JOHN MILTON

THE COLLECTED PROSE WORKS

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John Milton – A Primer

John Milton was born in London on December 9, 1608. He was the third child and namesake of a prosperous scrivener (lawyer and law stationer) whose puritanical leanings did not prevent him from conforming to the established church, from cultivating with some success the art of music, and from giving his children a liberal education and a pleasant, happy home. From this father Milton must have inherited much of his genius — a genius fostered by the wisdom and liberality of the parent to an extent that can scarcely be paralleled in our literary annals, save in the cases of Robert Browning and John Stuart Mill. To his mother, too, he owed not a little, as every good man does as well as to his early tutors, with whom he seems to have been on especially affectionate terms. The noted musicians who frequented his father's house must also have had an influence on him, and later, his friendship with Charles Diodati ; but the direct influence of his fellows seems to have counted for less with Milton than with any other great world-poet. The indirect influence of men .through their books counted, however, for

more with him than can be estimated in words. From his earliest youth he was an omnivorous reader and student, and to this day he stands as our most learned poet and cultured artist, Ben Jonson not excepted.

About 1620 Milton entered St. Paul's School as a day scholar and remained there until 1625, when he commenced residence, during the Easter term, at Christ's College, Cambridge. Although he continued his university studies for seven years, taking his B.A. in 1629 and his M.A. in 1632, he plainly did not enter into the spirit of the place ; and he heads the list of great English men of letters who have been more or less out of sympathy with their alma mater — a list that includes such names as Dryden, Gibbon, and Shelley. But he was laying the broad foundations of his character and his culture. The personal purity preserved through all temptation and ridicule (his fellow students dubbed him lady as much on this account, we cannot doubt, as on account of his conspicuous beauty of face and figure) enabled him to expound as no other poet has ever done

" — the sage
And serious doctrine of Virginity ; "

the self-absorption in the pursuit of high ideals, the proud aloofness from common things and common men that characterized him, may have lessened his human sympathies, but assuredly made possible that supremely ideal love of religion and his native land that prompted and accomplished the noblest deed of patriotic self-sacrifice that has yet been recorded to the credit of our race ; and finally it is almost impossible to believe that he would ever have become master of so profound and exact an erudition and so serene and balanced a culture had he not profited by that systematic training and discipline of the faculties

which is alone imparted in full measure by a historic university. In view of these facts, we may well conclude that Cambridge meant more to Milton than he was himself aware of, and we can afford to leave to his biographers the question whether he was actually "whipt" by his unsympathetic tutor, one William Chappell. But we should remember that during his university course he found time to write much of his Latin verse, as well as such great English poems as the ode "On the Morning of Christ's Nativity", the epitaph "On Shakespeare ", and the sonnet "On his being arrived at the age of twenty-three." This was no slight actual accomplishment in verse, but more important was the formation of the resolution to which he consistently adhered — to order his life.

" As ever in his great Task-Master's eye."

When he left Cambridge the young student betook himself to his father's residence at Horton in Buckinghamshire. Although he had criticized the administration of the university, he was pressed to take a fellowship, but that would have meant practically taking orders and, while such had once been his intention, he felt that he could not conscientiously pursue the latter course. Theological difficulties do not seem to have beset him, for he subscribed the Articles and his Arian proclivities were a matter of later j-ears. It was at the organization of the church then controlled by Laud, who was fostering to the best of his abilities the high church reaction that the Puritan idealist looked askance. If Milton had continued at Cambridge he would have been the centre of many an academic dispute; it is impossible to say what would have happened if he had entered the church in any active way and been brought into personal contact with Laud. The genius of Boswell would have failed to do justice to that encounter; it would have needed a Shakespeare.

