

William Blake, Poet, Painter, and Artist-Printmaker An Interview with Michael Phillips

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Michael, I would like to begin this interview by asking how you first became interested in William Blake, your first contact with Blake's illuminated books, and what influenced your approach to his work as a poet, painter and as an artist-printmaker?

Looking back I can see how certain experiences may have been formative, or at least encouraged interests that were instinctive. But before doing so, it may be helpful if I clarify very briefly what my approach to Blake has been and remains.

Increasingly over the years my interests have been in how Blake created his works, that is to say, how his poems evolved in manuscript and the social and historical circumstances that influenced their creation. This led me to try to learn how he then went on to reproduce and publish his works himself, by means of a very simple but highly innovative method of printmaking. I have not, for example, been interested in bringing a method of interpretation to Blake's work from outside, for example, an archetypal, psychoanalytical, feminist, or deconstructive approach. In contrast, my approach has been empirical, in attempting to reconstruct the immediate circumstances of Blake's life and work from historical evidence, and in particular how and why his works were made and reproduced. Recovering how he reproduced his works has very much entailed a hands-on approach, working and experimenting in the studio using the methods and materials that Blake himself used.

This approach is apparent from the title of your book published in 2000 by the British Library and Princeton University Press, *William Blake The Creation of the Songs from Manuscript to Illuminated Printing*. Were there influences or experiences that led to this way of exploring the making of literary or artistic artifacts, and Blake's in particular?

Looking back it is possible to reflect upon experiences that anticipate my approach to Blake. I was born in New York City in 1940, where my father was a writer and producer for radio. By the end of World War II, we had

moved to Southern California, where as a teenager in the 1950s I became enthralled with building and racing hot rods, notably a 1934 Ford three-window coupe. I was not interested in academic subjects at school, certainly not in secondary or high school, only in hot rods, how they were put together and made to look and run faster.

We lived then in Santa Monica. My next-door neighbor, Mr. Lyon, had been a mechanic at the Indianapolis 500 races before the First World War. From floor to ceiling his enormous garage displayed row after row of carefully arranged and polished sets of tools of every description used for repairing and renovating automobile engines and parts. His workbenches stood spotless in readiness. At age 15, for \$50.00 I bought a 1931 Model A Ford two-door sedan that I had seen parked behind a gun shop on Wilshire Boulevard. When I got it home, Mr Lyon helped me take out the engine and together we did everything possible to increase its power. He showed me how, by hand, I could hone out the piston cylinders to increase their size, grind in larger intake and exhaust valves, introduce additional carburetors, mill the cylinder head, and so on and so forth. I learned how an internal combustion engine was put together, how it worked, and how to enhance its performance. For the next several years I was interested in nothing else.

That is certainly an unorthodox beginning for a scholar of literary manuscripts.

But there is a connection: My research into Blake's manuscripts has been to learn how his poems were made, how they evolved and came together in their final published form. It then followed naturally to learn how he used his skills and training as a copy-engraver to invent a method of reproducing his writings and designs himself. This was an extraordinary innovation. Blake made himself entirely responsible for the production of his works (apart from making the paper), from start to finish, rather than submit his manuscripts and designs to a publisher and be subject to the economics of illustrated book production as it existed in London in the latter part of the eighteenth century. To accomplish this was at first a slow and sometimes a halting process. But his accomplishment was unique and is all the more fascinating because it was all-encompassing: he was poet, painter, printmaker and publisher.

Tell me more about your upbringing. What role did your parents play?

My father loved American and particularly English literature, and my mother English history and contemporary American politics. It was my father who introduced me to Blake's poetry: I can remember him reciting the

opening lines of the 'Auguries of Innocence'. After high school, in spite of my desire to continue my interests in hot rods and racing, my parents persuaded me to go on to college - at least to give it a try. As I had a relatively poor academic record, I could only manage to obtain a place on probation in a small liberal arts college in Springfield, Missouri, called Drury College. There were about 600 students, I recall.

At Drury interest in literature that had been instilled when I was very young was reawakened. After two years, I had taken all of the lower and upper division courses offered by the English Department, then staffed by two inspiring professors in classes of less than 10 students each. Their influence was formative, in particular that of Professor Robert F. Lee who continued to take an interest in my career after I left Drury. His course in creative writing I particularly remember, where every week we had to write a formal imitation of a prose or poetic style and then examine the results in class. It was a rigorous way of learning how literature was put together, and how it achieved its meaning.

