Literature and Politics in Seventeenth Century
London
Transcript

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At the heart of my research lies the desire to understand, and to foreground, the world in which writers operate. When I read what Ben Jonson said of William Shakespeare, that ‘He was not of an age, but for all time!’ I say, ‘yes, but Shakespeare worked within a particular culture of drama’. He worked in a particular place (not far from here – although the City authorities did what they could to suppress the dangerous South Bank theatre world); he worked within particular norms of performance and publication - a play would run for just a night or two, and play texts were generally ephemeral, shoddily produced things, often pirate editions half-remembered by an actor looking for a bit of extra cash from an unscrupulous publisher; and he worked at a particular historical moment, when the content of plays was controlled and policed by the state. One sign of his success was that Shakespeare was one of the few dramatists who didn’t spend time in prison. So, although I agree with Jonson – Shakespeare is for all time – he is also of his age.

In fact, Jonson was pursuing his own agenda when he wrote those lines. They come from a commendatory poem he wrote for the 1623 folio edition of Shakespeare's plays (To the memory of my beloved, The Author Mr William Shakespeare: And what he hath left us.) Jonson’s edition of Shakespeare sought to transform the status of stage plays through presenting them in a ground-breaking format – the folio, usually reserved for weighty works of theology, law, or history – as if the tweets of Liz Hurley were to be published as an OUP monograph. The Folio reveals Jonson’s agenda: he wants plays to be taken seriously (he even published his own plays with footnotes). Shakespeare himself didn’t bother to circulate or preserve his plays in print.

To look at the world in which writers function, and to consider how their work came to be read, can give us valuable insights in particular into those factors that enable or disable a writer from being heard. The issues are at their most stark when one considers the lives and works of women: following Virginia Woolf’s lead (and who can resist the elegant arguments of her essays?), I always wonder about Shakespeare’s sister – Woolf imagines an equally talented sister for William. If you are denied education, or educated only to fulfil certain proscribed roles; if you cannot access pen and paper (or a laptop); if you have no privacy or time for your own writing; if you are prohibited, whether by law or custom from publishing your work (whether in print or over the internet); if you are barred from public or professional life; and if to publish or perform your own work would make you tantamount to a prostitute – and all these were true for women in the time of which I speak, and remain true today for some women, then it is hardly surprising that no female Shakespeare or Milton appeared.

But these questions are not only questions for women – and my concern this evening is to demonstrate the obstacles that both Ralegh and Milton had to overcome in order to write their most monumental works, and, even more importantly, what was necessary to bring those works to the eyes of readers. In exploring this second issue, I will be talking about an emergent, and rapidly changing, print culture in the seventeenth century – and possibly now – and I am not talking about the content of the works (although I could do so). No, I am talking about their very publication. In my lecture this evening, I hope to explain that claim, and in doing so, I hope to show the ways in which writers, and in particular writers who had contentious political messages to convey, responded to, and exploited, what we would call new media in the seventeenth century – here, in the City of London.

Both publications were remarkable achievements that can tell us much about literature and politics in the seventeenth-century, and possibly now – and I am not talking about the content of the works (although I could do so). No, I am talking about their very publication. In my lecture this evening, I hope to explain that claim, and in doing so, I hope to show the ways in which writers, and in particular writers who had contentious political messages to convey, responded to, and exploited, what we would call new media in the seventeenth century – here, in the City of London.

So, first, to Sir Walter Ralegh. Why do I say it was remarkable that, in 1614, his History of the World was published? One answer is that the book’s author, Ralegh, was, in legal terms at least, a dead man: his King, James I, controlled his lands, goods and person, because in 1603, Ralegh had been condemned for treason. Although reprieved from execution by James, he was nevertheless imprisoned in the Tower of London, and he was certainly not pardoned. I have written elsewhere about the early years of that imprisonment, both from the perspective of Ralegh and from that of his wife, Bess Throckmorton, and I will not discuss them here: suffice to say, they can be characterised by the words desperate and hopeless (with a new low reached in 1609, with the loss of the Sherborne estate in Dorset, held in trust up until then by Lady Ralegh).