If Milton read his own character as we now do and restrained his ardent nature that he might allow his powers to ripen through solitude and study, he more than deserves the epithets he bestowed upon his favorite Spenser — " sage and serious." If he did not fully understand himself but simply felt conscious of high powers and a mission to fulfill, he deserves all the praise that so amply belongs to those " who only stand and wait." But much praise is also due to the father who, now that his business career was over and his chief interest was necessarily centered in his children's success, was content to do his share of waiting till the genius of his son should in the fullness of time be manifest to the world. That genius was slowly developing through study, contemplation, intercourse with nature, and occasional wooing of the muse. He mastered the classics and the chief writers of more recent times until he may fairly be said to have lived with them. He contemplated life with all its possibilities and became more firmly fixed in his determination to devote himself to the service of humanity, to lead a life that should be a true poem, and to leave behind him some child of his imagination that posterity would not willingly let die. He watched also with poignant anguish the headlong course of Charles and Laud toward destruction and saw that they would involve in ruin, not merely themselves but the nation for which he already felt the burning passion of the man who not loving easily still loves well. But he also contemplated the serene beauty of the peaceful landscape around him and the spirit of nature took hold upon him — not as it had done on Shakespeare and was to do on Wordsworth — but in a true, noble, and elevating way. Finally he wrote verse to relieve his pent up feelings or to oblige friends, but never without keeping his eyes fixed upon the masters of his craft, and registering a solemn vow not to allow himself to be tempted by easy praise to abandon the arduous upward path on which his

feet were set. It is to the five years (1632— 1637) spent at Horton that we are said to owe L'Allegro, Il Penseroso, Arcades, Comus, and Lycidas — a fact that should make the little Buckinghamshire village second only to Stratford in interest to all lovers of English poetry.

In the spring of 1638 Milton undertook to put the finishing touch upon his education by setting out for Italy. The spell that she exercises on every liberal soul, had already been felt by him through the medium of her great poets, but it was not to be permanently sealed upon his spirit as it has been since upon Byron, Shelley, Landor, and Browning. He was fitter than these to penetrate into Italy's secret and it is interesting to speculate what a longer residence there would have meant for him ; but that was not to be. Yet we may be sure that no nobler stranger has ever since apostolic times set foot upon that sacred soil so often trod by alien feet — not Chaucer or Goethe, not Luther or Bayard. Shakespeare never saw the land that his genius so often adorned and Dante was its native — and it is with Shakespeare and Dante alone that we can safely compare Milton. The details of his journey are scant but even the few facts we know must be here rapidly passed over. He gave and received compliments, was hospitably entertained, discussed philosophy sagely and religion imprudently, proved that although he was an angel not an Angle, the Angles were not entirely barbarous, heard Leonora Baroni sing — and met Galileo. " The meeting between the two great blind men of their century," writes Dr. Garnett, " is one of the most picturesque in history ; it would have been more pathetic still if Galileo could have known that his name would be written in ' Paradise Lost,' or Milton could have foreseen that within thirteen years he too would see only with the inner eye, but that the calamity which disabled the astronomer would restore inspiration to the poet."

The young traveler had been some time in Naples when news from England warned him of the fact that the political and ecclesiastical crisis had come, and that it was his duty as a true patriot to turn his face homeward. He accordingly relinquished his design of proceeding to Sicily and Greece, and after another visit to Florence, which fascinated him, and a short stay at Geneva where he probably learned of the death of his friend Diodati, he once more set foot on English soil toward the end of July, 1639. Here his first duty was an act of piety — he wrote his greatest and practically his last Latin poem — the *Epithaphium Damonis* in honor of Diodati — a tribute the exquisite sincerity and beauty of which its foreign medium of expression could not impair but unfortunately obscures to those of his countrymen whose classical education has been neglected. Then he set himself to a less congenial but in every way honorable task, he began to teach his two nephews, Edward and John Phillips. Milton as a schoolmaster may suggest to some the veriest profanation of genius, to others that irony of fate at which we smile or jest ; but no one who has read the tractate entitled " Of Education," or rightly gauged Milton's character, or comprehended the true dignity of the teacher's office will ever regret the quiet months spent by the poet-pedagogue in the house in Aldersgate street where he could smile grimly at the failure of the attempts to subdue Scotland and wait for the Long Parliament to throw open the door concealing " that two-handed engine."

For a short space after his return Milton seems to have formulated no plan of action that concerned the outer world, but he did contemplate a great poem that should be his lifework, although he could not definitely settle upon a theme. "King Arthur" was abandoned for a lesser though great poet. " Paradise Lost " was begun as a drama and fortunately laid aside for epic treatment. The times began

to call for something besides poetry and Milton felt that he had something else in him to give. For twenty years he wrote no verse save a comparatively small number of sonnets — great it is true — and his silence curing a period when most poets do their best work has been regretted by many an admirer and by more than one able critic. This regret is natural but probably unreasonable as we shall soon see.

