

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



Developments and Debates in English Censorship during the Interregnum

Benjamin Woodford

University of Waterloo

bwoodfor@uwaterloo.ca

During Oliver Cromwell's five-year rule as Lord Protector, various political and religious groups devoted themselves to toppling and undermining his government. The Protectorate had many enemies, some of whom chose to attack the regime with pamphlets rather than arms. This printed threat had the potential to destabilize the regime and prompted the government to enhance existing laws by creating new means for discovering unlicensed printing. Despite these measures, the Protectorate could not censor every pamphlet that spoke ill of Cromwell; it simply did not have the resources for such a task. Censorship existed, but it was neither all powerful nor all pervasive. How then does one characterize the system of censorship in the Cromwellian Protectorate?

In order to explain the process of censorship in early modern England, historians have developed a variety of models. Annabel Patterson argues that a delicate balance existed between writers and those who held power; she claims that 'what we are considering here was essentially a joint project, a cultural bargain between writers and political leaders'.¹ In this model, authors and authorities developed a mutual understanding of what was an acceptable publication. This interpretation has received much criticism, chiefly from Blair Worden who views censorship in early modern England as arbitrary and frustrating to writers.² Sheila Lambert, who confines her study to the pre-civil war era, views the Stationers' Company — the body in charge of registering all printed works — as an under-resourced group that was more concerned with the well-being of its own members than

¹ Annabel Patterson, *Censorship and Interpretation: The Conditions of Writing and Reading in Early Modern England* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984), p. 7.

² Blair Worden, 'Literature and Political Censorship in Early Modern England', in *Too Mighty to be Free: Censorship and the Press in Britain and the Netherlands*, ed. by A. C. Duke and C. A. Tamse (Zutphen: De Walburg Pers 1987), pp. 45–63 (p. 49).

halting the production of seditious pamphlets.³ Focusing on Jacobean and Caroline England, Cyndia Clegg states that in Jacobean England, it is a mistake to think of state censorship. Rather, many different people and institutions could censor books.⁴ In Caroline England, the most significant development, according to Clegg, was not related to the mechanisms of censorship, but to the emergence of a cultural awareness of censorship.⁵ After 1625, the topic of ecclesiastical licensing became part of the broader political discussion, but the licensing system remained a tool that was used by rival religious factions.⁶ Anthony Milton agrees with Clegg that historians need to reject the simplistic view of a monolithic government trying to suppress opportunistic writers. He believes that it is more accurate to view controlling print as one of the ways by which Arminians and Calvinists sought to establish their own criteria for religious orthodoxy.⁷ All of these models provide little insight into the process of censorship during Oliver Cromwell's years in power, however, because they focus on periods other than the Protectorate.

Jason McElligott and Jason Peacey are two historians who offer a censorship model suitable for the Protectorate. Both stress the role and potentially far-reaching ability of the state in the 1650s.⁸ McElligott argues that it is wrong to view the Stationers' Company as an incompetent, self-interested group. The Company could create conditions that were repressive for publishing, even though its capacity to control the press was limited.⁹ The process of censorship was also a collective one. Government officials, the army, and private citizens were all involved in discovering and censoring seditious pamphlets.¹⁰ McElligott believes that with the Protectorate, one should not count the instances of censorship in order to determine how effective the regime was; Protectoral censorship focused on quality over quantity, banning only the most dangerous pamphlets.¹¹ Peacey agrees that although

³ Shelia Lambert, 'State Control of the Press in Theory and Practice: The Role of the Stationers' Company before 1640', in *Censorship & the Control of Print: In England and France 1600-1910*, ed. by Robin Myers and Michael Harris (Winchester: St. Paul's Bibliographies, 1992), pp. 1–32 (pp. 3–23).

⁴ Cyndia Clegg, *Press Censorship in Jacobean England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), p. 18.

⁵ Cyndia Clegg, *Press Censorship in Caroline England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 42.

⁶ Clegg, *Caroline England*, p. 95.

⁷ Anthony Milton, 'Licensing, Censorship, and Religious Orthodoxy in Early Stuart England', *The Historical Journal*, 41 (1998), pp. 625–651 (p. 627).

⁸ See Jason McElligott, *Royalism, Print and Censorship in Revolutionary England* (Woodbridge: Boybell Pres, 2007), pp. 211–15, and Jason Peacey, *Politicians and Pamphleteers: Propaganda During the English Civil Wars and Interregnum* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), pp. 160–61.

⁹ Jason McElligott, "'A Couple of Hundred Squabbling Small Tradesmen'?: Censorship, the Stationers' Company, and the state in Early Modern England', *Media History*, 11 (2005), pp. 87–104 (p. 92).

¹⁰ McElligott, 'Couple of Hundred', pp. 92–8.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 98.

there are impressive examples of censorship during the Protectorate, this fact does not necessarily demonstrate a repressive culture of censorship.¹² Protectoral censorship ‘was less concerned to stifle all oppositional tracts and treatises, but merely those which were, strictly speaking, seditious, in the sense of promoting unrest, advocating uprisings, and inciting rebellion or assassination, as well perhaps as promoting heresy’.¹³ Where Peacey differs from McElligott is in his focus on the decline of the Stationers’ Company as civil servants assumed more responsibilities for controlling the press.¹⁴ McElligott’s and Peacey’s model fits the Protectorate well because it can explain both the extreme examples of censorship (such as the suppression of *Killing Noe Murder*; see below) as well as the cases in which the Protectorate chose not to censor a potentially subversive tract (such as the republican writings of Marchamont Nedham and James Harrington).

McElligott and Peacey present convincing models of censorship, which underscore the growth and power of the centralized state in Cromwellian England. A centralized state may have censored pamphlets during the Protectorate, but the enforcing of censorship laws was delegated primarily to a single entity: the army. The McElligott/Peacey model does not ignore the army, but it does not place enough emphasis on it either. McElligott is correct that censorship was a collective process, as many individuals and factions participated; however, it was the presence of a standing army that ultimately rendered effective press control possible. Prior to the Civil War, there were no standing armies in England. If a monarch needed an army for a war or to defeat a rebellion, he or she had to raise the army, which would disband once the war or rebellion was over. The situation was different in the 1650s, as the New Model Army was present throughout the decade, providing Cromwell with a new tool to restrict the press. Another aspect of the Interregnum which requires further examination is the printed debate surrounding the subject of censorship. How did the print world react to the new system of state-censorship? Were printers angered that the responsibilities once held by the Stationers’ Company were now in the hands of the government? Were there any printed pamphlets that defended the stationers’ position? This article seeks to accomplish two objectives: illustrate the role that the army played in the censorship process, and, by examining the pamphlets produced during the ‘Beacon controversy’, demonstrate that the newly formed state-censorship inspired a heated printed debate, which lasted for years.

