In recent years, “companion” and “handbook” volumes, collections of essays introducing or elucidating the dimensions of certain genres, literary movements, or authors, have proliferated in the academic marketplace as part of a competition among prominent publishers to satisfy a presumed need for supplemental aid in reading and/or teaching literary texts. In seventeenth-century studies, while the major literary figures (Shakespeare, Donne, Milton, etc.) elicit the greatest number of these volumes—and the keenest competition for market share—a variety of lesser known and lesser studied writers also receive attention in these volumes, either under the auspices of a specific genre or, in the case of the Cambridge Companion series, of period or thematic groupings (e.g., *The Cambridge Companion to Writing of the English Revolution*, 2001). Perhaps throughout its existence as a discipline from the end of the nineteenth century to the present, literary studies has elicited handbooks as tools for counteracting cultural drift or for excavating what have become obscure ideas and references in complex works of literature. The modern mind needs help in recovering its intellectual, cultural, and aesthetic ancestry.

What marks the current trend as a departure from the mentality underlying, say, James Holly Handford’s *A Milton Handbook* (1929) is a shift from general backgrounding—introducing an audience to an already agreed upon body of essential ideas or received wisdom—as an end unto itself to the advancement of original scholarship as part of the introduction. Thus, the twenty-first-century “handbook” or “companion” essay attempts to offer an original thesis as if the larger collection assumes an audience of both general readers and academic specialists. Indeed, the claim to offer “original scholarship” becomes a selling point, as in the case of *The Oxford Handbook of Milton*, edited by Nicholas McDowell and Nigel Smith.

Before exploring the riches of this book—and riches there are—it is best to place it into its publishing context so that readers can see its contributions more clearly. The drive toward including the work of
established scholars as assigned texts within classes has perhaps never been stronger than now, at least in the U. S. and Canada, where many upper division Milton courses operate as seminars with capstone papers. At the same time, though, because of the increasing dependency on online learning management systems, such as Blackboard, Angel, and Desire2Learn, publishers have intensified the crack-down on perceived copyright infringements, thereby making it more difficult for instructors to include critical readings in their classes. To meet the demand for ready access to scholarship, academic publishers appear to have adopted two general strategies. The first, advanced mainly by the British publishers, Wiley-Blackwell, Cambridge University Press, and Oxford University Press, is the aforementioned companion volume, which presumably is pitched for course adoption as a separate text alongside the chosen literary text.

Within Milton studies, a prime example is the Cambridge University Press volume, *Milton in Context*, published in 2010 and edited by Stephen B. Dobranski. This book can be seen as the nearest competitor of *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* in its substantive scope. Its purpose is to investigate the “various ways in which Milton’s works and experiences emerged from the culture and events of his time.” After two sections of essays on Milton’s life and on the critical heritage, twenty-four chapters focus on subjects of interest to Milton and contexts necessary for situating his literary efforts within a larger milieu. Some of these topics pose no surprise—“Astronomy,” “Classical literature and learning,” “The Civil War,” “Italy,” “Logic,” “Music,” etc.—but a few others promise the sharpened focus on Milton’s relationships with his contemporaries that has come to characterize contemporary Milton studies—“The book trade,” “The Caroline court,” “Manuscript transmission,” “Pamphlet wars,” “Reading practices,” “London,” etc. Curiously, some of the same contributors of *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* are also contributors to *Milton in Context*. Nicholas McDowell, the editor of the former volume and the author of two essays within it, also wrote “The Caroline court” for the latter; Edward Jones wrote the essay on the first half of Milton’s life for the former and the essay on “Early lives” in the latter; Ann Baynes Coiro wrote on Milton’s *Mask* in the former and on “Poetic tradition, dramatic,” for the latter. In a similar fashion, John Leonard, John Creaser, Elizabeth Sauer, N.
H. Keeble, and William Poole all have essays in both volumes. In every case, however, the choice of author for entry makes sense, given each contributor’s scholarly record, and every entry stays within its primarily contextual frame. One can see how the volume functions as a supplemental aid, supplying a series of contextual layers against which *Paradise Lost* or indeed any of Milton’s works might be read.

As may be apparent in the above cursory description, the primary purpose of *Milton in Context* is to create a cumulative thick description of Milton’s milieu and the cultural, political, ideational, and ideological forces acting upon Milton’s imagination. On a smaller scale, *The Cambridge Companion to Milton*, edited by Dennis Danielson (Cambridge UP, 1999), also offers detailed overviews of each of the genres in which Milton wrote, sometimes focused on individual works (e.g., J. Martin Evans on “Lycidas” or Cedric Brown on “Milton’s Ludlow Masque”), sometimes on larger categories (e.g., R. F. Hall on “Milton’s sonnets and his contemporaries” or Thomas N. Corns on “Milton’s Prose”), and sometimes on more general subject areas (e.g., Martin Dzelzains on “Milton’s Politics” or Georgia Christopher on “Milton and the reforming spirit”). Clearly, though, the overriding impulse is the same as in *Milton in Context*: to present the reader with the equivalent of a brilliant lecturer who discourses at length on material a student’s professor might not have time to “cover” in the same depth during the confines of a class session.