In 1961, I transferred from Drury College to Loyola University of Los Angeles, then an all men's university, where again I had outstanding teachers. Particularly memorable was a special seminar in my final year on the Romantic Poets led by Professor Frank Carothers. There were four of us and I started things off by presenting three weekly seminars on Blake that established the foundations of my lifelong enthusiasm.

At the time my mother worked as a librarian for the Rand Corporation in Santa Monica and was able to provide me with a pass to the UCLA Research Library; typical of her political interests, she was to help Daniel Ellsberg, then a military strategist at Rand, copy what became known as the Pentagon Papers when they were published in the *New York Times*, exposing the United States' political-military involvement in Vietnam. In the open stacks at UCLA I discovered that Blake was an artist as well as a poet. Sitting on the floor before the shelves of books on Blake, I first opened colour facsimiles of the illuminated books. I had no idea then how they had been produced.

Something else happened at this time: During the Summer between my third and final year at Loyola I drove with a friend from Los Angeles along the Mexican border until we reached the Gulf Coast and New Orleans. We then made our way up through the Southern United States until we arrived in New York City. When I later left New York I hitchhiked up into New England to New Bedford, following in the footsteps of Ishmael as described in the opening chapter of Herman Melville's *Moby Dick*. After sleeping in a church yard that night, I took the ferry out to Nantucket Island where in the small whaling museum I found in the ship's log of an early nineteenth-century whaler an entry describing the killing of an albino whale.

But it was another experience altogether, while still living in New York that Summer, that was perhaps even more important as a harbinger of my later scholarly interests. At the Museum of Modern Art I saw an exhibition of Picasso's *Guernica* in which not only the painting but many of the preliminary drawings were exhibited together in such a way as to reconstruct the evolution of the work. I have never forgotten the impact this made upon me, not only the subject matter, but also the process that the exhibition recorded, the series upon series of sketches recording the evolution of the work to its completion.

When you returned to Loyola for your final year, did you have graduate school in mind to go on and work on Blake?

No, not immediately. I wanted to do something very different. During my final year I spent one day nearly every week at the Seafarers International Union hall in Long Beach in an effort to obtain papers to work as a merchant seaman. As I was sitting my last examination a telegram was delivered to my room notifying me that if I could be at the union hall in San Francisco first thing the following morning a job as Ordinary Seaman was available. I hitchhiked overnight from Los Angeles to San Francisco and for the next year worked on tramp freighters sailing the Pacific and North Atlantic. During the course of that year I also applied to several British universities for a place to research for an MA by thesis on Blake and was accepted by Exeter University to begin in October 1964. I wanted to go to England, to where Blake had lived and worked, to where it had happened.

What distinguished your time as a graduate student in England, presumably having come from a very different kind of undergraduate program in America? Was the approach to literary study, particularly at graduate level, what you expected?

No, it was certainly not what I expected! The most startling thing was that there was no course work, nothing at all. I was not told what to do, there were no guidelines, no introductory talks or seminars. Nothing. In America everything had been prescriptive: reading lists, essay questions, timetables, deadlines and examinations. Not in England, not for postgraduate students, as they were known. It was assumed that a postgraduate student had previously spent three years specializing in his or her subject, English literature for example, and to qualify for a place to do research, he or she had to achieve a first class degree, the highest awarded. Even to be accepted as an undergraduate to read for a BA at most English universities, two years of preparation in the subject was normal in addition to having Latin and at least

one modern language. By comparison, I had spent four years at college and university in a program of general study of a wide range of subjects, only in part specializing in a major subject in the last two years. The knowledge of English literature possessed by my English postgraduate contemporaries was impressive, sufficient for them to be in a position to know what they wanted to research and to be equipped to do it.

When I discovered that there was no course work, I asked my supervisor what I should do? After not a long pause he suggested I go away and try thinking about the subject I intended to work on. So that is what I did and over the coming months worked out for myself what I would do and how I would go about it: I would establish a definitive text of Blake's first volume of poems, *Poetical Sketches*, that had been privately printed in letterpress and that Blake variously amended in manuscript when he gave copies to friends and acquaintances over the course of his later life; followed by a history of the reception of the volume from its publication in 1783 to 1964; and concluding with a critical interpretation of the lyric poems, dramatic fragments and prose fragments contained in the volume.

By Spring 1965 the money saved to study in England had run out and I left Exeter to find work in London, during the day in Claude Gill's Bookshop in Oxford Street and at night at Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club in Soho, then located in a cellar in Gerrard Street. By year's end it was possible to return to Exeter to complete the PhD on *Poetical Sketches*.

