

The Botanic Blake by Tim Heath

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One of the pleasures of occupying the only surviving London home of William Blake is the privilege of talking to the many scholars who come to visit the rooms at No 17 South Molton Street.

At the moment the building is being redecorated and the foreman of the builders, upon seeing the image of the Ancient of Days that I have on the front door, took me aside and confided in me: Ahh, The William Blake Society - they invite beautiful young women, they smoke opium, and then, they shag them!

I think he was confusing Blake with Coleridge but I didn't correct his scholarship ... however I was left with the lingering suspicion that perhaps our Chairman is organising events to which I have not been invited ...

This evening I am going to talk about one of the minor influences that informed Blake's work: the world of botany in the 18th Century. Blake had a synthetic soul - if I may be allowed to use such flowery language - and in the provenance of his work can be seen the concerns of his age. Tonight I will recall a few of the horticultural events of the 1790's and suggest how they reappear in the body of his work.

My own personal introduction to Blake was a gift of a copy of the Songs of Innocence and of Experience. Over the past 30 years my eye has kept returning to one particular image, *Infant Joy*, and one particular question: what is this flower?

(caption: Infant Joy, Songs of Innocence 1789)



The colouring of the flower in *Infant Joy* varies wildly from copy to copy. indeed in one version the sepals and petals are even given the same tint. In the notes to my Trianon Press edition, Keynes concluded that the flower was unidentifiable.

Blake wrote in the *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*: To create a little flower is the labour of ages. But William was not an idle man and his technical virtuosity in not in doubt. So what was William Blake doing creating a flower that departs so wildly from botanical realism and especially in an age when botanical illustration was a discipline and an art?

To begin to answer this question, let me take you on a brief tour of the world of 18th century botany. The *Songs of Innocence* was published in 1789, and to illustrate the revolutionary changes taking place in horticulture at the time, I will take this one same year, and travel quickly round the globe.

We begin in Berkeley Square in Mayfair in 1789 with the planting of those magnificent London Plane Trees. It is a curious pleasure to know that whatever else was happening in the world in 1789, in England we were planting trees. These hybrid trees have remained a popular street planting because of their ability to withstand pollution. Pollution is not a modern phenomenon and in 1789 William Curtis had to move his botanical garden from Lambeth to Brompton to escape the smoke that was invading Lambeth Marsh. South of the metropolis in a little village in Hampshire, Gilbert White saw the publication of *The Natural History of Selborne* in 1789. This clergyman married English literature to English nature with a timeless sensibility.

Further afield in Lichfield in the same year of 1789, Erasmus Darwin published *The Loves of the Plants* (*Part II of The Botanic Garden*). Erasmus was the first of five successive generations of the Darwin family to become Fellows of the Royal Society. In

the book he humanises the process of fertilisation in plants and flowers. Blake made commercial engravings for *The Botanic Garden* and you can see the anthropomorphic echo of Darwin in *Infant Joy* where the stamen and pistil take on human forms.

Leaving England and crossing the channel to France, the year of 1789 is remembered for something very different. It is of course the year that the Dahlia was introduced into European horticulture. Thomas Jefferson, who was American Minister in Paris in 1789 wrote: 'The greatest service that can be rendered to any country is to add a useful plant to its culture'. The Dahlia is a native of Mexico, which has a remarkable climate ranging from alpine to desert, and was introduced in the hope that its tubers might rival the potato as a food crop.

One final leap in our survey of horticulture, takes us from the Americas to the South Pacific. In January 1789, a ship set sail from Tahiti with a cargo of Bread Fruit plants on course for the British colonies in the West Indies. The ship was named The Bounty and was under the command of a Captain Bligh.

The movement of economic crops from one side of the world to the other was to fertilise the empire. Tea was to be stolen from China to be grown in India, Opium forcibly imported into China from British India, and Rubber taken from Spanish America to the British plantations in Malaya. When the Chelsea Physic Garden in London was asked to advise on a crop to be grown in the new colonies in America, their advice was Cotton. A fluffy ball of cotton seeds can lead to slavery and racism that persists to this day.

However I have forgotten Captain Bligh. Set adrift in an open boat by the mutineers of The Bounty in April 1789, he began one of the epic feats of navigation and command. But now I am going to leave him, 4000 miles from landfall, but we will return to him later in the story.

The search for valuable crops from around the world began the great age of plant hunters. It is often said that England has both the largest and the smallest natural Flora - small because our true native species are few in number and large because of our avarice for plants and our clement weather. Yet it is also a measure of early industrial activity. Industrialisation at the end of the 18th century was primarily the processing of crops: cane into sugar and rum, cotton into yarn and clothes, poppies into Laudanum and Coleridge ... and the profits were enormous. Stedman calculated that the value of the Sugar, Molasses and Rum exported to Amsterdam from Surinam was two hundred thousand pounds per year and this is in the currency of the 1790's.

