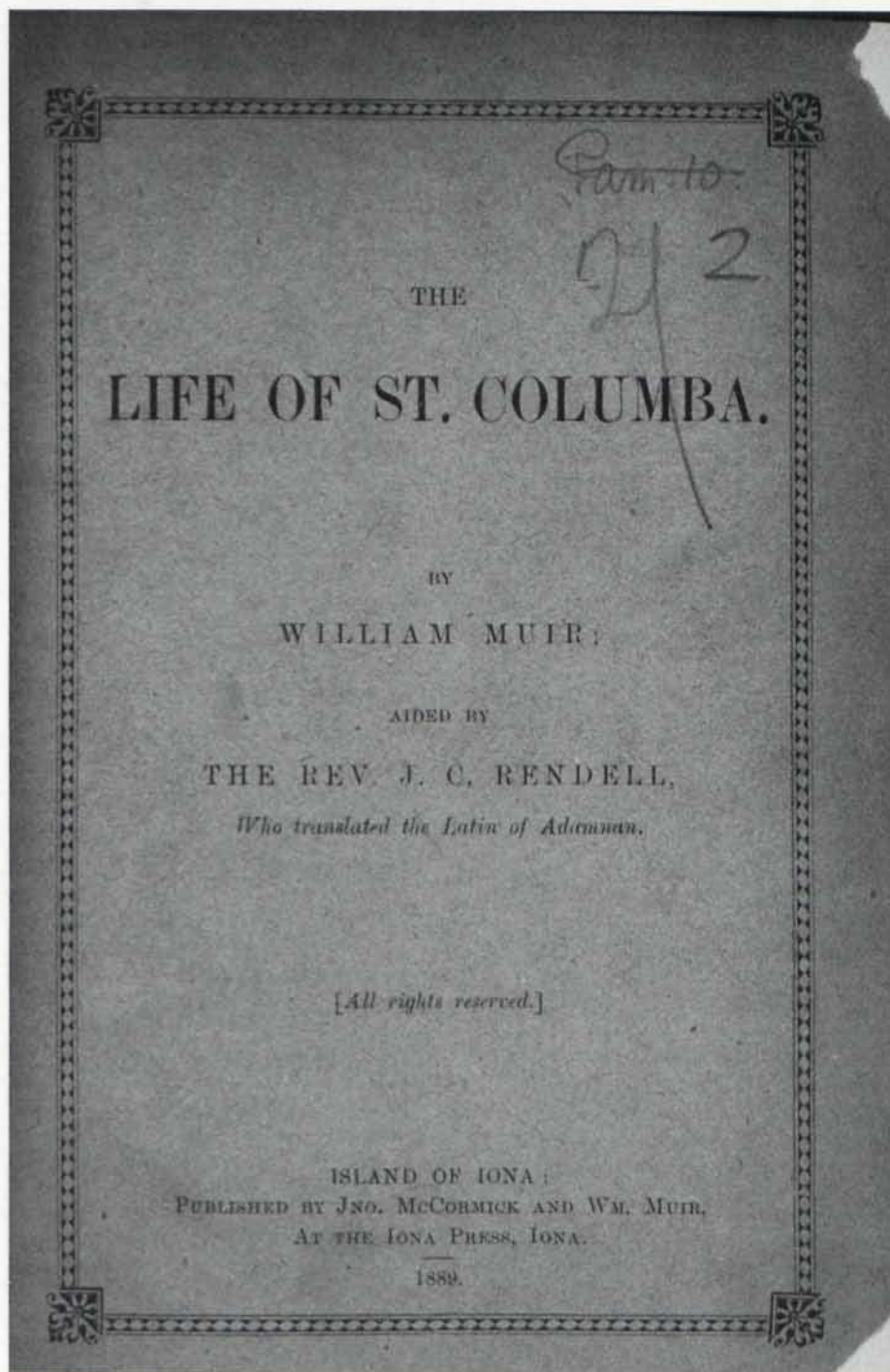
538 Romford Road  
Forest Gate, London E  
18 July 1916

K. Preston Esq.  
Dear Sir

In reply to your favour of yesterday's date, on Fly leaf please find a list of my Blake facsimiles—Those marked x are all sold. I still have two copies of the "Heaven & Hell", two or three of the "Ancient of Days" and a few of the others not marked x. —A copy of those all sold can occasionally be got from Mr Quaritch for he buys up any that come into the market as libraries containing them are sold.

