
“WAVING A MOUCHOIR À LA WILKES”: HUME, RADICALISM AND THE NORTH BRITON*

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This article examines the use of David Hume’s political writing by the extra-parliamentary opposition writers of the 1760s and early 1770s. The disturbances surrounding the publication of North Briton 45 and Wilkes’s abortive attempts to become MP for Middlesex attracted a level of public support which was remarkable for its size, social diversity and ideological coherence. Hume, as is well known, reacted angrily to this growth in popular politics, condemning both the “mobs” that swept through London in the latter part of the decade and the Ministry’s failure to deal with them. However, while Hume may have been highly critical of the Wilkites, the Wilkites frequently used ideas and quotations from the Scotsman’s work in their anti-Ministerial polemics. My discussion traces the various ways in which Hume was employed in Wilkite political discourse, and aims to establish the significance of these appropriations for our understanding both of Hume’s later life and of the radical politics of the period.

In a letter from the late 1760s, d’Alembert, perhaps Hume’s closest friend among the *philosophes*, wrote to the Scot introducing his neighbour the abbé de Vauxcelles, who was about to embark on a trip to Britain. The letter proclaimed, seemingly without irony, that the abbé “goes to England to have the pleasure to cry with you ‘Wilkes and Liberty’.”¹ Discussing this correspondence, Laurence L. Bongie has observed, “David Hume, it need hardly be said, never waved a *mouchoir à la Wilkes!*”² The idea that Hume’s political outlook was fundamentally opposed to the Wilkites is a persuasive one; Hume’s letters of the late 1760s provide

* I am very grateful for the support and advice I received from Claire Brock, Andrew Lincoln, Nicholas Phillipson, Christopher Reid and the three anonymous readers the journal engaged.

¹ *Letters of Eminent Persons addressed to David Hume*, ed. J. H. Burton (Edinburgh and London, 1849), 214 (my own translation). The letter is undated, but the fact that Hume is in Britain demonstrates it is from the later period of Wilkite agitation.

² L. L. Bongie, *David Hume: Prophet of the Counter-Revolution* (Oxford, 1965), 30.

evidence of his anger at the disturbances of the period, and as Duncan Forbes, David Miller, John B. Stewart and Donald W. Livingston have demonstrated, Hume's philosophy was based on an analysis antithetical to the popular polemics found in the *North Briton*.³ However, the focus in existing scholarship on Hume's reaction to the Wilkites means that the Wilkites' conception of Hume has been ignored. This article will seek to demonstrate that the paper, and the radical press in general, were often sympathetic towards Hume, frequently employing ideas and quotations from his work. There is then a good deal of irony in Hume's angry reaction to the Wilkes and liberty movement; at the same time that he was bemoaning the "hourly Progress of Madness and Folly and Wickedness in England", his work was being employed to stir up further discontent.⁴ This cooption of Hume, it will be argued, has significance for our understandings both of the nascent radical movement, and of Hume's political thought.

I

There were two distinct phases of Wilkite activity. The first (1762–4) saw the launch of the virulently anti-Scottish opposition periodical, the *North Briton*, and culminated in the seizure of Wilkes's papers on 30 April 1763 under a general warrant, following the publication of the periodical's forty-fifth number. Subsequently, he was expelled from Parliament, and prosecuted for seditious libel (in relation to *North Briton* 45) and blasphemy (for his part in *An Essay on Woman*, a pornographic version of Alexander Pope's *Essay on Man*). Fearing jail and his creditors, Wilkes had fled abroad, and, in light of his refusal to attend sentencing, was outlawed on 1 November 1764. The second phase (1768–72) saw Wilkes's return from exile, his successful campaign to become MP for Middlesex in the general election of 1768, his imprisonment and his second expulsion from Parliament. Unwilling to accept this decision, Wilkes stood for re-election on three further occasions (February–April 1769), each time securing a large majority of the popular vote, only for the House of Commons to nullify

³ For examples of Hume's thinking in the late 1760s see Hume, *The Letters of David Hume*, ed. J. Y. T. Greig, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1969), 2: 178–235. On the relationship between Hume and Wilkes see D. Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics* (Cambridge, 1975), 187–92; D. Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology in Hume's Political Thought* (Oxford, 1981), 182–4; J. B. Stewart, *Opinion and Reform in Hume's Political Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ, 1992), 269–71; D. W. Livingston, *Philosophical Melancholy and Delirium: Hume's Pathology of Philosophy* (Chicago and London, 1998), 256–89. See also J. G. A. Pocock, "Hume and the American Revolution: The Dying Thoughts of a North Briton", in *idem*, *Virtue, Commerce and History: Essays on Political Thought Chiefly in the Eighteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1985), 137–8.

⁴ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 208 (16 Oct. 1769).

the result. Following the fourth poll, the second-place candidate (Henry Lawes Luttrell) was declared the Member for Middlesex. It was during this second period that Wilkes, as the self-proclaimed champion of English liberties, gained a massive public following, and became (albeit briefly) a key figure in British politics. His activities served to generate a genuinely popular political movement which launched campaigns both to widen the franchise and, more successfully, to legalize the reporting of parliamentary debates.⁵

During the first phase of Wilkite activity, references to Hume were infrequent but, in the main, positive. He is discussed briefly (and favourably) in *North Briton* 12, and his work is commended by the writer of the pamphlet *Briton's Constitutional Test for 1763*.⁶ A letter by Wilkes published in the *London Evening Post* of 13–15 March 1764 notes Hume's role as secretary to the French ambassador, but although disparaging comments are made about other (Scottish) embassy staff, Hume escapes any direct criticism. Indeed, rather than criticizing the Scotsman's works, those sympathetic to Wilkes employed them; a quotation from “Of the Liberty of the Press” was used in two separate publications to censure the Ministry over its handling of Wilkes's prosecution in 1764.⁷ The only really significant attack on Hume by a prominent Wilkite during the period came in Charles Churchill's poem *The Journey* (written in 1764, and published posthumously in 1765), which makes reference to the “lies” contained in Hume's *History*.⁸

In the second phase of Wilkite activity, references to Hume became a good deal more common. Following a five-year lay off, the *North Briton* was relaunched

⁵ For general accounts of the Wilkite movement see I. R. Christie, *Wilkes, Wyvill and Reform* (London, 1962), 25–67; J. Brewer, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (Cambridge, 1976), 3–25, 163–218; H. T. Dickinson, “Radicals and Reformers in the Age of Wilkes and Wyvill”, in J. Black, ed., *British Politics and Society from Walpole to Pitt: 1742–1789* (Basingstoke and London, 1990), 123–46; K. Wilson, *The Sense of the People: Politics, Culture and Imperialism 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), 206–36. For a discussion of the Wilkite crowd see George Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty: A Social Study of 1763–1774* (London, 1962). For Wilkes himself see P. D. G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (Oxford, 1996); A. H. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (New Haven and London, 2006); J. Sainsbury, *John Wilkes: The Lives of a Libertine* (Aldershot, 2006).

⁶ *North Briton*, no. 12 (12 Aug. 1762); *England's Constitutional Test for the Year 1763* (London, 1763), 24.

⁷ J. Towers, *An Enquiry into the question, whether juries are, or are not, judges of law, as well as of fact* (London, 1764), vi; *St. James Chronicle*, 1 March 1764. The title page of the former publication also contains an inscription from Hume's essay. In Towers's pamphlet the attack on the Wilkes prosecution is made explicitly, in the *St. James Chronicle* letter the critique is implicit in the timing of the publication of a defence of a free press (a week after the verdicts).

