

## The Common Freedom of the People: John Lilburne and the English Revolution

**Review Number:** 2349

**Publish date:** Thursday, 7 November, 2019

**Author:** Michael Braddick

**ISBN:** 9780198803232

**Date of Publication:** 2018

**Price:** £25.00

**Pages:** 416pp.

**Publisher:** Oxford University Press

**Publisher url:** <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-common-freedom-of-the-people-9780198803232?cc=gb&lang=en&>

**Place of Publication:** Oxford

**Reviewer:** Tom Brautigam

Pauline Gregg's *Freeborn John* was previously the most recent full biographical work on John Lilburne. Published in 1961, Gregg's work was extremely close to H. N. Brailsford's seminal *The Levellers and the English Revolution*; the two works standing for decades as the cornerstones to Leveller historiography. It is appropriate, then, that Michael Braddick's *The Common Freedom of the People: John Lilburne and the English Revolution* follows relatively closely John Rees' excellent survey in his *Leveller Revolution*.<sup>(1)</sup> A recent resurgence in interest in the Levellers, in part an attempt to revive them from their revisionist marginalisation, has opened several avenues for exploration of the networks and ideologies for which John Lilburne can be an illustrative example. In this biography, however, Michael Braddick has sought to move beyond a simplistic exploration of 'Lilburne the Leveller' and to open up the various phases of Lilburne's experience, through which he developed his ever-changing campaigns and relationships. This is a biography of Lilburne, the campaigner for civil — and particularly *legal* — rights, with this including, but not being limited to, his activities as a Leveller.

Braddick does not attempt to begin by filling in detailed background on the Lilburne family or John's childhood; rather he seeks to establish John's teenage arrival into London's 'puritan underground', through his apprenticeship under Thomas Hewson, a London cloth merchant who himself was in close contact with many in the Calvinist resistance to 1630s Laudianism. The time in Hewson's household is formative for Lilburne, who was being mentored in his trade, and introduced to men of social influence, such as Henry Jessey, Edmund Rosier and John Bastwick, all figures with a significant profile in the London puritan network. In the case of Bastwick, this introduction would provide guidance in both legal defiance and public martyrdom. However — in addition to a series of purely religious associations — Braddick outlines important political and commercial ties which the young John Lilburne is able to build through both the guilds and trading companies; as well as powerful individual connections to men like Lord Brooke. Braddick's presentation of symbiotic networks allows him to explore a depth within Lilburne's motivations and connections which can be overlooked by focusing solely on the general rhetoric around his early religious campaigns. This duality is highlighted by Lilburne's involvement in printing, or at least importing, the anti-Episcopalian pamphlets of John Bastwick from Amsterdam; 'It is not exactly clear what he was

doing there: pursuing a career in publishing or fleeing persecution. It was probably both' (p. 18). This financial motivation (alongside the religious) is something his enemies would later allege and it speaks to Lilburne's more practical considerations as a young second son, thus complicating any view of him as simply a two-dimensional ideologue.

Lilburne's 1638 trial and punishment have been key elements of his legacy, in terms of both his approach to questioning and his defiance in the pillory. His refusal to swear the *ex officio* oath before the court of Star Chamber over his illegal importation of religious pamphlets 'has been assimilated to the interpretation of the 5th Amendment' (p. 271), with his compelling arguments and public defiance aiding the portrayal of Lilburne as a puritan martyr; although Braddick notes here that we only have Lilburne's account, written for publication. In his analysis on Lilburne's behaviour in the pillory, Braddick singles out the 'wholly secular' arguments that he first puts forward as justification to the crowd, only then turning to points on religion. This inclusion of rights-based arguments is what Braddick suggests helped Lilburne gain a more populist appeal as well as making him 'more comprehensible to subsequent generations' (p. 26). This understanding of Lilburne is central to Braddick's argument throughout the work; Lilburne portrayed *himself* as a Christian martyr, while his *arguments* were legal. Braddick chooses not to explore concepts of citizenship at this stage, avoiding Pauline Gregg's fond use of the heroic epithet '*Free-born*', something that did come into use at this time, but was — as yet — under-developed in Lilburne's own thinking. Instead, our impression, through Braddick, is of an individual moving in a network of unrest, learning to marry legalistic arguments and popular acts of defiance in reaction to perceived mistreatment.