Was there anyone at Exeter who influenced or helped you in your studies?

A. When I returned to Exeter from London I found lodgings in the home of the Shakespearian scholar G. Wilson Knight (perhaps best known for his study of Shakespearian tragedy, *The Wheel of Fire*), who had recently retired from the University of Leeds to live in Exeter. With characteristic generosity, Wilson Knight realized how little his new lodger knew and in the evenings tutored me, sharing his infectious enthusiasm for the full range of literature and eventually inviting me to help with the revision of several of his books. With the dissertation near completion, and with Wilson Knight's encouragement and support, I applied for and, astonishingly, was elected Martin Senior Scholar of Worcester College, Oxford.

What did you do at Oxford?

In an effort to make up for my relatively poor undergraduate training, at Oxford I read for the then newly established B Phil degree in Modern English Studies, specializing in late seventeenth and eighteenth-century

English literature. Here indeed, for the next two years, was the course work I had not found at Exeter concluding with a battery of three-hour examinations. At the same time, at the invitation of Christopher Ricks, at the time Fellow in English Literature at Worcester College, I was asked to tutor the finalists of my college in preparation for sitting the Restoration and Eighteenth Century paper in the English School's examinations diet. I also tutored the first year students of St Edmund Hall in preparation for taking the English School's Milton Preliminary Examinations. From Oxford I was appointed to a one-year temporary Lectureship in the English Department at University College London, then headed by Professor Frank Kermode, and the following year I accepted a tenured Lectureship in English Literature at the University of Edinburgh.

During your time at Oxford, and then teaching in London and Edinburgh, how did your work on Blake progress?

While I was still at Exeter I had written to the great Blake scholar and editor, Sir Geoffrey Keynes. Eventually this correspondence led to an invitation to visit Sir Geoffrey at Lammas House, his home in the Suffolk village of Brinkley a few miles outside Cambridge. After joining with Morton D. Paley in organizing a collection of essays on Blake published in honor of Sir Geoffrey (1973), our relationship developed into a lifelong friendship. For many weekends and holiday periods I was fortunate to be invited to Lammas House where in Sir Geoffrey's company and alone I spent time at leisure with one of the greatest collections in private hands of Blake's illuminated books, separate prints, and books containing his annotations, and much, much else.

Another friendship began while at Oxford when a note from David V. Erdman arrived asking to meet. Erdman was another of Blake's great twentieth-century editors and the author of the classic *Blake: Prophet Against Empire A Poet's Interpretation of the History of His Own Times* (1954). After spending the day together in Oxford, David asked to borrow a copy of my PhD dissertation from which he later edited papers for publication in the *Bulletin of the New York Public Library*, that later still were incorporated in the third revised edition of *Blake: Prophet Against Empire* (1977). I was also invited by David to join him at the British Museum to examine Blake's *Manuscript Notebook* for a new transcript and photographic edition that he was preparing for publication by Oxford University Press (1973). This would be an experience that would bear fruit 20 years later when I studied the *Manuscript Notebook* for myself, now in the keeping of the British Library, researching what would become my monograph *William Blake The Creation of the Songs From Manuscript to Illuminated Printing* (2000).

What about your time at Edinburgh University, where you taught from 1970 until 1993?

A. At Edinburgh University in the 1970s and 1980s, as a member of the Faculty of Arts, I was exposed to diverse and ground-breaking ideas; for example, Edinburgh together with MIT had become a center for theoretical linguistics, artificial intelligence, and for highly innovative centers for historical research. Oxford had instilled the rigors of evidence-based scholarship while the cross-fertilization of ideas at Edinburgh sowed the seeds for an interdisciplinary approach. In an era becoming dominated by literary theory, I became increasingly drawn to asking how, why and in what circumstances the creation of a work of art took place.

This rapidly growing interest in interdisciplinary research and teaching found one expression in helping to establish a new Joint Honours degree in English and History of Art at Edinburgh, and in the creation of a Final Honours course on Blake that was taught jointly by members of both departments and open to students throughout the Faculty. I understand that this joint degree still attracts some of the very best students in the Faculty of Arts at Edinburgh.

In 1988-89, this broadening of my literary interests into those of history, painting, and printmaking, also led to my taking part-time courses in the evening in traditional printmaking methods at Edinburgh College of Art, followed by membership of the professional Edinburgh Printmakers Workshop.

Was there a moment when the way seemed clear for you to implement this developing interest in interdisciplinary research into Blake?

