

Recovering the Lost Moravian History of William Blake's Family

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ABSTRACT. This paper seeks to amend and extend Keri Davies's essay on Blake's mother published in *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* in 1999.¹ There, he established that Blake's mother Catherine's true maiden name was Wright, and that Thomas Armitage, her first husband, was born in Royston, Yorkshire in 1722, the son of Richard Armitage of Cudworth. Davies also produced evidence that contradicted E. P. Thompson's Muggletonian hypothesis, and speculated upon the identity of Blake's maternal grandparents. We now link Blake's mother to a very different religious community, providing further evidence about her first marriage, and correcting the assumptions Davies made in identifying Blake's grandparents. These latest discoveries about Blake's mother disclose her place of birth (Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire), the names of her parents and siblings, and her association with the Moravian sect. Documentary and autographic records in the archive of the distinctive and exceptional eighteenth-century Moravian church, some dating from many years before the poet was born, are a vivid indicator of how much of our thinking about Blake's life and early influences might need to be revised and rewritten in the future.

Biographical discussion of William Blake has long been dominated by unexamined commonplaces regarding his family background, his early religious allegiance, and other aspects of his life and personality. Three persistent *topoi* dominate the nearly two hundred years of biographical writing about Blake. First, present even in Malkin's *A Father's Memoirs of His Child*, is the question of Blake's sanity (what Malkin calls "the hue and cry of madness").² Second, there is the belief that Blake had no contemporary audience, and thus we in posterity are Blake's true disciples. And third, the most misleading, because the least examined, the insistence that he came from a radical dissenting family.³

1. Keri Davies, "William Blake's Mother: A New Identification," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 33.2 (fall 1999): 36-50.

2. Benjamin Heath Malkin, *A Father's Memoirs of His Child* (London: printed for Longman, Hurst, Rees, and Orme, 1806) xxii. And even earlier, in 1794, Richard Twiss wrote of Blake: "I suppose the man to be mad; but he draws very well" (Letter to Francis Douce, 13 September 1794. Bodleian Library MS. Douce d.39 fol.70v). See Keri Davies, "Mrs. Bliss: A Blake Collector of 1794," *Blake in the Nineties*, ed. Steve Clark and David Worrall (Basingstoke: Macmillan; New York: St. Martin's, 1999) 212-30.

3. The assumption, on next to no evidence, that the Blake family belonged to some group that rejected Anglican teaching; isolated and exclusive, doctrinally eccentric, somewhat like the Muggletonians.

A recent example of the madness *topos* appeared during the Tate Britain "William Blake" exhibition of 2000-01. Thomas Stuttaford, the *Times* medical correspondent, devoted his column to a diagnosis of Blake's "schizophrenia." Stuttaford wrote, "although he was obsessively hard-working, Blake was also fascinated by the mystical from an early age, which is another symptom displayed by those suffering from schizophreniform troubles."⁴ As long ago as 1925, in his short witty biography of Blake, Harold Bruce commented on the mad-or-not-mad *topos*:

To say confidently that Blake suffered from mythomania, or from automatism, or from occasional hyper-aesthesia, or from manic-depressive tendencies, or that he did not tend 'towards a definite schizophrenia,' is to add polysyllables rather than illumination to the discussion of his state.⁵

The second *topos* is that indicated by Alexander Gilchrist in the subtitle to his biography of 1863: *pictor ignotus*—the unknown painter—and with it the idea that Blake had no contemporary audience. But there is plentiful evidence of that contemporary audience. In 1794, Joseph Johnson, one of the foremost progressive publishers of the decade, was displaying Blake's books for prospective customers.⁶ Bentley's *Blake Books* lists sixty-one persons who bought copies of the illuminated books in Blake's lifetime or shortly after.⁷ Blair's *Grave* (1808) with Blake's illustrations had no fewer than 578 subscribers.

The third assumption, the dissenting *topos*, first appears in Crabb Robinson's essay "William Blake, Künstler, Dichter und religiöser Schwärmer" of 1811.⁸ There Robinson notes that Blake belonged "von Geburt zu einer dissentirenden Gemeinde"—from birth to a dissenting sect. But this was written before Crabb Robinson ever met Blake. In the later account of Blake in Robinson's diary, there is no further indication that he belonged "zu einer dissentirenden Gemeinde." The diary account was written after Robinson had met Blake and become genuinely interested in him; Robinson records his conversations with Blake after they met in 1825 but never again does he call Blake a Dissenter.⁹

4. Thomas Stuttaford, "Blake: Mad or Just Bizarre?" (medical briefing), *The Times* 30 November 2000.

5. Harold Lawton Bruce, *William Blake in This World* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1925) 110-11.

6. See Davies, "Mrs. Bliss" 212-30.

7. G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977). Davies's count.

8. Henry Crabb Robinson, "William Blake, Künstler, Dichter und religiöser Schwärmer," *Vaterländisches Museum* 1 (January 1811): 107-31. The German text is reprinted in G. E. Bentley, Jr., *Blake Records* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969) 432-47, and translated on 448-55.

