John Milton was born in Bread Street, Cheapside, the son of a scrivener and composer. He was educated at St Paul's School and Christ's College, Cambridge. His apprentice work at Cambridge includes the "Nativity Ode", an epitaph on Shakespeare and "At a Solemn Music". In 1635 his father moved to Horton in Buckinghamshire; there Milton wrote L'Allegro and Il Penseroso, Comus and the pastoral elegy Lycidas (1637). For the next two years Milton visited Italy (1638-39). The fame of his Latin poems had preceded him and he was received in the academies with distinction.

His Italian tour was interrupted by news of the imminent outbreak of Civil War in England. This event, into which he threw himself with revolutionary ardour, silenced his poetic output for 20 years except for some Latin and Italian pieces and occasional sonnets, most of which were published in a volume of Poems in 1645. Two of these stand out: the noble "On His Blindness" and "On the Late Massacre in Piedmont".

During the years after his return to London in 1639, he devoted himself to the cause of the revolution with political activity and a series of pamphlets defending civil and religious liberties. These included five pamphlets against episcopacy, including Apology for Smectymnuus (1642, Smectymnuus was an attack on episcopacy by five Presbyterians). In 1642 Milton married Mary Powell, the daughter of a Royalist; when she failed to return to him after a visit to her parents in Oxford, Milton published The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce (1643), followed by three supplementary pamphlets against the opponents of his views; these occasioned a threat of prosecution by a parliamentary committee dominated by the Presbyterians, who were now to be reckoned his chief enemies after the episcopacy pamphlets. Areopagitica, A Speech for the Liberty of Unlicensed Printing (1644) was the famous vindication which is still quoted when the press finds itself in danger.

Meanwhile, in 1645 his wife returned to him, accompanied by her whole family as refugees after the Battle of Naseby, and two years later Milton inherited sufficient money to give up his schoolteaching. The execution of Charles I launched him on his third public controversy, now addressed, however, to the conscience of Europe. As Latin secretary to the new council of state to which he was appointed immediately after his defence of the republicans (The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates, 1649), he became official apologist for the Commonwealth. As such he wrote Eikonoklastes and two Defensiones, the first, Pro Populo Anglicano Defensio (1650), addressed to the celebrated humanist Claudius Salmasius. The second, also in Latin, Defensio Secunda (1654), contains autobiographical matter and so supplements the personal matter in the Apology for Smectymnuus.

Meanwhile, his wife had died in 1652, leaving three daughters, and he now married Catherine Woodcock, whose death two years later is the theme of his beautiful sonnet "Methought I saw my late espoused Saint". Although blind from 1652 onwards, he retained his Latin secretaryship until the Restoration (1660), which he roused himself to resist in a last despairing effort as pamphleteer. But the fire had gone out of him, and The Readie and Easie Way, which pointed to dictatorship, became the
target of the Royalist wits. After the Restoration, Milton went into hiding for a short period, and then after the Act of Oblivion (August 1660) he devoted himself wholly to poetry with the exception of his prose *De Doctrina Christiana* (which did not appear until 1823).

He married his third wife, Elizabeth Minshull, in 1662. This was the period of his most famous works, beginning with *Paradise Lost* (completed 1665, published 1667), the theme of which had been in Milton's mind since 1641. It was originally to be a sacred drama; but when in 1658 his official duties were lightened so as to allow him to write, he chose the epic form. The first three books reflect the triumph of the godly, so soon to be reversed; the last books, written in 1663, are tinged with despair. God's kingdom is not of this world. Man's intractable nature frustrates the planning of the wise. In *Paradise Regained* (1671), the tone is more of resignation, and the theme is the triumph of reason over passion. *Samson Agonistes*, published with it in 1671, shows the reviving spirit of rebellion, due perhaps to the rise of Whig opposition about 1670. The parallel of his own fortunes, both in the private and the public sphere, with those of Samson made Milton pour out his spirit into this Greek play, which also formed the libretto of Handel's oratorio.

His last years were spent in sociable comfort in Cripplegate, where he was buried next to his father in St Giles’ Churchyard.


"Lords and Commons of England, consider what nation it is whereof ye are, and whereof ye are the governors: a nation not slow and dull, but of a quick, ingenious, and piercing spirit, acute to invent, subtle and sinewy to discourse, not beneath the reach of any point the highest that human capacity can soar to."

- From *Areopagitica*.

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