

A Radical Shrew in America



Mary Wilkes Hayley and celebrity in the early United States

Mary Wilkes Hayley was an ugly shrew. At least that is how the few historians who take notice of the sister of John Wilkes, the famous London radical, would have it. Mrs. Hayley (c. 1728-1808), as she was generally known, came to the United States in 1784 and stayed for eight years. During her sojourn, the sister of one of America's great heroes may have been the first person to experience that fabled fifteen minutes of American fame. Her celebrity faded almost as quickly as it rose. Stardom needs constant tending, and in America, Mrs. Hayley dropped the ball.

In her day, Mrs. Hayley had a knack for being noticed. She reportedly raced around London in her chariot, always insisting on "breakneck speeds" from her coachman. She routinely went to trials at London's famous courthouse, the Old Bailey, where she would sit in a place reserved for her. "When,"—everyone who writes about Mrs. Hayley repeats this tidbit—"the discussion of the trial was of such a nature that decorum, and indeed the judges themselves desired women

to withdraw, she never stirred from her place, but persisted in remaining to hear the whole with the most unmoved and unblushing earnestness of attention." Like her rakish brother, Mrs. Hayley "never permitted any ideas of Religion, or even of delicacy, to impose a restraint upon her observations." She shared other traits with her brother: she was intelligent, witty, a good conversationalist, and, also like Wilkes, ugly. She had one brown tooth and looked so much like a man that someone who had never met John Hancock once assumed Mrs. Hayley to be her friend Hancock.

She was also a political ally of her brother. His fame came from fighting for liberty—and for being a libertine. John Wilkes's first strike against government abuse of civil liberties came when he challenged general warrants (arrest warrants that specified neither the individual to be arrested nor the particular crime, thereby giving free rein to arresting agents). Wilkes (1725-1797) had been elected to the House of Commons in 1757 but had made no mark until he began publishing an opposition newspaper, the *North Briton*. In the forty-fifth issue of the paper, which appeared in April of 1763, Wilkes attacked the treaty ending the Seven Years' War. Britain had defeated France in the war and had gained many French territories in the peace settlement. Nevertheless, critics of the government, including Wilkes, made much of the treaty's perceived leniency toward the French. The audacious Wilkes, however, went farther than others by casting doubt on the probity of the king himself. As soon as his views appeared in the famous *North Briton*, no. 45, the government, now under the leadership of George Grenville, had him arrested for seditious libel. The arrest was carried out using a general warrant, and Wilkes immediately contested the warrant's legality. Over the next few years, the courts came to accept his position. Meanwhile, he was expelled from Parliament for the alleged seditious libel and also prosecuted for publishing the obscene parody *Essay on Woman*. As his legal troubles mounted, Wilkes fled to France.

He returned from exile in 1768 and went first to the home of his sister and her second husband, George Hayley. Wilkes soon reentered the political fray, getting elected as MP for Middlesex (Greater London), first in March 1768 and then a few more times over the next year. But the government continued its assault on the notorious politician, repeatedly denying him his seat. This violation of voters' rights—the government was denying Wilkes's electors their will—cost Wilkes's enemies dearly. Partly because of the ensuing controversy, the government of Prime Minister Grafton collapsed in 1770. Meanwhile, the indefatigable Wilkes exploited his popularity to get elected as a London alderman and later as the city's mayor. Wilkes had made a name for himself by championing liberty in the general warrants and voters' rights issue. In the early 1770s, he furthered his reputation as civil libertarian by forcing the government to allow parliamentary debates to be reported in the newspapers.



Mary Hayley (née Wilkes), mezzotint by and published by Samuel William Reynolds, after Sir Joshua Reynolds (1821 [1763]). © National Portrait Gallery, London (D15231). Courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

