

THE LEVELLERS: A CHRONOLOGY AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

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The members of the political movement known to history as the Levellers were active for four years in the 1640s, during the English Civil War. They were far ahead of their time in their political thinking, and they may justly be called the first libertarians in the world. There is an extensive literature about them, but most of it has been written by socialists, and some of the most highly regarded authorities are Marxists, so the reader can easily gain a false impression of what the movement stood for. This Study Guide is designed to direct students of history to the most reliable sources of information on the Levellers, and also to indicate where some of the Levellers' own writings can be found reprinted, so that they can be judged by their own words rather than by the distortions of socialist historians. At a time when our national independence is threatened by the advance of federalism, it is more important than ever for us to be conscious of our political heritage, and the Levellers are a crucial part of this heritage which should not be neglected.



A CHRONOLOGY OF THE LEVELLER MOVEMENT

April 1645

John Lilburne, a Lieutenant-Colonel in the Parliamentary Army, resigns his commission on grounds of conscience. All officers are being required to sign the Solemn League and Covenant, which implies support for Presbyterianism, but Lilburne is an Independent (i.e. a Congregationalist). In London Lilburne starts to gather a group of friends and supporters around him, including William Walwyn and Richard Overton.

July 1645

Lilburne arrested and imprisoned for slandering William Lenthall, the Speaker of the House of Commons, whom he accuses of corresponding with Royalists.

October 1645

Lilburne released after petition to House of Commons by over two thousand leading London citizens.

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

June 1646

Lilburne arrested and imprisoned for slandering the Earl of Manchester, whom he accuses of protecting an officer who has been charged with treason.

July 1646

Oxford surrenders. End of the first phase of the Civil War, except for a few isolated Royalist garrisons.

August 1646

Overton arrested and imprisoned for printing without a licence.

March 1647

Harlech Castle surrenders. End of the first phase of the Civil War.

Discontent spreads through the Parliamentary Army about pay arrears, lack of indemnity for wartime acts and arrangements for drafting to Ireland.

April 1647

Soldiers in contact with Lilburne's movement start electing "Agitators" (delegates) to take their grievances to Parliament.

May 1647

Under pressure from Agitators, who threaten mutiny, Sir Thomas Fairfax (commander-in-chief) agrees to call a rally of the whole Army to plan action.

June 1647

Agitators take Charles I into their own custody so that Parliament cannot negotiate a separate deal with him. Cornet George Joyce leads a force which brings the King from Holmby House (Northamptonshire) to Newmarket.

Rally of the Army on Newmarket Heath. Soldiers defy Parliament by refusing to disband until grievances redressed. General Council of the Army is formed, representing officers and men.

Second rally on Triploe Heath (Cambridgeshire). General Council adopts a political program incorporating some ideas from Lilburne's movement.

July 1647

Mob incited by Presbyterians (the most conservative Parliamentary faction) invades Parliament and forces it to pass motions taking control of the London militia (a potential rival army) and inviting the King to London for talks.

August 1647

Army marches into London and occupies it without bloodshed. Parliament reverses motions passed under duress.

September 1647

Overton released from jail.

October 1647

Agitators from five regiments present *The Case of the Army Truly Stated* to Fairfax as a manifesto. The Putney Debates (28th October - 11th November). General Council considers the first Agreement of the People, a proposed new constitution based on *The Case of the Army*. A split appears between Lilburne's movement and the senior officers, known as "Grandeess". Lilburne's supporters are nicknamed "Levellers" for the first time by Grandee spokesmen Oliver Cromwell (second-in-command) and Henry Ireton. Colonel Thomas Rainsborough (M.P. for Droitwich) emerges as the highest-ranking Leveller sympathiser in the Army. Other Leveller spokesmen are Agitators Edward Sexby and William Allen, and civilians John Wildman and Maximilian Petty.

November 1647

Attempted mutiny by Leveller soldiers at Corkbush Field, near Ware (Hertfordshire). Called off after an appeal by Fairfax and Cromwell. One soldier executed. A serious setback for the movement.

March 1648

Governor of Pembroke Castle declares support for the King. Start of the second phase of the Civil War.