9. Crabb Robinson's diary references to Blake are conveniently reprinted in Bentley, *Blake Records* 224-26, 228-29, 231-32, 235, 309-26, 331-32, 337-38, 367-68, 371, 578.

Alexander Gilchrist's *Life* remains our only source for much of what we know of Blake's biography.¹⁰ Gilchrist worked on his biography in the late 1850s when a number of people who knew Blake were still alive, and it is this first or second-hand information from those who knew Blake in his later years that gives Gilchrist's *Life* its continuing authority. Gilchrist makes very little use of documentary sources or public records. This means that his biography is weakest for Blake's life before he met Palmer and Linnell, Gilchrist's chief informants, and for any information about his family.

It was not until 1906 that Arthur Symons consulted the parish registers of St. James's Piccadilly, to establish the dates of birth of William's brothers and sister.¹¹ It took until 1947 for H. M. Margoliouth to locate the marriage of James and Catherine, William's parents (James Blake married Catherine "Harmitage" at the Mayfair Chapel, 15 October 1751).¹² Bentley's *Blake Records* spreads the known information about Blake's life over 418 pages. But the years 1757 to 1800, half of his life, occupy just the first 61 pages. Bentley adds little to Gilchrist, Symons, and Margoliouth about Blake's childhood and parentage.

E. P. Thompson's acclaimed *Witness Against the Beast* is a recent example of the persistence of unexamined and unverified ideas in Blake studies.¹³ It became widely accepted that Thompson "offers plausible evidence to suggest that Blake's mother may well have come from a family with Muggletonian connections."¹⁴ In reality, the Muggletonians were a small Protestant sect whose membership is largely identifiable and contains no Blake relatives. Thompson does, however, make the extraordinarily important discovery that Catherine, Blake's mother, was married twice, first to Thomas Armitage (whom Thompson calls "Hermitage") and then to James Blake. This, in turn, led to Keri Davies's discovery of the date of Catherine Blake's first marriage and her true maiden name (Wright). We can now confidently say that Catherine Wright married Thomas Armitage on 14 December 1746, was widowed in 1751, and married James Blake in October 1752.

Davies suggested in 1999 that Blake's mother was the daughter of John and Elizabeth Wright of the parish of St. Martin-in-the-Fields. Assuming Catherine Wright to be a Londoner seemed the simplest explanation, the one that gave the best fit with the known data. He was misled. He had unthinkingly accepted a fourth *topos*, one given fullest elaboration by Peter

Ackroyd: that of Blake the "cockney visionary"¹⁵ whom Davies assumed must have had a cockney mother.

Davies concluded in 1999 by stressing how the surviving evidence not only does not support Thompson's claims of a Muggletonian background to the Blake family, but in fact does not even support the conventional view of the Blakes as Radical Dissenters. The research reported in this present paper is the result of a suggestion made by the nineteenth-century facsimilist William Muir regarding Blake's early religious affiliation, which we felt warranted further investigation.¹⁶

The nature of Blake's religious background and development has long been insufficiently defined. In 1828 John Thomas Smith reported that William Blake had not attended "any place of Divine Worship" for the last forty years of his life.¹⁷ Nancy Bogen suggests that "it seems reasonable to suppose that he was connected with a religious organization prior to that time, that is, before 1787. Indeed, Blake must have received some sort of religious training as a youth—but of what denomination remains to be seen."¹⁸

The evidence of an Anglican marriage ceremony (though, without reading of banns or bishop's license, it was technically "clandestine"), and baptism of children in the parish church, but later family burials at Bunhill Fields, suggests that the Blake family were originally Anglican, but that later on, after 28 January 1764 when the youngest child of the family (William's sister Catherine) was baptized, they may have become members of some dissenting congregation.¹⁹

But another way of resolving this problem of Blake's early religion is suggested by an item in his deathbed conversation. It seems that during the course of discussing his last wishes, he had expressed a preference for burial in Bunhill Fields, the Dissenters' burial ground, and Mrs. Blake offered him a choice as to funeral arrangements; that is, "either he would have the Dissenting Minister, or the Clergyman of the Church of England, to read the service."²⁰ It's as though Catherine, his own wife, did not know where his preferences lay. Blake, in this account, chose the Church of England. The possibil-

10. Alexander Gilchrist, *The Life of William Blake: Pictor Ignotus*, 2 vols. (London and Cambridge: Macmillan, 1863).

11. Arthur Symons, "The Family of William Blake," *Athenaeum* no. 4096 (1906): 515-16.

12. H. M. Margoliouth, "The Marriage of Blake's Parents," *Notes & Queries* vol. 192 (6 September 1947): 380-81.

13. E. P. Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast: William Blake and the Moral Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

14. Roy Porter [review of Thompson, *Witness Against the Beast*], *English Historical Review* vol. 111, no. 442 (June 1996): 743-44.

15. Peter Ackroyd, "Cockney Visionaries," *The Independent* 18 December 1993: 27, and in his *Blake* (London: Sinclair-Stevenson, 1995) passim.

