

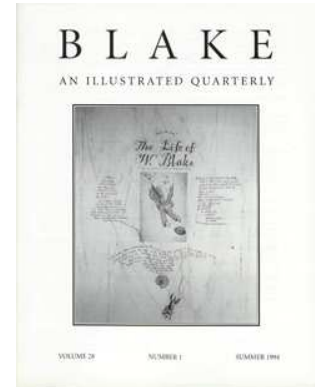
AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

M I N U T E
P A R T I C U L A R

The Life of W. Blake

Chris Orr

Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly, Volume 28, Issue 1, Summer 1994, pp. 35-38





MINUTE PARTICULAR

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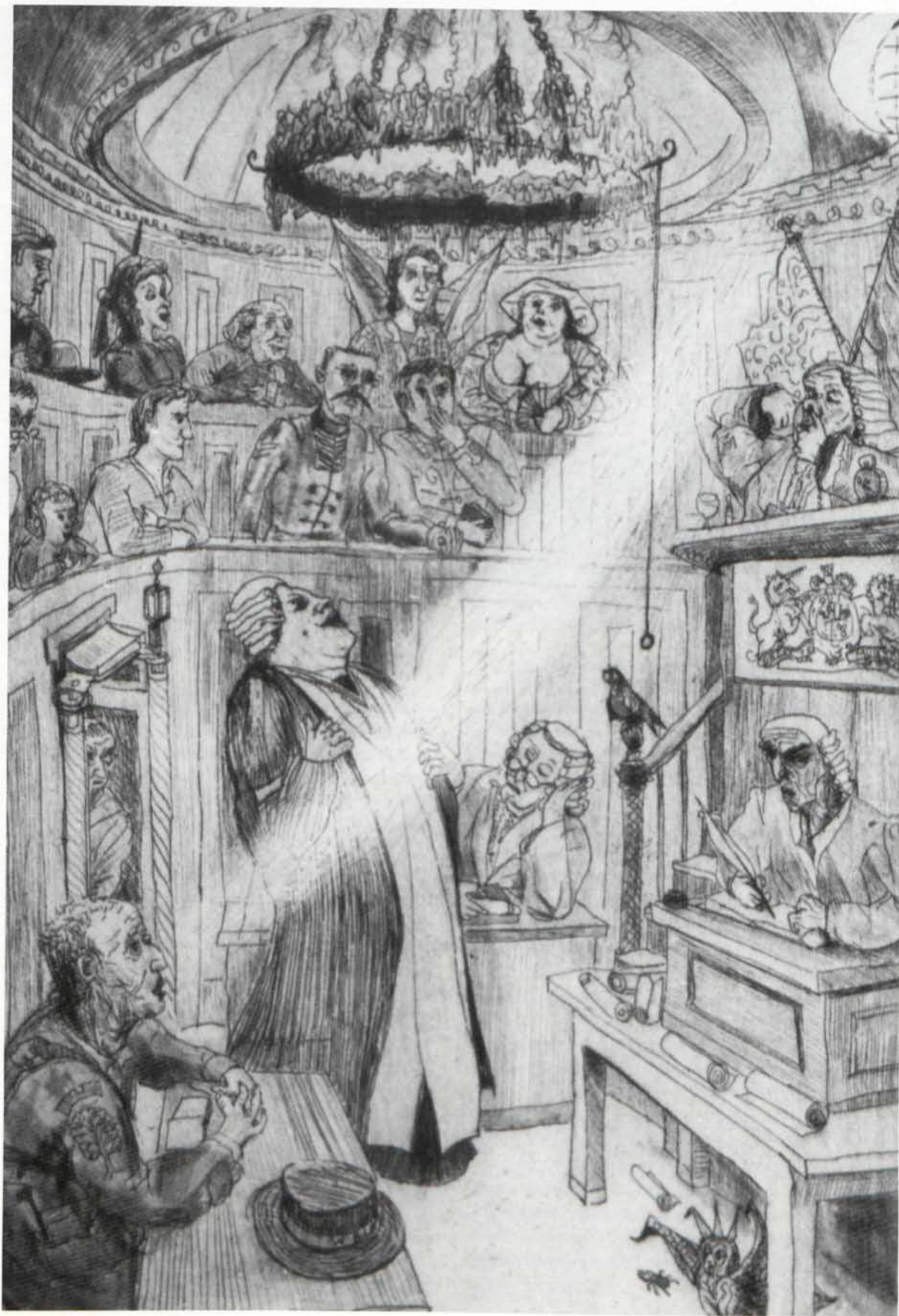
The *Life of W. Blake* is a set of 8 colored prints that I published in 1992. They are a complex mix of etching and monoprint techniques. Although in a limited edition of 20 examples, each image is uniquely printed much in the way that Blake's engravings are individual productions, varying slightly between copies. The main plate is drawn on copper, etched, revised and proofed through many variations. Drypoint techniques are added. The text and additional elements are similarly etched onto copper but are printed by the counter-proof method. Although this is a recognized technique, I believe that I have developed counter proofing more than any other artist in Britain recently. It is essentially an offset method. An impression is taken onto tissue paper and then reprinted. This allows the artist to work the correct way round. Printing a hand-written text suddenly becomes straightforward! It also permits the artist to print anywhere on the paper. For example the grasshopper in the "Visions" print can be placed on the extreme bottom left-hand corner, echoing the real grass-

