

Print and principals: John Lilburne, civil war radicalism and the Low Countries

Jason Peacey

UCL

If we know anything about John Lilburne, it is that, as one of the most important political radicals of the mid-seventeenth century, he was acutely conscious of being English, and of the need to defend the rights and liberties of freeborn Englishmen. As such, it might seem odd to suggest that we need to think again about Lilburne's Englishness, and yet this chapter focuses on a brief but intriguing episode in his life – the time he spent in the Low Countries between his banishment in January 1652 and his return to face trial and imprisonment in June 1653 – precisely in order to correct some pervasive misapprehensions about his attitudes during the republic, and to reassess the pride he took in his homeland. This episode is obviously well known, and yet it also tends to be glossed over rather briefly by Lilburne's biographers, and it has not been analysed very rigorously or understood entirely adequately, and the reason for subjecting it to closer scrutiny is to shed new light on Lilburne, as well as on neglected dimensions of his ideas about political and constitutional reform, not least by placing his comments from this period in the wider context of seventeenth-century radicalism.¹ The problem with this particular chapter in Lilburne's life, therefore, is not just that it has been used to develop a highly problematic argument that he was prepared to collude with royalists, but also that an opportunity has been missed to recognise that he – like others – learnt from his experiences of, and reflections upon, the Low Countries. As such, the

¹ P. Gregg, *Free-Born John* (London, 1986), pp. 312-22; H. N. Brailsford, *The Levellers and the English Revolution* (Nottingham, 1983), pp. 611-15.

aim of this chapter is threefold. First, it seeks to examine the evidence about his exile in the Low Countries, using royalist correspondence, republican propaganda and Lilburne's own pamphlets, in order to assess the nature and strength of his links with exiled cavaliers. Secondly, it seeks to explore the ways in which Lilburne responded to the challenges that he faced in the Low Countries by using pamphlets to address a variety of audiences, both English and European, and both friendly and hostile. Thirdly, it seeks to evaluate what light this period, and these texts, can shed on Lilburne's attitudes towards the Dutch republic, and towards its system of government. The argument will be not just that it is possible to question the idea that Lilburne became some kind of 'royalist' after his banishment from England, but also that he found it necessary and useful to deploy printed pamphlets in rather unusual ways, and in order to address not just English radicals but also exiled royalists and his Dutch hosts. Ultimately, it will be possible to suggest that even this most English of political radicals was inspired by the example that had been set by the Dutch republic, which served in important and overlooked ways as a model for constitutional reform in England, and that Lilburne also provides an example of the ways in which political strategies, and the uses of print, became much more complex and creative in a situation where political cultures of England and the Dutch republic became entangled in such rich and difficult ways.

I

Lilburne's experience in the Low Countries in the early 1650s is generally discussed in terms of his fraught relations with the republican regime, with Sir Arthur Hesilrige and with Oliver Cromwell, in relation to both his personal affairs – the property he claimed had been taken from him – and his outspoken political position. It was this complex situation which resulted in Lilburne being accused of treason and then expelled him from England, and it is said to

have led to his conspiring with royalists in order to kill Cromwell and overthrow the Rump.² However, while Lilburne certainly knew and consorted with royalist exiles – such links were discussed explicitly in Lilburne’s own pamphlets – the surviving evidence needs to be handled with considerable care, not least in terms of royalist attitudes towards the Leveller leader and the role of republican propaganda.

First, while Lilburne’s arrival in the Low Countries was observed with interest by leading royalists, it is not clear that he was universally welcomed or taken very seriously as a possible ally. Writing in late February 1652, therefore, Richard Watson explained that Lilburne and some of his ‘tribe’ had arrived on the Continent, but his first thought was that the old Leveller was not to be trusted, and he added that ‘I have a jealousy that his banishment is but counterfeit, to give him an opportunity of doing mischief in Holland’. Clarendon, meanwhile, could barely bring himself to pay Lilburne even back-handed compliments, explaining to Sir Edward Nicholas merely that Lilburne would make a better neighbour than the Earl of Roxburgh, of whom the king was said to have had a deservedly bad opinion.³ In June 1652, moreover, Clarendon expressed his reservations by noting that ‘Lilburne is not without reputation with some great persons here, as well as with you’, and that ‘I am thought an obstinate fool for not understanding that he will ever be able or willing to do good’. Indeed, it soon became clear that Lilburne’s royalist contacts were largely confined to the so-called ‘Louvre group’, an assortment of Catholics and pragmatists who pursued a controversial policy of joining forces with Scottish Presbyterians, and from whom

² *Calendar of State Papers Domestic (CSPD) 1652-3*, pp. 415, 419, 423, 435; The National Archives (TNA), SP 18/37, fo. 258.

³ *Calendar of the Clarendon State Papers (CCSP)*, ed. O. Ogle et al (5 vols, Oxford, 1872-1970), ii. 121, 124.

Nicholas and Hyde sought to distance themselves. More particularly, they bemoaned the fact that it was men like the Duke of Buckingham who became particularly close to, and perhaps even ‘governed by’, the ‘infamous John Lilburne’, adding somewhat mischievously that Buckingham was ‘the fittest man for those transactions’.⁴ Buckingham, of course, was a highly unorthodox and unpopular royalist, who had fallen out of favour with Charles II, and who devised all sorts of implausible schemes for uniting royalists with republicans – and indeed with France and Rome – against Cromwell. At the same time, however, he was also attempting to make his peace with Cromwell, and may even have spied for the English government. Later, of course, he would consort with other dissidents and radicals in the late 1670s. It is thus significant that it was with Buckingham in particular that Lilburne held ‘close consultations’ in July 1652, resulting in the two men having ‘some design in hand’ to kill Cromwell, ‘on whom Lilburne will be revenged’.⁵ Indeed, it was this particular relationship that seems to have lasted, notwithstanding the reservations of Hyde and Nicholas. In May 1653, therefore, Nicholas suggested that Bishop John Bramhall was ‘very great and intimate... with the rogue Lilburne, who boasts very much of his friendship and power with the Duke of Buckingham’, while in June 1653 Hyde explained to Nicholas that Buckingham had been ‘much in council’ with Lilburne at Calais, in the belief that he had ‘no little interest’ with the ex-Leveller.⁶

⁴ *CCSP*, ii. 136; *State Papers Collected by Edward, Earl of Clarendon (CSP)* (3 vols, Oxford, 1767), iii. 74; Bodleian Library, Oxford (Bodl.), MS Clarendon 43, fo. 139; *The Nicholas Papers (NP)*, ed. G. F. Warner (4 vols, London, 1886-1920), i. 299, 301.

