

The Printing and Publishing History of the Leveller Movement, 1645-49

The London Leveller movement of the English Civil War period can fairly be described as the first popular political movement in history. Power in early modern England was generally wielded by the country's landed, hereditary elite: whether king, lords, or gentry. The Levellers, led by John Lilburne, William Walwyn and Richard Overton, did not have such a power base to draw upon; but, in spite of this, they were able to create a highly influential political movement based almost entirely upon their skill as propagandists, and their highly effective use of illicit and underground printing.

Popular print played a crucial role in the success of the Levellers, but it is not surprising that historians and bibliographers have badly neglected this aspect of the movement. The very nature of the Levellers' pamphlets required them to be produced secretly. Printers and publishers would often sign their work as part of a means of advertising either their printing houses or the bookshops where more copies of a tract would be sold wholesale. In the case of Leveller pamphlets this information was almost always withheld, with the consequence that there is little obvious material upon which to base a history of this facet of their writings.

Nevertheless, the activities of even a secret printing press were never entirely untraceable. Most, if not all, presses from the period contained damaged or defective type (often in great quantity). High resolution digital photography makes it relatively easy to detect such irregular letters for a given fount; and the more unusual or distinctive examples can effectively act as fingerprints to identify other works from a press, even where a printer has withheld his name or all other indications of his or her involvement (such as display initials or other ornaments). I recently completed an article upon the secret printing activities of the Leveller Richard Overton (which will appear in *The Library* in March 2010), while, at present, I am undertaking research on the printing career of the stationer Thomas Paine, who frequently did work for the Levellers. Generally, anonymous publishing is harder to trace given that booksellers would pay printers to produce tracts for them but had no personal involvement in production; nevertheless, I am currently developing a variety of means for examining Overton's publishing activities with other (legal) printing houses, while I am also investigating the activities of another Leveller publisher called John Harris.

The aim of my paper for the Material Cultures conference will be to give an account of these printers and publishers and of other figures involved in the production of Leveller pamphlets. In addition, I will describe the various techniques employed in my work and which I am in the process of developing. The paper will also reflect more broadly upon what this research reveals about the Leveller movement and the print culture of the period more generally.