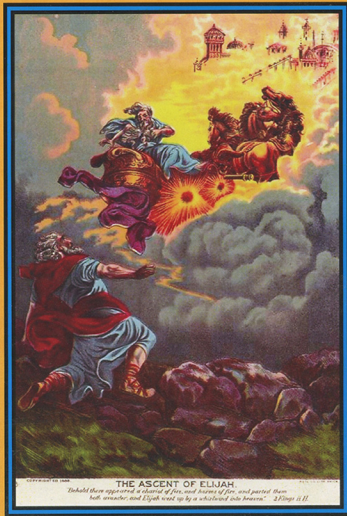


**THOMAS MACKLIN (1752-1800),
PICTURE-PUBLISHER AND PATRON**

Creator of The Macklin Bible (1791-1800)

G. E. Bentley, Jr.



R E V I E W

G. E. Bentley, Jr., with a foreword by Mark Crosby. *Thomas Macklin (1752-1800), Picture-Publisher and Patron: Creator of the Macklin Bible (1791-1800)*. Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2016. x + 260 pp. \$219.95, hardcover.

Reviewed by Alexander S. Gourlay

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¹ NO one who knows the quality and quantity of his work will be surprised to hear that G. E. Bentley, Jr., published one more meticulous, thoughtful, and eminently readable book before his death in 2017. This one is an account of the publishing career of Thomas Macklin, patron

of William Blake (and most of his colleagues in art), proprietor of the Poets' Gallery (the name of a printshop, a gallery, and a series of publications), and the publisher of the largest and most opulent illustrated letterpress King James Bible ever produced.¹ Little is known about Macklin beyond the public facts of his commercial activities—even the year of his birth is expressed by a span of nearly a decade—but in his day he was second in importance only to John Boydell among English publishers of prints and illustrated books. Boydell began building his publishing empire in the early 1750s, cannily introducing vertical integration into the prevailing model of printselling, in which independent engravers sold their prints and sometimes their plates to printers, who retailed them to the public. Except for Hogarth's works, the English print market in the first half of the eighteenth century was dominated by portraits, landscapes, and genre subjects with only modest aesthetic pretensions, using merely functional graphic techniques. Hoping to raise the dignity of the English print, Boydell began to hire the best painters in England to create grand images of historical (that is, narrative) subjects from myth and ancient and modern history, then hired the best engravers to create large, highly polished prints, often on the scale of small paintings, using elegant graphic techniques that had been the specialty of European engravers. "History painting" was the most exalted, among critics, at least, of the pictorial modes, but had been largely avoided in the early English print market, whether because of vestigial Protestant iconoclasm, objections to the "Roman" associations of traditional religious subjects, or aversion to classical paganism. Boydell's new English prints often appealed to patriotism (as in the large engraving of Benjamin West's *Death of Wolfe*) and were marketed as fine art for those who could not afford oil paintings but could manage a few fancy prints, framed and glazed, perhaps hand colored, for their parlors. This phenomenon expanded and exalted the English print market for a while, but bourgeois parlors had limited space on the walls, and only wealthy collectors could afford to buy and store, much less display, large numbers of prints.

- 2 A 1774 change in the understanding of copyright law pertaining to texts, which had previously held that rights were eternal, made it practical for Boydell and a little later Macklin (and Bowyer and Bell and others) to publish literary classics, mostly English, in illustrated editions that were similarly aimed at the middle class. Many of these were published in serial form, which minimized the publishers'

1. The unique copy of the half-ton Waynai Bible of 1930 is not illustrated and was printed one large letter at a time with a rubber stamp wheel. See <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ScXM4suZjDE>> (turn down the sound).

outlay and maximized the affordability of even huge deluxe editions that combined prestigious national texts and fine engravings of narrative subjects. Beyond the patriotic appeal of the titles, the bound volumes simultaneously diminished the idolatrous implications of hanging pictures and provided a practical means of storing dozens of large-scale engravings, although the books were so huge that no one could comfortably read them. The editions were aristocratic in pretense, even if their primary audience was bourgeois, and their scale ensured that they provided as much cultural ostentation as a large framed engraving. Boydell's most important single project was an edition of the works of Shakespeare, for which he commissioned huge canvases by the most important artists in England, established a Shakespeare Gallery to display them, and paid unprecedented sums to have them engraved on a smaller but still grand scale.

