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Who Was Robert Blake?

BY AILEEN WARD

What G. E. Bentley once called "the decent ignorance which still obscures Blake's family"¹ is still far from dispelled. The ages and even the identities of the Blake children have been especially problematic. Among his nineteenth-century biographers, Alexander Gilchrist mentioned only three of Blake's siblings and knew the names of only two; J. T. Smith and Allan Cunningham's information was still scantier, and B. H. Malkin spoke only of Blake's father among his family members.² Frederick Tatham in his manuscript *Life of Blake* gave the names though not the birthdates of Blake's four surviving siblings but got their birth order wrong.³ However, his *Life* was not known to Gilchrist and the other early biographers: it did not come to light till 1864, after Gilchrist's death, and was referred to only casually by Swinburne and E. J. Ellis; it was in fact not published till A. G. B. Russell's 1906 edition of Blake's *Letters*.⁴ No doubt it was this publication that spurred Arthur Symons to search the St. James Parish register, where in 1907 he discovered the names and birthdates of six children of James and Catherine Blake: James, born 10 July 1753; John, born 12 May 1755; William, born 28 November 1757; a second John, born 20 March 1760; Richard, born 19 June 1762; and Catherine, born 7 January 1764.⁵ All six were duly baptized a few weeks after birth. But Symons's discovery raised almost as many questions as it answered. The duplication of the name John could be



1. *A Naked Youth Seen from the Side, Perhaps Robert Blake, c. 1779-80 (Butlin 71)*. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

explained by the assumption that the first John died in infancy, though there is no record of his death. Blake himself, in describing the second John as "the evil one" (E 721), left no doubt of his existence, but almost nothing is known of his life.⁶ The name of Richard is another puzzle, since he is never mentioned again in the Blake records. If, like the first John, he died in infancy, this fact is not recorded, although the death or burial dates of young children are found fairly often in parish registers of the time—witness those of four young siblings of Catherine Boucher Blake.⁷ And most puzzling of all, nowhere in the St. James Parish register is the birth or baptism of Blake's beloved younger brother Robert to be found.

Robert's absence from the record remains the most controverted question about the makeup of Blake's family. Symons answered it by suggesting that the parish clerk made a careless mistake in entering Robert's name as Richard at the time of

¹ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977; hereafter cited as *BB*) 30.

² Though Gilchrist knew from Blake's letter to Flaxman of September 1800 that he had a sister, he referred to her only as "Miss Blake" (*Life of William Blake* ed. Ruthven Todd [London: Everyman, 1945; hereafter cited as *LWB*] 357-58).

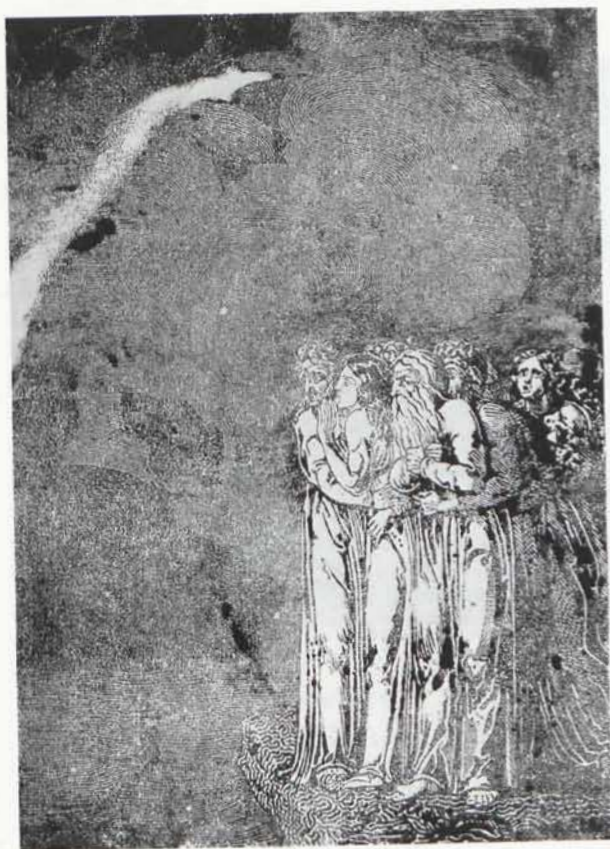
³ G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969; hereafter cited as *BR*) 508. Tatham presumably had his information from Catherine Blake, who was understandably vague about the details of her husband's childhood. Bentley provides a full account of the birth and baptism dates of the Blake children, *BR* 1-7.

