"Confused Anarchy and the late civil broils": The Politics of Genre in Milton's *Histories*

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The writing of history was seminal to Milton's conception of himself as a humanist and is a key to our understanding of his literary career. Yet, Milton's Brief History of Moscovia *and* The History of Britain *occupy a unique position in the way in which they are poised between the humanist notion of history as counsel and history as an assertion of "republican" values. However, situating Milton in a climate of republicanism has often been problematic and challenging. Like writers of humanist historical narratives, Milton's primary aim was to guide the English people in their current political crisis by making the past an analogue of the present. I wish to contend that he approaches his intention generically: by a manipulative use of the genres of history and chorography, Milton is able to straddle the earlier notion of history with the later notions of "republicanism" that permeated the political climate of England in the aftermath of the Civil War. In an inversion of Shklovsky's notion of "form shaping content", Milton's reliance on genre as a vehicle for articulating his political and ideological stance, ultimately results in content shaping form.*

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In 1563, the Elizabethan chronicler and printer Richard Grafton urged the rising Robert Dudley to read history for at least one important reason: "Beside many profitable causes … for which histories have been written, the chiefest in polecie is this, that the examples in tymes passed are good lessons for tyme to come …" (Grafton sig B2r).

Throughout the sixteenth century the "Ciceronian tradition" of history as morally educative dominated discussions on the scope and practice of the subject. Tudor and early Stuart historians, viewing their primary function as didactic, certainly aimed at giving advice, however subtly and obliquely,

filling their works with generalisations of either the political or moral variety. The clearest antecedents of history written as political advice lay in Florentine historiography and the Tacitean revival of the late sixteenth century.[1] In their historical writings, Sir Francis Bacon, Sir Robert Cotton and others provided advice of a specific character – often on subjects of topicality.[2] In humanist historical theory, one learnt by example.

The writing of history was integral to Milton's conception of himself as a humanist and is a key to our understanding of his literary career. But we should in any case expect these works of history to have ideological significance, given that, as Quentin Skinner has put it, in the early modern period political arguments were "commonly sustained by an appeal to the past, an appeal either to see precedents in history for new claims being advanced, or tosee history itself as a development to the point of view being advocated or denounced" (Skinner 238). Milton's *Histories* occupy an interesting position in the way in which they are poised between the humanist notion of history as counsel and history as an assertion of "republican" values. In both the texts I intend to discuss – the *Brief History of Moscovia* and *The History of Britain*, Milton's intention is clearly educative: like writers of humanist historical narratives, his primary aim was to guide the English people in their current political crisis by making the past an analogue of the present. In the process of doing this however, one may decipher the seeds of "republican" values in these works, though the entire issue of Milton's "republicanism" is a complex and debatable one.

I wish to contend that Milton approaches this problem generically. Throughout his literary career, Milton shows a remarkable degree of concern with genre and form. The daring mixtures of generic elements in his poetry have received considerable attention; a relatively neglected area has been the preoccupation with *genre* in his prose although the connections between his prose and contemporary politics have been discussed at length.[3] In the two prose texts that I wish to analyse here, one finds that by a manipulative use of the genres of history and chorography, Milton is able to straddle the earlier notion of history with the later notions of "republicanism" that permeated the political climate of England in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Historical Writing: New Directions

Surveying the state of historical writing almost a hundred years after Grafton,

just before the Restoration, Thomas Fuller in his *The Appeal of Injured Innocence* (1659) lamented the divisions that had sprung up among historians, and wistfully recalled a bygone era when differences of opinion remained camouflaged below the surface:

> Happy those English historians who wrote some sixty years since, before our civil distempers were born or conceived…But alas! Such as wrote in or since our civil wars, are seldome apprehended truly and candidly, save of such their owne persuasion, whilst others do not (or what is worse, *will not*) understand them aright. (Fuller 10)

Fuller clearly recognises here the partisan direction which historical writing had taken under the pressure of war – a point not lost on an earlier commentator Thomas May, who in his *The History of Parliament* (1647) had reiterated that the proximity to political events often reduced the breadth of one's field of vision. While professing his loyalty to "that one rule, Truth", May also warns that "a partial history" containing "rhetorical disguises, partial concealments and invective expressions" can undermine veracity much more stealthily than a piece of straightforward polemic writing (May xv). Precisely because history was believed to present the unadorned truth, it had much greater potential to subvert that truth if written in a partisan spirit.

Although it was possible to look much beyond the beginning of the seventeenth century for the origins of the war and to rethink the entire course of English history, the first historiographical battlefield was the immediate past. Like May, many other writers on the parliamentary side felt obliged to search further back than 1640 to find the origins of the war. Attacks on and defences of Charles I appeared both during the war and after his execution, while throughout the 1650s works like Arthur Wilson's *The History of Great Britain* (1653) and Anthony Weldon's scandalous *Court and Character of King James* (1651) debated on the character of James I, and his responsibility for the civil wars. The late 1650s saw a wave of anti-Cromwellian republican texts like Marchamont Nedham's *The Excellencie of a Free State*, Sir Henry Vane's *A Healing Question Propounded* and James Harrington's *The Commonwealth of Oceana* (1656), where Harrington rewrote English history in the light of a new thesis, the relationship of land ownership to the shifting balance of political power.

