

Blake in the *Times Digital Archive*

BY KERI DAVIES

According to G. E. Bentley, Jr., relying, one presumes, on the printed volumes of Palmer's *Index to the Times*, "no account of Blake in *The Times* [London] is known before 1901."¹ However, since late 2003, the online *Times Digital Archive, 1785-1985* has not only incorporated every page of every issue of the *Times* newspaper from 1785 to 1985, but has made available the means to search its full text.² The *Times Digital Archive* uses character recognition software to read a sequence of digitized images of the actual pages of the newspaper (including graphics and pictures).

For the first time, users of the *Times Digital Archive* are able to search not just for home and international news, but can scan City pages, court pages, law reports, letters to the editor, book and theatre reviews, display and classified advertising, obituaries, and much material ignored by Palmer's *Index*. (There is one small caveat. As users of similar online sources such as *EEBO* and *ECCO* will be aware, the search software does generate a small percentage of misreadings and failed readings.)³

The *Times Digital Archive* makes newly possible an extensive search for references to William Blake (and his friends and acquaintances), whether these references appear in news items, advertisements, book reviews, or in any other apparently irrelevant pages of the newspaper. I leave it to others to explore all 56,317 references to "blake" in the full *Archive*, but by restricting one's search by date (for example, to the years before the publication of Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake* in 1863), and by utilizing Boolean combinations of keywords such as "blake AND engraver," it becomes possible to reduce the number of references to be checked to manageable proportions.

It was, in fact, use of the search string "blake the engraver" that led me to a *Times* article that showed early knowledge of Blake's spiritualist drawings—the Visionary Heads—and that, remarkably for the time, rejected the view that these were

evidence of Blake's madness.⁴ The *Times* for 3 January 1829, I found, included a lengthy review, spread over two columns, of "LODGE'S PORTRAITS AND MEMOIRS. | FURTHER NOTICE," of no obvious connection to Blake, but incorporating a Blake reference that a twenty-first-century researcher could only have located with the aid of the *Times Digital Archive*.⁵

Edmund Lodge (1756-1839), Clarenceux King of Arms, began issuing his *Portraits of Illustrious Personages of Great Britain* in 1814. It was completed in 1834 in 40 folio parts.⁶ The parts already completed were reissued in 12 volumes, quarto, in 1823. The *Times* reviewer, however, is concerned with the "Cabinet edition," published by William Smith in 6 volumes, octavo, in 1828. The review opens conventionally enough:

This magnificent work, which has hitherto been confined, owing to its size and costliness, to the libraries of persons of opulence, has just made its appearance in a form and at a price which place it within the reach of the most moderate means.

The reviewer goes on to commend the value of biography:

We are desirous of knowing the particulars of the domestic lives, the personal habits, and daily customs of men whose names are as familiar in our mouths as household words, and of whom, although they had become dust before we drew breath, we have as distinct and individual a notion as if we had personally talked with them. Biographical history satisfies this natural craving; separates the man from the events which he controlled or was controlled by, and holds his character up to an exclusive consideration. The lesson which his life teaches is then felt in its full force; it comes home to the business and bosoms of men, because every human being perceives that the same impulses that have governed the actions of the object of his contemplation, throb in his own heart, and influence his own conduct; and he learns, by a practical example, whether their issues are of good or of evil.

He adds:

Closely associated with the desire of knowing the exclusive history of such personages, is the wish to be acquainted with their external appearance, and the fashion of the human form they wore. Nothing is more natural than to covet the power of calling them up

"In their shapes and state majestic,
"That we may wonder at their excellence,"

1. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records*, 2nd ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004) 717fn. Palmer's *Index* is now conveniently available as *Palmer's Index to the Times, 1790-1905, on CD-ROM*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Chadwyck-Healey, 1995) or as an online resource <<http://historynews.chadwyck.com>>.

2. For further information, go to <<http://www.galegroup.com/Times/index.htm>>.

3. *EEBO: Early English Books Online* <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>>; *ECCO: Eighteenth Century Collections Online* <<http://www.gale.com/EighteenthCentury>>.

4. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *The Stranger from Paradise: A Biography of William Blake* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001): "After 1820, most accounts of Blake refer to his Visionary Heads either as evidence of his madness or as something to be explained away" (379).

5. *Times* 3 January 1829 (issue 13793): 4, col. A.

6. Lucy Peltz, "Lodge, Edmund (1756-1839)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

and verify or correct the images which fancy has formed by the true copy which the art that confers immortality has preserved of them.

The quotation is from Christopher Marlowe, *Doctor Faustus*, act 4, scene 2, in which Faustus and Mephistophilis conjure up the shade of Alexander the Great for the German emperor.

We then get the following comment on Blake:

The late Mr. Blake, the engraver, whose genius was subject to a kind of morbid excitement, was so possessed with this notion, that he had contracted a belief that he could, almost at will, bring before his actual physical eyesight the forms of the great men of this and other countries, whose existence he could only know by means of history. Under this delusion, which, however, was of no kin to madness, and could not have happened to any but a person of exalted imagination, he had frequent interviews with his distinguished buried acquaintance, and used to relate his imaginary conversations with them in perfect conviction of their truth and reality.

This review appeared during the editorship of Thomas Barnes (1785-1841), whose view was that anonymous journalism, subordinating the personality of the journalist, “was the only kind that would be read seriously.”⁷ The anonymous reviewer (and, of course one would still like to know his identity) gives us a much more sober account than Dibdin’s nonsense about Blake “shaking hands with Homer.”⁸ The *Times* persisted with anonymous reporting as late as January 1967, when the first staff bylines appeared. In this review, it is the *Times* that, corporately, is expressing a view of Blake that is surprisingly friendly and well disposed. It is assumed that the *Times* readership will know, at least vaguely, of “Mr. Blake, the engraver,” and perhaps of the imputation of madness, which is then denied, admitting no more than that his “genius was subject to a kind of morbid excitement.” By way of comparison, the search string “keats the poet” calls up a death notice in 1821, but nothing equivalent to the Blake comment until a concert review in 1868.⁹ What the article thus suggests is that Blake was part of what the average reader of the *Times* was expected to know about without explanation, that he was by no means *pictor ignotus*, at least for the reviewer and his editor. Moreover, all this precedes Allan Cunningham’s ac-

count of Blake in the second volume of his *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* in 1830.¹⁰ It raises some interesting questions about public acquaintance with Blake’s work in the years immediately following his death in 1827.

10. Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects*, vol. 2 (London: John Murray, 1830) 140-79.

7. Gordon Phillips, “Barnes, Thomas (1785–1841),” *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

8. Thomas Frognall Dibdin, *The Library Companion, or, The Young Man’s Guide and the Old Man’s Comfort in the Choice of a Library*, 2 vols. (London: Printed for Harding, Triphook and Lepard, 1824) 2: 334.

9. *Times* 23 March 1821 (issue 11201): 3, col. F “Deaths”; 5 October 1868 (issue 26247): 10, col. E “Crystal Palace Concert.”

Sarah Jones tells me that the search string “john keats” retrieves an 1848 *Times* reference to Monckton Milnes’s biography of Keats. I would suggest that this further bears out my argument; the Blake reference is both early (within a few months of his death) and is in a casual, almost irrelevant context. Knowledge of “Blake the engraver” is part of the common currency of the well-educated *Times* reader.