⁴ Deborah Dorfman, *Blake in the Nineteenth Century* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1969) 33n11. Ellis mentioned the "four other children" but actually listed only the three brothers ("Memoir," *The Works of William Blake*, ed. E. E. Ellis and W. B. Yeats [London: Quaritch, 1893] I: 4-5; *BB* 23n1 and 31.

⁵ Arthur Symons, *William Blake* (London: Cape, 1907) 22.

⁶ See Tatham in *BR* 508-09 and Bentley, *BR* 509n1 and n2.

⁷ *BR* 5.



2. *The Approach of Doom*. Relief and white-line etching. Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

his birth in June 1762—as he had previously done in recording the name of Blake's father as John, not James, at the birth of the first John in 1755. This plausible supposition satisfied Blake scholars—including Mona Wilson and Geoffrey Keynes⁸—for over 50 years. Then in 1969 Bentley offered a new explanation of the omission of Robert from the parish records. In the roster of the Royal Academy Schools he discovered a Robert Blake enrolled as a student of engraving in April 1782 and described as having been “14 last 4th August”—i.e., born in 1767. This he conjectured was in all probability Blake's youngest brother, five years younger than hitherto supposed.⁹ To explain why Robert's name was missing from the St. James

⁸ Mona Wilson, *The Life of William Blake* (London: Nonesuch, 1927) 2 and 339n; Geoffrey Keynes, *Blake Studies*, 1st ed. (London: Hart-Davis, 1949) 3.

⁹ BR 7, 20; see also Sidney C. Hutchison, “The Royal Academy Schools, 1768-1830,” *Walpole Society* 38 (1962): 146. Hereafter, to avoid confusion, this Royal Academy student will be referred to as “Robert Blake,” and Blake's youngest brother simply as “Robert.”



3. *Milton 37*. Copy D. Courtesy of the Library of Congress.

Parish register, Bentley proposed that some time after his daughter's birth in 1764 James Blake Sr. joined the Baptist Church and so never had the infant Robert baptized. In support of this theory he noted that one “_____ Blake” (no Christian name given) was listed among the members of the Grafton Street Baptist Church from 1769 to 1772¹⁰—two years after the conjectured date of Robert's birth, it should be noted. While Bentley thought it possible that the Royal Academy student was not related to Blake, he dismissed the idea as “unlikely,” seeing “no good reason to challenge [the] accuracy” of the entry as “the only record of the birthdate of Blake's favorite brother.” And from the time of the publication of his *Blake Records* this hypothesis has been almost unanimously accepted as the solution to the puzzle of Robert's birthdate and non-baptism.¹¹

¹⁰ BR 7-8.

¹¹ BR 20 and n3. Only David V. Erdman (*Blake: Prophet Against Empire* [3rd ed. rev., Princeton: Princeton UP, 1971] 98) keeps to the earlier conjecture of a 1762 birthdate for Robert, without, however, alluding to Bentley's hypothesis.



4. *The Approach of Doom*. Pen and sepia wash (Butlin R2). Reproduced by permission of the Trustees of the British Museum.

And yet some doubts remain. A number of small facts or inferences—none of them decisive evidence taken singly, but certainly suggestive in their totality—point in another direction. First of all, the assumption that the Robert Blake who entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1782 was in fact Blake's youngest brother is questionable, given the "hosts of Blakes" living in London at the time.¹² Bentley himself collected some 23 London contemporaries who bore the name of William Blake, one of whom was also an engraver, and today "Robert Blakes" are at least as common as "Williams."¹³ This profusion of Blakes also undermines the probability of the nameless "Blake" of the Grafton Street Baptist Church being Blake's father, the premise of Bentley's explanation for the absence of a baptismal record for Robert. Furthermore, it is striking that not one of Blake's early biographers—neither Malkin, to whom Blake described his own experience at the Academy, nor Smith, who knew Robert personally, nor Tatham, who got his information

