

Review Essay:
Nicholas McDowell: *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660*

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Nicholas McDowell. *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2003. Pp. 192. ISBN 0-19-926051-6.

Marxist historians have laudably challenged traditional historiography that has focused on the achievements of the privileged classes to the exclusion of the accomplishments of the underprivileged. Revisionists' attempts to write history "from below" have helped to fill in glaring gaps in the historical record, and so have paid tribute to lives often deemed unworthy of much mention. Yet in using class struggle as the primary explanatory tool for a range of social phenomena, a generation of cultural historians has tended to assume that those who resist elite oppression necessarily hail from the lower classes. The assumption that it is primarily the unschooled rabble who revolt has persisted with remarkable ease among scholars of seventeenth-century English radicalism, particularly Christopher Hill and Nigel Smith. Thankfully, Nicholas McDowell's innovative interdisciplinary study, *The English Radical Imagination: Culture, Religion, and Revolution, 1630-1660*, offers a more complex picture of radicals than the historiographer's Marxist lens have thus far allowed them to see. Where past cultural historians have viewed radicals as illiterate, lower-class artisans whose heterodoxy originated from a timeless folk underground, McDowell perceives them also as highly educated writers who emerged from every social class.

The richness of his portrait depends in large part on the primary methodological and theoretical tools used to develop it. Following the linguistic turn in historical studies, McDowell utilizes literary analysis to expose the intellectual sophistication

in radical texts previously thought to be the product of a comparatively naïve subculture. Following the recent critical trend of resisting stark social divisions, McDowell shows through biography how intertwined popular and elite worlds are for key seventeenth-century radicals. The point of his closely argued study is twofold: radicals have a far more diverse intellectual and social provenance than early modern and modern readers have hitherto granted, and when scholars allow them this provenance, radical writings offer a greater interpretive yield than previously thought.

McDowell's opening chapters supply a general introduction to his argument and a specific examination of historical assumptions about literacy that inform it. Chapter one links radicals to the academic and religious establishments that both their enemies and their friends say radicals had little connection with. In order to spotlight the years in which radicals studied at university, McDowell begins his study in 1630 rather than 1640, the more conventional starting point for discussions of English radicalism. By focusing on the form of radical texts as well as their content, he illumines how different is the work of unschooled writers such as Digger leader Gerrard Winstanley, Quaker founder George Fox, and Fifth Monarchist prophet Anna Trapnell from that of their formally educated counterparts, namely Leveller Richard Overton, Ranter Abiezer Coppe, Quaker Samuel Fisher, and Fifth Monarchist John Rogers. McDowell contends that these latter radicals had enough familiarity with sanctioned educational and religious institutions to marshal orthodox resources in service of heterodox ideas. On his reading of the rhetoric of religious enthusiasm, "literacy begot heresy rather than vice versa" (10).

McDowell challenges the persistent stereotype of radical as ignoramus by illustrating how skillfully radicals shaped their own identities in print. When academic, religious, and political authorities accused radicals of heresy—a charge for centuries associated with illiteracy in Latin—the radicals accepted the charge of illiteracy but redefined what it meant. Radicals refuted their opponents' stereotype of the illiterate as heretic by grouping themselves with the unschooled apostles, whose spiritual power trumped any cultural influence acquired through an elite education. For radicals, ultimate authority is not gained through human effort but infused through divine revelation. Here McDowell points out a fundamental tension in radical self-fashioning: while radicals lacked the Latin required for full participation in the dominant culture, and so were illiterate by medieval and early modern standards, their studied knowledge of the vernacular enabled them to style themselves as illiterate holy men in a highly literate way.