Wilkes's fights against government power in the 1760s and 1770s coincided, of course, with the events that preceded the American Revolution. The Sugar Act, the Stamp Act crisis, the declaration of parliamentary supremacy over America, the arrival of British troops in Boston, the Boston Massacre (which was strikingly similar to the earlier St. George's Fields Massacre, in which British government soldiers killed seven demonstrators protesting the incarceration of Wilkes in the nearby King's Bench Prison), the Tea Act, and the Coercive Acts occurred between 1764 and 1774. Not surprisingly, then, many Americans saw in the Wilkesites English allies in the fight against government corruption and constitutional failure. They were all, American patriots believed, fighting for imperiled "English liberties." In recognition of the common cause, Americans sent gifts to Wilkes and often invoked the number "45" in politically symbolic acts. Moreover, Americans, such as the Boston Sons of Liberty, corresponded with Wilkes in the hope that he would help force the government to reconsider its obnoxious policies. The astute politico reciprocated Americans' admiration by speaking out on their behalf in Parliament, although after the colonists declared their independence, Wilkes's support for them waned. Like other opposition politicians, he came to accept independence less as a matter of principle than of political expediency.

Wilkes's brother-in-law George Hayley, also a London alderman and a member of Parliament, shared his famous relative's initial sympathy for the American cause, although perhaps for different reasons. Hayley had substantial business ties to New England merchants including John Hancock and the Brown family of Rhode Island; in 1769, Hayley's partnership, Hayley and Hopkins, arranged the insurance for a slaving voyage of John Brown. For Hayley, the imperial crisis was simply bad for business.

In 1781, George Hayley died. Hayley's friend and fellow merchant Gilbert

Deblois, an American Loyalist living in London, supposed that since Mrs. Hayley was "much taken up in the Gay world," she would not continue her husband's business, as widows often did. To Deblois's "Surprize," however, Mrs. Hayley did carry on her husband's affairs and soon distinguished herself as a tough-minded businesswoman. "[S]he seems not to feel for any Body or thing but herself," Deblois wrote. For in the immediate aftermath of the Revolutionary War, as American merchants struggled to manage their debts, she showed no sympathy in demanding payment. Mrs. Hayley pressured Deblois not to "Engag[e] in the American business here untill [his balance] is paid." Across the water, a Rhode Island merchant also learned that Mrs. Hayley was a hard-nosed creditor when she refused him an extra two months to pay his debt. Her position, she explained to the beleaguered American, was simply a function of the market. If he could find better terms elsewhere, he was welcome to pursue them.

Mrs. Hayley was more than tough. She had pluck too. Her husband's estate was owed substantial funds by various American merchants. And in 1784, Mrs. Hayley resolved to collect those debts in person. Her decision to travel for business did not make her unique. Businesswoman Elizabeth Murray of Boston, for instance, crossed the Atlantic to buy merchandise for her shop. But, as the press (which found ideal copy in this colorful lady's life) made clear, Mrs. Hayley's trip was no small shopkeeper's errand. "This lady," one paper reported, "has outstanding debts there to the amount of more than 20,000 pounds, and has the good sense and spirit to be her own attorney." Too many London merchants, the account seemed to suggest, had relied on impotent agents to collect American debt. Taking a very different tack, another paper mocked Mrs. Hayley: A gentlelady traveling on business would set sail with a cargo of fripperies "so judiciously selected as to be capable of furnishing a new colony in the West, if Mrs. Hayley should be disposed to plant one."

In May 1784, Mrs. Hayley arrived in Boston. Before she set sail, she had already made a savvy decision to shape Americans' perceptions of her. According to a newspaper report, she had bought the American frigate, the *Delaware*, which had been captured by Britain during the Revolutionary War, and had renamed it the *United States*. (It sailed under Captain James Scott, who was often employed by John Hancock.) The stunt paid off. Hayley's arrival in Boston was reported in newspapers from New England to South Carolina. Here, Americans were seeing somebody very different from the woman they met through business correspondence or the London press. This visitor was neither an aggressive merchant nor an object of ridicule but an enlightened friend of the new republic.



John Wilkes, Esquire. Frontispiece from Abraham Weatherwise, *The New England Town and Country Almanack* . . . 1769 (Providence, R.I., 1768). Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

As Abigail Adams wrote, “nothing but the ardent desire she had to visit a Country so distinguished for its noble and ardent defence of the rights of Mankind could have tempted her at her advanced age to have undertaken a sea voyage.” “Sister of WILKES, who first in virtue’s cause/Stood forth the Champion of insulted love/Accept from Freedom’s Sons, the grateful strain/Which bids thee welcome to Columbia’s reign,” read a poem in *The (Boston) Gentleman and Lady’s Town and Country Magazine*, hailing her arrival. And when Mrs. Hayley bought a home in Boston, it was not as hard-driving merchant that the city welcomed her but as the sister of the famed defender of liberty. “The Sister of the celebrated John Wilkes” has “chosen this Place as one of the principal Seats of her Residence in America,” news reports from Boston boasted.

