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Alexander Gilchrist
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Life of William Blake

Although today William Blake (1757–1827) is recognised as a visionary poet and artist, at the time of his death he was unknown except for his presumed insanity. This highly influential two-volume biography by the barrister Alexander Gilchrist, first published in 1863 and reissued here in its second edition (1880), rescued William Blake from almost complete obscurity. The accepted interpretation of his madness was challenged and his creative talents were brought to the attention of Victorian society by the inclusion of selected writings and artistic works, nearly all previously unpublished. Volume 1 of Gilchrist's book is an account of William Blake's life, combining excerpts from his written works and paintings with detailed biographical information drawn from surviving letters and contemporary accounts.

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Life of William Blake

*With Selections from his Poems and Other
Writings*

VOLUME 1

ALEXANDER GILCHRIST
EDITED BY DANTE GABRIEL ROSSETTI
AND WILIAM ROSSETTI



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L I F E
O F
WILLIAM BLAKE.

VOL. I.

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I ASSERT for myself that I do not behold the outward creation, and that to me it is hindrance and not action. “What!” it will be questioned, “when the sun rises, do you not see a round disc of fire somewhat like a guinea?” Oh! no, no! I see an innumerable company of the heavenly host, crying, “Holy, holy, holy is the Lord God Almighty!” I question not my corporeal eye any more than I would question a window concerning a sight. I look through it and not with it.—BLAKE, *A Vision of the Last Judgment*.

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Fac-simile of a Portrait on Ivory
Painted from life by John Linnell, 1827.
Engraved by C.H. Jeans.

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L I F E
O F
W I L L I A M B L A K E

WITH SELECTIONS FROM HIS POEMS AND OTHER WRITINGS

BY

ALEXANDER GILCHRIST

OF THE MIDDLE TEMPLE, BARRISTER-AT-LAW
AUTHOR OF "THE LIFE OF WILLIAM ETTY, R.A."

A NEW AND ENLARGED EDITION
ILLUSTRATED FROM BLAKE'S OWN WORKS
WITH ADDITIONAL LETTERS AND A MEMOIR OF THE AUTHOR

IN TWO VOLUMES

VOL. I

London
M A C M I L L A N A N D C O.
1880

The Right of Translation is Reserved

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION.

IN 1878 thirty-four autograph letters from William Blake to Hayley were sold by Messrs. Sotheby and Wilkinson. Thanks to the courtesy of the gentlemen into whose possession a large proportion of the letters ultimately passed,—Mr. Frederick Locker and Mr. Alexander Macmillan,—these, and a few more obtained from the same source (one by the British Museum and the others by Mr. Kirby), are now incorporated in the Biography, and carry on the narrative of Blake's life during the two years immediately succeeding his return from Felpham. In the same way the letters to Mr. Butts, generously placed in my hands by his grandson, Captain Butts, just before the appearance of the first edition, and there printed in Vol. II., are now put in their place, making the Felpham chapters mainly autobiographical.

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The two friends whose labour of love wrought so largely to give completeness to the first issue of this book have revised and, especially in the case of the Annotated Catalogue, brought up to date their work; whilst another friend, Mr. Frederic J. Shields, out of the same warmth of admiration for Blake's genius and character, has freely rendered precious service with pen and pencil further to enrich the new edition. He has supplied a vigorous translation into words of the more pregnant among the large and important series of Designs by Blake to Young's *Night Thoughts*, which has lately come to light, and is now in the possession of Mr. Bain, of the Haymarket—the series of which a very small portion only was engraved by Blake for Edwards's edition of 1797. Mr. Shields has also drawn, from original pencil sketches by Blake, two new portraits of Mrs. Blake and the head of Blake by himself, which was somewhat roughly given in the first edition. Lastly, he has adapted a fairy design of Blake's own to the cover.

