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The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century

William Blake

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Keywords

Art
Collecting
Commerce
Conversation
Correspondence
Exhibitions
Friendship
Patronage
Poetry
Salons

Abstract

William Blake was never the eccentric loner or outsider that his early biographers made him out to be. Blake had visions but wasn't mad. He was a Londoner and lived in a thriving metropolis. He went to a drawing school, was apprenticed to an engraver and studied at the Royal Academy. Blake had a close-knit family, many friends, patrons and employers. He was an eclectic reader and sympathized with radical politics as well as with Swedenborgianism. Though his ambitions were thwarted in the emerging market of book selling and publishing, every aspect of Blake's life gives opportunity to think about Blake and sociability.

William Blake (1757-1827) was born into a dissenting family at 28 Broad Street in Soho (London) where his father had a hosier shop. He was homeschooled and had precocious talents: 'as soon as the child's hand could hold a pencil it began to scrawl rough likeness of man or beast, and make timid copies of all the prints he came near'.¹ Blake went to Henry Pars' Drawing School (1767-72) and was apprenticed to James Basire (1730-1802), engraver to the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society. Blake trained as a journeyman engraver and contributed to Richard Gough's *Sepulchral Monuments in Great Britain* (1786) and possibly to Jacob Byrant's *A New System, or, an Analysis of Ancient Mythology* (1774-76). After completing his seven-year apprenticeship in 1779, he enrolled at the Royal Academy to become a painter. He practised in the plaster cast collections and used the library, but never completed his studies. Yet, each stage of his training offered opportunities. Blake continued to exhibit at the Royal Academy and must have realized that this didn't further the sales of his paintings. He forged friendships that would help with employment and lead to collaboration. His circle of friends included the painter Henry Fuseli (1741-1826), the printmaker and amateur painter George Cumberland (1754-1848), the painter, illustrator, and engraver Thomas Stothard (1755-1834) as well as the sculptor John Flaxman (1756-1826). Blake was an avid collector of prints; his early networks existed through print shops and auction rooms. On his father's death in 1784, his older brother James took over the family business and Blake set up a print shop with fellow apprentice James Parker next door (1784-85). The business failed but the venture is indicative of his ambitions for his commercial work.

In the 1780s Blake developed his writing and, again, his social networks tie into his projects. *Poetical Sketches* (1783), a collection of juvenilia and only work to appear in letterpress, was financed by Flaxman and the Reverend A.S. Mathew (1734-1824) and his wife Harriet Mathew (1743-1815), who hosted a literary salon and invited Blake on Flaxman's recommendation. At these social gatherings Blake is reputed to have sung; Harriet Mathew, who was fascinated by Blake, gave him funds for the print shop. The second work, inspired by the gatherings at the Mathews, is the unfinished satire *An Island in the Moon* (1784-85). One of the characters, 'Quid the cynic', is recognizably Blake's alter-ego and 'Suction the Epicurean' might be modelled on his younger brother Robert. Together with 'Inflammable Gass the Wind-finder' and 'Steelyard the Lawgiver', and several others, they form an imagined community of gossipy philosophers, resembling the Birmingham Lunar Society: 'In the Moon, is a certain Island near by a mighty continent, which small island seems to have some affinity to England. & what is more extraordinary the people are so much alike & their language so much the same that you would think you was among your friends' (E449).²

Blake is a religious artist, inspired by continual Bible reading and his mother's Moravian background.³ He had a life-long interest in Swedenborg's ideas about the afterlife, the human and the divine, and briefly considered joining the newly founded Swedenborgian Church in 1789. Swedenborgianism envisages man's sociability through the doctrines of correspondences, existing between the spiritual and materials realms of man's existence, and of influx, which is love that comes from 'above' and connects man with the divine.⁴ In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* (1790), partially written to refute and satirize Swedenborg's

theology (Paley 16-17), Blake describes his production process, while explaining its symbolic potential for psychological unity: 'by printing in the infernal method' and by 'melting apparent surfaces away', he will show 'the infinite which was hid' and open 'the doors of perception' so that 'every thing would appear to man as it is: infinite' (E39). Blake always linked himself to Swedenborg or Boehme because he, like them, had visions. Alexander Gilchrist, his mid-Victorian biographer, writes that the visions started in childhood (Gilchrist 7) and that he was aware of the nature of his visions; they were eidetic images, not hallucinations, and only real to him. In the final decade of his life, when he frequented the Aders' Salon, Blake is reported to have told 'a little group gathered around him' about an extraordinary sighting on an evening walk. When challenged on where he had seen this 'beautiful sculpture', Gilchrist writes, "'Here, madam'", answered Blake, touching his forehead' (320).