But probably some time around 1610 or 1611, Ralegh seemed to gain a new focus. On one level, he had hopes from the court: King James’ son, Prince Henry, was rumoured to be a supporter of his cause, and Ralegh wrote various position papers, about naval or political matters, either for him, or in the hope that he would be interested. These were tentatively circulated in manuscript. It is quite possible that Ralegh’s interest in history was prompted by the desire to serve the young Prince, but soon the project became all-consuming: he was...
absorbed in the writing of a History of the World, from the Creation to the present day. With maps.

So far, so scholarly and therefore harmless. Except that it was a history. The ability of history to comment on the present, under the guise of talking about the past, was feared by the state: already effectively banned from writing about contemporary matters unless under royal authority, authors had had to deal with Privy Council censorship of histories, since 1599. But as the project grew, so did Raleigh's ambition. Raleigh decided that he wanted to reach beyond the Tower walls and past even the Court. He would publish (after all, he was already damned...).

I will ask 'how' first, then 'why'? How to get a work, which was well over a thousand pages of folio (and it only gets up to the second Macedonian war, not even reaching the birth of Christ) printed – and past the censors? Two answers first off: what we now call networking – and anonymous publication. A key player is Ben Jonson (we've already seen how he was responsible for establishing Shakespeare's status with the Folio of 1623). Jonson, it seems, got his publisher and his bookseller on board. (The bookseller was Walter Burre, the publisher William Stansby: Jonson had been a Stansby author through the 1610s). (Jonson was then hired by Sir Walter to tutor Wat, his son, and through 1612 and 1613 he did something approximating that – Ben and Wat went on an extended, alcohol-fuelled trip round northern Europe – a sort of mini-grand tour meets gap year meets extended stag party.) The Stansby deal was done in 1611, and printing went on for three years, Raleigh continuing to produce material during this time. His commitment to the project only intensified with the early death of young Prince Henry in 1612 and thus the loss of his potential royal reader and supporter – it was now even more important to reach beyond the Tower walls. Raleigh wrote the book back to front, in fact: the long Preface was completed only in 1614, just before publication.

And this answers the second part of my 'how' question: how did this work get past the censors? It got past because they didn't see the whole thing. If you pick up the work now and turned to Book One, you would find chapters entitled

'Of the meaning of the words Heaven and Earth'

or

'Of the intellectual mind of man, in which there is much of the image of God: and that this image is much deformed by sin'

or, possibly a bit more exciting, but not much:

'Why it should be needful to entreat diligently of the place of Paradise' (which is not, as some commentators suggest 'as high as the moon' or 'under the equinoctial' but, a nice uncontroversial choice, in Mesopotamia).

This is undoubtedly what the censors saw, and passed, in 1611 – with the stipulation that the work appeared anonymously. That explains how, but the more interesting question, to me, is 'why'? Raleigh is operating at a cusp in communication methods. Print had been around for over 150 years at the time I am talking about, but it was not as widely used as one would think. Yes, Books of Homilies were provided by the Church to ensure that the right words were spoken in every church and we should not forget, in its quatercentenary year, the Authorized Version of the Bible, but this is state-sponsored publication, designed not to create debate, but to establish conformity. In other arenas, print was far less important than scribal circulation. Literary figures such as Sir Philip Sidney, John Donne and George Herbert never published their poetry, but passed it round it in manuscript, often responding to the work of other poets, also in manuscript. Raleigh, as good a poet as any, and better than most, never published a volume of poetry: he too circulated within a coterie manuscript culture, or occasionally offered a printed verse in praise of public figures, such as Sir Philip Sidney.

These kinds of authors (Sidney, Raleigh, Donne, Herbert) were reluctant to move in to print for various reasons. In social terms, elite authors sought to seem above the mercenary world of trade. Added to that, certain forms of literature, such as lyric poetry and drama were seen as fundamentally ephemeral - not for all time. Thinking in a more utilitarian way, there were also questions of readership. If you wanted to target the powerful elite, then it was often far better to use scribal publication. Indeed, why would one want to target anyone else? Literacy levels remained low, and spare money for books, or even pamphlets, was scarce and we are still over three hundred years from a universal franchise. Finally, if one did want to communicate something controversial, then scribal publication was quicker and easier, circumventing the state's licensing system.

