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Review of Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England by David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens

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David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens, eds. *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008. xii + 470 pp. \$82.00. Review by BROOKE CONTI, STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW YORK AT BROCKPORT.

To call Milton a nationalist is at once uncontroversial and problematic. While Milton's lifelong fascination with the English national character and its destiny are on rich display in his works, his attitudes toward his country, his countrymen, and the very idea of the nation are not stable; they shift with the context and subject of a given work as well as with the political circumstances in which Milton found himself. *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England*, edited by

David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens, is therefore a welcome guide to the variety of things that we (and Milton) talk about when we talk about nationalism.

As the editors point out in their introduction, although it has become increasingly common to read the emergence of nationalism backwards into the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the works of Milton and his revolutionary contemporaries have rarely been examined in light of what they might tell us about Early Modern conceptions of nationhood during those tumultuous mid-century years (7-9). Moreover, to the extent that Milton's nationalism *has* been considered, it has tended to be read simplistically, as purely exclusionary and as a justification for political and military aggression (9-10). This volume offers a fuller picture, examining the different and sometimes conflicting ways that Milton understood his nation: as the product of language and ethnicity; as constituted by a common religious identity; and as a shared political or civic enterprise (3-4). In contrast with the prevailing view of Milton as an enthusiastic nationalist, many of the essays in this collection consider Milton's ambivalent attitude toward nationalism. As several contributors note, Milton was as often disappointed by or concerned about what he saw as his countrymen's tendency toward luxury and servility; the number of those he considers his national kindred can also expand or contract according to the values and commitments they share.

Loewenstein and Stevens's collection is divided into five overlapping sections, each dealing with a different aspect of Milton's nationalism. The first part examines Milton's political nationalism: the relationship between his revolutionary politics and his idea of the nation as a self-determining assembly of free people (10). David Loewenstein's lead chapter traces the ways in which Milton uses the language of nationhood throughout his career, in response to his political successes and disappointments; Andrew Hadfield reads *Paradise Lost* through the lens of *Eikonoklastes*' idealized parliamentarianism; and Warren Chernaik examines Milton's ambivalence toward military action and Oliver Cromwell. The book's second part turns to the religious dimension of Early Modern national identity. Achsah Guibbory's chapter focuses on the ways nonconformists and supporters of prelacy alike used the analogy between England and ancient Israel for rhetorical

effect; Joad Raymond examines guardian angels and European ideas of nationhood in *Lycidas* and elsewhere; and Andrew Escobedo considers the relationship between the state and the nation and its similarities to the relationship between the visible and invisible church. This is an especially strong section, one that provides illuminating new readings of *Lycidas* and *Areopagitica* in addition to new and interesting contexts in which to consider a number of Milton's works.

The collection's third section looks at the ways nationalism and internationalism function in conflict or in harmony, and this section dovetails nicely with the preceding one. Thomas N. Corns argues that Milton's nationalism is not narrowly ethnic, but informed by his Protestant internationalism; John Kerrigan examines the important roles played by Scotland and the United Provinces in Milton and Marvell's nationalism; Victoria Kahn places *Samson Agonistes* and Milton's later thinking about nationalism within contemporary debates about the claims of the nation-state versus the law of nations; and Paul Stevens makes the case for a *positive* nationalism, based on individual liberty and dialogic interaction. In contrast with these more neutral or even affirmative readings of Milton's nationalism, the fourth section of the book looks at its more negative aspects, especially when it comes to matters of gender and race. Willy Maley surveys the way women are depicted in the *History of Britain*; Laura Lunger Knoppers examines Milton's longstanding interest in the "effeminate" effects of luxury and how its effects can be redressed by the body politic; and Mary Nyquist looks at the ways that the metaphor of slavery, when applied to tyranny by Milton and Locke, manages not actually to condemn the institution of slavery itself. Both Knoppers's and Nyquist's essays are among the strongest in the collection.

The fifth and final section, on the reception of Milton's nationalism, consists of one longer, excellent chapter by Nicholas von Maltzhan that considers the ways *Paradise Lost* and its poetics were aligned with nationalistic purposes in the late seventeenth century and afterwards. As von Maltzhan demonstrates, although blank verse became the standard form for nationalistic epic, the politics of those writers and those poems were rarely reflective of Milton's own.

While there are many fine essays in this collection and the volume's organization encourages a range of fruitful conversations among those

essays, occasionally its attempts to probe the complexities of Milton's attitude toward the nation seem reducible to a shrugging "it's complicated": on the one hand, Milton's nationalism does have an exclusionary aspect; on the other hand, it's not narrowly so. While it is surely true that Milton's nationalism is, as Stevens says, "Janus-faced"—and one of the volume's most useful contributions is a reminder that nationalism is not always a dirty word—there are times when analysis seems sidestepped. Nevertheless, such moments do not change the fact that this collection is essential reading for anyone interested in Early Modern nationalism. It should be welcomed by all scholars of Milton.