July 1648

The Moderate, a Leveller weekly newspaper, starts publication. Gilbert Mabbott editor.

August 1648

Lilburne released from jail after petition to House of Commons by supporters.

October 1648

Cromwell enters Edinburgh. End of the second phase of the Civil War, except for isolated Royalist garrisons in Yorkshire.

Rainsborough killed by Royalist raiding party at Doncaster.

November 1648

Cromwell worried about the strength of the Presbyterians in Parliament, who still want a compromise with the King. Invites Levellers to meet Grandeess for new talks about a constitutional settlement.

December 1648

Pride's Purge. Colonel Thomas Pride bars Presbyterian M.P.s from House of Commons. Balance of power tilts towards Grandeess.

The Whitehall Debates (14th December - 13th January). Levellers present the second Agreement of the People to the General Council of Officers, which rejects it because of proposals for religious toleration.

January 1649

Charles I tried and executed for treason against the people.

February 1649

House of Commons votes to abolish monarchy and House of Lords, and appoints Council of State as executive authority.

Leveller activity in Army intensifies. Grandeess ban petitions to Parliament by soldiers.

Lilburne writes *England's New Chains Discovered*, condemning Grandeess and Council of State for exercising arbitrary power.

March 1649

Eight Leveller troopers go to Fairfax and demand the restoration of the right to petition. Five of them are cashiered.

Lilburne writes *The Second Part of England's New Chains Discovered*, repeating his attacks.

Pontefract Castle surrenders. End of the second phase of the Civil War.

Lilburne, Walwyn, Overton and Thomas Prince (Leveller treasurer) arrested for treason by order of the Council of State.

April 1649

Mutiny by Leveller soldiers in London, led by Robert Lockyer. Mutineers surrender after a personal appeal by Fairfax and Cromwell. Lockyer executed.

May 1649

Mutinies by Leveller soldiers in Salisbury, Aylesbury and Banbury. Mutineers from Salisbury and Aylesbury join forces near Abingdon and head west. Fairfax and Cromwell lead a flying column from London which overtakes and defeats the rebels at Burford (Oxfordshire). Three soldiers executed.

Mutineers from Banbury (a much smaller group) defeated at Wellingborough.

September 1649

Mutiny by Leveller soldiers in Oxford. Officers of the regiment restore order. Two soldiers executed. *The Moderate* ceases publication.

October 1649

Lilburne tried for treason and acquitted.

November 1649

Lilburne, Walwyn, Overton and Prince released from jail.

End of the Levellers as an organised movement.

BOOKS ABOUT THE LEVELLERS

AYLMER, G.E. (ed.)

The Levellers in the English Revolution

Thames and Hudson, London, 1975

Contains 12 Leveller pamphlets and petitions (some of them abridged), extracts from the Putney and Whitehall Debates, and a 47-page historical Introduction. A very useful introductory work, giving a well-balanced account of the movement.

BRAILSFORD, H.N.

The Levellers and the English Revolution

Spokesman, Nottingham, 1976 (first published 1961)

The most comprehensive history of the Levellers. Unfortunately the author was a Marxist. Provides some important pieces of information which cannot be found in any of the other sources listed here, but it is constantly necessary to make allowances for Brailsford's political views, which intrude throughout. A book which should be treated with caution, especially regarding William Walwyn, whom the author tries to turn into a socialist by bending the evidence.

FRANK, Joseph

The Levellers

Russell and Russell, New York, 1969 (first published 1955)

Traces the history of the Levellers through the writings of John Lilburne, William Walwyn and Richard Overton. An objective and comprehensive account of the development of their ideas. Sometimes rather sketchy about background events, but still highly recommendable.

GREGG, Pauline

Free-Born John

Dent, London, 1986 (first published 1961)

A comprehensive biography of John Lilburne (1615-1657), the leader of the Levellers. Factual and very informative. The author's socialist views only show through in one or two places, mainly in the last chapter.

HALLER, William, and DAVIES, Godfrey (eds.)

