

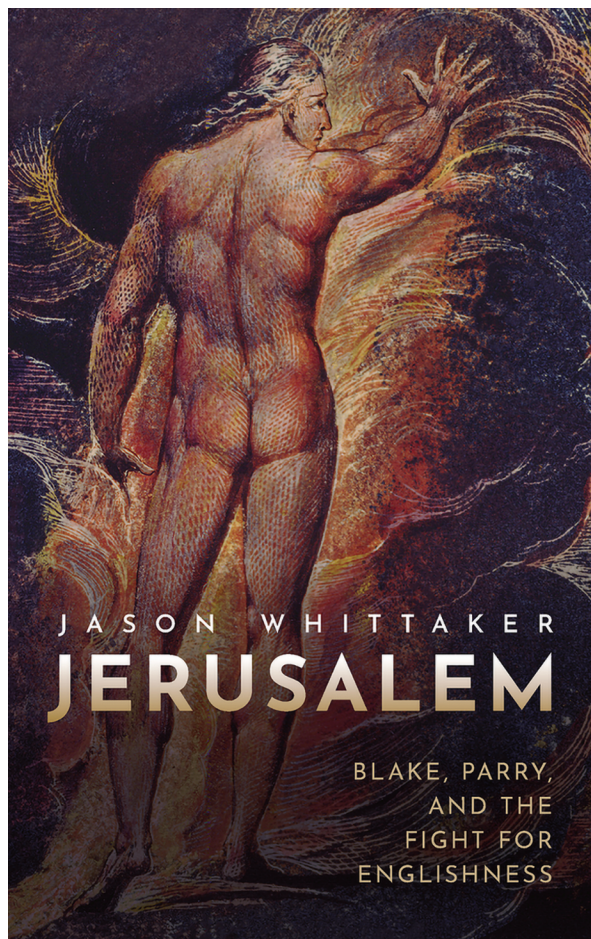
Jason Whittaker. *Jerusalem: Blake, Parry, and the Fight for Englishness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022. 249 pp. £28.99/\$38.99, hardcover; £12.99/\$38.99, e-book.

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- 1 **B**LAKE famously stated "Without Contraries is no progression," and the history of the hymn "Jerusalem" proves his dictum. Elevated to the status of anthem, the opening lines of *Milton*, set to music by Hubert Parry in 1916, have been adopted not only by national teams in sporting events but also by antagonistic political forces and by a diverse multitude of artists. Such a phenomenon demonstrates that Blake's ode to England accommodates a polyphony of voices with different understandings of the meaning and implications of Englishness. This is precisely the sum and substance of Jason Whittaker's *Jerusalem: Blake, Parry, and the Fight for Englishness*. By presenting a well-knit study of the hymn's history and reception, Whittaker examines in detail how "Jerusalem" has been converted into an ambivalent and often problematic emblem of patriotism and nationalism, terms translated by George Orwell as the "love of home" in opposition to the "fear of the other" (Whittaker 19).¹
- 2 The opening chapter is dedicated to an account of the context in which the epic *Milton* was produced. In order to shed light on the contrast between—and irony of—Blake's radical political stands and the conservative movement for which the hymn was initially composed, Whittaker rightfully evokes Blake's trial for sedition, which took place

1. See Orwell's essays "England Your England" (1941) and "Notes on Nationalism" (1945).



around the time that the poem was penned. After an altercation with a soldier in the village of Felpham in the first year of the Napoleonic Wars, Blake was accused of treason for uttering seditious words against the king, an offense that could have landed him in prison. This episode reinforced his disapproval of war and violence, conveyed by the manifesto that opens *Milton* and underlined by the oxymoronic appropriation of martial imagery in the stanzas of "And did those feet": "Mental Fight" and "Arrows of desire." Whittaker traces the genealogy and sources of the poem, demonstrating Blake's departure from the notion that Western civilization is modeled on Greek antiquity and calling attention to the Judeo-Christian influence to sustain, among other things, his view that the feet Blake refers to are those of Joseph of Arimathea, the precursor of the Christian faith in England, according to twelfth-century legends.