mainly from Catherine Blake¹⁴—spoke of Robert's studying at the Royal Academy Schools, certainly a noteworthy event if it actually occurred. And if, as seems likely, Blake continued attending the Schools for a full six year term after his admission in 1779,¹⁵ the brothers' overlapping terms would be a still more notable circumstance—though if, as is generally assumed, Blake left the Academy in disgust after a few months, it is hard to see why Robert would have decided to apply there two years later. Nor can Robert's surviving drawings be taken as evidence of Academy tutelage. While his work reveals some genuine talent, not unlike Blake's own in theme and mood, it is an undeveloped one, showing neither the precocious ability that would have gained him admission to the Academy at the unusually early age of 14 nor the influence of Academy training thereafter¹⁶—though of course there is no record of how long he remained there if he actually enrolled.

¹² See BR 22 and n1, 553-54.

¹³ Bentley, *N&Q* 210 (1965): 172-78; see also Symons 26-28. Today there are eight Robert Blakes (plus three Williams) listed in the Manhattan telephone book. The current London telephone directory unhelpfully identifies most of its subscribers merely by their initials, but it does list two "Roberts" among 35 "R. Blakes," with only nine "W. Blakes" and no "Williams."

¹⁴ It might be noted that Robert's supposed admission to the Academy occurred only four months before Blake's marriage in August 1782, which would seem to ensure that Catherine knew of his studying there.

¹⁵ See Aileen Ward, "Sir Joshua and His Gang," *Huntington Library Quarterly* 52 (1989): 78-79.

¹⁶ Only eight boys (including John Flaxman) aged 14 or younger were among the 414 students admitted to the Schools prior to Robert Blake in 1782 (see Hutchison 313-46). On Robert's "barely passable" drawing, as for example in "The

actually enrolled.

Yet since it appears that Blake at some point tutored Robert in drawing—"a task which he must have found above all others delightful"—this has been taken to imply that the older brother was preparing the younger to qualify for admission to the Academy.¹⁷ This would seem to strengthen the likelihood that Robert was actually the student of engraving admitted to the Schools in 1782, and indeed it appears a remarkable coincidence that two Robert Blakes both born in the 1760s should both be training as engravers at the same time.¹⁸ Yet a number of similar duplications occur in the roster of the Royal Academy Schools which—like that of Blake's namesake engraver—considerably diminish the coincidentalness.¹⁹ As for Blake's teaching Robert, the story stems from Smith's mention that William "considered him [Robert] his pupil" around the time Blake opened his printshop with Parker,²⁰ and since the discovery of the name of Robert Blake in the Academy roster it has been fortified by reference to the *Robert Blake Sketch Book*, first described by Geoffrey Keynes in 1949.²¹ This rather decrepit notebook containing about 50 pages of drawings is inscribed "Robert Blake's / 1777 Book" on the front cover, with similar signatures elsewhere and seven occurrences of the date 1778.²² Many of the pages contain competent sketches of various parts of the human body on the left hand side, apparently by some instructor, with rather

hesitant copies filling up the rest of the page, progressing from lips, noses, eyes, hands, arms and legs to faces, busts and full figures.²³ Despite some awkwardness, especially in the early pages, the work shows real ability for a 10 or 11 year old boy. He was evidently aiming at a kind of academic realism: later pages include heads of women with eighteenth-century hats and hairstyles as well as carefully detailed drawings of birds, animals and a rural scene. But his pedestrian manner contrasts strongly with the abstract and archaic but imaginatively expressive figures of the authentic drawings by Blake's brother found in the Notebook of William Blake and elsewhere, and indeed the drawings that served as the boy's models have a more assured and detailed grasp of human anatomy than Blake's own work at the time.²⁴ It is hard to see these sketches as the work of either William or Robert. A final argument against linking the Sketch Book to Blake's teaching Robert in 1777-78 is the date implied in Smith's account—that the lessons occurred during Blake's partnership in the printshop, i.e., around 1784, two years after Robert's supposed entrance at the Schools and not, as Bentley suggests, prior to his enrollment.²⁵ Whatever the instruction amounted to, its purpose was probably to train Robert as an assistant with his engraving, as Blake later did with Catherine—a supposition which gives point to the vision of Robert later providing Blake with his most valuable trade secret.

