



John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty

Arthur Cash

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One of the most colorful figures in English political history, John Wilkes (1726–97) is remembered as the father of the British free press, defender of civil and political liberties, and hero to American colonists, who attended closely to his outspoken endorsements of liberty. Wilkes's political career was rancorous, involving duels, imprisonments in the Tower of London, and the Massacre of St. George's Fields in which seven of his supporters were shot to death by government troops. He was equally famous for his "private" life—a confessed libertine, a member of the notorious Hellfire Club, and the author of what has been called the dirtiest poem in the English language.

This lively biography draws a full portrait of John Wilkes from his childhood days through his heyday as a journalist and agitator, his defiance of government prosecutions for libel and obscenity, his fight against exclusion from Parliament, and his service as lord mayor of London on the eve of the American Revolution. Told here with the force and immediacy of a firsthand newspaper account, Wilkes's own remarkable story is inseparable from the larger story of modern civil liberties and how they came to fruition.

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