



# William Blake

*G.K. Chesterton*

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WILLIAM BLAKE would have been the first to understand that the biography of anybody ought really to begin with the words, "In the beginning God created heaven and earth." If we were telling the story of Mr. Jones of Kentish Town, we should need all the centuries to explain it. We cannot comprehend even the name "Jones," until we have realised that its commonness is not the commonness of vulgar but of divine things; for its very commonness is an echo of the adoration of St John the Divine. The adjective "Kentish" is rather a mystery in that geographical connection; but the word Kentish is not so mysterious as the awful and impenetrable word "town." We shall have rent up the roots of prehistoric mankind and seen the last revolutions of modern society before we really know the meaning of the word "town." So every word we use comes to us coloured from all its adventures in history, every phase of which has made at least a faint alteration. The only right way of telling a story is to begin at the beginning—at the beginning of the world. Therefore all books have to be begun in the wrong way, for the sake of brevity. If Blake wrote the life of Blake it would not begin with any business about his birth or parentage. Blake was born in 1757, in Carnaby Market—but Blake's life of Blake would not have begun like that. It would have begun with a great deal about the giant Albion, about the many disagreements between the spirit and the spectre of that gentleman, about the golden pillars that covered the earth at its beginning and the lions that walked in their golden innocence before God. It would have been full of symbolic wild beasts and naked women, of monstrous clouds and colossal temples; and it would all have been highly incomprehensible, but none of it would have been irrelevant. All the biggest events of Blake's life would have happened before he was born. But, on consideration, I think it will be better to tell the tale of Blake's life first and go back to his century afterwards. It is not, indeed, easy to resist temptation here, for there was much to be said about Blake before he existed. But I will resist the temptation and begin with the facts. WILLIAM BLAKE was born on the 28th of November 1757 in Broad Street, Carnaby Market. Like so many other great English artists and poets, he was born in London. Like so many other starry philosophers and naming mystics, he came out of a shop. His father was James Blake, a fairly prosperous hosier; and it is certainly remarkable to note how many imaginative men in our island have arisen in such an environment. Napoleon said that we English were a nation of shopkeepers; if he had pursued the problem a little further he might have discovered why we are a nation of poets. Our recent slackness in poetry and in everything else is due to the fact that we are no longer a nation of shopkeepers, but merely a nation of shop-owners. In any case there seems to be no doubt that William Blake was brought up in the ordinary atmosphere of the smaller English bourgeoisie. His manners and morals were trained in the old obvious way; nobody ever thought of training his imagination, which perhaps was all the better for the neglect. There are few tales of his actual infancy. Once he lingered too long in the fields and came back to tell his mother that he had seen the prophet Ezekiel sitting under a tree. His mother smacked him. Thus ended the first adventure of William Blake in that wonderland of which he was a citizen.

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