Although Keynes and Butlin accept the attribution of the Sketch Book to Blake's brother, both Bindman and Essick are quite doubtful.²⁶ Apart from its dissimilarity to the brothers' work, the provenance of the book, as given in a long note inside the front cover by an unidentified hand sometime after 1878, is suspicious. The note claimed

Approach of Doom," one of his latest works (1785 according to R. N. Essick, *The Separate Plates of William Blake* [Princeton: Princeton UP, 1983] 12), see David Bindman, *Blake as an Artist* (Oxford: Phaidon Press Ltd., 1977) 40.

¹⁷ BR 29 and 20.

¹⁸ As G. E. Bentley has argued in correspondence, noting also that there is no record of either one being formally apprenticed or later continuing in the profession.

¹⁹ Counting only students born within a dozen years of one another and enrolled in the same field, we find the following pairs: among architects, two Richard Hollands (born 1750 and 1752), two George Moores (born 1806 and 1810), two James Pennethornes (born 1801 and 1810), two Charles Smiths (born 1790 and 1792), and two George Smiths (born 1782 and 1790); among painters, two pairs of John Grahams (born 1755 and 1766 and 1792 and 1795 respectively), two William Rosses (born 1795 and 1798), two William Turners (born 1763 and 1774), and two George Wards (born 1789 and 1801). Simple duplications of names among the 1551 students enrolled between 1768 and 1830 are too numerous to include (cf. Hutchison 183-91 passim).

²⁰ BR 457—a point echoed by Cunningham (BR 482).

²¹ Keynes 4-5.

²² Martin Butlin, *The Paintings and Drawings of William Blake* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1981) 1: 617; Essick, *The Works of William Blake in the Huntington Collections* (San Marino, CA: Huntington Library, 1985) 235-36.

²³ Butlin 1: cat. R1; 2: pls. 1126-1177. This procedure echoes the teaching method Blake encountered a decade earlier at the Pars's School (where, as Bindman notes [12], he did not distinguish himself). See the record of Thomas Jones, quoted Bindman 227n12, and Janet Warner, *Blake and the Language of Art* (Montreal: McGill-Queens UP, 1984) chap. 2.

²⁴ For Robert's work, see *The Notebook of William Blake*, ed. David V. Erdman (Oxford: Clarendon, 1973) NN. 1, 3, 5, 7, 9; Butlin 1: cat. R2-R11, 2: pls. 176 and 1178-90. For Blake's early drawings, see Butlin 2: pls. 71, 73, 106, 107, et seq., and Bindman's comment ("an almost complete lack of natural dexterity"), *Blake* 16-17.

²⁵ BR 20. Both Erdman (*Prophet* 98) and Jack Lindsay (*William Blake* [New York: Braziller, 1978] 33) also accept a date as early as 1777 for the lessons on the evidence of the Sketch Book.

²⁶ Keynes 4-5; Butlin 1: 617; Bindman 232n3; Essick, *Huntington* 235-36.

onetime friend Thomas Stothard after his death in 1834 and again in the sale of Sir Alexander Spearman's books in 1878; thereafter it disappeared, to surface again in 1919 when it was purchased for the Huntington Library.²⁷ However, it was not listed among the 1500 items in the catalogue of the Stothard sale or (apparently) in that of the Spearman sale.²⁸ Wherever it came from, the book was not linked to Blake's brother Robert till a century after his death by its nameless late nineteenth-century owner, whose note may not have been a deliberate fabrication so much as a bit of wishful thinking. Moreover, there is no reason to think that Blake would have given Stothard such a treasured memento as this Sketch Book if indeed it was his brother's: there is no evidence of a close friendship between Robert and Stothard, but rather a seven if not a 12-year difference in age, and Blake had ceased collaborating with Stothard a year before Robert's death, perhaps as a result of a cooling of their friendship.²⁹ All in all, it is a more likely guess that the book belonged to the other Robert Blake—the precocious lad who entered the Royal Academy Schools at 14.

