

John Milton.

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On the ninth of December we celebrate the three hundredth anniversary of the birth of John Milton, England's greatest epic poet. He who, next to Shakespeare, is the greatest glory of English poetry, was born in London on the 9th of December, 1608.

He is famous, not only among people of his own race, but throughout the world, and his great poem, "Paradise Lost," stands among the greatest epics in all languages. You remember that an epic poem is one that tells of great deeds done by great heroes. Milton's epic is the tale, not of the wars or adventures of mere men, but of that great struggle between good and evil, between God and Satan, when the rebel angels were cast out of heaven, and when they tempted man, and brought sin into the world. Every English-speaking boy and girl ought to learn by heart the opening lines of that great poem, in which Milton tells us what his subject is:

Of man's first disobedience and the fruit
Of that forbidden tree, whose mortal taste
Brought death into the world and all our woe,
With loss of Eden, till one greater man
Restore us, and regain the blissful seat
Sing, heavenly muse.

Let us consider how Milton has been celebrated in the verse of other great writers in all these three hundred years.

John Dryden, a great poet who lived in the same century, wrote these lines under a picture of Milton:

Three poets, in three distant ages born,
Greece, Italy and England did adorn.
The first in loftiness of thought surpassed;
The next in majesty; in both the last.
The force of nature could no further go;
To make a third, she joined the former two.

Wordsworth calls him:

That mighty orb of song, the divine Milton.

Longfellow compares the music of his verse to the sound of great waves rolling in on the beach:

So in majestic cadence rise and fall
The mighty undulations of thy song,
O sightless bard.

And Tennyson addresses him thus:

O mighty mouthed inventor of harmonies,
O skilled to sing of Time or Eternity,
God-gifted organ-voice of England,
Milton, a name to resound for ages.

You see that all these writers dwell upon the *grandeur* and *power* of Milton's verse; and that is where he is greater than other poets. No one who has not committed to memory passages from Milton can know, I think, what glorious music English words can make. The sweetest lines of other writers compared with his sound like the singing of a sweet voice compared with the harmonies of a mighty organ, or of a great orchestra. He was a musician himself, and he writes many beautiful things about music and its power. For instance, in the first book of *Paradise Lost*, he speaks of music:

Such as raised
To height of noblest temper heroes old
Arming to battle; and, instead of rage,
Deliberate valour breathed, firm and unmoved,
With dread of death to flight or foul retreat;
Nor wanting power to mitigate and swage
With solemn touches troubled thoughts, and chase
Anguish, and doubt, and fear, and sorrow, and pain
From mortal or immortal minds.

Milton's life was noble, too, as well as his poetry. He had his faults, like other men, but his life is one that we must honour and admire. He feared God and loved his country; he was brave and honourable, and patient in great trials, such as the loss of his sight, and poverty and loneliness. His most earnest desire was to use his genius and learning in God's service.

Wordsworth says of him:

Thy soul was like a star and dwelt apart;
Thou hadst a voice whose sound was like the sea;
Pure as the naked heavens, majestic, free,
So didst thou travel on life's common way,
In cheerful godliness; and yet thy heart
The lowliest duties on herself did lay.

But it is of little use to know what other people think of Milton. You must learn to know him for yourselves, and be proud that you—

Speak the tongue

That Shakespeare spake; the truth and morals hold
Which Milton held.

THE CHIEF EVENTS OF MILTON'S LIFE.

- 1608. Born in Bread Street, London.
- 1623. Went to St. Paul's school.
- 1624. Went to Christ's College, Cambridge.
- 1632. Took his degree of M. A.
- 1632-1638. Lived at Horton, in Buckinghamshire, where he wrote probably *L'Allegro*, *Il Penseroso*, *Arcades*, *Comus* and *Lycidas*.
- 1638, 1639. Visited France, Italy and Switzerland.