The Leveller Tracts, 1647-1653

Peter Smith., Gloucester (Massachusetts), 1964
(first published 1944)

Contains 17 pamphlets and petitions by or about the Levellers, and a 50-page historical Introduction. Useful and informative.

MACMICHAEL, Jack R., and TAFT, Barbara (eds.)

The Writings of William Walwyn

University of Georgia Press, Athens (Georgia), 1989.

William Walwyn (1600-1680) was the theorist of the Leveller movement, while John Lilburne was the man of action. This book contains 31 pamphlets by Walwyn on politics, religion and medicine, along with a 51-page biographical Introduction. An insight into the mind of a truly compassionate man.

MORTON, A.L. (ed.)

Freedom in Arms

Lawrence and Wishart, London, 1975

Contains 19 Leveller pamphlets and letters. Also includes a 59 page historical Introduction, which reflects the author's Marxist views in places, but is still quite informative.

SHAW, Howard

The Levellers

Longmans, London, 1968

A concise history of the movement and its religious, political and economic background. A good introductory work, generally fair and balanced, although in a few places the author seems to have relied on socialist sources.

WOLFE, Don M. (ed.)

Leveller Manifestoes of the Puritan Revolution

Humanities Press, New York, 1967 (first published 1944)

Contains 20 pamphlets and petitions by the Levellers, about them or relevant to them. Also includes an Introduction extending to 108 pages which gives a fair and well-balanced account of the movement's history.

Shorter Works About the Levellers

ELLIOTT, Nick

"The Levellers — Britain's First Libertarians?"

In: *Economic Affairs* 9(1), October/November 1988, pp. 33-35.

HOILE, David

The Levellers: Libertarian Radicalism and the English Civil War.

Libertarian Heritage No. 5, Libertarian Alliance, London, 1992

The only works published in Britain in recent years which deal with the Levellers from an explicitly libertarian point of view. Both well worth reading.

THE LEVELLER DOCUMENTS AND WHERE TO FIND THEM

England's Birthright Justified

John Lilburne October 1645

Defends the rule of law against arbitrary power. Argues that Parliament's own power must be limited by law to protect individual rights. Attacks the monopolies of preaching (the established Church), the wool trade (the Merchant Adventurers) and printing (the Stationers' Company).

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 56-62 (abridged).

England's Lamentable Slavery

Anon. — attributed to William Walwyn October 1645

Takes the form of an open letter to Lilburne. Praises his stand against the arbitrary power of Parliament, but warns him that the Magna Carta to which he appeals is only a part of the people's rights.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 63-67 (abridged); MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 143-153.

A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens

Anon. — possibly a joint work by Richard Overton and William Walwyn July 1646

Argues that Parliament should be accountable to the people as an agent to a principal. Attacks the practice of imprisonment for debt and calls for religious toleration and freedom of the press.

Reprinted in: MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 223-226 (extracts); Wolfe 1944, pp. 109-130.

A Demur to the Bill for Preventing the Growth and Spreading of Heresy

Anon. — attributed to William Walwyn October 1646

A plea for free speech and freedom of conscience in matters of religion. Argues that truth should be allowed to defeat error in an open debate.

Reprinted in: MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 236-244.

An Arrow Against All Tyrants

Richard Overton October 1646

Puts forward a natural rights argument for the freedom of the individual.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 69-70 (abridged).

The "Large Petition"

March 1647

Presented by Lilburne's London supporters to Parliament, which ordered it to be burned as seditious. Calls for religious freedom, the abolition of tithes, the dissolution of the Merchant Adventurers, the translation of all laws into English, the abolition of compulsory self-incrimination in court and the humane treatment of criminals.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 75-81; Morton 1975, pp. 87-99; Wolfe 1944, pp. 131-141.

An Appeal From the Degenerate Representative Body

Richard Overton July 1647

Attacks Parliament for acting tyrannically and betraying the trust placed in it by the people. Argues that reason is the basis of all law.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 82-87 (extracts); Wolfe 1944, pp. 154-195.

The Case of the Army Truly Stated**October 1647**

The Agitators' manifesto. Deals largely with soldiers' grievances, but also includes political proposals such as biennial elections to Parliament with votes for "all the freeborn", as well as the abolition of monopolies, religious freedom and other points repeated from the Large Petition.

