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# Godwin on Wollstonecraft

The Life of Mary Wollstonecraft  
by William Godwin



Edited by Richard Holmes

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# Godwin on Wollstonecraft

**Memoirs of the Author of  
‘The Rights of Woman’**

by

**William Godwin**

Edited with an Introduction by Richard Holmes



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# Table of Contents

[Cover Page](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Introduction by Richard Holmes](#)

[Select Chronology](#)

[Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'](#)

[Preface](#)

[Chapter One 1759-1775](#)

[Chapter Two 1775-1783](#)

[Chapter Three 1783-1785](#)

[Chapter Four 1785-1787](#)

[Chapter Five 1787-1790](#)

[Chapter Six 1790-1792](#)

[Chapter Seven 1792-1795](#)

[Chapter Eight 1795-1796](#)

[Chapter Nine 1796-1797](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Appendix](#)

[Further Reading](#)

[Index](#)

[Classic Biographies](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

# INTRODUCTION

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## 1

It is often said that William Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of 'The Rights of Woman'* of 1798 destroyed Mary Wollstonecraft's reputation for over 100 years. If that is true, it must count as one of the most dramatic, as well as the most damaging, works of biography ever published.

At the time of her death in London on 10 September 1797, Mary Wollstonecraft was certainly well-known and widely admired, as an educational writer and champion of women's rights. She was renowned not only in Britain, but also in France, Germany and Scandinavia (where her books had been translated), and in newly-independent America. Although only 38 years old, she was already one of the literary celebrities of her generation.

The *Gentleman's Magazine*, a solid large-circulation journal of record with a conservative political outlook, printed the following obituary in October 1797, with an admiring – if guarded – summary of her career and an unreservedly favourable estimate of her character.

In childbed, Mrs Godwin, wife of Mr. William Godwin of Somers-town; a woman of uncommon talents and considerable knowledge, and well-known throughout Europe by her literary works, under her original name of Wollstonecraft, and particularly by her *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792, octavo.

Her first publication was *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, 1787...her second, *The Rights of Man*, 1791, against Mr Burke on the French Revolution, of the rise and progress of which she gave an *Historical and Moral View*, in 1794...her third, *Elements of Morality for the Use of Children, Translated from the German*, 1791...her fourth, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, 1792...her fifth, *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark*, 1796.

Her manners were gentle, easy and elegant; her conversation intelligent and amusing, without the least trait of literary pride; or the apparent consciousness of powers above the level of her sex; and for soundness of understanding, and sensibility of heart, she was perhaps, never equaled. Her practical skill in education was even superior to her speculations upon that subject; nor is it possible to express the misfortune sustained, in that respect, by her children. This tribute we readily pay to her character, however adverse we may be to the system she supported in politicks and morals, both by her writing and practice.

Many other favourable articles appeared, such as her friend Mary Hays's combative obituary in the *Monthly Magazine* for September 1797, which lauded her 'ardent, ingenuous and unconquerable spirits', and lamenting that she was 'a victim to the vices and prejudices of mankind'. The *Monthly Mirror* praised her as 'a champion of her sex', and promised an imminent biography, though this did not appear. Friends in London, Liverpool, Paris, Hamburg, Christiana, and New York expressed their shock at her sudden departure, one of the earliest, premature Romantic deaths of her generation. It seemed doubly ironic that the champion of women's rights should have died in childbirth.

William Godwin, her husband, was devastated. They had been lovers for little over a year, and married for only six months. At 42 he also was a literary celebrity, but of a different kind from Mary. A shy, modest and intensely intellectual man, he was known paradoxically as a firebrand philosopher.

the dangerous radical author of *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (1793) and the political thriller-novel *Caleb Williams* (1794). His views were even more revolutionary than hers. He proposed republican, atheist and anarchist ideas, attacking many established institutions, such as private property, the Church, the monarchy, and (ironically) marriage itself – ‘that most odious of monopolies’. Indeed he was notorious for his defence of ‘free love’, and their marriage in March 1797 had been the cause of much amusement in the press. Yet Godwin believed passionately in the rational power of truth, and the value of absolute frankness and sincerity in human dealings.

He was in a state of profound shock. He wrote bleakly to his oldest friend and confidante, the playwright Thomas Holcroft on 10<sup>th</sup> September 1797, the very evening of her death: ‘My wife is now dead. She died this morning at eight o’clock...I firmly believe that there does not exist her equal in the world. I know from experience we were formed to make each other happy. I have not the least expectation that I can now ever know happiness again. When you come to town, look at me, talk to me, but do not – if you can help it – exhort me, or console me.’

Another of Godwin’s friends, Elizabeth Fenwick wrote two days later to Mary’s younger sister, Evarina Wollstonecraft, in Dublin. ‘I was with [Mary] at the time of her delivery, and with very little intermission until the moment of her death. Every skillful effort that medical knowledge of the highest class could make, was exerted to save her. It is not possible to describe the unremitting and devoted attentions of her husband...No woman was ever more happy in marriage than Mrs Godwin. Whoever endured more anguish than Mr Godwin endures? Her description of him, in the very last moments of her recollection was, “He is the kindest, best man in the world.”’

Mrs Fenwick added thoughtfully, and perhaps tactfully: ‘I know of no consolation for myself, but in remembering how happy she had lately been, and how much she was admired, and almost idolized by some of the most eminent and best of human beings.’

To take advantage of this surge of interest and sympathy across the literary world, Wollstonecraft’s life-long friend and publisher, Joseph Johnson, proposed to Godwin an immediate edition of her most recent writings. This was to include most notably her long, but unfinished, novel *Maria, or The Wrongs of Woman*, which had a strong autobiographical subtext. It was a shrewd idea, to provide a fictional follow-up to Mary’s most famous work of five years previously, *The Rights of Woman*. The two titles cleverly called attention to each other: ‘The Rights’ reinforced by ‘The Wrongs’.

Though unfinished, *The Wrongs of Woman: A Fragment in Two Volumes* contained a celebration of true Romantic friendships, and a blistering attack on conventional marriage. The narrator Maria’s husband has committed her to a lunatic asylum, having first brought her to court on a (false) charge of adultery. The judge’s summary of Maria’s case, which comes where the manuscript breaks off, ironically encapsulates many of the male prejudices that Mary Wollstonecraft had fought against all her life.

The judge, in summing up the evidence, alluded to the fallacy of letting women plead their feelings, as an excuse for the violation of the marriage-vow. For his part, he had always determined to oppose all innovation, and the new-fangled notions that encroached on the good old rules of conduct. We did not want French principles in public or private life – and, if women were allowed to plead their feelings, as an excuse or palliation of infidelity, it was opening a flood-gate for immorality. What virtuous women thought of her feelings? – it was her duty to love and obey the man chosen by her parents and relations...

Johnson also suggested that Godwin should include some biographical materials. The idea for a short memorial essay by Mary's husband was mooted, as was the convention in such circumstances; and possibly a small selection from her letters.

Battling against his grief, Godwin determined do justice to his wife by editing her *Posthumous Works*. Immediately after the funeral on 15 September, he moved into Mary's own study at No.9 Polygon, surrounded himself with all her books and papers, and hung her portrait by John Opie above his desk for inspiration. He hired a housekeeper, Louisa Jones, to look after the two children who were now his responsibility: the little motherless baby Mary (the future Mary Shelley); and four-year old Fanny, who was Wollstonecraft's earlier love-child by an American, Gilbert Imlay.