The humbling of Charles, the arrest and imprisonment of Laud, and the execution of Strafford, had shown the religious and political reformers their power, and had brought into prominence not merely men of action but also a crowd of zealous and advanced theorists and of visionary schemers for the ordering of church and state. It is always so with revolutions. The French had their Abbe Siéyès and we Americans had scores of theorists from Jefferson down. But no such ideal reformer as Milton has ever since lifted his voice above the din of party and faction — and if we convict him of partisanship, we must nevertheless figure him to ourselves as a seraphic partisan. His first utterances were naturally on the subject of episcopacy. As Dr. Garnett has pointed out, it is difficult for us now not merely to see any great force in Milton's arguments, but to comprehend at all the point of view maintained by him in the five tractates of 1841—42. It was not a question of expediency that he was considering ; it was a question whether God or the devil should rule in England, if not in the world. The sublime confidence with which he promulgated his ideas of church polity moves our wonder; the impassioned language in which he clothed those ideas moves not only our admiration but a sense of our infinite inferiority. Such swelling periods of prophecy and denunciation, of high purpose and holy hope have been possible to one man alone — to the future author of " Paradise Lost." Whether or not we love Laud less and Milton more, whether or not

we seek or shun the arena of religious controversy, we cannot but conclude that the crisis which called forth the following dithyrambic utterance was not lacking in momentous results to England's literature or to the character and work of her noblest son :

"Then amidst the hymns and hallelujahs of saints, some one may perhaps be heard offering at high strains in new and lofty measures, to sing and and celebrate Thy Divine mercies and marvelous judgments in this land throughout all ages; whereby this great and warlike nation, instructed and inured to the fervent and continual practice of truth and righteousness, and casting far from her the rags of her old vices, may press on hard to that high and happy emulation to be found the soberest, wisest, and most Christian people at that day when Thou, the Eternal and shortly-expected King, shalt open the clouds to judge the several kingdoms of the world, and distributing national honors and rewards to religious and just commonwealths, shalt put an end to all earthly tyrannies, proclaiming Thy universal and mild monarchy through heaven and earth ; where they undoubtedly, that by their labors, counsels, and prayers, have been earnest for the common good of religion and their country, shall receive above the inferior orders of the blessed, the regal addition of principalities, legions, and thrones into their glorious titles, and in supereminence of beatific vision, progressing the dateless and irrevoluble circle of eternity, shall clasp inseparable hands with joy and bliss, in over-measure forever."

The out-break of war in the autumn of 1642 forced upon Milton the question whether he should take up arms in defense of the principles he advocated. We do not know his exact course of reasoning, but we can infer it. He could serve his country and his God better with his pen than with his sword, so instead of fighting, he wrote his sonnet "

When the Assault was Intended to the City" — that superb plea for the inviolability of the " Muse's bower." To blame Milton for not becoming a soldier is like blaming Washington for not writing an epic on the Revolutionary War after he had sheathed his sword. The man whose imagination was already revolving the war in heaven was not wanted on the fields of Naseby and Dunbar ; the prophet of the glories of a renovated and redeemed England had faith enough to believe that God would, in due season, show forth the man who should render those glories possible. He could not foresee that the representatives of the people for whom he sang and Cromwell fought would one day refuse the need of a statue to their greatest ruler and soldier; but could he rise from the dead he would set the seal of his approval upon the fiery protest against a nation's ingratitude recently wrung from a poet into whom he has breathed not a little of his own impassioned eloquence and love of liberty :

" The enthroned Republic from her kinglier throne
Spake, and her speech was Cromwell's. Earth has known
No lordlier presence. How should Cromwell stand
By kinglets and by queenlings hewn in stone?"

But while Oxford was protesting her loyalty and Cornwall was rising in arms and the king's cause seemed by no means hopeless, Milton for the first time in his life apparently, was falling in love. Exactly how this came about is not known. He seems to have gone to Oxfordshire in the spring of 1643 to collect a debt from a Cavalier squire, Richard Powell by name, and to have returned to London in a month with this gentleman's daughter, Mary, as his bride. A party of her relatives soon after visited the pair and the young wife appears to have enjoyed their dancing more than she did her husband's philosophizing, for she shortly left him under promise of return and took up her abode

with her father, from whose protection she could not be induced to withdraw for about two years. Whether Milton began his pamphleteering on divorce before or after his wife's desertion is a moot point ; indeed this whole matrimonial affair is the most mysterious, perhaps, on record save that of a very different character — Sam Houston of San Jacinto fame. But Milton wrote four learned treatises on divorce while Houston consoled himself with a Cherokee squaw. The divorce literature was too strong diet even for his co-religionists and had to be published without license — a fact to which we owe the greatest and best known of his prose writings — the noble "Areopagitica ; a Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing, to the Parliament of England."

