

Topic Page: [Wilkes, John, 1725-1797](#)

Definition: **Wilkes, John** from *Philip's Encyclopedia*

British radical politician and journalist. He was expelled from Parliament for his savage criticism of George III and his government in the political journal *North Briton* (1763). His prosecution under a general warrant was condemned in the courts, a landmark in civil liberties. The refusal of Parliament to readmit him as member for Middlesex after he had been elected three times encouraged the movement towards parliamentary reform.

Summary Article: **Wilkes, John**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

1727–97, English politician and journalist. He studied at the Univ. of Leiden, returned to England in 1746, and purchased (1757) a seat in Parliament. Backed by Earl Temple, Wilkes founded (1762) a periodical, the *North Briton*, in which he made outspoken attacks on George III and his ministers. In the famous issue No. 45 (1763), Wilkes went so far as to criticize the speech from the throne. He was immediately arrested on the basis of a general warrant (one that did not specify who was to be arrested), but his arrest was adjudged a breach of parliamentary privilege by Chief Justice Charles Pratt, who later ruled also that general warrants were illegal. The government then secured Wilkes's expulsion from Parliament on the grounds of seditious libel and obscenity (Wilkes was notoriously dissolute and the author of an obscene parody of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*, which was used against him).

Wilkes fled (1764) to Paris and was convicted of seditious libel in his absence. He returned in 1768 and was repeatedly elected to Parliament from Middlesex, but each time he was denied his seat by the king's party. The issue, in the eyes of the angry populace, became a case of royal manipulation of parliamentary privilege against Wilkes to restrain the people's right to elect their own representatives. Wilkes was supported by Edmund Burke and the unknown writer Junius, but he was not seated. After 22 months in prison for his libel conviction, he was elected sheriff of London (1771) and lord mayor (1774). In 1774 he was again elected and this time allowed to take his seat in Parliament, where he championed the liberties of the American colonies and fought for parliamentary reform. He lost popular favor for his vigorous action as chamberlain of London in suppressing the Gordon riots (1780). Although a demagogue, Wilkes was a champion of freedom of the press and the rights of the electorate.

See biographies by O. A. Sherrard (1930, repr. 1972), C. P. Chenevix Trench (1962), L. Kronenberger (1974), A. H. Cash (2006), and J. Sainsbury (2006);
Christie, I. R. , *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform* (1962);
Rudé, G. F. E. , *Wilkes and Liberty* (1962).

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Wilkes, John. (2018). In P. Lagasse, & Columbia University, *The Columbia encyclopedia* (8th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press. Retrieved from https://search.credoreference.com/content/topic/wilkes_john_1727_1797



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