Within this increasingly crowded field of supplemental aids to Milton, a book called *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* might seem like just another installment of the British variety, given the incorporation of “handbook” in titles of both the volume and of the series of which it is a part. Yet what is most intriguing about it is that it not only fulfills the introduction function of the first approach but also seeks to advance the scholarship on each of its subjects. In this way, the volume as a whole accords with a second approach to supplemental aids. This approach, favored by the American presses W. W. Norton & Company, through its Norton Critical Edition series, and Bedford/St. Martin’s, through its Texts and Contexts and Case Studies in Critical Controversy series, presents a state of the art primary text that is then followed—at usually twice or more the page length—by supplemental critical readings. Norton Critical Editions provide generous selections
of mainly already extant critical judgments, spanning the earliest reac-
tions to the work more recent, significant interpreters. Sometimes the
editors might commission an essay or two specifically for the volume;
but for the most part, the selections are already extant, influential
readings. It follows, then, that they are pitched toward specialists in
the field, rather than toward a more generalized audience, and thus
treat students and other newcomers to the work implicitly as appren-
tice professionals in the field. Bedford/St. Martins’ Case Studies in
Critical Controversy series adopts a similar approach, except that it
groups its selections according to studies in controversy rather than by
genre or subgenre. The Texts and Contexts series immerses readers in
readings from the period in which the literary text was produced and
groups these according to topic clusters. Bedford/St. Martins has yet
to present a Milton text; but Norton has a Critical Edition of _Paradise
Lost_, now in its second edition and edited by Gordon Teskey, as well
as _Milton’s Selected Poetry and Prose_, edited by Jason P. Rosenblatt.

At nearly 200 pages longer than _Milton in Context_, _The Oxford
Handbook of Milton_ does not give a newly edited text of Milton’s work;
but each of its essays does provide a new angle of vision in regard to
its subject, in keeping with the scholarship routinely published in
academic journals. Thanks to the thoughtful selection of topics and
the astute pairing of scholar and subject matter, this handbook sets
a new standard of thoroughness and scholarly advancement for this
emergent academic genre. For, rather than focus simply on providing
cultural context or plain overviews of extant critical commentary or
basic introductions, most of the essays both fulfill and subordinate
these tasks to an implied injunction to offer new insights about their
subjects.

The book is organized into seven parts: two essays on the “Lives”
(by Edward Jones and Nicholas von Maltzahn); five essays on the
“Shorter Poems” (Estelle Haan, Gordon Teskey, Ann Baynes Coiro,
Nicholas McDowell, and John Leonard); five on “Civil War Prose,
1641–1645” (Nigel Smith, Sharon Achinstein, Diane Purkiss, Ann
Hughes, and Blair Hoxby); seven on “Regicide, Republican, and
Restoration Prose, 1649–1673” (Stephen M. Fallon, McDowell,
Joad Raymond, Haan, N. H. Keeble, Elizabeth Sauer, and Paul Ste-
vens); four on “Writings on Education, History, Theology” (William
Poole, Timothy Raylor, Martin Dzelzainis, and Gordon Campbell and Thomas N. Corns); eight on Paradise Lost (Charles Martindale, John Creaser, Stephen B. Dobranski, Karen L. Edwards, Smith, Stuart Curran, Susan Wiseman, and Dzelzainis); five on “1671 Poems: Paradise Regained and Samson Agonistes” (Laura Lunger Knoppers, John Creaser, Stephen B. Dobranski, Karen L. Edwards, Smith, Stuart Curran, Susan Wiseman, and Dzelzainis); and two on “Aspects of Influence” (Anne-Julia Zwierlein and Joseph Wittreich). Many of the essay titles highlight the effort to contribute new interpretations to the established discourse—not just “Milton’s Latin Poetry,” for example, but Haan’s “The ‘adorning of my native tongue’: Latin Poetry and Linguistic Metamorphosis,” or not just “Milton’s Sonnets” but Leonard’s “The Troubled, Quiet Endings of Milton’s English Sonnets,” or not just “Lycidas” but McDowell’s “Lycidas’ and the Influence of Anxiety.”