¹² Jason Peacey, ‘Cromwellian England: A Propaganda State?’, *History*, 91 (2006), pp. 176–99 (p. 184).

¹³ Peacey, ‘Cromwellian England’, p. 184.

¹⁴ Peacey, *Politician and Pamphleteers*, pp. 155–62.

Before examining the responsibilities of the army, it is worthwhile to trace the legal developments in censorship throughout the sixteenth and early seventeenth century. In the sixteenth century, the Stationers' Company was responsible for monitoring the book trade. Established in 1557, the Company was meant to oversee all aspects of printing, and 'to seize, take, hold, burn, or turn to the proper use of the foresaid community, all and several those books and things which are or shall be printed contrary to the form of any statute, act, or proclamation, made or to be made'.¹⁵ Everyone involved in the book trade was supposed to be a member of the Company, and the term Stationer began to mean more than just an institutional affiliation; it became a distinct cultural identity.¹⁶ The Company functioned as a guild, and its role slowly expanded to safeguard its members. By the late sixteenth century, the Company established and protected its members' property rights over books, rented tenements and taverns to members, lent money to stationers who were experiencing financial difficulties, and provided older stationers with a pension.¹⁷ In the words of Adrian Johns, 'the decisions structuring print culture were overwhelmingly Stationers' decisions, arrived at by reference to Stationers' perspectives'.¹⁸

In addition to the Company, a pre-publication licensing system controlled the print industry. The foundation of the license system was a Star Chamber decree of 1586, which formally codified existing practices for licensing books. The decree ordered that Stationers could not publish any book unless it 'hath been heretofore allowed, or hereafter shall be allowed, before the ymprintinge thereof, according to thorder appoynted by the Queenes majesties Injunctyons, [of 1559, which empowered six individuals to act as licensers]¹⁹ And been first seen and pervsed by the Archbishop of Canterbury and Bishop of London'.²⁰ In theory, all licensers were supposed to be ecclesiastical officers, but in reality, individuals from a variety of backgrounds signed licenses in the pre-Civil War era.²¹ This license system did not equal strict control of the press, as licensers had to maintain and negotiate

¹⁵ Geoff Kemp and Jason McElligott, eds, *Censorship and the Press, 1580-1720*, 4 vols (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2009), I, p. 6.

¹⁶ Adrian Johns, *The Nature of the Book* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p. 59.

¹⁷ Johns, p. 201.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 60.

¹⁹ The six licensers were Matthew Parker, Edmund Grindal, Thomas Smith, Walter Haddon, Thomas Sackford, Richard Goodrich, and Gilbert Gerard.

²⁰ Kemp and McElligott, I, p. 110.

²¹ Johns, p. 239.

the complex alliances of printers, booksellers and writers. If a licenser enforced strict orthodoxy, he would be ridiculed and likely ousted.²²

After the Star Chamber was abolished in 1641, the licensing system ceased to exist, leaving no effective controls on the press. With the removal of the traditional means of censorship, the number of printed tracts exploded. When compared with 1640, the year 1641 witnessed an increase of one hundred and forty percent in the number of titles printed. In 1642, the number of printed tracts increased by ninety eight percent over 1642.²³ Throughout the 1640s, the Long Parliament attempted to restrict the expanding print industry by passing its own printing regulations in 1643 and 1647. The ordinance of 1643 ordered that all books must be licensed and entered into the Company's register, and that no book belonging to English stock could be printed without the consent of the Company. The ordinance also provided powers of search and seizure for the Company. Cyprian Blagden views this ordinance as an attempt to re-establish a partnership between the Stationers and government similar to that of the 1630s.²⁴ The ordinance of 1647 set out specific punishments for those who violated the printing laws, namely the writer of an unlicensed pamphlet would receive a fine of forty shillings or forty days in prison, the printer would receive a fine of twenty shillings or twenty days imprisonment, the bookseller would receive a fine of ten shillings or ten days imprisonment, and the hawker would lose all his books and be whipped as a common rogue.²⁵

Clegg views the 1647 ordinance as the key moment in the evolution of state control of the press. She notes that the act made no mention of the Stationers' Company and charged parliament with prosecuting the authors of seditious and blasphemous works.²⁶ The ordinance may have sidelined the Company, but this marginalization did not last. In 1649, the Rump Parliament passed its own print act, which empowered the Masters and the Wardens of the Company to 'make diligent search in all places where they shall think meet, for all unallowed Printing-presses, and all Presses any way employed in the printing of any

²² Ibid., pp. 239–40.

²³ Joad Raymond, *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), p. 165.

²⁴ Cyprian Blagden, *The Stationers' Company: A History, 1403-1959* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), p. 146.

²⁵ *An Ordinance of the Lords & Commons Assembled in Parliament, Against Unlicensed or Scandalous Pamphlets, and for the Better Regulating of Printing* (London, 1647), pp. 4–5.

²⁶ Clegg, *Caroline England*, p. 231.

such Unlicensed Books as aforesaid; or any Malignant, Seditious or Scandalous Books'.²⁷ All imported books also had to be viewed by the Master and Wardens of the Company.²⁸ Just two years after the Long Parliament limited the Company's involvement in censorship, the Rump brought it back into the process, once again establishing a partnership with the company. Perhaps the members of the Rump considered the Long Parliament's ordinance ineffective and believed that utilizing the Company was the best means for controlling the press.

