The Life of
John Milton

A Critical Biography
Revised Edition

Barbara Kiefer Lewalski
The Life of John Milton
The Life of
John Milton

A Critical Biography
Revised Edition

Barbara Kiefer Lewalski
This acclaimed series offers informative and durable biographies of important authors, British, European, and North American, which will include substantial critical discussion of their works. An underlying objective is to re-establish the notion that books are written by people who lived in particular times and places. This objective is pursued not by programmatic assertions or strenuous point-making, but through practical persuasion of volumes which offer intelligent criticism within well-researched biographical text.
For Ken, David, and Laurence
# Contents

**List of Plates** viii  
**Preface** x  
**Acknowledgments** xiv  
**List of Abbreviations** xvi  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Pages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>“The Childhood Shews the Man” 1608–1625</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>“To Cambridge . . . for Seven Years” 1625–1632</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>“Studious Retirement”: Hammersmith and Horton 1632–1638</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>“I Became Desirous . . . of Seeing Foreign Parts, Especially Italy” 1638–1639</td>
<td>87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>“All Mouths Were Opened Against . . . the Bishops” 1639–1642</td>
<td>120</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>“Domestic or Personal Liberty” 1642–1645</td>
<td>154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>“Service . . . Between Private Walls” 1645–1649</td>
<td>198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>“The So-called Council of State . . . Desired to Employ My Services” 1649–1652</td>
<td>236</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>“Tireless . . . for the Sake of Liberty” 1652–1654</td>
<td>278</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>“I . . . Still Bear Up and Steer Right Onward” 1654–1658</td>
<td>319</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>“The Last Words of Our Expiring Libertie” 1658–1660</td>
<td>357</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>“In Darkness, and with Dangers Compost Round” 1660–1665</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>“Higher Argument”: Completing and Publishing <em>Paradise Lost</em> 1665–1669</td>
<td>442</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>“To Try, and Teach the Erring Soul” 1669–1674</td>
<td>489</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Epilogue: “Something . . . Written to Aftertimes”</td>
<td>539</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes** 548  
**Select Bibliography** 705  
**Index** 754
Plates

[Plate section located between pp. 334–5 of text]

2 Christ’s College in about 1688, from David Loggan, Cantabrigia Illustrata, Cambridge, 1690. The British Library.
5 Cityscape of Florence, Veduta dell’Arno con Ponte Vecchio by Israel Silvestre, c. 1640. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City.
6 Milton’s house in the Barbican, as it looked in 1864, from the Illustrated London News, July 16, 1864. The British Library.
9 Frontispiece to Eikon Alethine. With permission from the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
11 William Marshall’s frontispiece to Eikon Basilike, 1649. With permission from the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
12 Title page to Milton’s Eikonoklastes. With permission from the Houghton Library, Harvard University.
13 William Faithorne’s 1658 map of London, showing the area of Milton’s house in Artillery Walk and Bunhill Fields. The British Library.
14 Milton’s Cottage, Chalfont St Giles. Author’s photograph.
15 Title page, *Paradise Lost*, 1667. With permission from the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

16 William Faithorne’s engraving of Milton, from the frontispiece to the *History of Britain*. The British Library.

17 Title page, *Paradise Regained* and *Samson Agonistes*, 1671. With permission from the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

18 The engraved stone near the place of Milton’s burial, in St Giles Cripplegate. Author’s photograph.
More than two centuries ago Samuel Johnson pronounced categorically, as was his wont, that “Nobody can write the life of a man but those who have eat and drunk and lived in social intercourse with him.” Social intercourse with Milton being now impossible, I have to hope that living in intellectual and aesthetic intercourse with his works for most of my professional life will do. A literary biography should, I believe, focus on what is of primary importance in a writer: his or her works. Milton more than most demands to be seen as an author of many kinds of works: magnificent poems in all the major genres – lyric, dramatic, epic – but also polemics, history, theology, and treatises on political, ecclesiastical, educational, and social issues. No writer before Milton fashioned himself quite so self-consciously as an author. He often signs his title pages “The Author John Milton” or “The Author J. M.” He incorporates passages of autobiography that make something like a *bildungsroman* of his early life. He claims poetry and also his polemic service to church and country as a vocation. And he often presents himself as prophet–teacher and as inspired Bard. In text after text he calls attention to his authorial self engaging with the problems of the work in hand: justifying the use of invective and satire in his antiprelatical tracts; making occasion in *The Reason of Church-governement* to comment on the kinds of poems he might write; and registering in the divorce tracts and elsewhere the conflict he feels between citing authorities and claiming originality. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton constructs his bardic self in collaboration with his “heavenly Muse” in four extended Proems whose length and personal reference are without precedent in earlier epics. While all these autobiographical passages are designed to serve poetic or polemical purposes, they also allow us to glimpse the emergence of the modern idea of authorship.

