

John Wilkes

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John Wilkes was a very interesting and complicated man, a radical and a libertine, who had a large influence on the governance of Britain for many years. He was a radical journalist, and a politician as well as a magistrate, essayist and soldier. He was said to be the ugliest man in Britain due to a protruding jaw and an unsightly squint, though this was offset by his great charm.

John Wilkes is remembered chiefly for the Middlesex election dispute of 1769 in which he fought for the rights of electors, rather than the House of Commons, to choose their representatives, for his part in asserting the rights of newspapers to report the proceedings of Parliament, and for his support of the American colonists in the American War of Independence.

He was born in Clerkenwell in 1725. His father was a distiller. He went to Leiden University in Holland, and while there became sympathetic to religious non-conformists. He also developed a great sense of patriotism. At the age of 22, he made an advantageous marriage to Mary Meade, then aged 32, and came into possession of an estate and income in Buckinghamshire. They separated after ten years; Wilkes never married again, but gained a reputation as a rake.

He was a Fellow of the Royal Society from 1749, appointed High Sheriff of Buckinghamshire in 1754 and was elected MP for Aylesbury in 1757 and 1761. He was also a member of the notorious Hellfire Club in West Wycombe.

Wilkes first came to prominence when the Earl of Bute became head of the government in 1762, and Wilkes started a radical publication *The North Briton* to attack him. In issue 45 of April 1763, Wilkes strongly attacked King George III's speech which was said to have been written by Bute. The King felt personally insulted, and a general warrant was used to arrest Wilkes and 49 other people. Wilkes successfully argued that he was protected by



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parliamentary privilege; this claim was upheld by the Lord Chief Justice in court. Parliament then removed the protection of members for the writing and publishing of seditious libel.

Also in 1763, a pornographic poem *Essay on Women*, partly written by Wilkes, began to be circulated, and was used by his enemies to attack him. One of them was the Earl of Sandwich, who some time previously had had an exchange in which he told Wilkes "Sir, I do not know whether you will die on the scaffold or of the pox". Wilkes immediately retorted "That depends, my lord, on whether I embrace your lordship's principles or your mistress". Sandwich read out parts of the poem in the House of Lords, where it was declared obscene and blasphemous. Wilkes fled to Paris before charges could be brought, and was tried in absentia, found guilty, and declared outlaw.

He had planned to wait for a change of government, but his French creditors became pressing, and he returned to England in 1768. The government did not issue warrants for his immediate arrest, as they did not want to inflame popular support.

He stood again as MP for Middlesex in 1768, but waived his immunity, and was sentenced to two years imprisonment and

a £1,000 fine. After he went to jail in the Kings Bench Prison in Southwark, his supporters gathered in St. George's Fields nearby charting "No liberty, no King". Troops opened fire causing some deaths and injuries. Wilkes was expelled from Parliament 4 times, and then re-elected by the Middlesex voters, but Parliament declared his opponent the winner. In defiance, Wilkes mobilized his supporters to elect him as an Alderman of the City of London.

Wilkes was released from prison in March 1770 and resumed his seat as an MP. While in Parliament, he condemned Government policy towards the American colonies. He also introduced the first Radical bill to Parliament, though it failed to pass. His key success was to protect the freedom of the press by gaining passage of a bill to remove the power of general warrants and to end Parliament's ability to punish political reports of debates.

During the Gordon riots of 1780, he was in charge of the militia protecting the Bank of England from the mob. On his orders, the troops fired into the mob. His popularity rapidly declined, although he continued to be MP for Middlesex until 1790.

He died in January 1898. A talking statue to his memory stands in Fetter Lane, off Fleet Street.



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Additional notes

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Website sources: Wikipedia,
UK parliament: www.parliament.uk

Further reading

National archives: blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk

National Portrait Gallery: npg.org.uk

John Wilkes; The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty, Yale U.P., 2006

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