We cannot discuss here Milton's view of what an ideal marriage ought to be, or his notions about divorce which he threatened to put into practice, and can say only a word about his relations to his wives and to women in general. On the last of these points he has been much criticized, not always with entire justice. We know that his first wife returned to him of her own accord, a fact which is decidedly in his favor. We have his sonnet to his second wife, Katherine Woodcock, by which any woman might be proud to think she would be remembered; and with his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, he seems to have lived as congenially as could be expected when all the circumstances are taken into account. His daughters by his first wife have won a sympathy which they hardly deserve. Reading aloud in a language one doesn't understand is not an enjoyable task ; but what are we to say of the characters and dispositions of women who could lack reverence for such a father? Admiration and sympathy are two of the noblest attributes of womanhood, and who has ever been fitter to elicit them than Milton in his blindness? Perhaps the best excuse for these daughters is that they were

trained by their mother. We may dismiss this unpleasant topic with the remark that it is well to note that in the scanty tale of Milton's English sonnets there are four addressed to women, in which there is not a line to make us believe that he had a low estimate of the sex, and much to convince us that he was capable of extending to them that intelligent admiration which the mass of mankind are only just beginning to recognize as their due.

In 1645 or rather in the early part of 1646 at the solicitation of Humphrey Moseley the publisher, Milton brought out the first edition of his poems, English and Latin. He prefixed a quotation from Virgil which showed that he regarded the publication as premature. It was an unpropitious time for the Muses, but it was not many years before he was plagiarized from in a shocking manner by Robert Barron, and if imitation is the sincerest flattery, he ought to have been pleased, but probably was not. Meantime his school seems to have prospered and he worked away at his studies, gathering materials for his " History of England," and perhaps writing his treatise " De Doctrina Christiana " which did not see the light until 1825. In 1647 his father died and the consequent improvement in his circumstances led him to give up all his pupils save his nephews. So he lived on and looked out at the swift succession of events that seemed about to change entirely the course of English history. He was still conscious of great powers and still yearning for an opportunity to do something for his people, but he preferred a scholarly seclusion, as he tells us, to a station " at the doors of the court with a petitioner's face."

With the king's death, however, a change took place in Milton's affairs. Charles was beheaded on January 30, 1649; in exactly two weeks Milton had published his pamphlet " The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates " in which

he maintained the right of " any who have the Power, to call to account a Tyrant, or wicked King, and after due Conviction, to depose, and put him to Death, if the ordinary Magistrate have neglected, or denied to do it." This was a bold and certainly expeditious defense of the actions of his party ; how bold may be somewhat realized when we remember how the news of the execution of Louis XVI. nearly a century and a half later resounded through Europe. Even the philosophic mind of Burke was unhinged by the latter catastrophe ; the prior and more astounding event simply woke Milton up. Merely as a private citizen with convictions of his own he dared to defend a deed which had filled a whole people with horror and consternation ; to the seductions of sympathy stimulated by the timely appearance of the " Eikon Basilike" he opposed the warning voice of reason and the high clear strains of duty. The popular leaders could overlook him no longer and he was offered the post of Latin Secretary to the Committee on Foreign Affairs. The salary was ample and the position such as even a Milton could accept, for he was not merely to carry on diplomatic correspondence in the language of scholars but, we cannot doubt, to be the recognized spokesman of his party. As Dr. Garnett happily expresses it, he was to be the " Orpheus among the Argonauts of the Commonwealth."

His first work that we need notice is his " Eikonoklastes " a reply to the "Eikon Basilike " of Bishop Gauden, then believed by many to be the work of the "Royal Martyr " himself. Milton seems to have shirked the task knowing that to accomplish it effectively would necessitate depreciation of the dead king and much chaffering over straws. In spite of this known reluctance on his part and of the obvious fact that much of his matter and manner was determined by circumstances that he could not control, critics have not ceased to search his book minutely for data

on which to rest charges against his personal integrity, his consistency, even his taste in literature. But he was soon to undertake a greater task. The learned Frenchman, Salmasius, had been employed to unmask the batteries of his ponderous erudition, so valued at the time, in defense of Charles I. His " Defensio Regia " appeared in the latter part of 1649, and Milton was directed by the Council to answer it. He did at the cost of his sight.