This has, of course, led to endless debate as to what constituted "republicanism" in early modern England. With its challenging, paradoxical

thesis that Elizabethan England was a "republic that also happened to be a monarchy", Patrick Collinson's 1987 essay "The Monarchical Republic of Queen Elizabeth I" instigated a proliferation of research and lively debate about quasi-republican aspects of Tudor and Stuart England. Arguing that resistance theory was a key feature not just of Marian but also of Elizabethan political thought, Scott Lucas suggests that *A Mirror for Magistrates* (1553) had proto-republican sympathies and counselled "magistrates to take upon themselves the task of preventing monarchical misrule" (Lucas 96). That the term "republicanism" was problematic has been recognised by David Norbrook when he suggests that "it was identified with a particular type of political grouping that while not specifically anti-monarchical, had distinct hankerings after a severely limited monarchy which, as far as some absolutist theorists were concerned, would be in practice little better than a republic" (Norbrook 40). This is in keeping with Mark Goldie's notion of England being an "unacknowledged republic" based on his study of the remarkable extent of public participation in government at the local level. By contrast, Blair Worden provides the most sustained argument against the existence of republicanism prior to the English Civil War and offers a dialogue between literary texts and political discourse of the Interregnum in *Literature and Politics in Cromwellian England*. Andrew Hadfield argues that republicanism was a "cluster of themes concerning citizenship, public virtue and true nobility" and was a "ghostly presence in English political life from the early sixteenth century onwards" (Hadfield 52, 19).

How then does one situate Milton in this climate of republicanism? Thomas N. Corns offers the idea that Milton's republicanism is more "an attitude of mind than a particular governmental configuration" (Corns 41). Although I agree with Corns's basic argument that there is rarely an outright assertion of "republican" principles in Milton's works, I would suggest that it is through his choice of genre, a choice that is motivated by the material he wishes to incorporate, that Milton strongly articulates his political and ideological stance. In his "uncanonical" texts, for instance his *Histories*, Milton's concern with genres or "kinds" (to use the Renaissance term), is inextricably connected to his concern with contemporary politics. The politics of genre result in the use of generic conventions that are, to use Rosalie Colie's term, "metastable" and thus open to alteration and new generic possibilities (Colie 30).

In his discussion of genre and the theory of prose, Victor Shklovsky points out that a work of art is "created as a parallel and a contradiction" to some

kind of model that existed before it. Thus "a new form appears, not in order to express a new content, but in order to replace an old form that has already lost its artistic value [...] Form creates content for itself" (Shklovsky 53–56). Shklovsky treats the "content" as one of the manifestations of form. I argue that in Milton's case, the reliance on genre as a vehicle for a political message that would be exemplary for a nation ultimately results in *content shaping form*. It is the content of his work – the political events that formed the core of his material, which is instrumental in Milton's choice of genre; the chosen genre then motivated the form and structure within which this content was to be enclosed. The written and printed literature during the 1640s and 1650s was both a response to the Civil War and a central part of that conflict, acting to articulate the political and religious transformations of these decades and contributing to the divisiveness that was characteristic of civil war. Nigel Smith makes a similar though more general point when he puts forward the view that Parliamentarian and radical cultures as well as Royalists had their own literary forms (depending on their ideological content), while generating discourse from shared generic models and how "generic interaction is the literary counterpart or surrogate of social and political difference" (Smith 5).

Milton's Treatment of Genre: Chorography and the *Brief History of Moscovia*

Milton's *Brief History of Moscovia* and *The History of Britain* were begun in tandem in 1647, though they were published much later, in 1670 and 1682 respectively. 1647 was the year in which the Scots evacuated England leaving Charles a captive with his English subjects. Glancing back at the period 1645–1649 in his *Defensio Secunda* (1654), Milton claims that until the trial of the king in late 1648 he felt no need to address the issue of civil liberty as a complement to his treatises on ecclesiastical and domestic liberty since "it was being adequately dealt with by the magistrates" (*Defensio Secunda* 626). These were apparently years of withdrawal from the arena of polemical combat when he collected and published his earlier poems and wrote a manual each on grammar and logic. Yet these were also the years in which he wrote his two *Histories*, which were by no means apolitical. In a letter to his Florentine friend Carlo Dati dated 20 April 1647, Milton voices his mounting anxieties about the current state of affairs:

> Since I returned home, there has been an additional reason for silence in the extremely turbulent state of our Britain, which quickly compelled me to turn my mind from my studies to protecting life and property in any way I could. Do you think there can be any safe retreat for literary leisure among so many civil battles, so much slaughter, flight and pillaging of goods? (Milton, *Letterto Dati* 764)

Although he may not have been galvanised into direct polemical activity, Milton's acute awareness of what the content of his *Histories* should be, governed his choice of genre: this in turn functioned as a political statement.