From America has come help in the shape of some admirable examples of engraver's work, four of which are from designs by Blake never before reproduced, and two are from the *Grave*. These were executed to illustrate an article on Blake, by Mr. Horace Scudder, in *Scribner's Magazine*, June, 1880; and to the courtesy of Messrs. Scribner & Co., of

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PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION. vii

New York, we are indebted for the use of the blocks.

Of additional illustrations there remain to be specified a newly discovered design to *Hamlet* (from a copy of the Second Folio Shakespeare containing also several other designs by Blake, and now in possession of Mr. Macmillan); another plate from the *Ferusalem*; the Phillips portrait of Blake, which Schiavonetti engraved for Blair's *Grave*; a view of *Blake's Cottage at Felpham* and of his *Work Room and Death Room* in Fountain Court, both drawn by Herbert H. Gilchrist; and, last not least, the *Inventions to the Book of Job* executed anew by the recently discovered photo-intaglio process.

In Vol. II. will also now be found an *Essay on Blake*, by James Smetham, republished (by permission) from the *London Quarterly Review*. Its fine qualities and its inaccessibility will, I feel assured, make it welcome here as an important accession to a work which aims to gather to a focus all the light that can be shed on Blake and on the creations of his genius.

ANNE GILCHRIST.

KEATS CORNER, WELL ROAD, HAMPSTEAD,
Oct. 10, 1880.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION.

ONE short word of sorrowful significance which has had to be inserted in the title-page, while it acquaints the reader with the peculiar circumstances under which this Biography comes before him, seems also to require a few words about its final preparation for the press; the more so as the time which has elapsed since the *Life of Blake* was first announced might otherwise lead to a wrong inference respecting the state in which it was left by the beloved author when he was seized, in the full tide of health and work and happy life, with the fever which, in five days, carried him hence. The *Life* was then substantially complete; and the first eight chapters were already printed. The main services, therefore, which the Work has received from other hands—and great they are—appear in the Second Part and in the Appendix: in the choice and arrangement of a large collection of Blake's unpublished and hitherto almost equally inaccessible published Writings, together with

introductory remarks to each Section; and in a thorough and probably exhaustive Annotated Catalogue of his Pictorial Works. The first of these services—the editorship, in a word, of the *Selections*—has been performed by Mr. Dante Gabriel Rossetti; the second by his brother, Mr. William Rossetti. To both of these friends, admiration of Blake's genius and regard for the memory of his biographer have made their labour so truly a labour of love that they do not suffer me to dwell on the rare quality or extent of the obligation.

To the *Life* itself one addition has been made,—that of a Supplementary Chapter, in fulfilment of the Author's plan. He left a memorandum to the effect that he intended writing such a chapter, and a list of the topics to be handled there, but nothing more. This also Mr. D. G. Rossetti has carried into execution; and that the same hand has filled in some blank pages in the Chapter on the *Inventions to the Book of Job* the discerning reader will scarcely need to be told.

The only other insertions remaining to be particularized are the accounts of such of Blake's Writings as it was decided not to reprint in the Second Part; chiefly of the class he called *Prophecies*. I could heartily wish the difficult problem presented by these

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PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION.

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strange Books had been more successfully grappled with, or indeed grappled with at all. Hardly anything has been now attempted beyond bringing together a few readable extracts. But however small may be the literary value of the *Europe*, *America*, *Jerusalem*, &c., they are at least psychologically curious and important; and should the opportunity arise, I hope to see these gaps filled in with workmanship which shall better correspond with that of the rest of the fabric. In speaking of the Designs which accompany the Poems in question, I was not left wholly without valued aid.

To Mr. Samuel Palmer and Mr. William Haines, to Mr. Linnell and other of Blake's surviving friends, and to the possessors of his works, grateful acknowledgments of the services rendered are due, in various ways, by each and all to enhance the completeness of the following record of the fruitful life and labours of William Blake. In my dear husband's name, therefore, I sincerely thank these gentlemen.

ANNE GILCHRIST.

May 15th, 1863,
BROOKBANK, NEAR HASLEMERE.

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