R E V I E W

Marsha Keith Schuchard. *A Concatenation of Conspiracies: "Irish" William Blake and Illuminist Freemasonry in 1798*. Alexandria, VA: Plumbstone Academic, 2021. x + 119 pp. $33.97, hardcover.

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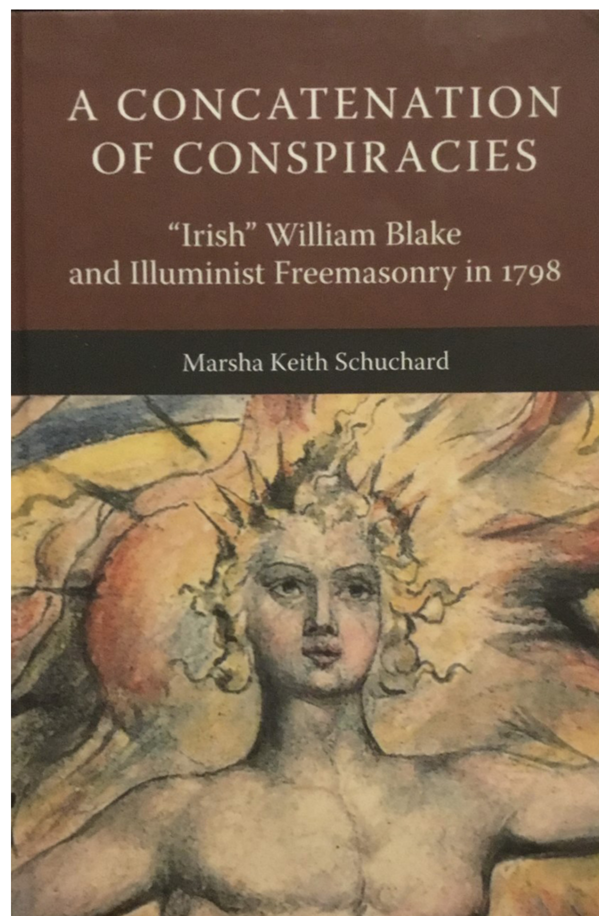

1 THIS readable and compelling study, focusing on the tempestuous 1790s in England, Ireland, Scotland, and Europe and the culmination of events in the Irish uprising of 1798, yields important new insights on Blake and his historical context. Schuchard's research in Moravian archives in 2001 (Davies, "William Blake in Contexts" 4) (with subsequent collaboration with Keri Davies) resulted in the announcement in 2004 in these pages of her startling discovery that Blake's mother had attended the Moravian Church, and that the church took a decided interest in—as it did with all church members—Catherine Wright's marriage to her first husband, Thomas Armitage. This, along with Schuchard's further research on Blake and Moravianism and other sects in *William Blake's Sexual Path to Spiritual Vision*, was sparked by the revelations in E. P. Thompson's *Witness against the Beast* (120-21) and subsequently in Davies's "William Blake's Mother: A New Identification" about that first marriage. *A Concatenation of Conspiracies* expands upon this groundbreaking work.

2 Schuchard's preface to *Concatenation* reveals that it began with the exhibition Up in Arms! The 1798 Rebellion in Ireland (Ulster Museum, Belfast, 1998) and resultant public comment on the role of Freemasonry (1-2). Thus, her interest in Blake and Moravian and Swedenborgian sexual and spiritual beliefs and practices was conjoined to her early work on Freemasons and other groups (her dissertation had been on "Freemasonry, Secret Societies, and the Continuity of the Occult Traditions in English Literature"). The book's focus on 1798 provides a brilliant basis for her exploration of how the historical context of events, movements, and actions, which involved various lodges of Freemasons as well as the Brotherhood of United Irishmen (BUI), led to the Irish rebellion and likely affected Blake in London. Her thesis is, basically, that acts of suppression—including the Unlawful Societies Act—under William Pitt's increasingly paranoid government also influenced Blake's artistic works and the course of his life. Separate publications in 1797 by the Abbé Augustin Barruel and John Robison convinced many of their contemporaries that Freemasons, Illuminati, and groups like the London Corresponding Society (LCS) fomented movements that led to the French Revolution, and that these societies were determined to bring a revolution to England. Inevitably, Barruel's and Robison's arguments only increased government paranoia. To establish her argument, Schuchard offers many details from Blake's writings, both prose—especially letters—and poetry; cites his movements; and suggests links between activities of members of such organizations as the LCS and BUI, who "often met in taverns in Lambeth" (*Concatenation* 39).