Blake had a sense of his audience. He published a flyer in 1793 to announce the sale of his engravings and poetic works, available in small numbers or to be printed on demand (E692-693). Over the course of his life, he was employed for diverse projects or publishing schemes that involved collaborators from the London art world or investors that were part of the booksellers' networks. He worked on a new edition of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* (1797), published by Richard Edwards, and Robert Blair's *The Grave* (1808), published by C.H. Crome. There was much overlap between his commercial and creative work and patrons, or friends involved. Dr Robert Thornton (1768-1837), physician, botanist and subscriber to *The Grave*, commissioned Blake to produce woodcut engravings for *The Pastorals of Virgil* (1821). Thornton would acquire a copy of *The Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826) which the painter John Linnell (1792-1882) commissioned.⁵ Blake's biggest undertaking was the exhibition of 1809. His marketing campaign, following the commercial approach of the literary galleries, advertised commissions for engravings and promoted the Canterbury Pilgrims painting specifically. Blake implemented what he learned from Crome but again only contacted his friends. The exhibition was a fiasco.⁶

The 1790s, when Blake lived in Lambeth, were a time of great productivity. Joseph Johnson (1738-1809), publisher of scientific texts as well as religious tracts, was Blake's main employer.⁷ Johnson commissioned Blake to work on Mary Wollstonecraft's *Original Stories* (1791), designing and engraving its illustrations, Erasmus Darwin's *The Botanic Garden* (1791), engraving plates as well as adding to Fuseli's design of 'Fertilization of Egypt',⁸ and John Gabriel Stedman's *Narrative, of a Five Years' Expedition; Against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam* (1796), engraving and working up Stedman's drawings whom Blake also befriended (Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 113). Much of his work connected him to current topics: Johann Caspar Lavater's *Aphorisms on Man* (1788), translated by Fuseli, which heralded the publication of *Essays of Physiognomy* (1789-98), and *Gottfried August Bürger's Leonore* (1796), which was part of the fad for Gothic literature.⁹ Through the Johnson circle Blake would have met Mary Wollstonecraft, Erasmus Darwin and Henry Fuseli as well as Joseph Priestley and William Godwin but there is no certainty about how many of Johnson's dinner parties Blake attended.¹⁰ Blake benefited from the Johnson circle; he met, for example, Thomas Holcroft who commissioned plates for *The Wits Magazine* (Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 111). Despite being incredibly busy with commercial work, Blake was also able to advance his own work: the powerful lyrical simplicity of *Songs*

of *Innocence* (1789) gave way to the intense and accusatory voices in *Songs of Experience* (1794). He embarked on his creation myth, starting with *The [First] Book of Urizen* (1794), to explore a combination of the Biblical fall narrative and Milton's *Paradise Lost* (1667). Blake comments on social and political injustices and engages with liberal ideas, circulating in the aftermath of the French Revolution, as in *The French Revolution* (1791), existing only in typescript, *America* (1793) and *Europe* (1794). To avoid confrontation in the decade of the British backlash and treason trials, he published his works as illuminated books.¹¹

In 1782 Blake married Catherine Boucher (1762-1831). They had no children but an apprentice and two of Blake's siblings lived with them. Robert, whom Blake considered his pupil, died in 1787 and his unmarried sister Catherine stayed while in Felpham (1800-03). Blake went to Felpham to work and live near his new patron, the poet William Hayley (1745-1820). He profited from Hayley's circle¹² and though his professional relationship with Hayley deteriorated, Hayley stood by him during his trial for alleged sedition. Indeed, on 12 August 1803 Blake insulted a soldier, who had entered his garden uninvited. Because of this confrontation, which involved much swearing and pushing, Blake was put on trial for sedition against the British State. Hayley supported Blake by getting him a lawyer; this kindness is perhaps symptomatic of Hayley's eagerness to support those in need (Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 250-57).

Blake also worked on his major works: *The Four Zoas*, an abandoned work in manuscript, and the illuminated epic poems *Milton* (1811) and *Jerusalem* (1820). Back in London, he lived at 17 South Moulton Street and from 1821 at 3 Fountain Court. Support in form of steady advance payments from 1799 onwards came from another source, Thomas Butts (1757-1845), a civil servant, now recognised as Blake's main collector. Many of Blake's patrons were his friends - the letters make explicit familiarity and [sympathy](#). Blake wrote to the Editor of the *Monthly Review* to defend Fuseli, whose lost painting *Ugolino and His Sons Starving to Death in the Tower*, exhibited at the [Royal Academy](#) in 1806, had been attacked by reviewers. In this letter, published on 1 July 1806, Blake gives moral support through his 'indignation' at the 'widely-diffused malice [...] against true art' (E768). Similarly, in a letter to Cumberland, Blake expresses his gratitude for Cumberland's enduring friendship: 'I am very much obliged by your kind ardour [*sic*] in my cause & should immediately Engage in reviving my former pursuits of printing if I had not now so long been turned out of the old channel into a new one that it is impossible for me to return to it without destroying my present course [...] when I have got my work printed I will send it you first of any body' (E769-770).