⁵ Bodl. MS Clarendon 43, fos. 217, 277-8, 303-4; *CCSP*, ii. 141, 146.

⁶ *NP*, ii. 13; *CCSP*, ii. 212-13; *CSP*, iii. 170; Bodl. MS Clarendon 45, fo. 442v; MS Clarendon 46, fos. 9-v.

Secondly, it is important to recognise that the association between Lilburne and the royalists may have been prompted by, and was certainly exploited by, the Rump regime, and by its chief intelligencer and propagandist, Thomas Scott. Although the nature of Scott's operation in the Low Countries remains murky, it seems clear that spies were set to watch Lilburne in exile, and to report on his activities. During the early months of his banishment, therefore, stories about Lilburne appeared fairly regularly in the official newspaper, *Mercurius Politicus*, and Lilburne certainly claimed to have exposed more than one of the characters involved.⁷ Chief amongst these was Captain Wendy Oxford, who was accused of having been hired by Scott in order to bring about his ruin, and who may even have been subjected to a mock prosecution in order to give him a fake Leveller identity, thereby enabling him to follow Lilburne around Europe.⁸ Lilburne bemoaned, therefore, having had 'too much cause confidently to believe' that a plan had been hatched to get Oxford to accompany him into exile, 'the more securely to get me murdered in our travels together'.⁹ Indeed, the scheme seems to have worked, to the extent that royalist onlookers made the connection between the two men; Sir Edward Nicholas explaining to Hyde in May 1652 that Oxford,

⁷ *Mercurius Politicus*, 89 (12-19 Feb. 1652), p. 1424; *Politicus*, 90 (19-26 Feb. 1652), p. 1440; *Politicus*, 92 (4-11 Mar. 1652), p. 1472; *Politicus*, 97 (8-15 Apr. 1652), p. 1536; J. Lilburne, *A Defensive Declaration* (London, 1653, L2098); J. Lilburne, *Lilburne His Apologetical Narration* (Amsterdam, 1652, L2082), p. 45; *Severall Informations and Examinations* (London, 1653, S5255), pp. 2, 3, 6.

⁸ *Commons Journals (CJ)*, vi. 591-2; *CSPD 1651-2*, p. 287.

⁹ Lilburne, *Defensive*, p. 13.

‘when he first came from England, was a great companion of your friend Lilburne, but they of late seem to be fallen out’.¹⁰

Lilburne’s interpretation of Scott’s strategy was not entirely consistent over time, but it certainly involved the idea that Oxford was engaged in a variety of subtle schemes, not all of which were necessarily compatible. On one occasion, therefore, Lilburne suggested that Scott’s aim was to use Oxford to fool royalists into believing that he supported their cause, thereby ‘to gull and cheat the credulous cavaliers’.¹¹ On another occasion, he claimed that Oxford sought to convince exiled royalists that parliamentarians were ‘traitors against the king’, adding that his ‘constant plotted dissembling devices’ were intended to ‘exasperate the body of the mad and ranting cavaliers in these parts to cut my throat’. Yet another theory was that Oxford’s goal was ‘to make the people of Holland believe my banishment was but a counterfeit, a juggling and dissembling fictitious thing, out of design, that so I might be the more serviceable to the general, or my brother traitors at Westminster... [and] that so the people in Holland might beat my brains out as a rogue, an one of the generals or parliament’s chief spies’.¹² Moreover, whatever the reality of Oxford’s mission, Scott’s aim was certainly to discredit Lilburne at home. In March 1652 he may have been responsible for peddling stories that Lilburne had been made ‘captain of a man of war for the states of Holland’, with ‘power and instructions to fire, sink or take any ships whatsoever, that shall be declared enemies to the United Provinces’.¹³ Another story, from December 1652, lumped Lilburne together with men

¹⁰ *NP*, i. 299.

¹¹ J. Lilburne, *L. Colonel Lilburne Revived* (Amsterdam, 1653, L2128), sig. a3.

¹² Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 5, 14.

¹³ *Bloudy Newes from Holland* (London, 1652, B3270), p. 8; *A Declaration of the High and Mighty Lords* (London, 1652, N476), pp. 5, 8.

like Major General Edward Massey and Sir Marmaduke Langdale, and implied that all three had made approaches to the Dutch, with whom England was then at war, apparently in the hope of facilitating a Dutch victory, not least in order to further their hopes of restoring Charles II. The author of this report claimed that Lilburne was ‘very active, and great is the concourse of people towards him’, adding that he had ‘set forth a declaration, touching the liberty of the people, and the freedom of nations, which gives ample satisfaction to the states’.¹⁴

Such stories, which have the ring of black propaganda, may have been circulated surreptitiously by the republican regime, and it is perfectly clear that Scott was willing to publicise intelligence gathered by English spies, alongside information from Lilburne’s intercepted correspondence. Some such evidence appeared, therefore, in a tract called *Severall Informations and Examinations*, which was timed to coincide with Lilburne’s trial in July 1653 and dispersed throughout the army, and which did more than anything else to cement the idea that he had associated with exiled royalists.¹⁵ It contained evidence, for example, from Isaac Birkenhead, one of the spies that Lilburne himself identified, who referred to ‘very desperate enemies of all sorts to this commonwealth, with whom I observed Lieutenant Colonel Lilburne much to associate’. Birkenhead outlined not just Lilburne’s ‘great correspondencies’ with England, therefore, but also his links to Buckingham and Lord Hopton, to whom he apparently offered to destroy Cromwell and restore Charles II in return for £10,000. According to Captain John Titus, meanwhile, Lilburne had not only held meetings with Buckingham, but also boasted

¹⁴ *A Declaration of the Proceedings of Major General Massey* (London, 1652, D748), pp. 3-5.