16. On William Muir (1845-1938), see G. E. Bentley, Jr., "Blake ... Had No Quaritch': The Sale of William Muir's Blake Facsimiles," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 27.1 (summer 1993): 4-13, and Keri Davies, "William Muir and the Blake Press at Edmonton with Muir's letters to Kerrison Preston," *Blake/An Illustrated Quarterly* 27.1 (summer 1993): 14-25.

17. John Thomas Smith, *Nollekens and his Times* (London: Henry Colburn, 1828). Cited in Bentley, *Blake Records* 458. Smith (1766-1833) had known the Blake family as a boy and had, according to his own account, been a playfellow of Blake's younger brother, Robert.

18. Nancy Bogen, "The Problem of Blake's Early Religion," *The Personalist* vol. 49 no. 4 (autumn 1968): 509.

19. Bentley, *Blake Records* 7-8, has suggested adherence to a Baptist church.

20. Bentley, *Blake Records* 476.

ity then raised by Nancy Bogen is that Blake and his family were Anglicans and at the same time maintained a connection with the Moravian Church.²¹ The position of this body in England during the eighteenth century was quite unusual. While it was recognized by an Act of Parliament as an episcopal church and therefore a sister to the Church of England, its members were still required to have their places of worship licensed as Dissenting chapels. In other words, they *were* and then again *were not* Dissenters. Also, having been more intent on evangelizing than proselytizing, the Moravians encouraged those who joined their congregation not to sever their tie with whatever denomination they had been born into. The Moravians were only too pleased when they could lead their adherents back to the local parish church for the ministration of the vicar.²² Accordingly, one could be an Anglican and a Moravian at the same time—and it turns out that a majority of the English brethren were and remained loyal members of the Church of England.

This theory of Blake's Moravian connection was first advanced by Thomas Wright and later enlarged upon by Margaret Ruth Lowery, their informal source of information having been William Muir. It deserves a fair hearing because Muir was explicit; that is, according to him, Blake's parents "attended the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane"—and such a chapel did exist, having been established around 1738. Muir and Wright suggested the influence of Moravian hymns on Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*, while Lowery notes the "striking resemblance" between Blake's "The Lamb" (E 8-9) and the Moravian James Hutton's hymn, "O Lamb of God So Mild."²³

In 1743 the names "Mr. and Mrs. Blake" appeared on the register of the Fetter Lane Society, at a time when seventy-two members formed "The Congregation of the Lamb," a society "within the Church of England in union with the Moravian Brethren." The Blake couple were perhaps William's grandparents, James Blake's parents. And it even may be that the Mr. and Mrs. Parker on the 1743 list were the parents of Blake's later business partner, James Parker. When William Muir wrote to Margaret Ruth Lowery in 1936, claiming that Blake's parents attended the Moravian Chapel in Fetter Lane, he may merely have seen the list transcribed by Abraham Reincke and published in 1873:

21. Bogen 517.

22. A. J. Lewis, *Zinzendorf, the Ecumenical Pioneer: A Study in the Moravian Contribution to Christian Mission and Unity*, Christian Lives series (London: SCM Press, 1962) 131.

23. Margaret Ruth Lowery, *Windows of the Morning: A Critical Study of William Blake's Poetical Sketches, 1783*, Yale Studies in English, 93 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1940). Pp. 14-15, 210 cite Muir, in correspondence with Wright and Lowery, as the source of the Moravian argument.

MEMBERS OF "THE FETTER LANE SOCIETY," IN LONDON.
1743.

Married Men

BELL, WILLIAM.
BENNETT, —.
BLAKE, —.
BULLY, —.
CAMDEN, —.
EWSTERS, —.
FARMER, —.
FLOOD, —.
GIBBS, —.
GLADMAN, THOMAS.
GLENDENNING, —.
GRAY, —.
HARRISON, —.
HASLIP, —.
HUGGINS, —.
HUGHES, —.
JAMES, —.
JONES, OWEN.
LEWIS, —.
MAN, —.
MARSHALL, WILLIAM.
MILLS, —.
MOORE, —.
MORGAN, —.
MOSS, —.
NEEDHAM, —.
NUNN, —.
PARKER, —.
[etc.]²⁴

Married Women

BELL, —.
BENNETT, —.
BLAKE, —.
BULLY, —.
ALTERS, —.
EWSTERS, —.
ASHBURN, —.
BROWN, (on *Swan Alley*).
GIBBS, —.
BURTON, —.
DAY, —.
GRAY, —.
DELAMOTTE, —.
HASLIP, —.
FISH, —.
HUGHES, —.
FOOT, —.
FOXWELL, —.
FROGNALL, —.
MAN, —.
GRACE, —.
MILLS, —.
HAROLD, —.
INKS, —.
LANE, —.
NEEDHAM, —.
NUNN, —.
PARKER, —.