Having been released by Parliament in 1640 with the support of Cromwell, set up as a Brewer with the financial backing of his uncle, Lilburne (a Freeman of the City) is clearly placed in the middling sort. John's choice of wife is a rare glimpse into his personal life; Elizabeth Dewell who, as the daughter of a London merchant who had already suffered arrest for sectarian involvement, is consistent with Braddick's social positioning of Lilburne and the circles in which he moved in the early 1640s. Elizabeth is an ever-present participant and plays 'a crucial role at a number of critical junctures' (p.44) in John's actions. Refreshingly, however, Braddick is prepared on several occasions to address the utter neglect which Lilburne shows toward Elizabeth as well as the effect his situation has on her. There is an acknowledgement that his 'egotism and misogyny do not sit easily with modern readers' (p. 232), without the imposition of a 21st-century value judgment on the 17th-century relationship. Instead, Braddick takes the opportunity to explore the experience of Elizabeth, and the sacrifices and hardships she undergoes (including John's exacerbation of these), while she was also regularly contributing to campaigns or petitioning. Sadly, as he acknowledges, the limited source material inhibits Braddick from a more detailed exploration of Elizabeth in her own right and we are forced to infer some of her involvement from occasional references.

One issue which, while relatively minor, can be illustrative of the personal balance within Lilburne's ideology is his approach to oath taking. As well as the well-trodden arguments around refusing the *ex officio* oath, Braddick also attempts to explore Lilburne's attitude to the Protestation loyalty oath, required by Parliament in 1642. Braddick notes that Lilburne himself was evasive in his writings on whether or not he had taken the oath but asserts that 'the Protestation was clearly a statement of the Parliamentary cause of which Lilburne approved' (p. 54), referring back to its terms in his later work. Indeed, Braddick identifies a possible record of a 'Lilburne' taking the oath at a church in Essex, with which Lilburne could have had links. Lilburne's regular refusal to swear in his various court cases, alongside his later Quakerism, can lead to the assumption that his objection to oaths was a firmly religious one. Braddick, however, notes that — as with the Protestation — it is often the *terms* of the oath that are attacked by Lilburne, rather than the swearing itself; Lilburne was apparently prepared to swear the 1649 Engagement, if permitted to qualify certain clauses. This balance between Lilburne's religious motivation and his legalistic, rights-based, worldview is an example of the complexity of Lilburne's activities, which Braddick successfully untangles.

Braddick acknowledges the success of Lilburne's military career, particularly around the Battle of Brentford and Tickhill Castle; however, he is most expansive about the personal relationships and disputes that affect his experience. Lilburne's initial entry into the Parliamentary army is shown to have a somewhat

patron/client aspect, with Lord Brooke finding places for not just John, but his brothers and 400 others from similar backgrounds in London (including the later regicide John Oakey), in part through religious connections like Lilburne's friend William Kiffin. However, after Lilburne's capture and trial at the hands of the royalist forces, with his release being facilitated by Elizabeth, he comes under the command of the Presbyterian Colonel King. This troubled relationship, along with an apparently mutual lack of respect between Lilburne and the Earl of Manchester, is used by Braddick to usefully highlight both the wider division within the Parliamentary Eastern Association and Lilburne's support within the Independent faction; particularly from Oliver Cromwell.

When captured by Royalist forces and placed on trial in 1643, Lilburne is described 'bridling' at the court's reference to him as a yeoman as showing 'prejudice to his family' (p. 64), insisting instead on gentleman status. This is consistent with the point made throughout by Braddick that Lilburne was against social-levelling, defending class status while demanding legal equality. The same fact is most apparent in an episode in the 1650s during which Braddick describes Lilburne forcibly evicting his tenants, despite them claiming 'tenant right'. Braddick rightly makes no attempt to compare Lilburne with Winstanley, seeing an entirely different perspective at work, with Lilburne comfortable with a stratified society; the civil war, for Lilburne, was a battle for legal rights and freedoms, particularly "negative liberty" — freedom from interference' (p. 137).