⁸ C. Churchill, *The Journey* (London, 1765), 6–7.

on 10 May 1768, with an exposition of Hume's thoughts on the liberty of the press.⁹ After this initial discussion, the *North Briton* continued to utilize Hume's writing and ideas through the summer of that year. Four of the five numbers of the paper published between 16 July and 13 August contain quotations from or paraphrases of Hume's work, and a footnote in *North Briton* 57 and the accuracy and length of some of the material used imply that the author(s) of these papers wrote next to an open copy of the 1758 edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*. While the volume of material from Hume declined after this, references to his work still occurred periodically; *North Briton* 73 uses the species-flow model he developed in "Of Money" to explain why Britain had experienced economic decline, and France economic growth, since the end of the Seven Years War; *North Briton* 105 invokes Hume and Robertson as part of its critique of an anti-Wilkite pamphlet; and *North Briton* 195 produced a long quotation from Hume's "Of Some Remarkable Customs" as part of an article opposing the press gang. Other pro-Wilkite writers also employed Hume's writing in their work. By far the most popular essay was "Of the Liberty of the Press", extracts from which were reprinted in the periodical press on ten separate occasions between Wilkes's election in 1768 and his entry into Parliament in 1774.¹⁰ At the

⁹ This footnote contains all the references to Hume to be found in the *North Briton* (1768–71). The nature of the material from Hume is indicated in square brackets. The term "credited" will be used to refer to those passages where the paper acknowledges Hume as the author; those where the borrowing is not noted will be listed as "un-credited". Page reference are to the specific passages referred to by the *North Briton*. The editions used are *Enquiries*, ed. L. A. Selby Bigge, revised by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1998); *Essays Moral Political and Literary*, ed. E. F. Miller (Indianapolis, 1985); *The History of England from the Invasion of Julius Caesar to the Revolution in 1688*, 6 vols. (Indianapolis, 1983). *North Briton* 47 (10 May 1768) [credited quotation from Hume, "Of the Liberty of the Press" in *Essays*, 12–13, 605]; *North Briton* 57 (16 July 1768) [credited paraphrase of "An Enquiry Concerning the Principles of Morals" in *Enquiries*, 183 *passim*]; *North Briton* 58 (23 July 1768) [uncredited quotation from "Of Public Credit", *Essays*, 360–61]; *North Briton* 60 (6 Aug. 1768) [uncredited quotation from "That Politics Might be Reduced to a Science", *Essays*, 18–21]; *North Briton* 61 (13 Aug. 1768) [credited general reference to *The History*], [credited quotation from *The History*, 6: 404], [uncredited paraphrase of "Of the Parties of Great Britain", *Essays*, 67], [uncredited quotation from "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm", *Essays*, 78]; *North Briton* 73 (5 Nov. 1768) [credited paraphrasing of "Of Money", *Essays*, 281–94]; *North Briton* 105 (6 May 1769) [credited paraphrasing of *The History*, 4: 84–94]; *North Briton* 195 (8 Dec. 1770) [credited quotation from "Of Some Remarkable Customs", *Essays*, 374–5].

¹⁰ It was common for eighteenth-century newspapers to copy material from their competitors. Entries marked with a * are those which reprint material from the periodical immediately prior to them in this list. *North Briton* 47 (10 May 1768); *St. James Chronicle*, 9 June 1768; *Gazetteer and Daily Advertiser*, 13 June 1768*; *Middlesex Journal, or Chronicle of Liberty*, 5 Oct. 1769; *Middlesex Journal, or Chronicle of Liberty*, 16 June 1770; *Public Ledger*,

same time, *The History of England* was used by radical writers to support the frequent parallels drawn between contemporary political events and those of the seventeenth century, while “Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic”, “That Politics may be reduced to a Science” and “Of Taxes” were employed to justify opposition (if not necessarily Wilkite) arguments.¹¹

II

In what ways was Hume used by the radical press, and to what ends? In the first phase of Wilkite activity, somewhat ironically, references to Hume acted as a means of furthering the opposition’s anti-Scottish agenda. The central line of argument adopted by the *North Briton* (1762–3) was that Bute’s was a “*Scottish administration*.”¹² In a series of articles, many of them purporting to be by Scottish correspondents, the paper sought to lambaste the Scots, who, as Wilkes and Churchill presented them, were a beggarly race, engaged in a dastardly plan to hijack the English financial system, replace the Church of England with the Presbytery, and secure power “*universal, absolute, and perpetual*.”¹³ What Wilkes and Churchill provided, then, was a violently Scottophobic version of the standard Country argument that the Ministry was engaged in a pernicious plot to undermine popular liberties.¹⁴ However, within such polemics, rather than

16 June 1770, quoted in *The Repository: or Treasury of politics and literature for MDCCLXX* (London, 1771), 40; *St. James Chronicle*, 18 Nov. 1773; *General Evening Post*, 18 Nov. 1773*; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 19 Nov. 1773*; *London Evening Post*, 8 March 1774. Extracts from the essay also appear in *Essays, Historical Political and Moral* (Dublin, 1774), 233.

¹¹ For references to Hume’s *History* see *Middlesex Journal, or Chronicle of Liberty*, 11 April 1769; *General Evening Post*, 24 May 1770. A more negative verdict on Hume’s *History* in relation to opposition politics is to be found in *St. James Chronicle*, 9 June 1768. Repeated in *Public Advertiser*, 13 June 1768; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 14 June 1768. References to “Whether the British Government inclines more to Absolute Monarchy, or to a Republic”: *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 31 July 1765; *St. James Chronicle or the British Evening Post*, 18 May 1769. Reference to “That Politics Might be Reduced to a Science”, *London Chronicle*, 2 Dec. 1769. References to “Of Taxes”, *London Chronicle or Universal Evening Post*, 9 March 1765; N. Forster, *An Enquiry into the Causes of the Present High Price of Provisions* (London, 1767), 49–66; *Considerations on the Policy, Commerce, and Circumstances of the Kingdom* (London, 1771), 63.

¹² *North Briton* 6 (10 July 1762).

¹³ *North Briton* 10 (7 Aug. 1762).

¹⁴ For Country modes of political argument see H. T. Dickinson, *Liberty and Property: Political Ideology in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1977), 163–94; B. Harris, *Politics and the Nation: Britain in the Mid-eighteenth Century* (Oxford, 2002), 67–101.

attacking Hume directly (as it did most prominent Scotsmen), the *North Briton* sought to heap further indignities on his countrymen by praising him. This is particularly apparent in the *North Briton* of 12 August 1762, when the paper turns to one of its favourite subjects, the preponderance of government pensions that had been given to Scotsmen. With his usual heavy irony, Wilkes “confuses” the playwright John Home (who had worked as a secretary for Bute, and received a 300 l. pension) with the unpensioned Hume:¹⁵

There is one *Scottish Pension* I have been told of, which afforded me real pleasure. It is Mr. *Hume's*; for I am satisfied that it must be given to Mr. *David Hume*, whose writings have been justly admired both abroad and at home, and not to Mr. *John Hume*, who has endeavoured to bring the name into contempt, by putting it to two insipid tragedies, and other trash in *Scottish miscellanies*.¹⁶

Britain's Constitutional Test for 1763 adopts a very similar tactic. Before employing his definitions of the Whig and Tory parties from “Of the Parties of Great Britain”, the writer asserts, “we shall present the readers with the sentiments thereon of the learned ingenious Mr. David Hume, although a Scotchman, and what is still more surprising, unpensioned by the great Man, a proof of his taste in favourites.”¹⁷ In both examples, Hume’s atypical Scottish qualities serve to demonstrate the validity of the general assumptions about Scottishness on which the paper based its polemic.¹⁸

However, it was not just Hume’s status that was employed in Wilkite writing, but (especially after 1768) his ideas. As mentioned above, the paper that used Hume’s work most regularly was the second *North Briton*, the weekly paper run by the publisher William Bingley from 10 May 1768 until its demise three

¹⁵ K. Simpson, “Home, John (1722–1808)”, *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, (Oxford, 2004), available at <http://0-www.oxforddnb.com.catalogue.ulrls.lon.ac.uk:80/view/article/13646> (accessed 19 Jan. 2008).

¹⁶ *North Briton* 12 (12 Aug. 1762).

¹⁷ *England's Constitutional Test*, 24.

¹⁸ The Wilkites’ positive attitude towards Hume might be seen, in part, as a product of the association that Wilkes and Hume enjoyed during this period. Having corresponded with one another ten years earlier (see Hume, *Letters*, 1: 194–5 (8 Oct. 1754)) they were thrown together in Paris in 1764 by Hume’s appointment and Wilkes’s exile. In a letter of 9 Jan., Wilkes informed his friend Humphrey Cotes that he had left a card for Hume and subsequently “met him at Baron D’Holbach’s where we laughed much” (Hume to Cotes, 9 Jan. 1764, BL Mss 30867). The two were in frequent contact over the next five months as they regularly attended the ambassador’s chapel for Sunday services (a move both wrongly attributed to a turn towards religious piety in the other). For Hume’s view, see Hume, *Letters*, 1: 444 (23 April 1764). For Wilkes’s view see Wilkes to Onslow, 9 Jan. 1764, BL Mss 30868.

years later.¹⁹ Spring 1768 was a particularly auspicious time for a young and newly independent printer like Bingley to commence such a venture.²⁰ Events surrounding the Middlesex election had demonstrated that a substantial body of people (most of them from the class of shopkeepers, artisans and journeymen) identified closely with Wilkes, and consequently were likely to be sympathetic to a publication that adopted the name and politics of its infamous predecessor.²¹ On the very day of the relaunch a large number of such individuals—estimates range from fifteen to forty thousand—had paraded around St George’s fields and engaged in violent scuffles with the military. At the same time, while the elections were over (for the moment at least) there were a series of legal and political matters to be resolved. In the aftermath of events at Middlesex, the Cabinet, with the support of the king, had decided to expel Wilkes from Parliament once he had finally been sentenced for the crimes he had been convicted of in 1764. However, Wilkes’s outlaw status (which he was in the process of appealing against) complicated matters, and following a series of legal blunders he was still in prison, where he had surrendered himself on 27 April, when the *North Briton* returned. The key aim for the paper, then, was to exploit the political and commercial potential of the massive popularity that Wilkes had acquired, in order both to provide an aggressive critique of the actions of the Ministry, and to support Wilkes in his ongoing legal—and later political—battles.

