

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797)

By Valerie Patten

Mary Wollstonecraft's turbulent and unhappy life ended when she was only thirty-eight. Her anger and zeal were destructive forces in her personal life, but these same qualities fuelled her creative talents. Her writing challenged the accepted conventions of the day, particularly in relation to women, education, and marriage. Wollstonecraft's most famous publication was written as a response to Rousseau's *Émile* (1762) which argues for women's subjugation and claims that educated women would lose their power over men. She responded by arguing that 'This is the very point I aim at. I do not wish them to have power over men; but over themselves'. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) she claims that women should contend for equal rights with men and claims that their supposed inadequacies are 'the natural consequence of their education and station in society'. She was dubbed a 'hyena in petticoats' by Horace Walpole in 1795 and reviled after her death when her husband published memoirs exposing her unconventional relationship with Gilbert Imlay by whom she had an illegitimate child. This revelation of her sexual freedom overshadowed her demands for rational female education, and her influence only came to the fore again within the context of the 'Woman Question' of the mid-Victorian era, and again with the rise of Womens' Rights campaigners in the 1960s.

Born in Spitalfields, London on 27 April 1759 Mary Wollstonecraft never found life easy. She was a second child and from an early age she resented the favouritism shown to her brother, Ned, who was to inherit the family wealth. She had two younger sisters, Eliza and Everina, and three younger brothers, Henry, James and Charles. Her grandfather, Edward Wollstonecraft, had done well financially in the silk manufacturing trade. However, her early life was unsettled as her father, Edward John, renounced his lace-making skills and, with money from Mary's grandfather, attempted to become a gentleman farmer moving from farm to farm, losing money as he went, and subjecting his family to a spiral of downward mobility. Family life deteriorated as her father took to drinking and mistreating his Irish-born wife, Elizabeth Dickson. To protect her mother from her father's drunken rages, Mary would sleep on the landing across the doorway of the room where her mother slept.

Mary's escape from her unhappy life at home was in passionate attachments. The first was to Jane Arden, whom she met when the family spent five years in Beverley, Yorkshire, their longest sojourn. Jane's father was an itinerant lecturer in philosophy. Mary was impressed and envied Jane's home life. One of Mary's letters to Jane, written after a quarrel, reads, 'I am a little singular in my thoughts of love and friendship; I must have the first place or none'. This sentiment was to dog Mary through her life. Beverley was the only place Mary remembered with any affection: it was here that she received her only useful schooling. When she revisited the town twenty years later, she wrote in a letter that 'It appeared so diminutive and, when I found that many of the inhabitants had lived in the same houses ever since I left it, I could not help wondering how they could thus have vegetated, whilst I was running over a world of sorrows, snatching at pleasure and throwing off prejudices'.

In 1774 Mary's family moved to Hoxton in London and here Mary was introduced to Fanny Blood by a neighbouring couple, the Clares, who were childless and eager to nurture deserving young women. Fanny's family were poor, but related to the land-owning Irish Bloods, and to the sixteen-year-old Mary the eighteen-year-old Fanny was sophisticated, elegant and accomplished. The girls formed an intense friendship which sustained Mary through difficult years: 'a friend, whom I love better than all the world beside, a friend to whom I am bound by every tie of gratitude and inclination: To live with this friend is the height of my ambition'.

Determined to be independent, Mary took a job as a companion to a Mrs. Dawson in Bath. She loathed her lowly status and the hypocrisy of the society in which her employer moved: 'I am particularly sick of genteel life ... the unmeaning civilities, I long for a little sincerity'. Mary returned home in 1781 to nurse her sick mother who died in April the following year just before Mary's twenty-third birthday. Mary then lived with the Blood family for over a year in poor and crowded conditions, even helping them with the sewing they took in to support themselves. The feckless family began to rely on Mary, in thrall to her dominant personality and her albeit limited experience of earning her own living. This situation came to an abrupt end when Mary discovered that her sister, Eliza, who gave birth to a daughter in 1783, was suffering from post-natal depression. Mary's dominant will made her masterful in a crisis, and she took it upon herself to take responsibility for her young siblings and others, managing their lives and their finances with a resolute confidence in her own views and decisions. Mary 'rescued' her sister from her marriage, by helping her to flee marital home and new-born child and going into hiding in lodgings. It is certain that Mary obstructed any reconciliation between her sister and her husband.