Soliciting your commands I am  
Yours faithfully  
W<sup>m</sup> Muir

x Songs of Innocence & of Experience  
x Book of Thel  
x Visions of the Daughters of Albion  
x Urizen  
x The Song of Los  
x Little Tom the Sailor  
Marriage of Heaven & Hell £3. 3. 0.  
Milton 10. 0. 0.  
There is no Natural Religion 1. 1. 0.  
The Ancient of Days  
— a single plate. 1. 1. 0.  
Blake's favourite work.  
America a Prophecy 4. 4. 0.



9. *The Life of St Columba* written by Muir, is his only extended work and his only book conventionally set in type. His collaborator the Rev. J. C. Rendell had been curate at St James' Edmonton in 1884 when Muir was sidesman there. (Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Library.)

Do specially coloured from an original  
now in U.S.A.—very effective 5. 5. 0  
Europe coloured from  
the BM copy 5. 5. 0.  
x The Gates of Paradise  
copper plate not coloured 3. 3. 0.

In addition to these I have *one copy* of the  
Songs of Experience coloured from the  
Brit Mus copy. £5. 5. 0.



## - Letter 2 -

538 Romford Road Forest Gate  
London E  
28 July 1916

Dear Sir

I duly received your card of 23<sup>rd</sup> I fear that Mr Quaritch cannot sell you any of my out of print facsimiles of Blake's works cheap, for they usually fetch higher prices now than I got for them — I saw one set on sale (and sold) at £110. —But—If *un-coloured* copies answer your purpose I could let you have "Milton", "America" & "Europe" for 10/- each. —I have never before known uncoloured copies be asked for but no doubt the text is the feature that interests you.

Each copy takes six or eight weeks to colour. —Milton takes longer. —Hence the high price.

Yours faithfully  
W<sup>m</sup> Muir

## - Letter 3 -

538 Romford Road Forest Gate  
London  
14 Aug 1916

K. Preston Esq.

Dear Sir

With this I have posted per registered parcel post your uncoloured copy of Milton and your copy N<sup>o</sup> 37 of "No Nat Relig".

The parcel should arrive two or three posts after this letter.

*Re the Milton.* Please do not blame me for the *very* rude engraving of one or two of the illustrations. They are so in the original. —One, in especial, is positively ugly—I suspect that it was engraved by M<sup>rs</sup> Blake—as rich colouring makes them look quite different.

*Re No Nat Relig.* No *complete* copy of this book (or books) exists This is made up from three copies, all imperfect, and still one plate is lacking as you will see. Assuring you that the colouring (slight as it is) is

faithful to Blake and hoping that you will be pleased I am

Yours faithfully  
W<sup>m</sup> Muir

## - Letter 4 -

538 Romford Road Forest Gate  
London E  
23 August 1916

My dear Sir

I thank you for your kind letter of 16<sup>th</sup> and am glad that the No Nat. Relig. & the Milton please you — but I am sorry that your Milton is not coloured.

It occurs to me that you may possibly be an Artist, or at least have some skill in water colour work.

If so I would be very willing to *lend* you a coloured Milton free (no payment) for a month or two and in that time you could colour your own copy yourself —The meticulous accuracy that I habitually use is not necessary (would not be necessary) in your case.

You can easily get the general effect, if you, or any one of your household, can use colours at all.