¹⁹ For discussions of Bingley’s life see H. R. Plomer, G. H. Bushnell and E. R. McC Dix, *A Dictionary of the Printers and Booksellers who were at work in England, Scotland and Ireland from 1726 to 1775* (Oxford, 1932); W. Bowyer, *Literary Anecdotes of the Eighteenth Century*, 6 vols. (London, 1812), 3: 631–4; E.S., “A Forgotten Journalist”, *Athenaeum*, 20 May 1899, 626. Bingley provides some information in his *A Sketch of English Liberty* (London, 1793). See also J. Brewer, “Commercialization and Politics”, in N. Mc Kendrick, J. Brewer and J. H. Plumb, eds., *The Birth of a Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1983), 256–7.

²⁰ Born c.1738 in New Romney, Bingley spent his early years working for a series of respectable printers, among them William Nicoll, Charles Say and Hume’s friend and correspondent William Strahan. In 1767 he set up as a bookseller and publisher in his own right producing an edition of the Quaker tract *Observations on the late anonymous publication in vindication of Robert Barclay* (London, 1767). From 1768 the focus of his work turned to political matters as he put out an extensive selection of political pamphlets, Wilkite poetry and scandalous memoirs (mostly chronicling the immoralities of ministers and their mistresses), as well as printing a number of periodicals, among them the *North Briton*, *Bingley’s Journal*, or *the Universal Gazette* and the *Constitutional Magazine*. See Bowyer, *Literary Anecdotes*, 3: 631–4; Bingley, *A Sketch*.

²¹ Indeed, the moniker was of such value that 10 May saw the launch not only of Bingley’s *North Briton*, but also of Staples Steare’s *Extraordinary North Briton*. The two remained in competition until the demise of the latter at the very end of 1769. For the social composition of the Wilkites see Rudé, *Wilkes and Liberty*.

To employ Hume's work within Wilkite writing, the *North Briton* had to adapt it in two principal ways. Firstly, the Scotsman's account of the relationship between liberty and authority had to be fundamentally reinterpreted. Secondly, the rather narrow Humean understanding of "the people" had to be substituted for a more expansive Wilkite one. These strategies will now be addressed in turn.

Central to Hume's political project was his attack on what he saw as the crude account of the relationship between liberty and authority, which had been used by the Country opposition since the beginning of the century. Hume's critique was composed of three strands. Firstly, he rejected Country ideas about the nature of liberty.²² For Country writers, personal liberty (the legal framework which secured the life and property of the individual) emerged from political liberty (the people's freedom to determine their own laws). As a consequence, the only form of government that preserved any liberty (and consequently had any legitimacy) was one in which the populace played an active role in determining the state's legal framework. Hume fundamentally disagreed, arguing that there was no necessary connection between personal liberty and political liberty, and that the role of government was to secure the former. Thus while he offered, on occasions, lavish praise for the British constitution, absolutist France, Hume asserted, also provided personal liberty for its subjects and was likely, in the future, to surpass the achievements of the British.²³ As a result, whereas Country polemicists argued that a government was either free (and provided liberty), or absolutist (and did not), Hume maintained that a degree of liberty could exist within a variety of political systems. Secondly, and partially as a consequence of this, although he maintained that there was a "perpetual intestine struggle" between liberty and authority within a state, Hume (unlike many Country writers) did not see the relationship between these two principles as entailing a straightforward battle between good and evil, in which one side would inevitably triumph.²⁴ Rather, for Hume, while liberty was "the perfection of civil society", authority was "essential to its very existence" and neither can (or should) "ever absolutely prevail in the contest."²⁵ Thirdly, at the heart of the Country analysis was the notion that Britain's constitution contained a perfect balance between monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, and provided both stability and liberty for the populace. The

²² The classic account of Hume's view of liberty is Forbes, *Hume's Philosophical Politics*, 125–92.

²³ For Hume's endorsement of British political achievements see "Of the Protestant Succession", *Essays*, 508. For his views on France and absolute monarchy see "Of Civil Liberty", *Essays*, 87–96.

²⁴ Hume, "Of the Origin of Government", *Essays*, 40.

²⁵ Hume, "Of the Origin of Government", *Essays*, 40–41. This essay was not published until 1777, but the principles it uses are central to much of Hume's analysis.

Ministry, it was argued, through a series of attempts to extend monarchical authority, was undermining this balance, and with it the rights and liberties of the populace. Hume rejected such claims, maintaining that Britain’s constitution was as much the cause of political instability as its victim. It was difficult, perhaps impossible, Hume argued, to establish the exact nature of the balance between the republican and monarchical part of the government. As a consequence, the constitution was a constant source of debate, and served to promote a conflict between those driven by a love of peace and order to support the crown, and those driven by a love of liberty to defend the state’s republican institutions.²⁶

Such ideas were clearly anathema to the Wilkites, who identified purely with the principle of liberty. However, what was usable in Hume’s writing was the language of conflict with which he described the relationship between liberty and authority, and his account of the constitution as a site of conflict and instability (or at least potential instability). The most important text here is “Of the Liberty of the Press”. Within the essay Hume emphasized the pivotal role Britain’s free press played in protecting liberty (in the form of the republican part of government) from authority (in the form of the monarchical part of government). It is this notion of a battle between liberty and authority that is manifest in the passage from Hume’s work that was employed most frequently by the Wilkite press, and which lies at the centre of *North Briton* 47:

It is apprehended, that arbitrary power would steal in upon us, were we not careful to prevent its progress, and were there not an easy method of conveying the alarm from one end of the kingdom to the other. The spirit of the people must frequently be roused, in order to curb the ambition of the court; and the dread of rousing this spirit must be employed to prevent that ambition. Nothing so effectual to this purpose as the liberty of the press, by which all learning, wit, and genius of the nation may be employed on the side of freedom, and everyone be animated to its defence. As long, therefore, as the republican part of our government can maintain itself against the monarchical, it will naturally be careful to keep the press open, as of importance to its own preservation.²⁷

From such a starting point it was a straightforward matter for the *North Briton* to present the press as a means of protecting England’s sacred and ancient constitution, a constitution characterized by, the paper argued, a master–servant relationship between a people and its government.

Hume’s ideas about liberty and authority were also employed to discuss the relationship between religion and politics, and more specifically the alleged plan

²⁶ See Hume, “Of the Independency of Parliament”, 42–6; “Of the Parties of Great Britain”, 64–72.

²⁷ Hume, “Of the Liberty of the Press”, *Essays*, 12–13. This section was used on nine of the ten occasions Hume’s essay appeared in the periodical press between 1768 and 1774.

to introduce Anglicanism as the established religion in the thirteen colonies.²⁸ Through a series of quotations from Hume's *History* and the essays "Of the Parties of Great Britain" and "Of Superstition and Enthusiasm", the *North Briton* aimed to demonstrate the connection between Episcopalianism, superstition, monarchy and tyranny on the one hand, and dissent, enthusiasm, republicanism and liberty on the other. Such a line of argument allowed the paper to represent the Americans' concerns about episcopacy as part of the same struggle between liberty and authority which had led to the Civil War and which the *North Briton* saw as the defining conflict of modern politics. The application of Hume's work then involved focusing on the parts of his analysis where he discussed the threat authority posed to liberty, and reading this conflict in Country terms (as a battle between good and evil) rather than Humean ones (as a confrontation between two competing but necessary forces).