On the other hand, Muir may just possibly have been drawing on some family tradition that originated with his great-great-uncle Alexander Tilloch, a friend of Blake's, or his great-great-aunt Margaret Tilloch, Alexander's sister.²⁵

In June 2001, M. K. Schuchard decided to take William Muir's claims about the Moravians seriously.²⁶ Informed by Davies of the existence of a Moravian Church Library and

24. Abraham Reincke, *A Register of Members of the Moravian Church and of Persons Attached to Said Church in This Country and Abroad between 1727 and 1754. Transcribed from a MS. in the Handwriting of the Rev. Abraham Reincke to be Found in the Archives of the Moravian Church at Bethlehem, PA. and Illustrated with Historical Annotations by W. C. Reichel*, Transactions, vol. 1 (Nazareth, PA: Moravian Historical Society, 1873) 294.

25. On Alexander Tilloch (1759-1825), journalist and inventor, see Bentley, *Blake Books* 928-29; *Blake Books Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) 660; *Blake Records* 32, 58.

26. Schuchard had earlier discussed possible Moravian influences on Blake in "Why Mrs. Blake Cried: Swedenborg, Blake, and the Sexual Basis of Spiritual Vision," *Esoterica* 2 (September 1999): 45-93 <<http://www.esoteric.msu.edu>>. The new Moravian findings will be fully explored in her book-length expansion of the article, forthcoming from Random House, London.

Archive (5-7 Muswell Hill, London N10 3TJ), she visited the library and discovered there several documents by Catherine and Thomas Armitage and by John Blake. Schuchard and Davies then made further exploration of this important archive. The results have proved to be of the first importance for an understanding of Blake's biography and will have serious implications for the study of his works.

There are a number of references in the archive to members of a Blake family. Thus, in November 1749: "Sister Blake an old member of the Society went to our Saviour."²⁷ Or this in 1742: "Blake is a poor vexed man, a Slave."²⁸ There is even a petition for membership in the Congregation of the Lamb addressed by one John Blake "For Brother Beoler":²⁹

Dear Brother Beoler I have a Desire to write to you and to our Saviour's Dear Congregation that I may come in a Closer connexont with them, that I may enjoy those privilidged with our Dear Saviour as his Congregation have. I made bold to Rite to you to Let you know how it stands with my hart I am a poor missarable unhappy Creature. but for such I know the Saviour Shed his Blood for. may that blood which he Shed in y^e Garden in the hall before Pilate and on the cross I say may that blood which me Clense and make me one of those that can Rejoyce in hiss wounds, and may his Death and Suf-fring be the only thing, the one thing neefull for me, to make me happy, I know I am a Sinnor and for Sutch the saviour shed his blood. O may I become a happy Sinnor from this moment and to all Eternity. O take me by the hand and hart. and Promise me to our Saviour as one as his purchase, as one he paid So great a price for as one that cost him many Tears Smarts and pain, O Lamb of God grant that I may be a memb^r of thy Congregation, and may be quite happy, from your Brother
John Blake
O take me by the hand and
hart. ec.³⁰

27. Moravian Archive: Congregation Diary, vol. III (Jan. 1749-Dec. 1749) 116.

28. Moravian Archive: Congregation Diary, vol. I (11 November 1741-23 November 1742). The term "slave" was frequently used for a believer's self-humbling in imitation of Christ. In a London sermon, Zinzendorf imagined the wounded Jesus speaking to the individual:

"Do you want me? Do you receive me? Am I acceptable to you? Do I please your heart? See, here I am! This is the way I look ... For the sake of your sins I was torn, beaten, and put to death ... Do I in this way please you? Do I please you better in the idea of a mangled slave who is thrown to the wild beasts in the circus, or in the form of the emperor who sits high on the throne and takes pleasure in the destruction of the poor creature?"

See Zinzendorf, *Nine public lectures on important subjects in religion, preached in Fetter Lane Chapel in London in the year 1746*, tr. and ed. George W. Forell (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1973) 83.

29. That is, Peter Böhler (1712-75), German-born leader of the Fetter Lane community. In 1748 Böhler was consecrated bishop of the Moravian churches of America and Great Britain.

30. Moravian Archive: MS. C/36/2/168 (undated). A number of these letters conclude, as here, with a line or lines from a Moravian hymn.

Conceivably this could be the John Blake, perhaps James Blake's brother or uncle, resident like him at 5 Glasshouse Street in 1743.³¹ The letter is typical of such requests for membership in the congregation; its stress on the blood and wounds of Christ is fully in accord with contemporary Moravian spirituality.

All this, of course, is speculation, but of much the greatest importance are the references to a Moravian Church member called Thomas Armitage (already established as the name of Blake's mother's first husband). Thus, in the Congregation Diary for 1751:

Sat. Sept. 28, 1751. Br. Armitage, being sick, and having long desired it, had the H. Communion administered to him privately. At 1:00 was Sabb[ath] L[ove] F[east] at Blooms-bury.³²

Could this really be Catherine Blake's first husband? Confirmatory data can be found in the Church Book of "The Congregation of the Lamb ... as Settled Octr 30 1742. in London," which contains a tabulated list of members. Thus, we find an entry for

