
Professor Braddick’s survey of the English Civil Wars offers much to both scholarship and a more general readership. The book describes key events in a traditional ten-year scope of the civil wars, beginning with the Bishops’ Wars and ending with the regicide. Yet, like the thousands of pamphlets from the 1630s and 1640s that lay at the foundation of Braddick’s analysis, the apparent orderliness of the book’s narrative cleverly serves to expose the sheer disorder and complexity of the period. Braddick’s ‘New History’ successfully uses the most clear-cut events, such as parliamentary victories at Marston Moor or Naseby, to reveal their diverse meanings for contemporaries who could publicize their views in an ever-expanding and increasingly anarchic public sphere. As Braddick proves, the civil wars were ‘a conflict with the pens as well as swords, and which “divided the understandings of men, as well as their affections.” In fact, in a sense, it was what the war was about.’ Braddick’s persistent discussion of the ‘pamphlet wars,’ much more so than the Second Civil War of 1648, justify the use of the plural form of the ‘civil wars.’

As evident in the book’s title, Braddick’s civil wars are plainly English, though he uses some ‘Three Kingdoms’ approaches to underscore his main argument. Readers who are inclined to emphasize the importance of Scotland and Ireland in the civil wars may feel let down by the promising title of the first part of the book, ‘The Crisis of the Three Kingdoms, 1637-1642,’ especially since the first chapter opens by discussing the Scottish Reformation and Prayer Book Rebellion before the remainder of the book focuses upon England as ‘the cockpit of a war of all three kingdoms.’ Yet Braddick cleverly uses the history of Scotland and Ireland to strengthen his interpretation of the English Civil Wars. For instance, Scottish Presbyterian unity serves an important function in the book since it highlights the disunity amongst partisans on either side of the conflict in England. Religion played a prominent role in this lack of unity, especially on the parliamentarian side where divisions surfaced between Presbyterians and Independents, but Braddick skillfully traces the transformation of religious disagreement during the early 1640s to constitutional disagreement by the end of the 1640s. This is a well-known history, but Braddick carefully
analyses these disagreements within the context of an increasingly fraught relationship between the public sphere and public policy. The huge burst of pamphlets contributed to a ‘greater hesitancy and lack of clarity about the aims of the opposition,’ and ultimately led to greater radicalism as all sides sought to cast events according to their own views and aspirations. Braggick demonstrates that the breakdown of authority, especially spiritual authority, led to a situation where ‘print had become a source of authority and community in itself,’ culminating in the bloody partisanship of the 1640s. Recently, comparisons have emerged between the unruly public sphere of the 1640s and our own unrestrained world of the blogosphere and twittersphere. However, without making the comparison explicit, Braggick’s book reveals both the positive and negative consequences of the hyper-democratization of news and public opinion. Truth was up for grabs, and while the cacophony of voices making absolute claims paved the way for discord it also ‘created the opportunity to fly kites and make creative arguments.’ On both the national and local level, Braggick demonstrates how a wide range of ‘creative arguments’ contributed to major religious, military and political decisions while also being shaped by them. However, while suggesting links between ideas and events, Braggick convincingly denies that any outcome was ‘inevitable.’ He rejects holistic explanations for the motivations of one group or another, arguing that they fail to take into consideration the complex processes of conflict and negotiation in both the buildup and aftermath of key events. Braggick often uses symbols to illustrate this point, showing the various meanings that different pamphleteers attached to a wide range of objects, including Cheapside Cross, the Great Seal, the king’s living body, or even the dead bodies of John Pym and William Laud.

This book is an impressive work of scholarship, fully equipped with extensive citations, bibliography and index. However, for the general reader, Braggick does not overload the narrative with references to other historians or historical debates. Also, for a book verging on 600 pages, the prose is clean and concise, and he injects humor at points to keep the narrative moving smoothly. Overall, this is an accessible book for readers with limited historical background, and for scholars it fulfills its promise to offer a ‘new’ history of the civil wars by locating print and religion at the centre of the upheavals of the 1640s. Braggick’s sympathetic analysis of individual and corporate responses to these upheavals takes us significantly closer to solving the riddle posed by the pamphleteer John Benbrigge, in his own