



R E V I E W

G. E. Bentley, Jr. *William Blake in the Desolate Market*. Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2014. xx + 244 pp. \$49.95, hardcover (also available as an e-book).

Reviewed by Mark Crosby

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1 AS an artist, engraver, poet, printmaker, and occasional publisher, Blake navigated a complex nexus of patronage relationships during his working life. These relationships included the various booksellers, such as Joseph Johnson, who employed Blake's burin; Harriet Mathew's salon, which financed the printing of Blake's early poetry; and friends, such as John Flaxman, George Cumberland, and

Henry Fuseli, who provided economic assistance through engraving commissions and initiated connections with other patrons. Ozias Humphry and Rebekah Bliss were early buyers of the illuminated books and Thomas Butts, Richard Edwards, Joseph Thomas, and Lady Elizabeth Wyndham, wife of George O'Brien Wyndham, the third Earl of Egremont, commissioned paintings and watercolor drawings. There was also the patronage of William Hayley and John Linnell, whose various commissions sought, in different ways, to establish a commercial platform for Blake's creative output. In his latest study of Blake's life and work, G. E. Bentley, Jr., draws on nearly all of these patronage relationships to set out in a concise and accessible manner how exactly "Blake earned his living" (3).

2 Based on Blake's own pejorative comments about the marketplace and money—"Where any view of Money exists Art cannot be carried on" (E 275)—and anecdotes such as Catherine's placing an empty platter before her husband to prompt him back to remunerative work, the perception of Blake as an otherworldly figure, unconcerned about and far detached from the economic realities of his time, has long permeated Blake studies. While such a view is restated at the beginning of *William Blake in the Desolate Market* with Bentley's claim that Blake was "most comfortable living in his imagination" rather than in "the world of pence and penury" (3), the information that Bentley has marshaled, particularly the amount of money earned over the first twenty-five years or so of Blake's professional career, suggests a rather different William Blake: a highly skilled engraver frequently attuned to a developing marketplace, who explored numerous commercial opportunities with varying degrees of economic success.

3 *William Blake in the Desolate Market* opens by identifying six chief sources for Blake's income, much of which derived from commercial engraving work. Bentley lists Blake's other income streams as his work as a printseller; printing engravings for booksellers; his work as designer and painter; a teacher of painting and engraving; and poet/prophet, which generally refers to the sale of illuminated books. Six of the short chapters focus on one of the above, with two others briefly discussing the support from the Mathew salon for the publication of *Poetical Sketches* and Blake as a publisher of works in conventional typography. There is also a short conclusion summarizing the amounts Bentley calculates that Blake earned during his career and an eighty-seven-page appendix containing an alphabetized register of all patrons, by which Bentley means all the individuals who paid Blake directly or indirectly for work, including the subscribers that R. H. Cromek assembled for Blair's *The Grave* (1808). In most chapters Bentley also includes helpful and minutely footnoted tables detailing works, publication dates, and estimated prices.

- 4 From the outset, Bentley is clear that much of the information presented in *William Blake in the Desolate Market* is drawn from his earlier work on Blake, specifically *Blake Records* (2nd ed., 2004), *Blake Books* (1977), *Blake Books Supplement* (1995), and “William Blake and His Circle,” published annually in *Blake*. He also relies heavily on Robert N. Essick’s *William Blake’s Commercial Book Illustrations* (1991) and *The Separate Plates of William Blake: A Catalogue* (1983) and Martin Butlin’s catalogue raisonné (1981); he effectively synthesizes the financial and bibliographical information from these standard reference works, although payments and measurements are rounded up rather than given exactly. Bentley sets the scene for each income source with contextual descriptions that offer occasional insights into Blake’s milieu, as in chapter 3, where we learn that the three older Blake brothers, James, John, and William, were close neighbors in Broad Street in 1784–85 (34).
- 5 But there seems little new here; perhaps the area of most interest to Blake scholars, because it has yet to be explored adequately, is the brief chapter on Blake’s role as a teacher. Bentley does offer some speculative discussion of Blake’s taking Thomas Owen as an apprentice on 23 June 1788 for seven years, according to the Apprenticeship Books, City Registers February 1786–August 1788, in the National Archives, Kew (ref. IR1/33 [pp. 218–19]). Yet, other than this piece of documentary evidence, nothing certain is currently known of Owen’s apprenticeship under Blake. All we know at present is that for taking Owen as an apprentice, Blake was paid £52.10.0 or fifty guineas, of which he paid £2.12.6 in duty. Bentley includes the first, larger sum in the table of Blake’s earnings for this chapter, but not the tax duties, calling into question the accuracy of the calculations for Blake’s earnings. This oversight points to some broader concerns about the financial information given in the tables and in the final chapter.
- 6 As Bentley notes, we have documentary evidence for the monies Blake was paid for only a handful of commissions, and we know Blake’s own asking prices for his illuminated works, but for the majority of his earnings we have only circumstantial evidence. Accordingly, most of the figures given for Blake’s earnings in *William Blake in the Desolate Market*, as Bentley acknowledges, “are estimates” that have been “rounded” (18). In many instances, it isn’t immediately clear how these rounded estimates have been calculated. The lack of transparency is particularly worrying given all the variants in, to take one example, Blake’s engravings. The fees he received for engraving commissions depended on some of the following factors: the sizes of copperplates, the degree of finish, the amount of detail, the proportion of the work assigned to other craftsmen, and the rise and fall of his reputation as a copy engraver over the years. Similarly,

the amount of money Blake charged for illuminated books also depended on the amount of finish and detail, and, in some cases, the use of gold leaf. Furthermore, a number of Bentley’s estimates don’t seem entirely representative of the commission. For instance, table 6.1 lists the estimated fees Blake received for his painting commissions, such as £18.18.0 (59)—the total sum for the eighteen portrait heads executed for Hayley’s upper library at Turret House, Felpham, at an estimated price of one guinea per portrait. A few entries later, we learn that Blake also received one guinea for each of the miniature portraits he produced on card in Felpham. Was he paid the same amount per painting for the much larger portraits decorating Hayley’s library, which measure between 40 and 43 cm. high and 50.3 and 106.6 cm. wide (Butlin #343), as the portrait miniatures on card, which measure between 7.2 and 9 cm. high and 6 and 7.8 cm. wide (Butlin #347, 353, 354)? Bentley’s figure of one guinea per painting is presumably based on the amount Butts paid Blake for each of the biblical temperas and watercolors, according to Blake’s letter to Cumberland of 26 August 1799, but did Blake, or Hayley for that matter, use the same one guinea figure for the library portraits and the portrait miniatures?

- 7 As a volume of reference, *William Blake in the Desolate Market* collates and recontextualizes much of the economic and bibliographical information relating to Blake’s life and work already published by Bentley, including his two important articles “Blake’s Heavy Metal: The History, Weight, Uses, Cost, and Makers of His Copper Plates” and “‘What is the price of Experience?’: William Blake and the Economics of Illuminated Painting.” While caution should be exercised regarding the use of Bentley’s estimates of Blake’s fees, if these amounts are anywhere close to the actual money Blake received during his working life, then the information presented in *William Blake in the Desolate Market* suggests that during certain periods, particularly the two decades after his apprenticeship under Basire, the market wasn’t as desolate as Bentley’s title implies.