Yours very truly  
W<sup>m</sup> Muir

## - Letter 5 -

538 Romford Rd London E7  
23 Jan 1922

Dear Mr Kerrison Preston

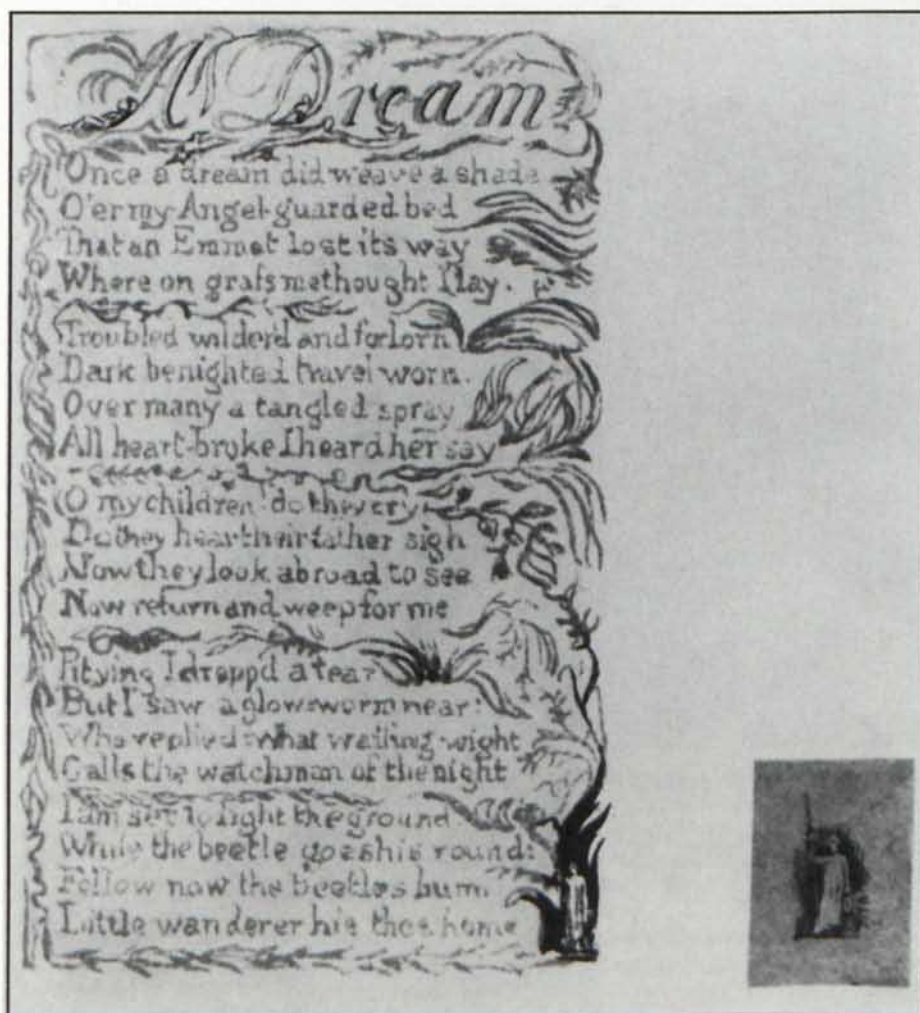
How stupid of me! It is entirely my fault! I had kept no record, and somehow had got it into my mind that Jan 15<sup>th</sup> had been arranged — Of course complete your copy — Do not on any account return the book till that is done. — It will suit me quite well if I have the book back by February 28<sup>th</sup> if *you have finished by that time.* — Do not distress your self or your good wife. make your copy a good one, take time, and don't let her neglect the children for the book.

If not finished by Feb 28<sup>th</sup> let me have a postcard saying so and that will be all right.

Thanks for your kind and interesting letter. So your wife has had the prevalent influenza? I have had it also but am quite better.

*Traberne* Thanks for your remark — I will alter the 1647 to 1674 — as it should be as he was born about 1636

Garth Wilkinson's "poems"<sup>65</sup> are more curious than beautiful but he hits on a good thing by accident occasionally. I think the little poem "A Landscape" is a *gem*. Rossetti was interested in the "poems" because they were written in much the same way as Blake wrote his "Prophetic books" — putting the words down just as they came to mind — Garth Wilkinson's book is *very* scarce. I don't suppose six copies are known — I *know* only two, the B. M. copy



10. *A Dream* from the master copy of Muir's facsimile of *Songs of Innocence*. Outlines printed by lithography with hand-coloring. A slip bearing a hand-drawn detail has been pasted to the page. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Director and University Librarian, the John Rylands Library of Manchester.)



and my own, which I got on a costermonger's barrow for 4<sup>d</sup> — [in margin] its real worth as *literature* that was why I copied some onto blank pages in my Blake.

