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Milton for Millenials: Sponsoring Digital Creativity

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Milton for Millenials: Sponsoring Digital Creativity

by Hugh Macrae Richmond.

Our website *Milton Revealed* was not conceived through epiphany or built in a day, but resulted from many persons' career-spanning processes of discovery in a variety of contexts. In my sixty-year academic career I have seen Milton's reputation oscillate to a remarkable degree, and I attribute consolidation of its progression from frequently negative to firmly positive partly to the evolution of electronic technology, and its impact on literary studies. As a graduate of both Cambridge and Oxford Universities I have been exposed to their contrasting traditions in the seventeenth century: Oxford as the effective capital of Royalism and tradition; and Cambridge as the hotbed of Puritanism and the new philosophy of science and technology - illustrated in the mixture of religion and science in Isaac Newton's mind, as Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge. That Puritan emphasis survived into my stay at Emmanuel College, 1951-54, which had fostered such graduates as Peter Sterry and John Harvard. My room at Emmanuel's North Court overlooked the front court of Christ's College, equally Puritanical to Emmanuel, where John Milton resided as an undergraduate. As I have shown in my study *The Christian Revolutionary*, Milton's own fascination with science led to his meeting with Galileo, in Florence, and gave to his works an astronomical perspective that provided precedents for modern science fiction.

The research speciality I chose for my B.A. degree was Milton, although at that time Cambridge was associated with a powerfully anti-Miltonic critical tradition, including William Empson, Frank Leavis, and a host of New Critics. Fortunately my supervisor was more sympathetic Joan Bennett (her husband, Emmanuel's medievalist H.S. Bennet, was my Director of Studies). Ironically, when I progressed to Oxford to complete a D.Phil. on seventeenth-century poetry I found a strongly pro-Milton faculty which included C. S. Lewis, Helen Gardner; and among my contemporaries were C. A. Patrides and Christopher Ricks. By the time Patrides and I were both hired to teach Milton at U.C. Berkeley, a pro-Milton revolution was in progress, reinforced by U.C. Berkeley's subsequent hiring of my office-mate there, Stanley Fish; and later still of another Oxford D.Phil., Miltonist James Turner. Meanwhile, in the sixties and seventies the radical movement at Berkeley ensured the popularity of Milton as prophet for the Free Speech movement: my Milton lecture course ran to over 200 students. Such class sizes seemed to deny much interaction with students; but then electronic technology burst on to the scene, introducing many audio-visual options: use of multiple slides, reinforced by progressively more dynamic modes of electronic performance via cinematic film, then television modes, evolving from cassettes to DVD's and use of on-line sources such as YouTube and the Internet. Finally we recorded our own in-class stagings of scenes.

Almost inevitably, course performance options progressed to the video recording of a full staging of *Comus*; and, almost unbelievably, to a two-hour recording of a live version of *Paradise Lost*, based on its direct speech episodes. Added together these episodes produced a coherent two-hour script, since published by Peter Lang as *Milton's Drama of*

Paradise Lost. Because of the new television technology, both productions were recorded and produced fresh educational materials, reinforced by a documentary staging of Lawes' subtle music for *Comus*, performed by professionals. These performances are currently accessible in sections on YouTube. The previously not-easily-accessible Lawes' settings have been one of our most welcomed developments on the Internet by scholars. With the increasing facility of technology use, we consolidated all this raw material into a thirty-minute video documentary: *Milton by Himself*, funded by a grant from N.E.H. to make this and two other documentaries: *A Prologue to Chaucer* and *Shakespeare and the Globe* - all still distributed by Films for the Humanities. *Milton by Himself* is partly available on YouTube as *The Early Life of John Milton*. This documentary deployed Milton's passages spoken *in propria persona*, stressing his wry progression from fallible youthful assurance to heroic public service, until he met political defeat with stoic resilience. It also presented stills and video clips from our tour of Miltonic sites in England, ranging from Cambridge, with Christ's and Emmanuel Colleges, and the setting of the first performance of *Comus* at Ludlow Castle, to the site of completion of *Paradise Lost* at the cottage and garden at Chalfont St. Giles. We were fortunate in securing interviews by local authorities, and by literary experts at Christ's and Emmanuel, such as the latter's Master, Derek Brewer. With the arrival of the Internet, this audio-visual material was consolidated into the website now entitled *Milton Revealed*.

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