

# "The Grave"

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## In Wesley's Day

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alarums of war in the north drowned the sound of Gabriel's trumpet summoning the still-young poet to "the gloomy horrors of the tomb" which he had so stirringly described. And then, of course, at Atheistaneferd, in East Lothian, he was well off the beaten track. His poem had twice been refused, apparently unread, by London publishers on whom Isaac Watts urged it—

"scarcely thinking . . . that a person living three hundred miles from London could write so as to be acceptable to the fashionable and polite."

Passed on from Watts to Dr. Philip Doddridge, by whom it was "altered in at least fifty places." *The Grave* was finally published in the spring of 1743, price one shilling, being advertised in the *March Gentleman's Magazine* alongside a book of Young's *Night Thoughts*, with which it had so much in common.

Discriminating readers at once applauded its powerful descriptions, seeing in them the strength of Shakespeare and the fire of Webster, even though some looked askance at the introduction of such low-life terms as "chop-fall'n." Dozens of his phrases are still quotable, such as "There's no bye-road to bliss," or the lovely description of a good man's death—

"Night-dews fall not more gently to the ground,  
Nor weary worn-out winds expire so soft."

Robert Blair was described as "so austere and void of urbanity as to make him quite disagreeable to young people." His more macabre verses, though often

vivid, as when he speaks of burial-vaults "furr'd round with mouldy damp and ropy slime," are open to the same objection. Dr. Johnson, in spite of Boswell's defence of *The Grave*, "did not like it much," while the Wesley brothers never so much as mention it, though probably both had read it. Yet so popular did the poem become that it passed through many editions, and was even published at five guineas, illustrated by William Blake, in 1808. It is represented in the *Oxford Book of Eighteenth Century Verse*, and at least one modern anthology includes all its 767 lines of decasyllabic blank verse.

*The Grave* was published with a religious purpose, even though Blair's worldly wisdom led him to disguise the fact until the reader was half-way through. He was the first, and probably the best, of the graveyard school of poets, whose most popular flowering was in the smoother verse of Gray's *Elegy*. Blair's genuine concern for religion can be seen in his last extant letter to Philip Doddridge, where he laments the "blind zeal about minutiae of religion" in Scotland, whose only remedy is "plain, serious, and affectionate preaching." The same letter discloses a faint hope that Methodism might possibly be the instrument of the desired revival—

"I wish you would give me your opinion of Mr. Whitfield, a man who has made abundance of noise in the world. I never in my life knew any person so much idolised by some, and railled at by others."

His lines on epitaphs would have earned Wesley's approving nod—

"Perchance some hackney hunger-bitten scribbler  
Insults thy memory, and blots thy tomb  
With long flat narrative, or duller rhymes."

And so no memorial marked Robert Blair's resting-place, except a plain stone, inscribed "R.B."

F. B.

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