*Quaritch's* announcements of 1888 interest you. I do not remember them, but I note your remarks. Most, perhaps all, have (no doubt) gone to the U.S.A.

The only facsimiles we have now for sale would not interest you — when you are in London some time you can see them if you can find time to call, letting us know the day before.

I am so glad you like the Bournemouth Guide<sup>66</sup> — I got it on a costermonger's barrow for 2<sup>d</sup>, which was *less* than its value as literature — Notice the account in the medical appendix of the "Broken Spectre" seen near *Edinburgh*.

I thought the proper place for the book was in the hands of a Bournemouth man and I am glad you value it.

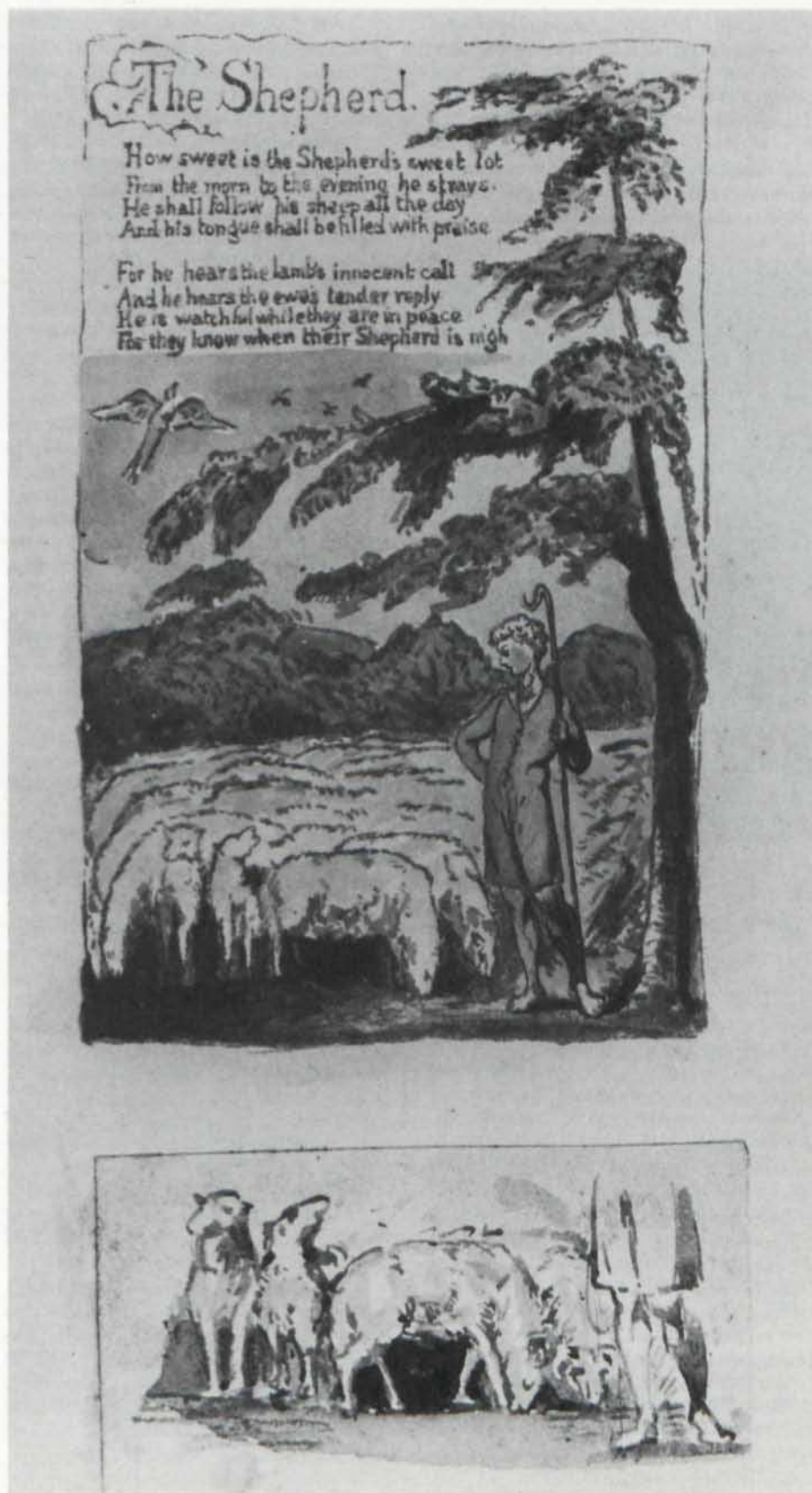
You wonder what you could give to me! I will tell you what I would like very much. If it would not be too much trouble a copy *tinted* perhaps (ain't I greedy!) tinted perhaps — a copy — not a facsimile but just a freehand copy of the View of Bournemouth that is at the beginning of the Guide would be very welcome\*. It may not be elaborately faithful, but just something giving the general effect. I would frame it and hang it in this room where I am writing. — Now please don't worry over this if it is not convenient, but if as I suppose you or your wife *do* sketch occasionally it will not come very difficult. If you *don't* sketch then please don't attempt it.

