vision of how contemporary capitalism should be criticised on moral grounds and how it might develop in a better way in the future.

McCabe's work is strongly argued, and her detailed analysis of Mill's works provides a strong underpinning for her views – though, as she admits, she is unlikely to convince those liberals who are committed to seeing Mill as the key liberal thinker of the last two hundred years. McCabe's work can also be seen, though, as an important contribution to Mill's contemporary relevance. Mill is not just seen today as a founding father of the Liberal Democrats – he can also be claimed by some kinds of conservatives. Mill was an enthusiastic supporter of the British empire – he worked for the East India Company from 1823 to 1858 – and his arguments for free speech and individual autonomy in *On Liberty* can be used to support campaigns against 'cancel culture' and generally for libertarian causes, especially in America. But McCabe is anxious to reclaim Mill as very much a man of the left. This is not just a matter of Mill's early feminism – when he was briefly MP for Westminster in 1865–68 he introduced an amendment to the 1867 Reform Bill arguing for women's suffrage. To McCabe, Mill has much to offer those who are thinking about how to create alternatives to a globalised capitalism. Indeed, his emphasis on voluntary associations of individuals in local cooperatives fits in very well with the approach of many Greens, anarchists and New Left thinkers generally. By foregrounding this aspect of Mill's thought, McCabe has ensured that Mill's place in the twenty-first century will continue to be a matter of debate – as is only appropriate for the author of *On Liberty*. ■

Ian Packer is the author of *Lloyd George, Liberalism and the Land* (2001) and *Liberal Government and Politics, 1905–1915* (2006).

Liberal darling of the mob

Robin Eagles, *Champion of English Freedom: The life of John Wilkes, MP and Lord Mayor of London* (Amberley Publishing, 2024)
Review by Hugh Gault

Robin Eagles is an expert on John Wilkes, editing the diaries Wilkes kept from 1770 to 1797, the last twenty-seven years of his life, for the London Record Society in 2014. Eagles is also familiar with, and very knowledgeable about, the history of parliament in the pre-Victorian era.

The ostensible reason for publishing this full and detailed biography in 2024 was that Wilkes had become Lord Mayor of London in 1774, exactly 250 years before. It is a comprehensive and impressive work, exploring every aspect and, as far as one can tell, virtually every detail of Wilkes's life from his birth, probably in 1725 (300 years ago) to his death aged 72. This is a work of scholarship that draws together, and expands upon, the myriad other assessments of Wilkes over the last couple of centuries. There were several such in Wilkes's own lifetime and many since, including a flurry from the 1950s into the twenty-first century. Writers as well-known as Raymond Postgate in 1956 and George Rudé in 1962 have written lengthy books on him.

So, the obvious question is why Wilkes should continue to resonate with different generations so long after his death.

He was an unattractive character, often in behaviour and apparently in physique. Yet he clearly had an appeal that transcended these limitations: a good friend

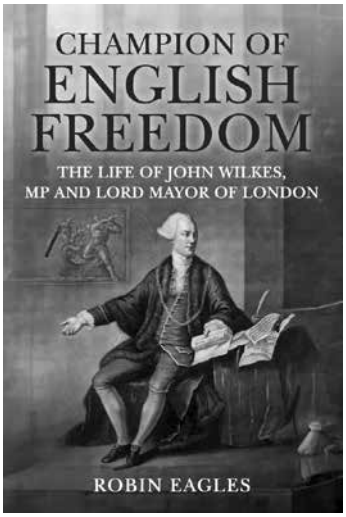
to a few but a bad enemy to more, a constant father to his daughter but a libertine whose relationships with most of the other women in his life were dismissive and cavalier. Wilkes was an underdog at odds with the establishment, making him the darling of the Georgian mob who could identify with one of their own, Wilkes's background reflecting theirs but whose determination and principled stance elevated him to a position of prominence and differentiated him from the run-of-the-mill crowd. His enemies – and there were many (including the king and his prime minister in 1762–63, the 3rd Earl of Bute) – interpreted this as a dangerous notoriety that had to be stamped on before it got out of hand.

Wilkes was a contrarian and frequently a chancer, a lasting irritant to the civil, political and court authorities. One of the sayings attributed to him by a barrister writing in the nineteenth century was 'Give me a grain of truth and I will mix it up with a great mass of falsehood so that no chemist will ever be able to separate them' (p. 74). Even if apocryphal, it sums up Wilkes well.

It was *The North Briton*, the newspaper Wilkes established in 1762 to attack Bute and his policies (Bute had set up *The Briton* the year before) that brought him to widespread attention. Wilkes referred to Bute as 'the King's incompetent friend' but the light-hearted nature of the newspaper altered with issue number 45 in 1763. This attacked Bute for the speech he had written for the king praising the Peace of Paris to mark the end of the Seven Years War. The treaty had 'saved England from the certain ruin of success', the *North Briton* asserted.

