



Life of William Blake

By Alexander Gilchrist



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Despite the flow of books on William Blake, this first full-length life biography published in 1863 remains essential to those who would understand one of the greatest of Englishmen, for the author, Alexander Gilchrist, had one advantage which has been denied to his successors - he could still find people who had known Blake. These personal reminiscences give the book an actuality which few of the later ones have touched. The second and best edition of Gilchrist's biography, upon which this edition is based, originally appeared in 1880, and has long been out of print and obtainable only at a price which placed it out of the reach of the general reader and ordinary student. Modern research, which has done so much to throw light on certain aspects of the life of William Blake, has also shown that Gilchrist was sometimes in error in the facts he recorded. These have now been corrected and, for the benefit of the student, the editor has supplied a section of notes amplifying the text (including some information not previously published) which should also act as a guide to those who wish to proceed further. The many quotations have been brought into line with the standard text of Blake's writings edited by Mr. Geoffrey Keynes, and the book is illustrated with Blake's woodcuts to Virgil, executed in 1821, which are generally accounted among his finest works. Altogether this new edition of the standard Life of Blake should prove a fitting testament to the great man and his work.

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Life of William Blake By Alexander Gilchrist Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #842465 in eBooks
- Published on: 2013-04-16
- Released on: 2013-04-16
- Format: Kindle eBook

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Of William Blake, William Wordsworth said, "There is something in the madness of this man which interests me more than the sanity of Lord Byron and Walter Scott." Blake was, after all, known to report on his "conversations" with such dead notables as the great Milton. He felt no constraint in sharing the bold content of his vivid imagination. "Once [he] was walking down Cheapside with a friend," Alexander Gilchrist writes. "Suddenly he took off his hat and bowed low. 'What did you do that for?' 'Oh! that was the Apostle Paul.'" This full-length study of the visionary artist and poet, first published in 1863, is credited with bringing to light not only the unique genius of William Blake, but his body of work.

When Gilchrist wrote this critical biography, the world was largely ignorant of William Blake (1757-1827). Most of his works--visual and poetic--were "never published at all ... [and] Blake's poems were ... not even printed in his life-time; simply engraved by his own laborious hand." The first-edition printing of *Songs of Innocence and Experience*, for example, consisted of slightly more than 20 copies. Nevertheless, Blake was not spared the ironic fate of so many posthumously honored artists. At the time of Gilchrist's writing, "Blake drawings, Blake prints fetch prices which would have solaced a life of penury, had their producer received them."

Of course, it's no surprise that *The Life of William Blake* is drenched in the style peculiar to the late 19th century, as if proclaimed in an echo chamber where lofty and pious tones vie with the sentimental. Still, who isn't drawn into the central tragedy of Blake's life? He had the capacity to become a great public and religious poet, but instead turned in upon himself, gaining neither reputation nor a following. Blake was simply not of his time, "partly by choice; partly from the necessities of imperfect education."

Although in paperback, this volume suggests antiquity--the type fonts are reminiscent of those used in the dusty, old tomes found in Grandma's attic. Chapter titles reflect the 19th-century sensibility ("A Boy's Poems," "Struggle and Sorrow," "Mad or Not Mad?"). The 39 chapters also reveal Gilchrist's exhaustive study of Blake's life. His report of Blake's first vision at the age of 8 reveals the 19th-century tone: "Sauntering along, the boy looks up and sees a tree filled with angels, bright angelic wings bespangling every bough like stars." Unabridged and illustrated with 40 black-and-white photographs of Blake's engravings, this first critical biography will interest the Blake scholar wishing to add a more period feel to his or her body of research (100 years separate Gilchrist from his subject), as well as the Blake fan in the mood for a courtly and doting guide. --*Hollis Giammatteo*

About the Author

A seminal figure in both the literature and the visual arts of the Romantic age, William Blake (1757–1827) dwelt his entire life in London, where he made his living as an engraver. The visionary poet and painter, whose art was misunderstood and overlooked during his lifetime, created intensely spiritual works informed by his strong philosophical and religious beliefs.

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