Yes, 1993 was certainly a turning point. That year I was awarded a British Academy Research Readership in the Humanities. The Readership provided two years in which a research project could be carried out unhindered by teaching or administration. At the same time I was awarded a National Endowment of the Humanities Senior Research Fellowship for the same project, to research a book on the creation of Blake's *Songs*. I was also invited to become a Fellow of the newly established Centre for the Study of the Book at the British Library that gave me extraordinary access to its resources. I was able to travel throughout Britain and North America in order to see every copy of the *Songs* in public and private collections, photographing each example for later comparative study, and where possible examining copies in the conservation studio, for example, at the National Gallery of Art in Washington and at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven. It was an

opportunity that confirmed the importance of seeing and studying Blake's illuminated books in the original, first hand. Only by being in the physical presence of the original copy is it possible to see and study the nuances of evidence of how it was printed, hand coloured and/or colour printed; in other words, to discover how it was made.

These two years eventually led to the publication of several papers, for example, an historical study published by the Bibliographical Society in *The Library* in 1994 entitled 'Blake and the Terror, 1792-93', and of course your monograph on the creation of the *Songs*, both reflecting the importance of an interdisciplinary approach to Blake grounded in historical scholarship and research in the studio. But did this approach express itself in other ways, for example, in your teaching?

Yes, I was extremely fortunate in this regard. By 1998 I had left Edinburgh and that year was invited to join the newly established interdisciplinary postgraduate Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies at the University of York, where I was asked to create a course on Blake. In 1999 the first students of the new one-year MA in English and History of Art entitled 'William Blake and the Age of Revolution' matriculated, and for the next five years the course attracted some of the most exciting and innovative students working and publishing on Blake today. Several of my students later published an appreciation of the course which I believe is still relevant as a way of training young scholars by introducing them to a range of historical archives for primary research.

(<http://www.york.ac.uk/inst/cccs/staff/phillips/mcp.htm>)

At this time you were also given the opportunity as guest curator to create one of the greatest exhibitions of Blake ever mounted.

Yes, 1998 was an auspicious year, not only was there the opportunity to join the Centre for Eighteenth Century Studies, but, as you suggest, I was also invited to be guest curator of one of the most comprehensive exhibitions of William Blake ever mounted. It opened at Tate Britain in November 2000 and the following Spring transferred from London to New York, opening at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. An invitation to be guest curator of the first major exhibition of Blake in France followed, with *Le Génie Visionnaire de Romantisme Anglais* opening in Paris at the Petit Palais in April 2009. Yet another major exhibition of Blake, will open at the Ashmolean Museum of the University of Oxford in 2014, where a feature will be the full-scale

reconstruction of Blake's printmaking studio in the 1790s at No. 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth.

Yes, I have been extremely fortunate in being given such opportunities. It is almost like being given a magic wand: wave it and what you wish will be yours in terms of the works you want to include and how they are to be shown. Alas, it was never thus! It is very hard work involving an extraordinary amount of diplomacy; collectors and institutions are fearful of their works being moved and exposed to light, and are very reluctant to lend without the strongest reasons being given.

I would like to turn now, if I may, to your research and to ask you to say something more about your approach in relation to some of the specific works and circumstances in Blake's life that you have concentrated upon. I would like to begin with Blake's manuscripts, and in particular *An Island in the Moon* and the *Manuscript Notebook*. What is the importance of his manuscripts for our understanding, bearing in mind that most students of Blake know his works only or very largely through his published illuminated books, like the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*?

As you will know from your own research into Blake's manuscript of *Tiriel*, his manuscripts provide the opportunity of letting us observe Blake's processes of creation. They allow us, so to speak, to enter into his working imagination, to discover the stops and starts, the hesitations, as well as the moments of clarity and brilliance, as we see a work of art come into being.

For example, the manuscript of *An Island in the Moon* (c. 1784-87) is in the form of a dramatic satire, with an array of characters engaged in dialogue punctuated by a series of satirical songs. As a dramatic form it looks back to the experimental dramatic fragments that Blake included in *Poetical Sketches*, and forward to a letter he wrote to his friend, the sculptor John Flaxman, on 12 September 1800, in which he includes the following lines of verse autobiography:

... Milton lov'd me in childhood & shew'd me his face
Ezra came with Isaiah the Prophet, but Shakespeare in riper years
gave me his hand
Paracelsus & Behmen appear'd to me. terrors appear'd in the Heavens
above
And in Hell beneath & a mighty & awful change threatend the Earth
The American War began ...