With our united kind regards to you both  
I am

Yours very Truly  
W<sup>m</sup> Muir

\* It might be a little bigger than the engraving — say the size of this paper 7" x 9" or so.

My account of Muir's life had its origin in an invitation from the Edmonton Hundred Historical Society to speak on "William Muir and the Blake Press at Edmonton" in February 1991. I am grateful to the Society and to Mr. D. O. Pam, its chairman, for encouraging me to put my haphazard notes on Muir into a semblance of order. Mrs. Angela Alabaster kindly granted permission to publish her father's letters from Muir. I should also acknowledge here Raymond Lister's role (*Blake*, fall 1986) in suggesting that Muir's letters may have survived amongst the Kerrison Preston papers. My particular thanks are due to Dr. E. Mairi MacArthur for her help in locating references to Muir in Scottish newspapers, and for sharing her unrivalled knowledge



11. *The Shepherd* from the master copy of Muir's facsimile of *Songs of Innocence*. A drawing of an enlarged detail has been tipped in, presumably as a guide for Muir's assistants. (Reproduced by courtesy of the Director and University Librarian, the John Rylands Library of Manchester.)



of Iona history. Ted Ryan was generous with assistance and advice. My brother Geoff gave successive drafts a close and critical reading. I gratefully acknowledge the help received from G. E. Bentley, Jr., who allowed me to see his essay on Muir, coincidentally written at the same time as my own, and to improve mine on the basis of his.



12. William Muir is buried alongside his in-laws in the City and East London Cemetery. (Photo: K. Davies.)

<sup>1</sup> The Blake Press at Edmonton issued 15 titles, of which 12 were hand-colored: *Act of Creation* (1885?), *America* (1887), *The Book of Thel* (1884), *Europe* (1887), *The First Book of Urizen* (1888), *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1885), *Milton* (1886), *The Song of Los* (1890), *Songs of Experience* (1885), *Songs of Innocence* (1884), *There is No Natural Religion* (1886), *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1884), and three were issued as monochrome facsimiles, *The Gates of Paradise* (1888), *Little Tom the Sailor* (1886), *On Homer's Poetry On Virgil* (1886).

<sup>2</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1977) 28.

<sup>3</sup> Robert N. Essick, *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983). The disputed prints were items 66 and 67 in the catalogue of the 1978 Tate Gallery exhibition.

<sup>4</sup> Robert N. Essick, "Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. Manchester, England: Manchester Etching Workshop, 1983," *Blake* 19 (1985): 39.

<sup>5</sup> Alex Gartshore, "The late Mr William Muir: a man of ability and resource" *Oban Times*, 19 October 1940, 3 col 4. Biographical statements not otherwise supported are derived from this account.

<sup>6</sup> Principal sources for this section are *Post-Office Annual Glasgow Directory* 1844-45 to 1846-47; *Old Parish Registers: Gorbals Parish* [Microfilm and typescript indexes in Mitchell Library, Glasgow]; *Glasgow Register of Electors* 1846-55.

<sup>7</sup> Census 1851, *Enumerators' returns for Glasgow, Gorbals*. (Microfilm ref. 613-9).

<sup>8</sup> W. Innes Addison, *The Matriculation albums of the University of Glasgow from 1728 to 1858* (Glasgow: Maclehose, 1913).