Cromwell inherited all the print legislation of the Long and Rump Parliament, but he also passed additional printing laws in 1655. Under Cromwell's laws, John Barkstead, Lieutenant of the Tower, Alderman John Dethick, and Alderman George Foxcroft were empowered to find all master printers in London and determine their opinion of the present government; to discover who used unlicensed printing presses and destroy their type materials; to find out if all London printers had entered the necessary bonds, and if not then to prosecute them; to ensure that no one printed without authorization from the council; and to halt and destroy all scandalous books. If they encountered any resistance, they had permission to break open any locks and call civil and army officers for support.²⁹ Once Barkstead, Dethick, and Foxcroft discovered any illegal printing, they were to arrest everyone involved, place them in Bridewell and seize and destroy all their presses; the detainees could not leave Bridewell until they had experienced all corporal and pecuniary punishments as outlined in the law.³⁰ The details of these punishments lie in the ordinance of 1647 and the Printing Act of 1649 (see above). Cromwell's printing regulations essentially restated previous printing laws, but with greater powers of search and seizure. Also of note is the fact that Cromwell's orders made no reference to the Stationers' Company. The Rump's Act charged the Company with searching for unlicensed printing, but Cromwell entrusted this task with state officials and army officers. In terms of punishments and the definition of illegal printing, there is nothing new in Cromwell's laws; the difference between his legislation and that of the Long and Rump Parliaments was the entity that enforced the print laws. The Stationers' Company was no longer the government's primary means for controlling the press, the state and military officials were.

²⁷ C. H. Firth and R. S. Rait, eds, *Acts and Ordinances of the Interregnum, 1649-1660*, 3 vols, (London: Wyman and Sons, 1911), II, pp. 247-48.

²⁸ Firth and Rait, II, p. 251.

²⁹ *Orders of His Highness the Lord Protector Made and Published by and with the Advice and Consent of His Council, for putting into speedy and due Execution the Laws, Statutes and Ordinances, made and provided against Printing Unlicensed and Scandalous Books and Pamphlets, and for the further Regulating of Printing* (London, 1655), pp. 107-14.

³⁰ *Orders*, p. 112.

Cromwell's laws empowered the army to aid in the censoring of seditious texts, but how did the army officers actually contribute to this process? Peacey has demonstrated that Secretary of State John Thurloe was the key figure in controlling the press, and the army officers were some of Thurloe's best sources of information.³¹ After the Cromwellian conquest of the three kingdoms, army officers were well placed throughout the British Isles to supply Thurloe with intelligence on printing.³² Whether or not the Cromwellian Protectorate can be classified as a military dictatorship is debatable,³³ but the rule of the Major-Generals was unquestionably the most militarized form of government to date in England, and it enhanced the power of the state. This is not to say that the Major-Generals had absolute control over their territories. In fact, the Major-Generals often fell short of their lofty objectives, such as moral reformation of the nation;³⁴ however, the existence of a network of loyal generals who each closely monitored one district provided the state with an effective instrument to scrutinize the press.

Many Major-Generals were keen to convey information relating to printing to Thurloe. On 26 December 1654, General Monck in Scotland wrote to Thurloe: 'And thus much you may assure him [Cromwell] concerning some new pamphlets, I shall bee careful to hinder the printing of them all I may'.³⁵ Monck's letter demonstrates that both he and Thurloe were aware of unauthorized pamphlets in Scotland and desired to halt them. Similarly, Major-General Goffe informed Thurloe: 'Foxe and two more eminent northern Quakers have beene in Sussex, and are now in this county, doing much worke for the devil, and delude many simple soules, and att the same time there are base books against the Lord Protector disperst among the churches, but rejected by all sober men'.³⁶ On 8 August 1656, Goffe wrote another letter to Thurloe, stating: 'I heere he [Mr. Cole of Hampton, a man inclining towards Quakerism] did disperse some of these pamphlets into the Isle of Wight, and some were scattered about the streets in the market places in Southampton'.³⁷ Goffe was both concerned with Quaker attempts to spread printed works and quick to relay all information to Thurloe.

³¹ Peacey, 'Cromwellian England', p. 180.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

³³ See Austin Woolrych, 'The Cromwellian Protectorate: A Military Dictatorship?', *History*, 75 (1990), pp. 207–31.

³⁴ See Christopher Durston, *Cromwell's Major-Generals: Godly Government during the English Revolution* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001).

³⁵ Thomas Birch, ed., *A Collection of the State Papers of John Thurloe, Esq.*, 7 vols (London: Printer for the Executor of F. Gyles, 1742), III, p. 45.

³⁶ Birch, IV, p. 408.

³⁷ Birch, V, p. 287.

Although not major-generals, Colonel Hacker and Captain Shield wrote to Cromwell relating news of ‘scandalous and seditious’ pamphlets being spread in Uppingham.³⁸ Their letter was addressed to Cromwell, but it lies in the Thurloe State Papers, so the Secretary of State most likely knew its contents. Major Robert Creed described the printing activities of Walter Gostelo — a royalist who claimed to have received visions from God — in a letter to Cromwell. The letter reads: ‘I have this present unto your Highness, that one, who writes himself Walter Gostelo, did sent almost forty bookes to one Mr. Humphreys, a bookseller in Warwick, in my judgment a very dangerous consequence to your highness and these nations’.³⁹ The preceding examples demonstrate the extent to which the Protectorate relied on the army to keep tabs on writers and pamphlets. The presence of a standing army enabled the Protectorate to monitor the press in a way that Elizabeth and the early Stuarts never could.

Army officers did more than inform Thurloe, they also presented seditious pamphlets to parliament. On 7 November 1654, Colonel Shapcott acquainted the first Protectoral Parliament with the pamphlet *The Speech of Colonel Shapcott*. Parliament immediately resolved that the pamphlet was ‘treasonous, false, scandalous and seditious’ and ordered that the pamphlet be:

referred to the Committee for Printing, to inquire after the Author, Printers, and Publishers of this Paper, and to suppress the same: With Power to the Committee, to send for, and secure, any Persons whom they conceive to be, or that shall appear to be, guilty of framing, contriving, printing, or publishing, the said Paper, until the same shall be examined, and reported to the House: And that the Quorum of that Committee be reduced to Five, as to the Dispatch of this Business.⁴⁰

The Sergeant-at-Arms was also ordered to seize all printed copies of the pamphlet and arrest all persons who were publishing or selling it.⁴¹ The decision to reduce the quorum of the Committee for Printing to five illustrates the urgency with which the government

³⁸ Birch, IV, p. 720.