Milton's *Brief History of Moscovia* is a compilation of facts about Russian topography, regions, climate, manners and customs, followed by a brief political history and an account of the English ambassadors to that country. Although the material was drawn almost exclusively from Hakluyt and Purchas and perhaps Giles Fletcher's *Russe Common Wealth*, Milton's choice of genre is interesting and indeed politically significant. Despite being titled a "brief history", *Moscovia* is clearly in line with the chorographical type of writing that had existed in Britain since medieval times, although chorography as a distinct genre was a relatively new fifteenth century import from Renaissance Italy. In his *Speculum Topographicum* (1611), Arthur Hopton shows how topography is different from other subjects like cosmography:

> Topographie (with some called Corography) is an Arte, whereby wee be taught to describe any particular place, without relation unto the whole, delivering all things of note contained therein, as ports, villages, rivers, not omitting the smallest: also to describe the platforme (plan) of houses, buildings, monuments, or any such particular thing. (Hopton 1)

Thus the distinctions between topography, chorography and history were often blurred: William of Malmesbury's *Deeds of the English Bishops* (1125) combined history and topography as did Giraldus Cambrensis's *The History and Topography of Ireland* (1188). In England, chorography dominated regional studies from the time of Leland to William Dugdale's *Antiquities of Warwickshire* (1656). Drawing on a wide range of scholarship as advised by the ancients Strabo, Ptolemy and Pliny as well as by glancing back at their own medieval antecedents, early modern British chorographers could incorporate history, geography, politics and topography in their chorographical texts. The chorographical works of William Lambarde, John Norden and William

Camden had some features in common: the county is always the unit of description and all these works correspond with the hugely influential series of maps by Christopher Saxton. Richard Helgerson has persuasively argued that long chorographical descriptions left little space for representations of royal power, and chorography came to be seen as a threat to royal absolutism as the opposition between the Crown and Parliament escalated in the years leading up to the civil war. Helgerson ends his argument suggestively by pointing to a possible connection between chorography and Whiggery (Helgerson 356). Although we might see Nicholas von Maltzen's assertion that Milton was "one of the first Whigs" (230), as an overstatement, it is not difficult to imagine why chorography as a genre would appeal to Milton, given his political engagements.

It is perhaps pertinent at this juncture to briefly compare John Stow's *Survey of London* (1598), the most important and frequently published example of chorography in the period and Milton's *The Brief History of Moscovia* to appreciate the crucial differences between Milton's text, and Stow's work. Despite Stow's claims of kinship with the work of his peers, his *Survey* differs in significant ways from its chorographic cousins by its distinctive urban focus and its representation of London that is decidedly non-cartographic in both conception and execution. Moreover, at the heart of Stow's embodiment of the duties of the surveyor in his text lies his adoption of a central tenet of surveying practice: the actual viewing of the land, of being an overseer bound to the community rather than a detached overlooker. In the *Brief History of Moscovia* Milton is attempting a work that takes as its unit not a county or a city but an entire country. What is even more significant is that Milton does not choose to write a chorography of England, but of Russia. The differences of scale and subject in turn denote a difference in the imaginative relationship of the individual to the area described; one can look at Russia only conceptually, detached from the physical experience of space. In the Preface Milton points out:

> The study of geography is both profitable and delightful: but the writers thereof, though some of them exact enough in setting down longitudes and latitudes, yet in those other relations of manners, religion, government, and such like, accounted geographical, have for the most part missed their proportions…; which perhaps brought into the mind of some men more learned and judicious, who had not the leisure or purpose to write an entire geography, yet at least to assay something in the description of one or two

countries, which might be as a pattern or example to render others more cautious hereafter, who intended the whole work. (*Moscovia* 474-475)

Although Milton is referring to subsequent writers of chorography who may benefit from these geographical descriptions, by following Paulus Jovius, he takes as his model an author who had chosen to describe and thereby connect the two countries of Moscovia and Britain (Milton, *Moscovia* 474-475). Clearly, Milton's description of Russia was intended as a mirror of England in his time. Yet what is more telling is that this work was to be "a patterne or example" (Milton, *Moscovia* 474–475). Perhaps this is why, despite writing a work that is largely chorographical in nature, Milton chooses to call it a "brief history". Although viewed by modern critics as an obscure and odd composition within the Milton canon and often dismissed as "an abandoned project never intended by Milton for publication" (Gleason 640), I contend, on the contrary, that the *Brief History of Moscovia* was clearly intended as advice for his countrymen and that Milton's choice of genre was deliberate. By writing in the chorographical tradition, Milton could undermine representations of royal power and indicate his political inclinations; by the strategic use of nomenclature and by calling it a "brief history" he could draw attention to the fact that like the humanist writings on history, his work was meant to be morally educative. If English republicanism was a kind of "cluster" (Scott 6) influenced by related languages of politics, philosophy, law and history, it is this clear and combined political and ethical aim, exemplified through his use of a particular genre that constitutes Milton's doctrinal form of republicanism at a time of national crisis.

Milton begins in a characteristically chorographic manner, describing the geographical coordinates of the empire of Moscovia bound by Lapland, Lithuania, Poland, and the rivers Ob and Volga. Like Giraldus' *Topography of Ireland* where the land, rivers, islands and different kinds of animals, fish and fowl are described, Milton describes the beauty of Rose Island; the river Petzora abounds "with swans, ducks, geese, and partridge, which they take in July, sell the feathers, and salt the bodies for winter provision" and the Riphćan mountains have dense woods of fir where bears, black wolves and another beast, the rossomakka reside (Milton, *Moscovia* 479). Up to this point, the *Brief History of Moscovia* seems structurally like any of the numerous chorographical and topographical writings that were published in Britain. As the work progresses however, tacit parallels between Russia and Britain permeate the text. Several references in *Moscovia* resonate with Milton's

immediate concerns, for example, a long description of Russian tyrants and tyranny. The emperor has absolute power, reports Milton, and if a wealthy man is unable to serve the emperor, he is turned out of his estate. Moreover, if a man dies without a male issue, his land is returned to the crown. Milton gives a picture of a country petrified by the tyranny of the emperor:

> Any rich man, who through age or other impotency is unable to serve the public, being informed of, is turned out of his estate, and forced with his family to live on a small pension [...] The man thus called to impart his wealth, repines not, but humbly answers, that all he hath is God's and the duke's, as if he made restitution of what more justly was another's, than parted with his own. (Milton, *Moscovia* 487)

Perhaps here Milton is warning against the long-term consequences of tyranny when the people themselves become enslaved through terror. In his *Commonplace Book*, Holinshed's account of Richard II leads Milton to an observation about tyranny with clear contemporary relevance: "to say that the lives and goods of the subject are in the hands of the K. and at his disposition is...most tyrannous and unprincely" (Milton *Commonplace Book* 446). The depiction of the Russian monarch in *Moscovia* not only fits this picture of a tyrant but is also remarkably similar to the description of modern politicians in Book II of *Of Reformation* (1641–42), where Milton contrasts debased modern politics with the true art of politics, i.e., "to train up a Nation in true wisdom and vertue". Assaulting the people's liberties and property is the sole objective of a modern politician whose "deep design" concentrates on "how to qualify and mould the sufferance and subjection of the people to the length of that foot that is to tread on their necks; how rapine may serve itself with the fair and honourable pretences of public good" (Milton, *Of Reformation* 571). Like the Prelates in *Of Reformation* who "lye basking in the Sunny warmth of Wealth and Promotion" (Milton, *Of Reformation* 590), the monarch in Moscovia also has an ingenious way of collecting money:

> The revenues of the emperor are what he list, and what his subjects are able; and he omits not the coarsest means to raise them: for in every good town there is a drunken tavern, called a Cursemay, which the emperor either lets out to farm, or bestows on some duke, or gentleman, in reward of his service, who for that time is lord of the whole town, robbing and spoiling at his pleasure, till being well enriched, he is sent at his own charge to the

> wars, and there squeezed of his ill-got wealth; by which means the waging of war is to the emperor little or nothing chargeable. (Milton, *Moscovia* 489)

The Russian emperor's strategy of garnering finances to wage wars may be traced back to a similar entry in Milton's *Commonplace Book*, which offers interesting insights into his immediate political concerns. When he returned to England from Italy in 1639, the nation was in a state of precarious peace. As the months progressed, Milton watched the political crisis worsen. Both the King and his chief adviser the Earl of Strafford, attracted fierce animosity for seeking heavy subscriptions and extra-legal taxes to renew war with the Scots. In his *Commonplace Book*, several citations under "Property and Taxes" and "Official Robbery or Extortion" display Milton's anger over Charles's hated levies. For instance, Harold Harefoot "exacting ship monie" is just one of several examples he cites of kings who were "pollers" (plunderers) and lost their subject's love or provoked rebellion by exorbitant taxes to fight unwise wars or for private corruption. Other entries indicate a heightening of Milton's antimonarchist and republican sentiments, notably his summary of Machiavelli's views as to why a commonwealth is preferable to a monarchy (Milton, *Commonplace Book* 421). It is in this context perhaps, that Milton also includes in his *Brief History of Moscovia,* an extended report of Russia's salvation from the chaos of civil war by a "mean Man" who persuaded them to choose an able general to eliminate corruption and to pay the soldiers well.

> … it happened that a mean man, a butcher, dwelling in the north about Duina, inveighing against the baseness of their nobility, and the corruption of officers, uttered words, that if they would but choose a faithful treasurer to pay well the soldiers, and a good general, (naming one Pozarsky, a poor gentleman, who after good service done, lived not far off retired and neglected,) that then he doubted not to drive out the Poles. The people assent, and choose that general; the butcher they make their treasurer; who both so well discharged their places, that with an army soon gathered they raise the siege of Mosco, which the Polanders had renewed… (Milton, *Moscovia* 493–494)

Sometime between July and August 1648, Milton addressed a sonnet to Lord General Fairfax, the commander-in-chief of the army, who was besieging some 3,000 royalist soldiers in Colchester. While the poem pays tribute to

the strength and goodness of Fairfax, it also urges him to take on the more important task of reforming civil order by the exercise of his virtue.

> For what can Warr, but endless warr still breed,
> Till Truth, and Right from Violence be freed,
> And Public Faith cleard from the shamefull brand
> Of Public Fraud. (Milton, *On ye Lord General Fairfax*, 215)

Clearly Milton was now looking to the army and the noble Fairfax as the best hope to settle the government; the reference to the humble but virtuous butcher and "good" general Pozarsky in *Moscovia* may have been indicative of this attitude.

By using the genre of chorography, Milton's "brief history" thus takes on a special political import and produces an ethical critique rather than neutral account. The implicit parallels and contrasts between Moscovia and Britain indicate that Milton uses chorography in a radically different way from his predecessors and contemporaries. Writers of chorography in late Elizabethan and early Stuart England had used the genre in one of several ways: to search for precedents for the Anglican Church, to support the "Tudor myth", to highlight local history, or, as in James I's reign, to specifically marginalise the monarch. Chorography had never been deliberately used for instruction or advice. Milton's virtuoso use of the genre is evident in the way this chorography becomes doctrinal and exemplary to the nation in a moment of acute crisis and it can articulate Milton's antimonarchist sentiments in a way ordinary history would be unable to. By combining the instructive aim of history with the subversive aim of chorography, Milton is able to achieve an "alteration of generic possibilities" (Colie 30).

