

NOTES AND DOCUMENTS

John Wesley on 'Patriotism'

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ABSTRACT

In a 1774 letter published in *Lloyd's Evening Post*, previously unrecognized in Wesley Studies, John Wesley contested the use of the label 'patriot' in current political debate, particularly by those challenging the court of George III and pushing for abolition of constitutional monarchy—like John Wilkes and his followers. This article reproduces the letter, with an introduction and annotation.

Keywords: Thomas Hobbes, William Legge (Lord Dartmouth), patriotism, John Wesley, John Wilkes

On the front page of the 12–14 January 1774 issue of *Lloyd's Evening Post* is a letter to the editor addressing current debates about 'patriotism', which is signed 'J. W.'¹ Some time ago Frank Baker came across this letter in the only known surviving copy of this issue of *Lloyd's Evening Post* in the library of the American Philosophical Society in Philadelphia. While Baker annotated his photocopy with a query about whether the author was John Wesley, he never resolved the question (it is still listed with a question mark in Baker's most complete manuscript list of Wesley letters).² Thus, the letter has not previously been brought to the attention of Wesley scholars.

On investigation, the evidence is conclusive that the author of this public letter was John Wesley. It is dated during a time Wesley was in London, quotes from a little-known poem by his brother Samuel Wesley Jr, and invokes John Wesley's characteristic distinction between mere 'opinions' and 'right tempers'. Most importantly, Wesley reiterated passages from this letter a year later in a sermon published in the *Arminian Magazine*.³

1. This issue is number 2581, in volume 34.

2. Baker's manuscript is held in the Wesley Works Archives at Duke University.

3. See John Wesley, Sermon 84, 'The Important Question', I.4, *Sermons III* [vol. III of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1986), 184–5.

Through this letter Wesley added his voice to a prominent thread of eighteenth-century political debate in Britain.⁴ Indeed, while the word ‘patriot’ had earlier use in English, the first listing for the word ‘patriotism’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary* is from the journal *The Political State of Great Britain* in 1716. As the century unfolded, appeals to ‘patriotism’ and true ‘patriots’ became central to criticism of corruption in government from both ends of the political spectrum. Tories like Lord Bolingbroke (1678–1751), while defenders of monarchy, challenged the corruption of George II by championing George’s (estranged) son Frederick⁵ as a future virtuous ‘patriot king’—one whose actions would be guided by love of country rather than love of money or power.⁶ Meanwhile, moderate Whigs like William Pitt (1708–78), while accepting in principle the form of constitutional monarchy established through the Glorious Revolution, utilized the label ‘patriot’ to champion the role of country gentlemen in resisting the potential corruption of monarchy and inherited nobility. Although Frederick died before he could take on the role, his son George III laid claim to the label of ‘patriot king’ on ascending the throne in 1760. This move weakened the appeal of Pitt, and fostered fractures within the Whig camp. In particular, many of the emerging middle class in London came to view country gentlemen like Pitt as a corrupt ‘Whig aristocracy’. They lodged hope for effective constitutional balancing of the monarch and nobility in the political participation of ‘city patriots’. The most radical wing of the Whigs, led by John Wilkes (1725–97), rejected constitutional monarchy itself as a halfway measure, and presented themselves as the true ‘patriots’, who would free England from monarchy—through force if necessary.

Against this backdrop, John Wesley’s letter in the 12–14 January 1774 issue of *Lloyd’s Evening Post* takes its place alongside his *Free Thoughts on Present State of Public Affairs* (1770) and *Thoughts on Liberty* (1772) as a form of resisting the political philosophy and impact of John Wilkes,⁷ who was being heralded as ‘the great patriot Wilkes.’⁸ In the letter, Wesley defended the beleaguered constitutional establishment implicitly by refusing any equation of ‘patriot’ with

4. The following summary draws upon John Brewer, ‘Pitt and Patriotism: A Case Study in Political Argument’, *Party Ideology and Popular Politics at the Accession of George III* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 96–111; Paul Langford, ‘Patriotism Restored, 1757–1770’, *A Polite and Commercial People: England, 1727–1783* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), 331–88; and Adrian Randall, *Riotous Assemblies: Popular Protest in Hanoverian England* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 195–9.

5. Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales (1707–51).

6. See Henry St John Bolingbroke, *Letter on the Spirit of Patriotism* (1736); and *The Idea of a Patriot King* (1738).

7. See the discussion of these items in Theodore R. Weber, *Politics in the Order of Salvation: Transforming Wesleyan Political Ethics* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2001), 87–110.