<sup>9</sup> UK Patents nos. 25 "Warming & ventilating," 1173 "Fumaces," 2912 "Steam-boilers" (1855); and no. 52 "Warming & ventilating" (1858).

<sup>10</sup> Slater's *General and classified directory and street register of Manchester and Salford* 1855-58.

<sup>11</sup> Niven lair, Glasgow Cathedral. Grave-slab reads:

THE PROPERTY OF DAVID NIVEN, BOOKSELLER OF GLASGOW ANDREW PENMAN MUIR (SECOND SON OF G.W. MUIR) BORN 4TH SEPT. 1846: DIED 16TH JULY 1860 AT ASCOG, BUTE CHRISTINA PENMAN (GRAND DAUGHTER OF D. NIVEN AND WIFE OF G. W. MUIR BORN 4TH SEPT 1818: DIED 14TH NOV 1869 Grief endures. W M MUIR 1917

<sup>12</sup> See the *Dictionary of National Biography* 56: 391-92.

<sup>13</sup> G. E. Bentley Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1967) 58.

<sup>14</sup> Census 1841, *Enumerators' returns for Glasgow, Gorbals* (Microfilm ref. 6442-47).

<sup>15</sup> "Memories of Oban in the Sixties" *Oban Times*, 5 May 1934.

<sup>16</sup> For a history of the quarry at Tormor, see Joan Faithfull's article in *Am Muileach: community newspaper for Mull and Iona*, February 1990.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication from Neil MacCormick's granddaughter, Miss Margaret Harper-Nelson, October 1990.

<sup>18</sup> *Oban Times*, 13 February 1875.

<sup>19</sup> Census 1881, *Enumerator's returns for Middlesex*, Edmonton. (Microfilm ref. ED4 Edmonton Schedule 242).

<sup>20</sup> See *DNB Supplement* 3: 388-89.

<sup>21</sup> Contemporary accounts of the two monuments at Woolwich can be found in *The Times*, 5 October 1882: 7 and 15 January 1883: 10. Confusingly, the *Times* reporter manages to ascribe the distinctive pink granite of cairn and plinth both to Cumberland and to Aberdeenshire.

<sup>22</sup> I have been unable to locate the present whereabouts of the monument to the Prince Imperial.

<sup>23</sup> William Blake, *The book of Thel: the author & printer William Blake, 1789* (The

edition of the works of Blake prepared by the Blake Press at Edmonton; vol. 1) (Edmonton, 1884).

<sup>24</sup> Muir's note in his master copy for the *Songs of Innocence* facsimile, now in John Rylands Library, University of Manchester.

<sup>25</sup> Price list included in Muir's facsimile of *The Song of Los* (Edmonton, 1890).

<sup>26</sup> A discussion of the various processes available for the lithographic printing of facsimiles can be found in Michael Twyman, *Early Lithographed Books* (London: Farrand P, 1990). The period covered precedes Muir, of course, but indicates the technical possibilities available to the capable amateur.

<sup>27</sup> Prospectus bound with Muir's master copy for the *Songs of Innocence* facsimile. See n24 above.

<sup>28</sup> Muir's letter to Kerrison Preston, 28 July 1916.

<sup>29</sup> Muir's letter to Quaritch, 17 Feb. 1936.

<sup>30</sup> Accounts of Mackmurdo's role in the development of English Art Nouveau and the influence of Blake on the movement can be found in Stephan Tschudi Madsen, *Sources of Art Nouveau* (Oslo: H. Aschehoug, 1956); Nikolaus Pevsner, *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*. Vol. 2: *Victorian and after* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1968) 134-35; Robert Schmutzler, *Art Nouveau* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1964) and in many subsequent studies.

<sup>31</sup> For studies of the *Century Guild Hobby Horse* see Lorraine Lively Hunt, *The Century Guild Hobby Horse: A Study of a Magazine* (University of North Carolina doctoral thesis, 1965) and Peter Frost, "The Century Guild Hobby Horse and Its Founders" *The Book Collector* 27 (1978): 348-60.

<sup>32</sup> See for example *Century Guild Hobby Horse* Jan. 1889 (unnumbered pages following page 40).