¹⁵ J. Lilburne, *Malice Detected* (London, 1653, L2141), pp. 1-2; *The Triall of Mr John Lilburn* (London, 1653, T2201), p. 33; *Politicus*, 161 (7-14 July 1653), p. 2580; *A Conference with the Souldiers* (London, 1653, L2098A), p. 2; *CJ*, vii. 284.

to Hopton of his many ‘agents’ in England, and of his ability to ‘instigate the people against the parliament’. Yet another witness, John Staplehill, claimed to have seen Lilburne, his wife and Buckingham ‘very familiar’ with each other at the Silver Lyon in Calais in June 1653, not least in conversation about Cromwell.¹⁶

That such allegations were hugely damaging is evident from the vehemence of Lilburne’s response. On 15 July, therefore, mid-way through the legal proceedings against him, he replied to *Several Informations* in a work called *Malice Detected*, claiming that ‘no stone hath been left unturned, no stratagem unattempted, to render me odious, and fit for death, in the esteem of my friends, my jury, and the Parliament’. Denying the allegations made against him, moreover, Lilburne claimed that Scott’s spies had lied in order to curry favour with the regime, that the work was ‘full of the most abominable falsities that ever proceeded from the wicked heart of the falsest man’, and that ‘its poison’ was intended to ‘insinuate itself into the understanding of men without any possibility of an antidote’. For Lilburne, however, the real significance of *Several Informations* was that it was ‘a stratagem of a new nature, and far unsuitable to the way of true Christians, to print against the prisoner under trial, such particulars as are altogether foreign, and nothing relating to the way of his indictment’.¹⁷

II

Given the prevalence of such claims about Lilburne’s activity in the Low Countries, it is obviously necessary to pick our way through the evidence with some care, and doing so makes it possible to develop a rather different picture of both his activity and his aims.

¹⁶ *Severall Informations*, pp. 1-4, 4-5, 13-14.

¹⁷ Lilburne, *Malice*, pp. 1, 3-4.

The place to start is with Lilburne's known movements after his banishment. This can be done in part through contemporary newspapers, whose editors capitalised on his notoriety, as well as through the observations of contemporaries and Lilburne's own statements. We know, therefore, that Lilburne was given thirty days to leave England on 15 January 1652, and that, although he found it difficult to travel without an official pass, he reached Dover at the end of the month, where he was reported to have made a public speech before embarking for Europe.¹⁸ According to his own account, Lilburne arrived at Ostend on 8 February 1652, from where he apparently sent 'several letters of compliance... unto several of his clandestick friends here in England, wherein he much complains of the severity of his banishment, desiring them to use their endeavours for his restauration, accounting it a thing easy, and within their power'.¹⁹ From there he apparently passed through Flushing, Rotterdam and Middelburg before reaching Amsterdam in late February, where he settled in Holy Way Street, apparently in the house of Miss Mezar in Sheep's Alley.²⁰ Thereafter, it was said that he 'lyeth very private, not daring to adventure himself much abroad openly', and in the absence of hard news journalists may have resorted to using their imagination. One editor claimed that 'those whom he trusteth most are some few acquaintances of his of the Jewish synagoue, who have privately entertained him', while Nedham added that 'the talk is that he

¹⁸ Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 2, 60-1; *Mercurius Bellonius*, 1 (28 Jan.-4 Feb. 1652), pp. 7-8; *Perfect Account*, 57 (28 Jan.-4 Feb. 1652), p. 456.

¹⁹ Lilburne, *Apologetical*, p. 61; *Bellonius*, 2 (9-16 Feb. 1652), p. 13.

²⁰ *CCSP*, ii. 121; *Weekly Intelligencer*, 61 (17-24 Feb. 1652), p. 365; Lilburne, *Apologetical*, pp. 21, 72; J. Lilburne, *L. Colonel Lilburne his Letter to his Dearely Beloved Wife* (Amsterdam, 1652, L2136), sig. A4; J. Lilburne, *As You Were* (Amsterdam, 1652, L2084), p. 32.

is very busy writing, but what they know not'.²¹ We can be somewhat more confident, however, that Lilburne presented a petition 'to the magistrates of this place', in the hope of securing their protection, and that he was able to correspond with his wife, Elizabeth, in England.²² In the end, however, Lilburne did not stay very long in Amsterdam. As early as 15 April 1652 it was reported that he found 'but small encouragements to stay here, so that tis talked he intends to remove', and by May he was living in Vianen, 'that pleasant city of refuge', a few miles south of Utrecht and just outside the United Provinces.²³ Indeed, despite subsequent reports that Lilburne had returned to Holland, he probably spent the rest of his exile in the Spanish Netherlands, most obviously in Bruges, where he found a 'beautiful dwelling' through an English friend called Mr Lambert, and from where he departed for England, via Dunkirk and Calais, in late May or early June 1653.²⁴

This is a rather skeletal picture of Lilburne's activity in the Low Countries, but it nevertheless helps to explore the challenges that he faced. In part, these were financial, and Lilburne claimed that he was 'forced in a land of strangers, for many months together, to borrow... every penny that brought me bread', although Wendy Oxford claimed that he

²¹ *Perfect Account*, 60 (18-25 Feb. 1652), p. 480; *Politicus*, 90, p. 1440; *Politicus*, 92, p. 1472.

²² *Politicus*, 90, p. 1440; *Bellonius*, 4 (25 Feb.-3 Mar. 1652), p. 27; Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, sig. A.

²³ *Politicus*, 97, p. 1536; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 33.