- 3 Chapter 2 discusses the circulation and reception of the opening stanzas of *Milton*, placing emphasis on the difficulties found with the prophetic books by early critics such as Blake's biographer Alexander Gilchrist, Algernon Charles Swinburne, and, most notably, W. B. Yeats and Edwin J. El-

lis, who published the controversial yet indispensable *Works of William Blake* in 1893, which offered an allegorical and overtly mystic interpretation of the English poet, but nonetheless helped to boost Blake's popularity in the twentieth century. Whittaker highlights the pivotal role of anthologies in the dissemination of "And did those feet," once the lines were detached from their original and rather cryptic context. He argues that anthologies, which are often thematic, were also responsible for the promotion of certain interpretations; the very early inclusion of the stanzas in nationalist-tinted collections fostered a perception of them as a defense of England's supremacy, which appealed to the spirit of the time, although utterly disregarded what nationalism or Englishness meant to Blake. This was precisely the case for Henry Charles Beeching's *A Paradise of English Poetry* (1893)² and Robert Bridges's *The Spirit of Man* (1915, published 1916). The latter played a crucial role in the composition of Parry's famed setting, for Bridges—after a meeting of Fight for Right, a movement deeply connected to Britain's War Propaganda Bureau—offered a copy to the composer and asked him to set *Milton's* opening lines to music as an endeavor to boost morale. Whittaker assigns equal importance to the earliest musical rendering of "And did those feet" (1907, published 1908), by Henry Walford Davies, Parry's former student, who set a handful of Blake's poems to music at a time when Blake was still paving his way toward the English canon.

4 The third chapter focuses on the context in which Parry's setting was produced and problematizes the intrinsic contradictions of the composition: for instance, Parry wrote the music to support the war against Germany while highly sympathetic toward German culture; on the political spectrum, he was some kind of moderate Liberal, but composed the hymn for a rather conservative movement, under the influence of his comrades Walford Davies and Bridges. After withdrawing his support from Fight for Right for its escalating jingoistic propaganda, Parry found a more suitable home for the hymn with the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies (NUWSS); a rearranged version, with "Jerusalem" as its official name, was performed in support of the campaign for Votes for Women in 1918. Significantly, Parry left the copyright to the NUWSS.

5 In chapter 4, the book moves on to the interwar period, when the fluidity of "Jerusalem" in the political spectrum becomes even more evident. Whittaker argues that the new arrangement by Edward Elgar in 1922 not only secured

2. Whittaker also mentions Beeching's anthology *Lyra Sacra* (1895), which puts together the lines of "And did those feet" and a fragment from *Jerusalem*. The combined form is titled "The New Jerusalem," a detail that cannot go unnoticed, given the later title of the hymn.

Parry's setting in the canon but also elevated it to the status of anthem, while restoring its former nationalistic appeal and diluting its association with progressive causes. In the following decade, the anthem was readopted by the Left in an attempt to resurrect Blake's revolutionary spirit. The political momentum embodied by the British Labour Party leader, Clement Attlee, added new layers of interpretation to the hymn. Drawing attention to images once overlooked, the Left underscored the perniciousness of industrialization by harnessing Blake's evocation of "dark Satanic Mills," and converted it into a well-established expression. Whittaker also highlights the recording in 1939 by the African-American actor and singer Paul Robeson, known for his political activism, which reinforced the anti-establishment appeal of "Jerusalem."

6 The tide turned and the turbulent waters of the Second World War awakened the nationalist spirit. The anthem was appropriated by the Right once more, but the public response was less celebratory and more pragmatic, compared to the early days of the Fight for Right movement, because of concerns about the prospect of a catastrophic defeat. Surprisingly, the Allies' victory in 1945 didn't translate into a favorable result in the polls for the Conservatives, and Labour took power for the rest of the forties, adopting "Jerusalem" as the hymn of the postwar welfare state. The Conservative administration that followed in the fifties encouraged the singing of the anthem in schools as part of the propaganda of empire. In 1953, "Jerusalem" featured in the film of the coronation of Elizabeth II and enjoyed patriotism's *heure de gloire* when it was incorporated into the closing section of the Last Night of the Proms.

7 As Whittaker demonstrates in chapter 5, in the next two decades the revolution that again changed the status of "Jerusalem" was less political than cultural. Defiant baby boomers sneered at the outdated and tacky symbols of a crumbled empire and Parry's hymn was deemed an obsolete reminder of the past. In desacralizing "Jerusalem," this new generation turned it into a rather ambivalent and profane symbol of Englishness. Neoteric visions of it began to emerge in popular culture as a reflection of the spirit and tastes of the time. Whittaker duly stresses that the social backgrounds of the artists had a role to play; they were particularly keen to use Blake's words against the purposes to which Parry's hymn had often been put. In music, it was adapted to a variety of genres: Don Partridge's folk, a bolero by the Castells, and a progressive version by the trio Emerson, Lake & Palmer. In the TV and film industry, "Jerusalem" was largely used as an ironic or metaphorical trope, as in the case of Monty Python and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, etc. While not particularly celebratory, the sixties and seventies indubitably imbued "Jerusalem" with new life and secured its endurance for the next generation.