If then Blake's youngest brother was not the Robert Blake enrolled in the Schools in 1782, who was he, or rather when was he born? The preponderant evidence seems to point back to Symons's conjecture—that he was in fact the mysterious Richard Blake conjured into being in June 1762 by a slip of the parish clerk's pen. Several other considerations support this hypothesis. First of all, the absence of a death record for Richard Blake (or any other record subsequent to that of his birth) suggests that a child of that name never existed. That a death record is also lacking for the first John is not material: he may have died elsewhere than in London, as Bentley suggests, or even have been the son not of James but of John Blake, the father's name given in the entry of his birth, and lived to maturity for all we know.³⁰ Second, Blake's mother, who was born

around 1722, would have been 45 in 1767, the supposed date of Robert's birth: a not impossible age for child-bearing, but an improbable one, especially considering that this would have been her seventh child. Again, the close intimacy between William and Robert, which probably dates from Blake's return home at the end of his apprenticeship in 1779, is far more likely to have been based on a five than a 10 year's difference in age. The "Academy study" of a naked youth seen from the side, dated c. 1779–80, which Keynes took to be a portrait of Robert represents a youth of about 17 or 18, not a boy of 12:³¹ and though both date and identification are tentative, this too would support a birth date for Robert of 1762 rather than 1767.³²

The most telling argument against the Bentley hypothesis, however, is the fact that the only two early biographers to mention Robert's age at the time of his death in February 1787 both gave it as 24: Tatham, whose information came from Blake's widow, and Gilchrist, who never saw Tatham's *Life* and relied on other informants such as Linnell and Palmer, both of whom knew Blake well.³³ By this

³¹ Butlin 1: cat. 71; Keynes 4 and pl. 1.

³² The fact that Robert's birthdate is given as 1767 in the London section of the Mormon Genealogical Register does not prove Bentley's theory, since the source given is Bentley's own *Blake Records*. Unfortunately the other Robert Blake (born in August 1767) is not listed anywhere in England, in London or outside: but this proves nothing, since the Genealogical Register relies on fragmentary parish records for its information.

³³ Tatham in BR 510; Gilchrist 51. Gilchrist placed Robert's death "in his twenty-fifth year," i.e., a few months before his twenty-fifth birthday in June. Bentley noted this testimony but was not convinced by it (BR 31, 510n1); yet the congruence of two independent records is impressive. That Gilchrist had not seen Tatham's *Life* seems clear from internal evidence. His few direct citations of Tatham mostly concern matters not mentioned in Tatham's own *Life* (cf. LWB 261, 366) and often appear to be based on oral reports (e.g. LWB 352); but where Gilchrist discusses matters which are included in Tatham's *Life* his account either significantly departs from Tatham's (cp. LWB 10 and BR 511, LWB 81 and BR 530, LWB 355 and BR 534) or contradicts it (LWB 85 and BR 521) or is attributable to another source (cp. LWB 31–32 and BR 517 and 459, LWB 351 and BR 471). Though Gilchrist's account of Blake's midnight composition seems to derive from Tatham (cp. LWB 31–32 and BR 526n1), the unnamed "cordially appreciative friend" who supplied Gilchrist with this and much of his other information is almost certainly Samuel Palmer in one of his frequent discussions with Gilchrist of matters probably familiar to all the Ancients. Gilchrist's mentions of Tatham are infrequent and perfunctory compared with his own many cordial references to Palmer (cf. LWB 299). Thus, while Tatham's information about Robert's age at death was no doubt supplied by Catherine, with whom he became familiar after Blake's death, Gilchrist's most probably derived from Blake himself through Palmer.

²⁷ Butlin 1: 617; Keynes 5–6.

²⁸ BB 656 and cf. 661, where the Spearman sale is not included in Bentley's chronological listing of catalogues mentioning Blake's work from 1780 to 1974—though it may have been omitted as of minor importance (cf. 649).

²⁹ See BR 611, also Blake's 1803 letter to his brother James (E725) on the break in their friendship some years earlier.