These labour intensive activities encouraged both slavery and mechanisation and even one of the first Health & Safety innovations in industry. In his description of a Sugar Plantation in Surinam, Stedman observed how a sharp scythe was placed next to the rollers that crushed the sugar cane. If a hand got caught in the rollers, the arm could

be severed before the remainder of the operator was pulled into the machinery to disrupt production.

(caption: Europe supported by Africa & America engraved by WB from John Gabriel Stedman's Narrative of a Five Years' Expedition against the Revolted Negroes of Surinam 1796)



Stedman witnessed many cruel events in Surinam, however he gave to Blake the job of engraving an emblem of hope: 'Europe supported by Africa & America'. To the modern eye it has many levels of irony (pearls adorn Europe whilst America and Africa wear bands of slavery) yet what binds the 3 figures together is a rope made of hemp. In England, the unravelling of these ropes, tarred and salty from naval use, and with no other tools than the bare fingers of prisoners, was to lead to only another form of suffering (picking oakum).

Blake, the engraver, was the son of a hosier and married the daughter of a market gardener. Now hosiers dealt with matters close to the skin including perfumes. So our first urban poet was not unfamiliar with flowers or horticulture, even though he might write: 'Natural objects always did & now do Weaken deaden & obliterate Imagination in Me' (Annotations to Wordsworth).

They were married in 1782 and that same year saw the outbreak of an infestation of the Brown-Tail Moth in London. William Curtis rushed out a book to explain this natural phenomenon: 'The attention of the public has of late been strongly excited by the unusual appearance of infinite numbers of large white webs, containing caterpillars, conspicuous on almost every hedge, tree and shrub in the vicinity of the metropolis: respecting which, advertisements, paragraphs, letters almost without number have appeared in the several newspapers most of which though written with a

good design have tended greatly to alarm the minds of the people, especially the weak and the timid. Some of those writers have gone so far as to assert, that they were a usual presage of the plague, others that their numbers were great enough to render the air pestilential and that they would mangle and destroy every type of vegetable and starve the cattle in the fields. From the alarming misrepresentations almost everyone ignorant of their history has been under some dismal apprehension concerning them and even prayers have been offered up in some churches to deliver us from the apprehended approaching calamity.'

While Curtis hyperbolically describes the number of webs as infinite, other evidence gives a measure of this phenomenon. Church wardens offered one shilling per bushel to encourage the collection of the webs and during one day in the parish of Clapham four score bushels were collected! (A bushel is 8 gallons, a score is twenty, for those who are not imperial in measure.)

Now, you might be wondering why I am talking about webs and caterpillars, so let me spin the literary argument. William Curtis's book was published in 1782 by Joseph Johnson, Blake's publisher. 1782 was also the year of Blake's marriage, the first time in a young man's life when the intimacy of the marriage bed became attainable and at this very moment of coitus, London became infested with worms on every plant, including roses ... There are not enough interpretations to *The Sick Rose*, so I thought I would add one more. 'Oh Rose thou art sick, the invisible worm that flies in the night in the howling storm has found out thy bed of crimson joy and his dark secret love does thy life destroy.'

In the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* many of the images are surrounded by a border of vines. This recurrent motif has a biblical origin in St John Chapter 15: 'I am the true vine ...' These curlicues have also been interpreted as hair suggesting the provenance of creativity within sexuality. But whether the imagination is divine or sexual, Blake's creativity is firmly rooted in the language of Ezekiel. His sentences unwind like a vine grows, images tumbling out of a continuous stream of narrative.

'A great eagle with great wings, long winged, full of feathers, which had divers colours, came unto Lebanon and took the highest branch of the Cedar. He cropped off the top of his young twigs and carried in into a land of traffick, he set it in a city of merchants. He took also of the seed of the land and planted it in a fruitful field; he placed it by great waters and set it as a Willow tree. And it grew and became a spreading vine ...' (Chapter xvii)

For a man like Blake, who dined with Isaiah and Ezekiel, the vine is a tribute to his fellow prophets. Yet the Botanic Blake is also playful. In *Infant Joy*, the human figures can be interpreted either as safe within the petals of a flower or about to be consumed by flickering flames. This ambiguity, which is so important to the modern reader, subverts the way you read the poems and indeed the very structure of the book: does

***Infant Joy* belong to Innocence or Experience?**

And does experience belong to joy? The story of William Curtis is a tale echoing Blake's own life. They were both striving to find an audience and at the same time create an economic engine that would remunerate their genius in a grand manner. After many false starts, Curtis succeeded.