The most obvious way in which the volume embodies the current emphases in Milton scholarship is in the heavy concentration on the prose, sixteen essays in all. Here, again, the titles reveal much—not just single essays on “Milton’s Prose” or “Prose style” in the Danielson and Dobranski volumes respectively, but in the section on the 1649–1673 prose alone, Fallon’s “The strangest piece of reason: Milton’s Tenure of Kings and Magistrates”; McDowell’s “Milton’s Regicide Tracts and the Uses of Shakespeare”; Raymond’s “John Milton, European: The Rhetoric of Milton’s Defences”; Haan’s “Defensio Prima and the Latin Poets”; Keeble’s “Nothing nobler then a free Commonwealth: Milton’s Later Vernacular Republican Tracts”; Sauer’s “Disestablishment, Toleration, the New Testament Nation: Milton’s Late Religious Tracts”; and Stevens’ “Milton and National Identity.” Each of these essays commits to a reading of the work in question. Cumulatively, the essays in the three prose sections richly contextualize the many concerns that animated Milton’s imagination before, during, and after the period when he lost his eyesight, gave his all for what Andrew Marvell later would call in The Rehearsal Transpros’d the “Cause” “too good to have been fought for,” and composed his greatest poem.

For a volume composed of thirty-eight substantive chapters, this review space is too small to afford the luxury of comprehensive summary. But a cursory look at a few chapters illustrates how well the volume succeeds in making good on its initial promise to “incorporate
developments in what can broadly be termed historical criticism of over the last twenty years and to place both the poetry and the prose in a more continuous, unfolding biographical and historical context” (v). For example, the subject of Milton’s famous surviving commonplace book seems like it would invite a mere summary treatment. Yet William Poole, in “The Genres of Milton’s Commonplace Book,” not only provides succinct accounts of its provenance and the cultural habits of commonplacing, but also asks identifies the rationale behind its tripartite division of moral philosophy into ethics, economics, and politics. He then addresses the distinctively Miltonic features of the material within this conventional system of division, what we can deduce about Milton’s reading habits based on the excerpts he copied, and how the manuscript fed into his prose works and later poetry. Along the way, we learn more about Milton the reader. In a brief section on “Fatigue,” Poole glances at how Milton commented on his exhaustion in reading patristics, an experience with which modern scholars wrestling with this same material surely can identify. Rather than simply background one of Milton’s minor works, Poole conjures a lively image of Milton behind the scenes of his composition practice.

The eighteen chapters on poetry also yield many payoffs, even when covering familiar ground. What I am calling the “new-angle-of-vision” approach is prominently on display in Nigel Smith’s essay on “Paradise Lost and Heresy.” From the first two pages, Smith reorients readers regarding his subject by underscoring, in Of Education and Areopagitica, Milton’s “forceful plea for a return to the original meaning of ‘heresy’ in Greek philosophy: choice, from Greek proairesis” (510). By placing this earlier definition in opposition to the Augustinian conception of heresy as “that which is forbidden and to be expunged from believers,” Smith posits an animating tension throughout Paradise Lost between these two definitions. While Milton’s poem articulates the “Augustinian sense of theological doctrine,” the “drama” of the characters’ “dilemmas” is predicated on the notion of heresy as choice. The chapter then reads this tension in the Creation, in the treatment of love in the garden, and in the operations of free will to conclude that Paradise Lost “is a heresy machine: it produces heresies as we readers make sense of the epic” (524). It is difficult to look at heresy in Milton in the same way after reading Smith’s account.
The same can be said of most of the other essays on the poetry, from Stuart Curran’s treatment of God, to Susan Wiseman’s account of Eve within the larger scope of seventeenth-century female interpretation, to Dzelzainis’ explication of the role of lying in politics, as Milton understood it. Each modern interpreter takes us someplace new. It is true that, while John Rogers’ account of *Paradise Regained* as a sequel to *Paradise Lost* is equally enlightening, one wishes for more than one full essay on this poem, at least in keeping with the three on *Samson Agonistes*. Yet what book can offer everything? To read *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* straight through is to stroll from one richly thoughtful set of deductions about the development and workings of Milton’s imagination to another. It also is to encounter Milton studies as it lives and breathes right now, not as it existed three decades ago, and this is one reason why libraries without this volume on hand might seem quaint in their holdings on Milton.

When it first appeared in 2009, the cloth edition of *The Oxford Handbook of Milton* cost $150.00, a price viable for libraries and research specialists but outside the Pale of student budgets. In early November, 2011, the paperback version was released at a third the cost. That shift immediately makes it more attractive for inclusion in graduate seminars. Even so, a fifty-dollar supplemental text, even one so astute in its original readings and so accurately representative of developments in Milton studies during the past two decades, is probably not realistic for undergraduate course adoption, when the course context suggests that less than half the essays would find their way onto even the most ambitious syllabus. Would that the cost were a bit lower, so that students would be more able to slide their own copies into their backpacks alongside their trusty, inexpensive editions of the complete poems.