²⁴ *CCSP*, ii. 148; Lilburne, *Revived*, pp. 1, 12, sigs. A3, b-c4; J. Lilburne, *A Defencive Declaration* (Amsterdam, 1653, L2097); *Severall Informations*, pp. 1, 6; J. Lilburne, *The Upright Mans Vindication* (London, 1653, L2197), pp. 3-19, 20-2, 25-7.

received weekly contributions from ‘his brotherhood and faction in England’.²⁵ More obviously, Lilburne faced very real threats to his safety, and he not only suspected a plot to kill him as he first made his way to Amsterdam, but also felt threatened thereafter by ‘the rudest sort of cavaliers’, who apparently threatened to ‘Dorislav’ him, and who prompted his plea for protection from the Dutch authorities.²⁶ Lilburne claimed, indeed, that ‘all my brains, valour and mettle hath been scarce able several times to preserve my life, from the murderous hands of the various plots, and their greatly deluded credulous accomplices’.²⁷ Such dangers are only likely to have increased as political tensions rose between the two republics during 1652, and Lilburne’s departure from Amsterdam was a very logical move once war broke out.

More importantly, such difficulties also provide the context for, and make sense of, Lilburne’s writing and publishing during his exile, not least during a brief printed battle with Wendy Oxford. Lilburne was evidently ‘very busy looking after a printing press’ as soon as he arrived in Amsterdam, and in March 1652 he produced the *Letter to his Dearely Beloved Wife*, and this was quickly followed by his *Apologetical Narration*, which appeared from the same press in April 1652, and by a tract called *As You Were*.²⁸ In Leiden, meanwhile, Oxford produced *A Prospective for King and Subjects*, which was dedicated to Charles II, as well as *The Unexpected Life and Wished for Death of the thing called Parliament in England*, which

²⁵ Lilburne, *Defensive*, p. 4; W. Oxford, *Vincit qui Patitur* (London, 1653, O846).

²⁶ Lilburne, *Revived*, sig. a3; Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, p. 21; *Bellonius*, 4, p. 27; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 9.

²⁷ Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 5-6.

²⁸ Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, sigs. Av, A4; Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 5; *Severall Informations*, pp. 10-11.

in turned prompted the appearance of *L. Col. John Lilburne Revived* (March 1653), Oxford's *Vincit Qui Patitur, or Lieutenant Colonel John Lylborne Decyphered* (April 1653), and then Lilburne's *Defensive Declaration*, the latter of which appeared in May 1653, shortly before he returned to London. Such works saw Lilburne accuse Oxford of printing with the 'advice or consent' of Thomas Scott, while Oxford denied that he was an English spy and claimed credit for prompting Lilburne's departure from Amsterdam, but more important than the trading of such blows is evidence of the strategy that Lilburne pursued in response to Oxford's machinations.²⁹

First, therefore, Lilburne's pamphleteering involved continuing his propaganda effort in England, not least in order to reassure those allies who would doubtless have been alarmed by allegations regarding his flirtation with royalists, and not least by demonstrating that he continued to 'stand up against oppression, to propagate the Gospel, to preserve the liberty of the people, and to maintain the laws of the land in its purity without corruption or bribery'.³⁰ According to evidence presented against him by Captain John Tutus, therefore, Lilburne boasted that

²⁹ W. Oxford, *A Prospective for King and Subjects* (Leyden, 1652, O844); W. Oxford, *The Unexpected Life* (Leyden?, 1652); Lilburne, *Revived*, sig. a3; Oxford, *Vincit*; Lilburne, *Defensive Declaration*. Oxford claimed that he had planned another reply to Lilburne, called 'The banished mans complaint, the other John Lylbornes Portraicture with a hue and cry after him'. He also mentioned that his own printer was the same that Lilburne had known in Delft in the 1630s.

³⁰ *Bloudy Newes*, p. 8.

I'll set my press on work (for which purpose I have bought one with a letter to Amsterdam, which cost me £30) and then I'll send my papers over into England, which by my agents shall be spread all over the nation, and by my agents (for I have enough) my papers shall be brought into the army there... and as soon as these papers are spread they'll fly in the faces of their officers, so that with the help of my particular interest, the soldiery shall do all themselves, and I'll do nothing but sit in my chair and use my pen.³¹

Thus, Lilburne's *Letter to his Dearely Beloved Wife* contained a familiar assault upon the republican regime, in which readers were invited to reflect on what safety there would be in England once Cromwell's will became law, and when 'he is faster riveted in his unlimited and a thousand times more than kingly power'. Lilburne railed, moreover, that 'the House of Commons may bear the name of things, but in reality it is but his screen, he alone himself as to man, being the alpha and omega of all their chief results'.³² In his *Defencive Declaration*, meanwhile, Lilburne dealt explicitly with Scott's campaign against him. He drew attention, therefore, to spies like Hugh Riley, whom he described as 'one of Mr Scot's great agents and negotiators beyond the seas', despite being 'a common reputed Irish rebel, and lately a piece of a quarter master general to Sir Charles Lucas in Colchester', and who 'for his most villainous roguery, cheating, cozening, treachery and running from one side to another, hath several times hardly escaped hanging in Flanders'. Lilburne also described Oxford's wife –

³¹ *Severall Informations*, p. 6.

³² Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, sigs. Av, A3v. See also: British Library, Additional MS 71533, fo. 8.

one of Scott's go-between's – as little more than 'a common notorious reputed whore'.³³ More importantly, he also felt compelled to respond to allegations that he had become a cavalier, 'or at least a mighty great man with the chief leaders of the king's party here', which he said were being peddled by Scott and his agents, 'even at Parliaments [and] committees'.³⁴ Indeed, this determination to deliver public explanations to his natural constituency – as 'a rational security to my person' – explains why Lilburne sought to ensure that the pamphlets he produced in exile were conveyed to London, in order that they might be reprinted and distributed by Hugh Peter, Henry Marten, John Lambert and Robert Bennet. *Lilburne Revived*, therefore, was described as being 'for the use of England', while the *Defensive Declaration* not only appeared in Amsterdam, in May 1653, but was also reprinted, in an expanded form, in London.³⁵ As he explained after his return to England, moreover, Lilburne's aim in exile had been to make 'clear demonstrations' of his 'true affection to my native country', to 'its liberties and freedoms', and to 'the way of a commonwealth rightly constituted', even while he was 'daily struggling with the complotted designs of my death, by the barbarous, wicked and most vile agents of Master Thomas Scot'.³⁶

³³ Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 6-7.