³⁰ Bentley raises this second possibility only to argue against it (BR 3n3). It should be noted that eighteenth-century parish records are far from complete, and the definitive central register at Somerset House of all births and deaths occurring in Great Britain was not established till the passage of the Births and Deaths Registration Act in 1836 (*Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed. [Cambridge UP, 1910] 3: 990).

account, Robert must have been born sometime between February 1762 and February 1763. Apparently it was their independent testimony that persuaded Symons that the name of Richard in the parish register for June 1762 must have been a clerical error for Robert; and indeed their record of Robert's age at death is in the end the only explicit evidence we have for his birthdate.³⁴

Thus when all aspects of the question are considered, the conclusion seems almost inescapable: Robert was born in June 1762, not August 1767, and a slip of the pen accounts for the confusion over his name. More than merely revising the record, however, this investigation underscores a basic principle of biography. A single document, however impressive its credentials, cannot establish a fact apart from its total narrative context. The entry from the Schools register remains a tantalizing but isolated item, unsupported by any firm corroborative evidence, among the myriad minute particulars which the biographer of Blake must sift and assemble. Written evidence, while it can provide uniquely valuable information, can also be mistaken or misleading, and must therefore be scrutinized as carefully as all other kinds; conversely, non-verbal evidence may be admitted even where it appears to contradict the written evidence. In short, documentary evidence should not be privileged to the exclusion of all other kinds; we should remember how little of any life finds its way into written accounts, and keep our minds open to the mute testimony of things and circumstances and inferences from them. Every piece of biographical evidence, documentary or otherwise, must be viewed against the total experience of the biographical subject. It is the living context of each event that shapes isolated records into the semblance of biographical truth.

³⁴ Bentley points out in correspondence that even the evidence of a death date is not definitive: Blake's brother James's age at death is given wrongly as 71 in the perfunctory six-word entry in the Bunhill Fields Burial register when he is actually 73 and a half (cf. *BR* 340 and n4). However, James's death was not the subject of any biographical interest that would have corrected the record, while Robert's death was a matter of concern to Blake's early biographers. Unfortunately his age is not given in the Bunhill Fields register as quoted by Bentley (*BR* 32). I wish to thank Professor Bentley for his generosity in reading the final draft of this article and offering perceptive criticism on this and other matters.

MINUTE PARTICULARS

"What have I to do with thee?"

BY JUNE STURROCK

The rejected "thee" of the fourth line of "To Tirzah" is Mary in that she was the original recipient of Jesus's snub at the marriage at Cana (John 2.4); she is also Tirzah because that is how the poem is addressed. Yet perhaps the preceding three lines may be read as directed (in rebuke? in consolation?) rather towards the two women who on the green hill below the text of the poem support the decaying corpse of a man:

Whate'er is Born of Mortal Birth,
Must be consumed with the Earth
To rise from Generation free.¹

This group suggests Mary and Martha of Bethany with their brother Lazarus² already decomposing, as Martha warns Jesus (John 11.39). Indeed the central figure resembles Lazarus in Blake's painting of *The Raising of Lazarus* in Aberdeen (B 487), in that Lazarus is emerging from the ground (not the sepulchre mentioned in John 11.38-41) and seems to be half in and half out of the grave. Certainly the inscription on the robes of the old man bending over the corpse—"It is raised a spiritual body" (1 Corinthians 15.44)—suggests Blake's reading of the raising of Lazarus as a spiritual resurrection misinterpreted by a materialistic church

¹ Blake is quoted from Erdman's edition, which is abbreviated as E with page numbers following in the parenthetical references. Other abbreviations include B (Butlin's catalogue) and IB (Erdman's *Illuminated Blake*).

² Both Mellor and Lincoln speak of Lazarus in this connection, but neither identifies Mary and Martha, or deals fully with the implications of the Lazarus story. Mellor says of this design "an old man pours a reviving, baptismal water upon a corpse held by two women. This iconographic fusion of the descent from the cross and the raising of Lazarus is summed up in the lines engraved upon the old man's robe—"It is raised a Spiritual Body." Mortal existence is totally evil; only through death can fallen man be freed from his corrupted human form and redeemed as a spiritual, purified body" (p.189). Lincoln, who foregrounds the negative reading of the design allows that "seen as an image of redemption the design shows humanity "Raised a Spiritual Body, "brought back from the grave like Lazarus (whose two sisters had faith in his resurrection," but qualifies this by saying that "the Saviour who presides over this vision of Liberty is not Jesus but his Father, the God who promotes the vision of human nature as sinful" (201-02).