

William Blake as precursor of independent working-class education

*Article version of a talk given by Colin Waugh at a zoom event titled 'Building community, democracy and dialogue: adult education for a change' on 17 September 2021.**

Born in 1757, William Blake worked continuously from age 14 to his death in 1827 to earn a precarious living as a free-lance engraver. From 1821 he and his wife Catherine lived and conducted their printing business in a two-room London flat overlooking the heavily polluted Thames. Blake also produced paintings, and, with Catherine, hand-coloured illustrated and printed versions of his poetry, sold if at all to a small circle of well-off patrons.

England was at war with France almost continuously from 1793 to 1815. This meant that,

especially in the late 1790s, Blake, who, although not a political activist, knew people in oppositional movements, was constantly at risk from state repression and mob violence. Thus in August 1803, following a quarrel with an off-duty soldier in the garden of a Sussex cottage where Blake was living by arrangement with his patron William Hayley, he was tried (though later acquitted) on a charge of sedition.

Although Blake never went north of what's now Greater London, his writings show that he saw industrial machinery as embodying the dominant

form of logic, seen by him as restrictive, developed by John Locke a century previously

The 1790s saw oppositional activity around the 1789 French revolution, anti-slavery, women's rights, parliamentary representation and freedom of conscience. It included naval mutinies, the defeat by former slaves of a British force in Haiti, the 1798 Irish uprising against British rule, the first English socialist movement (round Thomas Spence) and the development by artisans in the London Corresponding Society (LCS) of independent working-class education via reading and discussion.

Though not involved in Spence's movement or the LCS, Blake developed between 1790 and 1810 a conceptual framework which may guide people seeking to rebuild working-class adult collective self-education now.

In 1790 the Unitarian minister Richard Price preached, then published, a sermon supporting the French Revolution. In his *Reflections on the Revolution in France* the MP Edmund Burke attacked Price, denouncing the middle-class revolutionaries in France, especially for triggering activity by people further down the social scale, viewed by Burke as a feral mob. Burke's book set off what was later called 'the revolution controversy'. Writers like Mary Wollstonecraft and Tom Paine intervened on Price's side.

The controversy also generated a drive amongst radicals to investigate the history of religion, one strand of which is exemplified by Paine's *The Age of Reason*, while another developed from earlier writings by James Macpherson (especially in material he attributed to the Celtic poet Ossian) and Thomas Gray, especially his 1757 poem *The Bard*.

Re-published repeatedly in Blake's lifetime, including with engravings by Blake, Gray's poem depicts the slaughter of bards during Edward 1's 1282-83 invasion of North Wales. From a rock in Snowdonia, the last remaining bard addresses Edward's forces, prophesying the death of the Black Prince (Edward's son), the Wars of the Roses and the replacement of the Plantagenet dynasty by the Tudors. Blake, like others outside the mainstream intelligentsia, was inspired by this interest in bards and prophecy to write 'prophetic' books and pamphlets. He saw a sharp opposition between Celtic bards and Druid priests.

Blake brought the two strands stemming from the revolution controversy together in his *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, which he started to compose and illustrate in 1790. This is partly a critique of *Heaven and Hell*, a book by the formerly left-leaning Swedish writer Emanuel Swedenborg, who died in London in 1772. (William and Catherine Blake were briefly involved in a Swedenborgian 'church'.)

The Marriage of Heaven and Hell includes the dialectical passage:

Without contraries is no progression. Attraction and Repulsion, Reason and Energy, Love and Hate, are necessary to Human existence.

From these contraries spring what the religious call Good and Evil. Good is the passive that obeys Reason. Evil is the active springing from Energy.

Good is Heaven. Evil is Hell.

and a section titled 'Proverbs of Hell', comprising aphoristic statements seemingly aimed at making people think twice about their ethical assumptions. An untitled passage then reads:

The ancient Poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations and whatever their enlarged and numerous senses could perceive.

And particularly they studied the Genius of each city and country, placing it under its Mental Deity;

Till a System was formed, which some took advantage of, and enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realise or abstract the Mental Deities from their objects - thus began Priesthood;

Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales.

And at length they pronounc'd that the Gods had order'd such things.

Thus men forgot that All Deities reside in the Human breast.