Number 45, which Wilkes deferred for a fortnight until after Bute's resignation and the end of the parliamentary session, was to be the pivot about which much of Wilkes subsequent life would turn. The new administration issued general warrants (not naming anyone specifically) for the author(s), printers and publishers of number 45. Wilkes nailed his reputation on the constitutional issues this raised, notably the freedom of the press, whether it was lawful to arrest an MP such as Wilkes, and eventually *habeas corpus*. Wilkes was ultimately released because of parliamentary privilege.

Wilkes's parody of the poet Pope ('Essay on Woman') was then added to the libel accusations and he fled to Paris, being expelled from parliament in his absence in 1764. Failing to answer a summons, Wilkes was outlawed that November and only returned from Paris four years later. Wilkes might have been tolerated as a private citizen living in obscurity but, when he attempted to stand as MP for Middlesex, the authorities decided to act. Wilkes, by now labelled 'the friend to liberty',



was elected but the election was declared null and void. This happened a further three times, with the government declaring as MP another candidate who had polled fewer votes than Wilkes on the final occasion.

A major political controversy, Grafton resigned as prime minister and was replaced by Lord North. The Supporters of the Bill of Rights Society was formed as a consequence, so endorsing the principle in the 1688 Bill of Rights that law-abiding citizens were to be protected from the state. Wilkes's debts were paid off and his reinstatement to parliament demanded.

Wilkes turned to the City of London, being elected first as an alderman and then as sheriff. When parliament sought to stop the printing of parliamentary debates and arrest the printers, Wilkes had the parliamentary officer arrested for exceeding his remit (only the City of London could make arrests within

its boundaries). On this occasion Wilkes outmanoeuvred the government and in 1774 he did finally become MP for Middlesex. He was re-elected in 1780 and 1784.

Also Lord Mayor from 1774, Wilkes was in his element, publicly visible to all and entertaining lavishly, with his daughter rather than his mistress as his Lady Mayoress. His debts accrued once more but, more positively, he acted to regulate food prices, establish a charity for prisoners, and campaign against prostitutes (somewhat ironically given his earlier years). As MP for Middlesex, he called for parliamentary reform and the political rights of all, including religious dissenters. He helped to suppress the anti-Catholic Gordon Riots.

There are many aspects of Wilkes' career that remain pertinent today and ought to be a part of any Liberal or democratic campaign: against general warrants and for civil liberties, against a tyrannical executive and for the individual, for informed and transparent representation and hence a stronger democracy, against prejudice and for tolerance.

Eagles includes a brief epilogue to underline some of these points and, along the way, describes Wilkes in ways that could equally be applied to one of his successors as Mayor of London (and, in the latter's case, briefly a Conservative prime minister): Wilkes 'ability to reinvent himself', a 'celebrity politician, revelling in the adulation of the crowd', using 'the independence of London to its full potential', yet 'frequently self-obsessed and never tired of seeing his name in print', with a 'final phase as courtier, Arcadian and translator'.

Without this epilogue, however, the achievements and events that led Wilkes to be called 'A friend to liberty' and illustrate his continuing relevance and appeal today might be lost in a 244-page biography freighted with a further forty-six pages of notes. Both the book and Wilkes would have benefited from an editor's scalpel, with a leaner book better reflecting the pace at which Wilkes lived his life. ■

Hugh Gault is an independent writer and historian. His most recent book is *Labour, Lancashire and the 1924 Government: Its rise, fall and parallels with today* (2024).

HM: High Maintenance

Anne Somerset, *Queen Victoria and her Prime Ministers: A personal history* (William Collins, 2024)
Review by Peter Truesdale

She was ghastly. Self-centred. Opinionated. Obstinate. She had 'absurdly high notions of her prerogative, and the amount of control which she ought to exercise over public business'. Lord Clarendon spot on with that September 1863 observation.

There was trouble right from the start. The Bedchamber Crisis of 1839 displayed the unreasonable behaviours that showed themselves again and again throughout her reign. She came to the throne a definitive and partisan Whig. She benefitted from the care and guidance of Melbourne, her first prime minister. On 7 May, Melbourne's majority in a vote on the Jamaica Bill was a mere five. It was time for the government to go. A Tory administration must be formed. This required Tories to replace Whigs as Ladies of the Bedchamber. Whether that meant each and every lady was a moot point. Victoria was immovable. She would keep every single one.

She would not accept Sir Robert Peel, 'a cold, unfeeling, disagreeable man', as premier. Wellington was summoned instead. He declined office. Peel was sent for.