

**Tobias Churton, *Jerusalem!: The Real Life of William Blake*. London: Watkins, 2014. Pp. xxxix + 358. £25. ISBN9781780287508.**

With *Jerusalem!: The Real Life of William Blake* Tobias Churton, Britain's leading scholar of Western Esotericism, has added to the great pile of Blake biographies. The question then is: Do we really need another biography of William Blake? Having read Churton's book, the answer must be yes. Churton's strategy is quite different from that of other Blake biographers and therefore the work has great value of its own. Instead of just recapitulating the well-known earlier biographies, Churton finds his own method by reading the life of Blake through his works. The usual anecdotes are there, of course, but always related to the art and poetry with considerable sophistication and originality.

Churton agrees with previous Blake scholars that there is 'little reliable first-hand biographical information' about Blake, which is a frustration when investigating him (27). However, by closely examining accounts by Benjamin Heath Malkin, Henry Crabb Robinson, John Thomas Smith, Allan Cunningham, Frederick Tatham, Alexander Gilchrist and others, Churton adroitly manages to question the truth of Blake's life and of several anecdotes. Taking as a telling example the familiar story of Blake having seen angels in some trees at an early age, he shows that it is only a legend concocted by several sources, which Alexander Gilchrist picked up in his monumental Blake biography from 1865.

The book is much more than just a biography. It is a thorough scholarly investigation of Blake's *œuvre* that works well as an analytical text. It is ambitious in its scope and objective, and Churton shows great learning throughout the study. The sense of detail is extraordinary. Churton even draws upon his own family records. Archdeacon Ralph Churton was an almost exact contemporary of Blake's, and Churton therefore makes use of his ancestor's writings throughout the book in order to further illuminate Blake's life and works. Context is a key concern: as Churton argues, 'an historical understanding of William Blake is impossible without a good knowledge of the cultural forces prevailing in his lifetime' (xxxvi).

Churton is keen to acknowledge the achievements of other Blake scholars and shows an appropriately humble attitude towards these. For one thing, he makes clear the significance of the astonishing findings about the Moravian background of Blake's mother by Keri Davies and Marsha Keith Schuchard, and these inform Churton's biography throughout (xxxviii).

The biography surprisingly takes Blake's death as its starting-point. Hereby, Churton skilfully sets the scene by giving the general background to the year 1827, politically, socially and otherwise. By relating the particular circumstances of Blake's demise, Churton introduces readers to William Blake as a person. Then, in the next chapter he goes back to Blake's, by now more-or-less established, Moravian background, on his mother's side. It is Churton's view that Blake's mother had absorbed something of Count Zinzendorf's spiritual liberty. She taught Blake such basics as Moravian hymns, prayers and intimacies between mother and child. Churton expertly reads Blake's poetry in relation to fundamental Moravian ideas. He pertinently contextualises events in Blake's life with those of the Moravians, and with other world events that had a bearing on the Blake family.

The study then usefully takes us through Blake's career in twenty-four interesting and, for the most part, intriguing chapters. Almost all of Blake's works are dealt with at various lengths in illuminating discussions. Perhaps more space could have been devoted to the longer poems *The Four Zoas*, *Milton* and *Jerusalem*. But it should be said again, that the unfolding of Blake's life by way of his works is extremely constructive and a fuller picture of Blake emerges as a result.

Churton makes an important conclusion on the subject of Blake's religious orientation. After some debate, Churton infers in Chapter 7 that 'Blake shows no visible signs of being a radical Protestant in the political sense: all the evidence suggests a tolerant, ecumenical approach to Catholicism' (88). This is all in line with the latest findings of Blake criticism in the field, in works by, for instance, David Worrall, Susanne Sklar, and Schuchard and Davies, as already mentioned.

However, a negative aspect of the study is that Churton does not always provide references. This is a major drawback from a scholarly perspective and quite puzzling given Churton's ambitions for the book. More precise information would have been helpful to readers wishing to orientate themselves within Blake's voluminous writing.

All things considered, *Jerusalem!: The Real Life of William Blake* is a thorough and well-researched study. Even though it is somewhat dense and difficult, it ought to be consulted by all experts of William Blake and those historically inclined. Churton obviously demonstrates his expertise within a wide range of topics, which can be used to analyse Blake's *œuvre*.

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