Reinterpreting Hume's account of the relationship between liberty and authority could convert him into something resembling a vulgar Country Whig; however, in order to tie his ideas more closely to the populist rhetoric of the Wilkites his account of both the role of the populace and the nature of "the people" had to be adapted. The process through which the former took place can be seen most clearly in relation to justice.²⁹ For Hume, to behave justly was to respect property rights. Justice is valuable because it contributes to public utility by securing man's external possessions (a natural source of conflict) and consequently bring peace and order to society. Indeed, it is the peace and order that justice provides that makes civil society possible. However, because justice's value lies solely in its usefulness to the populace, on the very infrequent occasions when the rules of justice come into conflict with the public interest it is justice that has to be abandoned. Thus in *The Enquiry* Hume argues that the "strict laws of justice" are suspended among the survivors of a shipwreck or in times of severe dearth when it is not either "criminal or injurious" to seize the goods necessary for survival.³⁰ Similarly, in "Of Passive Obedience" Hume argues that although unjust, it would be right (because in the public interest) to burn the suburbs of a town if their presence had the potential to help facilitate the path of an invading army.³¹

For the *North Briton*, however, any conflict between justice and the public interest is impossible, because justice simply *is* the public interest. Indeed, it is

²⁸ See *North Briton* 61 (13 Aug. 1768).

²⁹ For Hume's views on justice see *Enquiry*, 183–204; *A Treatise of Human Nature*, ed. L. A. Selby-Bigge, rev. by P. H. Nidditch (Oxford, 1978), 477–500. The *North Briton* is referring to the *Enquiry*.

³⁰ Hume, *Enquiry*, 186–7.

³¹ Hume, "Of Passive Obedience", *Essays*, 489.

this notion that the paper employed when it attempted to use Hume’s account of justice to counter the ideas of Lord Mansfield, the Lord Chief Justice of the King’s Bench and the man charged with sorting out many of the complications surrounding Wilkes’s legal situation in spring 1768.³² During a lengthy digression which formed part of his judgement on Wilkes’s outlawry, Mansfield rejected the argument—made by the *North Briton* in its fiftieth number—that the legal profession had a duty to consider the damage to public order which might result if the courts found against Wilkes.³³ “We must not”, Mansfield asserted, “regard political consequences, how formidable soever they might be: if rebellion was the certain consequence we are bound to say ‘*Fiat justitia ruat cælum.*’”³⁴ The *North Briton*’s reply came on 16 July, when it argued,

The chief, nay, the sole intention of justice, I had always imagined to be to prevent chaos from returning, or the world from being destroyed. This, at least, I know, is the definition given of justice by all the best philosophers and civilians, who have written on the subject. I will only produce one authority, which . . . will, I dare say, prove decisive with the learned lawyer . . . ’Tis that of *David Hume, Esq;* who has composed a dissertation expressly on this topic; in which he proves beyond the possibility of a doubt, *that the usefulness of justice to society, or its tendency to promote the happiness and welfare of mankind, is the sole foundation of that virtue.* But could any act of justice, that should be attended with the return of chaos, or the destruction of the world, be said to be *useful to society*, or calculated

³² By 1768 Mansfield had been a *bête noire* for Wilkes for a considerable period of time, having contributed in some way to almost all of the many and varied legal difficulties he had experienced through his career. As early as 1757, Mansfield had ruled against Wilkes when he had tried to suspend alimony payments to his estranged wife. Mansfield was also heavily involved in securing Wilkes’s conviction when he was tried in absentia for the *North Briton* 45 and *The Essay on Woman* in February 1764. Prior to the trials he had altered evidence, and when presiding over it he ordered the jury to deliver a guilty verdict if they believed Wilkes had published these texts. The matter of whether the material was or was not a libel, Mansfield argued, was for the judge to decide. In 1768, after Wilkes had given himself up to the courts, Mansfield had been instrumental both in delaying the delivery of his sentence and in refusing him bail.

³³ See *North Briton* 50 (28 May 1768). It was this edition of the *North Briton* that led to Bingley’s prosecution and two-year imprisonment. For discussion of Bingley’s prosecution see *Lloyd’s Evening Post*, 3–6 June 1768, 6–8 June 1768; *St. James’s Chronicle*, 7–9 June 1768. For a later and more partisan view see William Bingley, *The Case of William Bingley Bookseller* (London, 1773). The arguments from *North Briton* 50 were quoted from and discussed at length in *The Westminster Journal and London Political Miscellany*, 11 June 1768, 18 June 1768. This number also prompted a pamphlet—*A Letter to the author of the North Briton No.50* (London, 1768)—which provided an angry rejoinder to the attack on Mansfield.

³⁴ *A Complete Collection of State Trials and proceedings for High Treason and other Crimes and Misdemeanours from the earliest period to the present time*, ed. T. B. Howell, vol. 19 (London, 1813), 1112.

to promote the happiness and welfare of mankind? The question is too absurd to deserve a serious answer.³⁵

Thus while it is Hume's rejection of the dictum that "justice should be done though the world be destroyed" that leads the *North Briton* to his work, the paper assumes that an act which would save the world would necessarily be just, in a way that Hume does not. Such a position allows it to maintain that treating Wilkes leniently is not only advisable, but also in line with the dictates of justice. Giving the people their own way will achieve peace and order, and what brings peace and order is in the public interest and therefore just. The difference between the two arguments may appear rather minor, but the effects are highly significant. In Hume's work the emphasis is on property, and justice is presented as a stabilizing force that acts upon the people, bringing welfare and happiness through the order it provides. The *North Briton*, however, contended that the people have an active role in determining the structure and nature of justice, and justice itself shifts to meet their changing interests. For the paper, it was this mode of justice which provided the political liberty on which ancient English freedom was based. For Hume, to give the population such power was to remove all authority from the crown (and, for that matter, from the law), thereby destroying the fragile balance of republican and monarchical government that characterized British government. Indeed, from a Humean perspective, the *North Briton's* account of justice was not only a flagrant rejection of the spirit of moderation which a mixed constitution required to work adequately, it also demonstrated the tendency of that form of government to promote faction and extremism. What the paper provides, then, is a radical populist and distinctively un-Humean account of justice, but one built on Hume's basic dictum that "public utility is the sole origin of justice".³⁶

At the same time, the Humean notion of the political public is very different to that contained in Wilkite writing. As David Miller has argued, Hume's beliefs about politics "were formed on the underlying assumption that politics was an activity properly confined to a fairly select social group".³⁷ In "Of the Middle Station of Life" he asserted that the poor are "too much occupy'd in providing for the Necessities of Life, to hearken to the calm Voice of Reason".³⁸ As a result, Hume tended to associate large-scale popular involvement in politics with anarchy.³⁹ Indeed, in his account of a "Perfect Commonwealth" he argued that while "the

³⁵ *North Briton* 57 (16 July 1768). A footnote informs us the extract the writer has in mind is "Of Justice" from *The Dissertation of the Passions*. See Hume, *Enquiries*, 183.

³⁶ Hume, *Enquiries*, 183.

³⁷ Miller, *Philosophy and Ideology*, 183.

³⁸ Hume, "Of the Middle Station of Life", *Essays*, 547.

³⁹ See Hume, "That Politics May be Reduced to a Science", *Essays*, 16.

lower sort of people” can be given a role in choosing representatives for local assemblies, “they are wholly unfit for county-meetings, and for electing into the higher offices of the republic”, as “their ignorance gives the grantees an opportunity of deceiving them”.⁴⁰ It should be noted that “the lower sort of people” Hume referred to here were themselves “freeholders”; those without property were, for Hume, not even worth mentioning in a discussion of political matters.⁴¹ By contrast, the *North Briton*, anxious to attract the journeymen and shopkeepers who had protested at Wilkes’s imprisonment in May 1768, assumed that the political public was composed of the “whole body of the people”. This included “all ranks of men in the kingdom, from the first peers of the realm down to the meanest peasants”.⁴² Ideas about “the people” were also altered by the political climate of the late 1760s; the populace were functioning as an active political presence (attending hustings and demonstrations, and attacking the persons and property of prominent MPs) in numbers and with a vociferousness unknown thirty years before. As a consequence, statements such as “the spirit of the people must frequently be roused, in order to curb the ambition of the court” had a very different meaning when placed in the context of a Wilkite paper in the late 1760s than they had had within Hume’s essays of the early 1740s.⁴³

III

What, then, is the significance of Hume’s presence in the *North Briton* (and other Wilkite writing) for our understanding of the emerging radical movement? While it would be of considerable interest if it could be demonstrated that Hume’s work had a formative impact on radical thinking, there is no real evidence for such a reading. As we have seen, the *North Briton* is not so much being shaped by Hume’s thinking as shaping his writing to bring it more into line with a popular form of Country/radical discourse. Rather, Hume’s presence in the *North Briton*, and Wilkite writing in general, should be seen as a formative chapter in the rapidly changing relationship between Wilkitism and political philosophy.

