

Nicholas McDowell. *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630–1660*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. x + 219 pp. \$72.00. Review by JASON PEACEY, HISTORY OF PARLIAMENT TRUST, LONDON.

The ‘radicals’ of the English Civil Wars, according to the author of this stimulating and subtle book, have virtually become the preserve of literary scholars. They have, he states, faded from view for a historical profession still reeling from the assault launched upon the likes of Christopher Hill by the revisionists of the 1970s and 1980s. Historians, he argues, are still seeking to respond to this assault with weapons of its own creation, namely archival sources rather than printed pamphlets. McDowell arguably underestimates the extent to which ‘post-revisionist’ historians—not least Alasdair Bellany—have begun to reassert the legitimacy of historicising and contextualising such tracts. Nevertheless, he is surely right in claiming that there is much to be learnt about the early modern period, and seventeenth-century radicalism in particular, from literary analysis, and that “questions of rhetoric, style, genre, allusion and audience” are “as relevant to a reconstruction of the past as the traditional political, social, and economic concerns of the historian” (26).

McDowell’s literary treatment of mid-century radicals—Levellers, Ranters, and Quakers—pursues a grand purpose through a specific project. He suggests, quite rightly, that “to understand the culture of radicalism in the English revolution we need to develop a greater understanding of how that culture was shaped not simply by conflict between the cultural worlds of the high and the low, of the learned and the unlearned, but by their interaction” (9). His more precise aim is to suggest that what might be called the “radicalism industry” has too often fallen into the trap of accepting the ideas of the radicals’ contemporary opponents: that they were misguided, worthless, and indeed heretical, because of their lack of learning. McDowell seeks to show that, although part of the rhetorical strategy of writers such as Richard Overton, William Walwyn, Abiezer Coppe, and Samuel Fisher involved valorising

ignorance in order to boast of their "holy simplicity," they nevertheless blended this with displays of learning which reflected the fact that some of them were demonstrably learned, and even university educated. As McDowell claims at the outset: "I show how university educated radicals drew on their knowledge of learned culture and their experience of institutional education to expose those systems and structures of knowledge as a means of preserving hierarchical and anti-Christian relations of power" (9).

McDowell's aim, therefore, is not merely to challenge authors such as Christopher Hill who consider radicalism to be the authentic voice of popular culture, written by and for a popular rather than an elite audience. He also questions the work of more recent authors, such as David Norbrook, in terms of their assumption that the radicals understood little of the intellectual and literary culture of their times. Like Roger Chartier, McDowell resists any notion of predictable relationships between particular social groups and specific cultural forms. Moreover, he argues that literary analysis provides one of the most important ways of challenging those scholars—notably Colin Davis—who assert that at least some radical groups had little identity beyond that which was imposed upon them by outsiders and opponents. He seeks to demonstrate that the tools of literary analysis, namely scrutiny of "rhetoric, style, genre, allusion and audience," can help recover the sophistication of the radicals (26).

In chapters on Levellers, Ranters, and Quakers, therefore, McDowell combines biographical detail with literary analysis, focusing largely upon those authors whose backgrounds can be shown to have involved a university education, although highlighting also learned autodidacts such as the Leveller William Walwyn. Contemporary critics, including Presbyterian parliamentarians, vilified such men as being "representative of the ignorant and irreligious multitude, evoking the threat of popular disorder and the subversion of social, religious, and educational hierarchies" (35). Like earlier Protestant martyrs, such writers sought to identify themselves with "the simple and mean things of this earth," but beyond the deployment of such rhetoric, they often flaunted their learning

in order to defend their particular visions, whether political, religious, or spiritual. As McDowell states, they “satirically applied their humanist education to reject the religious, political and cultural values which they associated with that education” (184).

The Leveller Overton, therefore, invoked his university experience to “satirise the institutional connection between universities and the clergy” (65), and in order to claim that the common people were prevented from exercising their rational capacities by the monopoly of knowledge maintained by the elite (67). Turning to the Ranter Abiezer Coppe, McDowell highlights his rhetoric of holy simplicity, while also demonstrating how his university education enabled him to formulate a more complex argument than that of his associates, attacking formal grammar and syntax, and ideas regarding the value of ancient languages. Ultimately, McDowell argues, it is difficult to conclude that Coppe was writing for a constituency of illiterates. The Quaker Samuel Fisher, meanwhile, penned prose which was “full of...rewritten or adapted classical references” (151), and he produced a “radical enlightenment” critique of scriptural authority. Like Coppe, Fisher equated formal education with the subjection to religious and moral laws from which he had been liberated.

McDowell’s recovery of the learning which underpinned the works of at least some radical authors is extremely valuable, but there is a nagging sense that he places too much emphasis upon the role of universities in providing the source for such erudition. McDowell denies that he seeks to “valorise those with education and culture and exclude the many unlettered” radicals of the period, or that he regards those radicals with formal educations as being inherently more interesting than those without Oxbridge degrees. He stresses, indeed, that he merely seeks to recover the extent to which some radicals were more learned than others, and the importance of appreciating the “diversity and complexity of the English radical imagination” (21). The problem here lies in the rather limited biographical background that the author provides. We learn about the education of Overton, Coppe, and Fisher, but little about that received by fellow radicals such as Clarkson or

Coppin, and to the extent that we lack information on their background and training, the link between the experience of university and enhanced erudition appears somewhat shaky. The criticism which McDowell ought to have addressed is not that he valorizes education, but that he assumes that education is a prerequisite for learning. McDowell might respond that he has addressed Milton's ideas regarding the self-taught citizen-scholar, and that he has highlighted the perfect embodiment of this ambition in William Walwyn, an autodidact who challenged the relevance of formal education to religious knowledge, and who stands as "a warning against underestimating the intellectual resources of 'popular' radicalism in the English revolution" (88). However, McDowell then stresses that Milton always boasted of the respectable and formal nature of his own education, and that he eventually abandoned his optimism regarding the capacity of the masses. Moreover, McDowell's analysis of Walwyn's genteel background suggests a desire to reclaim him for the elite, and hints at an assumption that learning reflected social status as well as educational training.

Turning from McDowell's precise project to his more general aim—to improve our understanding of radicalism through a recognition of the interaction between high and low culture—the concern must be that he remains locked into an outmoded notion of radicalism, which is limited to Levellers, Ranters, and Quakers. Perhaps a more fruitful way both to re-examine radicalism and to stress the importance of interaction between elite and popular culture would be to address the radicalism of those who fell outside such groups. These include relatively humble polemicists and propagandists such as George Wither and Henry Walker, as well as intellectuals from the elite such as Cheney Culpeper and even Sir Roger Twysden. The erudite radicalism that we need to recover, in other words, is that which was produced by those who may not have had formal education, by those who became, and remained within, the social, cultural, and political elite, and even by those who are traditionally regarded as 'royalists.'