The History of Britain: Humanist History and Republican Historiography

The Second Civil War was over by August 1648 after Cromwell's victory at Preston over the Scottish and English armies, and the surrender of the royalist forces to Fairfax at Colchester. In September, fifteen commissioners from the Lords and Commons in Parliament began a final attempt to reach a negotiated settlement and "personal treaty" with King Charles I at Newport on the Isle of Wight, but Charles, hoping for an Irish or European invasion, continued

his delaying tactics. As the crisis intensified with Charles's insistence on preserving bishops and the subsequent collapse of the Treaty of Newport, Milton was engaged in the writing of the *History of Britain*. Milton's statement in the preface to *Moscovia* that he intended to write of "the description of one or two Countreys […] and I began with Muscovy", makes it clear that he was following Paulus Jovius's example and thereby suggests that he conceived of these two projects at approximately the same time. There has been considerable debate regarding the exact dating of the *History of Britain*, particularly the Digression (that was meant to be attached to the third book). However, it seems fairly certain that Milton wrote the initial draft of the first four books sometime between late 1647 and the chaotic months of 1648, just before the King's execution in early 1649.[4] The work was continued again after 1655.

When Milton decided to write the history of his nation from earliest times to the present, he rose to a call by Henry Savile, Samuel Daniel and Francis Bacon, among others, to write a history that would break free from the ponderous chronicle format and would be in the form of a continuous narrative. In the dedicatory epistle to *Rerum anglicarum scriptores post Bedam* (1596), Savile puts forward his case against chronicles, particularly the corrupt Latin in which they were written, while in *The Advancement of Learning*, Bacon advocated a more holistic approach to history, pointing out that "unperfect histories" were those which lacked "a perfect continuance or contexture of the thread of the narration" (Bacon 179). Milton does not, however, follow any of the recent models of historical writing available to him, like Camden's antiquarian chorography *Britannia* (1586), Selden's elaborate analysis of the institution of tithe payment in *Historie of Tithes* (1618) or Thomas May's republican history of the English Parliament, which focussed on the triumphs of liberty. Instead, Milton chose to revive the humanist ideal of history as counsel, not now to princes or kings, but significantly, to Parliament and the English people. In his seminal study *Milton's History of Britain: Republican Historiography in the English Revolution,* Nicholas Von Maltzahn illustrates how Milton's essentially humanist and literary conception of what a history should be, and his exclusive interest in narrative sources, made him already out of date in his method at a time when Spelman and Selden were pioneering a recognizably modern form of historical scholarship. Von Maltzahn carefully traces the development of Milton's ambition to write a great national history, explaining why his first conception of a verse epic, singing the heroic past, gave way to that of a lofty prose narrative that would culminate in a celebration of God's presence with his elect nation in the struggle for religious and civil liberty in his own time. In

this work, Milton looks afresh at the era of the Britons and the Saxons, less to trace the origins of the war than to shed light on the collapse of liberty in his own time. Drawing on the moralising history of writers like Gildas, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Bede, Milton emphasises how the lessons of British history can be applied to his own times. The period between the Roman withdrawal and the Saxon invasion deserves to be highlighted, considering that

> the late civil broils had cast us into a condition not much unlike to what the *Britans* then were in, when the imperial jurisdiction departing hence left them to the sway of thir own Councils; which times by comparing seriously with these later, and that confused Anarchy with this intereign, we may be able from these two remarkable turns of State, producing like events among us, to raise a knowledge of our selves, both great and weighty. (Milton, *Britain* 129)

The writing of history in the 1620s and 1630s reflects a tension between ambivalence to the politics of statecraft and the urge to provide political counsel. In offering subtle criticisms of past policies with a view to suggesting changes in the present, historians found themselves straddling a fine line between directness that might cause offence, and a more oblique approach, as Bacon and William Habington discovered. D.R. Woolf has cogently argued that by the 1640s and 1650s, more pressing issues had emerged: there was a multitude of conflicting interpretations of both the remote and the recent past, as historians tried to make sense of the civil war (Woolf 141–169). Argument, debate and controversy replaced general consensus about the past. It was at this critical juncture that Milton writes his *History of Britain*.

Milton's *History* is generically rich and complex in the way in which he attempts to move away from contemporary treatments of history while fusing different traditions. Milton was working with two historiographical traditions. In a 1657 letter to Henry de Brass, Milton reaffirms "that I prefer Sallust to any other Latin historian whatever" (Milton, *Letter to Henry de Brass* 500). This comment registers both a moral and stylistic preference: Milton's own analyses in the *History of Britain* found a model in Sallust's interpretative narrative of the Roman republic. Milton also admired Italian historians for their ability to produce an objective, rational narrative of complex historical situations and the republican stance many of them advocated. At the same time, he was drawn to the moralistic tradition of British history. As he explores the dark, convoluted course of history up to the Norman Conquest, Milton not

only amalgamates these two traditions, but he faces the additional problem of treating history as a literary construct. There is an undercurrent of tension that runs through the work as Milton's scepticism in the *History* struggles to reconcile itself with his ideas of the strong affinity between history and poetry.