³⁹ Birch, III, p. 212.

⁴⁰ ‘Journal of the House of Commons.’ Vol. 7. *British History Online*, p. 383. <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/report.aspx?compid=24388>> [accessed 20 September 2012]

⁴¹ ‘Journal’, p. 383.

proceeded.⁴² The content of the pamphlet demanded swift action as it was scandalous to both Shapcott and the Protectorate. Written as a mock speech delivered by Shapcott to parliament, the pamphlet accused Cromwell of sweeping away the nation's 'Orthodox Clergie' only to replace them with 'Anabaptistical persons', while at the same time creating a 'Tyrannie over us [the people of England] and our Liberties'.⁴³ If England, Scotland, and Ireland had to be ruled by a king, it would be better, the pamphlet asserted, that the king had an unquestioned right to rule, as Charles II did.⁴⁴ The investigation into *The Speech of Colonel Shapcott* began with an army officer being personally offended by a pamphlet, and quickly grew into a full scale search for the pamphlet and everyone connected to it.

Similarly, on 20 October 1656, Colonel Jephson presented to parliament a book delivered at the door of the House of Commons entitled *Thunder from the Throne of God Against the Temples of Idols*. Packed with quotations from both the Old and New Testament, this book contained fiery rhetoric as it attacked the worship of idols for being 'the work of errors'.⁴⁵ The book also included an epistle directed to Cromwell and parliament, which does not survive. Parliament began by calling Samuel Chidley — a Leveller pamphleteer who, after the Leveller movement collapsed, attempted to establish a separatist congregation in London — to appear before parliament in order to determine if he wrote the epistle. Chidley was suspected of authoring the book because of both the appearance of his name on the first page and his history of associating with radical movements. Chidley admitted that he wrote the epistle as well as the book. Parliament responded by forming a Committee (which included both Jephson and Colonel Shapcott) to examine *Thunder from the Throne of God* and to send for persons, paper, and witnesses as needed. That same day, parliament ordered the Committee to determine new ways for controlling the press and ordered the Sergeant-at-Arms to take Chidley into custody.⁴⁶ As with the case of *The Speech of Colonel Shapcott*, the investigation concerning *Thunder from the Throne of God* began with an army officer informing parliament of the existence of a seditious pamphlet.

The Protectorate also employed soldiers to halt any printing operation that it perceived as threatening, especially at the beginning of Cromwell's rule in December 1653. On 23 December 1653:

⁴² The normal quorum for the Committee for Printing is not listed. Quorums during this period varied. For example, the Hale Committee in 1652 had a quorum of seven, while the Council of State had a quorum of nine.

⁴³ *Speech of Colonel Shapcott* (London, 1654), p. 1.

⁴⁴ *Speech*, p. 1.

⁴⁵ Samule Chidley, *Thunder from the Throne of God against the Temples of Idols* (London, 1653), p. 1.

⁴⁶ 'Journal', p. 442.

Edward Dendy, the Serjeant-at-arms, was to search Robert Wood's house, or elsewhere, for an abstract of the Instrument settling the government of the Commonwealth, seize all the copies found, break the presses used for it, apprehend the owners, the printers and persons employed, and bring them before the Council.⁴⁷

The *Instrument of Government* was too crucial a document for Cromwell to entrust to Wood or any other printer who was not on the government's payroll. Within the *Instrument* were the rules for governing the nation; if an inaccurate edition of the *Instrument* was printed and spread across England, people might become confused about the nature of the Protectorate. An even more dangerous possibility was the printing of a deliberately distorted version of the *Instrument* in order to vilify Cromwell and the other army officers who wrote it. Given this situation, Cromwell and the army officers decided that only one person would be permitted to publish the *Instrument*: the Protectorate's official printer, Henry Hills.

The army could suppress pamphlets that threatened national security, as it did when Robert Wood printed the *Instrument*, as well as those that infringed on monopolies. The army's protection of monopolies is no less significant than its efforts to control political printing. In all matters pertaining to print, the army was now the agent that enforced the print laws rather than the Stationers' Company. The case of William Bentley is an example of the army searching for books that offended neither the Lord Protector nor the Protectorate. Prior to the Civil War, Bentley, as the king's printer, had a monopoly on printing Bibles. The collapse of royal authority prompted intense competition over the printing of Bibles; Bentley took advantage of this situation and commenced printing Bibles. His fortunes, however, changed with the rise of Cromwell. The Lord Protector's two chief printers, Henry Hills and John Field, received a monopoly on printing Bibles and were given the right to search their opponents' homes for scandalous pamphlets. Hills and Field used this power to rifle Bentley's home — with the aid of soldiers — and seized his equipment, thus eliminating their competition.⁴⁸ Bentley was outraged by this act and published a pamphlet in which he related his story. In his pamphlet, Bentley stated:

⁴⁷ D. F. McKenzie and Maureen Bell, eds, *A Calendar and Chronology of Documents Relating to the London Book Trade, 1641-1700*, 3 vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), I, p. 351.

⁴⁸ William M. Baillie, 'Printing Bibles in the Interregnum: The Case of William Bentley and a Short Answer', *Papers of the Bibliographical Society of America*, 91 (1997), pp. 65–91 (p. 82).

And in particular the 28 *August* last, *Hills* and *Field* assisted by some Souldiers, and producing nothing, but the said Deputations, did carry away from Bentleys house the Form and Materials for printing part of the New Testament, and seized the Sheets to his *Hignesse* use, as if the same were scandalous.⁴⁹

Given the fact that Bentley printed this pamphlet after all his printed equipment was taken, he must have either had extra hidden materials or used a friend's press. Bentley was not printing anything scandalous or seditious, but he was treated as though he was. Hills and Field had access to soldiers in order to enforce the printing regulations; such power was not available to the Stationers' Company in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. Bentley's story demonstrates the power of the army, which the government and official printers could call upon for assistance in cases of both seditious writing and printing that infringed upon monopolies.