Both as a father and as an author, he regarded himself as fulfilling a sacred trust, and wrote: 'It has always appeared to me, that to give the public some account of a person of eminent merit deceased, is a duty incumbent on survivors...The justice which is thus done to the illustrious dead, converts into the fairest source of animation and encouragement to those who would follow them in the same career.' (Preface)

## 2

Godwin immersed himself in papers and memories for the next three months, and writing at speed, soon found that the short essay was expanding into a full Life. He turned all his cool, scholarly methods on the supremely emotional task in hand. He reread all Mary's printed works, sorted her unpublished manuscripts, and established a precise chronology of her life from birth. He dated and meticulously numbered the 160 letters they had exchanged. He interviewed her friends in London like Johnson, and wrote to others abroad, like Hugh Skeys in Ireland. He sent diplomatic messages to Mary's estranged sister, Evarina Wollstonecraft in Dublin, requesting family letters and reminiscences. He assembled his own journal notes of their intimate conversations, and lovingly reconstructed others, such as the long September day spent walking round the garden where she had grown up near Barking, in Essex. Here Mary had suddenly begun reminiscing about her childhood.

Godwin recalled the moment tenderly, but with characteristic exactitude: 'In September 1796, I accompanied my wife in a visit to this spot. No person reviewed with great sensibility, the scenes of her childhood. We found the house uninhabited, and the garden in a wild and ruinous state. She renewed her acquaintance with the market-place, the streets, and the wharf, the latter of which we found crowded with activity.' (Chapter 1)

Godwin determined to tell each phase of her short but turbulent life with astonishing openness. This was a decision that stemmed directly from the philosophy of rational enquiry and sincerity enshrined in *Political Justice*. He would use a plain, narrative style and a frank, psychological appraisal of Mary's character and temperament. He would avoid no episode, however controversial.

He would write about the cruelty of her father (still living); the strange passionate friendship with Fanny Blood; the overbearing demands of Mary's siblings; her endless struggles for financial independence; her writer's blocks and difficulties with authorship; her enigmatic relationship with the painter Henry Fuseli; her passionate affair with the American Gilbert Imlay in Paris; her illegitimate child Fanny; her two suicide attempts; and finally their own love-affair in London, and Mary's agonizing death. This would be a revolutionary kind of intimate biography it would tell the truth about the human condition, and particularly the truth about women's lives.

As the biography expanded, Godwin's contacts and advisors began to grow increasingly uneasy.

Evarina Wollstonecraft wrote anxiously from Dublin, expressing reservations. She had been delighted at her clever elder sister's literary success, and been helped financially by it. But it now emerged that she had quarreled with Mary after her Paris adventures, and disapproved of the marriage to Godwin. She had not been properly consulted by Godwin, and feared personal disclosures and publicity. In a letter of 24 November 1797, she abruptly refused to lend Godwin any of the family correspondence, and informed him that a detailed biographical notice would be premature. She implied that it would damage her (and her sister Elizabeth's) future prospects as governesses.

When Eliza and I first learnt your intention of publishing immediately my sister Mary's Life, we concluded that you only meant a sketch... We thought your application to us rather premature, and had no intention of satisfying your demands till we found that [Hugh] Skeys had proffered our assistance without our knowledge... At a future date we would willingly have given whatever information was necessary; and even now we would not have shrunk from the task, however anxious we may be to avoid reviving the recollections it would raise, or loath to fall into the pain of thoughts it must lead to, did we suppose it possible to accomplish the work you have undertaken in the time you specify.

Evarina concluded that a detailed Life was highly undesirable, and that it was impossible for Godwin to be 'even tolerably accurate' without her help. On reflection, Godwin decided to ignore these familial objections. He judged them to be inspired partly by sibling jealousy, partly by the sisters' desire to control the biography for themselves, but mostly by unreasonable fear of the simple truth.

Other sources proved equally recalcitrant. Gilbert Imlay had disappeared with an actress to Paris and could not be consulted. He had not seen Mary for over a year, though he had agreed to make a trust in favour of his little daughter Fanny. When this was not forthcoming, Godwin officially adopted her. Godwin felt that it was impossible to understand Mary's situation without telling the whole story and now took the radical decision to publish all Mary's correspondence with Imlay, consisting of 77 love-letters written between spring 1793 and winter 1795. He convinced Johnson that these *Letters to Imlay* should occupy an additional two volumes of the *Posthumous Works*, bringing them to four in total. His *Memoirs* would now be published separately, but would also quote from this correspondence, openly naming Imlay.

The *Letters* gave only Mary's side of the correspondence (which Imlay had returned at her request). They thus left his own attitude and behaviour to be inferred. But they dramatically revealed the whole painful sequence of the affair from Mary's point of view, from her initial infatuation with Imlay in Paris to her suicidal attempts when he abandoned her in London. This was another daring, not to say reckless, publishing decision which sacrificed traditional areas of privacy to biographical truth. Godwin's own feelings as a husband were also being coolly set aside. In his Preface he described the *Letters* as 'the finest examples of the language of sentiment and passion ever presented to the world' comparable to Goethe's epistolary novel of Romantic love and suicide *The Sorrows of Young Werther* (1774). They were produced by 'a glowing imagination and a heart penetrated with the passion it essays to describe'.

Henry Fuseli briefly and non-committally discussed Mary with Godwin, but having given him a tantalizing glimpse of a whole drawer full of her letters, refused to let him see a single one. If he knew of Godwin's intentions with regards to Mary's letters to Imlay, this is hardly surprising. But it left the exact nature of their relationship still enigmatic. Years later the Fuseli letters were seen by Godwin's own biographer, Kegan Paul (see Further Reading), who claimed that they showed intellectual

admiration, but not sexual passion. Yet when these letters were eventually sold to the Shelley family (for £50), Sir Percy Shelley carefully destroyed them unpublished, towards the end of the 19th century.

Joseph Johnson was torn between a natural desire to accede to Godwin's wishes as the grieving widow, and his long-standing professional role of defending Mary's literary reputation. He may also have entertained the very understandable hope of achieving a publishing *coup*. He at least warned Godwin of several undiplomatic references to living persons in the biography, especially the aristocratic Kingsborough children to whom Mary had been a governess in Ireland, and the powerful and well-disposed Wedgwood family. He also questioned the wisdom of describing Mary's many male friendships, in London, Dublin and Paris, so unguardedly. He felt the ambiguous account of Fuseli was particularly ill-judged, and challenged Godwin's characterization of the painter's 'cynical attitude towards Mary.

But Godwin would not give way on any of these issues. On 11th January 1798, shortly before publication, he wrote unrepentantly to Johnson, refusing to make any last minute changes. 'With respect to Mr Fuseli, I am sincerely sorry not to have pleased you...As to his cynical cast, his impatience of contradiction, and his propensity to satire, I have carefully observed them...' He added that, in his view, Mary had actually 'copied' these traits while under Fuseli's influence in 1792, and this was a significant part of her emotional development. He was committed to describing this, 'in the sincerity of my judgement', even though sometimes unfavourable to her.