Reprinted in: Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 64-87; Wolfe 1944, pp. 196-222.

An Agreement of the People for a Firm and Present Peace**(The first Agreement of the People)****October 1647**

Proposes biennial elections to Parliament and electoral districts with equal numbers of inhabitants (implying votes for all men). Matters to be "reserved by the represented to themselves" as basic rights which Parliament may not violate include religious freedom, a ban on conscription and strict equality under the law.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 88-96; Morton 1975, pp. 135-149; Wolfe 1944, pp. 223-234.

Petition**January 1648**

Circulated for signature but never formally presented to Parliament. Attacks corruption and calls for all government officials to be held accountable to the people through Parliament. Accepts a compromise on voting rights proposed by the Grandees at Putney, under which servants and beggars would have had no votes.

Reprinted in: Wolfe 1944, pp. 259-272.

Petition**September 1648**

Presented to Parliament by the London Levellers. Urges Parliament not to sign a treaty with the King, and calls for enclosures of common land to be reversed or carried out only or mainly for the benefit of the poor. Also calls on Parliament not to abolish private property or equalise wealth by force, thus repudiating an allegation against the Levellers which their opponents had started to make.

Reprinted in Aylmer 1975, pp. 131-138; Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 147-155; Morton 1975, pp. 181-194; Wolfe 1944, pp. 279-290.

Foundations of Freedom, or an Agreement of the People**(The second Agreement of the People)****December 1648**

Puts forward detailed proposals for the election of a new Parliament, with votes for all except servants and beggars. Lists eight matters to be "reserved from the power of the people's representatives", including a ban on forcible equalisation of wealth. Presents a list of grievances to be redressed, urging Parliament to abolish base tenures as well as repeating earlier demands.

Reprinted in: Wolfe 1944, pp. 291-303.

No Papist Nor Presbyterian**Anon. December 1648**

Argues for the extension of religious freedom to Roman Catholics.

Reprinted in: Wolfe 1944, pp. 304-310.

England's New Chains Discovered**John Lilburne February 1649**

Denounces the new political system for failing to fulfil the Levellers' hopes.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 142-148 (abridged); Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 156-170.

The Second Part of England's New Chains Discovered**John Lilburne March 1649**

The pamphlet which led to the arrest of the four Leveller leaders for treason.

Reprinted in: Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 171-189.

A Manifestation**John Lilburne, William Walwyn, Thomas Prince and Richard Overton April 1649**

Written to refute the smears and abuse circulated by the authors' political opponents, who were accusing them of anarchism and atheism as well as seeking to equalise wealth by force.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 150-158; Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 276-284; MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 334-343; Morton 1975, pp. 245-259.

An Agreement of the Free People of England**(The third Agreement of the People)****May 1649**

The Levellers' final constitutional program, written in the Tower of London as "a peace-offering to this distressed nation". Proposes annual elections to Parliament, with servants and beggars excluded from the franchise, and lists a large number of basic rights which Parliament is not to be empowered to infringe.

Reprinted in: Aylmer 1975, pp. 159-168; Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 318-328; MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 344-347 (introduction only); Morton 1975, pp. 261-277; Wolfe 1944, pp. 397-410.

Walwyn's Just Defence**William Walwyn Circa June 1649**

A reply to "Walwyn's Wiles", a pamphlet signed by seven opponents and published in May 1649, which portrayed Walwyn as an unprincipled and Machiavellian figure.

Reprinted in: Haller and Davies 1944, pp. 350-398; MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 383-432.

Juries Justified**William Walwyn December 1651**

A defence of trial by jury. Argues that conscience is the most important quality in a juror, and ordinary people's consciences are as good as anyone's.

Reprinted in MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 433-445.

For a Free Trade**William Walwyn May 1652**

Written in an unsuccessful attempt to persuade the Council of State to abolish the Levant Company's monopoly of trade with the Middle East. Appeals to the common law, and also anticipates some of Adam Smith's arguments by over a century.

Reprinted in: MacMichael and Taft 1989, pp. 446-452.