All these factors meant that a move into print for anyone in this period remained a relatively innovative step. But Raleigh had form in this area. He was the author of two works published in the 1590s, which illustrate clearly two functions of print. The first was an account of the only English naval loss in the war with Spain, the loss of Sir Richard Grenville's ship, The Revenge. Raleigh was asked to turn a defeat into a victory by his Queen, and did so, triumphantly. He tells the glorious story of one lone English captain's brave stand against a vast Spanish fleet. Yes, the ship had been lost; yes, the captain had been killed, but all the glory was England's and that of her Queen. Sir Richard Grenville's foolish, dangerous, lone stand is transformed into an act of transcendent heroism. Raleigh's Queen is ordained by God to bring Spanish Catholicism to its knees, and to lead England to further Protestant greatness. Elizabeth 'by the favour of God' will continue to 'resist, repel, and confound all whosoever attempts against her sacred Person or kingdom. In the meantime, let the Spaniard and traitor vaunt of their
success: and we her true and obedient vassals guided by the shining light of her virtues, shall always love her, and serve her, and obey her to the end of our lives'. It's great stuff, and the Queen and her counsellors had it printed, showing that the state was developing its use of new media (to work with those Homilies). The other work from this decade was Raleigh's account of his voyage up the Orinoco in search of El Dorado. Here Blackadder is harsh but fair: Raleigh did not find gold, or at least, did not find easily mineable gold. On his return to England, Raleigh did what most people would have done. He wrote to his court backers, asked for more money, explained what had gone wrong. He sent them a manuscript account of the voyage (which still survives at Lambeth Palace Library), in the hope that this would persuade them. It did not. So, in an uncharacteristic step, he published the work (The Discovery of the Large, Rich and Beautiful Empire of Guiana), including an address to the Reader (although still containing the addresses to Lords Cecil and Howard). This was followed up in the next two years by further print accounts, written by Raleigh's team, of the quest for gold, the aim being to drum up investors, to keep the dream alive.

So back in the 1590s, Raleigh, unlike many of his contemporaries, had direct experience of producing print, and understood its uses. In 1614, he turned to it again, but now with the gloss of new ideology, which I will illustrate from the words of two allies of Raleigh's: the historian John Selden, and the brother of the parliamentarian, John Hoskins, also called John Hoskins. (A confusing practice, but more common than you'd think...). Selden, the historian, had his first work published by Stansby, Raleigh's publisher, in 1614. In it, he explicitly justifies his move into print: he is writing about truth, a 'thing of public right'. He self-consciously places himself and his project outside the patronage system but within the realm of public duty. Hoskins published his first work (also with Stansby) in 1615: a collection of his sermons given in 1614. He writes that he would not have published, but he has been forced into it by circumstances. His brother, the other John Hoskins, had been imprisoned in the Tower of London 1614 and now he is making up, by the publication 'for the time which I then lost from my function, whilst that which was sometimes preached in the ears of a few, shall now preach to the eyes of all'.

These quotations from contemporaries and allies of Raleigh reveal two things. The first is that most writers, particularly those from the elite classes, still believed, or said that they believed, that publication was not their choice. They are forced into publication. The ideal remains manuscript or scribal publication. Print is dangerous, smacks of trade but is necessary in these times, with its growing rhetoric of 'public right', of reaching 'the eyes of all'.

So, one answer to the question as to why The History of the World was published is that it was a response to imprisonment and an attempt to find a wider audience – to bypass the court patronage system, to move beyond a coterie manuscript culture, to reach 'the eyes of all'. The History of the World is thus the act of a politician and soldier who, denied an opportunity to participate in the active world because of his imprisonment, turns to reading histories and then to writing one based on his reading, in order (Ralegh argues) to contribute to the common weal. This is a history of the world offered to the world. It is a public, political act on the part of the imprisoned Raleigh. It is a plea to the reader, to the public, to understand him – that he is loyal:

For conclusion; all the hope I have lies in this, that I have already found more ungentle and uncourteous readers of my love towards them, and well-deserving of them, than ever I shall do again. For had it been otherwise, I should hardly have had this leisure, to have made my self a fool in print.