This idea that Mary Wollstonecraft's intellectual power grew out of a combination of emotional strengths and weaknesses, was central to Godwin's notion of modern biography. 'Her errors were connected and interwoven with the qualities most characteristic of her genius.' He was not writing a pious family memorial, or a work of feminist hagiography, or a disembodied ideological tract. He felt he could sometimes be critical of Mary's behaviour, while always remaining passionately committed to her genius. Godwin stuck unswervingly to his belief in the exemplary value of full exposure. The truth about a human being would bring understanding, and then sympathy. 'I cannot easily prevail on myself to doubt, that the more fully we are presented with the picture and story as such persons as the subject of the following narrative, the more generally shall we feel ourselves attached to their fate, and a sympathy in their excellencies.' (Preface)

### 3

It appeared that Godwin could not have been more mistaken. Most readers were appalled by the *Memoirs* when they were first published at the end of January, 1798. There was no precedence for biography of this kind, and Godwin's 'naïve' candour and plain-speaking about his own wife filled them with horrid fascination.

Mary's old friend, the radical lawyer and publisher from Liverpool, William Roscoe, privately jotted these sad verses in the margin of his copy.

Hard was thy fate in all the scenes of life  
As daughter, sister, mother, friend and wife;  
But harder still, thy fate in death we own,  
Thus mourn'd by Godwin with a heart of stone.

The *Historical Magazine* called the *Memoirs* 'the most hurtful book' of 1798. Robert Southey accused Godwin of 'a want of all feeling in stripping his dead wife naked'. *The European Magazine* described the work as 'the history of a philosophical wanton', and was sure it would be read 'with detestation b



everyone attached to the interests of religion and morality; and with indignation by any one who might feel any regard for the unhappy woman, whose frailties should have been buried in oblivion.’—

*The Monthly Magazine*, a largely conservative woman’s journal, saw Mary as a kind of female Icarus figure, who had burnt out her talents with pride and ambition. ‘She was a woman of high genius; and, as she felt the whole strength of her powers, she thought herself lifted, in a degree, above the ordinary travels of civil communities...’

The most even-handed was Johnson’s own *Analytical Review*, which observed that the biography, though remarkable, lacked intellectual depth. It contained ‘no correct history of the formation of Mrs G’s mind. We are neither informed of her favourite books, her hours of study, nor her attainments in languages and philosophy.’ Even more pointedly, it noted that anyone who also read the *Letters* would ‘stand astonished at the fervour, strength and duration of her affection for Imlay’.

These initial criticisms, some written more in sorrow than in anger, and not necessarily bad publicity (at least for Johnson) were soon followed by more formidable attacks. *The Monthly Review*, previously a supporter of Wollstonecraft’s work, now in May 1798 wrote with extreme disapproval of Godwin’s revelations: ‘blushes would suffuse the cheeks of most husbands if they were *forced* to relate those anecdotes of their wives which Mr Godwin voluntarily proclaims to the world. The extreme eccentricity of Mr Godwin’s sentiments will account for this conduct. Virtue and vice are weighed by him in a balance of his own. He neither looks to marriage with respect, nor to suicide with horror.’

The *Anti-Jacobin Review* delivered a general onslaught on the immorality that everything that Wollstonecraft was supposed to stand for: outrageous sexual behaviour, inappropriate education for young women, disrespect for parental authority, nonpayment of creditors, suicidal emotionalism, repulsive rationalism, consorting with the enemy in time of war, and disbelief in God. It implied that the case was even worse than Godwin made out – ‘the biographer does not mention her many amours’ – and provided a helpful Index to the more offensive subjectmatter of the *Memoirs*.

Godwin edits the Posthumous Works of his wife – inculcates the promiscuous intercourse of the sexes – reprobates marriage – considers Mary Godwin a model for female imitation – certifies his wife’s constitution to have been amorous – *Memoirs* of her – account of his wife’s adventures as a kept mistress – celebrates her happiness while the concubine of Imlay – informs the public that she was concubine to himself before she was his wife – her passions inflamed by celibacy – falls in love with a married man [Fuseli] – on the breaking out of the war betakes herself to our enemies – intimate with the French leaders under Robespierre – with Thomas Paine...

James Gillray, quick to sense a public mood, produced one of his most savage cartoons in *The Anti-Jacobin* for August 1798. Mockingly entitled ‘The New Morality’, it showed a giant Cornucopia of Ignorance vomiting a stream of books into the gutter, which include Paine’s *Rights of Man*, Wollstonecraft’s *Wrongs of Women*, and Godwin’s *Memoirs*. Godwin looks on in the guise of jackass standing on his hind-legs and braying from a copy of *Political Justice*.

The gothic novelist Horace Walpole described Wollstonecraft as ‘a Hyena in petticoats’. The polemicist and antiquarian Richard Polwhele leapt into print with an entire poem against her, entitled ‘The Unsexed Females’, 1798.

See Wollstonecraft, whom no decorum checks,  
Arise, the intrepid champion of her sex;

O'er humbled man assert the sovereign claim,  
And slight the timid blush of virgin fame...

---

The Reverend Polwhele goes on piously to enumerate her love-affairs, her illegitimate child, her suicide attempts, and her lack of religion. Furthermore, he accuses Wollstonecraft of leading astray a whole generation of blue-stockings and female intellectuals. They are 'unsex'd' (presumably like Lady Macbeth), in the sense of having abandoned their traditional role as wives and mothers. They are a 'melting tribe' of vengeful, voracious and intellectually perverted women authors, who have been seduced by Wollstonecraft's principles.

Polwhele cites them by name in what is intended as a litany of shame: Mary Hays, Mrs Barbauld, Mary Robinson, Charlotte Smith, Helen Maria Williams...It is also, perhaps more sinisterly, intended as a kind of 'blacklist' of politically suspect authors, whose books no respectable woman should purchase. Many of these were of course friends of Godwin's, and they do indeed represent an entire generation of 'English Jacobin' writers, for whom the American and French Revolutions had been an inspiration, and against whom the tide of history was now ineluctably turning. For many of them the paths of their professional careers would henceforth curve downwards towards poverty, exile, obscurity and premature death.

It was now open season on Godwin. Yet paradoxically the *Memoirs* were selling briskly, for a second edition was called for by the summer of 1798. There were also printings in France and America. After anxious discussion with Joseph Johnson, Godwin made a series of alterations in the text, most notably re-writing (or rather, expanding) passages connected with Henry Fuseli, Mary's suicide attempt in the Thames, and the summary of her character with which the biography concludes. These three re-written sections from the second edition, are given in the Appendix at the end of the present text.

He also suppressed the references to the Wedgwood family, and rephrased sentences that had been gleefully taken by reviewers as sexually ambiguous. But the overall character of the *Memoirs* was unchanged, and it remained an intense provocation. Other events also served fortuitously to keep up the sense of a continuing outrage against public morals. One of Mary's expupils from the Kingsborough family was involved in an elopement (and murder) scandal; while Johnson himself was imprisoned for six months for publishing a seditious libel, though quite unconnected with the *Memoirs*. The sentence broke the elderly Johnson's health, and effectively ended his career as the greatest radical publisher of the day.

The *Anti-Jacobin* and other conservative magazines felt free to keep up their attacks for months and indeed years, descending to increasing scurrility and causing Godwin endless private anguish. Three years later in August 1801, the subject was still topical enough for the young Tory George Canning to publish a long set of jeering satirical verses, entitled 'The Vision of Liberty'. It was not even necessary for Canning to give Godwin and Wollstonecraft's surnames. One stanza will suffice.

