

market economy in China. So, conservative change maybe, but only politically; economically, capitalism continues to stride forward.

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John Lilburne and the Levellers: Reappraising the Roots of English Radicalism 400 Years On. [Routledge Studies in Radical History and Politics.] Ed. by John Rees. Routledge, London [etc.] 2018. x, 158 pp. £94.99 (Paperback/E-book £36.99).

Few individuals epitomize the mid-seventeenth-century English Revolution as much as the Civil War veteran and politically controversial figure John Lilburne (1615?–1657), or “Freeborn John” as he liked to call himself. A dissenter who was not afraid to suffer for his convictions, Lilburne achieved fame and notoriety – depending on where one stood in the conflict between King and Parliament – as early as 1637. Throughout the rest of his life he relentlessly challenged those in power, whether they be King, Parliament, or Lord Protector, orchestrating his dissent in as public a manner as possible. Lilburne produced a flood of tracts explaining himself and his points of view, and actively sought to provoke the authorities to subject him to well-publicized and widely attended trials. He excelled in eloquently – and verbosely, one might add – challenging abuses of power and advocating the rights of the citizen to a fair hearing, a say in politics, and last but certainly not least to a free exercise of one’s conscience in matters of religion.

In many ways, this was what the English Revolution was all about, and what many English of the time wanted to hear. “Freeborn John” therefore enjoyed a great deal of popular support, enabling him to grow into what historian Michael Braddick has termed a “celebrity radical” (p. 119), forever imprinting the concept of the “Freeborn Englishman” on English political thought. As such, he rightly ranks among the foremost leaders of the great grass-roots democratic movement that came to be called – initially disparagingly, to be sure – the Levellers. Their heyday was during the second half of the 1640s, but even after the movement had dissipated, owing in part to suppression by the victorious Parliament, many Levellers continued to express dissent through other means and groups. During the 1650s, the Quakers would emerge as an enduring channel of dissent, and Lilburne himself gravitated towards them, departing this life as a “Friend”. Typically, during his lifetime and after, not all Quakers were enthusiastic about his embrace of their creed, fearing he had his own programme. Lilburne attracted controversy throughout his life.

There is no telling how Lilburne would have developed after the collapse of the English Commonwealth, but it is unlikely that he would have stood by idly when the English once more submitted to King and Church (for a while at least). As it was, he would go down in history as the most outspoken leader of the Levellers. Over time, historians have devoted a great deal of their time to the Levellers, who, among all radicals, were assigned

the greatest importance – indeed, no work on the English Revolution could fail to pay significant attention to them. Paradoxically, Lilburne and his substantial body of writings have received somewhat less attention from historians. Thus, Pauline Gregg’s authoritative biography of Lilburne is still an indispensable work of reference, though obviously dated since the study of the English Revolution has hardly stood still since 1961.¹ The study of the Levellers has apparently suffered something of a late twentieth-century lull, but interest has since picked up again.² Recently, the versatile historian and activist John Rees published a new synthesis on the Levellers,³ and he has now also edited a slim volume of essays devoted to the life and thought of John Lilburne himself.

The preface explains that the essays are the fruits of the John Lilburne 400 Conference in 2015 and adds that Michael Braddick is currently writing a new biography. It appears therefore that “Freeborn John” is regaining the attention he so assiduously and successfully sought for his cause during his lifetime. In the meantime, *John Lilburne and the Levellers* offers fascinating new insights into his life and thought. A collection of eight essays, of varying length and placed more or less in the chronological order of his life, addresses a number of different aspects. Rachel Foxley concentrates on Lilburne’s development of the “free-born Englishmen” trope, Norah Carlin investigates his defence of liberty of conscience, and Ann Hughes focuses on the role of women in the Leveller movement. Geoffrey Robertson presents a compelling picture of his reshaping of judicial court practice, and Rees himself contributes an essay in which he looks critically at Lilburne’s reputation for intractability.

Jason Peacey researches Lilburne’s hitherto little-studied exile in the Low Countries in 1652–1653 and assesses the importance of the Dutch Republic as an example. Ariel Hessayon studies his last years and his conversion to Quakerism. Finally, Edward Vallance points out that Lilburne’s fame in eighteenth-century English politics was much more enduring than has often been assumed. All of these essays are well-researched, engaging, and extremely interesting. As with all collections of essays, however, reviewers are bound to have favourites, usually those essays that come closest to their own interests. My favourites include the contributions of Peacey and Hessayon, as the first moves beyond the borders of England and the second crosses the borders of secular and religious radicalism.