<sup>33</sup> Herbert H. Gilchrist, "Nescio quae nugarum no. III: The Ballad of Little Tom the Sailor," *Century Guild Hobby Horse* 1 (Oct. 1886): 159-60. The facsimile is bound as frontispiece to this issue, facing page 121.

<sup>34</sup> *Proposal for the publication of the Prophetic Books and the Songs of Innocence and of Experience by W. Blake* (London: J. Pearson, 1884).

<sup>35</sup> I have modified the interpretation given by Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies* 2nd. ed. (Oxford: Clarendon P, 1971) 105-10.

<sup>36</sup> Here I disagree with Bentley, *Blake Books* 335, 488, 836. Muir's facsimile and that printed with Herbert R. Horne, "Blake's Sibylline leaf on Homer and Virgil" *Century Guild Hobby Horse* 2 (1887): 115-16 differ in a number of respects and are unlikely to derive from the same lithographic plate.



<sup>37</sup> But among a collection of drawings by Christopher Whall in the William Morris Gallery are single sheets from Muir's *Songs of Innocence* (1885) and *Gates of Paradise* (1888) facsimiles, the former marked up to suggest Muir may also have planned a collaboration with Whall.

<sup>38</sup> "Enfield Local Art Exhibition," *Meyer's Observer and Local and General Advertiser* [Enfield], 14 June 1884: 6 and 7:

"Miss H. Gilchrist's loan collection included a singular work in oil colour 'The Descent to the Grave', by Blake; engravings, 'Southwark Fair', and 'The Distressed Poet', (by Hogarth) also an oil colour, 'The Translation of Enoch', by Blake; and a charcoal 'Study', by D.G. Rossetti."

<sup>39</sup> Frost 348-60.

<sup>40</sup> This brief account of the Iona Press draws largely on Mairi MacArthur. "Pages from Iona's Past," *Scotsman Magazine* (December 1987): 29.

<sup>41</sup> John MacCormick (born 1860) is known as a Gaelic writer chiefly of plays and humorous sketches. The *Scottish Gaelic Union Catalogue* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1984) lists 13 titles by MacCormick published between 1908 and 1931.

<sup>42</sup> Iona Press titles known to me are as follows:

- (i) The Blessing of the ship, 1887  
- reprinted 1893
- (ii) Bas Fraoich or The Death of Fraoch, 1887 (letterpress)
- (iii) Ossian's Address to the sun, 1887
- (iv) The Burial march of King Duncan, 1888
- (v) A Highland New Year's carol, 1888
- (vi) Prayer formerly used by all the children of Iona at school, 1888  
- 2nd ed. 1893
- (vii) The Death of Fraoch, 1888
- (viii) The Great hymn "Altus" of St Columba, 1889
- (ix) Iona, by the Marquis of Lorne, 1889
- (x) Views from an artist's sketchbook [by Elizabeth McHardy], 1889
- (xi) The Life of St Columba, by William Muir, 1889 (letterpress)
- (xii) Iona autograph album, 1891
- (xiii) The Great hymn "Altus" of St Columba, 1897 (new edition)
- (xiv) Map of Iona, n.d.
- (xv) Sailm cvii, 30, n.d. (single sheet)

<sup>43</sup> Prospectus of the Iona Press. Quoted in E. Mairi MacArthur *Iona: The Living Memory of a Crofting Community* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 1990).

<sup>44</sup> Malcolm Ferguson, *A Visit to Staffa and Iona*. (Dundee and Edinburgh, 1894).

<sup>45</sup> UK Patent No. 1907 (1892) "Extracting tin &c from slag."

<sup>46</sup> UK Patent No. 11,503 (1902) "Matches &c."

<sup>47</sup> "Death of notable Kilmarnock man" *Kilmarnock Standard*, 15 January 1938.

<sup>48</sup> Kelly's *Enfield, Edmonton & Winchmore Hill directory* and Kelly's *Tottenham & Edmonton directory* 1893-1909.

<sup>49</sup> William Muir, *The greatest of all visions, being the text of part of The Book of Revelation C4 V1 to C6 V2, with a commentary interpreting it* (Edmonton, 1901) Copy: Mitchell Library Glasgow pressmark A217141.