William hath penn'd a wagon-load of stuff  
And Mary's Life at last he needs must write,  
Thinking her whoredoms were not known enough  
Till fairly printed off in black and white.  
With wond'rous glee and pride, this simple wight  
Her brothel feats of wantonness sets down;  
Being her spouse, he tells, with huge delight

How oft she cuckolded the silly clown,  
And lent, o lovely piece!, herself to half the town.

---

Wollstonecraft's name was now too controversial, or even ridiculous, to mention in serious publications. Her erstwhile supporter Mary Hays omitted her from the five-volume *Dictionary of Female Biography* that she compiled in 1803. The same astonishing omission occurs in Mathilda Bentham's *Dictionary of Celebrated Women* of 1804. Satirical attacks on Godwin and Wollstonecraft continued throughout the next decade, though many of them were now in the form of fiction.

Maria Edgeworth wrote a comic version of the Wollstonecraft type in the person of the headstrong Harriet Freke (she promulgates adultery, intellectual repartee and female dueling) who appears in her novel *Belinda* (1801). The beautiful Amelia Alderson, now safely married to the painter John Opie (who had executed the tender portrait of Wollstonecraft that always hung in Godwin's study) revised her views on the springs of domestic happiness. Using Wollstonecraft's story, she produced a fictional account of a disastrous saga of unmarried love in *Adeline Mowbray* (1805). Much later Fanny Burney explored the emotional contradictions of Wollstonecraft's life in the long debates on matrimony and love, which are played out like elegant tennis rallies, between the sensible Juliet and the passionate Elinor, in *The Wanderer, or Female Difficulties* (1813).

Alexander Chalmers summed up the case against Wollstonecraft in his entry for *The General Biographical Dictionary* which appeared in 1814, at the very end of the Napoleonic Wars. This was a time when patriotic feeling was at its height, and distrust of subversive or vaguely French ideologies was at its most extreme. Mary Wollstonecraft was accordingly dismissed as 'a voluptuary and a sensualist'. Her views on women's rights and education were stigmatized as irrelevant fantasies: 'she unfolded many a wild theory on the duties and character of her sex.' Her whole life, as described by Godwin, was a disgusting tale best forgotten. 'She rioted in sentiments alike repugnant to religion, sense and decency'.

It is perhaps no coincidence that two years later Jane Austen's *Emma* (1816) was published to great acclaim. A new kind of heroine was being prepared for the Victorian age.

#### 4

From this time on Mary Wollstonecraft's name was apparently eclipsed in Great Britain for the rest of the 19th century. There was only one further Victorian re-printing of *The Rights of Woman* until its centenary in 1892; and no further editions of the *Memoirs* until 1927. Respectable opinion was summed up by the formidable Harriet Martineau in her *Autobiography*, written in 1855, and published in 1870. Women of the Wollstonecraft order...do infinite mischief, and for my part, I do not wish to have anything to do with them.' She concluded that the story of her life proved that Wollstonecraft was neither 'a safe example, nor a successful champion of Woman and her Rights'.

The force and endurance of these attacks, and the sense of shock and outrage that they express, suggest that the *Memoirs* had touched on a deep nerve in British society. It had arrived at a critical moment at the end of the 1790s, when both political ideology and social fashion had turned decisively against the revolutionary hopes and freedoms that Wollstonecraft's life represented. It was a time of political reaction and social retrenchment. It was also wartime.

As William Hazlitt later wrote of Godwin: 'The Spirit of the Age was never more fully shown than in the treatment of this writer – its love of paradox and change, its dastard submission to prejudice and the fashion of the day...Fatal reverse! Is truth then so variable? Is it one thing at twenty

and another at forty? Is it at a burning heat in 1793, and below zero in 1814?' (*The Spirit of the Age*, 1825)

It is now possible to see a little more clearly what made the *Memoirs* so provocative and so remarkable. No one had written about a woman like this before, except perhaps Daniel Defoe in the fictional Lives of his incorrigible 18<sup>th</sup> century heroines, like Moll Flanders. But Godwin was writing strict and indeed meticulous non-fiction, using a plain narrative style and a fearless psychological acuity. He signally ignored, or even deliberately aimed to provoke, proprieties of every kind, especially political and sexual ones.

Beginning with her uncertain birth in 1759 (Mary was unsure whether she was born in Spitalfields or Epping Forest), Godwin unflinchingly describes her restless and unhappy childhood, dominated by a drunken, bullying and abusive father, and a spoilt elder brother. His account gives the famous and iconic picture of Mary sleeping all night on the floor outside the parental bedroom, hoping to protect her mother from her father's assaults. This upbringing left her the victim of life-long depressive episodes, alternating with periods of reckless energy and anger. 'Mary was a very good hater'. But she was determined on a life-long 'project of personal independence', and revealed an instinctive desire to control and manage those around her. (Chapter 1).

He next recounts her overwhelming and 'fervent' friendship for the beautiful Fanny Blood, 'which for years constituted the ruling passion of her mind'. Godwin has no reservations in proclaiming how deeply those feelings shaped her emotional life in her twenties, and it is here that he first makes the notorious comparison between Mary and Goethe's lovelorn young Werther. The friendship took her on her first remarkable voyage, to Portugal in 1785, where Fanny died in childbirth. This passion was never subsequently forgotten. (Chapter 2 and 3)

The atheist Godwin also sympathetically describes and analyses Mary's religious beliefs. He treats them in a strikingly modern and psychological way, less as the product of Christian dogma or 'polemical discussion', but more as an imaginative expression of her temperament and character. 'She found inexpressible delight in the beauties of nature, and in the splendid reveries of the imagination. When she walked amidst the wonders of nature, she was accustomed to converse with her God.' (Chapter 3)

Next comes her combative experiences as a governess in Ireland, and the discovery of her charismatic talents as a teacher, and gifts as an educational writer (Chapter 4). This is followed from 1788 by the excitement of her early freelance work in London, and her professional friendship with the publisher Joseph Johnson, during which an intense period of self-education takes place. At the same time she takes responsibility for the careers and financing of most of her family, including her sisters and her father. (Chapter 5).

Then in 1792, at the age of 35, and at a climactic moment in revolutionary history, she achieves the rapid and triumphant writing of *The Rights of Woman*, in which she brings both her wide reading and her bitter personal experiences to bear, and makes herself in Godwin's words 'the effectual champion' of her sex. (Chapter 6). Yet at the very moment of success, she is frustrated and humiliated by the ill-judged affair with the married (but bisexual) painter Henry Fuseli, whose exact nature Godwin leaves curiously ill-defined

It is exactly at this crucial half-way point in his narrative, and significantly just out of chronological sequence, that Godwin ironically places his first and deeply unsatisfactory meeting with Mary, at a dinner party with Johnson and Tom Paine in November 1791. Far from being love at first sight, they quarrel so fiercely that Paine hardly gets a word in edgeways. It is again typical of Godwin that he does not omit this memorable scene.

From now on the biography seems to accelerate and intensify. Mary sets out on her own to observe events in revolutionary Paris, and as the Terror begins, falls in love with the handsome American adventurer Gilbert Imlay. Godwin's description of her sexual awakening by Imlay, using the beautiful pre-Freudian imagery of 'a serpent on a rock', is one of his triumphs as a biographer, and one wonders how much it must have cost him. Here the comparison with the suicidal young Werther is also repeated. (Chapter 7).