8. As in the *Public Advertiser* (18 December 1773), 2.

Wilkes's agenda. More explicitly, Wesley defended his friend Lord Dartmouth, a member of George III's court, who had come under attack.⁹

To the Editor of *Lloyd's Evening Post*

[London¹⁰]

January 8, 1774

Sir,

Perhaps there has scarce ever been a time when 'patriotism' has been more talked of than it is at this day. Never was it spoken of with more zeal and vehemence, and that all over the nation. Although in this respect, as in many others, London may be allowed to have the preeminence, the cry of patriotism having been more vehement here than in any other part of the nation.¹¹

But do we know what it is we are talking about? Do we know what 'patriotism', what a 'patriot' is? If we do not, what can we do but blunder on, from the beginning to the end? Patriotism is not an *opinion* of any kind; neither is it a set of opinions. It is true there are wrong opinions, which if we are strongly attached to them, may be hindrances of patriotism; nay, would seem to be almost incompatible with it (such as that of Mr. Hobbes that subjects are absolutely to obey their sovereign, though it were to the *destruction of their country*¹²). Yet men's opinions may be exactly right, without their having one spark of patriotism. It consists in *right tempers*, not right notions. It is seated in the heart rather than the head.¹³ Much less does it consist in *volubility of speech*, or in loud and vehement declamation. Many indeed have little other pretence to patriotism than the talking earnestly and impetuously—especially if it be against those whom they

9. See, for example, the critical letter addressed to Lord North and Lord Dartmouth, questioning their appeal to 'patriotism', published in the *Gazetteer* (12 November 1773), *Literary Chronicle* (12 November 1773), and *Middlesex Journal* (11–13 November 1773).

10. Wesley was in London on 8 January 1774 (and had been for the two previous months).

11. This reflects the prominence of the 'city patriots' after 1760, and the turmoil surrounding John Wilkes.

12. See Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan* (1651).

13. Note the parallel with Wesley's definition of true religion as 'right tempers towards God and man', which he contrasted with false religion—such as a religion of mere 'opinions'—that 'does not imply *the giving the heart to God*'. Sermon 120, 'The Unity of the Divine Being', §§15–16, *Sermons IV* [vol. IV of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. Albert C. Outler (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1987), 66.

affect to represent as the enemies of their country. But this is still utterly wide of the mark. A man may talk or write like Cicero, and yet all the time be as void of patriotism as Sylla¹⁴ or Catiline.¹⁵

What it really is we may in some measure learn from the very derivation of the word. Does not everyone know that it is derived from the Latin word *patria*, 'one's own country'? And does not this point out the nature of the thing, *right affections towards our country*? What is it then but the *love of one's own country*, distinct from the advantages we may receive thereby; from the honour, or ease, or profit which we may receive by the services which we render it. Love of honour or profit are not patriotism. Neither are any actions instances of it to which we are incited by these motives, either in whole or in part. Virgil therefore represents his admired Junius Brutus¹⁶ as only a mongrel patriot when he assigns as the motives of his most celebrated action,

*Amor patriae laudumque immensa cupido*¹⁷

Love of his country, and huge *thirst of praise*.

The same motive, doubtless, which inspired his successor and namesake,¹⁸

False Brutus cringing while he stabs his friend!¹⁹

Miserable patriotism which springs either from love of money, or from love of praise!

Surely patriotism (if there is any such thing in being) is a *disinterested love* of our country; unmixed with regard to our own honour or dishonour, praise or dispraise, gain or loss. Is it not such a disinterested love as includes a steady desire to advance the general interest of our country? To promote its prosperity, its peace and plenty, and that generous virtue which is the real glory of a nation? This is a genuine patriotism, and nothing else. What is

14. Lucius Cornelius Sulla Felix (c. 138–78 BC), a Roman general who overthrew his political opponent by force and ruled as a dictator.

15. Lucius Sergius Catalina (102–62 BCE), a Roman aristocrat who turned demagogue and made an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the republic.

16. Lucius Junius Brutus, founder of the Roman Republic in 509 BCE.

17. Virgil, *Aeneid*, vi.823.

18. Marcus Junius Brutus (85–42 BCE). Wesley made this same comparison, including the quotations, a year later in Sermon 84, 'The Important Question', I.4, *Works*, 3:184–5.

19. Samuel Wesley Jr, 'On Mr. Hobbes', l. 6, *Poems on Several Occasions* (1736), 102.

vulgarly so-called is only a painted bauble, which knaves try to get fools to stare at, while they pick their pockets, or cut their throats.

Who is a patriot then? Not the man who embraces this or that set of *political notions*. Not one who *declaims* against wicked ministers and corrupt administration, and who *bawls* aloud, perhaps curses and swears and gets drunk, for the liberty of 'Old England'. He that thinks himself a patriot on this ground is ignorant of the whole affair. There is not a grain of patriotism in all this. It is quite another thing. A patriot is only another word for 'a lover of his country'. One who ardently desires, and by natural consequence uniformly pursues, her real welfare. One who bends all his endeavours to promote virtue, and peace, and plenty among his countrymen. And continues so to do, not only when it may promote his own honour or interest, but even when he knows he shall incur disgrace thereby, and impair or ruin his fortune. This man is a patriot, and this alone. Therefore I laugh at Junius Brutus's patriotism. A patriot acting from 'thirst of praise'! What a gross absurdity? Little less than a contradiction in terms. He might as well have acted from *thirst of wine*. One thirst was as much patriotism as the other. Place him and Marcus Brutus, equally athirst for praise, with our patriotic mob screaming out 'English liberty'! A real patriot thirsts neither for praise nor gain; but simply, like Lord Dartmouth,²⁰ for the good of his country.

I am, sir, your humble servant,

J. W.

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20. Note Wesley's reference to Dartmouth as 'that real patriot' in his *Journal* (2 February 1778), *Journal and Diaries VI (1776-1786)* [vol. XXIII of *The Works of John Wesley*], ed. W. Reginald Ward and Richard P. Heitzenrater (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), 74. William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth (1731-1801), was serving in the court of George III as secretary of state for the colonies.