

The Publisher Not Mad

BY KAREN MULHALLEN

Karen Mulhallen (karenmulhallen@rogers.com) has lectured on and published several articles and reviews on Blake's *Night Thoughts*, on which she completed her PhD dissertation under G. E. Bentley, Jr. She is professor emeritus, Ryerson University.

- 1 **T**HE latest William Blake exhibition at Tate Britain was a cause for celebration, beautifully installed and covering Blake's entire career, from the earliest pencil sketches to his grand engravings to the book of Job and his illustrations to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. The accompanying catalogue is richly illustrated, with essays by the two curators for the exhibition, Martin Myrone and Amy Concannon. Blake's position in the art world of London as an engraver, his sense of lack of acknowledgement, and the wide range of his patrons are all admirably laid out.
- 2 Blake's largest commission was undertaken in 1795 for a young bookseller-publisher named Richard Edwards. Edwards had each page of Edward Young's *Night Thoughts* laid into leaves of Whatman paper, around which Blake designed 537 watercolors. The paper is watermarked 1794. Edwards's plan was to select a number of images and then publish a large quarto edition of the *Night Thoughts* with designs engraved by Blake. Only volume 1 was published, in 1797. Edwards then closed his business and took a government appointment in Minorca. However, his relationship with Blake continued after his return in 1803, since he was among the subscribers to Cromek's edition of Blair's *Grave*, with designs by Blake, in 1808.
- 3 Richard Edwards had the original watercolors bound into two volumes by a London firm of German book binders, Benedict, in red morocco with gilt lettering. He kept the books until 1821, when his surviving brother, Thomas, offered them for sale. In the early twentieth century the watercolors were given to the British Museum, where they can be viewed in the Department of Prints and Drawings. The bindings are now lost, but the two gatherings are apparent, each with a frontispiece and each with the inscriptions "Richard Edwards" and "High Elms," his house.

- 4 Richard Edwards's will can be seen in the National Archives, PROB 11/1741/248, dated 16 July 1822. It does not of course mention the *Night Thoughts*, but he seems to have laid out his estate in an orderly fashion, leaving his own father's gold watch to his eldest son, taking care of his beloved wife, Mary, and including a codicil for a faithful servant.
- 5 It is not surprising that Thomas Edwards should take over the sale of the *Night Thoughts* watercolors, since all the brothers were members of a distinguished family of booksellers and publishers, originally from Halifax. Apart from G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s recent study, *The Edwardses of Halifax* (University of Toronto Press, 2015), information on the family is to be found in the papers of T. W. Hanson in the Bodleian Library, Oxford.
- 6 Given the facts of Richard Edwards's life, I was surprised to read in the Tate Britain exhibition catalogue (p. 105), "After Edwards's demise (he had become insane), Blake seems to have acquired a stock of the *Night Thoughts* publication and hand-coloured these for patrons, creating a luxurious new version of the illustrations for them." There is no record of Richard going mad, nor of any issues with his bookshop and publishing activities. His brother James had a fashionable and immensely popular shop nearby and took over his stock when Richard accepted a government appointment. It is possible that the uncolored *Night Thoughts* remainders were given to Blake in part payment for his work with Richard Edwards at this time and not, as the Tate catalogue states, after Richard's demise, since Blake and Edwards died in the same year, 1827, Blake in August and Richard in October.