Mary is registered as Imlay's wife, and in 1794 bears his illegitimate child – named Fanny (after Fanny Blood) – in Le Havre-Marat. She embarks on a desperate journey to Scandinavia, transforming a secret business venture for Imlay into a wonderful, melancholy book of Romantic travels. Godwin's tender account of his personal reaction to this book, prepares the ground for the unexpected love-match that will follow.

If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book. She speaks of her sorrows, in a way that fills us with melancholy, and dissolves us in tenderness, at the same time that she displays a genius which commands our full attention.' (Chapter 8)

On Mary's return to London in 1795, she discovers that she is betrayed by Imlay, and twice tries to commit suicide, first with an overdose of opium and then by jumping into the Thames. Godwin's vivid and moving account of this episode includes another unforgettable image of Mary, pacing Putney Bridge at night in the rain, hoping that by soaking her clothes she would drown more quickly. Paradoxically, it opened Godwin to the charge of trying to make a moral defence of suicide. (Chapter 8).

The remaining two chapters become increasingly confessional. Yet they are written in the same admirably limpid and economic style, in which understatement is deliberately used to contain overwhelming emotion. Godwin describes how they fell in love in the spring of 1796, and began sleeping together in August, long before their mutual decision to marry. This was only taken after Mary became pregnant. Such a candid admission also opened Godwin to further mockery and abuse, although he never altered it in the second edition. (Chapter 9).

Finally, at great length and in almost gynecological detail, without the least reference to the traditional comforts of religion, Godwin painfully and minutely describes Mary's death, eleven days after bearing her second child (Chapter 10). It was the first time a deathbed had been described in this intimate way, including such unsettling details as Mary being given puppies to draw off her breast-milk, and being given too much wine to dull her pain.

## 5

Some two centuries later it is still possible to find the *Memoirs* shocking, and to disagree about the picture it draws of Wollstonecraft. Many feminist critics believe that it miscast her as a Romantic heroine, and fatally undervalued her intellectual powers. Most of her modern biographers freely use Godwin as wonderful source material, but condemn him as a hopelessly biased witness.

Even an outstandingly perceptive and measured writer like Claire Tomalin is uneasy about the effect of his work. 'In their own way, even the *Memoirs* had diminished and distorted Mary's real importance: by minimizing her claim to be taken seriously for her ideas, and presenting her instead as a female Werther, a romantic and tragic heroine, he may have been giving the truth as he wanted to

see it, but was very far from serving the cause she had believed in. He made no attempt to discuss her intellectual development, and he was unwilling to consider the validity of her feminist ideas in any detail.' (Tomalin, 1974)

This has weight, and is curiously close to the criticism originally made by the *Analytical Review* in 1798. But it has to be set, for example, against Godwin's extended analysis and celebration of the significance of *The Rights of Woman* in Chapter 6. 'Never did any author enter into a cause, with more ardent desire to be found, not a flourishing and empty declaimer, but an effectual champion...When we consider the importance of its doctrines, and the eminence of genius it displays, it seems not very improbable that [her book] will be read as long as the English language endures...'

Much criticism has also been directed against Godwin's attempt at the very end of his biography to summarize Mary's 'intellectual character', and apparently draw a 'gendered' distinction between masculine and feminine intelligence. He contrasts his own cool rational delight in 'logic and metaphysical distinction', with her strong, warm emotional instincts and 'taste for the picturesque'. (Chapter 10). This is easily ridiculed. But it is overlooked that Godwin, the faithful biographer, was actually paraphrasing one of Wollstonecraft's own letters to him of August 1796. This is what Mary herself wrote on the subject.

Our imaginations have been rather differently employed – I am more a painter than you – I like to tell the truth, my taste for the picturesque has been more cultivated...My affections have been more exercised than yours, I believe, and my senses are quick, without the aid of fancy – yet tenderness always prevails, which inclines me to be angry with myself when, I do not animate and please those I love.

But the problem of the intimate biography which seems to violate certain codes of family loyalty and trust is still with us. Thirty years ago, Nigel Nicolson's *Portrait of a Marriage* (1973), which revealed his mother Vita Sackville-West's lesbian relationships, and his father's homosexual ones, raised such questions. More recently, John Bailey's account of his wife Iris Murdoch's relentless destruction by Alzheimer's disease, in *Iris* (1999), left many readers and reviewers deeply troubled by such revelations. Yet both these are fine books, and it seems possible that biography as a form is destined to challenge conventions of silence and ignorance.

One also has to consider the historical effect of such a powerful biography is a more oblique way. The fact, for example, that Mary's life inspired so many Romantic novels, suggests Godwin had also made her something of a legendary figure. The emotional intensity of Marianne Dashwood in *Sense and Sensibility*, the novel which Jane Austen originally drafted at just this time (1797-8), might owe more than we suspect to Mary's example.

Her outrageous or comic persona still contained heroic or exemplary possibilities. Harriet Freke might yet be reincarnated as J.S. Mill's feminist companion Harriet Taylor, who was largely responsible for Mill's great work *On the Subjection of Women* (1869). Wollstonecraft was championed by the reformer Robert Owen, and written about admiringly in a little-known essay by George Eliot. In 1885 she was one of the first figures to be included in the *Eminent Woman Series*, alongside Elizabeth Fry and Mary Lamb.

So there is an alternative tradition in which Mary Wollstonecraft's reputation runs underground through the 19th century, especially among women writers. It has been traced in a recent classic of feminist scholarship, *Wollstonecraft's Daughters*, 1996. (See Further Reading)

It eventually resurfaces in the superb essay by Virginia Woolf of 1932. Inspired by the tone of the

*Memoirs*, she describes Gilbert Imlay not as a villain but as a laughable fool: ‘tickling for minnows I hooked a dolphin’. She celebrates Mary’s relationship with Godwin as the ‘most fruitful experiment’ of her life. Their marriage was ‘an experiment, as Mary’s life had been an experiment from the start, an attempt to make human conventions conform more closely to human needs.’ In a striking and prophetic conclusion, Woolf sees the story and example of Mary’s tempestuous life blossoming again among her contemporaries. ‘She is alive and active, she argues and experiments, we hear her voice and trace her influence even now among the living.’

## 6

Perhaps it was there from the beginning. A year after the publication of the *Memoirs*, the poet and novelist Mary Robinson released her *Letter to the Women of England on the Injustice of Mental Subordination* (1799). Originally a Shakespearean actress (‘Perdita’ Robinson) and mistress to the teenage Prince of Wales, Robinson’s later literary work in the 1790s brought her the friendship of both Godwin and Coleridge. Her *Letter* initially appeared under the pseudonym ‘Anne Randall’, but it was published by Longman, the biggest bookseller in London, and received wide circulation.

Robinson refers openly and admiringly to *The Rights of Woman* and salutes Wollstonecraft as ‘an illustrious British female...to whose genius Posterity will render justice’. In a militant footnote she describes herself proudly as ‘avowedly of the same school’ as Mary Wollstonecraft, and prophetically foresees her embattled life as having initiated a long campaign for women’s rights which would stretch far into the 19th century. ‘For it requires a legion of Wollstonecrafts to undermine the poison of prejudice and malevolence.’