In a desperate attempt to find a way of providing for herself and her sister, Wollstonecraft concocted a scheme to open a school in Islington with Eliza and Fanny Blood. The plan failed, but through her determination Mary begged and borrowed and tried again at Newington Green, joined by Everina. The location was significant. Newington Green was a centre for Dissenters, and famous among their number was Dr. Richard Price who was minister of the Dissenting chapel there. In Newington Green Mary found her spiritual home. Price was an intellectual and the centre of a group of free-thinking radicals who had gathered in this area. Mary was even introduced to Dr. Johnson while he was there, although he was ailing and near death. Although she never wholeheartedly embraced Dissent, the intellectual community of Newington Green helped to form her radical views.

In January 1785 Fanny Blood left for Portugal where she married a long-time suitor. When Mary heard she was pregnant she became concerned for her friend whom she knew to be suffering from consumption. Mary took a decision to abandon the school and go to Fanny. After thirteen days at sea Mary arrived in time for Fanny's labour and her baby's birth. Both mother and baby were dead within days. Mary despaired: 'I have lost all relish for pleasure - and life seems a burthen almost too heavy to be indured ... My constitution is so impaired, I hope I shan't live long'. She returned to Newington Green and her failing school.

It was during this period that she was encouraged by Price to set down the doctrine she had evolved on how to teach girls. *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* was published early in 1787. She used the ten guineas she earned, not to pay off any of her mounting debts, but to pay for the Bloods passage to Ireland. Mary was learning to form her views and some inconsistencies are apparent in *Thoughts*. It establishes her fast and furious style and some of the central strands of her thought. She observes, for example, that women have 'few ... modes of earning a subsistence' and those that are available (companion, schoolteacher and governess) are invariably 'humiliating'. The modest success of her first publication was the foundation of Mary's confidence in her writing abilities.

Oppressed by her debts, Mary's next move was to work as a governess to the children of Lord and Lady Kingsborough, Anglo-Irish aristocrats who were living at Mitchelstown near Cork in Ireland. The Kingsborough's daughter Margaret (later Countess of Mountcashel) was undoubtedly influenced by her governess. Later in life, she became a political radical and argued for a reform of marriage laws. Although Mary felt some affection for the children, she came to despise her employers, especially the vain Lady Kingsborough who appeared to be more devoted to her dogs than her children. Reading between the lines, a less prickly and less proud governess might have been gratified at Lady Kingsborough's concern for her health and efforts to make her comfortable both physically and socially, but Mary's criticism of the triviality of rich and aristocratic women was first inspired by her observations of Lady Kingsborough. Mary moved with the family to Dublin. It was at this point that she read Rousseau's *Emile* and embraced its values of individuality and sensibility. The family moved on to Bristol Hotwells before embarking on a continental tour. Mary had hoped to accompany them, but instead was shocked to find herself dismissed from her duties.

Mary then sought out Joseph Johnson who had published her *Thoughts*. His business in St. Paul's Churchyard was flourishing and, impressed by her emotional character and intellectual force, saw Mary as a deserving cause. He was her saviour, taking her temporarily into his house before finding modest accommodation for her at 49 George Street, Blackfriars. He encouraged her to use her writing talents to support herself. She embraced this opportunity, and his faith in her prompted her to say to him 'Your sex generally laugh at female determinations; but let me tell you, I never yet resolved to do, anything of consequence, that I did not adhere resolutely to it, till I had accomplished my purpose'. Through Johnson Mary met many of his liberal and radical circle including William Godwin, Mary Hays, Thomas Paine and Henry Fuseli. The next three years, from 1788 to 1790, were probably her most productive. Johnson published her first novel *Mary, A Fiction* in 1788. In part a fictionalised account of her childhood and her friendship with Fanny Blood, *Mary* adopts the sentimental mode in its exploration of a young heroine's bid for self-assertion in the face of female oppression. In the same year she published *Original Stories from Real Life* (1788). The second edition of this children's book was illustrated by William Blake. Her *Female Reader*, a collection of edifying passages from the works of writers including Shakespeare, Samuel Johnson, Elizabeth Carter and Charlotte Smith, was published in 1789. She also undertook some translating, from the French, Necker's *Of the Importance of Religious Opinions* (1788)

and from the German, Salzmann's *Elements of Morality* (1790-1791) and became a reviewer for Johnson's *Analytical Review*.

