

"And did those feet, in ancient time"

("Jerusalem")

Poem by William Blake (1757 - 1827)

And did those feet, in ancient time

Walk upon England's mountain green?

And was the holy Lamb of God

On England's pleasant pastures seen?

And did the countenance divine

Shine forth upon our clouded hills?

And was Jerusalem builded here

Among those dark satanic mills?

Bring me my bow of burning gold!

Bring me my arrows of desire!

Bring me my spear! O clouds, unfold!

Bring me my chariot of fire!

I will not cease from mental fight,

Nor shall my sword sleep in my hand,

Till we have built Jerusalem

In England's green and pleasant land.

"And did those feet in ancient time" apparently was inspired by the apocryphal story that Jesus accompanied Joseph of Arimathea on a visit to what is now England, possibly visiting Glastonbury, during the unknown years of Jesus' young adulthood. This legend is tied to the concept of the "new Jerusalem" in the Book of Revelation. The Christian Church in general, and the English Church in particular, has long used Jerusalem as a metaphor for Heaven.

Blake's motivations in writing the poem are not clear, but what is clear is that it was revolutionary in tone. It was written for the preface to his longer work *Milton, a Poem*, a mystical and obscure epic featuring the poet John Milton returning to earth to guide Blake through a spiritual journey. The short poem in the preface is preceded by an exhortation to artists of all kinds to resist the work of "hirelings" who slavishly copy Greek and Roman art forms. However, elsewhere in the epic (and in Milton's own writings) "hirelings" appears to refer to paid (or at least some overpaid) clergy of the English established church. (For a copy of the original page, as hand-lettered and colored by Blake, see http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/17/Milton_preface.jpg).

The poem was set to music by William Parry; this was in 1916, at the request of Poet Laureate Robert Bridges. The purpose was to inspire and "brace up" the nation during the depressing days of World War I. It quickly became popular especially with reform groups, such as the National Union of Women's Suffrage Societies, and later was regularly sung at meetings of the Labour Party (but political parties of very different stripes have used it as well). Today it is virtually a British national anthem, sung at many sporting events and other large assemblies.

The extreme popularity of the song illustrates the particularly British form of patriotism in which love of the Christian church (often loosely speaking), of tradition, and of the land itself can become closely tied to almost any political or social cause.

"dark Satanic Mills": Probably refers in part to the actual factories (fabric mills and others) of the early Industrial Revolution; Blake was a vocal critic of the terrible working conditions in the English factories of his time, and was certainly familiar with the controversial burning of the Albion Flour Mills, the first major factory in London. (The plant was actually spoken of as work of the devil before Blake's time.) However, Blake also used the concept of Satan's "mills" or work places in other writings, more generically standing for the machineries of evil.

"Bring me my Chariot of fire!" probably refers to the assumption of the prophet Elijah into heaven (2 Kings 2:11). The phrase came to stand generally for inspired or divine energy, and of course provided the title for the great 1981 film. Together with the bow, "arrows of desire," and spear, however, the imagery may have simply been meant to represent a great fight against evil.

"green and pleasant land" became a popular phrase for England itself and whatever is good about it, often used as a subtitle in books and newspapers.