hopper that came into my studio whilst I was making that print. (I fondly imagined that it was a visit from Blake's ghost.) Monoprinting, the final element in the work, is a direct print from a brushstroke or smear of printing ink. Only one impression can be made before the mark must be re-made.

One of the first art books I ever bought reproduced a selection of Blake engravings and he has been in a corner of my mind ever since, although for most of my career I have been associated with the tradition stemming from William Hogarth. A combination of things brought Blake bubbling to the surface for me in 1992, but it was a Scots poet who assailed me at a private view in London, accusing the English of producing no great artists or poets who lit the blue touch paper. I breathed the name of William Blake, he writhed in agony and left me. Every little English boy and girl is bathed in Blake at least once. He is selectively quoted, sung and admired for a few of his works but he is buried in Bunhill Fields not Westminster Abbey, we have acres of Turners on view at the Tate Gallery and a measly display of Blake. A National Hero? He was never knighted, never admitted to the Royal Academy and a printmaker to boot.

My W. Blake is somewhere in between an autobiography and a historical fantasy. A homage but not a sychophantic illustration of the good engraver Blake. He







has never suffered the fate of poor Vincent and been lam-pooned into a Lust for Life production, but my work does take all necessary liberties with the facts. I can claim some kinship with Blake. I, too, am a printmaker and painter struggling away in my workshop with word and image convinced of my own peculiar set of dreams. My W. Blake, never parted from his straw hat (straw hat varnish, an acid resistant liquid still used by etchers today) stumbles through his world, ecstatic in his alchemical etching studio, bemused at art school by the fatuous behavior of fellow students and dreaming of fabulous tigers (inflated domestic moggy due to indigestion). In the country he wears a home-made tarpaulin and whistle holding cloak whilst nearby a sheep stares sadly at a knitted woollen jumper by its feet. Don't look for a perfect televisual period recreation of eighteenth-century England, the odd transistor radio and fire extinguisher has crept in.

The text that weaves through the images comes from *Blake Records*, by G. E. Bentley, Jr. This is a biography constructed out of contemporaneous letters, newspapers reviews and reminiscences from which we learn that Blake once passed the remark that he thought the earth was flat. The recorder, Henry Crabb Robinson, tried to raise the question of circumnavigations, but at that moment dinner was called and the reply was lost. Saved by the gong. The general verdict

on Blake seems to have been that he was mad but harmless. Blake neatly counters; "... there are probably men shut up as mad in Bedlam who are not so: that possibly the mad-men outside have shut up the sane people." It has recently been suggested that prescribed the "right" drugs Blake could have been "cured" of his visions. He was an obstinate man and believed he walked and talked with Socrates, Jesus Christ, and Michael Angelo. Unlike Doris Stokes of Balham (the south London medium who produced pastiches of the music of Beethoven seated at her piano and with her eyes closed) Blake proceeded after years of humdrum engraving commissions to produce his own most exquisite works of the imagination. During his lifetime he suffered much rejection. Not until we caught up with him and developed a proper respect for the inner eye did his star rise. It is difficult now to imagine our civilization without him.

The 8 prints *The Life of W. Blake* are available as a boxed set from the artist. Write to 7 Bristle Hill, Buckingham MK18 1EZ England. Telephone 0280 815255. Price on application.