Within pro-Wilkes journalism it is possible to identify two distinctive attitudes towards Hume’s work. On occasions, polemicists sought to praise Hume and identify their publications with his writing. Thus, before reading quotations from his essays, readers are informed they are about to hear the views of the “Celebrated Mr Hume”, a “learned and ingenious writer”, “one of the first politicians of the

⁴⁰ Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”, *Essays*, 522.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 516.

⁴² *North Briton* 48 (14 May 1768).

⁴³ The quotation is from Hume, “Of the Liberty of the Press”, *Essays*, 12.

age”⁴⁴ Such an approach to Hume’s work should be seen as a product of the Whiggish understanding of political theory, which emerged out of the broad ideological consensus that developed in British politics after the Hanoverian succession. At its heart lay the notion that “great” writers (Hume, Montesquieu, Sidney, Temple, Harrington and Machiavelli among the moderns; Horace, Sallust and Tacitus among the ancients) formed part of a canon which represented the current state of political knowledge. These figures were, in a sense, open to those of all political persuasions; indeed their authority rested on their ability to transcend the factional divides that operated at Westminster. Quotations from such figures gave a political polemic gravitas. Indeed, a correspondent to the *Public Advertiser* in November 1766 was chastised by a fellow letter writer for basing his attack on Pitt on a French *bon mot*, when he should have supported “his Censures by the Authority of a Harrington, a Sidney, a Locke, a Temple, a Montesquieu, a Hume, or some such *serious Political Writer*”.⁴⁵ What is particularly noteworthy here is that these authors are treated as largely interchangeable. The implication is that it does not particularly matter which writer is employed, so long as one (or more) of them are used. Indeed, the frequent appeals to multiple “authorities” that are to be found within periodical writing suggest a belief that all of the great writers were in broad agreement with one another. The task for a polemicist, then, was to find excerpts from the great works of political philosophy which—perhaps with a little manipulation—could be used as a lens through which to read the contemporary political situation.

That polemicists could use such a seemingly diverse range of writers to support their work was itself a consequence of a general agreement among Whiggish theorists with regard to core principles. In direct contradiction to the arguments of seventeenth-century Tories like Filmer, the vast majority of writers accepted four core ideas. Firstly, that there was a natural equality between all individuals. Secondly, that the people were the origin of political power. Thirdly, that the state’s fundamental duty was to protect the interests of its people, or, as it was conventionally expressed, *salus populi suprema lex esto*.⁴⁶ Finally, that there were certain circumstances in which it might be legitimate to depose a government or

⁴⁴ *Middlesex Journal, or Chronicle of Liberty*, 16 June 1770; *North Briton* 47 (10 May 1768); *North Briton* 73 (5 Nov. 1768).

⁴⁵ *Public Advertiser*, 14 Oct. 1765.

⁴⁶ As Reed Browning has observed, this “was surely the most frequently cited if substantively impoverished classical dictum of the era”. Reed Browning, *Political and Constitutional Ideas of the Court Whigs* (Baton Rouge and London, 1982), 60. For examples of its use see Hume, “Of Passive Obedience”, *Essays*, 489; Algernon Sidney, *Discourses concerning government* (London, 1751), 318; John Trenchard and Thomas Gordon, *Cato’s Letters: or, Essays on Liberty, Civil and Religious, And other Important Subjects*, ed. Ronald Hamovoy, 2 vols. (Indianapolis, 1995), 1: 87. The quotation appears on the title page of Locke’s *Treatises*

ruler by means of force. These principles could be used to justify a very broad range of political practices and ideas ranging from the militant republicanism of Sidney to Hume’s cautious conservatism. However, the fundamental (if often purely theoretical) egalitarianism of Whig theory meant that it was possible for the *North Briton*—through selective quotation—to find excerpts to support the sort of populist politics it advocated in the works of a range of writers including Hume, Bolingbroke, Montesquieu, Locke, Temple and Rousseau.⁴⁷

On occasions, however, particularly when his *History* was being discussed, Hume was removed from the list of respectable “Whiggish” authorities. The key issue here was Hume’s analysis of seventeenth-century politics. For the Wilkites, the history of this era was structured around a straightforward clash between those who sought to defend England’s ancient constitution (the Parliamentarians and the Whigs) and supporters of arbitrary power who desired its destruction (Royalists and Tories). Hume entirely rejected such a crude schema, providing in his six-volume *History of England* a densely argued and sophisticated account of the transformation of England into a modern polity. For our purposes three elements of Hume’s analysis are of particular significance. Firstly, rather than presenting the constitution as an ancient artifice which provided a stable framework for government, Hume argued that by the time of James I it had become “an inconsistent fabric” composed of “jarring and discordant parts.”⁴⁸ As a consequence, the constitutional struggles of the Stuart era were a result of institutional instability (itself an effect, in part, of developments in mechanical and liberal arts) rather than the product of a deliberate subversion of the nation’s political infrastructure. Secondly, while he believed a conflict of some sort was perhaps inevitable, Hume presents the Parliamentarians as the primary originators of constitutional innovation. Within his narrative, therefore, it is the Stuarts, not their opponents, who are the defenders of established government. Finally, although Hume maintained that liberty had emerged triumphant from the internecine conflicts of the era, he refused to present this as a heroic or courageous struggle for freedom; rather, modern forms of liberty were an unintended and unforeseen by-product of zealotry and enthusiasm. Hume’s

of Government in most eighteenth-century editions. See, for example, John Locke, *Two treatises of government* (London, 1764).

⁴⁷ For the paper’s use of Bolingbroke see *North Briton* 74 (8 Nov. 1768), 90 (11 Feb. 1769), 131 (21 Oct. 1769), 153 (3 March 1770), 162 (5 May 1770), 182 (22 Sept. 1770). For its use of Montesquieu see *North Briton* 47 (10 May 1768), 48 (14 May 1768), 61 (13 Aug. 1768), 130 (14 Oct. 1769), 156 (24 March 1770), 163 (12 May 1770). The quotation from *North Briton* 61 does not acknowledge Montesquieu as its source. For Locke see *North Briton* 80 (17 Dec. 1768), 87 (28 Jan. 1769), 104 (29 April 1769), 120 (12 Aug. 1769). For Temple see *North Briton* 94 (4 March 1769). For Rousseau see *North Briton* 208 (2 March 1771), 213 (6 April 1771).

⁴⁸ Hume, *History*, 5: 59.

History, then, provides an account which shows a good deal of sympathy for the Stuarts (most notably Charles I) and is fiercely critical of popular politics (particularly in its levelling form).

As the author of such a text, Hume could easily be presented as a Tory, and consequently an apologist for arbitrary power. Thus in a discussion of “high Churchmen and Tories” from January 1768, Hume’s vindication of Charles I was likened by the *Public Advertiser* to those of Clarendon and Carte, while in June of the same year a correspondent to the *St. James Chronicle* referred to him as “that incomparable advocate of Church and State” when discussing his portrayal of Charles II in *The History of England*.⁴⁹ At the same time, rather than being used in conjunction with one another, Locke and Hume came to be seen as representing fundamentally opposite viewpoints. A writer in the *Whitehall Evening Post* expressed his desire that “advocates for despotism, the passive-obedient Tories, who by way of contempt call the Whigs, Liberty Boys, would lay down the fashionable history of Mr. Hume for one moment to peruse the opinions of Mr. Locke”.⁵⁰ Similar ideas are to be found in the *North Briton*. In the paper’s sixty-first number Hume is referred to as “a celebrated historian who cannot be supposed partial to the republican sect”, while by 1772 the paper had taken to prefacing its borrowings from Hume with condemnations of his basic political outlook. Thus before using Hume’s argument against the press gang, the paper introduces him as a writer “who cannot be suspected of being too violent an opponent of the prerogative of the crown, nor too warm a stickler for the rights of the people”.⁵¹ What we see here, then, is political philosophy not as a realm of unbiased objective authorities, but as a contest—rather in the manner of seventeenth-century debates—between advocates of the crown on the one hand and Lockean defenders of popular rights on the other. This did not mean that Hume was rendered *persona non grata*; his works continued to be used in defences of radical causes right up until the 1790s, most notably during the treason trials of 1793, when the defence councils of both Thomas Paine and Thomas Fyshe Palmer quoted at length from the essay on the liberty of the press.⁵² However, the argument had shifted. Whereas the Whiggish employment of Hume had

⁴⁹ *Public Advertiser*, 7 Jan. 1768; *St. James Chronicle, or the British Evening Post*, 9 June 1768. The latter article is reprinted in *Public Advertiser*, 13 June 1768; *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser*, 14 June 1768.

