

Following the Levellers

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Gary De Krey is a leading historian of mid-to-late 17th-century London. His two monographs on the City: *London and the Restoration* and *A Fractured Society* capture the complexity, dynamics and interiority of London politics in ways that have often stumped the best of historians. This research has provided valuable insights into late-17th-century political history, particularly the organisation and mobilisation of the City's opponents to the restored Stuart regime. It is from this background that Professor De Krey provides a two-volume study of the Levellers, and, more importantly, the Levellers' followers and successors. After being relegated almost to the status of bit players in the 1980s historical debate between Revisionists and their critics over the New Model Army, the Levellers have returned to the fore of historical publishing. In 2012 Philip Baker and I edited a collection of essays that aimed to reinvigorate debate on the various *Agreements of the People*. This was followed in 2013 by Rachel Foxley's substantial monograph exploring the roots and consequence of Leveller political thought. More recently John Rees has provided a well-researched 'biography' of the Leveller movement, Mike Braddick a new biography of John Lilburne, and David Como a groundbreaking monograph exploring the early 1640s origins of many of those who would become Levellers.

If the field of study is currently buzzing with new scholarship, Gary De Krey's two books attempt to cut a new path: to chart the Levellers' followers and successors from the 1640s into the later 17th century. De Krey's thesis is that the Levellers are best seen as having a 'heterogeneous loose following with divergent and even contradictory ideas' (p.2) rather than being the 'first political' party advocated in 20th-century historiography. De Krey takes up the insights of Murray Tolmie's groundbreaking 1977 study *The Triumph of the Saints* to find a stable locus for Leveller followers in the political and socio-economic milieu of Baptist and Separatist congregations in London and the Home Counties. The methodology — as well befits a student of Lawrence Stone — is to read the Levellers and their followers' printed literature in its

immediate context and to apply a prosopographical approach to understanding that context.

The first volume of this study covers the history of the Levellers to 1649. The introduction sets out a brief summary of the historiographical landscape. De Krey pins his colours to the mast here, adopting Jason Peacey's innovatory arguments from a 2000 article setting John Lilburne — and thus the pre-history of the Levellers — in the wider political Independent coalition.⁽¹⁾ The Levellers, De Krey argues, emerged as 'a unique historical development' (p. 9) from the tensions caused by the almost successful machinations of the political Presbyterian faction within Parliamentarianism to control the settlement with Charles I. Against such a peace, which would have entailed concessions to the King's traditional government and a national Presbyterian ecclesiastical settlement, the emerging Levellers pressed for fundamental alterations to the English constitution. In seeking such change the Leveller leadership looked to the radical margins of the Independent coalition, members of the gathered churches in London and its linked counties, and among the soldiery. I should state that I do not agree that the article *What was the First Agreement of the People?*, which I wrote with Philip Baker in 2010, can fairly be described as a 'Revisionist' piece.⁽²⁾ While the article challenged a number of assertions in the existing historiography, it does not, as De Krey states (pp. 5–6), argue that the first *Agreement of the People* was an exclusively army document. On the contrary, Baker and I argued that the boundaries between the New Model Army and the radical wing of the political Independent coalition had become increasingly porous by the summer of 1647. It was from a series of meetings between the Army and radical civilians that the *Agreement of the People* emerged, and ultimately constituted 'the Levellers' as a political force distinct from the Independent coalition. Indeed, De Krey accepts this aspect of our argument, agreeing that the Levellers were a movement of October 1647 fashioned from the events during and after Putney and not earlier (p. 105).

The origins and emergence of the Levellers are explored in the first three substantive chapters of volume one. The Levellers' immediate roots were the development of a programme of 'active citizenship, government accountability to the people, and freedom for a variety of religious practices' (p. 15). These ideas had been developed in pamphlet propaganda produced by Lilburne, Overton and Walwyn during the period of the first civil war. De Krey locates the appeal of this programme in the milieu of small-time London shopkeepers and artisans who inhabited the liberties and suburbs of the City, particularly Southwark and what would become the East End. While this constituency was frequently marginalised from full participation in London politics, it had been politicised by Parliament's struggle against the King. The emergence of gathered churches out of the shadow of episcopal suppression, and the explosion of ideas transmitted by civil war print culture, only served to further the appeal of notions of 'common right and freedom' to this constituency of people. Although Leveller thinking had formed as part of the struggle against Presbyterian attempts to control the political settlement, the Levellers emerged as a genuinely distinct political faction in October 1647 as radical soldiers and citizens converged to resist the Independent grandees' attempt to restore the King on the basis of the politically conservative *Heads of Proposals*.

