EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES

David Loewenstein and Paul Stevens, eds, *Early Modern Nationalism and Milton's England* **(Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008). xii+470pp. ISBN 978 0 8020 8935 9.**

Christopher Ivic

Bath Spa University

c.ivic@bathspa.ac.uk

As suggested by its title, this collection of fourteen essays offers a rich historical and theoretical exploration of nationalism during the lengthy, revolutionary period in which Milton wrote and published his poetry and prose. Milton wrote at a time when, to cite Benedict Anderson, 'the automatic legitimacy of sacral monarchy began its slow decline in Western Europe'.[1] 'In 1649', Anderson adds, 'Charles Stuart was beheaded in the first of the modern world's revolutions, and during the 1650s one of the most important European states was ruled by a plebeian Protector rather than a king'.[2] The now-familiar narrative, perhaps most eloquently expressed by Richard Helgerson (to whom this volume is dedicated), is that in the wake of monarchy's decline national communities came to be imagined otherwise: as 'boundary-oriented and horizontal' rather than 'centripetal and hierarchical'.[3] Anderson, however, locates the rise of nationalism not in the seventeenth century but the eighteenth, when religious modes of thought began to wane. This volume, heavily indebted to Anderson, but also to Helgerson's groundbreaking work on the Elizabethan writing of England, firmly situates the rise of nationalism in an earlier period; moreover, it places 'John Milton, Englishman' at the centre of seventeenth-century articulations of the nation. Loewenstein's essay, for example, challenges Anderson's belief

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[1] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. edn (London: Verso, 1991), p. 21.

[2] Ibid., p. 21.

[3] Richard Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p. 15.

that nationalism necessarily surfaces as religious modes of thought decline. For Loewenstein, 'a newly emergent Protestant nationalism', not to mention 'proto-republican nationalism' (p. 30), provides the context for 'the ways in which Milton attempted to imagine, forge, and reconstruct the godly nation' (pp. 26, 27). Andrew Escobedo, too, takes aim at Anderson's separation of nationalism and religious modes of thought, arguing that 'Milton defines the nation as an intimate, spiritual community in opposition to the coercive visibility of the state' (p. 192). Again and again, these essays reveal just how integral religious discourse is to early modern nationalism. Together, these essays offer new and fresh perspectives on not just Milton and his cultural moment but also nationalism and national identity.

Whilst Milton is the centrepiece, there is ample space in 'Milton's England' for other contemporary voices as well as later seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century writers, and this inclusion of other writers gives the volume an impressive and productive range. Warren Cherniak's essay, for example, examines Milton's writing on Cromwell alongside Marvell's and Waller's, and it also cites fellow republicans, including Nedham, Harrington and Sexby. John Kerrigan's essay situates the writings of both Milton and Marvell within a wide political framework that includes Scotland and Ireland as well as the Netherlands; Achsah Guibbory's attention to fast sermons explores the ways in which early modern conceptions of the English nation drew upon the Old Testament; Victoria Kahn's examination of Milton's 'disappointed nationalism' incorporates Filmer and Grotius; Mary Nyquist divides her essay between Milton and Locke; and Nicholas von Maltzahn's consideration of the national reception of Milton takes the reader beyond the seventeenth century and into the eighteenth. One of this volume's many strengths, therefore, is its placement of Milton amongst other contemporary writers and other key discourses — civic, ethnic, literary, political, religious — in the period. The result is a volume that situates the rise of early modern nationalism in an emergent, energetic and contested public sphere.

Another of this volume's strengths is its refusal to pigeonhole Milton's nationalism. As stated, many of the contributors are informed by Anderson's reflections on nationalism. Some, however, take issue with the notion that the seventeenth century gave rise to nationalism as we understand that term. The majority of contributors accept that Milton played a crucial role in defining the nation in his poetry and prose, but Joad Raymond (and to a lesser extent Thomas Corns) goes against the grain in following Colin Kidd's theories as expressed in his *British Identities before Nationalism*. For Kidd, nationalism is a modern, not early modern, invention; and, according to Raymond, literary critics are guilty

of anachronism by inscribing a 'prehistory of the British empire […] on early modern literature' (p. 154). For Raymond, Milton's inclusive imagined community has little to do with ethnicity or race, central components of modern nationalism, but instead with 'civic values' and 'neighbourliness' (p. 162). In sharp contrast to Raymond's essay are Willy Maley's and, especially, Nyquist's contributions. Maley reads Milton's *History of Britain*, a text that receives ample attention throughout this volume, in relation to gender ideology, particularly in the form of Milton's representation of Boadicea, and his conclusion is that 'Milton's is a militantly masculinist nationalism' (p. 307). Nyquist's brilliant close reading of Book 12 of *Paradise Lost* reveals that Milton's 'civic values' and 'neighbourliness' did not extend to Africans (did it extend to the Irish or Scots?), who were increasingly becoming the backbone of English slavery in the New World. Whereas Raymond tends to valorise Milton as a humanist, Maley and Nyquist remind us that the early modern period was a precursor to modernity, indeed to the dark side of modernity.