Effective control of the press in the Cromwellian Protectorate often relied on soldiers and other state officials spotting hawkers selling pamphlets in the street, and then following up these leads. On 30 March 1654, the Council of State learned that a female hawker had been apprehended (the names of the woman and her arrestors are not mentioned) for selling two scandalous pamphlets, *A Perfect Account of the Daily Intelligence from the Armies* and *The Moderate Intelligencer* (both of these documents were newsheets).⁵⁰ Based on information from the woman, the Council learned the identity of the printer (whose name is not mentioned, but it was likely either George Horton, who printed *The Moderate Intelligencer*, or Bernard Alsop, who printed *A Perfect Account*), who, once he was in custody, acknowledged that he had printed the pamphlets. The Council then released the woman and turned to an army officer to uncover more information. Under orders from the Council, Colonel Goffe and Mr. Stockdale, Justice of the peace at Westminster, examined the printer in order to discover who wrote the books and how many had been printed and sold, and to report back to the Council.⁵¹ This investigation began with the discovery of the

⁴⁹ Baillie, p. 87.

⁵⁰ *The Moderate Intelligencer* had entreated the government to release all political prisoners and also twice included comments that were sympathetic to the Leveller leader John Lilburne. The investigation of *The Moderate Intelligencer* must have been effective, as the paper ceased to appear in May 1654. *A Perfect Account* was a less controversial paper, which even complied with the government's order not to print any political news. The only reason the female hawker was apprehended was because the paper's editor, B. D., had not licensed *A Perfect Account* for that week. Since *A Perfect Account* was not subversive, it continued to appear until September 1655, when the Protectorate banned all newsheets except *Mercurius Politicus*. See Joseph Frank, *The Beginnings of the English Newspaper* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1961), pp. 241–2, 249.

⁵¹ *Calendar of State Papers, Domestic Series, 1654* (London: Longman, 1875–86), p. 59.

woman who was selling scandalous books, and through questioning eventually led to the arrest of the printer. Although many people were involved in the production and distribution of the pamphlets, the woman selling them was the most visible and consequently the easiest to apprehend. Her role, however, was relatively minor, which was why she was released after providing the name of the printer.

Other searches began in a similar manner. According to Colonel Hacker and Captain Shield's letter to Cromwell, a Mrs. Smyth in Uppingham received a packet of pamphlets and then dispersed them to several people. One of the individuals (who is not named) who received a pamphlet brought it to Colonel Hacker, who initiated enquiries and arrests. Hacker apprehended 'suspicious' people who were 'strangers in our country'.⁵² Upon further examination, Hacker and Shield determined that the subscribers to the pamphlets were Anabaptists and separatists, and they were particularly suspicious of a man named Anger.⁵³ The letter does not list any further action against Anger, and the Thurloe Papers do not mention his name again. Although it is unclear what legal proceedings followed this investigation, this case is another example of soldiers taking the lead in discovering illegal pamphlets.

The most significant case of censorship in the Protectorate was the suppression of the pamphlet *Killing Noe Murder*, and it also began with soldiers noticing unlicensed pamphlets. Published in Holland in 1657, *Killing Noe Murder* advocated the assassination of Cromwell. The author argued that Cromwell was a tyrant and 'a Tyrant, as we have said, being no part of a Commonwealth, nor submitting to the laws of it, but making himself above all law: There is no reason he should have the protection that is due to a member of a Common-wealth . . .'.⁵⁴ A tyrant was 'one out of all bounds of humane protection .. against whom is every man's hand'.⁵⁵ In the author's opinion, Miles Sindercomb — a former soldier in the New Model Army with Leveller convictions who attempted to set fire to Whitehall with a special incendiary device — and his failed effort to murder Cromwell was an example for all to follow.⁵⁶ The government recognized the seriousness of this pamphlet and Samuel Morland, who worked in Thurloe's office, referred to it as 'the most dangerous pamphlet lately thrown about the streets that ever has been printed in these times'.⁵⁷ The

⁵² Birch, IV, p. 720.

⁵³ Ibid., p. 720.

⁵⁴ Edward Sexby, *Killing Noe Murder* (Holland, 1657), p. 7

⁵⁵ Sexby, p. 6.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 15.

⁵⁷ C. H. Firth, "'Killing Noe Murder'", *English Historical Review*, 17 (1902), pp. 308–311 (p. 308).

author of this ‘most dangerous pamphlet’ was likely Edward Sexby, who had joined Cromwell’s Ironsides in 1643, and became the most radical of the original army agitators. The government had attempted to arrest Sexby in February 1655, but he escaped to Holland where he made contact with exiled royalist conspirators. While in Holland, Sexby attempted to organize a conspiracy against the Protectorate, which included Sindercomb’s efforts to burn Whitehall. The failure of this plot promoted Sexby to begin writing *Killing Noe Murder*.⁵⁸

The story of the Protectorate’s campaign to suppress *Killing Noe Murder* begins with a group of soldiers from the Tower investigating uncustomed goods. John Coltman, a soldier at the Tower, received information ‘that divers parcels of prohibited and uncustomed goods, where concealed in several houses in and about Wapping, Ratcliff, St. Catherine’s, &c’.⁵⁹ On 19 May 1657, Coltman, along with George Courtis, a haberdasher, searched several houses, including that of Samuel Rogers, a strong-water-man. In Rogers’s house they found seven parcels of the book *Killing Noe Murder*, with approximately two hundred copies in every parcel. Rogers’s servant, Elizabeth Cole, said that a man unknown to her had dropped off the books earlier in the day; she said that she could recognize the man if she saw him again. The next day, Coltman, Courtis, and Henry Matthews, another soldier from the Tower, waited by Rogers’s house in case the same man returned. When a man approached the house, Courtis and Matthews arrested him immediately, and Cole then verified that he was the same man who had come the day before. This man was Edward Wroughton, who, on 27 May 1657, confessed during examination that a man named Sturgeon⁶⁰ had asked for his help in moving uncustomed goods from Holland.⁶¹ Thomas Gregory, another soldier of the Tower of London, also found one-hundred and forty copies of *Killing Noe Murder* on the street.⁶² In addition to the efforts of these soldiers, a group of excise officers seized six hundred and fifty eight copies of the pamphlet. This discovery brought the total number of copies seized to approximately 2,200.⁶³ The confiscation of these pamphlets is the most impressive instance of censorship during the Protectorate, and soldiers played an essential role in it. By the time Cromwell was inaugurated as Lord Protector, the army had replaced the Stationers’ Company as the government’s tool for press control. There are, as McElligott and Peacey observe, impressive instances of

⁵⁸ Alan Marshall, ‘Edward Sexby (c. 1616–1658)’, *DNB*.