Ever alert to burnish her image, in October 1784, on the third anniversary of Lord Cornwallis’s surrender at Yorktown, Mrs. Hayley commemorated the American victory with “a very brilliant firework” display in her garden. She again signaled her political sympathies when, with much pomp, she presented John Hancock with a new chariot. The gesture, one newspaper explained, “was a mark of her respect for the good conduct of this great patriot during the war.” In addition, she helped fund a variety of public and charitable projects—a very uncommon role for a woman. She contributed to a meeting house in Charlestown; gave three pounds to a fund for improvements to the Boston Common; was a founding member of the Massachusetts Humane Society, an organization devoted to the rescue and resuscitation of drowning victims; donated blankets to Boston prisoners and wood to Boston’s poor. She also won acclaim for supporting the young country’s artists. “Mrs. Hayley, the friend of civil liberty,” was “a patroness of the arts . . . A well chosen collection of pictures, the production of American artists,” decorated her home, said a “private letter from Boston” (obviously meant for public consumption) reprinted in newspapers.

Through her patronage and beneficence, Mrs. Hayley made herself a fixture in New England. Money bought reputation, this shrewd operator knew. Moreover, with her largess, she may have tempered some of the indignation her debt collecting elicited. "Madam Hayly comeing [sic] to America, has sunk the *Spirits* of Many, as well as their Purses," a friend wrote to Abigail Adams, and "few of our Merchants have escaped" her. By returning some of her wealth to the community, Mrs. Hayley could mollify Americans—especially those patriots who shared her family's well-known politics but who also resented the power of their British creditors. The latter was, of course, a significant factor in the America's departure from the empire.

In 1786, Mrs. Hayley married for the third time. Her new husband, Patrick Jeffrey, was a merchant and twenty years her junior. Jeffrey did very well by the marriage. Until legislative changes in the mid-nineteenth century, a woman's property automatically became the property of her husband on marriage unless the couple made alternate arrangements in a prenuptial agreement—which the Jeffreys had not. "Mr Jeffries [sic] keeps the Keys now of Course being the head of the Family," commented a correspondent to Abigail Adams after telling her about Mrs. Hayley's remarriage. Samuel Breck, a Bostonian who as a youth had known Mrs. Hayley, made a harsher judgment. "Mrs. Hayley gave her hand and fortune [to Jeffrey]. Out of sixty or seventy thousand pounds sterling she did not reserve a shilling for herself."

Not surprisingly, the marriage soon collapsed. In November 1792, perhaps prompted by fear that the Revolutionary crisis in France would soon make oceanic travel dangerous, the sister of John Wilkes returned to England. She was to spend her last years in the resort town of Bath before her death in 1808. When Mrs. Hayley died, newspapers in New England remembered her for "the benevolence of her mind and her extensive charities." Nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century recollections of New England life also recalled her as a "star" of Boston society. But other than brief anecdotes in biographies of her brother and the occasional mention in other histories, Mrs. Hayley has been mainly forgotten.



John Hancock, painted by J. Herring from the original by J.S. Copley in Faneuil Hall; engraved by L.B. Forrest (c. 1835). From *The National Portrait Gallery of Distinguished Americans*, vol. II, conducted by James Herring, New York, and James B. Longacre, Philadelphia, under the superintendence of the American Academy of Fine Arts (1835-[1839]). Portrait Print Collection at the American Antiquarian Society. Courtesy of the American Antiquarian Society, Worcester, Massachusetts.

In part, perhaps, Mrs. Hayley stopped serving a purpose for Americans. When she came to the United States in 1784, less than a year after the signing of the peace treaty by which Britain accepted its loss of the thirteen colonies, Americans needed her. The “ardent desire” of the sister of the celebrated John Wilkes to see the new nation affirmed Americans’ decision to withdraw from the British Empire. Mrs. Hayley’s presence “in climes, where Liberty abides,” in the words of the poem in *The Gentleman and Lady’s Town and Country Magazine*, assured Americans that they were more than the citizens of a fractious union of weak states in a world of warring empires. They were architects of an exciting new political order.