Thomas Armitage Hosier Ch: of Eng^l M[arried] B[rothe]^r | [born] at Cudworth in the Parish of Royston in Yorkshire in May 1723 | [received into the Congregation] 1750 Nov. 26. | [first admitted to the Sacrament] on his sick Bed Sep: 28th 1751 | Departed this Life Nov: 19 1751³³

and a few pages later (male and female sequences are kept separate in the Church Book):

Catherine Armitage M[arried] S[iste]^r | [born] Walkingham Nottingham-shire Nov: 21st 1725 | [received into the Congregation] 1750 Nov. 26 | became a Widow & left the Congregation.³⁴

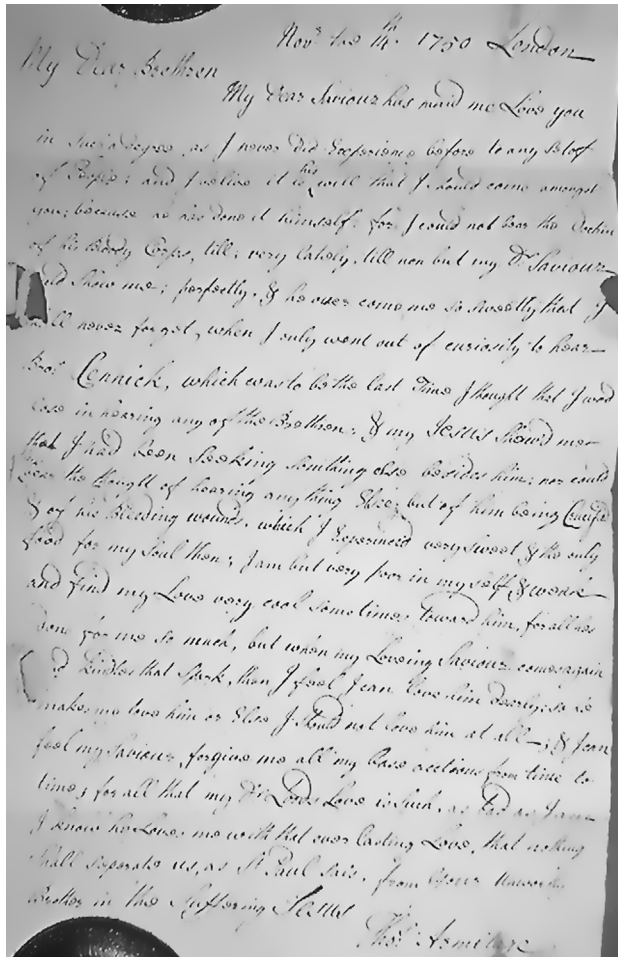
We thus see that, in 1750-51, the Moravian congregation at Fetter Lane included a young couple, Thomas and Catherine Armitage, and Thomas has the place and approximate date of birth (Royston, Yorkshire, 1723 for 1722), the profession (hosier), and the death in November 1751, already established for Catherine Blake's first husband. What is more, the archive includes documents from their hands. Persons wishing to participate fully in the Congregation of the Lamb were en-

31. Bentley, *Blake Records* 551. John Blake moved into 5 Glasshouse Street, southwest of Golden Square, Westminster, in 1743. James Blake, the poet's father, was resident in Glasshouse Street when he voted in the 1749 by-election. As Bentley points out, the evidence that John was related to James consists simply in that they lived in the same house.

32. Moravian Archive: Congregation Diary, vol. V (1751) 61.

33. Moravian Archive: MS. C/36/5/1, Church Book of the Brethren: Congregation in London, 36.

34. Moravian Archive: MS. C/36/5/1, Church Book of the Brethren: Congregation in London, 45.



1. Moravian Archive (London), MS. C/36/2/158: Letter ("Nov^r the 14th 1750 London") from Thomas Armitage "For Bro: West" to apply to Congregation of the Lamb. Reproduced with the permission of the Moravian Church Archive and Library.

couraged to make letters of application, formerly read in public at the Fetter Lane Letter Days, but after 1748 reserved for the private perusal of the congregation's elders. There survive in the Moravian Archive letters from both Thomas and Catherine Armitage (illus. 1, 2).

A letter from Thomas Armitage "For Bro: West" seeks admission to the Congregation of the Lamb.

Nov^r the 14th 1750 London

My Dear Brethren

My Dear Saviour has maid me Love you in Such a degree, as I never did Experience before to any Set of of People; and I believe it is his will that I should come amongst you; because he has done it himself, for I could not bear the Doctrine of his Bloody Corps, till; very lately, till non but my D^r Saviour could show me; perfectly, & he over came me so sweetly that I shall never forget, when I only went out of curiosity to hear Bro^r Cennick, which was to be the last Time I thought I wod care in hearing any of the Brethren; & my Jesus Show'd

me that I had been seeking something else besides him, nor could I then bear the thought of hearing anything Else; but of him being Crucified & of his Bleeding wounds, which I Experienced very Sweet & the only food for my Soul then; I am but very poor in my Self & weak and find my Love very cool sometime toward him, for all hes done for me so much, but when my Loveing Saviour comes again and kindles that Spark, then I feel I can love him dearly; so he makes me love him or Else I should not love him at all ; & I can feel my Saviour, forgive me all my base accions from time to time; for all that my D^r Lords Love is such, as bad as I am I know he Loves me with that ever lasting Love, that nothing shall separate us, as St Paul sais, from Your Unworthy Brother in the Suffering Jesus
Thos Armitage³⁵

