

Lecture 2: Wilkes and Liberty

Structure of the lecture:

- Object of the week
- Key words: patriotism and liberty
- Who was Wilkes and what did he represent?
- Wilkes's squint and the importance of new media
- Why did Wilkes fail?

Key words:

Patriotism.....

'Wilkes and Liberty'

Horace Walpole: 'Does not there seem to be a fatality attending the Court whenever they meddle with that man? What instance is there of such a demagogue maintaining a war against a King, Ministries, Courts of Law, a whole Legislature and all Scotland for nine years together? Wilkes in prison is chosen Member of Parliament and then Alderman of London. His colleagues betray him, desert him, expose him, and he becomes Sheriff of London. I believe, if he was to be hanged, he would be made King of England'.¹

John Wilkes, April 1763, before the Court of Common Pleas: 'The liberty of all peers and gentlemen and what touches me more sensibly, that of all the middling and inferior set of people who stand most in need of protection – is in my case this day to be finally decided upon; a question of such importance as to determine at once whether English liberty shall be a reality or a shadow'.²

Key point: 'Wilkes and Liberty' was so inclusive and ambiguous that the popular activity and crowd actions surrounding Wilkes went beyond his direction and control.

Programme of the Society of the Supporters of the Bill of Rights, 1771:

- shorter parliaments,
- exclusion of placemen,
- a fair and equal representation,
- imposition of oaths against bribery upon candidates,
- redress for the Middlesex election,
- renunciation of attempts to tax the American colonists other than in their own freely elected assemblies,
- repeal of all punitive legislation against the colonists,
- repeal of the Quebec Act.

¹ Cited by Ian Gilmour, *Riot, Risings and Revolution: Governance and Violence in Eighteenth-Century England* (1992), p. 301.

² *Ibid.*, p. 307.

Why did Wilkes ultimately fail?

1.
2.
3.
4.

Quick timeline

1757 – Wilkes enters parliament as MP for Aylesbury

1760 – accession of George III

June 1762 - John Wilkes starts *North Briton*

April 1763 – no 45 issue of North Briton published

16 May 1763 – Hogarth published his caricature of Wilkes

19 January 1764 – Wilkes expelled from the Commons; flees to France

25 March 1768 – Wilkes stood for City of London; came last

28 March 1768 – Wilkes contests Middlesex and wins

27 April 1768 – Wilkes eventually surrendered to the Court of King’s Bench. Sentenced to four years’ imprisonment.

10 May 1768 – ‘Massacre of St. George’s Fields’ – 11 people killed

16 February 1769 – Wilkes elected for Middlesex again; expelled from the Commons again [note in absentia – he was still in prison]

March 1769 – the Society of the Supporters of the Bill of Rights formed

March 1769 – Wilkes elected for Middlesex a third time, and again expelled from the Commons.

June 1771 – Society of the Supporters of the Bill of Rights produce a comprehensive plan for parliamentary reform.

October 1772 – Wilkes elected as Lord Mayor of London.

1774 general election - three of Wilkes’s candidates were carried in the city of London; across the river in Southwark, two Wilkites contested the borough and won one seat. In Middlesex, Wilkes and Serjeant Glynn were returned without opposition.³

³ I. Christie, *Myth and Reality*, chapter 11.