In the first book, Milton attempts to articulate the way in which the historian's attitude may overlap with that of the imaginative writer; the second and the third books resonate with the course of contemporary events and Milton's anxieties during and after the Second Civil War in 1648. In Book II he turns to the Roman historians Caesar, Tacitus, Suetonius and Sallust, summarising and following them closely. In the complex story of the Romans in Britain, Milton takes pains to illustrate that though the Britons were courageous and did not lack martial prowess, they were unable to grasp the opportunity of regaining liberty and establishing self-government. After Julius Caesar "tyrannously had made himself Emperor of the *Roman* Commonwealth", British tribes tried to resist him, but were unsuccessful (Milton, *Britain* 61). The third book carries on in the same strain: led by ambitious, corrupt and tyrannous leaders and clergy members, the Britons completely lacked the wisdom to govern or protect themselves from the invading Scots and Picts, and were ultimately forced to seek protection from foreign Saxon kings, who in turn subjugated them. The political implication of this narrative is not hard to follow: in the anarchic "interreign" of late 1648, history was repeating itself as the power struggles between the imprisoned King, the parliament, the army and the Scots continued.

The Digression, which was supposed to be inserted after Book III, but was ultimately published separately as a twelve-page quarto in 1681, has been the subject of much discussion because of the direct political parallel it offers between the "late commotions" in Milton's Britain, and the withdrawal of the Romans from ancient Britain.[5] Explicitly comparing the chaos and rampant vice in Britain after the departure of the Romans to the manifold evils and corruptions in England, Milton offers a scathing criticism of the Presbyterian Long Parliament for misuse of power and the Presbyterian divines for religious oppression and avarice:

> For a parlament being calld and as was thought many things to redress [...] [but] straite every one betooke himself, setting the common-wealth behinde and his private ends before, to doe as his own profit or ambition led him. [...] Thus they who of late were extoll'd as our greatest Deliverers

[…] did not only weaken and unfit themselves to be dispensers of what Liberty they pretended, but unfitted also the People, now grown worse and more disordinate, to receive or digest any Liberty at all. For Stories teach us, that liberty sought out of season, in a corrupt and degenerate Age, brought Rome itself into farther Slavery. (Milton, *Britain* 443–449)

Milton makes a careful and vital link here between the history of the decline of the Roman Empire (written by Sallust, Tacitus, etc.) and the moralistic history of the decline of the Britons by Gildas or Geoffrey of Monmouth. For Milton, the ideal republic could only come into existence in "civil, virtuous and industrious nations, abounding with prudent men worthy to govern" (Milton, *Britain* 450).[6] After the Digression, Milton takes up the historical narrative again. Although he describes Book IV as a "scatter'd story" of civil matters, the description of the Britons resonate with present conditions. Milton claims that his sources, Gildas and Bede, are often unreliable. Yet, he follows them because he was obviously more interested in establishing political parallels with contemporary England even at the cost of a few factual errors. The very terms in which the Britons are described corroborate this: for instance, the clergy were "Pastors in Name, but indeed Wolves" (Milton *Britain* 174) and the miseries that befell them were, to echo Bede's formulation, the act of a "divine hand on a perverse Nation" (Milton *Britain* 183).

When he was called to government service in 1649, Milton laid aside his *History of Britain*, only to return to it between 1655 and 1657. After this break of five or six years, Milton was clearly thinking about writing history once again. In a letter to the young Henry de Brass, dated 15 July, 1657, Milton sets down certain principles for writing history: not to break up a narrative, not to invent or conjecture, and to join brevity of language with abundance of matter. Milton also objects to the interposition of *sententiae*, although his own practice indicates that he did not object to moral lessons implicit in the narrative itself (Milton, *Letter to Henry de Brass* 501–507).

The last part of Book IV and the fifth and sixth books deal with the internal strife of the Saxon kingdoms and the repeated Danish invasions up to the Norman Conquest. For his Saxon history, Milton's chief sources were William of Malmesbury, Bede and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. The story of the Scots being aided by a vision in conquering King Athelstan "seems rather to have been the fancy of some Legend then any warrantable Record" (Milton, *Britain* 251) while the story of King Edgar as the victim of a bed-trick is "fitter for a Novel then a History; but as I find it in Malmsbury, so I relate it" (Milton,

Britain 357). Clearly, Milton's aim was not original scholarship, but to write an educative humanist narrative that would reveal moral and political lessons and providential patterns that would guide the English people in their political crisis and help them to throw off the legacy of the past.

In the earlier part of the *History,* because the Britons lacked wisdom they "shrunk more wretchedly under the burden of their own libertie, then before under a forren yoke" (Milton, *Britain* 130–131). The same fate awaited their successors, the Saxons. Steering clear of both ecclesiastical and local history, Milton chooses to concentrate on civic history by tracing the increasing subordination of the Saxon kings to monks and priests. Milton could now emphasise some elements of the "Saxon myth" invoked by many defenders of the revolution who asserted that Englishmen's liberties were embedded in Saxon laws and institutions and were destroyed by the Norman Conquest which brought royal absolutism in its wake. Yet, as Martin Dzelzainis has argued, Milton may not have actually subscribed to the myth of the Norman Yoke or been overly sympathetic to the Levellers and their idealised vision of Saxon England as was the common perception. Rather, he "makes a mockery of conquest theory" and the self-defeating nature of all conquests (Dzelzainis 286–287). Combined with the moral and civic perspectives that were in keeping with the aims of writing a humanist historical narrative, the Anglo-Saxon decline, as Milton sees it, was also partly due to rival factions among the people themselves who were incapable of meeting the standards of good citizenship and public virtue. In a radical departure from early Stuart treatments of the issue, Milton actually saw the union of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms under Wessex as the beginning of the Saxons' own enslavement and this "West-Saxon yoke" caused civil war and paved the way for the Danish and Norman conquests. People might have expected peace and prosperity from such a Union, but on the contrary what followed was "Invasion, Spoil, Desolation, slaughter of many" (Milton, *Britain* 257). Thus, approaching the historical narrative with a remarkably personal analysis, Milton suggests that even good princes like Egbert or Edgar proved insufficient against the corruption of a people who, through internecine squabbling, brought ruin on themselves. Drawing chiefly on William of Malmesbury, Milton noted how the licentiousness of the nobles and poor education of the clergy had allowed vices to run rampant, while the quarrelling factions of the people were unable to establish a settled government. The high standards of virtuous citizenship set by Milton and the inability of the English to meet those standards made him increasingly sceptical of the abilities of the people.