A year later, the Congregation Diary records the death of Thomas Armitage:

23 Nov. 1751. Sabb. L.F. was at Westminster. Today was buried in Bloomsbury Ground the Body of Thomas Armitage a married Br. He was born in the Parish of Royson in Yorkshire, in May 1723, married at London, & was by trade a Hosier. He was receiv'd into the Congregation, Nov. 26 1750, and partook of the H. covenant on his sick bed, Sept. 28 1751. His sickness was a slow Consumption, of which he died last Tuesday Morning. Towards the latter end a little Fretfulness clouded his Love, which he always bore to his nearest Hearts; but the Night before he departed, he desired they would forgive him this, & took a cordial Leave afterwards of his Wife.³⁶

The Moravian Church Archive also contains a letter of application from Catherine Armitage, expressing the same intense "Blood and Wounds" Moravian spirituality as her husband's.

My Dear Bretheren & Sitors

I have very littell to say of my self for I am a pore crature and full of wants but my Dear Saviour will satisfy them all I should be glad if I could allways lay at the Cross full as I do know thanks be to him last friday at the love feast Our Saviour was pleased to make me Suck his wounds and hug the Cross more then Ever and I trust will more and more till my fraile nature can hould no more at your request I have rit but I am not worthy of the blessing it is desid^r for I do not Love our Dear Saviour halfe enough but if it is will to bring me among his hapy flock in closer conection I shall be very thankful I would tell you more of my self but itt is nothing thats good so now I will rite of my Saviour that is all Love
Here let me drink for ever drink
nor never once depart
for what I tast makes me to cry
fix at this Spring My heart
Dear Saviour thou has seen how oft

35. Moravian Archive: MS. C/36/2/158. "Bro^r Cennick" is the popular Moravian preacher and hymnodist, John Cennick (1718-55).

36. Moravian Archive: Congregation Diary, vol. V (1751) 80.

My Dear Brethren & Sisters
 I have very little to say of my self for I am
 a poor creature and full of wants but my Dear Sisters
 will satisfy them all I should be glad if I could always lay
 at the Cross full as I should thanks be to him last
 Friday at the love feast our Saviour was pleased to make me
 touch his wounds and hug the Cross more then ever
 and I trust will more and more till my frail nature
 can hold no more at your request I have not but I am not
 worthy of the blessing it is desired for I do not love our
 Dear Saviour half enough but if it is will to bring me among
 his happy flock in closer connection I shall be very thankful
 I would tell you more of my self but it is nothing that
 good so now I will write of my favours that is all done
 Here let me drink for ever drink
 nor never once depart
 for ~~my~~ ^{my} heart makes me to cry
 fix at this string my feet
 Dear Saviour thou hast seen how aff
 I've turned away from thee
 O let thy work renewd to day
 Remain eternally
 Catherine Armitage

2. Moravian Archive (London), MS. C/36/2/159: Letter (no date, but probably 14 November 1750) from Catherine Armitage to apply to Congregation of the Lamb. Reproduced with the permission of the Moravian Church Archive and Library.

I've turned away from thee
 O let thy work renewd to day
 Remain eternally
 Catherine Armitage³⁷

The letter, we see, ends with a quotation from a Moravian hymn.³⁸ Here is irrefutable evidence of Blake's mother's religious convictions, her literacy (perhaps, too, showing where her son got his eccentric spelling from), and the intimacy with Moravian hymns that Muir drew our attention to.

The "Walkingham" of the Moravian Church Book where Catherine Wright was born in 1725 is the little Nottinghamshire village of Walkeringham,³⁹ some twenty-four miles from Cudworth, Yorkshire, where her first husband, Thomas Armitage, was born in 1722. Walkeringham stands on the west bank of the Trent, about one mile from where the ferry crossed to Walkerith, in Lincolnshire. In 1801, the earliest date for which census information is available, the population of the village was 419. It has remained a small community, the population being 859 in 1991. Epworth, where John Wesley was born in 1703, and where John Varley's father, Richard, originated, is six miles away.

37. Moravian Archive: MS. C/36/2/159. The letter bears no date, but is probably written at the same time as her husband's, 14 November 1750.

38. This hymn was first published by James Hutton in 1746. It is no. 79 of the 1754 hymnbook. The hymn is also cited in Daniel Benham, *Memoirs of James Hutton* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1856) 596.