Blake is recalling the authors and events that most profoundly influenced him as a young man before the ‘American War’ began in 1776: Milton, the Old Testament prophets Ezra and Isaiah, the mystics Paracelsus and Jacob Behmen, and then Shakespeare.

The importance of dramatic character and the use of persona would be less easily appreciated if we did not see it in the stages of its development, first in the early dramatic fragments printed in *Poetical Sketches*, and then in the dramatic satire of *An Island in the Moon*, where of course amongst the last of the songs to appear we find drafts of ‘Holy Thursday’, ‘Nurses Song’ and ‘The Little Boy Lost’, that will later be revised and included in the *Songs of Innocence*. Significantly, the original context of these first *Songs of Innocence* is satirical and dramatic. It is by way of the manuscript of *An Island in the Moon* that we can appreciate how skilled Blake became in the *Songs* in the creation of dramatic persona, and how finely his satirical instinct became honed. I think it is still not fully appreciated the extent to which the drama of Shakespeare, and the Shakespearean drama of Milton’s epics, influenced Blake.

When we turn to the slightly later manuscript of *Tiriel* (c. 1789), as you have shown, we see a further development. As you demonstrate in establishing where the full-page watercolour drawings that Blake made to illustrate the poem in fact occur in the manuscript, we can see for the first time Blake attempting to bring together text and image in relation to one another, in a prototype of the illuminated book (Fig. 01). The manuscript and drawings of *Tiriel* bear witness to an important stage in Blake’s progress toward the final integration of word and image in the illuminated books, where they are finally brought into harmony when relief-etched and printed together on the same copper plates.

And the Manuscript Notebook?

The *Manuscript Notebook* signposts Blake’s progress in other ways. Here we see the *Songs of Experience* evolve through a series of manuscript drafts and drawings for the designs, with whole poems being deleted and others being selected only to be discarded at an even later stage (Fig. 02). In all there are more than 50 poems that ultimately become reduced to less than 20 when a final selection is made, relief etched and printed. In this respect alone it is a document of the greatest importance, not just in allowing us to follow Blake in the process of composition of some of the greatest lyric poems in the language, ‘London’ and ‘The Tyger’, for example. It also establishes that Blake had to work, and work hard, at writing the poems that we take for granted in their published state. Neglecting the evidence in the *Manuscript Notebook* has led to a profound misunderstanding and misrepresentation in Blake scholarship.

Are you referring to the debate between yourself and Joseph Viscomi?

Yes, in his monograph *Blake and the Idea of the Book* (1993), Viscomi puts forward the view that the nature of Blake's method of composition in the illuminated books was autographic. Viscomi argues that because Blake composed directly onto the copper plate he had no need of manuscript drafts or even a fair copy manuscript. From this he concludes that Blake's process of composition was neither time-consuming nor difficult, but accomplished quickly and with relative ease (*Blake and the Idea of the Book*, pp. 237 *passim*).

The evidence in the *Manuscript Notebook* of the composition of the *Songs of Experience* demonstrates just the opposite to be the case. The process of drafting the poems took two years or more before Blake reached a point where he was ready to write fair copy of his text in mirror writing onto the copper plate, and embellish it with images prior to etching. The manuscripts of *An Island in the Moon*, *Tiriel*, and *Vala or The Four Zoas* (Fig. 01 e 02), when considered, imply much the same story: only with difficulty and over time was Blake able to bring to fruition the works that he relief-etched, printed and finally published in "Illuminated Printing".

Why do you think a few of Blake's manuscripts have survived and, as you imply, those that led to works that were completed, etched and printed, have not?

Nearly all of the examples that have survived in manuscript, like *An Island in the Moon* and *Vala*, could be described as either incomplete or even failures. Blake may have kept them back *because they were unfinished*. When a manuscript was finished and committed to etching on copper, to what was an irreversible process, it became redundant and could be discarded. It is even possible that fair-copy manuscripts and designs were used in laying out the copper plates to be etched and became soiled or damaged in the process. I am not suggesting that they were used in a transfer process; a mistaken notion, for example, that in the 1940s led Stanley Hayter, Ruthven Todd and Joan Miró to experiment at Atelier 17 in New York with methods of transferring script written conventionally, left-to-right, onto copper in reverse (so that after etching it would print the right way round), being convinced that Blake could not write backwards. Blake's friend and fellow engraver, John Linnell, attested that Blake was skilled at mirror writing, but fair-copy manuscripts composed of text and design may have been used by Blake as detailed guides or *aide-mémoire* for writing and drawing on the copper prior to etching. In this regard, the manuscript of *Tiriel* may be a prototype of what later evolved as composites of word and image in fair-copy manuscript. If Blake did preserve

these, perhaps together, then they must have been lost or destroyed following his or Catherine's death.