Postmodern literary theory, with its emphasis on the instability and undecidability of both texts and history, challenges the fundamental assumptions of biography, which has to ground itself on empiricism, probability, and narrative. To focus on
the endlessly proliferating meanings that can be found in Milton’s texts and on the uncertain dating of many of his works would not produce a biography of Milton but an essay about the problematics of such an enterprise. For most readers and writers of literary biography the interest lies in what we can know or probably conclude about the life, character, thought, and works of the person treated, what we can reasonably suppose about the order of composition of his or her works, what story makes best sense of all the evidence in hand. In constructing my narrative about this complex man I try to take account of the messiness and contingencies of life and history and to avoid some obvious pitfalls: assuming a teleology of growth and development, or offering a single interpretative key, or presenting an always integrated and self-consistent Milton. There will be and should be as many versions of Milton as there are Milton biographers, and readers will have to judge this one by its plausibility and its insight.

Because Milton was a public figure and because he was so self-conscious about his role as polemicist and poet, we have more extensive materials relating to him than we have for any other important writer to his date. J. Milton French has published five volumes of Milton’s *Life Records*: birth, baptism, and marriage records, property deeds, wills, and other legal documents, together with many contemporary references to him. A new *Chronology* compiled by Gordon Campbell adds several items to this record and corrects some errors. We have some sketches of Milton’s life by persons who knew him well or knew those who did: his nephew Edward Phillips, his pupil Cyriack Skinner, and those seventeenth-century compilers of brief lives of contemporary worthies, John Aubrey and Anthony à Wood. Several early eighteenth-century editors and biographers of Milton collected facts and anecdotes (some of them dubious) from many sources; in the late nineteenth century David Masson’s six-volume *Life* gathered a treasure-trove of historical as well as biographical information; and in 1968 William Riley Parker published the two-volume standard biography, to which Gordon Campbell has recently supplied a very useful appendix of updated notes. Since Parker’s *Life*, however, many additional aids to biographical research and interpretation have become available: the last four volumes of the Yale Milton’s *Prose*, John Shawcross’s invaluable *Milton Bibliography for the years 1624–1700*, several shorter biographies and investigations of particular aspects of Milton’s life, and some extended analyses of little-studied works, including Milton’s State Papers, Latin poems, and *History of Britain*. A new Milton biography at the new millennium has the challenge and the opportunity to rethink the course of Milton’s life, thought, and writing with the benefit of all the new scholarship. Still, some significant problems remain, and my investigations have not solved them definitively. I can only offer plausible inferences about, among other things, the date of *L’Allegro* and *Il Penseroso* or *Ad Patrem* or the “Blindness” sonnet, or what Milton was doing from 1646 to 1649, or which wife Milton addressed as his “late espoused saint,” or exactly when *Paradise Lost* and *Samson Agonistes* were begun and finished, or when Milton’s daughters left home.
A new Milton biography has especially the challenge and the opportunity to re-
think his life in a new interpretative milieu. I hope to bring into focus a Milton rather
different from the figure portrayed in some earlier biographical accounts: the tran-
scendent poet who mostly soared above contemporary struggles; or the Christian
humanist whose poetry and prose gives eloquent voice to mainstream Christian the-
ology and philosophy; or the “Grand Whig” whose dedication to advancing indi-
vidual liberty was straightforward and uncompromised; or the polemicist and poet
who sharply segregated the products of his right and his left hand; or the leftist Milton
whose poems are often thinly veiled political allegory; or the deconstructed Milton
who serves as a sounding board for multiple and contradictory cultural voices. Re-
cent historiography on the English Civil War and Interregnum – both revisionist and
counter-revisionist – has extended and complicated our knowledge of that period
and Milton’s place in it. Also, some of the best recent Milton criticism has explored
the complex ways his poems and prose works respond to their historical moment and
material circumstances, while attending as well to how they engage with literary
models and intellectual traditions, and how they address issues of enduring interest to
modern readers. We now have richly contextualized studies of Milton’s treatment of
women, gender, companionate marriage, love and sex; of Milton’s republicanism,
animist materialism, and radical Christian humanism; and of the relation of his poems
to an emerging literary marketplace and to Restoration politics and cultural norms.
As well, we have many illuminating analyses of genre, texture, and style in Milton’s
poems and prose works, sometimes probing the interrelationships between those two
modes. This biography is indebted on every page to the community of Miltonists,
past and present, on whose work it gratefully builds.