One of Mary Robinson’s most striking conclusions at the end of her hundred page *Letter* is that Wollstonecraft’s commitment to female education (emphasized by Godwin) lead logically to the idea of women going to university. ‘Had fortune enabled me, I would build a UNIVERSITY FOR WOMEN.’ Only then would women truly be equal.

In the year after Wollstonecraft’s death, a new biographical series entitled *Public Characters* (dedicated to the King) was launched, and would continue for the next decade. It carried some 30 ‘living biographies’ per annual issue, and featured such figures as Nelson, Wilberforce, Humphry Davy, Sheridan and Castlereagh. Volume 2 (1799) included a twenty-page ‘contemporary biography’ of Godwin. It was warmly favourable, and gave a sympathetic four page account of his marriage to Mary Wollstonecraft (‘that most celebrated and most injured woman’), and unstinting praise for both editions of the *Memoirs*. It concluded as follows, in a remarkable passage that has never been reprinted since.

It was in January 1798 that Mr Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Life of Mrs Godwin*. In May of the same year a second edition of that work appeared. A painful choice seems to present itself to every ingenuous person who composes Memoirs of himself or of any one so nearly connected with himself as in the present instance. He must either express himself with disadvantage to the illiberal and malicious temper that exists in the world, or violate the honor and integrity of his feelings.

*Yet that the heart should be known in all its windings, is an object of infinite importance to him who would benefit the human race.* Mr Godwin did not prefer a cowardly silence, nor treachery to the public, having chosen to write. Perhaps such works as the *Memoirs of Mrs Godwin’s Life*, and Rousseau’s *Confessions*, will ever disgrace their writers with the meaner

spirits of the world. But then it is to be remembered, that this herd neither confers, nor can take away, fame.'

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Most moving of all, the revolutionary influence of Mary Wollstonecraft's life continued through the next generation of her own family, the family she never knew. It was a powerful and unsettling example. Her love-child, Fanny Imlay, eventually committed suicide. But when her daughter Mary Godwin and Shelley eloped to France in 1814, they carried the *Posthumous Works* and the *Memoirs* with them in their tiny travelling trunk, and read them during their first nights in Paris. Shelley's poem *The Revolt of Islam* (1817) contained a heroic portrait of her. His triumphant chorus from his late verse drama *Hellas* (1821), written about the Greek War of Independence, drew on Godwin's memorable snake imagery of hope and revival.

The world's great age begins anew,  
The golden years return,  
The earth does like a snake renew  
Her winter weeds outworn...

Mary Shelley's entire literary career was inspired by her mother's example, and especially perhaps her desire to write novels of ideas. Both *Frankenstein* (1818), and *The Last Man* (1826) can be seen as part of the complex Wollstonecraft inheritance. After her father Godwin's death, she always intended to write a combined biography of both her daring literary parents.

A few scattered manuscript notes alone have survived, probably dating from the early 1840s. This is what the subdued, widowed, middle-aged Victorian Mary Shelley wrote about her outrageous mother Mary Wollstonecraft. 'Her genius was undeniable. She had been bred in the hard school of adversity, and having experienced the sorrows entailed on the poor and oppressed, an earnest desire was kindled within her to diminish these sorrows. Her sound understanding, her intrepidity, her sensibility and eager sympathy, stamped all her writings with force and truth, and endorsed them with a tender charm that enchants while it enlightens. She was one whom all loved, who had ever seen her

But of course Mary had never seen her mother. She only knew and loved her through her own writings and her father's intrepid and controversial *Memoirs*. Such is the dangerous, enduring power of biography.

*The text of the Memoirs reprinted here is that of Godwin's first, uncorrected edition of January 1798 apart from a few spellings that have been modernized. The three passages that Godwin substantially re-wrote for the second edition – concerning Henry Fuseli (Chapter 6), Wollstonecraft's suicide attempt (Chapter 8), and his summary of Wollstonecraft's character (Chapter 10) – are given in the Appendix.*



# SELECT CHRONOLOGY

- 1756 (3 March) Birth of William Godwin
- 1759 (27 April) Birth of Mary Wollstonecraft
- 1775 Wollstonecraft meets Fanny Blood
- 1785 Wollstonecraft goes to Lisbon
- 1786 Wollstonecraft publishes *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*
- 1788 Wollstonecraft works as governess in Dublin  
Wollstonecraft begins writing for the *Analytical Review* Wollstonecraft publishes *Mary: a Fiction* (novel)
- 1791 (November) Godwin and Wollstonecraft meet at dinner party in London with Joseph Johnson and Tom Paine
- 1792 (January) Wollstonecraft publishes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* Wollstonecraft intimate with Henry Fuseli (December) Wollstonecraft goes to Paris
- 1793 Godwin publishes *An Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* (April) Wollstonecraft meets Gilbert Imlay in Paris
- 1794 (May) Fanny Imlay born at Le Havre-Marat Godwin publishes *Caleb Williams* (novel)  
(April) Wollstonecraft returns to London Wollstonecraft travels in Scandinavia Wollstonecraft
- 1795 makes two suicide attempts in London Wollstonecraft publishes *Letters Written during a Short Residence in Norway, Denmark and Sweden*
- 1796 (April) Wollstonecraft calls upon Godwin
- 1797 (March) Godwin and Wollstonecraft marry (30 August) Birth of Mary Godwin (10 September)  
Death of Mary Wollstonecraft
- 1798 (January) Godwin publishes *Memoirs of the Author of the Rights of Woman* (first edition)  
(August) Godwin publishes *Memoirs* (second edition)
- 1801 Godwin publishes *St Leon* (novel)
- 1814 Shelley elopes with Mary Godwin
- 1816 Fanny Imlay (Godwin) commits suicide
- 1836 Death of William Godwin
- 1853 Death of Mary Shelley
- 1892 Centenary edition of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*
- 1927 Third edition of *Memoirs*, edited by William Clark Durant

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**MEMOIRS OF THE AUTHOR OF**  
**'THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN'**

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# PREFACE

It has always appeared to me, that to give the public some account of the life of a person of eminent merit deceased, is a duty incumbent on survivors. It seldom happens that such a person passes through life, without being the subject of thoughtless calumny, or malignant misrepresentation. It cannot happen that the public at large should be on a footing with their intimate acquaintance, and be the observer of those virtues which discover themselves principally in personal intercourse. Every benefactor of mankind is more or less influenced by a liberal passion for fame; and survivors only pay a debt due to these benefactors, when they assert and establish on their part, the honour they loved. The justice which is thus done to the illustrious dead, converts into the fairest source of animation and encouragement to those who would follow them in the same career. The human species at large is interested in this justice, as it teaches them to place their respect and affection, upon those qualities which best deserve to be esteemed and loved. I cannot easily prevail on myself to doubt, that the more fully we are presented with the picture and story of such persons as the subject of the following narrative, the more generally shall we feel in ourselves an attachment to their fate, and a sympathy in their excellencies. There are not many individuals with whose character the public welfare and improvement are more intimately connected, than the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.