The centrepiece of the Leveller programme, *The Agreement of the People*, is discussed in chapter five. De Krey argues that the Levellers recognised the need to establish a campaigning organisation to push for the *Agreement*, but were ultimately frustrated in their endeavours. The Levellers' break with the Army grandees and leading London Independents — especially John Goodwin's politically well-connected congregation — polarised the gathered churches upon which the fledgling Leveller organisation relied. Despite the efforts of the 'London agents' to build a political organisation, De Krey rightly casts doubt on the view that such a movement was fully realised before it was suppressed in the aftermath of the Army mutiny at Ware in November 1647. Nevertheless, solid Leveller contacts in counties such as Kent, Leicestershire, Buckinghamshire and Hertfordshire were made and these would prove important for the future.

Chapter six explores the 'Leveller moment' of 1648–9, as the Army grandees renewed their alliance with the Levellers to buttress the Army's opposition to Parliament's negotiations with the King at Newport. This rapprochement, which should have seen a version of the *Agreement of the People* adopted as the constitution of the new republic, soon led to disappointment as Lilburne and his friends encountered the inherently conservative instincts of those leading the Rump Parliament. The first volume is completed in chapter seven,

which explores what might be called the Leveller 'prison writings'; the sustained critique and challenge to the Commonwealth issued from the leader Levellers during their incarceration in the Tower of London. This chapter also charts the rise of the protest movement — including notable protests by Leveller women — which arose as a result of the imprisonment of the Leveller leaders. De Krey concludes this chapter with an analysis of the Army revolt of 1649, convincingly arguing that historians have all too readily fallen for Rump propaganda in seeing the events at Burford as a Leveller-driven mutiny. Volume one, therefore, provides a monograph-length survey of the history of the Levellers as traditionally understood by early modern historians. Throughout this volume De Krey engages with a century of historical interpretation, often pulling away fossilised orthodoxies that cannot be sustained by the evidence and drawing attention to areas that have not have had sufficient attention.

Volume two extends the timeframe to the mid-and-late 17th century. The argument made is that historians are required to refocus their optics when looking beyond 1649. It becomes necessary to adopt a more malleable view of the Levellers as 'adaptable and non-doctrinaire proponents of accountable government, popular rights, and liberty of conscience' (pp.1-2) rather than as a political party or movement centred on the *Agreement of the People*. As De Krey points out, many of those connected to the Levellers in the 1640s continued with their campaign to achieve a more equal society. The most pre-eminent of these was John Wildman, who fused Leveller thought with James Harrington's republican ideas, and spent the rest of his life conspiring against Cromwellian and Stuart regimes alike, before making peace with the Williamite settlement. Alongside the likes of Wildman, however, De Krey continues to discern less prominent Leveller successors within the Separatist and Baptist churches who were continuing to seek a settlement of the state on 'foundations of equity and freedom'.

The second volume begins with the period from the failure of the Burford mutiny to the fall of the Rump Parliament. De Krey argues that Lilburne's acquittal by a London jury in his 1649 trial and his (ultimately quashed) election to the Common Council for the ward of Farringdon Within highlights that the Levellers retained the support of sectary and Independent inhabitants of mid-17th-century London. As was typical of Lilburne, his disappointments and occasional (but always pyrrhic) personal victories of this period would be turned to wider propaganda purposes. The consequence was that the Leveller language of fundamental laws and liberties and political office resting on accountability and trust would be adapted as part of the radical critique of the Commonwealth and its successor regimes.

Chapters four and five explore the Levellers' followers through the Protectorate to the Restoration. As might be expected, these chapters focus on the often elusive John Wildman, who can be connected to the plotting against Cromwell of other old Levellers such as Miles Sindercombe and Edward Sexby, as well as the republicanism of James Harrington and Henry Neville. However, Wildman's was not the only strand of Leveller thought that continued into the Protectorate. Other, less well known, pamphleteers remained committed to the Leveller ideas of a fundamental constitution, unicameral government and the popular accountability of politicians. De Krey moves into the Restoration in chapter six, arguing that the ethos of the Levellers was re-articulated in the changed environment of Restoration politics. De Krey rightly sees a qualitative difference of political direction between 'Puritan Whigs' (to borrow Mark Goldie's term) and those Baptists and Separatists who De Krey aptly identifies as Leveller successors. While Puritan Whigs were more likely to hold to the civil war Presbyterian political theory of a limited monarchy within a mixed constitution, Leveller successors adapted the Leveller ideals of fundamental equality and political office being held on trust for the People. Once again John Wildman — now acting under the protection of the Duke of Buckingham — was central to the mobilisation of oppositional forces in the City, some of whom were directly connected to the mid-century Levellers.

The final chapter of volume two looks at the 1680s. After exploring the (limited) role of Leveller successors in the Whig clubs, and the Leveller roots of the Rye House Plotters, the chapter provides a substantial discussion of the diverging attitudes to James II's offer of indulgence to Protestant dissenters. While Wildman and others rejected James II, De Krey takes seriously those Baptists and Separatists who were willing to go along with James's desire to establish religious toleration. Their campaign for this toleration to

be entrenched in the form of 'a new magna carta' is seen as establishing, somewhat, the goal of the *Agreements of the People*. James II's sectary supporters are therefore looked at through a Leveller lens, rather than as 'bad Whigs', with the argument that the early Whigs have to be seen as a composite political movement, rather than one with an entirely coherent programme.