William Curtis was born in Hampshire in 1746 to a Quaker family. Quakers were successful in commerce - you need only think of the chocolate empires of Cadbury and Fry - because as a community they could be trusted - a Quaker would indemnify another Quaker's debts and this was to prove important for William Curtis when his ventures crashed.

He was apprenticed to an apothecary in Bishopsgate, who took a shine to Curtis, promptly died and left him his business. Drugs were a distraction to Curtis's first true love, so he sold the apothecary business to open The London Botanic Garden in Bermondsey in 1773. He was to set up 2 further gardens in Lambeth Marsh in 1779 and Brompton in 1789 besides holding the position of Demonstrator at the Chelsea Physic Garden from 1772 to 1777. After the Tradescants and Philip Miller, Curtis is one of the most important English plantsmen. In the British Library, Curtis's books bear the library mark of Joseph Banks, Captain Cook's botanist.

A prospectus describes the London Botanic Garden in Lambeth Marsh (near to the position of the Old Vic today close by Waterloo Station). Members were invited to pay one guinea a year subscription for which they were able to bring one friend, use the library and walk in the garden, which was open between 6 and 8, Tuesday to Friday. For two guineas a year, a member could bring two friends and take seeds and cuttings as permitting. The catalogue listed 700 specimens that was to grow in ten years to 6,000. Plants were laid out with coloured sticks: blue to indicate a food crop, black for poisons, red for dyes, green for agriculture and yellow for physics. Cannabis was green. 'Although new discovered chemical remedies and foreign drugs may have justly superseded many of our English plants ... it is the duty of everyone to be the guardian of the health of mankind.'

(caption: The London Botanic Garden, a water colour painted by James Sowerby (1757-1822), a contemporary of Blake, he also lived in Lambeth and found commercial success in his illustration work for Curtis's Botanical Magazine and as a botanical artist in his own right.)



This painting of the London Botanic garden is a fascinating record but a dispiriting vista. Curtis was the first gardener in England to systematically adopt the Linnaean system. The plants were arranged in a didactic manner, rather than for joy or pleasure. If you walk around a similar botanic garden today, like the Chelsea Physic Garden in London, you appreciate something of the way the heart of an English garden is corrupted by reason. Blake ranted against Newton or Locke, yet it is far easier to understand his rage when you imagine Blake walking through Curtis's Garden in Lambeth Marsh.

The Botanic Gardens were never a commercial success - there were not enough interested subscribers. So Curtis set about other projects. He organised Herbarising Excursions ('Meet at The Spaniards, Hampstead Heath, 11 O'clock, 11 June 1792'). He wrote books (*A Short History of the Brown-Tail Moth*) and he organised magazines or part-works. The first of these was *Flora Londinensis*. It was intended to be a complete catalogue of all the plants growing in Great Britain beginning with the neighbourhood of London. Who could resist? It was begun in 1775, printed in folio, 'accurately drawn and neatly engraved'. But the publishing was erratic, the numbering was overlooked, and the plants were more often than not visual weeds.

However Curtis learned some important lessons. When he came to his next project, *The Botanical Magazine* in 1787, each flower was numbered so that the series could be bound and collected, there was a minimum of text, comprising a Linnaean name, genus, character and some horticultural gossip. The publication was a handy octavo size, the publishing was disciplined with 3 plants per issue, each issue arriving regularly once a month, and most important of all, he limited his choice of plants to beautiful exotic specimens. The first plant was the Persian Iris. He charged one shilling per month and had 2000 subscribers. Curtis had no more financial troubles for the rest of his life. The Magazine continued to be coloured by hand until 1948 and the Magazine still exists today subsumed into The Kew Magazine. Curtis died in 1799, his obituary observing: 'There was never a pleasanter companion than Mr Curtis. He abounded in innocent mirth, good humour ever floating uppermost, having a pleasant cast to everything he said.'

So when you look again at *infant Joy*, with its flaming petals, you realise how close Blake came to the financial security and social fame that eluded him. The flower is exotic, the text is minimal, the book pocket size and Blake's unique printing methods improved on Curtis by incorporating the words into the very image. Yet Blake failed to reach the industrial levels of production that Curtis achieved. Perhaps *Joy* cannot be delegated.