The facts detailed in the following pages, are principally taken from the mouth of the person to whom they relate; and of the veracity and ingenuousness of her habits, perhaps no one that was ever acquainted with her, entertains a doubt. The writer of this narrative, when he has met with persons, that in any degree created to themselves an interest and attachment in his mind, has always felt a curiosity to be acquainted with the scenes through which they had passed, and the incidents that had contributed to form their understandings and character. Impelled by this sentiment, he repeatedly led the conversation of Mary to topics of this sort; and, once or twice, he made notes in her presence, of a few dates calculated to arrange the circumstances in his mind. To the materials thus collected, he has added an industrious enquiry among the persons most intimately acquainted with her at the different periods of her life.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## 1759-1775

**M**ary Wollstonecraft was born on the 27th of April 1759. Her father's name was Edward John, and the name of her mother Elizabeth, of the family of Dixons of Bally-shannon in the kingdom of Ireland: her paternal grandfather was a respectable manufacturer in Spitalfields, and is supposed to have left to his son a property of about 10,000*l*. Three of her brothers and two sisters are still living; their names, Edward, James, Charles, Eliza, and Everina. Of these, Edward only was older than herself; he resides in London. James is in Paris, and Charles in or near Philadelphia in America. Her sisters have for some years been engaged in the office of governesses in private families, and are both at present in Ireland.

I am doubtful whether the father of Mary was bred to any profession; but, about the time of her birth, he resorted, rather perhaps as an amusement than a business, to the occupation of farming. He was of a very active, and somewhat versatile disposition, and so frequently changed his abode, as to throw some ambiguity upon the place of her birth. She told me, that the doubt in her mind in that respect, lay between London, and a farm upon Epping Forest, which was the principal scene of the first years of her life.

Mary was distinguished in early youth, by some portion of that exquisite sensibility, soundness of understanding, and decision of character, which were the leading features of her mind through the whole course of her life. She experienced in the first period of her existence, but few of those indulgences and marks of affection, which are principally calculated to soothe the subjection and sorrows of our early years. She was not the favourite either of her father or mother. Her father was a man of a quick, impetuous disposition, subject to alternate fits of kindness and cruelty. In his family he was a despot, and his wife appears to have been the first, and most submissive of his subjects. The mother's partiality was fixed upon the eldest son, and her system of government relative to Mary, was characterized by considerable rigour. She, at length, became convinced of her mistake, and adopted a different plan with her younger daughters. When, in the *Wrongs of Woman*, Mary speaks of 'the petty cares which obscured the morning of her heroine's life; continual restraint in the most trivial matters, unconditional submission to orders, which, as a mere child, she soon discovered to be unreasonable, because inconsistent and contradictory; and the being often obliged to sit, in the presence of her parents, for three or four hours together, without daring to utter a word;' she is, I believe, to be considered as copying the outline of the first period of her own existence.

But it was in vain that the blighting winds of unkindness or indifference, seemed destined to counteract the superiority of Mary's mind. It surmounted every obstacle; and by degrees, from a person little considered in the family, she became in some sort its director and umpire. The despotism of her education cost her many a heart-ache. She was not formed to be the contented and unresisting subject of a despot; but I have heard her remark more than once, that, when she felt she had done wrong, the reproof or chastisement of her mother, instead of being a terror to her, she found to be the only thing capable of reconciling her to herself. The blows of her father, on the contrary, which were the mere ebullitions of a passionate temper, instead of humbling her roused her indignation. Upon such occasions she felt her superiority, and was apt to betray marks of contempt. The quickness of her

father's temper, led him sometimes to threaten similar violence towards his wife. When that was the case, Mary would often throw herself between the despot and his victim, with the purpose to receive upon her own person the blows that might be directed against her mother. She has even laid whole nights upon the landing-place near their chamber-door, when, mistakenly, or with reason, she apprehended that her father might break out into paroxysms of violence. The conduct he held towards the members of his family, was of the same kind as that he observed towards animals. He was for the most part extravagantly fond of them; but, when he was displeased, and this frequently happened, and for very trivial reasons, his anger was alarming. Mary was what Dr Johnson would have called, 'a very good hater.' In some instance of passion exercised by her father to one of his dogs, she was accustomed to speak of her emotions of abhorrence, as having risen to agony. In a word, her conduct during her girlish years, was such, as to extort some portion of affection from her mother, and to hold her father in considerable awe.

In one respect, the system of education of the mother appears to have had merit. All her children were vigorous and healthy. This seems very much to depend upon the management of our infant years. It is affirmed by some persons of the present day, most profoundly skilled in the sciences of health and disease, that there is no period of human life so little subject to mortality, as the period of infancy. Yet, from the mismanagement to which children are exposed, many of the diseases of childhood are rendered fatal, and more persons die in that, than in any other period of human life. Mary had projected a work upon this subject, which she had carefully considered, and well understood. She has indeed left a specimen of her skill in this respect in her eldest daughter, three years and a half old, who is a singular example of vigorous constitution and florid health. Mr Anthony Carlisle, surgeon, of Soho-square, whom to name is sufficiently to honour, had promised to revise her production. This is but one out of numerous projects of activity and usefulness, which her untimely death has fatally terminated.

The rustic situation in which Mary spent her infancy, no doubt contributed to confirm the stamina of her constitution. She sported in the open air, and amidst the picturesque and refreshing scenes of nature, for which she always retained the most exquisite relish. Dolls and the other amusements usually appropriated to female children, she held in contempt; and felt a much greater propensity to join in the active and hardy sports of her brothers, than to confine herself to those of her own sex.

About the time that Mary completed the fifth year of her age, her father removed to a small distance from his former habitation and took a farm near the Whalebone upon Epping Forest, a little way out of the Chelmsford road. In Michaelmas 1765, he once more changed his residence, and occupied a convenient house behind the town of Barking in Essex, eight miles from London. In this situation some of their nearest neighbours were, Bamber Gascoyne, esquire, successively Member of Parliament of several boroughs, and his brother, Mr Joseph Gascoyne. Bamber Gascoyne resided but little on this spot; but his brother was almost a constant inhabitant, and his family in habits of the most frequent intercourse with the family of Mary. Here Mr Wollstonecraft remained for three years. In September 1796, I accompanied my wife in a visit to this spot. No person reviewed with greater sensibility, the scenes of her childhood. We found the house uninhabited, and the garden in a wild and ruinous state. She renewed her acquaintance with the market-place, the streets, and the wharf, the latter of which we found crowded with barges, and full of activity.

In Michaelmas 1768, Mr Wollstonecraft again removed to a farm near Beverley in Yorkshire. Here the family remained for six years, and consequently, Mary did not quit this residence until she had attained the age of fifteen years and five months. The principal part of her school-education passed during this period; but it was not to any advantage of infant literature, that she was indebted for

her subsequent eminence; her education in this respect was merely such, as was afforded by the day-schools of the place, in which she resided. To her recollections Beverley appeared a very handsome town, surrounded by genteel families, and with a brilliant assembly. She was surprized, when she visited it in 1795, upon her voyage to Norway, to find the reality so very much below the picture in her imagination.