³⁴ Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 5-6.

³⁵ Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, sig. A4; Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 5; *Severall Informations*, pp. 10-11; Lilburne, *Defensive*; Lilburne, *Revived*, p.10; Lilburne, *Upright Mans*, p. 27. This is not to say, of course, that such tactics were a great success; some copies were handed into the Council of State in April 1652, and imported copies were also seized by the authorities: *CSPD 1651-2*, pp. 204, 287; TNA, SP 25/66, fo. 533; *Weekly Intelligencer*, 69 (13-20 Apr. 1652), p. 427.

³⁶ Lilburne, *Upright Mans*, pp. 26-7.

At the same time, however, the fact that Lilburne printed such works in the Low Countries also indicates that he had an eye on other English exiles. This no doubt reflected his awareness that such people had access to a range of English texts, and Lilburne referred to having seen in Amsterdam ‘a printed Act of Parliament’ relating to his banishment, ‘expressed in the notablest of English newsbooks, called *Mercurius Politicus*’, as well as to the fact that copies of Clement Walker’s *History of Independency* were ‘openly and avowedly’ sold at the Hague.³⁷ In this context, moreover, Lilburne’s most obvious target involved local royalists, not least out of a concern for ‘the safety of my life’.³⁸ He explicitly reacted, therefore, to the way in which Oxford had ‘writ and caused to be printed several books, with his name to them, proclaiming *in foreign nations*’ that both the army and the parliament were ‘traitors against the king’, and he recognised that ‘the main and evident scope of all his said books and constant plotted dissembling devices and actions’ was ‘to exasperate the body of the mad or ranting cavaliers in these parts to cut my throat’. Lilburne also claimed that Oxford had ‘constantly made it his work to incense the whole body of the king’s party beyond the seas against me, constantly averring that I have been the only principal man that embroiled the three nations in war, that murdered the king, and altered the government into a commonwealth, and have destroyed the king, his queen and posterity’, adding that, as a result, ‘my life hath been in a constant and perpetual danger to be taken from me, especially by the rasher and madder sort of the king’s party’.³⁹

As such, it seems clear that Oxford’s pamphlets, and the evidence being gathered by Scott’s spies, placed Lilburne in an extremely awkward position. On the one hand, failing to

³⁷ Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, p. 61; Lilburne, *Revived*, sig. a4v.

³⁸ Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 32.

³⁹ Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 5, 14.

reply to them would mean that he would ‘tacitly grant the truth’ of claims that were being made regarding his radical hostility to the Stuarts, and thus run the risk of provoking royalist assaults on his person. On the other hand, reassuring royalists that he was trustworthy might mean that he would ‘lose my interest in England’, which was ‘the thing they so much desire’.⁴⁰ Being thus caught between a rock and a hard place, in the face of claims not just that he had become a royalist but also that he was a dangerous enemy to monarchy, Lilburne’s pamphleteering represented an attempt to address a range of English readers, including both radicals at home and royalists abroad, and an attempt to ‘counterbalance... two destructive evils and mischiefs against me, and my life’.⁴¹ His solution, therefore, was to produce a carefully calibrated account of his relationship with those royalists he encountered in the Low Countries. Lilburne explained, therefore, that it was this awkward situation which underpinned his decision to develop ‘a friendly familiarity with the rationalest and principalest of the king’s party’, including Lords Percy, Hopton and Culpeper, as well as Bishop Bramhall and the Duke of Buckingham, with the latter of whom he claimed to have dined at Oxford’s chambers in Amsterdam, and with whom he claimed to be ‘the most conversant’. At the same time, Lilburne was also at pains to deny that he was in league with such men, adding that his discussions focused largely on facilitating Buckingham’s return to England.⁴² Elsewhere, moreover, he claimed that ‘if John Lilburne being banished did hold affinity or correspondency with malignants being beyond the seas, yet he betrayed no trust reposed in, or unto him’, adding that he could not be ‘blamed for what he said or did beyond the seas’. Indeed, having been made ‘an alien and stranger to England’, and placed ‘in the

⁴⁰ Lilburne, *Revived*, sig. a3.

⁴¹ Lilburne, *Defensive*, p. 14.

⁴² Lilburne, *Defensive*, pp. 15, 16-17.

condition of an enemy’, Lilburne claimed to have been released ‘from all the obligations, duties and performances of an Englishman’, and left ‘free in himself to act for himself either with or against those that banished him, as he pleased’.⁴³

What makes Lilburne’s printing in the Low Countries all the more intriguing, however, is that at least some of the texts he produced in Amsterdam – including the *Apologetical Narration* – were printed, in a somewhat innovative fashion, in bilingual editions, with parallel texts in both Dutch and English.⁴⁴ As such, it can be assumed that Lilburne was also addressing a Dutch audience, and indeed he himself boasted of having sought to translate his texts into French and Latin, for publication across northern Europe. In *The Upright Mans Vindication*, therefore, Lilburne explained that it was his confidence about Cromwell’s intransigence that led him to get 1,000 copies of his *Defencive Declaration* published ‘in these parts’, in Dutch as well as English, as well as to get another copy printed in Latin, and a copy sent ‘immediately’ to Paris, in order that an Anglo-French version might be ‘speedily’ produced.⁴⁵

In other words, Lilburne was seeking to address a wider European audience, and here too his publishing strategy was complex but explicable. Consistently, therefore, Lilburne made clear that his writings were intended ‘to apologize for himself *unto the Netherlanders*, by laying open the true state of his late fine and banishment eternal from his native countrie’, to respond to the claims that were being made about his activities, and to reassure the Dutch

⁴³ Lilburne, *Upright Mans*, pp. 32-3.

⁴⁴ For Lilburne’s reference to these bilingual editions, see: Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, sig. A4; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 5.

