

This article continues *FREE INQUIRY's* series on the precursors of modern-day humanists.

Mary Wollstonecraft and Women's Rights



Elizabeth Larson

Widely known as the founding mother of feminism, Mary Wollstonecraft, in her private life, often failed to reach her high public ideals. From her birth in 1759, a disappointment to Edward and Elizabeth Wollstonecraft, who had hoped for a second son, to her death during childbirth six months after a secret marriage, Mary felt herself born a woman with a “different face.”

For the first twenty years of her life, Wollstonecraft was tied to home, nursing a dying mother and avoiding a violent father. Her happiest hours were spent in the library of a neighboring clergyman and his wife, who had virtually adopted her.

Wollstonecraft did not meet a kindred spirit until 1783, when she and her sister opened a day school for girls in Newington Green, long a center for Dissenters. That intellectual companion was Richard Price, liberal philosopher, laissez-faire economist, and prominent Dissenting clergyman.

Price's influence on Wollstonecraft was profound and permanent. He was a fervent believer in natural rights, progress, and the perfectibility of mankind. His pamphlet, *Observations on Civil Liberty*, sold over six thousand copies when published in 1776 and was the most influential defense of the American Revolution after Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*. Price's belief that reason enables men to discern good from bad, thereby making them capable of self-government, set Wollstonecraft on the path to becoming one of the first female classical liberals.

Although Price occupied a place perhaps closest to Wollstonecraft's heart, he was by no means the only one to take an interest in her. The company of philosopher John Arden and his daughter Jane stimulated Wollstonecraft to seek a life pursuing knowledge rather than marriage. One acquaintance encouraged her to use her expertise as a teacher to write a treatise on the education of women.

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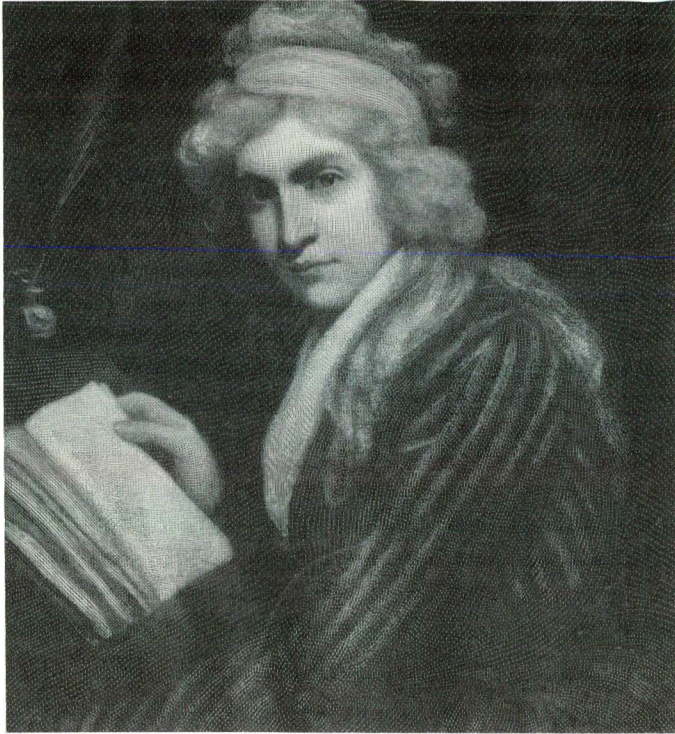
A Vindication of Mankind

Today, Wollstonecraft is best known as the author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, an essay much anthologized since its first printing in 1792. It sold so well that a second edition was printed before the end of the year. Few students and scholars realize, however, that Wollstonecraft did not, at first, see herself as a champion of women's rights, much less as a founder—the founder, according to some—of the modern feminist movement.

It all began in 1787 when Wollstonecraft made her way to the London home of radical publisher Joseph Johnson. Johnson, a supporter of both the American and the French revolutions, soon published Wollstonecraft's *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* as well as her first novel, *Mary*. Those small successes heartened Wollstonecraft and made her one of the first women to support herself solely by writing. At the age of twenty-eight Wollstonecraft had discovered herself. In September 1787 she wrote to Johnson:

I often think of my new plan of life. I am determined. 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, improbable as it might have appeared to a more timid mind.¹

Wollstonecraft was not without acquaintance in the big city for long. Johnson was known for the literary suppers he gave above his St. Paul's Churchyard shop. “Whenever I am tired of solitude, I go to Mr. Johnson's,” she told a friend. On November 13, 1791, a farewell dinner was thrown in honor of Paine and his departure to France to act as a delegate to the French Revolutionary Council. William Godwin, the Dissenting minister turned anarchical philosopher Wollstonecraft would later marry, was also present. He was little impressed with “Mrs. W.,” as he called her (like other female writers of the day, Wollstonecraft used “Mrs.” despite her unmarried status). He found her talkative and opinionated. For her part, Wollstonecraft found Godwin dry and unlikely.