⁵⁹ Birch, VII, p. 315.

⁶⁰ This man was John Sturgeon, a Baptist preacher and pamphleteer.

⁶¹ Birch, VII, p. 316.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 319.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 315–19.

ensorship during the Protectorate, but in many of these cases the army was the primary means of enforcing censorship. Without the presence of a standing army, Cromwellian print laws would have lacked the teeth necessary to tear seditious pamphlets apart.

With a standing army commanded by a centralized state, the Protectorate had the ability to suppress any pamphlet it deemed dangerous. This level of power was unprecedented in English history, and it sparked a printed debate that lasted for years. In 1652, a combination of conservative stationers and Presbyterian ministers united in order to censor the work of Thomas Hobbes and other writings they deemed to be blasphemous. The names of six members of the Stationers' Company (who were also Presbyterian partisans cooperating with the Presbyterian clergy) appeared on the pamphlet *A Beacon Set on Fire*, which complained that popish and blasphemous books dominated the book trade. The six stationers — Luke Fawne, John Rothwell, Samuel Gellibrand, Thomas Underhill, Joshua Kirton, and Nathanael Webb — specialized in theological books. Although they were all supporters of Presbyterianism, Underhill, demonstrating the fluidity of Interregnum convictions, associated with Quaker printer Giles Calvert in some publications.⁶⁴ In the list of blasphemous books, the stationers included John Biddle's work. They were pleased that parliament disapproved of Biddle's anti-Trinitarian writings, 'but alas, there is no standing penal Law (that giveth sufficient encouragement to the Prosecutor, and investeth the Master and Wardens of the Company of Stationers, or some others with sufficient authority) to deter men from Writing, Printing and Publishing the like form the future'.⁶⁵ In order to amend this situation, the six stationers 'offer Proposals (if commended) how it may be done, without any trouble or charge to the state'.⁶⁶ The only proper method for controlling the press, according to the stationers, was licensing all pamphlets 'by faithful able men that are found in the faith'.⁶⁷

The comments made by these stationers reveal their desire to revert to an earlier system of press control, one in which guild (the Company) and church took the lead in censorship. The stationers' disappointment that the Master and Wardens of the Company lacked sufficient power reveals where they thought censorship authority should reside. Their

⁶⁴ Henry R. Plomer, *A Dictionary of Booksellers and Printers Who were at Work in England, Scotland, and Ireland from 1641–1667* (London: Printed for the Bibliographic Society, 1907), p. 185.

⁶⁵ Luke Fawne, *A Beacon Set on Fire* (London, 1652), p. 16.

⁶⁶ Fawne, *Set on Fire*, p. 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

commitment to offer proposals ‘without any trouble or charge to the state’ suggests that they sought to place all matters pertaining to print in the hands of the Company. These remarks are a response to the diminishing influence of the Company in the wake of the rise of the centralized state. Finally, their insistence on a system with licensers ‘that are found in the faith’ brings the church back into the process. The stationers were essentially asking for a reversion to the pre-Civil War system of censorship, only with stiffer penalties for violators. The pamphlet *A Beacon Set on Fire* was written in September 1652, fifteen months before Cromwell became Lord Protector, but it still illustrates growing concerns among stationers that their role as the watchdog of the press was being replaced by an increasingly powerful state and army.

The comments of the six stationers did not go unnoticed by the very entity the Company sought to dispossess. The most hostile response came from a group of army officers led by Colonel Thomas Pride. In their pamphlet *The Beacons Quenched*, they charged the stationers with seeking to ‘lash their neighbours with some Presbyterian whips, and none be permitted to publish any thing but what they please’.⁶⁸ Religious issues and charges of persecution were prominent throughout the pamphlet. While the Presbyterian stationers ‘delight in nothing more than in persecution of tender consciences,’ the army leaders permitted mistaken Christians to print their errors and then receive ‘better instruction’.⁶⁹ The pamphlet sets the stationers in opposition to both the parliament and army, emphasizing the two different methods of press control: guild and the state. *The Beacons Quenched* was printed by Henry Hills, the official printer of the Commonwealth and Protectorate, suggesting that the Rump approved of the pamphlet’s content. The six stationers issued a further response to the army officers in *The Beacon Flaming with a Non Obstante*. Like the other pamphlets, it was framed in a religious context as the stationers argued that much of the army’s criticism centred on their Presbyterianism. Although the bulk of the pamphlet focuses on matters of religion, it also dissects the issue of press control. The army officers had argued that a committee of licensers was unnecessary, noting that printers themselves could bring forward potentially dangerous pamphlets. The stationers, however, were quick to point out that such a system ‘supposes every Bookseller and Printer a competent and able Judge of whatsoever matter is printed, which he is not’.⁷⁰ Only a specialized committee comprised of faithful men could handle the task of licensing the press. On the charge of desiring a monopoly, the stationers noted that ‘its no Monopolie

⁶⁸ Thomas Pride, *The Beacons Quenched* (London, 1652), p. 11.

⁶⁹ Pride, pp. 10–12.

⁷⁰ Luke Fawne, *The Beacon Flaming with a Non Obstante* (London, 1652), p. 8.

to have power from the State as their Instruments to execute their laws'.⁷¹ The stationers viewed themselves as simply enforcing the laws of the state. The problem was that by the early 1650s, the state had found a far more effective 'Instrument' to 'execute' its laws.