⁴⁵ Lilburne, *Upright Mans*, p. 26.

about his intentions.⁴⁶ This was why the *Apologetical Narration* was ‘directed to the people of the United Netherlands, the place of his present abode, wherein the judicious reader will observe diverse mysterious passages of state in reference to the present condition of affairs in England’, and why it consisted, in large part, of yet another re-working of his autobiography.⁴⁷ Lilburne replied, therefore, to evidence that ‘some imagine me here to be a spy for the commonwealth’. This, he explained, was not merely a problem in terms of threats from ‘the mad or ranting crew of the cavaliers’, who ‘enquired’ after him ‘as a traitor and rogue’, but also in terms of the reaction of his Dutch hosts, especially in the event of war.⁴⁸ Moreover, in detailing his life story and the circumstances surrounding his banishment, Lilburne hoped to convince the Dutch ‘that the parliament hath banished me in good earnest and intended it as the greatest mischief to me... and never in the least by the whole or any part of them intended it as a cloak or colour to enable me the better to be a spy for them’.⁴⁹ Lilburne later reiterated this point, indeed, by insisting that one of Wendy Oxford’s aims had been ‘to make the people of Holland believe my banishment was but a counterfeit, a juggling and dissembling fictitious thing, out of design, that so I might be the more serviceable to the general, or my brother traitors at Westminster’, and so that ‘the people in Holland might beat my brains out as a rogue, an one of the generals or parliament’s chief spies’. As such, Lilburne’s response to Oxford involved using ‘discourses and print beyond the seas, to make

⁴⁶ Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, title page.

⁴⁷ Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, title page.

⁴⁸ Lilburne, *Lilburne his Letter*, sig. A2. See also: Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, p. 21.

⁴⁹ Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, pp. 63-4.

it evident and apparent *to the people there* that my banishment was a real thing, and no fiction... and that I was so far from being a spy for the general'.⁵⁰

What seems clear, indeed, is that Lilburne's determination to convince the Dutch of his honourable intentions was driven in no small part by the worsening relations between England and the United Provinces, in the wake of the failed proposals for closer union and the passage of the Navigation Act. That Lilburne was acutely aware of mounting tension is evident from a letter to his wife in March 1652, where he explained his need to consider the possibility of a war, and it is thus notable that, in April 1652, Lilburne professed to the Dutch his desire for 'a quiet and peaceable abode in your land, while I walk honestly, civilly and peaceably, without meddling... with any of your affairs in the least'. Indeed, it is also striking that Lilburne was prepared to go a long way in order to convince the Dutch of his Leveller credentials, and thus of his opposition to the republican regime, only a matter of weeks before the first skirmishes of the Anglo-Dutch War. Thus, while seeking to reassure the Dutch that he was a leveller 'of propriety and magistracy' – and to point out that the name Leveller was devised by Cromwell and 'his crafty son Ireton' at Putney, as part of the attempt to 'blast and baffle' their arguments, and to 'render their persons odious in the eyes of the people of England' – Lilburne also sought to ensure that key texts – from *Putney Projects* to the *Manifestation* (14 April 1649) and the final *Agreement of the People* (1 May 1649) were also 'translated into Dutch'.⁵¹

⁵⁰ Lilburne, *Defensive*, p. 14. Later, Lilburne denied being legally banished, insisting instead that he had travelled as 'a freeborn Englishman, that might lawfully travel to any place about his occasions': *The Tryall of L. Col. John Lilburn* (London, 1653, T2195), p. 5.

⁵¹ Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, pp. 68-71; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 33.

Of course, the challenges involved in addressing and convincing three distinct audiences simultaneously were profound, and in the context of worsening diplomatic relations between England and the United Provinces Lilburne was not entirely successful. Indeed, it was his attempt to convince Dutch about both his credentials and his intentions that ultimately helped to bring about his departure from Amsterdam. In reporting that Lilburne found ‘small encouragements’ to stay in Amsterdam in mid-April 1652, and that he ‘intends to remove’, *Politicus* rightly noted that this was a response to his having ‘taken a course to disperse those books he calls his Apologie’, adding that copies were ‘seized by particular order from the Burgomasters’, much to Lilburne’s surprise and consternation. According to *Politicus*, indeed, the aim was ‘to let him know they could not permit him to print them here, their intention being to use all means to preserve amity with the state of England’, and it seems clear that, in the tense weeks before the outbreak of hostilities, the Dutch could not afford to run the risk that Lilburne was a spy, or to be seen to protect so notorious an enemy of Cromwell.⁵²

III

Such evidence suggests that we need to be cautious about overplaying Lilburne’s ‘royalism’ in exile, while also recognising that he faced serious if understandable difficulties in the United Provinces, and not just because he thought himself ‘too old’ to learn the language.⁵³

⁵² *Politicus*, 97, p. 1536. In essence, this fits with Lilburne’s account: Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 33. Nedham, of course, mocked Lilburne by noting that his experience of ‘arbitrary dealings in other countries’ might make him ‘think the better of his own’.

⁵³ *Severall Informations*, pp. 11-13.

At the same time, however, caution is also required in assessing Lilburne's response to this situation and to his Dutch hosts. Thus, while *Politicus* claimed that Lilburne became disillusioned and petulant, by noting how he indicated that 'if they would not permit him to print here, he would go where he might have that liberty', the reality may have been somewhat different. Lilburne himself claimed to have 'acquiesced' to the ban on his printing, and to have refrained from publishing other works 'till such time' as he could 'obtain licence to print avowedly what in that kind I have to say'. Thus, while Lilburne claimed to have been forced to 'spend much money and time to travel and look out for myself, where safely to abide and print without offence', he also recognised that the Dutch decision was probably inevitable in the current diplomatic context, and his departure was more obviously provoked by his sight of Parliament's declaration of war against the United Provinces.⁵⁴ Indeed, while the differences between this account and that offered in *Politicus* might be regarded as subtle, they are probably of vital importance for a more accurate assessment of Lilburne's attitude towards the Dutch republic.

What emerges, therefore, is that even though Lilburne expressed a desire to 'breath in England's air, in peace, security and quietness', and exclaimed that 'I long to see London', he also showed genuine respect for the Dutch Republic.⁵⁵ He referred to it as 'the common receptacle of wearied, tossed and banished men, being a place... of the greatest freedom that I have ever read or heard of', adding that Amsterdam was 'more famous for freedom, and flourishing thereby, more than all the rest'.⁵⁶ In March 1653, moreover, Lilburne made clear that, 'although I am very much an Englishman, yet I am... no enemy to Holland and its

⁵⁴ *Politicus*, 97, p. 1536; Lilburne, *As You Were*, p. 33; *Severall Informations*, p. 9.