Ralegh was being disingenuous. He may be making himself a 'fool in print' but over the three years of writing and printing, the text that emerged was anything but foolish. By the time of publication in 1614, not only was Raleigh's authorial presence visible to the reader, despite the lack of his name on the title page, but more importantly his own grievances and his trenchant criticisms of James I's policies imbue his supposedly historical text. He takes a shot at the divine right of kings, and suggests that kings may not be above the law: 'It is true, that there was never any Commonweal or Kingdom in the world, wherein no man had cause to lament. Kings live in the world and not above it.' More particularly, he takes a well-aimed shot at effeminate, corrupt, ineffectual kings, such as the Persian Darius, and his 'licentious Courtiers'. Above all, although Raleigh will never justify the overthrow of a monarch, he will illustrate it again and again. He asks the question: why do kingdoms fall? His answer, at first, is that kings do not learn from history. This is in part the fault of historians, who lay before the Kings and Princes of the world 'the actions, but not the ends, of those great Ones which preceded them'. In his final vision, justly famous, entirely cynical yet passionately eloquent, Raleigh reminds his readers of 'the end': the end of history, the end of time. His closing concern is with the power, not of God, but of Death. Death puts into man all the wisdom of the world, without speaking a word, which God with all the words of his law, promises, or threats, doth not infuse. Death which hateth and destroyeth is believed; God, which had made him and loves him, is always deferred.

History and death are both revelation. Just as Raleigh, four years later, would say, minutes before his execution, that he is grateful to have come from the darkness (of the Tower) in to the light of Old Palace Yard (at Westminster) in order to speak his message before death, The History, written in the Tower, has published his truth to the world. It has revealed, and not just to kings and princes, Raleigh, the great statesman, his oppositional policy, and the fate in store for kings who err.

It is not surprising that The History was called in by the government within weeks of its publication.

(There is another story to be told about the work's suppression, reprinting, and subsequent circulation history -
In 1614, Ralegh was joined in the Tower of London by John Hoskins, mentioned earlier, who had been imprisoned for a speech in the Parliament of that year. (Two others were also imprisoned for 'furnishing the speech'). At this time, Hoskins was developing his own ideas about 'actuating' the powers of the 'people', and Ralegh listened carefully – and began writing again. If The History was Ralegh's most notorious attempt to speak to the people, then his Dialogue between a Justice of the Peace and a Counsellor of State was his most sustained attempt to write about the people as a political entity, and to make claims for a public space in which opinions can be voiced in safety.

I want to note just three things about this work. One: putting political prisoners in the same prison is not a good idea. In 1614, Ralegh moves from generalised criticism of monarchy and a review of classical history (in The History) to a review of recent English parliamentary history, and specific demands for reform of the English political system. Two: Ralegh's Dialogue was circulated in manuscript, which exemplifies my point about the uneven move towards print. Manuscript circulation continued long after it should, logically, have been redundant. The Dialogue was circulated in manuscript for two reasons, I suggest: it was designed to reach only elite policy makers, including the king himself (indeed, two copies remain in the State Papers, and all copies begin with an address to the King, Ralegh's 'Sovereign misinformed'). And there's the point that there was not a chance in hell of Ralegh getting this politically-charged history past the censors and into print. Three: nevertheless, in 1628, ten years after Ralegh's death, the work did appear in print unlicensed, with the imprint Middleburg suggesting, but not proving that it had been printed abroad, and smuggled into the country. It had a new title: The Prerogative of Parliaments. Those of you who know your English parliamentary history will know 1628 as a year of crisis – the year Charles I decided that he would rule without parliament – and it was this that pushed Ralegh's manuscript work into print, now harnessed explicitly to the parliamentary cause. Consider the title: it was no longer an ostensibly neutral dialogue, it was now a defence of parliamentary powers. And it was published again, in 1640, when Charles reluctantly recalled parliament – and the country moved ever closer to civil war.

This brings us to 1640, and John Milton, for whom that year was a year of transformation. By that date, John Milton had done well for himself in many ways. The son of a scrivener father, and a mother from a merchant family, he'd grown up near here, in Bread Street. His powerful intelligence (and his parent's ambition) took him to St Paul's School – his local – and to Cambridge University. In his twenties he wrote beautiful poetry in many languages, a masque for an aristocratic patron, and travelled for many months in Italy where he had the most wonderful of times. Until his departure for Italy, he was, however, still living with his parents (now outside London, his father having retired), and an onlooker might have imagined that this not-so-young man was taking his time before heading towards the familiar career path of the church or the law. His family background (some wealth, more aspirations to gentility) and his talents suggested just that route. But neither priest nor lawyer, John Milton became a political activist, his only weapon, his pen.