⁵⁰ *Whitehall Evening Post, or London Intelligencer*, 19 Jan. 1769. This piece is reprinted in *Public Advertiser*, 20 Jan. 1769. A very similar argument can be found in *Public Advertiser*, 22 Feb. 1769.

⁵¹ *North Briton* 61 (13 Aug. 1768); *North Briton* 195 (8 Dec. 1770). See also the comments following the quotation from Hume in *North Briton* 47 (10 May 1768).

⁵² *The Whole Proceedings on the Trial... against Thomas Paine for Libel upon the Revolution Settlement* (Dublin, 1793), 107; *The Trial of the Rev. Thomas Fyshe Palmer... on an indictment*

emphasized his superior intellectual status, within this more radical framework any mention of his work had to be prefaced by an attack on his principles.

This ambivalence towards Hume should be seen as part of a wider tension that existed within Wilkitism. To an extent, Wikitism functioned both outside and in opposition to conventional sources of political authority. While it would be wrong to argue that there was no tradition of popular politics before Wilkes, the late 1760s and early 1770s saw the development of a new, independent political culture among those working “out of doors”.⁵³ The framework of this culture was provided by a network of clubs, societies which ranged from the high-profile and expressively Wilkite like the “Bill of Rights Society” (formed on 25 February 1769) to the host of smaller Masonic and tradesman’s societies which might, on occasion, act as bases for Wilkite feeling and organization.⁵⁴ As a consequence, the Wilkites seemed to be functioning independently of the world of politics, which was centred around Westminster and St James, and the clubs, coffee houses and taverns that surrounded it. At the same time, the press began to develop a new degree of autonomy.⁵⁵ Whereas all the major periodicals involved in the political controversy of 1762–3 were funded by Westminster patrons, papers like the *North Briton*, the *North Briton Extraordinary* and the *Patriot* existed outside these chains of patronage and were reliant on public sales for their survival.⁵⁶ As a consequence, rather than writing to inform the people of the views of the main factions within Parliament, the papers increasingly began to advocate ideas which would have been unacceptable to the vast majority of the traditional political classes.

for suspicious practices (Edinburgh, 1793), 131. Parts of Hume’s essay also feature in *The Manual of Liberty: or Testimonies on the Rights of Mankind* (London, 1795), 398.

⁵³ On pre-Wilkite extra-parliamentary politics see L. Colley, “Eighteenth-Century English Radicalism before Wilkes”, *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society* 31 (fifth series) (1981), 1–19; H. T. Dickinson, “Popular Politics in the Age of Walpole”, in J. Black, ed., *Britain in the Age of Walpole* (Basingstoke, 1984), 45–68. N. Rogers, *Crowds, Culture and Politics in Georgian Britain* (Oxford, 1998).

⁵⁴ See Brewer, “Commercialization and Politics”, 197–264.

⁵⁵ See R. R. Rea, *The English Press in Politics 1760–1774* (Lincoln, NB, 1963), 141.

⁵⁶ Arthur Murphy and Tobias Smollett were commissioned by Bute to defend the Ministry in the *Auditor* and the *Briton* respectively; the *Monitor* was edited by John Entick and Arthur Beardmore for William Beckford, himself an MP and prominent Pittite; while the *North Briton* was financed by Temple and a number of his Whig cohorts. For an account of the relationship between these four papers see R. D. Spector, *Political Controversy: A Study in Eighteenth-Century Propaganda* (London, 1992) and Rea, *English Press*, 28–41. The *North Briton* is discussed in detail in G. Nobbe, *The North Briton: A Study in Political Propaganda* (New York, 1939), and the *Monitor* is given similar treatment in M. Peters, “The ‘Monitor’ on the Constitution, 1755–1765: New Light on the Ideological Origins of English Radicalism”, *English Historical Review* 86/341 (Oct. 1971), 706–27.

At an ideological level, the Wilkites' key move in separating themselves from the parliamentary mainstream was to conceive of themselves less as a Patriot opposition of the sort that had opposed the Walpole and Pelham governments, and more as heirs to the radical Whigs of the late seventeenth century.⁵⁷ This shift had begun during the first phase of Wilkitism; whereas the "loyal" oppositions of the 1730s and 1740s had eschewed party labels, the Wilkites proudly proclaimed themselves Whigs.⁵⁸ As a consequence, associations of the sort that had structured political rhetoric at the start of the century re-emerged; the Whigs were the defenders of liberty and the constitution; the Tories were "abettors of arbitrary power" and supporters of the Stuart line whose pro-French and pro-Catholic sympathies put them at odds with the interests of the nation.⁵⁹ In the second phase of Wilkitism these ideas were extended a good deal further, as the Wilkites drew on exclusion-era ideas of popular consent and contract (principally derived from Locke, a figure the Patriot opposition had been reluctant to engage with) to support their anti-Ministerial campaigns.⁶⁰ From such a perspective the lawmaking process (and, by extension, the law it formed) were given legitimacy by the consent the populace had provided at the state's institution. To subvert the agreed legislative process (as the Wilkites claimed the Ministry had done in relation to the Middlesex election) was to break the contract between a people and its government, and to place the populace in a state of war with their rulers. The Wilkites' Locke, then, was not so much the Locke of the *First Treatise of Government* (the defender of the ancient constitution from Filmerian patriarchy), but the author of the second, who—as the radical press of the 1760s and 1770s presented him—was primarily concerned with providing an account

⁵⁷ For early Whig writing see J. G. A. Pocock, "The Varieties of Whiggism from Exclusion to Reform: A History of Ideology and Discourse", in *idem*, *Virtue, Commerce and History*, 215–310. For an account of political writing in the first half of the eighteenth century see N. Phillipson, "Politeness and Politics in the Reigns of Anne and the Early Hanoverians", in J. G. A. Pocock, ed., *The Varieties of British Political Thought 1500–1800* (Cambridge, 1993), 211–45.

⁵⁸ For "Patriot" views on party see I. Kramnick, *Bolingbroke and His Circle: The Politics of Nostalgia in the Age of Walpole* (Ithaca and London, 1992), 26–7.

⁵⁹ *North Briton* 23 (6 Nov. 1762).

⁶⁰ The significance of Locke's ideas within eighteenth-century political thought has been and remains a highly contentious area. However, while it is generally accepted that Locke's *Treatises of Government* were not entirely neglected before 1770, it is still fair to argue that Lockean resistance theory enjoyed something of a renaissance in the late 1760s and 1770s. For a good summary of debates about the reception of Locke's thought see A. Gibson, "Ancients, Moderns, and Americans: The Republicanism–Liberalism Debate Revisited", *History of Political Thought* 21/2 (2000), 261–307.

of the legitimacy of popular resistance to arbitrary government.⁶¹ In addition to employing a neo-exclusionist framework for their discussions, the Wilkites—like their seventeenth-century predecessors—sought to find parallels between their own struggles and those of the Whig heroes of the past. To this end, Wilkite prints place Wilkes next to Hampden, Sidney and Russell, while Wilkite poetry like Churchill’s *The Duellist* represent Sidney, Hampden and Wilkes as “all friends of liberty”.⁶² While Hume’s role was necessarily limited within such a mode of analysis, he could fulfil two principal functions. Firstly, he could be presented as something of a modern-day Filmer (a defender of absolute monarchy and an opponent of Locke), thereby helping to further the basic Wilkite premise that politics (both past and present) was essentially a confrontation between pernicious opponents of liberty and its noble defenders. Secondly, Wilkite writers (and other radicals) sought to exploit the gap between Hume’s ‘Tory’ *History* and some of the more Whiggish principles he espoused in the *Essays* by arguing that if an “incomparable advocate of Church and State” (as Hume had shown himself to be in historical writing) opposed measures like the press gang and the restriction of the press, this was categorical proof of their barbarity.⁶³

However, while it is right to stress the growing autonomy of radicalism, it is equally important to note its dependence on parliamentary politics, and the institutional and ideological framework that supported it. The Wilkities emerge as a political force as a consequence of their success in engaging the population of London—and, on occasions, the provinces—with the debates that were taking place in Parliament. Indeed, the Wilkites’ two major triumphs, the moral victory they achieved in the Middlesex election, and the successful campaign to allow parliamentary debates to be reported, demonstrated their ability to use parliamentary politics for their own ends.⁶⁴ Moreover, the Wilkite press still saw its main task as the reporting of events at Westminster. Further, parliament-centred features such as accounts of the public and private lives of prominent Westminster politicians, lists of how MPs had voted in key debates and

⁶¹ While they offer very different verdicts on his politics, there are some similarities between the interpretation of Locke presented by an early eighteenth-century Tory like Charles Leslie, and that offered by the Wilkites. For both, Locke is a radical exclusionist whose work questions the legitimacy of the established government. For Leslie see Phillipson, “Politeness and Politics”, 219–22.