39. Ordnance Survey Grid Ref.: SK766927.



3. Church of St. Mary Magdalen (15th cent.), Walkeringham, Notts. Photo: Keri Davies.

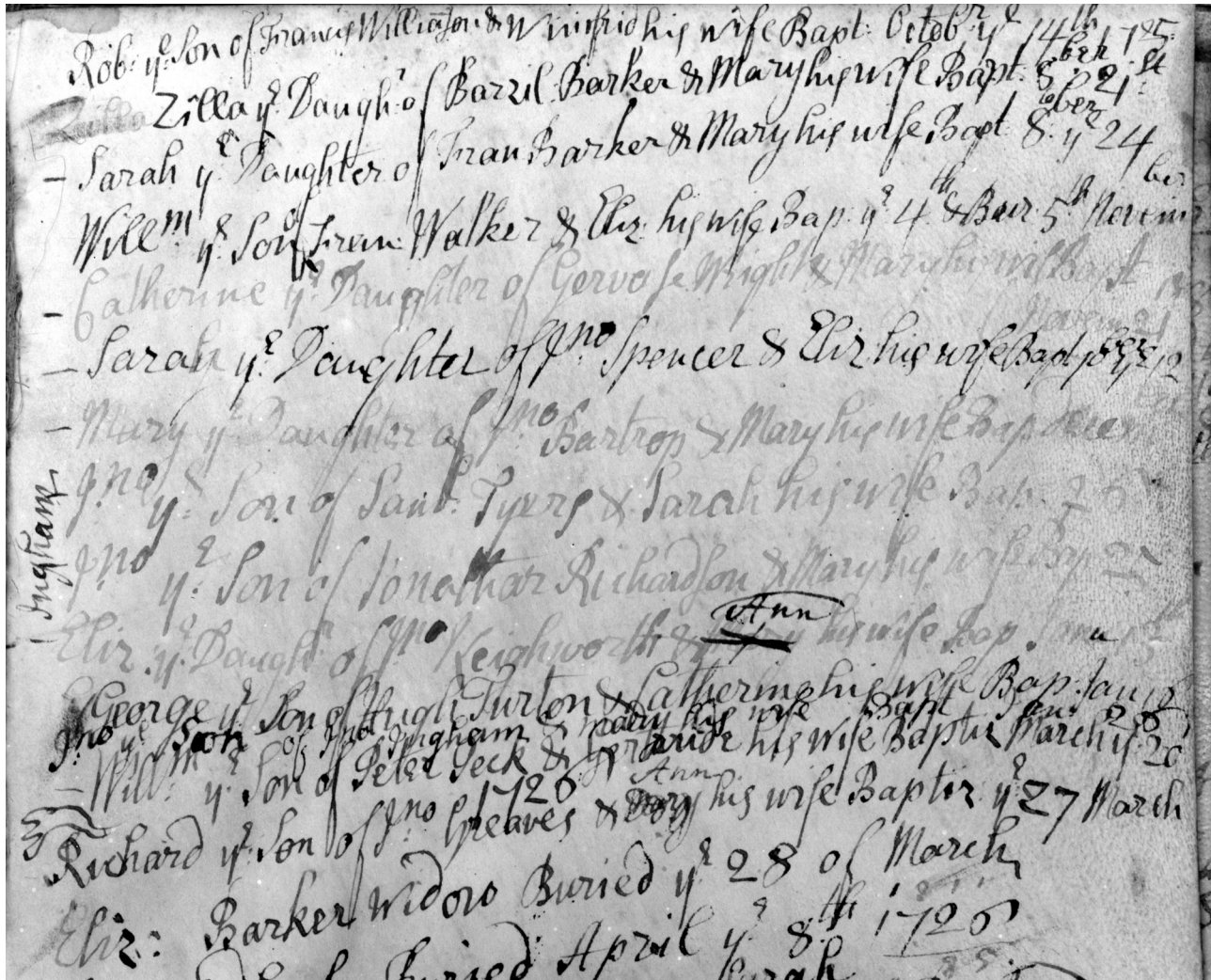
According to the parish register of the church of St. Mary Magdalen at Walkeringham (illus. 3), Catherine, daughter of Gervase Wright and his wife Mary, was christened 21 November 1725 (illus. 4).⁴⁰ (The entries in *FamilySearch* for Walkeringham parish through a dating error put Catherine's birth into 1726. Hence she did not show up in the trawl for a Catherine Wright born before 1725 that Davies recorded in his 1999 paper.) Gervase and Mary Wright had eight children:

- Richard, christened 29 April 1715;
- Katharin, christened 15 October 1718, died young;
- Robert, christened 6 February 1717;
- John, christened 1 January 1720;
- Elizabeth, christened 30 January, died October 1722;
- Elizabeth, christened 6 April 1724;
- Catherine, christened 21 November 1725;
- Benjamin, christened 23 September 1729.

William Blake now has uncles and an aunt. Most of their names recur for the Blake children. But none of the Blake children are named after their maternal grandfather, Gervase. Had Catherine quarreled with her father? Or is it just that "Gervase" is too much of a "country-bumpkin" name for an upwardly mobile London family? Her mother Mary's name is also conspicuously absent. Catherine's brother Benjamin, who married Elizabeth Whitehead in 1754, has children Richard (born 1759), Elizabeth (1763), Catherine (1766), Thomas (1769), and Mary (1772). Again, none of the sons are given their paternal grandfather's name.⁴¹

40. Nottinghamshire Record Office: Parish Register of Walkeringham, Notts.

41. Compare Blake's concern, in a letter to John Linnell of July 1826, that the Linnells should follow custom and name one son after his maternal grandfather: "The Name of the Child which Certainly ought to be Thomas, after Mrs Linnells Father" (E 780).