Peacey has extensively reviewed the available evidence for Lilburne’s travels in the Low Countries and his continued frenzied publishing even in exile. At some point, Lilburne published bilingually in Dutch and English, thus also addressing a Dutch audience, and he intended to publish in other languages. Apparently, he hoped to use Amsterdam as a basis for continuing his publicity campaign in England, acquiring a printing press for the purpose. His Amsterdam stay did not work out quite as he had intended, however. Lilburne felt unsafe because of hostile Royalist exiles and petitioned the mighty Amsterdam burgomasters for protection – a request that was apparently met with

1. Pauline Gregg, *Free-Born John: A Biography of John Lilburne* (London [etc.], 1961).

2. These new studies include Rachel Foxley, *The Levellers: Radical Political Thought in the English Revolution* (Manchester, 2013), and Geoff Kennedy, *Diggers, Levellers, and Agrarian Capitalism: Radical Political Thought in Seventeenth Century England* (Lanham, MD [etc.], 2008).

3. John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution: Radical Political Organisation in England, 1640–1650* (London [etc.], 2016).

indifference. A rapidly deteriorating Anglo-Dutch relationship induced the burgomasters to rid themselves of this troublesome exile in an attempt to minimize tensions. Eventually, it became clear that war could not be averted, but by then Lilburne had left Amsterdam. Nevertheless, he held no grudge afterwards. Indeed, he was fascinated by the Dutch polity and painted a rather overly optimistic picture of the Dutch. Peacey's essay thus presents an intriguing picture of the international dimensions and inspirations of seventeenth-century radicalism. It is a pity though that he seems not to have used Dutch sources. For example, no titles of Dutch-language tracts are given – the IISH in Amsterdam holds a few Lilburne tracts translated into Dutch, and there may be others – and there has apparently been no attempt either to trace Lilburne's petition in Amsterdam's archives. Of course, Dutch-language skills tend to be scarce outside the Low Countries, but surely a Dutch historian might have been able to assist? Nevertheless, thanks to Peacey we now know much more about Lilburne's international exploits, and he has interesting things to say about how the Levellers viewed the Dutch Republic.

Hessayon's essay shows that, contrary to earlier interpretations of his final years, Lilburne remained defiant and independent-minded until the last. His apparently heartfelt conversion to Quakerism caused frictions with his beloved wife and was not always trusted by more senior figures in the Quaker movement. However, Lilburne apparently took to his new confession with gusto, even preaching in the Quaker manner in Eltham and Woolwich. As was his custom, as a Quaker, too, he soon secured a place in the limelight, which raises the question how the Quaker movement might have developed had Lilburne lived longer. Though at the time he certainly professed adherence to the great inspirational figure of Quakerism, George Fox, he had no talent for subordination. Hessayon makes a highly plausible case for Lilburne not being undaunted by his repeated experiences of incarceration, and that his conversion to Quakerism was no flight into quietism. Thus, he underwrites earlier Marxist interpretations of the Quaker turn of Lilburne as “the continuation of native radicalism by other means” (p. 98), citing in support Eduard Bernstein, Henry Brailsford, and Christopher Hill, demonstrating along the way that ideologically fuelled hunches of previous generations of historians may well be proven correct by subsequent substantial empirical research.

Hessayon makes clear that, right until the end, Lilburne remained very much his own man, for certainly not all Levellers followed him down this path. Nevertheless, when he died prematurely, presumably because his health had been imperilled fatally during his imprisonments, his Quaker funeral still drew a tremendous crowd. Until the grave and beyond, “Freeborn John” provided an exemplary image of an implacable foe of high-handed authority, “a charismatic, uncompromising figure with an extensive network of supporters who would never bend the knee” (p. 110).

In sum, *John Lilburne and the Levellers* provides a fresh and refreshing look at this giant of oppositional politics, placing him, his actions, and ideas firmly in the context of what is no doubt one of the most fascinating eras of active radicalism. It is implied throughout the book that Lilburne may well be regarded as exemplary, even today. That may be so: in any case, this collection of sound scholarship on “Freeborn John” may itself be regarded as exemplary.

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