Between these opposed representations of Milton are essays that tease out Milton's complicated nationalism. Andrew Hadfield reads *Paradise Lost* through *Eikonoklastes* to reveal the republican politics of national self-representation at the heart of Milton's poetry and prose. Hadfield's conclusion, that the 'godly revolution failed in England because the people were too slavish, too much of a rabble or horde to merit a proper ruler' (p. 68), intersects nicely with Laura Lunger Knoppers' examination of classical notions of luxury in Milton's writings. 'Luxury,' as Knoppers points out, 'provides an archetype against which Milton's own nation can be measured: but, significantly, it is a model not of republican achievement (the focus of much recent scholarship), but of failure' (333). Knoppers's essay is a welcome addition precisely because it complicates recent upbeat accounts, including David Norbrook's, of Milton's republicanism. Perhaps more attention could have been given to issues of class or social status, especially since, as Loewenstein notes, Milton's nationalism 'was often complicated by his acutely strained and tumultuous relation to the English nation, a nation whose collectivity he alternatively identified with and felt repelled by' (p. 43).

These essays also reveal that, to cite Corns, 'the concept of Englishness across [Milton's] oeuvre is complex and conflictory' (p. 214). Milton's representations of his own nation are various: as suggested by von Maltzahn, Milton represents the nation as 'elect', as 'condemned by natural causes to civil and ecclesiastical misgovernment', as 'heroic', as 'making a mock of that promise in failing to govern itself', and as 'a necessary bulwark against worse international oppressions' (p. 404). Of course, the changing political

landscape has a massive affect on Milton's attitude toward his nation, but these essays resist any simplistic early/late or jubilant/disappointed opposition. In Stevens's words, Milton's nationalism taken as a whole — across a period of time and within a variety of texts — is 'Janus-faced': it is at times positive (in favour of liberty, toleration, inclusion) and at times negative (extreme, violent, exclusionary). Because of the dialogic nature of this volume, Milton's various articulations of nation across his long poetic and political career are captured in all their complexity.

One question that arises from this volume is what (or where) is Milton's nation? The obvious answer is England, and to a certain extent English nationalism, English national identity and Englishness are the core concepts under study. In *The Reason of Church-Government*, however, Milton refers to 'these British Ilands as [his] world'.[4] How exactly did Milton see himself as an Englishman or his English nation in relation to the rest of Britain (and Ireland)? The editors raise the question of how Milton's nationalism 'illuminates the contingencies of the British problem in the seventeenth century (i.e., the complex relations and negotiations among the "nations" of the Atlantic archipelago: England, Ireland, Scotland, and Wales)' (p. 5). A number of contributors, alert to the wider British framework of Milton's writings, respond intelligently: notably Corns, Kerrigan and Raymond. But the British problem is very much unresolved. Consider, for example, Raymond's references to 'England or Britain', 'the English or British', ' (pp. 150, 158). Is the use of 'or' satisfactory? How does Milton's nationalism, his sense of himself as 'John Milton, Englishman' relate to Britain and Britishness, which, as Corns reminds us, is both the precursor and successor to mid seventeenth-century Englishness? What does Milton have in mind when, in *Of Reformation*, he refers to 'this *Iland*' (or Marvell when, in 'An Horation Ode', he refers to 'our *Isle*')?[5] Whilst this volume may not answer these difficult questions, it invites further questions, and it teaches us that there are no simple, straightforward answers to such questions.

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[4] John Milton, *The Reason of Church-Government Urg'd against Prelaty by Mr. John Milton; in two books* (London: 1641), Wing M2175, p. 38.
[5] See John Milton, *Of Reformation Touching Church-Discipline* (London: 1641), Wing M2134, McAlpin Coll. II 58, Wither to Prior II 166, pp. 45, 77 and Andrew Marvell, 'An *Horation* Ode upon *Cromwel*'s Return from *Ireland*', in *The Penguin Book of Renaissance Verse 1509-159*, ed. by David Norbrook and Henry Woodhuysen (London: Penguin, 1992), pp. 166-9 (l. 97).

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