4. Nottinghamshire Record Office: Parish register of Walkeringham, Notts., 1725: "Catherine y^e Daughter of Gervase Wright & Mary his wife Bapt. November 21." From microfilm in Nottinghamshire Record Office, and used with the permission of the principal archivist.

The Wrights of Walkeringham were yeoman farmers and maltsters. The Archdeaconry wills, now in Nottinghamshire County Archives, include those of several members of the family. Benjamin Wright, yeoman, in his will, proven 12 February 1685/86, left £5 to the poor of the parish, with a number of legacies and bequests of sheep. Gervase Wright, maltster and yeoman, perhaps Catherine's grandfather, was comfortably off; the inventory of his estate, 7 October 1700, includes malt worth £120 out of a total value of the estate of £384. The village origins of Blake's mother suggest the possibility of linking Blake with a surviving peasant culture and not just the emerging urban proletarian one so often assumed.⁴² We need

further work on the Archdeaconry wills to learn more about her father's family and the rural milieu in which she grew up.

This present paper, modifying Davies's own published work (itself corrective of previous scholarship), indicates how much inaccurate or incomplete information abounds about even the most basic details of Blake's life. The intuitions of William Muir, of Margaret Ruth Lowery, and of Nancy Bogen as to the influence on Blake of Moravian hymnody are now shown to have some basis in fact; without Muir's assertions, the Moravian archive would have been left unexplored. In further research we shall consider a few of the Blakean topics which now demand attention—such as his relationship with "heart religion, his eclectic combination of different strands of culture, the importance of music, his view of childhood and of Jesus. For Blake scholars, the discovery of the Armitage and Blake documents in the Moravian Archives at Muswell Hill opens up a new frontier in Blake studies.

42. Perhaps John Adlard, *The Sports of Cruelty: Fairies, Folk-Songs, Charms and other Country Matters in the Work of William Blake* (London: C. & A. Woolf, 1972), deserves at least a second glance.

**Descendants of Gervase Wright
(grandfather of William Blake)**

1. Gervase Wright (b.Ab. 1687)

- | sp: Mary Dawson (b.Ab. 1691; m. 23 Apr 1712)
 - 2. Richard Wright (c. 29 Apr 1715-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire)
 - 2. Robert Wright (c. 6 Feb 1717-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire)
 - 2. Katharin Wright (c. 15 Oct 1718-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire; d. Bef 1725)
 - 2. John Wright (c. 1 Jan 1720-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire)
 - 2. Elizabeth Wright (c. 30 Jan 1722-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire; b. 8 Oct 1722-W, Nottinghamshire)
 - 2. Elizabeth Wright (c. 6 Apr 1724-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire)
 - 2. CATHERINE WRIGHT (c. 21 Nov 1725-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire; d. 1792)
 - | sp: THOMAS ARMITAGE (b. May 1722-Royston, Yorkshire; m. 14 Dec 1746; d. 19 Nov 1751-London)
 - | sp: James Blake (b. Abt 1723; m. 15 Oct 1752; d. 1784)
 - 3. James Blake (b. 10 Jul 1753-Broad Street, GS, Westminster; d. 22 Mar 1827-London)
 - 3. John Blake (b. 12 May 1755-Broad Street, Golden Square, Westminster; d. Bef 1759)
 - 3. WILLIAM BLAKE (b. 28 Nov 1757-Broad Street, G, Westminster; d. 12 Aug 1827-London)
 - | sp: Catherine Sophia Boucher (b. 1762; m. 18 Aug 1782; d. 1831)
 - 3. John Blake (b. 20 Mar 1760-Broad Street, Golden Square, Westminster)
 - 3. Robert Blake (b. 19 Jun 1762-Broad Street, Golden Square, Westminster; d. 1787)
 - 3. Catherine Elizabeth Blake (b. 7 Jan 1764-Broad Street, Golden Square, Westminster; d. 1841)
 - 2. Benjamin Wright (c. 23 Sep 1729-Walkeringham, Nottinghamshire)
 - | sp: Elizabeth Whitehead (c. 2 Dec 1732-Sutton Cum Lound, Nottinghamshire; m. 4 Jul 1754)
 - 3. Richard Wright (c. 5 Jul 1759-Sutton Cum Lound, Nottinghamshire)
 - 3. Elizabeth Wright (c. 3 Nov 1763-Sutton Cum Lound, Nottinghamshire)
 - 3. Catherine Wright (c. 22 Jun 1766-Sutton Cum Lound, Nottinghamshire)
 - 3. Thomas Wright (c. 23 Nov 1769-Sutton Cum Lound, Nottinghamshire)
 - 3. Mary Wright (c. 19 Feb 1772-Sutton Cum Lound, Nottinghamshire)