

# AN ILLUSTRATED QUARTERLY BLAKE

N O T E

## Blake's Ancient Forests of Europe

Joel Morkan

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## BLAKE'S "ANCIENT FORESTS OF EUROPE" Joel Morkan

In *The French Revolution*, Blake's Moloch, the Duke of Burgundy, exhorts the king "To rouse up the ancient forests of Europe, with clarions of cloud breathing war" (l. 101).<sup>1</sup> Burgundy warns that if this is not done the nobles will see "the ancient forests of chivalry hewn, and the joys of combat burnt for fuel" (l. 93).

David Erdman has commented on the power of Blake's epithet for the feudal aristocracy, but he has not chosen to explicate it.<sup>2</sup> The epithet, however, is another instance of Blake's careful fusion of history and myth in the poem, and it repays examination. On the mythic level the old nobility is Druidic, representing the primeval forest and the domination of the natural over the human. The historical reference, in turn, reinforces and intensifies the mythic dimension.

In 1669 Colbert promulgated an ordinance that closed the forests to the peasants.<sup>3</sup> They were banned from hunting in the forests or from gathering fuel wood. In the years just prior to the outbreak of the Revolution, the burden of this edict became even more onerous. Agents of the nobility exercised "planting rights" by growing trees on the road-side property of peasants, and further enforced the laws prohibiting them from the forests.<sup>4</sup>

During the weeks and days of turmoil immediately before the Revolution the agrarian lower classes vented their rage at these laws and moved to have "the ancient forests hewn, and the joys of combat burnt for fuel." When the Revolution was victorious, in fact, one of the first things the peasants did was to invade the forests and lay

claim to them.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, "forest rights" continued to be a serious political issue well into the nineteenth century. As Stendhal shows in Chapter XXIII, "Le Clergé, Les Bois, La Liberté," of *Le Rouge et Le Noir*, both the upper clergy and nobility intrigued to repossess *les forêts domaniales* after the Restoration.

This historical data establishes the precision of Blake's epithet for the nobility. They represent the old world of privilege and dominance that maintains the world of Nature over the human world. The revolutionary forces, on the other hand, represent the human urge to liberate mankind from the domination of Nature and to subordinate natural forces to human needs. Through this compact and appropriate epithet for the aristocracy Blake conflated his mythic and historical intentions into a dense and dramatically functional metaphor.

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1 Geoffrey Keynes, ed., *Blake: Complete Writings* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1971), p. 138.

2 David V. Erdman, *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday, 1969), p. 167.

3 Georges Lefebvre, *The Coming of the French Revolution, 1789*, trans. Robert R. Palmer (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1947), p. 122.

4 Lefebvre, p. 14.

5 Lefebvre, p. 129.

## THE GEDDES BIBLE AND THE TENT OF THE ETERNALS IN THE BOOK OF URIZEN F. B. Curtis

The reaction of the Eternals to the creation of the "first female form now separate" (*Urizen*, pl. 18), is to close off the fallen Los and Enitharmon in a tent:

"Spread a Tent, with strong curtains around them  
"Let cords & stakes bind in the Void  
That Eternals may no more behold them"

They began to weave curtains of darkness  
They erected large pillars round the Void  
With golden hooks fasten'd in the pillars  
With infinite labour the Eternals  
A woof wove, and called it Science  
(*Urizen*, pl. 19, 11.2-9)

Although Blake was possibly thinking here of a traditional Biblical image--the tents of the wandering Jews--it is perhaps more than a coincidence that we find the following description of a tent and darkness in A. Geddes' *The Holy Bible* (Vol. 1, 20 June 1792), published two years before the printing of Blake's poem:

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