3 In her earlier monograph, Schuchard speculated as to why there is resistance to her contentions regarding Blake and the esoteric and erotic background of the more radical Swedenborgian and Moravian sects, and why so many have shied away from the ideas she examines: "Sensible academic critics have cautiously refrained from taking the plunge, for this kind of historical detective work must reject most academic conventional wisdom about the eighteenth century … and dig deep into the esoteric underground of the mystical counterculture" (*William Blake* 10). Also, because of attacks on such dissenting sects and secret societies by writers like Barruel and Robison, records were destroyed and connections denied and downplayed. Since secrecy and subterfuge were necessary, how does one uncover the truth behind historical figures and their relationship to ideas that could have compromised their liberty, safety, or indeed lives?

4 Despite this hurdle, Schuchard's arguments are convincing on many levels. The possibility that Blake's very possession of a printing press (or more accurately, a star-wheel rolling press) endangered him so much after the sedition acts that he was virtually forced to leave London for Felpham on the Sussex coast is intriguing (72-73). If, as she contends, he was in danger of being turned in by neighbors or passersby who could see his press through the windows of Hercules Buildings in Lambeth, clearly he might have had a compelling reason to leave. All the same, if Blake was so paranoid, couldn't he have hidden his activities behind a curtain, and what about the fact that he told John Flaxman in a letter of 21 September 1800 that all of his and Catherine's worldy goods were transported in "Seven Different Chaises … with Sixteen heavy boxes & portfolios full of prints" for the full day's move to Felpham, including, presumably, the disassembled press (E 710)? Also, in making this case, Schuchard describes him as "in September 1800 writing of his 'Nervous Fear'" (*Concatenation* 73). It is always tempting to read between the lines when it comes to the compromising radical ideologies that Blake clearly held and sympathized with, but this quotation (from a letter of 12 September to Flaxman) appears not in a discursive form but in a poem—perhaps deliberately set up this way to elude suspicion, but the context is different from that implied by Schuchard:

> The American War began   All its dark horrors passed before my face
> Across the Atlantic to France. Then the French Revolution commencd in thick clouds
> And My Angels have told me. that seeing such visions I could not subsist on the Earth
> But by my conjunction with Flaxman   who knows to forgive Nervous Fear
> (lines 9-12 of "To My Dearest Friend John Flaxman," E 708)

Blake's reference to the historical events that so threatened the sovereignty of the British nation does stand out, but is this enough to establish that fear for his life and freedom on account of Pitt's repressive legislation caused him to leave London? Earlier the same summer, he had explained to George Cumberland that he was only beginning "to Emerge from a Deep pit of Melancholy, Melancholy without any real reason for it" (E 706). Was it "Melancholy" for no reason, or "Nervous Fear," or both that made Blake quit London? Or was it simply opportunity?

5 David Erdman cites the very same letter to Flaxman to support the centrality of the American Revolution in Blake's intellectual development and core convictions, and contends that ignoring this crucial fact in his identity on the part of critics "comes … as much from a failure to enter imaginatively into Blake's times as it does from a failure to enter Blake's imagination" (*Prophet* 5). Martin Price, in an early review of *Prophet against Empire*, accused Erdman of a "'conversion downwards' that throughout the book seems in effect to invert Blake's figural method into political pamphleteering" (quoted in Rose 48). Schuchard's tendency to quote Blake's poems, then, as "political pamphleteering" (as Price would have it), or as statements of biographical fact, is also evident in Erdman's work and in Bentley's biography, *Stranger from Paradise*, and is perhaps unavoidable given the gaps in our knowledge of Blake.