Hitherto Mr Wollstonecraft had been a farmer; but the restlessness of his disposition would not suffer him to content himself with the occupation in which for some years he had been engaged, and the temptation of a commercial speculation of some sort being held out to him, he removed to a house in Queen's-Row, in Hoxton near London, for the purpose of its execution. Here he remained for a year and a half; but, being frustrated in his expectations of profit, he, after that term, gave up the project in which he was engaged, and returned to his former pursuits. During this residence in Hoxton, the writer of these memoirs inhabited, as a student, at the dissenting college in that place. It is perhaps a question of curious speculation to enquire, what would have been the amount of the difference in the pursuits and enjoyments of each party, if they had met, and considered each other with the same distinguishing regard in 1776, as they were afterwards impressed with in the year 1796. The writer had then completed the twentieth, and Mary the seventeenth year of her age. Which would have been predominant; the disadvantages of obscurity, and the pressure of a family; or the gratifications and improvement that might have flowed from their intercourse?

One of the acquaintances Mary formed at this time was with a Mr Clare, who inhabited the next house to that which was tenanted by her father, and to whom she was probably in some degree indebted for the early cultivation of her mind. Mr Clare was a clergyman, and appears to have been a humourist of a very singular cast. In his person he was deformed and delicate; and his figure, I am told, bore a resemblance to that of the celebrated Pope. He had a fondness for poetry, and was not destitute of taste. His manners were expressive of a tenderness and benevolence, the demonstrations which appeared to have been somewhat too artificially cultivated. His habits were those of a perfect recluse. He seldom went out of his drawing-room, and he showed to a friend of Mary a pair of shoes, which had served him, he said, for fourteen years. Mary frequently spent days and weeks together, at the house of Mr Clare.

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# CHAPTER TWO

## 1775-1783

**B**ut a connection more memorable originated about this time, between Mary and a person of her own sex, for whom she contracted a friendship so fervent, as for years to have constituted the ruling passion of her mind. The name of this person was Frances Blood; she was two years older than Mary. Her residence was at that time at Newington Butts, a village near the southern extremity of the metropolis; and the original instrument for bringing these two friends acquainted, was Mrs Clare, wife of the gentleman already mentioned, who was on a footing of considerable intimacy with both parties. The acquaintance of Fanny, like that of Mr Clare, contributed to ripen the immature talents of Mary.

The situation in which Mary was introduced to her, bore a resemblance to the first interview of Werter with Charlotte. She was conducted to the door of a small house, but furnished with peculiar neatness and propriety. The first object that caught her sight, was a young woman of a slender and elegant form, and eighteen years of age, busily employed in feeding and managing some children, born of the same parents, but considerably inferior to her in age. The impression Mary received from this spectacle was indelible; and, before the interview was concluded, she had taken, in her heart, the vows of an eternal friendship.

Fanny was a young woman of extraordinary accomplishments. She sung and played with taste. She drew with exquisite fidelity and neatness; and, by the employment of this talent, for some time maintained her father, mother, and family, but ultimately ruined her health by her extraordinary exertions. She read and wrote with considerable application; and the same ideas of minute and delicate propriety followed her in these, as in her other occupations.

Mary, a wild, but animated and aspiring girl of sixteen, contemplated Fanny, in the first instance with sentiments of inferiority and reverence. Though they were much together, yet, the distance of their habitations being considerable, they supplied the want of more frequent interviews by an assiduous correspondence. Mary found Fanny's letters better spelt and better indited than her own, and felt herself abashed. She had hitherto paid but a superficial attention to literature. She had read, to gratify the ardour of an inextinguishable thirst of knowledge; but she had not thought of writing as an art. Her ambition to excel was now awakened, and she applied herself with passion and earnestness. Fanny undertook to be her instructor; and, so far as related to accuracy and method, her lessons were given with considerable skill.

It has already been mentioned that, in the spring of the year 1776, Mr Wollstonecraft quitted his situation at Hoxton, and returned to his former agricultural pursuits. The situation upon which he now fixed was in Wales, a circumstance that was felt as a severe blow to Mary's darling spirit of friendship. The principal acquaintance of the Wollstonecrafts in this retirement, was the family of a Mr Allen, two of whose daughters are since married to the two elder sons of the celebrated English potter, Josiah Wedgwood.

Wales however was Mr Wollstonecraft's residence for little more than a year. He returned to the neighbourhood of London; and Mary, whose spirit of independence was unalterable, had influence enough to determine his choice in favour of the village of Walworth, that she might be near her chosen friend. It was probably before this, that she had once or twice started the idea of quitting her parental

roof, and providing for herself. But she was prevailed upon to resign this idea, and conditions were stipulated with her, relative to her having an apartment in the house that should be exclusively her own, and her commanding the other requisites of study. She did not however think herself fairly treated in these instances, and either the conditions above-mentioned, or some others, were not observed in the sequel, with the fidelity she expected. In one case, she had procured an eligible situation, and every thing was settled respecting her removal to it, when the intreaties and tears of her mother led her to surrender her own inclinations, and abandon the engagement.

These however were only temporary delays. Her propensities continued the same, and the motives by which she was instigated were unabated. In the year 1778, she being nineteen years of age a proposal was made to her of living as a companion with a Mrs Dawson of Bath, a widow lady, with one son already adult. Upon enquiry she found that Mrs Dawson was a woman of great peculiarity of temper, that she had had a variety of companions in succession, and that no one had found it practicable to continue with her. Mary was not discouraged by this information and accepted the situation, with a resolution that she would effect in this respect, what none of her predecessors had been able to do. In the sequel she had reason to consider the account she had received as sufficiently accurate, but she did not relax in her endeavours. By method, constancy and firmness, she found the means of making her situation tolerable; and Mrs Dawson would occasionally confess, that Mary was the only person that had lived with her in that situation, in her treatment of whom she had felt herself under any restraint.

With Mrs Dawson she continued to reside for two years, and only left her, summoned by the melancholy circumstance of her mother's rapidly declining health. True to the calls of humanity, Mary felt in this intelligence an irresistible motive, and eagerly returned to the paternal roof, which she had before resolutely quitted. The residence of her father at this time, was at Enfield near London. He had, I believe, given up agriculture from the time of his quitting Wales, it appearing that he now made it less a source of profit than loss, and being thought advisable that he should rather live upon the interest of his property already in possession.

The illness of Mrs Wollstonecraft was lingering, but hopeless. Mary was assiduous in her attendance upon her mother. At first, every attention was received with acknowledgments and gratitude; but, as the attentions grew habitual, and the health of the mother more and more wretched, they were rather exacted, than received. Nothing would be taken by the unfortunate patient, but from the hands of Mary; rest was denied night or day, and by the time nature was exhausted in the parent, the daughter was qualified to assume her place, and become in turn herself a patient. The last words her mother ever uttered were, 'A little patience, and all will be over!' and these words are repeatedly referred to by Mary in the course of her writings.

Upon the death of Mrs Wollstonecraft, Mary bid final adieu to the roof of her father. According to my memorandums, I find her next the inmate of Fanny at Walham Green, near the village of Fulham. Upon what plan they now lived together I am unable to ascertain; certainly not that of Mary becoming in any degree an additional burthen upon the industry of her friend. Thus situated, their intimacy ripened; they approached more nearly to a footing of equality; and their attachment became more rooted and active.

Mary was ever ready at the call of distress, and, in particular, during her whole life was eager and active to promote the welfare of every member of her family. In 1780 she attended the deathbed of her mother; in 1782 she was summoned by a not less melancholy occasion, to attend her sister Eliza, married to a Mr Bishop, who, subsequently to a dangerous lying-in, remained for some months in a very afflicting situation. Mary continued with her sister without intermission, to her perfect recovery.



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