Meredith Martin argues that "meter as a cultural category is inextricably tied to ideas of national identity in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries" (15). Challenging "the accepted narrative of the rise of free verse" (79), this book recovers a "lost history of metrical debate" (2) in Victorian, Edwardian, and Georgian culture. In Martin's view, Ezra Pound's prevailing modernist myth of revolutionary form "obfuscates the rich heritage of experiment, debate, and contested metrical discourses that circulated throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth" (183). Expertly reconstructing that lost history and forgotten heritage, Martin demonstrates that prosody "operates as a powerful discourse that interacts with and influences discourses about national culture" (5).

Martin constructs her case with two complementary bodies of material: case studies of individual poets and comment on a surprising range of writings about the relation between meter and nationhood. Readers wedded to the canon will find new close readings of familiar major figures, especially Gerard Manley Hopkins and Wilfred Owen. The work on Hopkins, for example, builds to a summary view of "his attempts to demonstrate figuratively and prosodically the way that stress may be grounds for spiritual communication and national community building, as well as a growing despair that this communication is impossible" (69). Martin also restores to view the many crucial roles played by a more faded figure, Robert Bridges, whom she treats as "in many ways the book's protagonist" (11). The book skillfully surrounds these strong readings of individual poets with a rich set of materials from social and cultural history: metrical histories of the nation, forgotten pamphlets and treatises on prosody, the place of poetry in education policy and the national school system, linguistic scholarship in projects such as the New English Dictionary, military culture (such as the drill movement and Empire day), and the twinned engines of poetic order and orderly therapy in the convalescent wards of the Great War. The wartime materials in the latter chapters offer compelling new work on what Martin styles the "military-metrical complex," a resonant phrase in the first instance (130) but less so by the fourth (145) or fifth (178) repetition.

In the middle chapters, before the book turns to actual warfare, the discussion of Robert Bridges brings to view a different kind of warfare: "Contrasting Bridges with his influential competitor, George Saintsbury, reveals the contested landscape of the Edwardian and Georgian prosody wars, which have been largely ignored or suppressed in favor of the more convenient narrative of the rise of free verse" (80). The primary source of Bridges' views on meter is Milton's Prosody, which began as essays in the late 1880s and achieved book form in 1893, revised in 1901 and 1921. In this book as well as in his crucial friendship with Hopkins and in his own now-neglected poetry, Bridges worked "to diversify and destabilize any notion of traditional meter with multiple metrical systems" (133).

Because Bridges' original essay on Milton was drafted to serve as a preface to a teaching text of Milton in the schools, his book helps Martin recover the link between prosody and national culture. But while Martin locates national culture chiefly in the schools and the military, Bridges believed that day by day and week by week, national subjects were shaped by prosody just as much--if not more--in the church. Martin herself quotes (from Milton's Prosody) Bridges' complaint about "the ridiculous distortion of sense and speech-rhythm in the chanting of the Psalms by the trained choirs of our Cathedrals" (94). Whether or not Martin selects this passage to make Bridges seem unsympathetic to organized religion, many readers may not recognize the sentence as a devoted insider's indignant call for liturgical reform. Martin neglects Bridges' influential work on Anglican hymnody for the established church, Practical Discourse on Principles of Hymn-singing (Blackwell, 1901), designed to accompany his richly innovative Yattendon Hymnal (Oxford, 1899). In the Discourse, which was based on his decade as precentor of the Yattendon village choir, Bridges sounds like the metrical contrarian that Martin finds him to be in the non-ecclesiastical debates: "there is no reason," writes Bridges, why the rhythm of hymnody "should not be completely free" (qtd. 26). But even without considering Bridges' writing on hymns, Martin makes a potent case for the value of his precepts on meter as well of his own poetry. In her magisterial reading of "Poor Pol" (1923) at the end of the book, Martin gives us further cause to regret that "Pound's eventual dismissal of Bridges . . . guaranteed his obsolescence" (13).