6 Would it be fair to dub all these studies "visionary history," in which imagination is definitely and inevitably at play in the reconstruction of a milieu? Schuchard's ability to conjure up a vivid picture of Blake's physical surroundings and their influence on him—for instance, the area around the Royal Academy and Basire's studio, where Blake was apprenticed—is striking. Proximity to the Freemasons was made much of in her earlier work: "Young Blake now moved into the engraver's studio at 31 Great Queen Street, where for the next seven years he was situated in the heart of London's Masonic world" (*William Blake* 147). Sometimes, with as much detail as is provided by Schuchard, one can easily feel immersed in an approximation of the milieu that Blake inhabited, which indeed yields material for promising speculation. In quoting an entry from Joseph Farington's diary for 1797, in which he records a discussion about Blake with fellow Royal Academicians Thomas Stothard and John Hoppner, she notes that "the Academicians often met at Freemasons' Tavern on Great Queen Street, next door to Freemasons' Hall, where they had access to a great variety of initiates, both native and foreign" (*Concatenation* 9-10), and she explains that "Stothard was a Master Mason in a liberal 'Antient' lodge, while John Hoppner was an initiate of a conservative 'Modern' lodge" and that "the volatile Fuseli expressed radical notions and was in touch with illuminist Freemasons from Switzerland and

Germany" (10, 11). She contextualizes Blake's neighborhood by citing Masonic groups sympathetic to the BUI that met in Lambeth's Oakley Arms tavern (84) and pointing to his ties to the Lambeth Asylum for Female Orphans, asserting that he and his wife actually attended services at the chapel (*Concatenation* 14). This is puzzling, though, for she specifies two sources for this information, Erdman and Clarke Garrett. Erdman certainly mentions the orphanage and Blake's possible connections to it, but according to him it was William Hayley—not Blake—who in "January 1793" visited the asylum (*Prophet* 290n18). He does comment that a William Blake in 1779 "appears in a list of subscribers to *Discourses on Various Subjects*" by Jacob Duché,[1] but questions if this is "our" Blake (11-12n19). In *Respectable Folly*, Garrett says simply that "William Blake may have been one of the mystically inclined artists and engravers" who attended Duché's meetings (158). It may be quite probable, but there is no definite proof in these sources, at least.

7 Still, Schuchard shows that although Edwin Ellis and W. B. Yeats were wrong in their famously absurd and inaccurate assertion that Blake was Irish, he may have been an Irish sympathizer. Weaving her tapestry of clues from the historical record, she contends that the many and diffuse connections between Blake, Swedenborgianism and Moravianism, Masonry, and the BUI indicate that he did, at least in social discourse and in art, support the Irish rebellion of 1798, and subtly displayed his sympathy with the Irish cause by allusions to such charged symbols as the winged-maiden harp, a national emblem used by the BUI. She cites Catherine McClenahan's observation "that Blake referred to Ireland 'only once before 1797 (in *America*), but 17 times afterward, 14 in *Jerusalem*'" (*Concatenation* 90, see n234), and, by juxtaposing a reproduction of the title page of *Jerusalem* (80) with a spy report's mention of a Yorkshire "Society … under the title of New Jerusalemites" (*Second Report of the Committee of Secrecy* [1802], quoted in *Concatenation* 81), she implies that Blake's poem alludes to such groups. Furthermore, echoing McClenahan's contention that the female figure in the lower-right corner of the title page appears "in the form of an Irish harp" (87, caption) and citing other "minute particulars," Schuchard bolsters her point that Blake sympathized with the Irish cause—a dangerous opinion for him to hold.

8 Much careful and original archival work by Schuchard provides support for her arguments, though, as indicated here, conclusions are sometimes overstated. The significance of the word "concatenation" (from a phrase in Barruel's *Memoirs Illustrating the History of Jacobinism*, which serves as one of the epigraphs) as a controlling metaphor for her hypotheses becomes apparent; however, are all of the things she points out simply "occurring together," or are they "linked together" (from the Merriam-Webster definition of the word)? Each reader must ultimately decide, but perhaps we should remember, to quote Blake's *Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, that "what is now proved was once, only imagin'd" (E 36).

1. Duché was an Anglo-American minister who was chaplain of the asylum for several years and became a Swedenborgian (Erdman and Garrett give conflicting dates for Duché's tenure at the asylum).

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