How did this happen? It was partly that, on his return from Italy, he finally moved back to the City and away from his parents. Milton was again in a world familiar to him from his youth, with his lodgings in Aldersgate only a short walk from the print hub of Paul's Churchyard. But in 1640, in London, there were new politics (Parliament was in action again), new conditions for writing (censorship had been relaxed), and new uses for that writing. As Milton himself put it: 'as soon as freedom of speech (at the very least became possible), all mouths were opened'. His aims were magnificent. Now 'thoroughly aroused', he saw that men were 'following the true path to liberty' and making the 'most direct progress towards the liberation of all human life from slavery'. Milton was determined to play his part in the struggle for liberty. He put aside his poetry, whether in Latin, Greek, Italian or English, and transformed himself into a writer of polemical prose. His chosen format was the pamphlet: quick to write, cheap to print, cheap to buy, a form constantly in dialogue with itself, as pamphleteer responded to pamphleteer. Is it too much to claim that was the blogosphere of its time?

Suddenly, print was all that mattered. Old manuscripts were picked up, dusted down and published – including, as we have seen, Ralegh's Dialogue. This revolution in the use of print was characterised by rapid turnover, as satirised in a pamphlet of 1641 in which Suck-bottle the hawker (a street-seller of pamphlets) is looking for a 'new book being out today', whilst the poet who sold a book the night before, already has another to sell, but 'nobody will buy it because it is not licenceable'. Authors, book-sellers, printers, 'merceries' and 'hawkers' were all thoroughly dependent on each other: 'when fortune late hath frowned/All five are fallen, all five do kiss the ground' went one jingle. 'Mercury' became a common word for a newspaper, from the 'Mercuries' or messengers who brought news in person, but the term's other meaning (go-between, nimble-fingered thief) suggests vividly the edgy atmosphere surrounding news and other cheap print in this rapidly changing society.

I do not have time this evening to talk about the content of Milton's pamphlets. Suffice to say that he was radical on all fronts, whether personal life (arguing for the right of men to divorce their wives on the grounds of incompatibility, making him a truly lone voice in his own century); religion (arguing for the separation of state and church, and almost complete liberty of conscience); education (arguing for something close to a modern liberal education); freedom of speech (his remarkable onslaught on pre-publication censorship, Areopagitica); and, of course, models of government. His tract in defence of the people's right to bring a king to trial, and to execute him, and in praise of republicanism, The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates was written during the very trial of Charles I in 1649 (and got him a job in the Cromwellian government that followed). He was appointed Latin
Secretary to the Commonwealth, and used his undoubted literary ability to ‘sell’, as it were, the new English republic to a sceptical wider Europe: he was indeed poacher turned gamekeeper.

Milton was doing what he said he wanted to do: using his pen in the service of his political and religious beliefs. In these years, his energies went almost entirely into prose, with the exception of a few sonnets (including a fascinatingly ambivalent poem about Cromwell).

As you will know, it was not to last. In 1660, Charles II was restored as King of England, and the Church of England restored as the state church. Milton, a republican in politics, an independent in religion, was not for turning. He was imprisoned, and under sentence of death, only released, we think, on the intercession of well-placed, and less politically intransigent, friends or family.

On his release, the future looked intensely bleak. John Milton was 53, had been widowed twice, had lost his only son, had three young daughters to care for, one of whom was disabled. He had lost his eyesight ten years earlier, and was now completely blind. He had, of course, lost the political position (and salary and house in Petty France) that had come with his support of Cromwell's regime. And his vision of a republican England, with each individual free to worship in his or her own way, was in tatters. Through the 1660s, the new government moved to enforce political and religious conformity. There would be no return to the frightening chaos of competing views that had characterised so much of the preceding decade of civil and religious government. Compliance with the Church of England was enforced with an Act of Uniformity. A draconian Licensing Act controlled the press. No carpenter could construct a press, no ironmonger could found type, without the permission of the Stationer's Company. Pre-publication censorship (the kind of censorship that Milton so opposed in Areopagitica) was re-introduced, and involved a two-tier process, with government censors and the Stationers Company both given more aggressive powers actively to search out seditious material – and to imprison anyone with any connection to its production. Roger L'Estrange (appointed in 1663 as Surveyor of the Press), and one of the most outspoken and vindictive of the returning Royalists, demanded and got tougher laws and powers to stamp out the publishing underground that grew up in response to the new measures. Dawn raids, rewards for informers, and imprisonment without trial characterised L'Estrange's rule. The punishments for authors and printers could be severe. On 20 February 1664, the printer John Twyn was executed for printing an anonymous book (a Treatise of the Execution of Justice) which echoed John Milton's own Tenure of King's and Magistrates, although instead of Milton's discussion of the legal basis for the execution of tyrants, the offending Treatise was a terrorist's appeal: the work urged the assassination of Charles II and his family. The suppression of opposition took less brutal, but perhaps more insidious, forms. In London, the coffee house became the place to talk politics. Unable to stop the coffee houses opening, Charles II enlisted coffee merchants to act as spies for the state. The repression was justified in part because of external threats, most notably the Dutch at this time, who were humiliating the English. Unity, conformity at home, must be maintained.

