

Wilkes, John (1725–1797) and the “Wilkes and Liberty” movement

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John Wilkes, the son of a Clerkenwell distiller, played a central role in the development of English radicalism during the reign of George III. Wilkes was responsible for prompting several controversies that brought an end to the “general warrant” in England as well as a reassessment of the concepts of habeas corpus, due process, and freedom of the press. Wilkes's mother was a wealthy heiress of a tanner, and it is largely due to her inheritance that Wilkes received a boarding school education in Hertford. In 1744, his family sent him to the University of Leiden, but he left in 1746 without taking a degree, a common practice among the eighteenth-century elite.

Upon his return to England, Wilkes married Mary Mead, a childhood friend who was ten years his senior. Mismatched, Wilkes was an affable rake while Mary was a devout Presbyterian and recluse. With his father's marriage present of land, in addition to his wife's substantial trust, Wilkes set himself up as a country squire in Aylesbury. The couple was perpetually unhappy, and by 1756 they permanently separated. Their marriage resulted in the birth of a daughter in 1750. Mary, or Polly as Wilkes called her, was his closest companion throughout his life.

Wilkes was incredibly successful at cultivating the social network that he would need in the principal pursuit of his life, politics. He joined the Royal Society in 1748/9, the Sublime Society of Beefsteaks in 1754, and he became a governor of the Foundling Hospital in 1759. During these years, he and his close friend, Thomas Potter, engaged in the activities of the Monks of Medmenham Abbey, a club for libertines that included such notables as Sir Francis Dashwood and John Montagu, 4th Earl of Sandwich. Wilkes's introduction to parliamentary politics came through

Potter in 1754. Having supported Potter's bid for an Aylesbury seat in parliament, Potter's patrons, William Pitt and Richard Grenville, 1st Earl Temple, orchestrated Wilkes's appointment to High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire. This association with the Pitt–Temple alliance led to his election as MP for Aylesbury in 1757.



John Wilkes (1727–97) was an English radical who fought for voters' rights to determine their own representatives. As a member of parliament he advocated anti-government legislation and was often removed from office by his political enemies. Wilkes was instrumental in promoting the right of the press to publish parliamentary debates, which in turn made

the workings of government a public affair. (Dover Publications)

Wilkes's election to parliament took place during Britain's first bleak years in the Seven Years' War. Improved British fortunes by 1759 coincided with the subsequent rise of a new monarch and his Scottish favorite, John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute. Wilkes and other followers of Pitt and Temple found themselves in the opposition, for which Wilkes became the leading journalist. Wilkes published the *North Briton* between 1762 and 1763, turning his acid pen against the Bute ministry, including his friends Dashwood and Sandwich, now political rivals. When Wilkes's attacks became too much for the ministry with the publication of *North Briton*, number 45, it attempted to suppress Wilkes's voice, issuing a general warrant in May 1763 and arresting 48 printers in addition to Wilkes. His arrest, despite his parliamentary privilege, and the heavy-handed approach by the ministry sparked popular resentment, especially among the middling orders. Broadsides and newspapers came to Wilkes's defense, and crowds shouting "Wilkes and Liberty" were a common scene outside Wilkes's cell. By the time Wilkes was released under parliamentary privilege, he was a popular hero in London. And, even as the government attempted to build a case against him, he built a case against the arbitrary arrest and imprisonment of the printers as well as the illegal seizure of his papers.

During the spring of 1763, Wilkes helped organize 25 printers to bring suits against the government for illegal arrest and seizure of property. The printers, and later Wilkes, won their cases against the execution of the general warrant and received compensation. The precedent effectively ended the issuing of general warrants. Meanwhile, Wilkes embarked on printing a new edition of the *North Briton* as well as a scandalous poem, the *Essay on Woman*, which he and Potter had written for their fellow Monks of Medmenham Abbey. Unfortunately for Wilkes, the government was orchestrating a counteroffensive. In November, parliament, which had obtained a stolen copy of the *Essay on Woman*, declared Wilkes guilty

of seditious libels in both the Essay and the North Briton. It condemned the “Forty-Five” to be burned by the hangman. Once again, however, Wilkite “mobs” came to his defense, preventing the December 3 burning of the “Forty-Five.” Nevertheless, Wilkes's fate was sealed and he escaped to France, where he remained an outlaw for four years.

Wilkes's return to Britain in 1768 reveals that his popularity had not waned. Despite being imprisoned for libel and expelled from parliament, he was undefeated in three parliamentary elections. Wilkite supporters would not have their electoral wishes denied, and they voted him a London city alderman while they petitioned for the revocation of his parliamentary expulsion. One of the best-organized Wilkite groups was the Gentlemen Supporters of the Bill of Rights, or the Bill of Rights Society. The Bill of Rights Society's initial mission was to pay Wilkes's extensive debt so that he would not find himself in debtors' prison upon his 1770 release. However, the Bill of Rights Society's interests became more general, especially under the influence of John Horne, who argued for annual parliaments and the reform of the corrupt electoral system. Unfortunately, Horne and Wilkes's relationship was acrimonious, and, in 1771, Horne split to form the Constitutional Society. The ministry would use the split to undermine radical causes in the years leading to the American War of Independence.

While Wilkes had challenged arbitrary government in the 1760s, setting important precedents, his position in London City government allowed him to permanently transform the status of the press in Britain. Long denied the right to report on parliamentary debates, the press's ability to accurately cover the government was limited. In fact, the Commons actively prosecuted several printers in 1771. Led by Wilkes, the City of London defended the printers, claiming that it alone had the right of arrest within city boundaries. With massive support, and the potential for violence should the government pursue the matter, parliament backed down, beginning the period of modern parliamentary reporting.

Despite the fact that Wilkes continued to push for reform in city and national politics – even introducing the first parliamentary reform bill in 1776 – the final decades of Wilkes's life found him increasingly criticized by the public. His role in suppressing the 1780 [Gordon Riots](#) and his ever closer association with governmental ministries suggested to many that Wilkes was no longer the radical that he was in the 1760s. A more likely assessment may be that Wilkes's political positions did not change as rapidly as the face of radicalism. Thus, Wilkes could not find common ground with the more radical supporters of the French Revolution.

SEE ALSO: [Gordon “No Popery” Riots, Britain, 1780](#); [Horne Tooke, John \(1736–1812\)](#)

References and Suggested Readings

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