⁵⁵ Lilburne, *Upright Mans*, p. 26; *Severall Informations*, pp. 10-11.

⁵⁶ Lilburne, *Apologetical Narration*, pp. 2, 21.

welfare, but desire with all my heart an honest and a just peace betwixt them and England'.⁵⁷ Indeed, Lilburne's subsequent writings made it perfectly clear not just that he himself still had much to teach England – and that this could only be achieved 'if you get me home in safety, and thereby free me from the murderous dealings of Mr Thomas Scot, and his cursed and blood-thirsty associates' – but also that such lessons were informed by his time in Holland. Indeed, Lilburne's comments were sometimes explicitly framed in terms of how England needed to imitate the Dutch in order to emulate their glory and the fortunate situation in which Dutch citizens found themselves. From the Dutch, therefore, Lilburne learnt how to 'ease the people of three quarters at least of their present charges in taxes and excise', and he also sought to show how England could

provide for all the old and lame people in England, that are past their work, and for all orphans and children that have no estate nor parents, that so in a very short time there shall not be a beggar in England, nor any idle person that hath hands or eyes, by means of all which the whole nation shall really and truly in its militia be ten times stronger, formidabler and powerfuller than now it is.

This was explicitly aimed at the proud and passionate English reader, and those that 'love your own welfare, and the welfare and happiness of the land of your nativity', and it was such people who Lilburne implored to 'act vigorously, stoutly, industriously and unweariedly night and day for the preservation of your own interest, liberties and welfare'.⁵⁸

⁵⁷ Lilburne, *Revived*, p. 12.

⁵⁸ Lilburne, *Upright Mans*, pp. 20-22.

Such comments – which involved learning from, and emulating, a Dutch model – make even more sense when placed in the context of Lilburne’s circle of friends and supporters, and indeed of seventeenth century radicalism more generally. One pro-Lilburne statement from 1652, for example, demanded a ‘publique banck’, along Dutch lines.⁵⁹ More obviously, Lilburne’s comments can usefully be placed alongside those of his friend, Hugh Peter, whose *Good Work for a Good Magistrate* set out ideas for social, economic and educational reform, the unifying theme of which was that ‘though Holland seem to get the start of us, yet we may so follow, as to stand at length upon their shoulders, and so see further’. Peter advocated new methods for setting the poor and sick to work, where ‘Amsterdam is far advanced’, and suggested following a Dutch model in relation to the execution of justice, the use of cheap loans and the creation of banks. He also suggested re-modelling London in order to improve the ‘profit, pleasure and ease’ of its inhabitants, as well as its economic fortunes, and here too the model was Dutch. Peter suggested that the streets should be widened and paved, ‘as in Holland’, and made ‘high in the midst with the gutters on both sides, and bricks on both sides next the houses, as in Holland’, adding that houses should be remodelled ‘as at Amsterdam’. London also needed to be made much cleaner, and Peter found there ‘most beastly dirty streets, the hurt of which is so great, as is strange, and what a world of work is daily made by the dirt and wet, in rotting of shoes and stockings, women’s coats, fouling of houses, making clean of shoes, clothes etc’. Here too, therefore, he noted that it was ‘strange and not possible for merchants to live cleanly, and neatly, *as in Holland*, without cleaner streets’. In addition, Peter advocated better measures for preventing fire, with water pumps, ‘bored into the ground... as in Holland, as well as new

⁵⁹ *A Declaration of the Armie* (London, 1652, D629), p. 5.

quays for ships in Southwark, 'as at Rotterdam'.⁶⁰ Earlier in the century, moreover, another radical pamphleteer – the prolific and controversial Thomas Scott – likewise advocated reflecting on the United Provinces and 'considering her ways', in order to 'learn to be wise' by using the Dutch as 'tutors'. Scott explicitly argued that Dutch 'customs and orders' ought to be 'translated into our commonwealth', including their treatment of the poor (with almshouses 'maintained at the public charge of the state or the cities'), their tax system, their justice, their architecture, and indeed 'the general willingness of their hearts to advance any public work either for necessary use or ornament, wherein they are a people beyond comparison forward and liberal', and wedded to 'the common good'.⁶¹

More importantly, for both Peter and Scott the 'virtuous emulation' which was being advocated extended to issues of 'politique government'. Scott, for example, observed 'a general freedom permitted and used, where general actions which concern all, and are maintained by all, are generally debated, argued, sifted and censured by all men without contradiction', and he noted that magistrates 'seek not the satisfaction of their own wills so much, as the general satisfaction of all, where it may be with the good of all'. He also explained his constitutional preferences: 'I should rejoyce to see, instead of that monstrous head too big for the body, which hath cut itself off, by breaking asunder the fundamental laws

⁶⁰ H. Peter, *Good Work for a Good Magistrate* (London, 1651, P1706), sigs. A3, A6, pp. 18-19, 39, 91-2, 102, 105, 106-7, 108.

⁶¹ T. Scott, *The Belgicke Pismire* (London, 1622), 49, 50, 53-4, 72, 73-4, 75-80. This aspect of Scott's thought has generally been overlooked. See: P. Lake, 'Constitutional consensus and Puritan opposition in the 1620s: Thomas Scott and the Spanish Match', *Historical Journal*, 25 (1982), 805-25; J. Scott, *Commonwealth Principles* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 235-6.

and liberties of the state... some prevention invented against change and disunion'.⁶² For Peter, meanwhile, the example of the Dutch led to ideas for things like the use of a ballot box to prevent corruption, as well as changes to the practice of elections:

In the choice of a parliament man, if a thousand meet to choose, let these choose an hundred out of that number to choose for them, and the rest depart, the one hundred then out of themselves choose 20, to choose one for that service, and these upon oath to be faithful, if among these, two be in competition, then to balloting.