Mary Wollstonecraft

Many in Johnson's circle belonged to the Revolution Society, a group that convened annually on the birthdate of William III to commemorate the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The November 4, 1789, meeting was the first since the storming of the Bastille in July of the previous summer, and the society members hailed the French revolutionaries as the philosophical descendants of the English revolutionaries. A sermon by Price was one of the day's highlights.

A pamphlet of the society's 1789 proceedings fell into the hands of Edmund Burke. Horrified at the revolutionary implications of the natural rights doctrine that Price preached, Burke wrote *Reflections on the Revolution in France*, an attack on Price, the Dissenters, the French Revolution, and the "natural rights" of man and a defense of the traditional rights of English custom and law.

Wollstonecraft rushed to the defense of Price and natural rights theory. Johnson waited near the desk where she sat, typesetting each sheet as she lifted her pen from the page. In *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, published anonymously in December 1790, Wollstonecraft defended the doctrine of natural rights—rights that governments can never grant, only deny, because men are entitled to them by their nature.²

The ability to reason lies at the heart of Wollstonecraft's defense of natural rights. "I reverence the rights of men.—Sacred rights! for which I acquire a more profound respect the more I look into my own mind."³ Wollstonecraft had a greater respect for the natural rights of man when she saw within her own mind the ability to reason. Because all men are born with the ability to reason, she argued, all men are given the capacity to secure for themselves liberty and happiness.

Reason guides the power to choose. When a man is free to choose, he is free to pursue happiness as he defines it. "It may be confidently asserted that no man chooses evil, because it is evil; he only mistakes it for happiness, the good he seeks," Wollstonecraft wrote.⁴ This is man's greatest prerogative: to pursue the life he wants, regardless of others' estimation of his choice. It is implicit in Wollstonecraft's argument, and explicit in the writings of those who followed her, that this pursuit should only be questioned at the moment it interferes with the independence or happiness of another. "The happiness of the whole must arise from the happiness of the constituent parts, or the essence of justice is sacrificed to a supposed grand arrangement."⁵ Despite her occasional concession to the "grand arrangement" of traditional English society—such as marrying one of her lovers—Wollstonecraft was an individualist.

Birth or ill fortune may force upon someone an ignoble lot in life, but society cannot destroy the integrity of that person's reason unless he or she permits it. Submission to the authority of society or tradition reduces one to the level of barbarians, the men without reason, Wollstonecraft warned. Reliance on reason, on the other hand, furthers the progress of civilization by freeing men to discover, create, and learn. As Price wrote, "There can scarcely be a more pleasant and encouraging object of reflection than" the realization that the "world hitherto has been gradually improving."

Reason and emotion are equally natural in man, hence the question of what balance to strike between the two becomes a moral one. Wollstonecraft demanded of Burke:

In what respect are we superior to the brute creation, if intellect is not allowed to be the guide of passion? Brutes hope and fear, love and hate; but, without a capacity to improve, a power of turning these passions to good or evil, they neither acquire virtue nor wisdom.—Why? Because the Creator has not given them reason.⁶

Burke and others prefer the easy road of the emotions to the more disciplined, and less traveled, road of reason. Those who find it more gratifying to follow where their emotions lead try to convince others that they are only acting as humans naturally act, Wollstonecraft wryly observed. In her eyes, men who do not allow reason to tame their emotions are the moral equivalent of animals.

To live by reason leads one to self-government. That is where Price's natural rights doctrine developed from an abstract philosophy into a dangerous tool of revolution in Burke's eyes. If all men swore allegiance first to themselves, citizens the world over would revolt. The calls for self-government and recognition of liberty by those in Johnson's circle struck Burke's ears like a call to arms against the British crown and English society. He worded the title of his *Reflections* to indicate that what was happening in France was not simply a French revolution, but the first act of a general revolution that would spread like a fever across the globe.⁷

Inherited property, primogeniture, and the other English customs are the very battlements protecting England from

social chaos, Burke contended. To Wollstonecraft, those trappings of privilege sacrificed the individual liberty of the common man to the pomp and glory of the great.