This account of how class society emerged assigns a central role to ideology in four phases:

- Phase 1: a pre-class socio-economic order in which people have already formed 'cities [and] nations' and 'countries', and where there are, on one hand, 'poets' and, on the other, the broad mass of people who form the poets' audience. The poets treat both human products and natural entities imaginatively as if they possess consciousness because there is a 'God' or 'Genius' inside each one. However, both poets and hearers understand that these 'Gods or Geniuses' are imaginative constructs.
- Phase 2: the poets develop their narratives to a point where they bring their stories about local animating spirits together to form a mythological system, as for example in Greek or ancient Nordic myth cycles.
- Phase 3: 'some' unspecified people elaborate this system to a point where they represent these imaginary 'mental deities' as really existing supernatural beings and hence objects of worship. By the same process they constitute themselves as a priesthood to whom ordinary people are enslaved.
- Phase 4: the priesthood promulgates the

belief that the enslavement of the majority is divinely ordained.

Later in the same document Blake argues that: *If the doors of perception were cleansed everything would appear to man as it is, infinite. / For man has closed himself up till he sees all things thro' narrow chinks of his cavern.'*

He suggests, then, a need for people to perceive the world in a less restricted - and potentially perhaps more proactive - fashion.

In 1797, Richard Watson, Bishop of Llandaff, published a critique of Paine's *The Age of Reason*, titled *An Apology for the Bible in a Series of Letters, Addressed to Thomas Paine*. Paine had attacked the Old and New Testaments, and especially the supposedly 'prophetic' elements within them, as devices used by both Judaic and Christian priesthoods to secure ideological compliance. In 1798, with the intention of defending Paine against Watson's attacks, Blake wrote notes, which he eventually decided to keep to himself, on his copy of Watson's book. One such note reads:

Prophets, in the modern sense of the word, have never existed. Jonah was no prophet, in the modern sense, for his prophecy of Nineveh failed. Every honest man [sic] is a Prophet; he utters his opinion both of private & public matters. Thus: If you go on So, the result is So. He never says, such a thing shall happen, let you do what you will. A Prophet is a Seer, not an Arbitrary Dictator.

Blake, then, rejected the belief, as expressed for example in *The Bard*, that a prophet possesses supernatural insight into the future.

In September 1803, back in London, Blake began to compose and design his 'prophetic book' *Milton*. His one-page preface to this begins with a prose passage in which he calls on 'painters', 'sculptors' and 'architects' to:

*set [their] foreheads against the ignorant hirelings!
For we have hirelings in the Camp, the Court, and
the University, who would, if they could, for ever
depress mental, and prolong corporeal war . . .*

There follows the four stanza poem that we now know as the words to the song *Jerusalem*. Each of its first two stanzas consists of questions beginning with the word 'And', arguably giving readers a sense of joining a discussion already under way:

*And did those feet in ancient time Walk upon
England's mountains green?
And was the holy Lamb of God
On England's pleasant pastures seen?*

And did the Countenance Divine

*Shine forth upon our clouded hills?
And was Jerusalem builded here
Among these dark Satanic Mills?*

These lines refer to the contemporary belief that Joseph of Arimethea, believed to be Jesus's uncle, came to Cornwall to buy tin, and brought his nephew with him. The questions posed here can be read in several ways - for example as seeking evidence about actual events, or as rhetorical questions to which the implied answer in each case is probably 'no'. Alternatively Blake may here challenge readers to ask themselves, 'Does it really matter?', implying that the priority is to do something now, rather than seek comfort from questionable stories about the past.

The third stanza makes four demands:

*Bring me my bow of burning gold!
Bring me my arrows of desire!
Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!
Bring me my chariot of fire!*

Contemporary readers would have recognised a reference here to the bible story in which the prophet Elijah, instead of dying, is taken into heaven in a fiery chariot. Thus Blake presents himself either as - or as trying to become - a prophet.

In the fourth stanza, Blake gives, in the form of denials, two undertakings:

*I will not cease from mental fight,
Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,
Till we have built Jerusalem
In England's green and pleasant land.*

There is an ambiguity here: is 'sword' a metaphor for 'mental fight' - that is, ideological struggle - or is Blake advocating physical force? Either way, the transition from 'I' in the first sentence to 'we' in the second emphasises that the building of a valid social order must be a collective effort.

The page then ends with words spoken by Moses in an Old Testament story. Having escaped from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites are at a low point in their journey to Canaan. Demoralisation spreads. Informers tell Moses that some young men are starting to prophecy against his leadership. He replies: *'Would to God that all the Lord's people were Prophets'*.

Around 1810 Blake began to draft a group of poems titled *The Everlasting Gospel*, the first section of which includes a passage referring to the New Testament story in which Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness. In these lines, Blake equates Satan with 'the God of this world' - that is, conventional religious authority - and, referring to Jesus's rejection of Satan's advances, he says: *The God of this world rag'd in vain:
He [ie Jesus CW] bound old Satan in His chain,*