Indeed, Peter argued that:

if these plain and just rules of God's word were observed, there would be no need of any deceitful, base and Machiavellian courses, to keep a commonwealth in peace and obedience, as may be seen in the Low Countries, where no people have more liberty than they, nor pay such great taxations, nor so little state anywhere used to preserve authority, and yet the people of so many nations, and religions live in the greatest peace, and plenty of the world, merely by good justice, mercy and religion.⁶³

Such evidence might be thought to have taken us some way from Lilburne.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that Lilburne and his fellow Levellers were much more beholden to the example of the United Provinces than historians have recognised. In Overton's *Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* of 1646, therefore, it was explicitly argued that the

⁶² Scott, *Belgicke*, pp. 51, 89-90, 96.

⁶³ Peter, *Good Work*, pp. 30-1, 108-9.

Dutch provided a model for how to maintain an army without the need for impressment; that the Dutch model worked because it was a republic; and that England should ‘copy the Hollanders our provident neighbours’. As Overton explained, moreover, practical reforms were linked to constitutional models: ‘if we would in many things follow their good example, and make this nation a state, free from the oppression of kings, and the corruption of the court, and show love to the people in the constitution of your government, the affection of the people would satisfy all common and public occasions’. Indeed, Overton made explicit reference to the Dutch model for Leveller ideas about representation and accountability, by arguing that ‘we are your principals, and you are agents’, and by suggesting that Parliament’s power derived from the people’s ‘trust and choice’.⁶⁴ With this language of ‘principals’, indeed, Overton showed clear awareness of a Dutch political system whereby the authorities in the States General were beholden to provincial states, and whereby even provincial governments relied upon the consent of, and instructions from, their ‘principals’ in particular towns. As such, it is possible to argue that Leveller ideas were more or less directly modelled on the Dutch constitution, not least in terms of the kind of local self-government that the Levellers advocated in the so-called ‘earnest petition’, whereby:

some chosen representatives of every parish proportionably may be the electors of the sheriffs, JPs, committee men, grand jury men, and all ministers of justice whatsoever, in the respective counties, and that so such minister of justice may continue in his office above one whole year, without a new election.⁶⁵

⁶⁴ R. Overton, *A Remonstrance of Many Thousand Citizens* (London, 1646, O632B), pp. 3, 16.

⁶⁵ *A Declaration of Some Proceedings* (London, 1648, D625), p. 32.

IV

According to one of Thomas Scott's spies, Lilburne boasted that he had 'good intercourse with Holland', and it is now possible to reflect on what he meant, and what this means for our understanding of Anglo-Dutch political culture in the mid-seventeenth century.⁶⁶ It no longer seems possible, therefore, merely to treat Lilburne's brief spell in the Low Countries as an awkward interlude, when he merely sought to continue his English political campaigning, and when he dabbled with royalism. This is partly because, as scholars now recognise, 'royalism' is an awkward category. It seems clear, therefore, not just that royalists were deeply divided over both principles and tactics, but also that many parliamentarians found themselves closer to a version of royalism as time passed, and that certain individuals changed sides more than once, without really changing their political ideas.⁶⁷ In this situation, it is possible to accept that Lilburne's position was complicated by his experience of exile, and that, having concluded that the actions of the Rump regime – including the king's trial – were illegal, he was prepared to work with other enemies of the republic. Nevertheless, we should not place too much weight upon the strength of Lilburne's relationship with royalists in the early 1650s, just as we might need to reassess the links that emerged between royalist plotters and ex-Levellers during the protectorate. We should instead recognise that Lilburne's position in

⁶⁶ *Severall Informations*, p. 9.

⁶⁷ D. Smith, *Constitutional Royalism and the Search for Settlement, c.1640-1649* (Cambridge, 1994); J. McElligott and D. Smith, eds., *Royalists and Royalism during the English Civil Wars* (Cambridge, 2007); J. McElligott and D. Smith, eds., *Royalists and Royalism during the Interregnum* (Manchester, 2010).

exile – and the tactics of Thomas Scott’s spies – made it important for him not just to continue his attacks on Cromwell, but also to protect himself from ‘ranting cavaliers’, and to persuade the Dutch people of his good intentions, particularly as England and the United Provinces slid towards war.

It is this delicate situation that explains Lilburne’s innovative use of bilingual print and Anglo-Dutch pamphleteering, which involved doing much more than merely exploiting the well-known opportunities offered by the Dutch system to produce pamphlets for audiences in England. Indeed, what is striking about Lilburne’s tactics during the 1650s is not just his recognition of the need to speak to multiple English audiences, but also his willingness to address readers within and even beyond the Low Countries, far beyond the community of royalist exiles. More importantly, this outward-looking strategy also involved more than just a pragmatic desire for self-preservation, and the need to ingratiate himself with Dutchmen who may have suspected his motives. It was also linked to Lilburne’s respect for Dutch society and Dutch political culture, and if Lilburne’s reflections on what he encountered in the United Provinces were somewhat brief, they were nevertheless compatible with a strand of English radical thought – and with other Leveller texts – which regarded it as an ‘exemplar republic’. This is a theme that has generally been overlooked by historians of republicanism and radicalism, who generally focus on thinkers – like James Harrington and Algernon Sidney – who more or less explicitly rejected the Dutch model.⁶⁸ What Harrington and Sidney rejected, however, was precisely what the Levellers valued: a federal republic in which power was radically decentralised, and in which sovereignty was genuinely popular. Historians have only recently begun to appreciate the degree to which Leveller ideas were predicated on democratic local self-government, and it is thus important to emphasise that

⁶⁸ Scott, *Commonwealth Principles*, pp. 135, 235-6.

such ideas were influenced in no small part by observing the workings of the Dutch republic.⁶⁹ As such, it is possible to argue that while Lilburne and the Levellers may have been proud Englishmen, loyal to the liberties of freeborn Englishmen, they were also willing to respect, learn from and emulate their European neighbours, and also to participate in the Dutch public sphere.

⁶⁹ J. C. Davis, 'Reassessing radicalism in a traditional society', in G. Burgess and M. Festenstein, eds., *English Radicalism, 1550-1850* (Cambridge, 2007), 338-72.