In the letter-press page accompanying the first illustration in *The Botanical Magazine*, Curtis gives a Linnaean identity for the Persian Iris: Linn.Syst.Vegetab.p79.Sp.Pl.p.59. Scholarly editors often point despairingly to Blake's erratic punctuation - how he will insert a full-stop right in the middle of a word. However I like to think that Blake is synthesising yet another botanic feature of his age, the Linnaean system. Or perhaps I am wrong, and it's just another example of Blake's prescience in predicting the dotcom addresses of the internet age ...

During the 1790's while Blake worked in Hercules Row, Lambeth changed dramatically. We know already that in 1789 the pollution had forced Curtis to move out ('the smoke of London, which except when the wind blows from the South constantly envelopes my plants'). During the decade of Blake's stay, the village green was built over, the industrial river-side yards bought up the meadows, the breweries diverted and corrupted the streams, the Carlisle House pottery belched chlorine gas from its salt glazing furnace and the ditches overflowed with sewage from the tenfold increase in population in Lambeth. By 1800 it was time to move.

When Blake travelled down to Felpham he was uncharacteristically becoming a man of fashion. With Europe closed to tourists, people began to travel within England in search of scenery. The 1790's was a hayday for landscape gardening and one of its most successful exponents was Humphry Repton. It was Repton who redesigned the gardens of Kenwood House, north of London. He would remove an oak to open up a view of the City or plant a row of trees to hide the sprawling village of Kentish Town.

Repton charged five pounds per day and worked on 400 commissions during his lifetime. He was an excellent watercolourist and an even better salesman. A book bound in red Morocco leather was presented to the client containing views of the existing gardens. By lifting a flap a new picture appeared showing the same view after the proposed landscaping had been completed. These 'Red Books' suggest a curious provenance to the structure of the Songs: before and after, innocence and experience.

The re-engineering of the English Landscape was more than a profitable activity for gardeners; it even went beyond the 18th century distinction between the sublime and the beautiful; it became the field of radical politics. Repton observed: 'The neatness, elegance and simplicity of English gardening have acquired the approbation of the present century as the happy medium betwixt the wildness of nature and the stiffness of art - as is the English constitution the happy medium betwixt the liberty of savages and

the restraint of despotic government ... let experiments of untried theoretical improvement be tried in other countries.' *In England's green and pleasant land* landscape was the battleground of visionary politics.

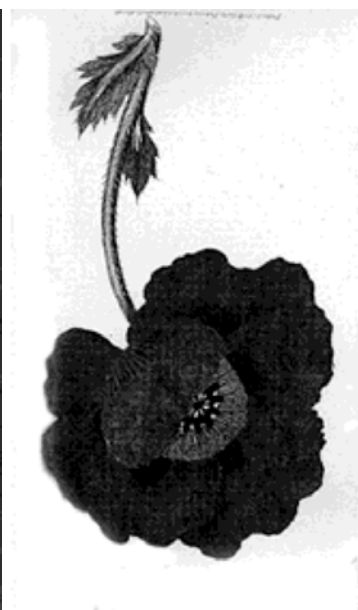
I left Captain Bligh adrift in an open boat, but he eventually reached Timor and then took ship for England. In 1792 he returned to the South Seas to complete his admiralty orders and successfully transported Bread Fruit from the Pacific to the Caribbean. Two years later he was back in London where he took a house in Lambeth in 1794, a few hundred yards from Blake, and brought up his five daughters. I imagine Captain Bligh would often pop in for tea and sit under the vine in Blake's garden and talk about Bread Fruit plants and Marlon Brando

But was the weather good enough in Lambeth for vines? By a curious coincidence we know the answer. One of the patrons of William Curtis's London Botanic Garden was Thomas White, who farmed in South Lambeth and lived in the old house of the Tradescants. (The Tradescants, father and son, were royal gardeners to Charles I. They created a physic garden in Lambeth and established Lambeth as a place of botanic importance). Now Thomas White was the brother of Gilbert White, the author of the *Natural History of Selborne*. Gilbert would often visit his brother in Lambeth and dutifully recorded his observations:

June 25 1791 My brother's strawberries well flavoured. The vines here in bloom and smell very sweet.

July 10 New potatoes. Grapes swell.

(*captions: Plate 15 from The First Book of Urizen 1794, and, Plant No 57 from The Botanical Magazine 1787*)



Finally, while I was looking in vain through the Botanical Magazine in search of the origin of the flower in *Infant Joy*, I came across another flower that might have passed through Blake's synthetic soul to become a famous image: the stellar globe of blood in Urizen that created Enitharmon. So if you ever have the chance to look at this most beautiful of botanic books, check out Plant No 57: The Oriental Opium Poppy.

I have now returned to where the lecture originally began with Opium. And I notice there are many beautiful young women here tonight. So perhaps ...

(end)