



Dennis M. Read. *R. H. Cromek, Engraver, Editor, and Entrepreneur*. Farnham: Ashgate, 2011. xii + 182 pp. £55.00/\$99.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

ALEXANDER S. GOURLAY (agourlay@risd.edu) teaches at the Rhode Island School of Design.

1 **G**OING back more than thirty years, Dennis Read has published articles large and small about the activities of Blake's associate Robert Hartley Cromek (1770–1812); in the most important of these, “The Rival Canterbury Pilgrims of Blake and Cromek: Herculean Figures in the Carpet” (*Modern Philology*, 1988), he showed that contrary to the account assembled by Gilchrist and echoed by most of Blake's subsequent biographers, who hold that Cromek stole the idea from Blake, Blake's Chaucer picture and engraving were conceived and created in response to the

painting by Thomas Stothard and the projected engraving after it. Now Read has gathered together much of what else he has found out about Cromek in a more comprehensive biography that concentrates on the busy final decade of Cromek's life, arguing persuasively that Cromek has been (somewhat) misunderstood.

- 2 Born in Yorkshire, Cromek studied at first to be a lawyer, and then at eighteen came to London to learn engraving from the Italian-born painter/engraver Francesco Bartolozzi. A twelve-page chapter covers Cromek's professional career from 1788 to the beginnings of the *Grave* project in 1805; it focuses mostly on wheeling and dealing rather than Cromek's practice as an engraver, identifying major engraving projects and outlining early disputes with publishers and collaborators. It ends with a report from one of Cromek's friends that although Cromek was “nominally an Engraver; ... his tastes and sympathies lay in another direction.” The artistic and artisanal aspects of Cromek's early career are treated as incidental: “Engraving,” writes Read, “... served Cromek mainly as a way of introducing him to the art world and, more importantly, to the prominent figures who moved in it” (18).
- 3 Cromek certainly did lose interest in actual burin work after about 1805, and Read shows that he often farmed out portions of his projects to others, but by the time he retreated from practice as an engraver he had spent almost half his life working in the trade, much of it in the more artistically ambitious end of the illustration business, even if he was not a creator of original designs. This chapter would be stronger if it included a survey and some more examples of Cromek's chalcographic output so that we could see his strengths and weaknesses, judge the trajectory of his career, or consider other ways that his engraving could shed light on his later projects, and on Blake's. For instance, did Cromek try harder than Blake did to conform to publishing fashions? How do Cromek's book engravings after Stothard in the 1790s compare to those that Blake did in the early 1780s? How about the illustrations to Shakespeare after Fuseli that both Cromek and Blake did for Chalmers (not “Chambers”) around 1803? Does Cromek's work as an engraver of Stothard shed any light on the relationship between publisher, engraver(s), and artist in the case of Stothard's Chaucer picture? Shelley M. Bennett's *Thomas Stothard: The Mechanisms of Art Patronage in England circa 1800* (1988) includes very handy (but not complete) lists by date of Stothard's works and engravings after him—a similar appendix of Cromek's engravings might assist scholars to assess Cromek's career for themselves. But the information in this chapter that is most relevant to comprehending Cromek's later dealings with Blake is the ample evidence that long before he and Blake fell out, Cromek often dealt with his business associates with sharp elbows.