From pulpit to coffee house it was all part of the restored monarchy's attempts to secure its authority, and predictably many of those who had seemed content with republican government were quick to see the errors of their ways. Some, such as the poet John Dryden, developed a theory of human nature that explained his change of heart: 'As I am a Man, I must be changeable [...] An ill dream, or a Cloudy day, has power to change this wretched Creature, who is so proud of a reasonable Soul, and make him think what he thought not yesterday'. Yesterday, as it were, he had celebrated Oliver Cromwell in ‘Heroic Stanzas'. Today, he was writing To His Sacred Majesty, a Panegyric on his Coronation.

You can see why I say that for a republican, non-conformist writer such as Milton there was little hope. To make matters worse, a series of disasters would befall Milton's city of London. First, natural disaster: the plague, which Milton escaped only due to the friendship of the Quaker Thomas Ellwood, who arranged for the Miltons (John, his new wife Betty, and the three daughters) to move to Chalfont St Giles in Buckinghamshire. More on Ellwood in a moment. In a moving letter from this time, Milton wrote: ‘Let me not be useless, whatever remains for me in this life’. He would not be useless, and much did indeed remain for him in this life – but many, including his correspondent, questioned whether he would ever write, let alone publish, anything again. If he was to do something, then the place to do it was London, and Milton was back in the City at the time of this letter, August 1666.

Then yet further disaster struck the capital: the Great Fire of London. For a man who loved the City, who needed the City, the plague and the fire were horrifyingly destructive of a familiar world. In 1665 more than 7,000 people had died in one week alone from bubonic plague. The next year, in less than five days, the Great Fire destroyed the City of London between the Tower and the Temple. This was Milton's London and it was gone forever. The Fire did not reach Milton's own neighbourhood (he'd moved north, to Bunhill Fields), but it had implications for any aspirations he might have had as an author in its catastrophic effect on the book trade. In a tragic misjudgement, the booksellers and printers of the area around St Paul's stored their stock in the Cathedral (charged for the pleasure by the Bishop of London). Approximately £200,000 worth of books and papers were lost in the fire, and many in the book trade never recovered.

Let me not be useless – but how, under these circumstances, could Milton make his voice heard?

The answer lies in the networks operating in the City. On his release from prison in 1661 Milton lived first in Jewin Street, a centre of non-conformist culture, packed with French Huguenot refugees, and it was there he started tutoring again. Thomas Ellwood, the Quaker who got him away from the plague (and, significantly, to a Quaker
stronghold in the Chilterns), was one of his students – and, as a Quaker, he was someone who had firsthand experience of persecution and imprisonment for his beliefs, and also the transitional networks that enabled those beliefs to survive. Unlicensed print was, in the words of one historian, the network's lifeblood. Quakers did not recognize the state's right to silence the printed, any more than the spoken, word: “our mouths were not opened by nor can they be shut by the will of man” wrote one. Ellwood took lodgings near Milton, and from thenceforth went every day in the afternoon (except on the first-days [the Quaker term for Sundays] of the week) and sitting by him in his dining room, read to him in such books in the Latin tongue, as he pleaded to hear me read'. It seems a pleasant image of scholarly retirement, but, books were not there merely to be enjoyed, they were not merely ‘dead things', but alive (as Milton famously argued in Areopagitica) and to be used. Like all readers in their century, Thomas and John were reading for action. Indeed, John Milton was not only reading, he was writing, and he had now completed a major new work.

