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

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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 Protes-
tant 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 national-
ism, 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.