She quickly became adept at discussing politics and when Edmund Burke published *Reflections on the Revolution in France* attacking Richard Price, she retaliated with *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790). The text was published anonymously, although a second edition was published the following year with her name, and preceded the publication of Thomas Paine's influential *Rights of Man* by a matter of weeks. She followed it with *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), the polemic for which she is best remembered today. The impact of these works made Mary something of a celebrity. Virginia Woolf referred to 'those two eloquent and daring books ... which are so true that they seem now to contain nothing new in them - their originality has become our commonplace'.^[1]

It was at this time that Mary became infatuated with Henry Fuseli, an artist and close friend of James Johnson. Fuseli was a charismatic character, clever, talented and confident and Mary was enthralled by him. He did not discourage her, although he referred to her as 'a philosophical sloven, with lank hair, black stockings and a beaver hat'. He was about to be married, and when Mary naively suggested that she live with him and his new wife she was firmly rejected and humiliated. In spite of herself, it seems that Mary Wollstonecraft would have welcomed marriage. Referring to herself as 'still a Spinster on the wing' in 1792, she made the decision to go Paris, in support of the Revolution, now in its fourth year.

In Paris she was sustained by old friends including Helen Maria Williams and Tom Paine, and worked on *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (1794). Still vulnerable after her attachment to Fuseli, and yearning for affection, she soon embarked upon a passionate affair with the handsome and charming American entrepreneur and liberal author Gilbert Imlay. Their illegitimate child was born on 14 May 1794 in Le Havre, a safer place by then than Paris. Mary's daughter was named Fanny after the friend of her youth. Imlay had registered Mary as his wife at the American Embassy in order to give her political protection and the baby was registered as Fanny Imlay. When Imlay returned to England Mary sent him passionate letters, revealing her suspicions of his waning love. She opened her heart to him and pleaded to be told the truth about his feelings for her. In 1795 she followed him to England where, devastated to discover his infidelity, she attempted suicide.

In a bid to dispose of his lover, Imlay suggested that Wollstonecraft act as his business envoy by investigating the loss of an illegal cargo. Harboured little doubt that her relationship with Imlay was over, Wollstonecraft once more revealed her spirit and tenacity in embarking on a difficult trip to Scandinavia with her young daughter. Out of this trip came the melancholic but lyrical *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796) which also contains some touching references to her daughter. When they were published they set a fashion for romantic travelogues. On her return to England Mary had to face up to the fact that Imlay would never live with her and she attempted suicide again. On a dark, wet night she went to Putney Bridge where

she walked in the rain to soak her skirts, and then plunged into the Thames. She was hauled from the water in an unconscious state, and with the help of friends she recovered. The experience resolved her to overcome her devastation at Imlay's desertion.

Shortly after her suicide attempt, Mary Hays re-introduced Mary to the radical theorist William Godwin. His first impression of her had been that she talked too much, reducing Thomas Paine to silence at a gathering they had all attended. Shortly, however, a mutual attraction developed, although Mary was slow to realise that in Godwin she had found a partner who would stand by her. Godwin later wrote an idealised portrait of their relationship in which 'to study the happiness of one by whom our happiness is studied in return, this is the most desirable ... condition of human nature'. At this time, Mary began work on her final and unfinished novel, *The Wrongs of Woman, or, Maria*. The novel relates the plight of a young woman imprisoned by her husband in a madhouse where she falls in love with another prisoner and forms an unconventional friendship with a young servant, Jemima. The novel's vivid descriptions of the servant's experience of sexual and emotional abuse continue to compel readers and critics of Wollstonecraft's work.

Although both Godwin and Mary famously disapproved of marriage, when Mary became pregnant, they decided to take this step. Many friends who had assumed Mary to be married to Imlay realised their mistake, and ostracised the couple, while others criticised the couple for not upholding their anti-marriage standard. When Mary gave birth to another daughter on 30 August 1797 the placenta was not expelled and she died in great pain of an infection eleven days later on 10 September 1797. The author Eliza Fenwick and her husband, John, were among the friends who were present in the Wollstonecraft's home as she gave birth. Following Wollstonecraft's death, they took her young daughter into their care for a few days.

Godwin assuaged his grief by writing Mary's life story in his *Memoirs*. He also published his wife's letters to Imlay, and as a result the works and memory of Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin were thrown into disrepute, until they were resurrected in the nineteenth-century, and embraced by women's liberationists in the twentieth. Her daughter, Mary, was to become Mary Godwin Shelley, best known for *Frankenstein* and a number of later and almost equally remarkable novels, and wife of the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin's funeral was held at St. Pancras Church on 15 September 1797. She had married Godwin there only months before and he could not bring himself to attend. He remembered her as a 'bright ray of light that streaked across my day of life'. Her tombstone acknowledged her as 'Author of A Vindication Of the Rights of Woman'.

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1 Virginia Woolf, *The Common Reader: Second Series* (London: Hogarth Press, 1932), p.158.