- 8 When Whittaker turns his eyes and ears to the eighties, he observes the ironic tone of the sixties and seventies giving way to hostility in the emerging and marginal punk scene in England. Thatcherism resulted in an even more aggressive form of patriotism, stirred by the Falklands War; an unprecedented antagonism toward unions and social movements; and a blind devotion to the “free-market god.” In chapter 6, Whittaker offers a gloomy portrait of the gray and unpleasant land that England had become in the name of the so-called progress cemented in the nostalgic grandeur of the old and mouldy empire of the never-setting sun. As a more immediate result, Parry’s anthem was reestablished as a trope of Englishness. The end of the Thatcher era in the 1990s represented an opening for more promising and inclusive forms of Englishness to arise. The Left was inspired by the socialist ideals of the postwar Labour Party, which were reechoed in the versions of “Jerusalem” by Billy Bragg and Test Dept. The two decades from the height of punk to the fall of the Conservative Party from office in 1997 saw a remarkable transformation of the political, artistic, and cultural contexts in which “Jerusalem” would henceforth be invoked. Whittaker also remarks on the escalating influence of the opening lines of *Milton* on writers such as Kenzaburō Ōe, Angela Carter, and J. G. Ballard, to name a few.
- 9 Chapter 7 is devoted to the reception of “Jerusalem” from the end of the 1990s into the 2000s, from the rise of Tony Blair to the controversial referendum in 2016 on whether the United Kingdom should leave the European Union. Ingrained in the English collective unconscious, the imagery of “Jerusalem” framed new myths, like that of Diana, Princess of Wales, in Elton John’s elegy “Goodbye England’s Rose” (1997). As a well-established emblem of the nation, the hymn featured in the royal wedding (2011), the Diamond Jubilee (2012), and the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games in London (2012).
- 10 Whittaker argues that the adoption of “Jerusalem” as an anthem in the arena of sports is less ecumenical than in the aforementioned examples. By celebrating England and its green and pleasant fields alone, the stanzas inevitably stress the intrinsically fractured nature of the United Kingdom. “Jerusalem” was declared the official anthem of England for the 2010 Commonwealth Games, and has been sung by England supporters at cricket and rugby union matches, though less so at the football. In an analogous divisive spirit, in 2016 the right wing used the words as a rallying cry of the Brexit campaign; the vote was, ironically enough, in the same year as the centennial of Parry’s setting.
- 11 As a counterweight to virulent jingoistic revivals in the 2000s, Whittaker celebrates the last few decades as the golden age in terms of artistic responses to “Jerusalem,” which bring a multiplicity of new perspectives. In music,

innovative experiments such as Bruce Dickinson’s heavy-metal version, a new tune by Bob Davenport, and the musical collage of Marc Almond and John Harle set the tone of the times. Whittaker also offers examples of playwrights, poets, novelists, filmmakers, and painters who engage with “Jerusalem” with a less sarcastic and more nonconformist attitude than that of the seventies. In addition, he emphasizes the pivotal role of multiculturalism in the expansion, problematization, and resignification of the stanzas and the hymn itself. In the epilogue, he reminds us that the One Nation that England has become is constituted by an amalgamation of peoples and ethnicities, as Blake makes explicit in his epic *Jerusalem*. Ultimately, the anthem “Jerusalem” does nothing but celebrate those origins and rouse men of the New Age to rebel against the ignorant hirelings who promote corporeal war and discord through a pernicious nationalist discourse. It epitomizes Blake’s projection of the pleasant and welcoming land he hoped England would become one day.

- 12 *Jerusalem: Blake, Parry, and the Fight for Englishness* is, beyond doubt, an indispensable book for Blake scholars and all those interested in understanding the recent history of England told through the reception of its most popular anthem. The book makes it evident that Blake’s oeuvre encapsulates ideas that can be read in today’s world through antithetical lenses, and attests that the greatest works of art, for good and bad, are “self-living” and pay no heed to the artist’s motives.