If Bridges is the book's protagonist and Pound its villain, George Saintsbury is its anti-hero. Unlike Bridges, who welcomed "multiple metrical systems" (see above), Saintsbury "devoted an enormous amount of energy to fixing the terms for poetic form" (95) within a constractive system that haunts us still: "Saintsbury's model of an abstract, interpretive, and essentially nationalistic model," writes Martin, "is that which we have inherited as our traditional prosody in English departments to this day" (108). The key text is Saintsbury's massive three-volume A History of English Prosody from the Twelfth Century to the Present Day (1906-10), which Martin once confusingly cites as the "three-volume History of English
Versification” (96). In the world of prosody, Martin's Saintsbury is a militaristic foot-fetishist: his "foot marched to a particularly English rhythm" (12); his publications were designed to "step toward foot domination" (96); his program was aimed at the "English foot soldier" (102). In Martin's account of Saintsbury's scholarship, prosody sponsors a militarist and imperialist culture: "Just like the schoolchild learning about English poetry through narratives of military glory, like the countless histories of England that justified and extolled imperialist expansion, Saintsbury's English meter spoke to and fostered what he imagined was a specifically national character" (102). Even though Saintsbury's academic perch was in Edinburgh, Martin maintains that his model of that national character remained exclusively English, the "classical English gentleman" (98). Saintsbury and Bridges, therefore, took opposite sides "in the 'Prosody Wars'": Saintsbury sought a purely 'English' metrical scheme that depended upon a perpetuation of the class differences in education, whereas Bridges sought a naturalization of English meter through universal accessibility" (104).

As an alert and lively study of the cultural stakes of prosody at the turn of the twentieth century, this book will take its place with a number of other important works on the cultural history of prosody, both older books (such as Paul Fussell's Poetic Meter and Poetic Form [1979] and O.B. Hardison's Prosody and Purpose in the English Renaissance [1989]) and more recent work such as that by Martin's mentor, Yopie Prins (e.g., her PMLA essay "Historical Poetics, Dysprosody, and the Science of English Verse" [2008]). Among its few flaws, however, the terms of Martin's argument tend to slip their moorings and float synecdochically: "meter" too often stands in for many other kinds of "form," "Victorian" too often morphs into "the nineteenth century," and "England" too often names a nation that in numerous instances should be called "Britain."

The second of these slippery substitutions--the "nineteenth century" for "Victorian"--exposes the curious absence of Romantic prosody as the formidable immediate antecedent of Martin's primary material. What Saintsbury in his History calls "the great rain which was to descend upon the parched and weary land of English versification" (III.4), Romantic verse theory and practice are primary evidence in the Victorian texts Martin analyzes. In Milton's Prosody, for example, Bridges repeatedly cites Shelley and devotes several pages to Coleridge's metrical experiment in "Christabel." But Martin does not consider how Romantic prosody supplied ammunition in the prosody wars. Given the chronological boundaries announced in the book's title (1860-1930), this complaint may seem unfair, but within the book Martin herself repeatedly casts a larger chronological net, regularly framing sentences with the phrase "throughout the nineteenth century." Only two pages after she punches the book's time clock by saying, "my focus is the late nineteenth century" (4), she pulls back for a wide-angle shot: "This book charts three interconnected and concurrent narratives that run from roughly the end of the eighteenth century to just after the First World War" (6).