The *Manuscript Notebook* is not an exception to what I have just speculated. Although from its pages Blake made a final selection of poems to etch as *Songs of Experience*, very few of these could be described as fair copy, that is, final versions that were then etched without change. Also, the *Manuscript Notebook* contains much else that was never completed, and of course, significantly, it had come down to Blake from his beloved younger brother, Robert, who had used it as his sketchbook until his death in 1787.

If Blake's method of composition was not autographic, did the protracted nature of drafting his texts and working up his designs end at this stage in the production of the illuminated books? In other words, once his text and design had been drawn in the acid-resistant varnish in reverse onto the copper plate, in readiness for etching, were the stages that followed straightforward?

In addition to the evidence of Blake's manuscripts, and the preliminary drawings for designs that have also survived, the etching process was also protracted, demanding Blake's constant attention over the course of many hours. This was needed in order to prevent under-biting, when the mordant bites down and then underneath the varnish lifting away elements of the text and design that had been written and drawn in it. The only surviving fragment of one of Blake's relief-etched copper plates, from a cancelled plate of *America a Prophecy* (Fig. 03) now in the National Gallery of Art in Washington, shows that etching took place in two stages, the second after the plate had been cleaned and checked for under-biting and the vulnerable relief surfaces further protected by a second application of varnish (Fig. 04).

Blake also had difficulty in preparing his relief-etched copper plates for printing (Fig. 04). There is a single but largely neglected account by John Jackson, who was himself a professional copper-plate engraver, who evidently saw Blake preparing examples of the relief-etched copper plates of the illuminated books for printing. In *A Treatise on Wood Engraving* (1839), Jackson describes how Blake experienced great difficulty in inking his plates using a dauber, a smaller version of a letterpress printer's ink ball, and how painstaking and time-consuming this was (Fig. 05 e 06). Because Blake etched his plates to such shallow depths (0.12 mm.), when attempting to ink the raised areas of text and design that had been protected, it was extremely difficult to avoid touching the etched shallows surrounding them. According to Jackson, Blake was unable to prevent the ink dauber from touching these shallows. As Jackson goes on to describe, after inking the plate Blake required even "more

time” to wipe away the spatters and smudges of ink that had been deposited by the dauber during inking (Fig 07).

Your account of Jackson’s description and its significance is presented in ‘The Printing of Blake’s *America a Prophecy*’ published in *Print Quarterly* (2004). If Blake’s printing process was an arduous one, does this help to explain why his works were little known during his lifetime?

Yes. Jackson’s account is born out when we look carefully at original printed impressions of the illuminated books, in particular examples that were left printed in monochrome and not hand coloured. Almost without exception, these impressions reveal the traces of where Blake has carefully attempted to wipe away the spatters and smudges of ink in the etched shallows that had been left when touched by the ink dauber.

When we worked together in the Edinburgh Printmakers Workshop you experienced how difficult it is to prepare copper plates of the illuminated books for printing. This was because the relief-etched copper plates of the illuminated books that I had re-created had been etched to the same shallow depths as the *America* fragment. When you inked them using a leather-covered ink dauber, as Blake did (ink rollers were not invented until very late in Blake’s life), you experienced the same difficulty that Blake encountered and that Jackson describes. It can take up to half an hour to ink and wipe a plate of the *Songs* in preparation for printing, and up to two hours to prepare one of the larger plates of *America a Prophecy* or *Europe a Prophecy*.

If we consider that a copy of the *Songs of Innocence and of Experience* is typically made up of 54 or 55 plates, and if it took Blake up to half an hour to ink and wipe each of these plates before printing an impression, it is likely that it would have taken two or possibly even three days to print one copy, at least 20 hours anyway (Fig. 08). The 18 plates of *America a Prophecy* would have taken even longer to prepare for printing, at least 18 hours and possibly up to twice as long. To then decorate each plate in water colour and fine pen and ink would entail even more time, perhaps another day or two depending upon how elaborate the decoration was, and even longer if it entailed overwriting the text because it had been printed too lightly, as is sometimes found (Fig. 09).

