

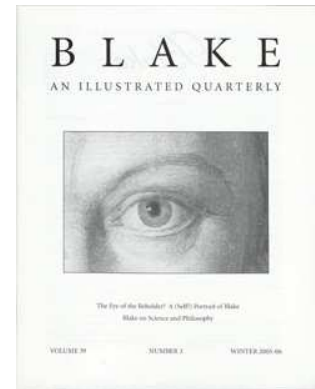
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P A R T I C U L A R

Blake and the Sheffield Iris

David Groves

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MINUTE PARTICULAR

Blake and the *Sheffield Iris*

BY DAVID GROVES

The *Sheffield Iris* was a weekly eight-page newspaper, founded in 1794 by the poet and reformer James Montgomery (1771-1854). Its enlightened political views gave the *Iris* an influence far beyond the English manufacturing city of Sheffield. Although Montgomery's role as editor ended in 1825, he continued to take an interest in the paper, and to contribute occasional pieces to it.¹

When the second volume of Allan Cunningham's *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* appeared in 1830, it was reviewed in the *Iris*, with special attention to Cunningham's chapter on Blake. The anonymous review has never been reprinted or mentioned in print, until now:

1. See John Holland and James Everett, *Memoirs of the Life and Writings of James Montgomery, Including Selections from His Correspondence*, 7 vols. (London: Longman, 1856) 1: 175 and 7: 95. Montgomery had some interest in Blake, and in the 1808 edition of Blair's *Grave*, with designs by Blake (see Holland and Everett 1: 38 and G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* [Oxford: Clarendon P, 1969] 194). In the review that follows, however, there seems to be no evidence of Montgomery's pen. See also the valuable discussion of the Cromek-Montgomery-Blake nexus in Robert N. Essick and Morton D. Paley, *Robert Blair's The Grave Illustrated by William Blake: A Study with Facsimile* (London: Scolar P, 1982) 23-25.

NUMBER X. of this interesting work, which we have on a previous occasion introduced to our readers, is just published, and comprises the lives of seven painters—West, Barry, Blake, Opie, Morland, Bird, and Fuseli, with likenesses, more or less highly finished, of each. To say, that the memoirs contained in this neat volume—the second of "British Painters, Sculptures [sic], and Architects," are from the fascinating pen of Allan Cunningham, and the far-famed depot of Albemarle-street, leaves nothing else to be added in the way of praise. What a singular being was William Blake! A painter, an engraver, a poet, and a visionary,—in the last character perhaps little less singular than Swedenberg [sic] himself. "To describe" says the biographer "the conversations which Blake held in prose with demons, and in verse with angels, would fill volumes, and an ordinary gallery could not contain all the heads which he drew of his visionary visitants. That all this was real, he himself most sincerely believed; nay, so infectious was his enthusiasm, that some acute and sensible persons who heard him expatiate, shook their heads, and hinted that he was an extraordinary man, and that there might be something in the matter." The spirits, however, who thus obeyed the artist's bidding, came not to reveal any secrets, save the secrets of their own countenances—in short they came as might be expected at the call of a painter—to have their portraits taken! and many of the likenesses of these spiritual sitters did poor Blake delineate, from the heroic Wallace to the "ghost of a flea!" Instead of transcribing the narrative of these unearthly vagaries, we shall copy the brief account of the enthusiast's procedure and luck in a transaction incident to the greater part of mankind: but in which few engage so inconsiderately, and fewer still, when that is the case, with such exemplary good fortune:—

(The two paragraphs that follow are the ninth and tenth paragraphs of Cunningham's chapter on Blake, from the first edition of the *Lives*.³ The only substantive change is the spelling of the names of Blake's wife as [alternatively] "Katharine Boucher" and "Catharine Boucher." Blake was in fact 24, not 26, when he married.)

2. Anon., *Sheffield Iris* 9 February 1830: 4. The opening words, "NUMBER X. of this interesting work," refer to the "Family Library" series, of which number ten was the second of Cunningham's six-volume *Lives*. "Albemarle-street" was the location of Cunningham's London publisher, John Murray. "Swedenberg" was of course the mystic Emanuel Swedenborg.

3. The second edition of Cunningham's life of Blake is reprinted in Bentley 476-507.