



# Classics in Short No.26: Songs of Innocence

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Classics in Short

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**Brian Alderson** on William Blake's **Songs of Innocence**.

## Songs of Innocence

**The Classic Never Read by Children (Never? Well hardly ever)** <!--break-->

### *Preamble*

Practically nothing from eighteenth-century authors remains current, but **Songs of Innocence** must be excepted ? not just one of the greatest of children?s books but one of the most original too. But because of the circumstances of its composition and sale it must have reached very few readers in its own time. It then more or less disappeared until a children?s edition came out in 1906, re-illustrated by Olive Allen (?very distressing? says G. E. Bentley Jr in his bibliographical history of the book). So what are we talking about and why?

### *Date of original publication*

1789 ? and it wasn?t the only revolutionary event of that year.

### *Author*

W. Blake (writing backwards)

### *Publisher*

W. Blake, from his dwelling in Hercules Building, Lambeth.

### *Printer*

W. Blake, assisted by his dead brother Robert, who came to him ?in a vision of the night?, and sundry infernal beasts (see **The Marriage of Heaven and Hell** , plate 15).

### *What was printed?*

A frontispiece, title page, introductory poem and eighteen Songs on twenty-three pages. As a further refinement the poems are all furnished with variegated pictures and decorations around the margins or between the lines. The poems are written with a ?rural pen?: lines of an elementary transparency about the Spring and lambs and blossoms, or longer descriptions of children playing, or, more darkly, of city children under rule, or tiny ballads of children lost and found. The simplicity is almost that of a child-author, and this heightens the book?s effect as a disclosure of the nature of innocence (later to be rudely subverted).

## *How?*

By a process never completely clarified. From what we can gauge, Blake inscribed the Songs, with reversed lettering along with the decorations on a copper plate using an acid-resistant ink. When the plate was etched his words and drawings stood out in relief and could be printed as single pages (the lettering now the right way round) on a normal hand press. Usually a brownish ink was used, but not always.

## *What then?*

In most instances the pictures and decorations were coloured by hand with watercolours. There was no exact scheme and it is thought that later colouring was usually heavier (sometimes much heavier) than earlier.

## *What's meant by 'later'?*

We don't know how many copies of **Songs** were printed. Up to 1794 the book was issued on its own – perhaps to order – but after that date it may often have been bound up with a companion volume **Songs of Experience** (which never seems to have been separately issued). Fewer than a hundred copies have survived of these editions and most of those are in institutional collections in North America, some of which possess multiple copies.

## *Reading 'the text'?*

With no copies of Blake's original likely to be offered you at below a seven figure sum, and with all re-illustrated substitutes being at worst 'distressing' or at best 'not Blake' what is to be done? For one must be dogmatic and say that only the 'illuminated' text be offered to children – preferably with the contraries of **Experience** alongside ('without contraries is no progression'). Each of Blake's pages is designed as a unit, with words, pictures, and decorations all supporting each other to make a single statement. Each Song is itself. Sometimes ('The Shepherd?') it may include not much more than an illustration; sometimes ('The Echoing Green?') there may be two pictures with a variety of marginal drawings and decorations (observe the smart young cricketer); sometimes ('The Chimney Sweeper?') the text exists within a trellis-work of fronds. Admittedly people find problems. Interpreting some of the naiveties and contradictions has been liable to put the most learned Blakeans into a quandary. But a plain text is pointless – the illuminations are essential. And anyway, is not the tussle over words and meanings half the fun? A bit more stimulating, I fancy, than the 'febrile whimsy' and the 'committed jokiness' that Robert Hull found for us in our latterday poetics described in the last **BfK** .

## *Getting copies*

Facsimiles are the only possible answer, and fortunately a well-printed one is to be had replicating the colouring in the Rosenwald copy of both **Innocence** and **Experience** in the Library of Congress. And you also get a letterpress printing of each Song with some unambitious notes.

The illustrations are taken from the Oxford University Press edition of **Songs of Innocence and of Experience** , 0 19 281089 8, £8.99 pbk.

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