The difficulty Blake experienced in preparing his relief-etched plates for printing certainly contributed to why so few were produced. How much time was involved in writing the texts and designing the plates prior to etching, and then, following printing, the time entailed in embellishing impressions in water colour and pen and ink, can only be surmised. In the 38 years between 1789 and his death in 1827, Blake produced just over 50 copies of the *Songs*, of

which there are significantly more copies than any other illuminated book. Only 14 copies of *America a Prophecy* are recorded, nine copies of *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell* and *Europe a Prophecy*, six of *Jerusalem* and four of *Milton*. Clearly Blake's methods of production influenced these numbers, not least as he undertook the entire process himself, from creation to reproduction.

I would like to turn now to a work in progress, the biography of Blake that you have been working on for some time. Earlier I referred to your paper entitled 'Blake and the Terror, 1792-93' published in *The Library* in 1994. In 2000 and again in 2004, you published two more papers, this time in *The British Art Journal*. On this occasion you reconstructed the house and studio in Lambeth where William and Catherine Blake lived from 1791 to 1800. Presumably, these papers also anticipate your biography in some way. Could you tell us something about it and how it differs from the standard biographies of Blake, for example the classic biography by Alexander Gilchrist published in 1863 that all Blake scholars must still refer to, Mona Wilson's biography published in 1927, Peter Ackroyd's popular biography of 1995, and most recently, G. E. Bentley, Jr.'s published in 2004. How does your biography differ from these?

The papers you refer to and others do indeed anticipate the biography that I am writing, which is very different from the conventional biographies you have mentioned that cover Blake's life from birth to death. I concentrate upon a period of less than two years in Blake's life, 1792 to 1794. Blake was then living and had his printmaking studio at No. 13 Hercules Buildings, Lambeth. Lambeth is located south of the Thames across Westminster Bridge from Westminster Abbey and the Houses of Parliament. In the 1790s it was still a village. Politically, the period 1792 to 1794 was at the height of what became known as the anti-Jacobin Terror in Britain.

In the first months of 1792 the British government had become increasingly concerned by the widespread dissemination of Thomas Paine's republican views as set out in the two parts of the *Rights of Man*. In August and September this was followed by reports of what became known as the Paris Massacres, histrionic descriptions of which appeared in the British press of the plight of the French monarchy and of the slaughter of thousands in the streets of Paris of those loyal to the King. In Britain reaction against these events became widespread. In October and November loyalist associations were established dedicated to seeking out and reporting to the government anyone known to have sympathized with the Revolution. One of these associations was established in Lambeth. In December, Thomas Paine, who had fled to Paris, was tried *in absentia* and convicted of treason. In February 1793, Louis

XVI was guillotined and Britain declared war against France. The British government now sought to indict, try and imprison anyone known to be proselytizing republicanism or involved in publishing seditious materials, including prints. As reported in Gilchrist's *Life of William Blake*, in the early days of the French Revolution Blake donned the *bonnet rouge*, the red Cap of Liberty, openly declaring his support for the Revolution; that is, until August and September of 1792 when the reaction to events in France and against the principles of the French Revolution became widespread.

At this time Blake was writing and designing some of his greatest and politically most iconoclastic works, the *Songs of Experience*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *Visions of the Daughters of Albion* and *America a Prophecy*, and experimenting with a new process of colour printing that within a year would lead to the production of his supreme work as an artist-printmaker, the Large Colour Prints or monotypes of 1795. What is remarkable about this period in Blake's biography is that apart from knowing where he was living and the works that he produced at this time, we know little else. There are no letters, diaries, notices by friends, or reference of any kind to Blake or to his works, that is, apart from a single entry written in his Manuscript Notebook that reads as follows:

I say I shant live five years
And if I live one it will be a
Wonder June 1793

No one had questioned this statement: In June 1793 why was Blake living in fear of his life?

This is the question that I have set out to answer, initially in the paper I published in *The Library*, and as the pieces began to come together, in other papers including the accounts reconstructing Blake's house and studio in Lambeth; reconstructions that were based upon photographs and floor plans I discovered that had been made before Hercules Buildings was razed in 1918. I was concerned not only to reconstruct where William and Catherine lived, but how they lived, what Catherine did to support her husband, their neighborhood, the manufactories nearby, the conditions of the workers and those of the poor, which at the time were amongst the most life-threatening in London. I found that it was these same surroundings that Blake bore witness to in the *Songs of Experience*, in particular, in poems like 'London'.

As I learned more about what took place in Lambeth at the time Blake was living there, it also became clear why he felt in danger. It was because he feared being indicted and imprisoned for his political views and publications, for speaking out about what he witnessed around him. In prisons like Newgate, 'gaol fever' (typhus) was rampant due to overcrowding,

particularly amongst political prisoners. The chances of Blake becoming ill and even dying awaiting trial, which could take months, were very real.