In *Prolusion III*, Milton describes a different effect of historical narrative in terms resembling his famous definition of poetry in *Of Education*: "History, skilfully narrated, now calms and soothes the restless and troubled mind, now fills it with delight, and now brings tears to the eyes" (Milton*, Prolusion III* 244). Thus the *History of Britain*, beginning with the myth of Brutus and then charting a tragic pattern of a people who bring ruin on themselves, not only addresses contemporary political concerns, but also reveals a powerful tension in its claims for historical discourse:

> I intend not with controversies and quotations to delay or interrupt the smooth course of History […] but shall endevor that which hitherto hath been needed most, with plain, and lightsom brevity, to relate well and orderly things worth the noting, so as may best instruct and benefit them that read […] imploring divine assistance, that it may redound to its glory, and to the good of the *British* nation. (Milton, *Britain* 4)

For his first book, which deals with the beginnings of the nation to the advent of Julius Caesar, Milton found no worthy history to follow, perhaps because records were lost, or as he is inclined to think, the wise men of those times perceived "not only how unworthy, how pervers, how corrupt, but often how ignoble, how petty, how below all History the persons or thir actions were" (Milton, *Britain* 1–2). The *History of Britain* is full of statements criticising the use of fable and invention in historiography. Milton protests against the dubious character of all old stories and legends from pre-Roman Britain, including Albion and Brutus. Nevertheless, he decides to narrate them anyway in case they can act as repositories for future poets who may use these stories judiciously. Milton's argument, that he is forced to include the myth of Brutus simply because it was defended by many, indicates that he was unable to disregard the rhetorical character of historiography. He relies almost entirely on Geoffrey of Monmouth's details about early Britain, promising to avoid the impossible and absurd but inviting a thoroughly sceptical reading of his reports. Milton wonders, for instance, as to how the Trojans, despite having "friends and countrymen so potent" (Milton, *Britain* 3) remained in bondage. But, as he points out, "to examine these things with diligence, were but to confute the fables of Britain, with the fables of Greece or Italy; for of this age, what we have to say, as well concerning most other countries, as this island, is equally under question" (Milton, *Britain* 9).

In January 1657, a plot to assassinate Cromwell and facilitate a royalist

European invasion gave Parliament the impetus to establish the government in more traditional, monarchical forms. A proposal was made to make Cromwell king and secure the succession. Although Cromwell refused the title, mainly due to fierce opposition from the army, a new constitution confirmed Cromwell as Protector and gave him the authority to choose his successor, making the office quasi-monarchical. Cromwell's movement towards centralisation of power seems to have evoked a camouflaged reaction from Milton. Engaged in writing the last part of his *History* while these developments escalated at Whitehall, Milton shows how the political achievements of worthy kings like Egbert and Alfred (who are implicitly compared to Cromwell), gave way to internal strife and ultimately proved counterproductive (Milton, *Britain* 257). Milton had pinned his hopes on Cromwell with the view that a general could perhaps mould a corrupt people into virtuous citizenry, extinguish different factions and establish a Free Government where "no single person should enjoy any power above or beside the laws" (Milton, *Second Defense* 668–674). But he was bitterly disappointed with Cromwell and his Protectorate. Cromwell's move towards a kind of "federalism" is subtly undermined in Milton's narration of the story of King Canute who recognises "the weak and frivolous power of a King [...] The best is, from that time forth he never would wear a Crown, esteeming Earthly Royalty contemptible and vain" (Milton, *Britain* 366). The Norman Conquest was, to Milton, just the final ignominy when the English started abandoning their own customs and imitating French manners. The parallels with 1658–1660 are hard to miss: the implicit analogue here of course is that if the Protector adopts quasi-monarchical forms, it will only reinforce slavishness and degeneration in the populace. Worse still, it could invite conquest by another French monarch, Charles II, who like William I, might force the people to "take the yoke of an outlandish conqueror". In concluding his account, Milton issued a warning to his contemporaries lest worse calamities should follow: "If these were the causes of such misery and thraldom to those our ancestors, with what better close can be concluded, then here in fit season, to remember this age in the midst of her security, to fear from like vices without amendment the revolution of like calamities" (Milton, *Britain* 402–403).