The six stationers also received signs of sympathy from fellow printers. Michael Sparke published *A Second Beacon Fired by Scintilla*, demonstrating solidarity among stationers. Sparke had been printing since 1617, and he was responsible for publishing many of William Prynne's works. Throughout the 1640s, he was frustrated with his trade and led a group of stationers who sought to reform the Company (Baron). In *A Second Beacon Fired by Scintilla*, Sparke, like the six stationers, argued that popish books were becoming prominent in England, and that they posed a serious threat. He also commented on the current financial hardships of many stationers. According to Sparke, some stationers 'have not taken 20 s. a week, and their Rent to be paid was so much without Firing, Beer, and Bread, with much more charges &c. nay I have heard others that have been excellent well furnished, that they took not above 12 s. a week, some not so much; How, O how can these pay that they have not!'.⁷² Sparke was just as concerned with the stationers' well-being as he was with the spread of popish books. His comments illustrate the bond that many members of the Company had, and the value they placed on helping each other. The print trade was where they made their livelihood, and they were eager to protect it and each other. The army had no such concerns. Stationers' financial status had no place in Colonel Pride's pamphlet. Soldiers' and Stationers' responses to the 'Beacon controversy' illustrate their different relationships with print culture. When regulating pamphlets, the Company served the interests of both its members and the government, while the army followed only the state's orders. The Protectorate's decision to rely on the army rather than the Company rendered its system of censorship more centralized.

A Beacon Set on Fire and the pamphlets that responded to it are representative of the struggle between the Company and the state over who should have authority to monitor the press.⁷³ Ultimately, the state won this battle, as illustrated by the print legislation in the Protectorate. Despite the state's apparent victory, the debate did not end. Two years later, when Cromwell was Lord Protector, the same group of six stationers printed another pamphlet entitled *A Second Beacon Fired*. The content of this pamphlet was similar to the earlier one, only it contained a greater sense of frustration. After listing the books that they

⁷¹ Fawne, *Flaming*, p. 14.

⁷² Michael Sparke, *A Second Beacon Fired by Scintilla* (London, 1652), p. 8.

⁷³ Peacey, *Politicians*, p. 159.

considered popish and blasphemous, which was almost identical to the original list, the stationers noted ‘all which we humbly minded the Parliament of, with the Contents of each Book, in a Book two years ago printed, called *The Beacon set on fire*’.⁷⁴ The number of blasphemous books troubled the stationers because ‘the Printing and Publishing so many thousands of such Books aforesaid, argues that there are many buyers, and the many buyers argue a great infection by them’.⁷⁵ Once again, they were eager to offer, ‘if commanded,’ a method for suppressing blasphemous books ‘without any trouble to the State’.⁷⁶ The stationers’ decision to re-publish their concerns regarding press control reveals their passion for this issue. In their opinion, the state and army had not taken sufficient steps to prevent the publication of blasphemous books. What was needed was a ‘way of Licensing Books, by faithful able men that are sound in Faith’.⁷⁷

Although this second pamphlet did not bring about the desired change in censorship, it did receive a response. The religious content of *A Second Beacon Fired*, in particular, prompted much reaction. The Quaker Francis Howgill published *The Firey Darts of the Divel Quenched*, which objected to the inclusion of Quaker writings on the list of blasphemous books. Howgill questioned the stationers’ qualifications to judge religious books, arguing: ‘What cry you out against books, and printing, and blasphemy, that cannot distinguish a lamb from a dog?’.⁷⁸ More significantly, John Goodwin, whose writings were also listed as blasphemous, wrote *A Fresh Discovery of the High-Presbyterian Spirit*, which contained a series of letters between the stationers and himself. Goodwin was an Independent minister and long-time supporter of religious liberty. He was initially supportive of Cromwell and the Protectorate, but the creation of a state church caused him to become disillusioned with the regime.⁷⁹

In Goodwin’s opening letter, he attacked the principle of having a committee specially appointed to license pamphlets. Many of his arguments centred on religious freedom, as he noted: ‘What ground is there in the Word of God for the investing of Edmund (for example) Arthur, and William, with a Nebuchadnezzarean power over the Press, to stifle or slay what

⁷⁴ Luke Fawne, *A Second Beacon Fired* (London, 1654), p. 3. Unlike the earlier pamphlet, *A Second Beacon Fired* does not include *The Holy Court*, Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, and *A Testimony to an Approaching Glory*. The authors of *A Second Beacon Fired* also list the blasphemies and errors that had been printed in ‘these two or three years last past’, which include some new items.

⁷⁵ Fawne, *Fired*, p. 10.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁸ Francis Howgill, *The Firey Darts of the Divel Quenched* (London, 1654), p. 20.

⁷⁹ John Coffey, *John Goodwin and the Puritan Revolution: Religion and Intellectual Change in Seventeenth-Century England* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2006), pp. 233–45.

books they please'.⁸⁰ Nebuchadnezzar was a Babylonian king in the Old Testament who captured and destroyed Jerusalem and exiled the Israelites. Religion may have been his focus, but Goodwin also made secular claims against a committee of licensers. He wrote: 'Is not the granting of such a power over the presse, as the Beacon firers in the great heat of their devotion and zeal, sollicite the Parliament to vest in a certain number of men, ill consistent with the interest and benefit of a free Commonwealth, and of the like nature and consideration with the granting of Monopolies?'.⁸¹ Goodwin's chief motive for responding to the stationers was the inclusion of his books on their list of blasphemous publications. His grievances with them, however, went well beyond any attack on his writing. He feared the power of a licensing committee and the looming threat of religious uniformity that such a committee created.⁸²

Following Goodwin's letter, *A Fresh Discovery* contains a series of responses from the stationers and Goodwin's further responses. Much of the ensuing debate focused on matters of religious doctrine, but in one instance, the two sides disputed how to control the press. The stationers 'wonder at your [Goodwin's] boldness in calling the power of the Protector & Parliament a Nebuchadnezzarean power, but we wonder more that you should invest Doctor Whitchote, Doctor Cudworth [theologians at Cambridge], and the rest with a Nebuchadnezzarean power over Bookes and Opinions'.⁸³ This comment was a reference to Goodwin's earlier work, *Redemption Redeemed*, which opened with a dedication to Whitchote and the other heads of Cambridge Colleges. In the dedication, Goodwin asked them to read his book and judge whether his religious arguments were true. He acknowledged that men with the power to judge opinions often become corrupted, but the Cambridge theologians:

have no such temptation upon you, as particular and private men have, to flee to any such polluted Sanctuary, as that mentioned, to save your Names and Reputations from the hand of any Opinion or Doctrine whatsoever. For you so far (I presume) understand your Interest and Prerogative, that for matters of Opinion and Doctrine, you are invested with an autocratical majesty, like that which was sometimes given unto Nebuchadnezzar over men ... But the joint suffrage of your Authority, your

⁸⁰ John Goodwin, *A Fresh Discovery of the High-Presbyterian Spirit* (London, 1654), p. 5.