- 4 The less perfunctory chapter on the history of Cromek's illustrated edition of Robert Blair's *The Grave* shows Cromek in a more positive light than Blake's party has usually been willing to grant him. Read carefully follows the contemporary records of Cromek's transactions and representations as the project evolved, showing that although plans changed in ways that worked out to Blake's disadvantage, Cromek's primary motivation appears to have been to ensure that his artistically and commercially ambitious project was a success. Cromek's elbows were as sharp as ever, and there is plenty of ungallant trimming in his business arrangements and shameless puffing in his promotions, but Read convincingly demonstrates that Cromek was never the villain that Gilchrist and most of his successors have made him out to be. Once again, Read's focus as a biographer is on elucidating the tactical calculations behind Cromek's commercial and promotional efforts rather than exploring the artistic thoughts of the various parties to the project. Although the book reflects the recent rediscovery of Blake's lost designs for Blair (and an appendix details the steps in that rediscovery), very little is made of them or their implications for improved understanding of Cromek or Blake or the published edition of *The Grave*. Because Cromek's most important design contribution to the Blair project may have been to select the images that were actually engraved and published, the renewed availability of many of the rejected designs could have afforded insights into his thinking as an editor and book designer.
- 5 The collision between Blake and Cromek over the Blair project reflects a fundamental difference in the way the two men approached the making of art and the making of money; the succeeding episode in their relationship, the creation of competing Chaucer paintings and engravings, appears to have been the result of mutual recognition of that difference, and here, Read argues, it is Blake's biographers who have misunderstood what was going on. Read refines and updates the arguments in his 1988 article, showing that contemporary first-party evidence indicates that long before Blake showed any interest in illustrating Chaucer, Cromek and Stothard had undertaken to create and promote a painting of Chaucer's pilgrims that could be the basis of a profitable large-scale engraving. Like the illustrated edition of *The Grave*, this was calculated as a middlebrow cultural/commercial project that would be both lucrative and prestigious for artist, engraver, and entrepreneur. Stothard executed his part with his usual technical brilliance and shrewdly sentimental superficiality. His painting was calculated for broad appeal, offering gently satirical stereotypes, sunny English nostalgia, unchallenging literary pretensions—who wouldn't love such a picturesque parade? Certainly Stothard's concoction was a canner offering to the market than the pious sublimity of Blake's *Grave* designs, and Blake seems to have decided that
- the commercial mechanism embodied in the picture and Cromek's campaign to exploit it constituted a challenge to everything he believed in. When Cromek, mystified by the intensity of Blake's detestation, challenged him to create his own version of the subject, Blake took him up on it, creating a picture with a vast allegorical program and an exhibition, advertisements, and *Descriptive Catalogue* to match the promotions of Cromek. Unlike his rivals, Blake delivered his engraving roughly as scheduled, but was humiliated in the aftermath. Even though both Cromek and his chosen engraver, Schiavonetti, died before their project could be completed, the Stothard Chaucer eventually achieved much of the success that Cromek dreamed for it, becoming Stothard's most famous work.
- 6 Another project of Cromek's that impinges on Blake's biography, though indirectly, was the Chalcographic Society, later the Society for the Encouragement of the Arts of Engraving. What sounds like a benign professional organization was actually another, even more ambitious, version of the entrepreneurial approach to art marketing that drove the Blair and Chaucer projects: Cromek, operating as the "Secretary to the Chalcographic Society," attempted to bring together the foremost patrons of the day with the heavyweights of painting and engraving to promote subscriptions for a series of twenty huge engravings from new British paintings—the patrons would confer social prestige, the painters would offer cultural prestige, and the engravers would enable mass production of freshly minted elite works of art, generating vast profits that could be tapped to benefit engravers and engraving, as well as others.
- 7 The engraver John Landseer (father of Edwin) responded to the Chalcographic Society's promotions by publishing an extravagantly critical *Letter to a Member of the Society for Encouraging the Art of Engraving* (July 1810), followed by *A Second and a Third Letter ...* (apparently published together but dated August and October 1810). These letters take on the scheme from a variety of angles—economic, political, ethical, practical, logical, aesthetic; the second two (with addenda) counterattack the insulting response to the first by Robert Hunt, Blake's nemesis. It is too bad that Read was unable to locate these serially paginated pamphlets (which are bound together in the Rosenwald Collection, now available digitally as a "page turner" at <http://hdl.loc.gov/loc.rbc/rosenwald.04580>), and had to reconstruct Landseer's elegantly devastating critiques from the attempts to refute them by Hunt and Cromek. Blake also responded to the controversy, probably about the same time, by drafting his famous unpublished "Public Address," in which he excoriates the Chalcographic Society's efforts in terms much less diplomatic than Landseer's; it seems likely to me that Blake and Landseer were aware of each other's feelings at some point, but I have yet to see evidence

of influence in either direction. By 1811 Cromek's most ambitious attempt to harness Mammon by means of the arts had collapsed, partly due to Landseer's criticisms, but also because of problems with its huge scale and other causes, including Cromek's failing health. The subscribers were repaid, and Mammon, of course, moved on, unperturbed.

- 8 The remainder of the book, outlining Cromek's projects related to Robert Burns, will be of less interest to Blake scholars, though there is further evidence of Cromek's ethical shortcomings, his resourcefulness as a promoter, and his energy in the last years despite tuberculosis; an appendix on travel by coach makes clear the hardships involved in his innovations in marketing the arts to the provinces.
- 9 This is a valuable book, and the new information in it is likely to lead eventually to revision of key points of Blake's biography. But it is also a bit slapdash, as if an old manuscript was hastily updated to reflect recent discoveries. There are dismaying clusters of petty errors. In the first few paragraphs of the second chapter, for instance, Robert is referred to as Thomas (his father's name), the family is traced to "Kidwick," rather than (presumably) Kildwick in Yorkshire, and the Cromeks are said to move south rather than west from Hull to Manchester. Most of the page citations from Erdman's *Poetry and Prose* are from the first edition rather than the now standard 1982 edition listed in the bibliography, and are thus wrong by several pages. It is not likely that there will be another biography of Cromek, so these minor shortcomings are regrettable, but this book brings us substantially closer to understanding Blake's contrary counterpart and the world they shared.