Having plucked these men from an indigenous hotbed of popular radicalism in his first and second chapters, McDowell relocates them in the elite halls of the early modern academy. In the next three chapters, McDowell indicates how several radicals employed a variety of scholarly tools to critique the same academic and ecclesiastical institutions that trained them. Chapter three examines the intellectual origins of the ideas held by Levellers Richard Overton and William Walwyn, showing how each writer veered from religious orthodoxy after their studies revealed the limitations of advanced learning. For Overton, Renaissance academic drama involves characters whose arrogance and foolishness illustrate how dim the light of

human achievement could be. Such examples of intellectual accomplishment void of spiritual insight allowed Overton to attack Puritan and Presbyterian divines for their power-hungry denial of the people's natural rights, chief among them the right to political self-determination. For Walwyn, by contrast, ancient and contemporary writers like Seneca, Lucian, Montaigne, and Charron illumine the weaknesses in Calvinist theology and point the way toward true charity. Walwyn's extensive knowledge of pagan and skeptical texts informs his advocacy of a true Christian ethic, in which liberty of conscience figures prominently. While Overton and Walwyn draw from different genres and schools of thought, both men agreed that academic sophistication can choke holy simplicity.

Ranter Abiezer Coppe surely concurred, for in chapter four, McDowell shows how Coppe repeatedly vilified classical learning using classical learning. Coppe rejects the elite assumption that study of ancient languages instills religious virtue, averring instead that proficiency in Latin, Hebrew, and Greek leaves students spiritually deficient. Yet Coppe makes this claim through elaborate parodies of the principle educational texts for these languages. McDowell pounces on Coppe's erudition in an attempt to refute scholarly characterizations of Coppe as a "mechanick" preacher more familiar with a lower-class laboring community fomenting heterodoxy than with an upper-class academic community striving to uphold orthodoxy.

McDowell similarly attempts to elevate Quaker Samuel Fisher in the minds of modern critics in chapter five, arguing that Fisher's writing manifests what scholars have touted as a late eighteenth-century phenomenon: the interweaving of rationalist and enthusiastic discourses. McDowell points out how Fisher utilizes Pyrrhonist skepticism to challenge the central Reformed conviction that the Bible is the rule of faith. Fisher draws on his academic training to argue that the light within is more authoritative than the scriptures because the Holy Spirit speaks to the individual believer directly, whereas the Bible is a heavily mediated text. Like his radical counterparts, Fisher uses the intellectual resources provided by his formal education to repudiate the values associated with it. McDowell's epilogue considers the relationship between two republicans, Fifth Monarchist John Rogers and poet John Milton, suggesting thereby that Milton may have more in common with radicals than scholars have recognized. Instead of believing that Milton rejected the ideas of many radicals on the grounds that they were illiterate fomenters of social disarray, McDowell wonders "whether the evolution of Milton's heretical ideas about free will, monism, materialism, and antitrinitarianism can be connected with this native tradition of learned radicalism that developed in England in the 1640s and 1650s" (189).

McDowell's study offers a much-needed corrective to cultural historians of English radicalism by allowing seventeenth-century radicals more agency than do their contemporary enemies or recent friends. Where scholars rehearse the disenfranchisement of lower-class rebels, McDowell boldly indicates how privileged some seventeenth-century radicals were. Moreover, he repeatedly emphasizes how these men skillfully exploited their intellectual and social privilege to contend with those who strayed from the radical path of true religion. In doing so, he addresses

a tragic irony in the historical record: those scholars most invested in fairly attending to the lives of English radicals are also often the same scholars who assume, erroneously, that radical works exhibit numerous weaknesses stemming from writers' limited education and their socially marginal positions. The power and poignancy of McDowell's book stems from his conviction—and his evidence—that radicals were far more in control of their pens than we have been taught to believe. Readers may well wish McDowell could have supplemented his literary history with more social history, such that we could better sense how typical it was for early modern universities to foster religious discontent, and thus just how far off the mark scholars have been in their overall characterization of early modern radicals as unschooled artisans. But there can be little question that McDowell prevents future historians from starting with the erroneous assumption that seventeenth-century radicals all had rude social and intellectual backgrounds. His chief contribution to the study of English radicalism is his dogged insistence that the religion of the radicals was far more learned and creative than we have to this point being willing to imagine.