- 3 Macklin also published some illustrated Shakespeare and many other British authors, including volumes of literary prints without texts, but his most important venture was Macklin's Bible, an "English" text that added a gloss of safely Protestant piety to the other appealing characteristics of deluxe illustrated editions. At the beginning of his career Blake had worked on more modest illustrated Bibles and related works, including *The Protestants Family Bible*, *The Royal Universal Family Bible*, and *The Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus*, all of which were first published as large quartos in serial format, issued in installments of a few pages and an engraving each. Macklin's Bible, proposed in 1789 and completed in 1800, was much more ambitious than these: seven elephant folio volumes with hundreds of engravings, many of them full page, and large engraved allegorical vignettes printed in conjunction with letterpress (a tricky procedure that involved coordinating intaglio and relief printing on the same piece of paper, one after the other). Heavy wove paper and large elegant type were created especially for this project. Full-page engravings using the most sophisticated graphic techniques were made from huge oil paintings that were displayed in Macklin's gallery. Most of the originals had been especially commissioned from twenty-four of the most eminent painters of the day (some pictures, such as *The Holy Family* by Joshua Reynolds, may have been repurposed); the engraved illustrations were signed (though not necessarily executed in entirety) by the most distinguished engravers.
- 4 The projects of Boydell and Macklin began in grandeur and extravagance, and they both succeeded in selling many large high-quality prints to a new audience, in part by promoting the local artists and engravers as national heroes. In the 1790s the spirit surrounding these mega-editions must have inspired great optimism in an ambitious English

artist/engraver like Blake, even if, as it turned out, both projects foundered as they reached the port, and there were no more such giants. Perhaps in part because his name had no promotional value, Blake was not one of the artists or engravers employed in any aspect of the Macklin Bible, though he had done exemplary and very lucrative engraving work for Macklin in the early 1780s. He later attributed this neglect to calumny, claiming in his *Public Address* that Macklin told him that Flaxman had blasted his character, but Bentley suggests that for some reason Macklin was dissatisfied with the quality of Blake's work (29). I do not think this is likely: Blake's stipple engraving after Stothard "The Fall of Rosamond," for which Macklin paid Blake the glorious sum of £80, is a very fine, commercially attractive piece, and the other three prints that Blake executed for Macklin are close to the same standard. We don't know what Macklin's political or religious views were, but if he was strongly conservative, he might have learned enough from Flaxman or another mutual acquaintance, such as Stothard, to conclude that Blake was too wicked to hire again.

- 5 Bentley's book is important to Blake scholars in many ways, despite the limited contact between Macklin and Our Man after 1783. One cannot fully grasp the significance of such a heroic undertaking as Blake's single-handed illustrated *Night Thoughts* edition of 1797 without considering it in the context provided by Macklin's Bible and Boydell's Shakespeare; the same is true of almost all Blake's major illustration projects from the Chaucer picture and print to the Book of Job engravings.² Also critical is the scuttlebutt about the Bible project that Bentley carefully extracts from Farington's *Diary* and other contemporary sources, tracing reactions to the hyperbolic puffery of the early years, illuminating private quarrels and resentments as the project developed, and describing what is known about the rather desperate machinations through which it was completed just a few days before Macklin died.
- 6 Like many of Bentley's other books, this one is long on facts and shorter, though not short, on analysis; he exploits his sources thoroughly and stitches his material together with great care and judgment, but expects readers to think further about the implications of that material for understanding Macklin or Blake. There are twenty glossy but not very impressive images of engravings, and tables, appendices, and lists galore, as well as an index that is more thorough than many but not comprehensive enough to locate a given fact easily in a densely factual volume.

2. The combined intaglio/letterpress pages of the 1797 *Night Thoughts* were even more challenging to print than those of the Macklin Bible. Cromek's *Grave* edition of 1808, by contrast, used large-scale engravings but all were on a few separate pages.

- 7 This is an expensive book, listed for \$219.95 (and at 304 pages) on the Mellen website, but it is definitely important and, importantly, likely to be definitive. A less expensive softcover edition may be available from the publisher.