⁶² For Wilkes’s representation in popular prints see Wilson, *Sense of the People*, 214; C. Churchill, *The Duellist: A Poem* (London, 1764), 9.

⁶³ *Public Advertiser*, 7 Jan. 1768.

⁶⁴ For the Middlesex election see Thomas, *John Wilkes*, 70–89; Cash, *John Wilkes*, 204–36. For the reporting of parliamentary debates see P. D. G. Thomas, “The Beginning of Parliamentary Reporting in Newspapers, 1768–1774”, *English Historical Review* 74 (1959), 623–36; Thomas, *John Wilkes*, 125–40; Rea, *English Press*, 201–11.

transcriptions of parliamentary debates still took up the majority of the column inches in a publication like Bingley's *North Briton*. When the paper finally came to an end in May 1771, the reason Bingley stated for his decision to quit was that it was not financially viable to run a political paper like the *North Briton* when Parliament was not in session.⁶⁵ The paper—particularly from 1770 onwards—may have been highly critical of Parliament and parliamentary politics, but it needed it for its survival. At the same time, the Wilkites were still dependent on parliamentary ideology, and employed conventional arguments and authorities to defend and analyse the “balance” achieved by Britain’s matchless constitution. When producing such analyses, the radicals sought to present themselves less as seventeenth-century rebels, and more as the spokespeople for a moderate brand of mid-century Whiggism, which was as comfortable employing the arguments of Locke, as it was those of Montesquieu and Hume.

It should be emphasized that the Whiggish conception of political writing did not necessarily act as a limit on radicalism; within Wilkite discourse there is not a straightforward opposition between an “old-fashioned”, parliamentary, Whig mode of politics, and a Lockean, rights-based, radical discourse which looked forward to the 1790s and the campaigns for universal manhood suffrage of the nineteenth century. Rather, as was observed in relation to Hume, it was possible to graft radical populist ideas onto moderate constitutional Whiggism, thereby allowing it to support a far-reaching critique of the Ministry. What we see within Wilkitism, then, are two different tactical approaches, each of which, on occasion, invoked Hume. At times, Wilkitism presented itself as outside and in opposition to the world of parliamentary politics, and, in so doing, frequently spoke with the voice of the radical Whigs of the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth. In such analyses, Hume, particularly in his role as a historian of the Stuarts, could be used to demonstrate the persistence of Tory values. On other occasions, Wilkitism functioned more like a political parasite, employing the language and structures of the political establishment, in order both to strengthen itself and to weaken the system it fed upon. When acting in this mode, Hume (the enlightened political theorist) could be praised, and his writing endorsed.

IV

Hume’s presence in the *North Briton* also has significance for our understanding of his thinking during the latter part of his life. Accounts of Hume’s reaction to “Wilkes and Liberty” have generally focused on the antithetical relationship that the Scotsman had with the radicals. Particularly notable here

⁶⁵ *North Briton* 214 (13 April 1771).

is the work of Donald W. Livingston.⁶⁶ For Livingston, the outrage that Hume felt in the late 1760s and the 1770s was a consequence of his realization that philosophy—which he had hoped would defeat religious forms of enthusiasm, and usher in an era of prosperity and humanity—had been corrupted into new, false forms. What troubled Hume about the Wilkites’ thinking was its relationship with custom. Whereas the “true” philosophy practised by Hume was self-consciously a product of common life, and worked within the customary framework, the “false philosophy” of the Wilkites saw itself as autonomous, and attempted to criticize custom using abstract principles, ideals and models. Through his encounter with Wilkicism, Livingston argues, Hume came to realize that the key ideological “battle” that lay ahead would not be between religion and philosophy, but “would occur *within* philosophy between its true and its corrupt forms”.⁶⁷ Livingston’s argument is both a useful and an important one; however, as this section seeks to demonstrate, an examination of Hume’s later work in the light of his appropriation by the radical press provides a different perspective on the Scotsman’s ideas on philosophy and politics in his final years.

Although he had very little sympathy for the “Wilkes and Liberty” movement, Hume followed political developments in London closely, and much of his correspondence between 1768 and 1771 is taken up with discussion of them. His attitude (as expressed in these letters) is complex. Initially, while he thought that the disturbances of 1768 provided evidence against Turgot’s notion of human perfectability, he did not see the situation as a particularly serious one.⁶⁸ Writing to the Marquise de Barbentane on 24 May 1768, he observed,

The elections have put us into a ferment; and the riots of the populace have been frequent: but as these mutinies were founded on nothing, and had no connexion with any higher order of the state, they have done but little mischief, and seem now entirely dispersed.⁶⁹

For Hume, then, the Wilkite mob might be an embarrassment to the Ministry, but they did not fundamentally threaten the order of the nation.⁷⁰ However, from spring 1769 onwards (the time of the Middlesex re-elections) Hume began to see the potential for catastrophe in the political situation. What particularly disturbed him was the behaviour of the more respectable elements of the parliamentary opposition (most notably the Chathamites), who were using Wilkicism as a

⁶⁶ See Livingston, *Melancholy and Delirium*, 256–89.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 280.

⁶⁸ For Hume’s comments to Turgot see Hume, *Letters*, 2: 180 (16 June 1768).

⁶⁹ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 178 (24 May 1768).

⁷⁰ For the embarrassment Hume thought the Ministry should feel see Hume, *Letters*, 2: 184 (22 July 1768).

platform through which they might dislodge the Ministry. As Hume commented in a letter to Hugh Blair,

affairs become quite serious: For I am well assured that Lord Chatham will after the holy days creep out from his Retreat, and appear on the Scene. . . This Villain is to thunder against the Violation of the Bill of Rights, in not allowing the County of Middlesex the Choice of its Member. Think of the Impudence of that Fellow; and his Quackery; and his Cunning; and his Audaciousness; and judge of the Influence he will have over such a deluded Multitude.⁷¹

Here, then, was the connection between the “higher orders of the state” and the multitude that had been lacking previously. It was this virulent objection to the political manoeuvrings of Chatham (and to a lesser extent the Rockinghamites) that served to move Hume closer to the Ministry. He followed the parliamentary debates over the expulsion of Wilkes closely, forwarding accounts to Adam Smith, and endorsed the position of his friend and countryman Gilbert Elliot in calling for a government crackdown on the radicals.⁷² At the same time, he expressed genuine gladness at the victories that the government achieved over the combined forces of Chatham, Rockingham and their supporters in the debates of January and February 1770. He was also broadly supportive of the ministries of the period. Thus while often critical of the measures pursued by both Grafton and North (specifically their weakness in the face of violence in the City of London and their rather bellicose attitude towards foreign policy), he rated both (particularly North) highly, and supported the king’s decision not to engage in discussions with the opposition following Grafton’s fall in 1770.⁷³ What we see in these letters, then, is that Hume was alienated not just by Wilkitemism, but by the general direction that opposition politics had taken. As a result, he tends to paint the key political confrontation as one between a pernicious opposition (something which includes Members of Parliament, the corporation of London, and the Wilkites) and a Ministry which, while far from perfect, merited support.

It is this attitude that helps to explain the changes that Hume made to the final editions of his *Essays*. When preparing the 1770 edition of *Essays and Treatises on Several Subjects*, Hume must have found that while the measured tone and impartial approach of his discussion placed him at a considerable distance from the frenzied enthusiasm of Wilkite politics, on specific issues (most notably taxation and the press) his work had notable similarities with the Country/Patriot tradition of opposition writing. Moreover, it is highly likely that Hume was aware that his work was being coopted by the Wilkites. Up until the autumn of 1769, he

⁷¹ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 197 (28 March 1769).

⁷² For Hume’s letter to Smith see: Hume, *Letters*, 2: 217 (Feb. 1770).

⁷³ See Hume, *Letters*, 2: 213 (25 Jan. 1770), 2: 214 (6 Feb. 1770).

was living in London, and would have had both the opportunity and the desire to follow political developments closely. Indeed, his enthusiasm for the press is demonstrated by the arrangement he made with Gilbert Elliot and William Strahan to have newspapers sent up to him when he returned to Edinburgh. This scheme only ended when Hume informed Strahan that he was “of a Club here that get down News papers and Pamphlets from London regularly”.⁷⁴ Given these circumstances, the fact that extracts from Hume’s essay on the press were published on ten separate occasions between 1768 and 1774 means it would have been a remarkable coincidence if he had not been aware of at least some of the ways in which his work was being coopted.

