

John Milton, Alexander Turnbull and Kathleen Coleridge

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Ladies and Gentlemen,

We do homage this evening to three people—a poet, John Milton; a collector, Alexander Turnbull; and a scholar, Kathleen Coleridge.

Every teacher knows how difficult—and how important—it is to keep the past alive. I need hardly remind this ‘fit audience’ that history expands our mental space by liberating us from the tyranny of the present; and poetry frees us from that circumscription of mind which petty fact daily dictates. There is no evasion in that freedom. For the Renaissance, and for Milton in seventeenth century revolutionary England, it meant only a higher commitment to transcendent truths.

What in me is dark
Illumine, what is low, raise and support;
That to the height of this great argument,
I may assert Eternal Providence
And justify the ways of God to men.

Paradise Lost I. 22–26

For Milton, history and poetry were indissolubly linked: history, properly understood, could prove God’s providence and record a nation’s struggle towards that revelation; the poet’s job was not merely to delight the senses but to direct the soul. Both history and poetry were therefore strongly purposive. Their function was not simply to reflect the world but of course to change it:

Methinks I see in my mind a noble and puissant nation rousing herself like a strong man after sleep, and shaking her invincible locks: Methinks I see her as an Eagle mewing her mighty youth, and kindling her undazzled eyes at the full mid-day beam . . .

Areopagitica

Milton brought formidable powers to that task. He was the last great writer to unite in his work the three main sources of western culture—the classical, hebraic, and christian. As such, he mediates

Speech delivered at the launching of Kathleen Coleridge’s bibliography of the pre-1801 Milton collection in the Library, 25 November 1980.