Primogeniture for the sake of tradition is immoral, Wollstonecraft believed, because no man has a right to any property other than that which he has earned through his talents and industry. "The demon of [inherited] property has ever been at hand to encroach on the sacred rights of men."⁸ Private property is one of "the dearest rights of men," but it is a right that has been upset by the English tradition of bequeathing all to the eldest son.

Wollstonecraft scorned Burke's dependence on tradition and mocked his belief in the superiority of the passions. She was a good hater, Godwin later wrote of her. Unfortunately, her defense of Price and the natural rights of man was understood by many of her contemporaries as a defense of only half of the human race.

It was the 1791 review of *The Rights of Men* in the *Gentleman's Quarterly* that made Wollstonecraft realize that not everyone understood "the rights of men" to be synonymous with "the rights of mankind." The *Quarterly* thought it absurd that a woman should defend the rights of men.

Wollstonecraft amended her vindication of the natural rights of mankind by writing *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, published by Johnson in 1792.

If reason is the guide to virtue for a man, then reason must be a woman's guide as well. Yet the position of women in society showed that what was seen as moral for a man was not the same as what was considered moral for a woman, Wollstonecraft argued. Indeed, a man's virtue was oftentimes a woman's sin. Gentlemen in Wollstonecraft's day were "learned"; ladies were "accomplished." Gentlemen read Aristotle and Ptolemy; ladies spoke French and did needlework. Virtue was tailored to gender. While the virtuous man was courageous, healthy, honest, and intelligent, the virtuous woman was chaste, modest, weak, and silent.

Virtue has no gender, Wollstonecraft insisted. The masculine sports of hunting and riding differ from the "masculine virtues." Wollstonecraft pointed out that she agreed with those who thought women should not be involved in hunting, shooting, and gaming, but

if it be against the imitation of manly virtues, or, more properly speaking, the attainment of those talents and virtues, the exercise of which ennoble the human character . . . all those who view them with a philosophic eye must, I should think, wish with me, that [women] may every day grow more masculine.⁹

While the heroic virtues are the true virtues—being those "the exercise of which ennoble the human character"—men will never lead moral lives until the natural rights of all of mankind are recognized.

Women, especially privileged women, are not unlike the son who stands to inherit a vast estate, Wollstonecraft argued.

Seldom occupied by serious business, the pursuit of pleasure gives that insignificance to [a woman's] character which renders the society of the great so insipid. . . . Such are the

blessings of civil governments . . . that wealth and female softness equally tend to debase mankind . . . for how can a rational being be ennobled by any thing that is not obtained by its own exertions?¹⁰

Inherited property debases men because they rely on the fruits of another's efforts; "feminine virtue" debases women because they come to depend on the fruits of another's mind, and the whims of their own emotions.

"My own sex, I hope, will excuse me if I treat them like rational creatures instead of flattering their fascinating graces," Wollstonecraft added after encouraging women to emulate more of the heroic and fewer of the graceful virtues.¹¹ Her excuse reveals both how thoroughly girls were taught to develop "fascinating graces" and how seriously Wollstonecraft believed in the natural equality of women as "rational creatures." Women must discard the double system of morality imposed by genteel society and come to understand the wrong-headedness of sacrificing one's liberty to so-called virtue.

Wollstonecraft's beliefs, needless to say, did not endear her to many of her contemporaries. Upon reading *The Rights of Women*, Hannah Moore wrote: "There is something fantastic and absurd in the very title. How many ways there are of being ridiculous. I am sure I have as much liberty as I can make use of. Now I am an old maid, and when I was a young one I had, I daresay, more than was good for me."¹² Judging the amount posterity has gained from Moore, she was probably right.

Lack of proper education was to blame for the barren blooming of the typical female mind.¹³ Although daughters received more education in Wollstonecraft's time than previously, women were "still reckoned a frivolous sex, and ridiculed or pitied by the writers who endeavor by satire or instruction to improve them."¹⁴

Girls should study history, literature, the sciences, and the classics with boys, Wollstonecraft wrote. Acquiring modesty and accomplishments simply dulls the senses, suffocates natural impulses to independence, and produces ladies of false virtue or guileless vanity. Mothers taught their daughters that their duty as women was to charm and as wives to obey. Coquetry was deemed a more persuasive tool in conversation with members of the "gallant" sex than expressing one's ideas and opinions.

Girls ended up with the pretended innocence of cunning children, who, like the brutes Wollstonecraft had described in *The Rights of Men*, "hope and fear, love and hate; but, without a capacity to improve, a power of turning these passions to good or evil, they neither acquire virtue nor wisdom." Women could never become truly good or wise, for the capacity to reason—the wellspring of both virtue and wisdom—had long since atrophied.