In the final edition of the *Essays*, then, Hume sought to disentangle his own thinking from the opposition politics that he now found so repellent. Unsurprisingly, given the frequency with which it was used in the anti-Ministerial press, the most extensive of the edits he made were those to “Of the Liberty of the Press”. In the edition of the *Essays* published in 1770, he was to omit the final three paragraphs of the original essay which contained a rather Wilkite-sounding commendation of the free press.⁷⁵ For the edition of 1777—prepared shortly before his death and published posthumously—Hume added a rather curt final sentence: “It must however be allowed, that the unbounded liberty of the press, though it be difficult, perhaps impossible, to propose a suitable remedy for it, is one of the evils, attending those mixt forms of government.”⁷⁶

Substantial edits were also made in 1770 to another essay that featured in opposition writing, “Of Taxes”. The new version did delete his controversial remarks concerning the superior productivity of labourers in years when wages (in real terms) were low, but, equally significantly, it also removed the material on the damaging nature of exorbitant taxes.⁷⁷ Moreover, Hume began to see taxes as goods in themselves, asserting, in a sentence added in 1770, that taxes on luxury goods “naturally produce sobriety and frugality”.⁷⁸ After dismissing the physiocratic idea that all taxes fall ultimately upon the land and the notion that a rise in taxes will inevitably lead to a rise in wages, he inserted the following conclusion to the paragraph: “They must be very heavy taxes, indeed, and very

⁷⁴ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 218 (13 March 1770).

⁷⁵ Because of the nature of the material, this section makes reference to the original editions of Hume’s work. Where appropriate, page numbers for the Miller edition will be placed after the main reference. Hume, “Of the Liberty of the Press”, *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, 4 vols. (London, 1770), 1: 9–13; Miller, 604–5.

⁷⁶ Hume, “Of the Liberty of the Press”, *Essays and treatises on several subjects*, 2 vols. (London, 1777), 1: 12; Miller, 13.

⁷⁷ Compare Hume, “Of Taxes”, in *Political Discourses* (Edinburgh, 1752), 118; Hume, “Of Taxes”, in *Essays and treatises on several subjects* (1770), 2: 128; Miller, 345, 635.

⁷⁸ Hume, “Of Taxes” (1770), 2: 128; Miller, 345.

injudiciously levied, which the artisan will not, of himself, be enabled to pay, by superior industry and frugality, without raising the price of his labour.”⁷⁹ Thus, while Hume still maintained that there was a limit beyond which taxes could not be increased without damaging the economy, this limit seemed considerably higher in 1770 than it had been in the earlier editions of the essay. In making such arguments not only are Hume’s 1770 views on this issue in direct opposition to those of the Wilkites, they also show a greater concern than previously with imbuing the labouring population—who in London were offering such vociferous support for Wilkes—with the values of sobriety, frugality and industry.

As well as responding to the cooption of his essay, Hume also sought to remove anything that might appear like Wilkite sentiment from his discussion. Thus just as the Wilkites were basing their political analyses on an increasingly broad conception of the political nation, Hume’s work was moving in exactly the opposite direction. In the first edition of “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”, Hume had given the right to vote to “all the freeholders in the country parishes, and those who pay scot and lot in the town parishes”.⁸⁰ From 1753 he added a stricter property qualification; the vote was now for “free-holders of ten pounds a-year in the country and all the house holders worth 200 pounds in the town parishes”.⁸¹ In 1770, just as the Wilkites were formulating plans for electoral reform, Hume extended these qualifications to freeholders of £20 a year and householders worth £500.⁸²

Such an account helps to refine the model suggested by Livingston. What Livingston’s analysis of “true” and “false” philosophy provides is a useful depiction of the relationship that Hume hoped his writing might have with the radical movement. Indeed, he maintained that such a relationship did exist when he observed, in a letter to the Comtesse de Boufflers,

Licentiousness, or rather the frenzy of liberty, has taken possession of us, and is throwing everything into confusion. How happy do I esteem it, that in all my writings I have always kept at a proper distance from that tempting extreme, and have maintained a due regard to magistracy and established government, suitable to the character of an historian and a philosopher!⁸³

⁷⁹ Hume, “Of Taxes”, (1770), 2: 131; Miller, 347.

⁸⁰ Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”, *Political Discourses* (1752), 285; Miller, 647.

⁸¹ See Miller, 647. I have not been able to locate the 1753–4 edition Miller discusses. However, the 1758 edition does contain the changes referred to above. See, Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”, *Essays and treatises on several subjects* (London, 1758), 273.

⁸² Hume, “Idea of a Perfect Commonwealth”, *Essays and treatises on several subjects* (1770), 2: 335; Miller, 516.

⁸³ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 191–2 (23 Dec. 1768).

However, in reality “true” and “false” philosophy were a good deal more interdependent than either Hume or Livingston would like to acknowledge. Rather than being engaged in a straightforward “battle” with the customary framework, the Wilkites realized that Hume’s “true philosophy” might act as a useful platform for their own polemics. It was, then, quite possible for the Wilkites to present themselves as both advocates of abstract speculative principles like reason, natural law and liberty, while, on occasion, employing Hume’s moderate, custom-based mode of analysis. At the same time, the false philosophy of the Wilkities played an active role in shaping Hume’s work in the latter stages of his life. Hume may well have kept a distance from the Wilkities, but in order to do so he had to make considerable changes to his essays.

Finally, it should be noted that Hume’s conception of the relation between the “true philosopher” and the world of ignorance that surrounds him alters towards the end of his life. In the original version of “Of the Liberty of the Press” there is a sense that a free press can contribute to a process of political maturation and advancement. Not only does the press protect the republican part of government from the monarchical, and help to secure a government from the dangers of secret plots, it is also to be hoped “that Men, being every Day more accustomed to the free Discussion of public Affairs, will improve in their Judgment of them, and be with greater Difficulty seduced by every idle Rumour and popular Clamour”.⁸⁴ The free press, then, and by extension Hume’s defence of it, were part of a wider process of philosophical advancement of the sort described in essays such as “Of Luxury” and hoped for in “That Politics Might be Reduced to a Science” and “Of Parties in General”. However, in his post-Wilkite work, Hume’s attitude towards “true” and “false” philosophy shifts. Rather than functioning as an advocate of a free press, Hume conceives of the press’s role—in Britain at least—as paradoxical. Thus while he continued to maintain that a free press was necessary for the survival of a British-style “mixed” system of government, he also argued that it served to fundamentally undermine the security of such a state. Hume’s attitude towards liberty in general is similar. His basic contention here is that an excess of liberty has placed the nation in a dangerous state, as “Liberty can scarcely be retrench’d without Danger of being entirely lost”.⁸⁵ The survival of the constitution, then, depends upon a principal which, in its current form, is fundamentally destructive. As a consequence, while he continued to be supportive of the Ministry, there is a sense that little can be done to alleviate the crisis. Indeed, immediately after congratulating Elliot on the victory achieved by the “King’s Men”, he observes in a rather more sombre style, “I look upon [all such victories] as temporary and imperfect, like the fallacious Recoveries of

⁸⁴ Hume, *Essays Moral and Political* (Edinburgh, 1741), 17.

⁸⁵ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 216 (21 Feb. 1770).

a hectic Person who is hastening to his Dissolution.”⁸⁶ Hume’s revisions, then, do not entail merely a removal of the adolescent false philosophy of his earlier work, but rather involve a fundamental revision of his account of what “true philosophy” might achieve.⁸⁷ In these later works, instead of opposing or directly critiquing “false philosophy”, Hume increasingly came to treat it as an inevitable part of political life; all a writer could do in response to the current situation was describe the effect of the populace’s ignorance and barbarism, and wait for the culmination of the historical narrative which he saw unfolding in front of him. It is this rather fatalistic approach which is perhaps the defining characteristic of Hume’s later work. While he had undoubtedly seen that there were weaknesses underlying the British political order throughout his career, and had fought against the complacency of many contemporary political commentators, there is a sense in his work from the late 1760s and 1770s that these problems had become in the light—or perhaps darkness—of Wilkicism both more intractable and more urgent. The appropriation of his work by the *North Briton* and other elements of the radical press should be seen as an important source of this sense of disillusionment.

⁸⁶ Hume, *Letters*, 2: 216 (21 Feb. 1770).

⁸⁷ The claim that Hume is providing “adolescent Enlightenment celebration” comes in Livingston, *Melancholy and Delirium*, 282.