The overlaps of circles are characteristic of the changes in the marketplace. In the late eighteenth century, the old system of patronage, where artists were sponsored, was replaced by a commercial culture where works were purchased rather than commissioned. Some of Blake's poetic works were stocked in Johnson's bookshop so that a collector could acquire his works through his bookseller, or from Blake directly or his friends who acted as agents. There is room to see these works as objects that create bonds between people,¹³ but the various economic and social transitions suggest that Blake played an active part in the exchanges. Going by the intersecting clusters of friends, visiting the same places of worship, or using the same bookshops and collectors, listed by Bentley (*William Blake in the Desolate*

Market), Blake's works were known, shared, and recommended.¹⁴ His poetry was also read and performed at Salons. Blake's early biographers tended to differentiate between his roles as engraver, artist, poet, and visionary. In *Life of William Blake: 'Pictor Ignotus'* (1863) Gilchrist, who interviewed Blake's surviving friends, introduced him as an 'unknown painter'. Considering the growing evidence of the sales and social gatherings, the myth of 'Pictor Ignotus' is beginning to fade.

The most important social gathering for Blake was the Salon of Charles (1780-1846), a German merchant, and his wife Elizabeth Aders (1785-1857). The main attraction was their collection of Dutch, Flemish and German art. Henry Crabb Robinson, a frequent visitor, prided himself that he had introduced 'the Wordsworths, and the Lambs and the Flaxmans' (Robinson I, 257).¹⁵ In his diary Robinson recorded details about conversations and poetry readings. On 10 December 1825 he met Blake, who arrived with his friend and patron John Linnell, to deliver a print of the *Canterbury Pilgrims* painting. The entry reveals how much Robinson knew about Blake. He is keen to talk to him and puts what he hears into context:

'The conversation was on art and on poetry and religion; but it was my object—and I was successful—in drawing him out and in so getting from him an avowal of his peculiar sentiments. I was aware before of the nature of his impressions or I should at times have been at a loss to understand him' (I, 325).

About four weeks later, Robinson visited Blake in his home to buy 'two subscriptions for his *Job*' (I, 331) and again with the German painter Jakob Götzenberger (1802–1866). After Blake's death, he visited with Barron Field (1786-1846), a judge and minor poet who would have met Robinson through the Lamb circle, to procure prints of the *Canterbury Pilgrims* (I, 353).

Blake, who is often perceived as a non-joiner and independent spirit, was valued by his friends, patrons, employers, and collectors. His provocative comments and playful behaviours need to be contextualised as they result from complex social relations. Blake may not have been an easy person to deal with; he could be neglectful and preoccupied but was charming when he gushed about his real and spiritual relationships. On 12 September 1800 he wrote to Flaxman: 'It is to you I owe All my present Happiness It is to you I owe perhaps the Principal Happiness of my life' (E707). Apologizing for the long silence, he breaks into a celebration of friendship: 'I bless thee O Father of Heaven & Earth that ever I saw Flaxmans face / Angels stand round my Spirit in Heaven. the blessed of Heaven are my friends upon Earth [...]' (ll. 1-2, E707), 'seeing such visions I could not subsist on the Earth / But by my conjunction with Flaxman who knows to forgive Nervous Fear' (ll. 11-12, E708). Blake's visions induced Linnell to introduce Blake to the watercolourist and astrologer John Varley (1776-1842), who organised *séance*-like meetings and published *Zodiacal Physiognomy* (1828), to which Blake also contributed (Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 368-79). Blake was a voracious reader. He read [Byron](#)'s *Cain* and [Wordsworth](#)'s *Poems* and wrote

both short and extensive comments into the books he owned, agreeing, or dismissing and responding with poetic ideas. This kind of dialogue with other authors was augmented through references to other works; Blake, moreover, kept returning to his books, adding more comments. Often his annotations were starting points for themes or thoughts in progress that he would develop or articulate elsewhere. G.E. Bentley's collection of recorded conversations and anecdotes about Blake speak for the appeal of Blake's voice, mind, and wisdoms.

In the final decade of his life, Blake gathered a group of young artists ('his disciples') around him. They were 'The Ancients' and included Samuel Palmer (1805-1881), George Richmond (1809-1896) and Edward Calvert (1799-1883). Blake frequently visited Linnell, whom he had met in 1818, on Hampstead Heath and thanks to Linnell, he created his masterpiece *The Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826) and worked on illustrating Dante's *Comedia*, which he left unfinished. We can glean the dimensions of Blake's social circle, the depths of his relationships, personal or commercial, as well as spats with friends and employers from the surviving letters as well as the epigrams written into the Notebook that Blake inherited from his brother Robert. During his lifetime, Blake was marginalized due to failing or failed publishing projects. His own initiatives, too, the self-publishing of his poetic works as illuminated books and his exhibition in 1809 were thwarted due to bad choices. Blake probably would not have left any traces, were it not for his wife, friends, employers, patrons, and collectors. Blake, who was baptized at St. James's Church in Piccadilly and never belonged to any Church, was buried in the dissenters' graveyard Bunhill Fields.

1. Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake: 'Pictor Ignotus'*, 2 vols. (London: Macmillan, 1863), vol. I, p. 8. All references are to volume one of Gilchrist's biography.
2. William Blake, *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, newly revised edition, in ed. David V. Erdman and Harold Bloom (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney and Auckland: Double Day Anchor Books, 1988). The page number appears after E in the main text.
3. For Moravian aesthetic and worship practice, symbolism, eschatology and hymn traditions, see Alexander Regier, *Exorbitant Enlightenment: Blake, Hamann, and Anglo-German Constellations* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
4. Morton D. Paley, "'A New Heaven is Begun': Blake and Swedenborgianism", in Harvey F. Bellin and Darrell Ruhl (eds.), *Blake and Swedenborgianism: Opposition is True Friendship* (New York: Swedenborg Foundation, Inc., 1985), p. 18.
5. G.E. Bentley Jr. collated lists of people who acquired Blake's works during his lifetime, including the 693 subscribers to Blair's *The Grave* (1808) and 47 to *Illustrations of the Book of Job* (1826). Sales continued after his death in 1827 from either Catherine Blake or Frederik Tatham's stocks because Blake kept what he could not sell. See appendix to *William Blake in the Desolate Market* (Kingston and Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014).
6. G.E. Bentley Jr, *Blake Records*, second edition (New Haven and London: Published for the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art by Yale University Press, 2004), p. 282.
7. Bentley estimates that Blake did 90 plates for Johnson, from 1786 to 1801 (*The Stranger from Paradise*, 108).
8. G.E. Bentley Jr, *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), p. 106
9. See Sibylle Erle, *Blake, Lavater and Physiognomy* (London: Legenda, 2010); Robert N. Essick, *William Blake's Commercial Book Illustrations: A Catalogue and Study of the Plates Engraved by Blake after Designs by Other Artists* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991).
10. 'It seems somewhat unlikely that the artisan William Blake was a member of this genteel gathering of earnest liberals, though he was often in political sympathy with them' (Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 110). See also Jon Mee, *Enthusiasm and Regulation: Poetics and the Policing of Culture in the Romantic Period* (Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2003), ch. 6.

11. Joseph Viscomi, *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993).
 12. Hayley wrote a biography of his friend, the poet William Cowper (1731-1800) and asked Blake to engrave a portrait after a painting by George Romney (1734-1803), another friend. Hayley invited Lady Harriet Hesketh (1733-1807), Cowper's cousin, to comment on Blake's efforts regarding her cousin's likeness (Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, 224-226). Hayley also introduced Blake to Lord Egremont of Petworth House, a member of the local gentry. His wife, who appreciated Blake's designs for Blair's *The Grave* (1808), was to commission *A Vision of the Last Judgment* (1808). See Bentley, *The Stranger from Paradise*, p. 315-318.
 13. Sarah Haggarty, *Blake's Gifts: Poetry and the Politics of Exchange* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).
 14. Keri Davies, "'My Little Cane Sofa and the Bust of Sappho': Elizabeth Iremonger and the Female World of Book-Collecting", in Helen P. Bruder and Tristanne Connolly (eds.), *Queer Blake* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 221-235.
 15. Henry Crabb Robinson was commissioned to write on Blake by Friedrich Perthes for the short-lived periodical *Vaterländisches Museum* (1810-1811). To prepare Robinson went to Blake's exhibition in 1809. He asked for three extra copies of Blake's catalogue. See Henry Crabb Robinson on Books and their Writers, in ed. Edith J. Morley, 3 vols. (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Limited, 1938), vol. I, p. 15-353. Entries on Blake appear between 1810 and 1828.
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Cite this article

ERLE Sibylle, "William Blake", *The Digital Encyclopedia of British Sociability in the Long Eighteenth Century* [online], ISSN 2803-2845, Accessed on 04/23/2024, URL: <https://www.digitens.org/en/notices/william-blake.html>

Further Reading

Bentley, G.E., Jr., *William Blake's Conversations: A Compilation, Concordance, and Rhetorical Analysis*, with a foreword by Mary Lynn Johnson (Lewistown: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008).

Matthews, Susan, *Blake, Sexuality and Bourgeois Politeness* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011).

[The Chimney Sweeper \(1795\)](#)