<sup>50</sup> Some documents of the Blake Society survive in the Thomas Wright collection in Buckinghamshire County Record Office.

<sup>51</sup> The reference is presumably to Blake's Visionary Heads of "Edward I. and William Wallace" (two on one sheet) formerly in John Linnell's collection, and now in the collection of Robert N. Essick.

<sup>52</sup> The most recent account of their criminal careers is John Collins, *The Two Forgers: A Biography of Harry Buxton Forman & Thomas James Wise* (Aldershot: Scolar P, 1992).

<sup>53</sup> Numbers planned derive from a letter "To the Reviewer" [1928?] once inserted in Muir's *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (2nd ed.) and now in the collection of Raymond Lister. Numbers completed derive from Muir's letter to Quaritch, 17 Feb. 1936.

<sup>54</sup> G.E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* 489.

<sup>55</sup> See n32 above.

<sup>56</sup> Thomas Wright, *The Life of William Blake* (Olney, Bucks: T. Wright, 1929).

<sup>57</sup> *America* (1887), *The Marriage of heaven and hell* (1885), *The Songs of Innocence* (1885), and *The Visions of the Daughters of Albion* (1885) were accessioned in September 1939 but are likely to have been in the possession of the Library for some time before then. (Personal communication from David W. Riley, Keeper of Printed books, John Rylands University Library of Manchester, 17 October 1990.)

<sup>58</sup> Probate register (England and Wales) 1943.

<sup>59</sup> Kerrison Preston, letter to Raymond Lister 25 Aug. 1961.

<sup>60</sup> Kerrison Preston, *Notes for a catalogue of the Blake Library at The Georgian House Merstham* (Cambridge: Gold-en Head P, 1960).

<sup>61</sup> Westm. Accession 924: Papers of I. Kerrison Preston, donated by his daughter Mrs. Angela Alabaster, and his son David C. Preston, 1 April 1977.

<sup>62</sup> Recent papers that make reference to Muir are:

Morton D. Paley, "A Victorian Blake Facsimile" *Blake* 15 (1981): 27. (Paley illustrates the first page of Muir's prospectus for the *Song of Los*.)

Robert N. Essick, "Songs of Innocence and Songs of Experience. Manchester, England: Manchester Etching Workshop, 1983," *Blake* 19 (1985): 39.

Raymond Lister, "William Muir" *Blake* 20 (1986): 49. (Reprints a letter about Muir from Kerrison Preston.)

<sup>63</sup> The Preston Blake Library in Westminster City Libraries contains a number of Muir's facsimiles, including a copy of *Milton* handcolored by Mrs. A. E. Preston.

<sup>64</sup> Kerrison Preston, *Blake and Rossetti* (London: A. Moring, 1944) 5.

<sup>65</sup> G. E. Bentley, Jr., points out that although Muir states in this letter that he has "two copies of the 'Heaven & Hell' and two or three of the 'Ancient of Days,'" he in fact sold three copies of the *Marriage* (nos. 48-50 on 9 Nov. 1916 and 23 Feb., 16 July 1917, and sold four copies of the *Ancient of Days* (which he calls the "Act of Creation") on 4 June 1917, 1 Apr., 27 June, 14 Aug. 1918 (nos. 47-50). The copy of *America* "specially coloured from an original now in U.S.A." imitates copy B, which has been in the Pierpont Morgan Library in New York since 1909. The copy of *Europe* "coloured from the BM copy" imitates copy D. The British Museum copy of *Songs of Experience* which he copied is probably copy T. (Personal communication from G. E. Bentley, Jr., 18 May 1992.)

<sup>66</sup> J. J. Garth Wilkinson, *Improvisations from the Spirit* (London and Manchester, 1857). The *National Union Catalogue* lists six copies.

<sup>67</sup> John Sydenham (publisher), *The visitor's guide to Bournemouth and its neighbourhood ... 2nd ed. containing additions and corrections with an appendix by Thomas Johnstone Aitkin* (Poole and Bournemouth, 1842). Aitkin's appendix ("A dissertation on the climate of the district of Bournemouth and its adaptation to health") takes up pages 53 to 152 of this work. His account of the optical phenomenon here called the "Demon of the Brocken" is on pages 121-23 of the Appendix.