For some years his eyes had been failing and one was already gone. He was advised that any further strain would speedily induce total blindness, yet he never wavered in the performance of his duty. He calmly faced the loss of a sense that every true scholar must value more than life itself; he put from him all anticipation of the noble pleasure he had looked forward to deriving from the first sight of his great poem in print ; he may even have despaired of ever composing that poem at all ; he looked forward to the miseries of a cheerless old age, and without repining accepted a commission that could not under any circumstances have been specially grateful to him — all because he deemed it right that his country and party should make a proper reply to the charges that had been laid against them in the forum of European opinion. If a sublimer act of patriotic self-sacrifice has ever been performed it has surely never been recorded. And yet critics have been found who could calmly dissect the " Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio contra Salmasium " and argue from it that its author had not merely a bad cause, but a bad temper and a worse taste. There have been critics who have imagined that it is proper to judge a seventeenth century controversialist by standards more talked about than acted upon in the nineteenth. There have even been friends of Milton who forgetting that the man is and ought to be greater than the poet, have wished that he had never

performed this act of self-sacrifice that makes him the true Milton of song and history.

And now by the Spring of 1652 the Milton who had won the plaudits of cultivated Italians for his beauty and his grace, the Milton who had looked on Nature's face and found her fair, the Milton who had at last been brought to mingle with the affairs of men at a critical juncture in his country's history, was totally blind, an object of pity, a man who was apparently without a future. It was due to the fact that he was Milton and no one else that he did not succumb but became the poet of " Paradise Lost." The mention of this great poem, however, reminds us that we may pass over his " Second Defense of the People of England," his answer to Moras, and his ecclesiastical treatises all accomplished with the assistance of coadjutors, one of whom was Andrew Marveil, which brings us to the year of the Stuart Restoration (1660,) when of course his political occupation was gone. That occupation while it may not have given him the position he deserved in the councils of his party (it is not even certain that he and Cromwell were ever face to face) had given him a knowledge of men and affairs which was to be of immense service to him in the coming years of retirement when he was to be permitted to resume his higher and natural role of inspired poet. It seems as idle to argue that " Paradise Lost " would have been the poem it is without the often regretted poetic interregnum of 1640-1660 as it is to argue that Milton could have been as great a man without it. Those critics may indeed be right who maintain that Milton's nature was subdued to what it worked in " like the dyer's hand," that the Puritan controversialist sometimes got the better of the poet long after occasion for controversy had passed away, but this is only to claim that Milton had not the universality of genius, the absolute perfection of artistic balance that characterize

Homer and Shakespeare alone — a claim no true critic will think of disputing for a moment.

It is difficult to say exactly how the defender of the regicides escaped with the mild punishment of having his writings against Charles I. burned by the hangman. Perhaps his blindness helped him, perhaps the entreaties of influential friends. The " Muse's bower" was spared (though removed more than once) to become the resort of a few congenial spirits and of an occasional admirer like Dryden, and in due time the poet of " Lycidas " culminated in the author of the greatest poem since the " Divine Comedy."

As we have seen Milton had long since resolved to use his powers in the production of a poem as noble as he must have felt those powers to be, and after examining and rejecting many subjects had finally determined on "Paradise Lost " as the most sublime and worthy theme. He had even practically determined on the equally sublime metrical form in which his epic should be cast before he began really working upon the latter in 1658. The story of its composition under the difficulties imposed by his blindness, his lack of a permanent and trained amanuensis, and his curious susceptibility to the effects of the seasons upon his temperament, has been often told and just as often the apparent irony of the circumstances of its publication in 1667 has formed the subject of critical homilies. Mr. Symmons may have driven a hard bargain though there is room to doubt it, but he did better by Milton and his epic than a good many modern critics have done who are not supposed to hold chairs in the School of Cobbett. We are told now that people do not read "Paradise Lost" and that its subject is antiquated and a little absurd, especially since the theory of evolution has thrown grave doubts upon the lion's ever having pawed to extricate his hinder parts. If this be true of the public, and if our critics

are to judge poets from the point of view of Cobbett's so-called common sense or of Huxley's epoch-making science, it may well be doubted whether printer Symmons was not more a child of the Muses than one is likely to-day to jostle on the streets of one of our great cities. But Symmons' niggardly pounds have either been quite worn out or have forgotten that they ever took part in a shabby transaction, and a similar fate awaits the Cobbett critics and the public that pays attention to them. "Paradise Lost" has set a seal upon Milton's glory that can be effaced or unloosed by angelic power alone — by the might of the angel who shall in the fullness of time blow the last trump.