When do you plan or hope to finish this biography?

In time for the exhibition that I am curating for the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, 'William Blake, Apprentice & Master', that is due to open in November 2014. That is, if I can finish it as well as the exhibition and exhibition catalogue in time!

Could you describe your plans for this new exhibition and how it will differ from the others that you have curated that were shown in London, New York and Paris?

The exhibitions at Tate Britain and the Metropolitan Museum of Art, in particular the former, were intended to be comprehensive, to show hundreds of examples of Blake's work in every medium. The exhibition in Paris was smaller though still containing nearly 200 works. As the first major exhibition of Blake in France, and the first in Paris of any kind devoted to Blake since 1947, it was intended to re-introduce Blake to the French public, and expand their knowledge of him, which had been very largely confined to his poetry and in particular to the *Songs* and *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*.

The exhibition planned for the Ashmolean Museum will present three major phases in the life and work of William Blake, reflecting the exhibition's theme. Blake's apprenticeship, as poet, painter and printmaker, will occupy the first of three galleries. His work as master artist-printmaker, technical innovator, painter and revolutionary poet of the prophetic books, will be presented in the second gallery, the centerpiece of which will be a full-scale reconstruction of his printmaking studio in Lambeth where during the 1790s he produced his most revolutionary illuminated books and separate prints. In the third gallery the theme is expanded, on the one hand with Blake looking back to the master artist-printmakers of the Renaissance that he emulated in a final set of astonishing graphic works produced in the last years of his life, and on the other, to how at this same time he inspired and guided the circle of young artist-printmakers who gathered around him, including Samuel Palmer, George Richmond and Edward Calvert, and the astonishing visionary landscapes that they produced as result. In a fourth gallery a nineteenth-century star-wheel rolling press will be set up where I will demonstrate how Blake printed his illuminated books, a practical realization of one of the educational themes running throughout the exhibition, that of graphic technique and innovation.

I have only two more questions that I would like to ask. The first is about the William Blake Archive. The internet has become an enormously useful tool to know and to be able to study Blake. In your opinion, what is the importance of the William Blake Archive?

It is an extraordinary aid particularly for those coming to Blake for the first time, and for scholars, enabling both in a truly accessible form to be able to see a broad range of copies of each of the illuminated books, to compare plates from each copy, side by side, and enlarge details for close study. Before the internet this would only have been possible by traveling to a collection to study the copies there, and then go on to another collection to see and study more, a privilege only a few scholars were able to enjoy. Now everyone can see these copies on line. But it is all-important to acknowledge that the William Blake Archive cannot replace the need for scholars to see Blake's works first hand, not if they are to be able to understand how they were made, and to fully appreciate their astonishing beauty. For the public, this is the importance of exhibitions. For it is exhibitions of original copies that provide the opportunity for us all to see Blake's works as he intended.

We have spoken earlier of recovering how Blake produced his illuminated books and the difficulties that he encountered. You have recently taken this research even further, in re-creating relief-etched copper plates from several of the illuminated books and making them available on your own website, <http://www.williamblakeprints.co.uk/>. Given that none of Blake's original relief-etched copper plates of the illuminated books have survived, it is remarkable to read your description of how you have been able to re-create them, to see examples of these copper plates and impressions that you have printed using the same historic materials that Blake used. In conclusion, can you tell us something more about your website and the purpose the plates and impressions you have made serve?

The website now records and makes available the results of more than 20 years of research and experimentation in the studio. Relief-etched copper plates that I have re-created from the *Songs*, *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, *America a Prophecy*, *Europe a Prophecy* and *Jerusalem* may now be viewed by going on line to the site.

The impressions are printed using old papers that match those that Blake selected to print on. Similarly, the inks are mixed from the same historic pigments that were available to and used by Blake and duplicate the unique colours that he created. The website shows examples of these as well as

explaining in greater detail how both the plates and impressions have been made.

Very largely, examples have been purchased by college and university libraries to use in teaching. They make it possible for students to see and study impressions printed in monochrome that are all but indistinguishable from the originals. Examples have also been purchased for private and public collections specializing in Blake, including the Lessing J. Rosenwald Collection in the Library of Congress, the British Library, and Victoria University Library of the University of Toronto. It has been enormously gratifying to have the results of my research called upon and acknowledged in both of these ways.

Michael, congratulations for your inspiring work. Thank you very much for this interview, it was very kind of you. The Brazilian readers of Blake say thanks.