

Book review: The Diaries of John Wilkes

John Wilkes (1725-1797) is surely one of the most important and interesting political figures of the eighteenth century. A pioneering radical who championed parliamentary reform and numerous civil rights, he also had a famously colourful private life, which came to embody his public commitment to 'liberty' in all its forms. As such, it is remarkable that it has taken until now for his diaries to be published.

As the editor of this fine new edition acknowledges, however, the diaries themselves may initially appear disappointing as a historical source. Robin Eagles even wonders out loud whether 'diary' may be a misnomer. 'Dining book' may be a more appropriate label, given that the daily entries almost exclusively record where he dined, and with whom (p.xxxii). These are not 'journals' in the same sense as those of his friend James Boswell. There is almost no narrative, little anecdote and nothing overt about the inner life. As Eagles argues in his introduction, the diaries 'may say little of what he thought of it, but they do reveal much of the environment in which he lived' (p.xii). To take a typical entry, that of 30 July 1786 reads: 'dined at Richmond with Sir Joshua Reynolds, Miss Palmer, Mr W[illiam] Windham, Mr Cambridge, Mr Boswell, Mr Malone, Mr Courtn[e]y, Lord Wentworth, Mr Metcalf, &c.' (p.188). What immediately strikes the reader is the sheer extent of his acquaintance – the diaries read like a Who's Who of Georgian Britain – and the regularity with which Wilkes dines out, and in company. Rare indeed is the entry 'dined at home alone'. The editor's excellent footnotes (which are more interesting than the diaries themselves) reveal that entries like this can be tellingly gnomic: 'it is perhaps significant that he sought to dine alone' on 16 October 1771, when he attracted criticism for presiding over the execution of an eighteen-year-old woman (p.27). Using the diaries in conjunction with our wider knowledge about Wilkes can therefore hint at his character. His choice of dining companions can also tell us a lot about his politics. On 21 April 1784, when Charles James Fox was fighting the famous Westminster election, Wilkes dined with his opponents Hood and Wray, revealing that he had by then decisively gone over to Pitt the Younger.

This is a handsome edition. Eagles has done some judicious editorial tidying up, combining various sources into a single chronological thread and cutting out duplication. The introduction gives us an excellent potted biography and reflects interestingly on the nature of the sources themselves. Few readers will read this book from cover to cover, as the present reviewer did for this review: it is more likely that researchers will head for a particular date, or will go in via the index (which only lists names and places, given that this is all there is to list). The only potential misgiving is whether a book is the best form for these sources. Although a conventional book is the obvious vehicle for an edition of a diary, this is essentially quantitative rather than qualitative data, which lends itself to an electronic format. Given that this is basically a record of people and places, Wilkes's diaries present opportunities to map networks and locations. Crunching these data via an online tool such as [Locating London's Past](#) could tell us a great deal about the social and political spaces of the capital. Wilkes was constantly on the move, often on foot, and often spending the night with friends or mistresses. The diaries also reveal how often this quintessentially metropolitan character travelled beyond London, such as when he took an excursion to the West Country in August 1772 on a pilgrimage to the site where William of Orange made his landing. It is therefore up to readers themselves to decide what they are going to make of these deceptively revealing sources, but Eagles deserves our thanks for bringing them to a wider audience.