

**"GREAT WRITERS".
LIFE OF
JOHN MILTON**

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"Great Writers". Life of John Milton by Richard Garnett & Eric S. Robertson

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RICHARD GARNETT & ERIC S. ROBERTSON

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EDITED BY

PROFESSOR ERIC S. ROBERTSON, M.A.

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BY
RICHARD GARNETT, LL.D.

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LIFE OF MILTON.

CHAPTER I.

JOHAN MILTON was born on December 9, 1608, when Shakespeare had lately produced "Antony and Cleopatra," when Bacon was writing his "Wisdom of the Ancients" and Raleigh his "History of the World," when the English Bible was hastening into print; when, nevertheless, in the opinion of most foreigners and many natives, England was intellectually unpolished, and her literature almost barbarous.

The preposterousness of this judgment as a whole must not blind us to the fragment of truth which it included. England's literature was, in many respects, very imperfect and chaotic. Her "singing masons" had already built her "roofs of gold"; Hooker and one or two other great prose-writers stood like towers; but the less exalted portions of the edifice were still half hewn. Some literatures, like the Latin and the French, rise gradually to the crest of their perfection; others, like the Greek and the English, place themselves almost from the first on their loftiest pinnacle, leaving vast gaps to be subsequently filled in. Homer was not less the supreme

poet because history was for him literally an old song, because he would have lacked understanding for Plato and relish for Aristophanes. Nor were Shakespeare and the translators of the Bible less at the head of European literature because they must have failed as conspicuously as Homer would have failed in all things save those to which they had a call, which chanced to be the greatest. Literature, however, cannot remain isolated at such altitudes, it must expand or perish. As Homer's epic passed through Pindar and the lyrical poets into drama history and philosophy, continually fitting itself more and more to become an instrument in the ordinary affairs of life, so it was needful that English lettered discourse should become popular and pliant, a power in the State as well as in the study. The magnitude of the change, from the time when the palm of popularity decorated Sidney's "Arcadia" to that when it adorned Defoe and Bunyan, would impress us even more powerfully if the interval were not engrossed by a colossal figure, the last of the old school in the erudite magnificence of his style in prose and verse; the first of the new, inasmuch as English poetry, hitherto romantic, became in his hands classical. This "splendid bridge from the old world to the new," as Gibbon has been called in a different connection, was John Milton: whose character and life-work, carefully analyzed, resolve themselves into pairs of equally vivid contrasts. A stern Puritan, he is none the less a freethinker in the highest and best sense of the term. The recipient of direct poetical inspiration in a measure vouchsafed to few, he notwithstanding studies to make himself a poet; writes

little until no other occupation than writing remains to him; and, in general, while exhibiting even more than the usual confidence, shows less than the usual exultation and affluence of conscious genius. Professing to recognize his life's work in poetry, he nevertheless suffers himself to be diverted for many a long year into political and theological controversy, to the scandal and compassion of one of his most competent and attached biographers. Whether this biographer is right or wrong, *Pattison* is a most interesting subject for discussion. We deem him wrong, and shall not cease to reiterate that Milton would not have been Milton if he could have forgotten the citizen in the man of letters. Happy, at all events, it is that this and similar problems occupy in Milton's life the space which too frequently has to be spent upon the removal of misconception, or the refutation of calumny. Little of a sordid sort disturbs the sentiment of solemn reverence with which, more even than Shakespeare's, his life is approached by his countrymen; a feeling doubtless mainly due to the sacred nature of his principal theme, but equally merited by the religious consecration of his whole existence. It is the easier for the biographer to maintain this reverential attitude, inasmuch as the prayer of Agur has been fulfilled in him, he has been given neither poverty nor riches. He is not called upon to deal with an enormous mass of material, too extensive to arrange, yet too important to neglect. Nor is he, like Shakespeare's biographer, reduced to choose between the starvation of nescience and the windy diet of conjecture. If a humbling thought intrudes, it is how largely he is

indebted to a devoted diligence he never could have emulated; how painfully Professor Masson's successors must resemble the Turk who builds his cabin out of Grecian or Roman ruins.

Milton's genealogy has taxed the zeal and acumen of many investigators. He himself merely claims a respectable ancestry (*ex genere honesto*). His nephew Phillips professed to have come upon the root of the family tree at Great Milton, in Oxfordshire, where tombs attested the residence of the clan, and tradition its proscription and impoverishment in the Wars of the Roses. Monuments, station, and confiscation have vanished before the scrutiny of the Rev. Joseph Hunter; it can only be safely concluded that Milton's ancestors dwelt in or near the village of Holton, by Shotover Forest, in Oxfordshire, and that their rank in life was probably that of yeomen. Notwithstanding Aubrey's statement that Milton's grandfather's name was John, Mr. Hyde Clarke's researches in the registers of the Scriveners' Company have proved that Mr. Hunter and Professor Masson were right in identifying him with Richard Milton, of Stanton St. John, near Holton; and Professor Masson has traced the family a generation further back to Henry Milton, whose will, dated November 21, 1558, attests a condition of plain comfort, nearer poverty than riches. Henry Milton's goods at his death were inventoried at £6 19s.; when his widow's will is proved, two years afterwards, the estimate is £7 4s. 4d. Richard, his son, is stated, but not proved, to have been an under-ranger of Shotover Forest. He appears to have married a widow named Jeffrey, whose maiden name had been Haughton,

and who had some connection with a Cheshire family of station. He would also seem to have improved his circumstances by the match, which may account for the superior education of his son John, whose birth is fixed by an affidavit to 1562 or 1563. Aubrey, indeed, next to Phillips and Milton himself, the chief contemporary authority, says that he was for a time at Christ Church, Oxford—a statement in itself improbable, but slightly confirmed by his apparent acquaintance with Latin, and the family tradition that his course of life was diverted by a quarrel with his father. Queen Mary's stakes and faggots had not affected Richard Milton as they affected most Englishmen. Though churchwarden in 1582, he must have continued to adhere to the ancient faith, for he was twice fined for recusancy in 1601, which lends credit to the statement that his son was cast off by him for Protestantism. "Found him reading the Bible in his chamber," says Aubrey, who adds that the younger Milton never was a scrivener's apprentice; but this is shown to be an error by Mr. Hyde Clarke's discovery of his admission to the Scriveners' Company in 1599, where he is stated to have been apprentice to James Colborn. Colborn himself had been only four years in business, instead of the seven which would usually be required for an apprentice to serve out his indenture—which suggests that some formalities may have been dispensed with on account of John Milton's age. A scrivener was a kind of cross between an attorney and a law stationer, whose principal business was the preparation of deeds, "to be well and truly done after my learning, skill, and science,"