Is it any wonder that children and households are neglected while wives pursue adulterous affairs? Wollstonecraft cried. Although she considered marriage "the foundation of almost every social virtue," Wollstonecraft had ample evidence from both her sister's and her parents' marriages of how much this institution had suffered from a perversion of the relationship between the sexes.

Wollstonecraft herself finally married. She had crossed paths only rarely with Godwin since their first meeting at Johnson's. Then one April day in 1796, Mary Hays invited her to tea, forewarning her that Godwin was to be there as well. Godwin was pleasantly surprised to find Wollstonecraft had become an attractive woman, both in person and in manners. A week later Wollstonecraft broke every rule of English courtship by calling on Godwin at his home. Their friendship was immediate and by August the two were lovers.

That winter Wollstonecraft became pregnant and, much to his philosophical embarrassment, Godwin, the anti-matrimonialist, agreed to marry her. The ceremony took place in secret, and the two continued to keep separate apartments and to dine with separate circles of friends. Yet it wasn't long before the Court and Social column of *The Times* noted that "Mr. Godwin, author of a pamphlet against matrimony" had secretly wed "the famous Mrs. Wollstonecraft, who wrote in support of the Rights of Women."

Their happiness ended abruptly. On September 10, 1797, Wollstonecraft died of complications from childbirth after eleven days of suffering. Their child, Mary Godwin, would grow up to be the author of *Frankenstein* and wife of Romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelley.

"It is impossible to represent in words the total revolution this event made in my existence," Godwin wrote after her death. "It was as if in a single moment 'sun and moon were in a flat sea sunk.'"¹⁵ Godwin completed his *Memoirs* of her in just ten weeks. Johnson published the *Memoirs* and a four-volume edition of her *Posthumous Works*, which Godwin had collected. An anonymous writer remembered her in the conservative *Gentlemen's Magazine*:

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 the soundness of her understanding, and sensibility of heart, she was, perhaps, never equalled. . . . This tribute we readily pay to her character, however adverse we may be to the system she supported in politics and morals, both by her writings and practice.¹⁶

A Most Victorian Response

A radical liberalism had arrived on the heels of Enlightenment, and Wollstonecraft's generation witnessed the beginnings of some great social upheavals. As an unprecedented openness of inquiry swept through the intellectual circles of Europe, the great liberal minds of the day reconsidered the rights of all humankind—whether slave, woman, or nobleman. Wollstonecraft ranked among those champions of liberty along with the likes of Frenchman Benjamin Constant and German aristocrat Wilhelm von Humboldt, elder brother of the better-known naturalist Alexander von Humboldt. The liberal ideas that thrived between the 1790s and the 1820s varied from England to France to Germany, but they formed enough of a cohesive ideology to strike fear into the hearts of the next generation's intellectuals and politicians.

Following Burke's lead, English conservatives seized upon the French Revolution as the ultimate embodiment of

Wollstonecraft's and other liberals' ideas and ushered in the Victorian era. By preserving social harmony, the Victorians said, we can spare London the excesses and tumult that devastated Paris from 1789 to 1815. "Let everything be as it was," they cried. And for much of the nineteenth century it was.

Stemming the tide of liberalism washing between Europe's shores and the British Isles, the Victorians reinstated the double system of morality Wollstonecraft and her contemporaries had fought to reform. While the rights of men came to be more universally recognized during the nineteenth century, the rights of mankind could only suffer as Wollstonecraft and her friends lost their popularity. It is not surprising that the Victorians primly observed that Wollstonecraft had been a "sexless female." It remained for us to discover in the writings of Mary Wollstonecraft the eloquent, often angry voice that excited respect and ridicule among eighteenth-century Englishmen.

Notes

1. Quoted by Wendy McElroy, "Vindication of Rights of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft," Knowledge products and audio tape series, produced by Carmichael and Carmichael, Inc., 1986.
2. A second edition, with Wollstonecraft's name, appeared in 1791.
3. Mary Wollstonecraft, "A Vindication of the Rights of Men," *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, Janet M. Todd, ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977), p. 75.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 79.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
7. Conor Cruise O'Brien, "A Vindication of Edmund Burke," *National Review*, December 17, 1990, p. 28.
8. *The Rights of Men*, p. 65.
9. Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, in *A Wollstonecraft Anthology*, p. 86.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 95.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
12. Quoted by McElroy, "Vindication of the Rights of Women: Mary Wollstonecraft."
13. *The Rights of Women*, p. 85.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 86.
15. Quoted by Richard Holmes in his introduction to *A Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*, Richard Holmes, ed. (Middlesex, England: Penguin, 1987) p. 14.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

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