Conclusion

Barring the Digression, Milton refused to draw a direct line of development

between the vicissitudes of ancient British history and the troubles of his own era. There may be several reasons for this, one of which may be that in the 1650s, the attitude that classical republicans took toward commercial society and interest became increasingly problematic. Their anxiety about and antagonism towards the newly emerging commercial society of mid-seventeenth century England was not shared by all the defenders of the Commonwealth. As Markku Peltonen has argued in his book *Classical Humanism and Republicanism in English Political Thought, 1570–1640*, from the mid sixteenth century onwards, many members of English society continued to use deeply entrenched notions of the humanist tradition as the virtuous civic life and *vera nobilitas* to portray themselves as citizens and to characterise their lives as one of active participation, a point reiterated by Mark Goldie who writes that measured by the standards of participatory rather than merely electoral democracy, early modern England starts to look like a thriving body politic. Many of those who celebrated the rule of the Rump Parliament criticised the Protectorate and fiercely opposed the restoration of an absolute monarch also propounded a new ideology appropriate to a commercial society. The political economy they defended assumed that wealth, not civic virtue, was the basis of political power; merchants, rather than virtuous, judicious men were the most useful members of society. As Pocock points out, the "ideals of virtue and commerce could not therefore be reconciled to one another" (Pocock 48). Milton shared the classical republican hostility to commercial society, noting in a 1651 entry in his *Commonplace Book* that "riches are not the nerves of war as is generally believed" but civic virtue, wisdom and experience was the basis of political and military power (Milton, *Commonplace Book* 414–415). For all his anti-monarchical sentiments and fondness for liberty, Milton was clearly hostile to the newly emerging English commercial culture of which, many of his associates and defenders of the Commonwealth were prime exponents. This led to a point when, as Blair Worden has suggested in an article, by 1688–89, most of the radicals "wanted the predominant form of the constitution to be democratic" (Worden 258–259). But the high standard of civic virtue set by Milton precluded the possibility for a truly deliberative popular politics. Milton's idealisation of an agrarian, pre-capitalist commonwealth and his strong aversion to the political economy of commercialisation – a political economy increasingly defended by Commonwealth radicals – may have been partly responsible for his camouflaged reaction in the *Histories*.

Milton did not, like Harrington or Nedham, develop a new republican paradigm in the mid-1650s. Although like them he found the best models for

a free commonwealth in ancient Greece and Rome and in modern Venice and Geneva rather than in Saxon England, he is obviously choosing a different path to articulate his ideological stand. When the government lost the trust and the support of a significant segment of the population, as it had done by the 1640s, the conditions were ripe for an alteration in the manner in which historical discourse occurred. An atmosphere of open ideological conflict and debate existed, when any reader of history would be well advised to take note of the author's political and religious perspective.

One may never know why Milton did not complete the *History of Britain*. He certainly intended to write an account up to the present day, but he stopped short at the Norman Conquest. The work envisions the remote past, as providing parallels for the present. But as Thomas Fuller noted, the day had passed when a work of historical writing could pass quietly into the public realm without generating criticism or challenges; with it went much of the humanist faith in the study of the past. Perhaps Milton's failure to complete his work was born of the recognition that it was futile to write a traditional humanist historical narrative in an age where history had become a marker of ideological and political difference and one of the most controversial of literary genres. In Milton's valiant attempt to make content shape the form, the form itself had to be finally abandoned.

Notes

1. For a general discussion and survey of formal historical writing in Italy, see Erich Cochrane, *Historians and Historiography in the Italian Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). For specific studies on Florentine Historiography see J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975); A. H. Gilbert, *Machiavelli's Prince and its Forerunners* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1938); Felix Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini: Politics and History in Sixteenth-Century Florence* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1965); the Dutch scholar Justus Lipsius initiated a new Continental interest in Tacitus which inspired much of the political history of the 1590s and early 1600s. See K.C. Schellhase, *Tacitus in Renaissance Political Thought* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976); Peter Burke, "Tacitism" in *Tacitus*, ed. T.A. Dorey (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969) 149–71; Alan T. Bradford, "Stuart Absolutism and the 'Utility' of Tacitus", *HLQ* 46 (1983), 127–55.
2. See Francis Bacon, *History of the Reign of King Henry the Seventh* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Sir Robert Cotton, *A Short View of the Long Life and Raigne of Henry the Third* (1627); William Habington, *Historie of Edward the Fourth* (1640).
3. In the last few years there have been numerous books and articles on Milton's use of prose to comment on revolutionary politics. See for instance, N.H. Keeble, "'Nothing

nobler then a free Commonwealth': Milton's Later Vernacular Republican Tracts" in *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*. Eds. Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Stephen M. Fallon, "Nascent Republican Theory in Milton's Regicide Prose" in *The Oxford Handbook of Literature and the English Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012); Edward Andrews, *Imperial Republics*. (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2011).

4. For dating of the *History of Britain*, see French Fogle in Wolfe V.1, xxxix-xl; Nicholas von Maltzahn, *Milton's History of Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 22–48; Austin Woolrych, "Debate: Dating *Milton's History of Britain*", *The Historical Journal 35* (1993), 929–43.

5. See, for example, Martin Dzelzainis, "Dating and Meaning: *Samson Agonistes* and the 'Digression' in Milton's *History of Britain*". *Milton Studies* 48 (2008) 160–177. See also Thomas Fulton, *Historical Milton: Manuscript, Print and Political Culture in Revolutionary England* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2010).

6. See Steve Pincus, "Neither Machiavellian Moment nor Possessive Individualism: Commercial Society and the Defenders of the English Commonwealth", *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 103, No. 3 (June 1998), 705–736; David Wooton, *Republicanism, Liberty and Commercial Society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1994).

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