⁸¹ Goodwin, *Fresh Discovery*, p. 46.

⁸² Coffey, p. 243.

⁸³ Goodwin, *Fresh Discovery*, p. 46.

Interest of Esteem amongst men being predominant, you may slay, what Doctrines, what Opinions you please; and what you please you may keep active.⁸⁴

Many of the men to whom Goodwin dedicated his book were Cambridge Platonists — philosophers with theological backgrounds who emphasized freedom of the will — who were sympathetic to Goodwin’s ideas.

Goodwin’s condemnation of the stationers’ license system may seem at odds with his willingness to have Cambridge divines judge opinions and doctrines. Goodwin’s reply to the stationers illustrates his own stance on censorship. ‘Is it,’ he wrote, ‘boldness or sauciness with God . . . to ascribe unto men, not simply (as you, after your manner suggest) an Autocratorial majesty, but with limitation and explication, an Autocratical majesty over books and opinions?’⁸⁵ John Coffey asserts that Goodwin was arguing in favor of a free press in *A Fresh Discovery*, but Goodwin did not advocate complete freedom. He was not opposed to having officials oversee ‘books and opinions’, he simply did not want those officials to be rigid Presbyterians. What Goodwin feared was an independent licensing committee whose power was unchecked. The men at Cambridge whom Goodwin charged with reading his book had ‘limitation and explication’, meaning that their role and powers were defined and controlled. An independent licensing committee, in Goodwin’s eyes, was both dangerous, because there was no check on its power, and unnecessary, because it would be unsuccessful. He queried: ‘have the Lord Protector and Parliament all this while, wherein they have established no such Committee, allowed men a liberty to blaspheme Jesus Christ, or to corrupt his Gospel?’⁸⁶ Although he would come to despise the Cromwellian state church, Goodwin, in 1654, viewed the removal of press control from the hands of the Presbyterian-inclined Stationers’ Company as a positive development. The authors of *A Beacon set on Fire* felt differently. They believed that only the Stationers’ Company was capable of monitoring the press, and they lamented its marginalization in the 1650s. The question of where to place the power of censorship ignited the passions of the stationers. This debate did not disappear with the creation of the Protectorate, as stationers continued to defend their interests against an encroaching government.

Despite the claims of the authors of *A Beacon set on Fire*, the Stationers’ Company was not completely inactive in the area of press control. Focusing on the late 1640s and early 1650s

⁸⁴ Goodwin, *Redemption Redeemed* (London: 1651), epistle dedicatory.

⁸⁵ Goodwin, *Fresh Discovery*, p. 48.

⁸⁶ Goodwin, *Fresh Discovery*, p. 52.

(before Cromwell became Lord Protector), Jason McElligott notes several instances when the Company censored books for religious or political reasons.⁸⁷ Even during the second Protectoral Parliament, Thurloe still envisioned a role for the Stationers' Company. When the second Protectoral Parliament was called, Thurloe attempted to augment the censorship laws, and he sought to include the Company in this process. By 1656, Thurloe seems to have believed that more could be done to control the press. At this point, the second Protectoral Parliament was sitting and expressing much animosity towards the Major-Generals, a key component in Thurloe's system of intelligence. Perhaps Thurloe anticipated that MPs would demand an end to the rule of the Major-Generals. Given this possible future problem, Thurloe might have thought it pertinent to enact new laws in order to continue to regulate printing effectively. On 17 October 1656, 'it was reported that Secretary Thurloe was having a Bill for regulating printing prepared 'to include all former Lawes and desired to have the advice of the [Stationers'] Company that nothing may be done to the prejudice of their interest.''⁸⁸ Thurloe sought to include the Company as he revised the printing laws, but the Secretary of State was now the dominate figure. Unlike the pre-Civil War years, it was a state bureaucrat who was responsible for regulating the press, while the Company had fallen to the role of advisor. The Company was still part of the process, but the state dictated the priorities of censorship.

Censorship and the debates surrounding it had existed before the Cromwellian Protectorate, but in the 1650s they both began to take a new shape. The work by McElligott and Peacey has provided an appropriate framework to understand Protectoral censorship, which was centralized and capable of suppressing any pamphlet, but chose to use that power sparingly. This ability to stifle pamphlets at will, however, was contingent on the presence of a standing army. The army was frequently the driving force behind investigations into seditious printing, leaving the Stationers' Company on the sidelines. Lacking the Company's concern for stationers' welfare, the army provided the state with new possibilities to control the press. Army officers sent reports to Thurloe and presented pamphlets to parliament, while soldiers spotted and confiscated seditious pamphlets. These means of censorship were only available to the governments of the Interregnum, as the army was disbanded when the Charles II was restored in 1660. The Licencing Act of 1662 established the legal framework of Restoration era censorship. Under the Licensing Act, the

⁸⁷ McElligott, *Royalism*, p. 204.

⁸⁸ McKenzie and Bell, I, p. 390.

Stationers' Company returned to its position of prominence, as all books had to be entered into the Company's register. Additionally, the Act contained provisions for a pre-publication licensing system similar to that of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century.⁸⁹ After the chaos of the Civil War and Interregnum, the general desire for a return to normalcy included the methods of press control.

The growth of the centralized state and the presence of an army provided the Protectorate with enhanced powers, and these new abilities were a topic of debate. Stationers had been protesting the state's trespasses upon their territory since the early 1650s, and Cromwell's inauguration as Lord Protector did nothing to silence those complaints. Army leaders and certain religious figures, conversely, rejoiced in the marginalization of the Stationers' Company as they celebrated their new religious liberty. The more Cromwell and Thurloe relied on the army, the less they needed the Company. Thurloe considered bringing the stationers back into the process only when the Major-Generals regime was at risk. This situation did not sit well with the stationers, who renewed the debate in 1654, with different factions contributing. Protectoral censorship was centralized and militarized and, therefore, novel in England. This novelty was the source of both the government's power and the print world's debate.

⁸⁹ Kemp and McElligott, III, p. 13.