



Mary Wollstonecraft: Mother of Women's Rights (Oxford Portraits)

Miriam Brody

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) was the first champion of women's rights in the modern Western world. Wollstonecraft's experience teaching young women in London led her to write her first book, in which she argued for equal education for girls and boys. The moderate success of her autobiographical novel *Mary, A Fiction* convinced her to start writing full-time. Under the tutelage of her publisher and mentor Joseph Johnson, she joined a circle of liberal intellectuals which included poet and artist William Blake, chemist Joseph Priestley, and political thinker William Godwin.

In 1790 Wollstonecraft penned *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, an impassioned reply to conservative criticism of the French Revolution and a call for social equality. She developed her ideas further in *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which extended the notion of natural rights to include women's rights as well. Going so far as to suggest that women should be allowed to vote, Wollstonecraft's revolutionary ideas garnered her overnight fame--and notoriety. She traveled to Paris, lived through the Reign of Terror, fell in love with an American, and gave birth to her first daughter. Though the love affair ended tragically, resulting in her thwarted suicide attempt, she happily wed William Godwin in 1797. That year she gave birth to her second child (the future author of *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley). She died a few days later from complications of childbirth. Wollstonecraft's writing inspired leaders of the American woman suffrage movement, such as Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and moved one admirer to call her a "pioneer of modern womanhood."

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