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William Blake (1757–1827)

Extract from Milton – Jerusalem

Blake was born and bred a Londoner, but this iconic verse – now the nation's best-loved hymn – was composed in Felpham, Sussex, where he lived for a time with his wife. They are known to have scandalized neighbours by conducting naked reading sessions in the garden.

And did those feet in ancient time
Walk upon England's mountains 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 these 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.

Edmund Spenser (c. 1552–1599)**Prothalamion [extract]**

The Crown still legally owns all the unmarked swans in British waters. 'Swan Upping' – in which teams of boatmen compete with the Queen's Swan Marker to save swans from the royal table by tagging them – still takes place on the Thames, although it now functions as a population census rather than a prelude to a tasty feast.

With that, I saw two swans of goodly hue
 Come softly swimming down along the Lee;
 Two fairer birds I yet did never see.
 The snow which doth the top of Pindus strew,
 Did never whiter shew,
 Nor Jove himself, when he a swan would be
 For love of Leda, whiter did appear:
 Yet Leda was they say as white as he,
 Yet not so white as these, nor nothing near.
 So purely white they were,
 That even the gentle stream, the which them bare,
 Seemed foul to them, and bade his billows spare
 To wet their silken feathers, lest they might
 Soil their fair plumes with water not so fair,
 And mar their beauties bright,
 That shone as heaven's light,
 Against their bridal day, which was not long:
 Sweet Thames, run softly, till I end my song.