Unlike much of the other work on Lilburne, Braddick takes a deeper account of the Lilburne family's personal finances, exploring in greater detail his attempted business ventures and financial hardship, and the roles played by his father and uncle. Like many in Parliamentary service Lilburne had experienced 'considerable cost, in plunder, quarter, and care for his men, and was himself owed around £700 pounds in arrears' (p. 83) and his brewing business — set up with the financial investment of his uncle — fell into ruin while he was away. His father and uncle, too, had an experience indicative of the national situation. Local royalist tensions in Durham initially caused their interests to suffer, but they eventually found advancement through participation in local committees and commissions. Braddick, without contrivance, is able to use the Lilburne family as a useful case study for the common experience of this social type. These familial links are also shown to intersect the political networks which Lilburne was on the fringes of at this stage; rivalries in Durham with men such as Henry Vane and Arthur Hesilrige were a lasting complication for John in London. This type of personal experience adds an important dimension to Lilburne's story, contextualising his actions beyond his political writings.

Lilburne had not joined the New Model Army, despite Cromwell's invitation, in large part because of his reluctance to swear the Solemn League and Covenant. Although he was 'not at the centre' of the printed debate that had broken out in the Parliamentary side regarding Church government, Braddick is clear that Lilburne was a participant of note and it is here that his relationships with Richard Overton and William Walwyn begin to develop, as does a mutual animosity with men such as William Prynne and Thomas Edwards. This 1645–6 phase of Lilburne's story is portrayed as somewhat transformative by Braddick, as Lilburne shifts from one network to another 'continuing to drift apart from some old friends' (p. 99) — particularly those in favour of an enforced religious settlement — and towards a more independent grouping, including several future Levellers. However, while acknowledging that Lilburne is 'clearly still motivated by his religious views, and continued to draw on the martyrological tradition' (p. 89), Braddick sees the next phase of Lilburne's campaigns as predominantly political rather than religious. Building on Jason Peacey's work on the support Lilburne enjoyed in Parliament of many political Independents, Braddick explores John's views regarding the separation of Church and State, as well as possible collaboration with men like Hugh Peter.<sup>(2)</sup> Braddick acknowledges that Lilburne's ideological positions are clearly developing, employing civil and natural law along with ancient tradition arguments, at times leading to apparent weaknesses and contradictions. However, the convincing point made by Braddick here is that Lilburne 'was an activist, drawing on those arguments that would work at particular moments, while collaborating with people who shared his political goals, but not necessarily his ideological grounds' (p. 107). Braddick sees Lilburne's self-identification as a martyr as central to his public presentation — and something clearly inspired by his faith. Braddick does, at times, take Lilburne's focus on civil law to be entirely separate from

his religious position; it may be argued here that while Lilburne sees the existence of two distinct states — one religious, one civil — his views on the civil may still be drawn from his religious experience and belief, something which perhaps could be developed further.

Braddick chooses to compartmentalise Lilburne's Leveller activity into one chapter, within the specific time-frame of 1647 to 1649. The decision not to dwell on this period of Lilburne's life (while still exploring its key elements) is entirely justifiable given Lilburne's centrality to existing Leveller historiography. There is a slight difference in interpretation here from the recent work of John Rees, regarding both the longevity of the Leveller campaign and the nature of Levellerism in the army. Braddick, unlike Rees, tends to characterise a Leveller/army alliance, with the Levellers 'influencing, or trying to influence, an argument within the army' (p. 136). Thus, Braddick takes a middle way between Rees and Mark Kishlansky. Braddick does offer refreshing realism in relation to the level of direct involvement that the imprisoned Lilburne had over the summer of 1647, suggesting he kept himself informed, rather than having 'a significant influence over the direction of events' (p. 128), his primary army link being Edward Sexby. Lilburne was clearly a totem around which much Leveller activity centred, although Braddick chooses to see Lilburne 'joining' rather than creating these campaigns, again in contrast to Rees' view of 'The first Leveller, John Lilburne'.<sup>(3)</sup> Braddick sees the 1648 Whitehall Debates as 'the closest he got to real power', but also as an expression of 'his own political failings' (pp. 153–55), with Lilburne — potentially a central figure in the constitutional debate — walking out in frustration. Braddick acknowledges the key area of contention around *An Agreement of the People* at Whitehall: the role of the magistrate in the regulation of religious practice. However, he does not fully explore Lilburne's passion over that issue, instead attributing his withdrawal to frustration at the continued discussion and at Ireton's perceived double dealing. This is perhaps an area worthy of further consideration, alongside Lilburne's legal and rights-based views, given the centrality of the toleration debate to so much of Lilburne's (and Leveller) rhetoric.