The Quaker Ellwood's query as to what Milton had to say of " Paradise Regained " after so much told of " Paradise Lost," may or may not have had much to do with the composition of that pendant poem, and Milton's partiality for it may have been exaggerated, but surely those persons, and they are many, who refrain from reading it now that its author's fame has made precious everything he touched, stand greatly in their own light. Neither it nor " Samson Agonistes." published with it in one volume in 1671, can claim the preeminence in our poetry that belongs of right to " Paradise Lost," "Comus," and " Lycidas," but none the less both poems are worthy of Milton, and therefore of our admiration and love. They may give evidence of the declining power of the genius that gave them birth (although as we are somewhat in the dark as to the exact time of their composition, this is not certain) or they may represent that genius moving in regions less elevated and pure, but they are worthy to shine through their own luster and to live through their own vitality. Their comparative unpopularity is proof of nothing save of the proverbial isolation of the noble, but their existence is proof of the fact that in a blind old age, Milton would be content with nothing less than a strenuous and lofty use of his divinely

bestowed powers. He could not, like his Nazarene hero, pull down the pillars of an ungodly state upon the heads of its citizens, although he would not have shirked the self-destruction involved, but he could still sing in exultant tones of the triumphs of virtue and of the justice and majesty and mercy of God.

That mercy was shown him in his last years in fuller measure than he perhaps himself expected or than his political or ecclesiastical foes would have admitted to be his due. From the moment that his safety after the Restoration was assured until his death on November 8, 1674, he lived a comparatively calm and peaceful life. The great Fire and Plague disturbed him, as was natural, but not seriously, his darkness was ever with him, but was shot through with visions of glory denied to all men save his three compeers Homer, Shakespeare, and Dante ; his home though now comfortable was hardly congenial, but he had a few choice friends and a memory stored with the best that the world of literature had to give. Thus he lived and thus he died, and although his " soul was like a star and dwelt apart," we feel glad that it had its earthly setting in a pure and cloudless sky. Yet before we take our leave of him in this imperfect sketch, let us remember that there are two facts that make a knowledge of hie life and work essential to all persons that would fain have the slightest claim to be considered cultured men.

The first is that Milton has unquestionably influenced his country's literature more than any other English man of letters, unless it be Shakespeare. Although he did not live to reap the reward of the fame that " Paradise Lost " began to attract, even before the close of the seventeenth century, he must have felt sure that he had built himself an enduring monument. His conviction was true. Certainly from the appearance of Addison's criticism of the great epic

to the present day no English poet of any note has failed at one time or another to pass under his spell. Even Pope borrowed from him, and Thomson, Dyer, Collins and Gray were his open disciples. What Cowper and Wordsworth would have been without him, it is hard to imagine. The youthful Keats imitated him and Shelley sang that " his clear sprite yet reigns o'er earth, the third among the sons of light." As for Landor, Tennyson, Browning, Arnold, and Swinburne their direct or indirect debt to him is plain to every student. With regard to his prose the case has been somewhat different. It is the old story of the bow of Ulysses, but it cannot be doubted that if on the formal side our modern writers look back to Cowley and Dryden, there has never been a writer of sonorous and eloquent prose who did not owe more than he was perhaps aware of to the author of " Areopagitica."

The second fact is equally patent but less often insisted upon. It is that in the triumphal progress of the Anglo-Saxon race, whether in the mother island, in America, or in Australia, whatever has been won for the cause of civic or religious or mental liberty, has been won along lines that Milton would have approved in the main had he been living, has been won by men more or less inspired by him, and will be kept only by men who are capable of appreciating rightly the height and breadth and depth of his splendid and ineffable personality.

W. P. Trent.

BIOGRAPHICAL INTRODUCTION.