Perhaps too, Mrs. Hayley, like so many other celebrities and notables who visited the United States immediately after the Revolutionary War, helped alleviate fears of urban elites that the cost of independence would be social and cultural isolation. The “blind philosopher” Dr. Henry Moyes, a Scotsman who gave popular lectures on chemistry and who also arrived in 1784 (ironically, he had traveled on the same ship as Mrs. Hayley), drew audiences in the hundreds up and down the eastern seaboard. Other notable visitors who arrived in the mid-1780s included Catherine Macaulay, the English radical and member of the Wilkes-Hayley circle in London; Francisco de Miranda, a Venezuelan leader of the Latin American struggle for independence; and Jacques-Pierre Brissot de Warville, a French *philosophe*, antislavery leader, and later revolutionary.

But the early Mrs. Hayley—the independent-minded, culturally sophisticated, indomitable woman—quickly gave way to a very different Mrs. Hayley, one who

sacrificed her wealth and celebrity for a dubious marriage. During her last years in England, according to Samuel Breck, Mrs. Hayley lived on no more than "a meagre allowance." Fame and money, it seems, were inseparable, in republic and monarchy alike. Whatever commitment this skillful businesswoman and political radical may have had to the founding ideals of the United States, at the end of the day her detachment from this fundamental fact of Anglo-American life cost Mrs. Hayley her reputation. Had she been more strategic about her marriage, more willing to place financial self-interest before marital fantasy, she might have endured as one of the young republic's great icons.

Further Reading:

For further reading on Mrs. Hayley and people around her, see John Almon, *The Correspondence of John Wilkes, with His Friends, Printed from the Original Manuscripts, in which are Introduced Memoirs of His Life* (London, 1805); William Beloe, *The Sexagenarian; Or, The Recollections of a Literary Life*, 2nd ed. (London, 1818); John Bullard, *The Rotches* (New Bedford, Mass., 1947); Arthur H. Cash, *John Wilkes: The Scandalous Father of Civil Liberty* (New Haven, 2006); William M. Fowler Jr., *The Baron of Beacon Hill* (Boston, 1980); James B. Gedges, *The Browns of Providence Plantation* (Providence, R.I., 1968); George Lyman Kittredge, *The Old Farmer and His Almanack* (1920; rpt. New York, 1967); Peter D. G. Thomas, *John Wilkes: A Friend to Liberty* (New York, 1996). On Wilkes and America, see Pauline Maier, "John Wilkes and American Disillusionment with Britain," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 20 (1963): 373-395; John Sainsbury, "The Pro-Americans of London, 1769-1782," *William and Mary Quarterly*, 3rd ser., 35 (1978): 423-454.

For histories of female contemporaries of Mrs. Hayley, see Patricia Cleary, *Elizabeth Murray: A Women's Pursuit of Independence in Eighteenth-Century America* (Amherst, Mass., 2000); Kate Davies, *Catherine Macaulay and Mercy Otis Warren: The Revolutionary Atlantic and the Politics of Gender* (Oxford, 2005) (Davies mentions Mrs. Hayley in a footnote); Linda K. Kerber, *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1980); see also Harriet B. Applewhite and Darlene G. Levy, *Women and Politics in the Age of the Democratic Revolution* (Ann Arbor, Mich., 1990). On Henry Moyes, see John Anthony Harrison, "Blind Henry Moyes, 'An Excellent Lecturer in Philosophy,'" *Annals of Science* 13 (1957): 109-125.

Sources I consulted on Mrs. Hayley include, L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Diary and Autobiography of John Adams, Vol. 3* (Cambridge, Mass, 1962); L. H. Butterfield, ed., *Adams Family Correspondence, Vol. 7* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005); *Commerce of Rhode Island, Vol. 2*, Massachusetts Historical Society Collections, 7th ser., vol. 10 (1775-1800); Gilbert Deblois Letterbooks, Rhode Island Historical Society, Providence; Readex America's Historical Newspapers.

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