Although Lilburne is conspicuously silent around the trial of the Charles I, Braddick feels it is his anger at the use of the High Court of Justice to proceed against royalist prisoners that drew him back into the political debate with *Englands New Chains Discovered*. This interpretation is entirely reasonable given Lilburne's arguments about just treatment before the law (perhaps with exception for the Earl of Strafford). Once Lilburne's renewed campaigns had earned him renewed imprisonment Braddick makes several references to the role — not just of Elizabeth but also of Lilburne's brother Robert — in petitioning for his freedom. By that stage Robert was both senior member of the army and regicide; his role in attempting to aid his younger brother is rarely acknowledged by others, perhaps due to the fact Robert is in no way active as a Leveller. Robert's unsuccessful request to the Rump that John be granted money to go into exile as 'he could not afford to go overseas without help' (p. 183), gives an interesting material insight into John's situation, but also detracts somewhat from the impression of an unyielding protagonist for the Leveller cause.

Once acquitted at his 1649 treason trial — using familiar populist, rights-based appeals to the jury — Lilburne moved into private life. Braddick identifies a fleeting, yet intriguing, reference to possible army service for the Commonwealth under his brother in 1651, after having rehabilitated his relationship with Cromwell. A great deal of detail is added to Lilburne's involvement in a Fen clearance dispute in Lincolnshire, alongside John Wildman. On more well-covered areas, such as his exile, Braddick does not dwell, other than to expand upon the personal family rivalry with Arthur Hesilrige, that ultimately leads to this extreme punishment. Braddick does note that — despite a lack of overtly political campaigning — Cromwell admitted to Elizabeth that her husband received such a harsh sentence because 'other things were feared from him' (p. 228), perhaps speaking to both Lilburne's residual profile and the vulnerability felt by the Commonwealth regime. Elizabeth becomes more visible in John's story in this period — perhaps in part because he was without the usual networks on which he had relied — and it was she who suggested he return to England at the dissolution of the Rump. Lilburne's subsequent trial is characterised by familiar arguments and defiance, and Braddick places large emphasis on the popular support John enjoyed, causing the authorities to increase their military presence in the vicinity. This, however, is not portrayed by Braddick as an 'Indian Summer' for the Levellers (as Austin Woolrych portrays) but simply as a show of personal support for Lilburne.<sup>(4)</sup> His influence over the jury is clear in the verdict and Braddick uses a wide range of

sources to corroborate the truth of the popular rejoicing at his acquittal, demonstrating his genuine profile and thus accounting for his continued imprisonment.

Braddick gives detailed consideration to Lilburne's conversion to Quakerism once returned from confinement in Jersey, and particularly to the impact of his desire 'to throw off worldly things, including family' (p. 264); although given his presence at Elizabeth's lodgings in Kent for her laying-in at the time of his death, the implication is that they remain close. Overall, however, Braddick feels his conversion was an important 'lesson in humility' (p. 261), requiring the sort of moral climb-down of which Lilburne has previously been incapable. While refusing Elizabeth's encouragement to give assurances he will remain out of politics (a step he also refused to take when prisoner in Jersey), Lilburne instead declined any interest in worldly affairs.

Michael Braddick provides a rounded and balanced political biography of John Lilburne, of interest to both a general and academic audience. Lilburne's high-profile Leveller activities, while significant, are not allowed to overshadow the wider activities and networks with which he was involved throughout his life. Braddick portrays a political activist, moving across multiple currents of the English Revolutionary period, sometimes propelled by these currents, more often moving against them. Though Lilburne's arguments on natural and ancient rights are explored, it is his campaigns on legal protections that define him in Braddick's view; he is shown as 'an activist, rather than political thinker' (p. 277). Braddick makes this case convincingly, providing a fascinating window into a man able to both represent the experience of a 17th-century radical and to stand alone as a significant individual.

## Notes

1. Pauline Gregg, *Freeborn John: The Biography of John Lilburne* (London, 1961); H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Nottingham, 1983), first published 1961; John Rees, *The Leveller Revolution* (London, 2016).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Jason Peacey, 'John Lilburne and the Long Parliament', *The Historical Journal*, 43, 3 (September 2000), 625–45.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Rees, *Leveller Revolution*, p. 23, p. 199; Mark Kishlansky, 'The army and the Levellers: the Roads to Putney', *The Historical Journal*, 22, 4 (1979), 796.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Austin Woolrych, *Commonwealth to Protectorate*, (London, 1982), p. 250.[Back to \(4\)](#)

*The author is grateful to the reviewer for this clear and sympathetic review and for his suggestions about where discussion might now focus.*

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