On the ninth day of December, 1608, John Milton was born in London.

It was near the close of the golden age of England. Spenser had been dead ten years. Shakspeare was alive, but had ceased to write. Bacon was in the meridian of his power, but was known already to be one of the meanest of mankind, and neither his genius nor his station secured respect.

The father of Milton had been disinherited for becoming a Protestant; but not until the completion of his studies at Oxford, where he was distinguished for his scholarship, taste and accomplishments. Deprived of his patrimony, he adopted the profession of a scrivener, in the practice of which he was so successful as to be able to give his son a liberal education, and at an early age to retire with a competence into the country.

The instruction of Milton was carefully attended to: his private tutor was Thomas Young, a Puritan minister, who remained with him until compelled on account of his religious opinions to leave the kingdom. In 1624, soon after entering upon his sixteenth year, he was sent to Cambridge, where he was committed to the tuition of Mr. Chappell, afterwards a bishop, and the reputed author of *The Whole Duty of Man.* He had already made astonishing progress in learning. He was familiar with several languages, and with the most abstruse books in philosophy. Before he was eighteen, he studied critically the best Greek and Roman authors, and wrote more elegant Latin verses than were ever before produced by an Englishman.

After remaining seven years at the university, where he took the degrees of bachelor and master of arts, he returned to his father's house, at Horton, near Colebrook, whither, he says, he was accompanied by the regrets of most of the fellows of his college, who showed him no common marks of friendship and esteem. In the malignant and envious life of Milton by Dr. Johnson, there is an endeavour to prove that he was expelled from Cambridge for some misdemeanor, or that he went away in discontent because unable to obtain preferment, to spend his time in the company of lewd women, and in the play-houses of London. All this is false. It is evident from what has been written on the subject, that he committed no act deserving punishment or regret. He left Cambridge because his theological opinions, and his views of ecclesiastical independence, not permitting him to enter the church, a longer stay there was not required. He believed that he who would accept orders, "must subscribe himself slave, and take an oath withal, which unless he took with a conscience that would retch, he must either straight perjure himself, or split his faith;" and he deemed it "better to prefer a blameless silence, before the learned office of speaking, bought and begun with servitude and forswearing."

On his father's estate Milton passed happily five years of uninterrupted leisure, occasionally visiting London to enjoy the theatres and the conversation of his friends, or to learn something new in mathematics or music. He wrote here the Mask of Comus, and Lycidas, the Arcades, L'Allegro, and Il Penseroso, a series of poems alike extraordinary for the sublimity and beauty of their conception, and for the exquisite finish of their execution.

On the death of his mother, in 1637, when he was about twenty-nine years of age, he became anxious to visit

foreign parts, and particularly Italy. His reasons for wishing to travel, as quaintly expressed by his biographer Toland, were, that “he could not better discern the preëminence and defects of his own country, than by observing the customs and institutions of others; and that the study of never so many books, without the advantages of conversation, serves either to render a man a fool or a pedant.” Obtaining permission of his father, he left England in 1638, accompanied by a single servant, and bearing a letter of direction and advice from Sir Henry Wotton. He arrived in Paris, the most accomplished Englishman who had ever crossed the Channel, and was courteously received by the ambassador of King Charles, who introduced him to the celebrated Grotius, then representative of the queen of Sweden at the court of France. The best account of his travels is contained in the brief autobiography which opens his Second Defence of the People of England. He soon set out for Italy, and taking ship at Nice, visited Genoa, Leghorn, Pisa and Florence. “In the latter city,” he says, “which I have always more particularly esteemed for the elegance of its dialect, its genius, and its taste, I stopped about two months; when I contracted an intimacy with many persons of rank and learning; and was a constant attendant at the literary parties, which prevail there, and tend so much to the diffusion of knowledge and the preservation of friendship. No time will ever abolish the agreeable recollections which I cherish of Jacob Gaddi, Carolo Dati, Frescobaldo, Cultellero, Bonnomatthai, Clementillo, Francisco, and many others. From Florence I went to Siena, thence to Rome, where, after I had spent about two months in viewing the antiquities of that renowned city, where I experienced the most friendly attentions from Lucas Holstein, and other learned and ingenious men, I continued my route to Naples. There I was introduced by a certain recluse, with whom I had travelled from Rome, to John Baptista Manso, Marquis of Villa, a