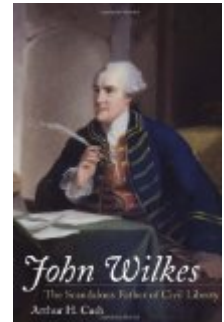


**Arthur H. Cash.** *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty.* New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006. xiii + 482 pp. \$22.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-300-12363-0.



**Reviewed by** Emma V. Macleod

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Arthur Cash's achievement is considerable in capturing so comprehensively, and in a readable narrative, such a full and colorful life as that of John Wilkes (1725-97). The son of a Clerkenwell malt distiller, Wilkes proceeded in the manner of a caricaturist's rogue's progress: Leiden student, libertine, Hellfire Club member, country Justice of the Peace, fashionable Londoner, devoted father, MP (1757-63 and 1770-90), duellist (twice), prisoner (also twice), Paris outlaw, debtor on a grand scale, political radical, hero of the rebel American colonists, Lord Mayor (1774-75), City Chamberlain (1779-97), womanizer, linguist, classical scholar, and supporter of the Crown and William Pitt the Younger. Despite this last named role, his name became synonymous with "liberty" for London crowds from 1763, while his battles with successive British governments to establish various civil and political rights constitute his lasting significance and the *raison d'être* for Cash's biography.

Wilkes has not been ignored by biographers hitherto, however, and Cash is generous in his acknowledgements of his predecessors, from Wilkes's contemporary and friend, John Almon to

P. D. G. Thomas's study, *John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (1996).[1] Indeed, Thomas's book is probably the closest of the modern biographies to Cash's volume in its central concern. Whereas, for instance, George Rudé was most interested in the Wilkite *movement*, both Thomas and Cash are preoccupied with the importance of Wilkes himself as a political radical.[2] Thomas's biography is the more nuanced of the two in terms of its analysis of the development of eighteenth-century British politics. Cash, however, has aimed his book at a general American readership, rather than a scholarly audience, wishing to introduce a key figure in the rise of modern liberty and to show the origins of some of our most important modern Anglo-American liberties.

For instance, Wilkes forced the extinction of general warrants--the practice of arresting anyone who might have been involved in a crime and doing the detective work afterwards--an issue of enormous contemporary significance in both Britain and the United States. He also established the first radical political society in eighteenth-century Britain, the Society of the Supporters of the

Bill of Rights (1769); most famously, perhaps, he fought for the right of voters to determine their representatives rather than the House of Commons (in the Middlesex election saga of 1768-70); he was instrumental in obliging Lord North's government to concede the right of printers to publish verbatim accounts of parliamentary debates (1771); and he introduced the first Bill for parliamentary reform in the British parliament (1776). Wilkes had many American admirers. For example, James Madison explicitly acted on his story when writing measures into the American constitution that prevented Congress from rejecting any legally elected member, and proscribing general warrants for arrest. Wilkes was not a deep political thinker, but he was a superb publicist, and he excelled at exploiting his own political crises to bring major issues tangibly and comprehensibly before a previously unpoliticized crowd. Cash's appraisal does not surpass Thomas's, but it is based on substantial research and contains full notes to cater to academic readers, and it is often shrewd and illuminating.

Academic quibbles do arise. For example, Jacobites were not all Roman Catholic (p. 15); Wilkes was not "democratic" (p. 12); the Earl of Sandwich was not a Duke (p. 33); the Houses of Parliament were not razed "to make way for" the current buildings in the nineteenth century (p. 49), but were accidentally destroyed by fire; the parliamentary reform Bill introduced by Pitt the Younger was proposed in 1785 not 1783 (p. 349); and universal male suffrage was achieved in Britain in 1918, not 1884 (p. 349). The book is written in a mostly enjoyably accessible style, but the repetition of such phrases as "as you know" and "as you may remember" begins to jar after a while. Nevertheless, this is a delightful and thorough account of an important political life, and it is to be hoped that Cash succeeds in his purpose of acquainting many people for the first time with John Wilkes, "the scandalous father of civil liberty."

Notes [1]. John Almon, *The correspondence of the late John Wilkes with his friends, printed from the original manuscripts, in which are introduced memoirs of his life by John Almon* (London, 1805).

[2]. George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763 to 1774* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962).

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