

a handsome and well-produced volume, with a myriad of applications that extend far beyond 'the auld grey toun'.

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Christian Liddy, *Contesting the City. The Politics of Citizenship in English Towns, 1250–1530*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017. xxi + 254pp. 5 figures. 5 maps. £75.00 hbk.
doi:[10.1017/S0963926818000330](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926818000330)

In *Contesting the City*, Christian Liddy develops a new perspective on the political history of late medieval English towns that redirects attention from oligarchy to contestation. He argues that conflict, as much as hierarchy, characterized urban politics, and that both were rooted in 'a *collective* consciousness of the rights of urban citizenship' (p. 12). The book's title expresses how he understands citizenship: it established the rules of communal living in a polyvalent way, and, as such, citizenship was the source of political contestation about 'the identity, role, rights and responsibilities of the citizen' (p. 2).

The book makes a significant historiographical intervention. It questions the conventional assumptions about medieval English town histories that emphasize singularity, linearity and royal power, by inscribing the themes of contestation, participation and public sphere into them. The result is a persuasive multidimensional narrative that identifies the commonalities in the political cultures of English towns in the later Middle Ages, which also puts the presumed distinctiveness of the English experiences into perspective by comparing them to those on the Continent, especially in the German lands.

The analysis of the native tradition of medieval urban citizenship, which preceded the civic republicanism of the early modern era, is organized in five chapters. First, Liddy dissects the contradictions inherent to the practices of citizenship: despite belonging to the same community or corporate body, not all freemen or burgesses were equal. This was a structural source of tension between the citizens who ruled and those who belonged to the commonality, as they differed in their understanding of the conditions of access to citizenship, and of the political, legal and economic privileges and responsibilities that came with it. Good reputation and guild membership were deemed important, but local residency appears to have been the critical criterion in – the book's case-studies – Bristol, Coventry, London, Norwich and York.

The following five chapters explore the 'citizen politics' in which the commons were involved. The freedom of the town was understood spatially, and freemen were keen to protect the spatial boundaries of what they considered communal space against legal, economic or physical encroachment by authorities, individuals or outsiders – for example, by the Lord of Whitley, closely linked to Coventry's ruling elite, who enclosed a part of what the town's citizens regarded as common pasturage, leading to a series of riots in the 1480s and 1490s. Disputes over boundaries were a clear example of spatial politics. To a certain extent, the urban ruling elites (composed by the *probi homines*) had a love-hate relationship

with their fellow citizens belonging to the commonalty. The former required the presence of the latter at the annual mayoral elections to legitimize the temporal power of the urban rulers, but urban magistrates were keen to prevent the commoners from literally raising their political voice at these occasions. Liddy convincingly demonstrates that civic authority was fragile in nature and its transfer was ceremonially reinforced to construct continuity. The 'sound and sight' of citizen politics is explored in the fifth chapter, in which it is argued that political communication was as much about publicly demonstrating the rulers' authority by proclamation as about controlling the various urban public spheres by keeping secrecy. The craft guilds, next to the street and the market place, are singled out as political arenas where dissenting speech could be heard, but also punished, signalling that urban politics was about communication itself. In the final chapter, Liddy demonstrates how written constitutions, such as the Great Charter of London from 1319 or the Norwich New Composition from 1415, became objects of political conflict. Whereas these documents were intended to codify and permanently settle the rules of the game (increasingly expressed in the vernacular), they remained compromises that failed to overcome the structural tensions about the political roles of citizens.

Contesting the City testifies to Liddy's profound familiarity with the medieval sources of English towns, the reading of which is enriched by the pertinent comparisons. He provides a compelling argument about the meanings and practices of urban politics, adding significant empirical weight to the recent historiographical emphasis on the active role of the 'middling sort of people' in shaping the urban communities of pre-modern Europe, in which the quest for concord involved contestation. While acknowledging the polycentric character of towns, Liddy explicitly takes a structural approach that asserts a 'repetitive and persistent rhythm' of medieval urban politics (p. 209). This implies, on the one hand, a rather static view of the late medieval urban conditions of which the politics of citizenship were reflective, and, on the other, a binary opposition between the oligarchy and the commonalty that fails to capture fully the complexity and plurality of urban social relations in this period. Similarly, the incompatibility of the two 'classic' ideas of citizenship does not exclude that more mundane meanings for citizens who eschewed practising politics or engaging in debates on good government and its nature. More important, however, Liddy points to an answer to the question how these multiple definitions of the citizen emerged and why oligarchic tendencies gained the upper hand in the early sixteenth century: power and its ideologies were the sources of urban politics.

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Anne F. Sutton, *Wives and Widows of Medieval London*. Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2016. x + 390pp. Bibliography. £24.00 pbk.
doi:[10.1017/S0963926818000342](https://doi.org/10.1017/S0963926818000342)

The main achievement of *Wives and Widows of Medieval London* is to show that behind the powerful men of London were often women, who used their wealth, status and connections to further their husbands' ambitions, and to secure their