De Krey's two-volume study provides a comprehensive history of the Levellers and their followers that judiciously assesses the most recent historiographical interventions in the field. Of particular interest is De Krey's discussion of the social dimension of the Leveller following. The idea that the English were in some sense more 'politicised' through the 'unacknowledged republic' of local office holding than was once imagined has become a commonplace in early modern historiography.⁽³⁾ Local office holding and active participation in local governance were often important aspects of both individual and collective power and position within the local community. Indeed, in many London parishes, local inhabitants were required to serve in parish office before gaining a seat on the vestry, the cockpit of local government. This often meant that those deemed lacking in economic substance were passed over from being selected for such offices and thus marginalised from 'the unacknowledged republic'. In London, as elsewhere, this could encourage petty oligarchies, with self-selecting cliques dominating parish government and excluding substantial numbers of parishioners from participation. De Krey makes the argument that many of the Levellers' followers were those who were excluded, whether on the basis of religious dissent, or because they fell (often just) below the economic rank considered necessary for participation in local office. This social class of person was the 'poorest he', not in service or in receipt of alms, referred to by Colonel William Rainsborough during the Putney debates. Leveller arguments concerning active citizenship, political accountability and local voting rights, therefore, spoke to the sort of person who probably had some degree of education, but who was at the margins of local political participation. De Krey thus adds a social dimension to his analysis and, in turn, questions the boundaries of the 'unacknowledged republic'. At times, the argument is let down by a lack of precision, especially in light of the very detailed historiography on the language of social stratification that has come from Keith Wrightson and his students. For example, we are told on the one hand that the Levellers appealed to 'ordinary' (vol. I, pp.7, 179–80) and 'marginal' people (vol. I, p. 15) yet, on the other, it is stated that the Levellers' constituency was 'tightly bound up' in Baptist and Separatist congregations (vol. II., pp. 63–4). This can be seen from the list of 140 known London Levellers, many of whom were sectaries. It seems legitimate to ask to what extent Baptists and Separatists — a group who would make up a fraction of the estimated 4–6 per cent of the population who were outright dissenters in the 1660s — can be classed as 'ordinary people', whatever their social position. Nevertheless, De Krey's thesis on this point is tantalising and raises wider questions about the political ideas of those at the margins of local political society in 17th-century England.

In many respects, this problem is part of a wider issue with historical studies of groups or 'movements'. The lumping together of a sizeable number of individuals can mean that the differences between those individuals lose precision. A second problem is the bestowal of too much importance on the group under study, leading to exaggerated claims of their historical importance. De Krey largely avoids these pitfalls, but at times stumbles on them. I was convinced by De Krey's method of exploring Leveller followers. However, some, such as the Southwark separatist Samuel Hyland, had a history of religious radicalism before the Levellers. While Hyland was undoubtedly an ally of Lilburne in the 1640s, I question whether it would be better to have considered people like Hyland as part of the same milieu as the Levellers, i.e. as 'fellow travellers' rather than as Leveller 'followers'. Others on De Krey's list of Leveller followers warrant more investigation. For example, George Almer of St Olave Old Jewry appears as a Leveller follower based on a newspaper report. Yet Almer was a Presbyterian ruling elder at St Olave's, being sufficiently committed to attend the sixth Presbyterian classis and the London Provincial Assembly. In all fairness to Professor De Krey, my gripes are perhaps better characterised as research issues arising from his volumes, and with around 600 pages of detailed analysis provided in these two volumes already, I would hope that they encourage future research.

In conclusion, these two volumes provide an exemplary study in how a prosopographical and network

approach can reveal political connections and influences over time. It has become fashionable to argue that the Levellers — or for that matter, the mid-17th century Revolution itself — had no lasting influence on English society. As well as contextualising the Levellers and their ideas in the political currents of their time, these volumes go on to establish that the Levellers' ideas laid down deep roots. These roots would inform the radical fringes of Restoration England and perhaps even the 'long eighteenth-century' nonconformist tradition.

Notes

1. Jason Peacey, 'John Lilburne and the Long Parliament' *The Historical Journal*, 43, 3 (2000), 625-645. [Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Elliot Vernon and Philip Baker, 'What was the First *Agreement of the People*' *The Historical Journal*, 53,1 (2010) 39-59. [Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Mark Goldie, 'The Unacknowledged Republic: Office Holding in Early Modern England' in Tim Harris (ed.), *The Politics of the Excluded, c.1500-1850* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) , pp.153-194. [Back to \(3\)](#)

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