I undertake here to describe the quotidian John Milton at the various stages of his
life and also to treat all his prose and poetry, to tell two stories that intersect con-
tinually but are in some important ways different stories. To that end, the second
part of each chapter is an in-depth discussion of a particular work or works from the
relevant years, focusing on the development of Milton’s ideas and his art. I also
endeavor to attend to the many contexts in which Milton’s works demand to be
seen. Because he was a public figure – Latin Secretary to the Republic and to
Cromwell’s Protectorate and an official polemicist for both – he was responsible for
a large body of state papers and polemic tracts that have to be examined in their
immediate historical circumstances. More broadly, because his life and writings as
political thinker, theologian, and poet were so intimately connected with the po-
litical and religious conflicts and the culture wars of his times, those connections
must be examined at every stage. More broadly still, because the context for Milton’s
poetry and prose is virtually the entire Western literary and intellectual tradition, I
have tried to recognize that in a very real sense Milton saw Homer and Virgil and
Cicero and Ovid and several other great poets and thinkers as his contemporaries,
as much as Cromwell or Bradshaw or Marvell or Vane.

The Milton I present in these pages is a man who began even as a young poet to
construct himself as a new kind of author, one who commands all the resources of learning and art but links them to radical politics, reformist poetics, and the inherently revolutionary power of prophecy. He was deeply involved with the major intellectual and political issues of his time, developing, arguing passionately for, and in some cases changing his views about, the central issues fought about in the revolution and after: monarchy, tyranny, idolatry, rebellion, liberty, republicanism, popular sovereignty, religious toleration, separation of church and state. He also took up issues on the periphery of the contemporary discourses: divorce, unlicensed publication, intellectual freedom, reformed education. And in his unpublished theological treatise *De Doctrina Christiana* he set out most fully a number of extreme positions and attitudes also present in his other works: Arianism, Arminianism, monism, mortalism, a qualified antinomianism, creation *ex Deo*, the absolute authority of the individual conscience illumined by the Spirit, the priority of the inward Spirit’s testimony over scripture itself, and the need to interpret scripture according to the dictates of reason, charity, and the good of humankind. The Milton in these pages did not, as is sometimes supposed, retreat from political concerns after the Restoration: his major poems—*Paradise Lost*, *Paradise Regained*, and *Samson Agonistes*—are profoundly and daringly political as well as being superlative aesthetic achievements. They dramatize in terms relevant to the Restoration milieu subjects Milton had addressed earlier—monarchy, tyranny, rebellion, idolatry, inner liberty, love and marriage—but with new emphasis on the nature of Christ’s kingdom and on the difficulties of interpreting God’s word and his action in history. In these last poems Milton employs the educative power and imaginative reach of poetry to help readers better understand themselves, the human condition, and the ways of Providence, so they might learn to live as free moral agents and as virtuous citizens who value and deserve personal and political liberty.

A biographer cannot, I expect, get very close to a subject she does not like. I like and admire Milton for many things: for his readiness to judge received doctrine by the standards of reason, charity, human experience, and human good; for his far-reaching—even though not total—commitment to intellectual freedom and toleration; for his republican ideals, albeit compromised in times of crisis; for his insistence on free will as the ground of human dignity; for his delight in natural beauty and exuberant creativity; for his efforts to imagine marriage and its sexual pleasure as founded on companionship of the mind and spirit, albeit partly undermined by his assumptions about gender hierarchy; for the courage it took to write *The Readie & Easie Way to Establish a Free Commonwealth* on the eve of the Restoration; and for the largeness of spirit that enabled him to write his three greatest poems when totally blind and disillusioned by the defeat of the political cause he had served for twenty years. Milton the man had his share of faults and flaws and limitations, as I trust this biography recognizes. But they do not diminish the achievement of the poet, “soaring in the high region of his fancies with his garland and singing robes about him.”