Britpolitics Fact Sheet – Mary Wollstonecraft

Mary Wollstonecraft was an English writer, philosopher and leading voice on women’s rights. Many commentators have called her the first ‘feminist’. A fascinating figure, she was a trailblazer through her writing, thoughts and alternative ways of life and love for a woman in the 18th Century. It came at a cost.

## Fact file

Born: 27th April 1759 in Spitalfields, London

Family: Second of seven children to Elizabeth Dixon and Edward John Wollstonecraft

Died: 10th September, 1797 (aged 38)

Married: William Godwin

Children: Fanny Imlay and Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin

## Growing Up

Mary had a troubled childhood. Although they were not poor, her father was not very good with money. He got involved in costly projects and they moved house many times. It is said he was often drunk and violent toward Mary’s mother.

In 1778, Mary left home to make her way on her own. She became a live-in assistant to a wealthy widow but they did not get along. After a brief spell back home to care for her dying mother Mary moved in with her close friend Frances (known as Fanny) Blood for the next two years. Fanny would be a major influence on shaping Mary’s thinking about life, politics and women’s rights. They set up a school together until Fanny’s death in X, which devastated Mary.

## From Governess to Writer

After her death and the closure of the school, Mary became a governess to the children of the Kingsborough family in Ireland. Her time there inspired her children’s literature. She took the decision after one year to leave her job and go into writing. This was a brave decision for an unmarried woman to take at that time. She moved back to London where a liberal publisher Joseph Johnson took her on. Mary provided translations of French and German works and wrote reviews for periodicals.

## Getting Published & Noticed

Johnson was well connected and Wollstonecraft met many literary giants and thinkers during this time including philosopher Thomas Paine. Mary also published ‘A Vindication of the Rights of Men’ at this time. (1790) This work was in response to conservative thinking Edmund Burke MPs ‘French Revolution in Reflections’. The second edition, for the first was published anonymously, made her instantly famous.

Mary met her future husband William Godwin at this time but not before beginning a doomed relationship with the married artist, Henry Fuseli. This caused quite a scandal and for a time Mary lived in France to escape the attention and immerse herself in he revolutionary atmosphere. She then followed up with A Vindication of the Rights of Women in 1792.

## Early Works

Mary: A Fiction – inspired by her friend Fanny Blood - 1788

Original Stories from Real Life – inspired by her time in Ireland

Vindication of the Rights of Men - 1790

A Vindication of the Rights of Woman – 1792

## A Turbulent Life in a Turbulent France

Wollstonecraft arrived just before the execution of King Louis XVI. Due to the turbulence both in France and between France and Britain, many advised Mary not to go. She did, and in February 1793, France declared war on Britain.

Life became very difficult. Mary was denied entry into Switzerland and had to live under surveillance in France as she, along with all foreigners, were not permitted to leave. She became disillusioned when the ideals of the revolution did not become the reality of the new rulers. Many of her friends, who were now enemies of the new regime, were killed.

During this time she met an American traveller, Gilbert Imlay. They began a relationship. In 1793 Imlay registered Mary as his wife to protect her even though they were not married. This made her an American citizen and not the citizen of a country at war with France. French opinion had also turned against ‘bad behaviour’ by unmarried respectable women. This lie probably saved Wollstonecraft’s life.

On 14 May 1794 Mary gave birth to a daughter who she named Fanny. She moved to Le Havre and continued to write about the impact of the revolution but Imlay left her and she was alone with a small child in a volatile country. Things got worse for Mary when she returned to Paris. Imlay was in London and Europe had one of its coldest winters in decades. The river Seine froze and many starved as cargo was unable to be transported. In 1793 the British Government cracked down on ‘radicals’ and revolutionary sympathisers. Mary did not want to return to Britain for fear of arrest.

## Return to England

In 1795 Mary, under the name of Mrs. Imlay, did return to London. She caught up with Imlay but he did not want to be with her anymore. Believing she could win him back, her and Fanny travelled to Scandinavia to help him with a business deal. This didn’t work and when she returned Mary, knowing the relationship was finished, attempted suicide for a second time.

## Getting back on track

Mary began to write again and reconnected with publisher Johnson. Through him she met William Godwin again and after a while they began a relationship. They connected over ‘Letters written in Sweden, Norway and Demark’ (1796) which had been written during her trip for Imlay. Godwin wrote "if ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book."

Mary became pregnant again and their decision to marry on 29 March 1797 exposed her fake marriage to Imlay. This real marriage was not to last long.

## Death

Mary died aged 38, at Somers Tower, London in September 1797. This happened eleven days after giving birth to her second daughter. The little girl was also called Mary. She would become an author herself famous for writing Frankenstein under the name of Mary Shelley. William Godwin brought up Fanny but tensions after he remarried saw her sadly commit suicide in 1816.