A striking act of loyalty made the next step possible: one Samuel Simmons agreed to publish Milton's new work. Simmons was a very much part of the London print world, the son of printers and booksellers, growing up, a neighbour of Milton's, in Aldersgate Street in the 1640s and 50s. Milton's new work was, however, a bold step for Samuel Simmons, the first work that he was to register under his own name, and demonstrated a remarkable loyalty to an author on the part of a printer publisher. Matthew Simmons, Samuel's father, had printed Milton's work in the far off days of the 1640s, including his most radical (and condemned) works, such as the Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce, Eikonoklastes, and The Tenure of Kings and Magistrates. Other unlicensed works from the period such as Areopagitica may also have come from the Simmons press. The Simmons family had not published anything by Milton for 26 years. But on 27 April 1667, the contract for Milton's new work was signed - and as you will have guessed, its title was Paradise Lost.

But...next came the really difficult task: getting the work past the censors. Milton's regicide tracts were still very much in the public mind, and the very title of Paradise Lost could quite easily be seen to refer to the political paradise that the republic might have been. Milton had to tread very carefully. Any explicit criticism of the Stuart monarchy, any impassioned plea for republicanism, and the work would never reach the booksellers.

In the light of all this, it is somewhat surprising that Paradise Lost did get past the censor. Scholars have shown that six months earlier, or six months later, and it would not have done so, which suggests there was some canny political timing going on. Moreover, wise decisions were made about presentation: the work looked plain, simple, unthreatening, there were no rousing addresses to the reader, no portraits of the author, let alone endorsements from radical non-conformists. (Its gaining a licence can also be attributed, in part, to the poem's style. It is easy to view Paradise Lost as high culture, beyond the grasp of the wider readership that the censor had a duty to protect.)

The first small, quarto edition of Paradise Lost appeared in October 1667. That John Milton emerged alive from the regime change of 1660 is noteworthy. As one opponent said bluntly, he 'was Latin Secretary to Cromwell and deserved hanging'. That he entered into the most creative phase of his life is surprising. That he found a way to make his voice heard in the new conditions, is nothing less than extraordinary.

It is up to you, the reader, to decide what, if any, message Paradise Lost carries – political, religious, moral. For those of you who have not read the work, I recommend reading it out loud, with a glass of something in one hand, and the poem in the other. For those of you who were forced to study it at school, bowing under the weight of scholarly footnotes, I recommend the same thing – and ignoring the footnotes this time, at least first time round. Even better, get together with other people, and read it to each other. (I was lucky enough to participate in an all-day reading at Sutton Courteney - we were assigned parts, Philip Pullman was Satan, I was Eve.....it was an interesting experience. Needless to say, Pullman had all the best lines.) The History of the World carries – political, religious, moral. For those that are as good as anything I've read, and if you have a taste for Macedonian history, enjoy eloquent explorations of the meaningless of human endeavour, or are fascinated by Hannibal (as Ralegh is), then you will find much to enjoy.

But, as I said at the start, I am not concerned (at least this evening) with the content of these works, but in what their publication shows us about Ralegh's and Milton's use of 'new media' (in their case, print) for political purposes – and the battle for control of that new media. These case studies demonstrate not only that old media co-exists with the new, but that old battles are constantly being re-fought, but in different ways.

As they are today. When I was invited to give this lecture, events in Egypt were already being labelled the Twitter Revolution. My sense, and I am no expert, was that this was to overplay the power of social networking tools and the new media. Subsequent events in Libya and Syria, to name but two civil conflicts, have shown starkly the limits of social media, whether as a mode of free speech or as a tool for political activists. In the end, tanks and guns continue to decide the fate of civilians.

More recently, and closer to home, the role of new media in the July riots drew much attention. There was talk from the government about banning people from social networks or shutting down their websites in times of civil unrest, which moderated somewhat into 'discussions' about the measures that companies could take to help contain future disorder, including how law enforcement agencies can use the sites more effectively. Symptomatic of this dynamic was a research call from the Government's Counter-Terrorism Unit for the development of ‘technology enabled solutions for gathering and analysing publicly available data to gain an
understanding of current and developing events’. Twitter (to give one example) is valued (for good or evil) in part because it bypasses or challenges the established media and the state's control of information. Its very ability to do so, however, means that it is now being absorbed, used, monitored by the established media and the state. It is important to analyse the evidence we have, if only to counter repressive measures such as those mooted in the aftermath of the July riots. A fine example is the work of The Guardian (published 24th August 2011), which analysed more than 2.5m Twitter messages relating to the riots in England, and demonstrated that Twitter was mainly used to react to riots and looting, rather than to incite events. (In fact, more than 206,000 tweets – 8% of the total – were related to attempts to clean up the debris left by four nights of rioting and looting.) Moreover, as in the seventeenth century, new media co-exists with old media. Whilst the new media seemed to (in the words of Dr Martin Farr, quoted in an article on the BBC news website) facilitate or characterise the rioting, another much more traditional form of communication emerged in the aftermath – collections of post-it notes, expressing support for the community. In the words of Dr Farr again, ‘writing notes is very old media, it’s as if it’s a restatement of community identity’. It may even perhaps be a response conscious of its own form, ‘low-tech’ fighting back against smartphones. (But, look at the way this expression is being channelled in the second image).