This claim prompts an inflated blur on the book's back cover: "The Rise and Fall of Meter tells the unknown story of English meter from the late eighteenth century until just after World War I." Not so. Martin superbly treats late Victorian and early modernist prosody, but in spite of a few examples drawn from early manuals on elocution, no one can plausibly claim that this book tracks prosody through the entire nineteenth century. When Saintsbury turns to Romantic prosody to open the third and final volume of the History (1910), he begins with forty pages on the "extraordinary prosodic quality" of Blake's illuminated books, mapping with amazement what appeared to him "at first sight as a prosodic chaos" (III.9). But Martin overlooks Blake when she claims that Hopkins' experiments in sprung rhythm are "rivalled only by the long lines of Walt Whitman in nineteenth-century poetic nation making" (46). Are they not rivalled also by Blake's fourteeners in Jerusalem, which--well before Whitman--exemplify both experimental prosody and poetic nation-making? And Saintsbury was not the only one of Martin's major metrical theorists fascinated by Blake. Here is Bridges--her protagonist--in Milton's Prosody: "I think I have liked some verses better because they do not scan, and thus displease pedants. I should have put Blake into the 'Golden Treasury' in 1861" (1921 ed., 99). But Blake's metrical experiments are invisible in Martin's otherwise skillful reconstruction of the "prosody wars." In spite of a few scattered references (most of which do not appear in the index), the same goes for the meters used by Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, or Keats. Martin cites a number of important recent studies of prosodic practice by later nineteenth-century poets (Dennis Taylor on Hardy and A. A. Markley on Tennyson, for example), but she nowhere cites Brennan O'Donnell's pathbreaking monograph, The Passion of Meter: A Study of Wordsworth's Metrical Art (1995).

Martin's use of national markers could also be more precise. Her subtitle pinpoints "English national culture," and the book is relentlessly Anglocentric. The final paragraph includes the phrases "English poetic form," "English literary studies," "English language," "English culture," "English verse," "English meter," "quintessentially 'English,'" and "Englishness" (205-206). What's the problem? Though this book makes important arguments about the nation that went to war in 1914, that nation was Britain and the United Kingdom, not just England; in the mud of France, Scottish, Welsh, and Irish soldiers were slaughtered along with their English comrades.

Those who survived sometimes did so in homeland hospitals located beyond the borders of England's green and pleasant land. Martin gives a fascinating account of therapeutic literary culture at Craiglockhart War Hospital, where Owen convalesced in 1917: "The ability to manipulate poetic language into English poetic form linked these soldier-poets to the larger field of English writing and the country in general. In the hospital, even the poetic self was part of the collective history of the region and country" (162). But since Craiglockhart was in Edinburgh, "region" in that latter sentence can mean only "Scotland" and "country" only "Britain." My point? After 1707 and 1800, as Linda Colley and many others have repeatedly reminded us, the question of nation is enormously complicated and requires careful discrimination among multiple older national units that sometimes aggregate and sometimes remain discrete (sometimes simultaneously). A key part of Martin's narrative of "nation" is the Education Acts of 1870 and 1902, which made an important place for poetry in the state-funded school system. But the Education Acts did not apply to Scotland, which had a separate education system, a separate church, and a separate legal system. Sometimes Martin's nation is indeed just England, but sometimes it is not--and what puzzles me is that occasionally but not consistently, Martin seems to recognize this complexity (almost exclusively in the first chapter, 17, 31, 45). She also seems unsure of what to do with Yeats--a great English poet?--who only fleetingly appears. To conclude the book with a native national poem from the 1920s that can be set against the Anglo-American immigrant modernism of The Waste Land, Martin chooses Alice Meynell's "The English Metres" (1923), a poem about "English national culture" (199). How would Martin's tale look if the native "national" poem were instead Hugh MacDiarmid's Drunk Man from 1926?

The press could supply better proofreading and copyediting. Potholes in the prose include "those who did not agree with the tenants of the Church of England" (17), "If we were all able to hear alike" (52), "Saintsbury" (5, 80), "scholars both then and now" (139), reviews "found the lack of perfect rhyme in to be alienating" (178), and "the poet whose legacy he was trying to desperately to unseat" (185). Not infrequently, plural subjects ride single verbs, as in "Newbolt's popularity..."
and the popularity of patriotic poetry in general was due to" (126). Parentheses and quotation marks are sometimes distractingly unclosed (43, 153, 166). The catchy phrase "military-metrical complex" is hyphenated the first time (130), but never thereafter. Princeton can do better than this.

In spite of these small blemishes and its more substantive neglect of Romantic prosody, this book makes an important contribution to what Martin herself styles "the project of historical prosody" (205). Vigorous and unafraid to wear its heart on its sleeve, it "hopes to repair" the "artificial division between aesthetics and politics" (10). Such a task might require a career's worth of books, and this volume is a worthy beginning.

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