Lionel Barber, the editor of the Financial Times, made a similar point last month (at the Fulbright/Eccles Centre lecture at the British Library) when he argued that old and new media would continue to co-exist. In the same that television did not destroy radio, the online news will not destroy the newspaper. Nevertheless, as he pointed out, thanks to social media such as Facebook and Twitter, a far wider range of people take part in gathering, filtering and distributing news – the death of Osama Bin Laden, for example, first appeared in the Twittersphere. This, of course, has links to the print revolution of the early 1640s, enabled by the relaxation of censorship. Consumers of print become producers of print, turnover increases rapidly, print becomes much cheaper, and more expendable, the content becomes more challenging. Then comes the reaction, from whatever or whoever is threatened by this expansion. (To digress for a moment - Penguin have published a satirical book of the great works of literature as tweets. Satire aside, does anyone here believe Twitter (or any form of social media) will generate its own literary form? It is, of course, too early to tell – and we may be as surprising as readers in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century were, when newsbooks turned into longer narratives of news, or what was ‘novel’, and thence into what we know as the novel – but that’s another story.)

To return to Ralegh and Milton, I acknowledge that I have been offering a liberal, hopeful analysis of their literary legacy. Although both writers were, to a greater and lesser extent, pushed by crisis into print, they found ways to make the new media work for them, and to negotiate the controls in place to stop them doing just that. Their responses represent profoundly creative forms of political engagement – and in Milton’s case, one of the great works of literature, full stop.

But I want to end with two sobering reminders of the realities of life, and death, in seventeenth-century England. A strange little poem from 1642 offers a glimpse of John Milton’s response to the threat that the Royalists would re-take the City of London (a parliamentary stronghold). The poem is a sonnet, in English, addressed to a ‘Captain or colonel, or knight in arms’, and subtitled ‘When the assault was intended to the City’. It is a plea from Milton to whichever member of the military might come to get him, whether Captain, Colonel, or Knight. The message is simple (although the poem, typically, is not). Take my house, but please save me, because I can be your chronicler – all regimes need their writers. Somebody, not Milton, added a note to the manuscript copy to say that the sonnet was pinned ‘on his door’. Whether or not the poem was indeed pinned to the door of Milton’s house in Aldersgate, it is a vivid reminder of the fear engendered by civil war, and perhaps of the naïveté of those who think that words matter more than muskets. (The sonnet was not put to the test – the assault never materialised).

Another little poem shows us something more of Ralegh’s use of words at a time of crisis. Back in his heyday, in the court of Elizabeth I, he wrote a glorious, mildly erotic, carpe diem poem – a poem of seduction, reminding his woman that time was passing, and that the bedroom was this way....

The night before his execution, in 1618, Ralegh returned to the poem in his cell in the Tower of London. He took its final verse, and transformed it into a remarkable farewell to the world. He wrote the verse into the only book he was allowed at this time, his Bible.

Even such is Time, which takes in trust
Our youth, our joys, and all we have,
And pays us but with age and dust,
Who in the dark and silent grave
When we have wandered all our ways
Shuts up the story of our days.
And from which earth, and grave, and dust,
The Lord shall raise me up I trust.

This little poem became a crucial part of Ralegh’s legacy, attached to his political works, convincing succeeding generations of his faith (there was always a question mark over that while he lived), his courage and his integrity. But it is also a fitting place to end my lecture. Ralegh expresses a tentative and inspiring hope that ‘the story of our days’ will not be ‘shut up’ for ever – that the silence of the grave can be, will be overcome – that words can
prevail.