



Mary Wollstonecraft and education

Mary Wollstonecraft has long been appreciated as a major political thinker - but she also made important contributions to educational theory and practice. Barry Burke investigates.

6

7 Life and works

8 Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97) was born in **Spitalfields**¹ in
9 1759. Her father uprooted the family on a number of occasions
10 and during her formative years Mary Wollstonecraft was to
11 find herself in Epping, Barking, Beverley in Yorkshire, back
12 to East London in Hoxton and then out again to Wales. At the
13 age of 18, having received a poor education, she left home and
14 never went back.

15 She became a companion to a widow in Bath for a short
16 period, then moved back to London (first to Fulham and then
17 to Hackney). In 1784, at the age of 24 Mary Wollstonecraft
18 opened up her own school for girls at **Newington Green**².
19 This did not last long and she finally became a governess to
20 the children of an aristocratic family on their estate in
21 Ireland. This, in turn, was another short appointment and in
22 1787, Mary Wollstonecraft finally came back to London and
23 settled in George Street just south of Blackfriars Bridge.

24 Five minutes walk away was St. Pauls' Churchyard which, at
25 the time, was the centre of the publishing trade. Mary
26 Wollstonecraft was given work by Joseph Johnson, a radical
27 and progressive publisher and spent most of her waking hours

¹ Spitalfields is a former parish in the borough of Tower Hamlets, in the East End of London.

² Newington Green is a residential suburb which spans the London Boroughs of Hackney and Islington.

28 in his shop, writing and translating, as well as meeting a
29 whole range of radical intellectuals and progressive thinkers.
30 Gradually, Mary became part of a circle of friends who were
31 constantly discussing the political affairs of the day.
32

33 In 1786, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote a short tract entitled
34 *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* but it was the advent
35 of the French Revolution in 1789 that brought Mary into the
36 public eye. As well known, the Revolution was welcomed by
37 many radicals throughout Europe. The new Republic's
38 principles of liberty, equality and fraternity were seen as
39 opening a new chapter in the struggle against aristocracy and
40 for a democratic society. Reaction in this country from the
41 wealthy aristocracy and their followers was **vitriolic**³.
42 Supporters of the Revolution were viewed as dangerous
43 subversives and were attacked at every opportunity.
44

45 The first major critique was Edmund Burke's *Reflections on*
46 *the Revolution in France* which both attacked the Revolution
47 and its supporters in this country. On reading it, Mary
48 Wollstonecraft decided to respond writing *A Vindication of the*
49 *Rights of Man* - a defence of the Revolution and its principles.
50 The book, published in 1790, was not particularly well written
51 although it became very popular and made her name known.
52 Soon after Mary Wollstonecraft's book came out, Tom Paine
53 wrote his classic *The Rights of Man*. In 1792, Mary
54 Wollstonecraft produced *A Vindication of the Rights of*
55 *Woman*. It was a significant milestone in the arguments
56 around women's rights and has since become a feminist

³ Vitriolic: velenoso, aspro.

57 classic. It was translated into French almost immediately and
58 brought Mary Wollstonecraft fame not only in this country but
59 also on the continent and in the United States.

60 Five years after the book was published and shortly after her
61 marriage to William Godwin, Mary died giving birth to a baby
62 daughter - Mary. As known, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin was
63 later to marry the poet Shelley and as Mary Shelley, became
64 famous as the author of the great gothic novel *Frankenstein*.

65

66 **Mary Wollstonecraft an educational thinker**

67 So why should Mary Wollstonecraft be of any great
68 importance as an educational thinker?

69 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* is more often than not
70 regarded as a purely political treatise. However, like **Plato's**
71 ***Republic***⁴ and **Rousseau's *Emile***⁵, it can be seen as both a
72 political and an educational treatise.

73 It is above all a celebration of the rationality of women. It
74 constitutes an attack on the view of female education put
75 forward by Rousseau and countless others who regarded
76 women as weak and artificial and not capable of reasoning
77 effectively. Mary Wollstonecraft rejected the education in
78 dependency that Rousseau advocated for them in *Emile*. A
79 woman must be intelligent in her own right, she argued. She

⁴ Plato (428 - 348 BC), Greek philosopher who was the pupil of Socrates and the teacher of Aristotle - and one of the most influential figures in "western" thought. He founded what is said to be the first university - his Academy (near Athens) in around 385 BC. The best known aspect of Plato's educational thought is his portrayal of the ideal society in *The Republic*.

⁵ J. J. Rousseau (1712 – 1778) was born in Geneva but became famous as a "French" political philosopher and educationalist His novel *Émile* was the most significant book on education after Plato's *Republic*.

80 cannot assume that her husband will be intelligent. Mary
81 Wollstonecraft maintained that this did not contradict the role
82 of the woman as a mother or a carer or of the role of the
83 woman in the home. She maintained that 'meek wives are, in
84 general, foolish mothers'.

85

86 Reason was her starting point. For Mary Wollstonecraft,
87 rationality or reason formed the basis of our human rights as
88 it was our ability to grasp truth and therefore acquire
89 knowledge of right and wrong that separated us, as human
90 beings, from the animal world. Through the exercise of reason
91 we became moral and political agents. This world-view was
92 acknowledged by all progressive thinkers of the time.
93 However, it was essentially a man's world and the work of
94 Rousseau was typical of this. What Mary Wollstonecraft did
95 was extend the basic ideas of Enlightenment philosophy to
96 women and Rousseau's educational ideas of how to educate
97 boys to girls.

98 She **set about**⁶ arguing against the assumption that women
99 were not rational creatures and were simply slaves to their
100 passions. Mary Wollstonecraft argued that it was up to those
101 who thought like this to prove it. She described the process by
102 which parents brought their daughters up to be docile and
103 domesticated. She maintained that if girls were encouraged
104 from an early age to develop their minds, it would be seen
105 that they were rational creatures and there was no reason
106 whatsoever for them not to be given the same opportunities as
107 boys with regard to education and training. Women could
108 enter the professions and have careers just the same as men.

⁶ Set about: cominciare. Ma anche mettere in circolazione, diffondere.

109 In proposing the same type of education for girls as that
110 proposed for boys, Mary Wollstonecraft also went a step
111 further and proposed that they must be educated together
112 which was even more radical than anything proposed before.
113 The idea of co-educational schooling was simply regarded as
114 nonsense by many educational thinkers of the time.
115 It was fashionable to contend that if women were educated
116 and not docile creatures, they would lose any power they had
117 over their husbands. Mary Wollstonecraft was furious about
118 this and maintained that “This is the very point I aim at. I do
119 not wish them to have power over men but over themselves”.

120

121 “The most perfect education, in my opinion, is such an
122 exercise of the understanding as is best calculated to
123 strengthen the body and form the heart. Or, in other
124 words, to enable the individual to attain such habits of
125 virtue as will render it independent. In fact, it is a farce
126 to call any being virtuous whose virtues do not result
127 from the exercise of its own reason. This was Rousseau’s
128 opinion respecting men: I extend it to women” (Mary
129 Wollstonecraft – *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*)

130

131 Mary Wollstonecraft favoured co-educational day schools,
132 lessons given by informal conversational methods, with lots of
133 physical exercise both free and organised. She had a picture of
134 an ideal family where the babies were nourished by an
135 intelligent mother and not sent away to nurses and then to
136 boarding school and fathers were friends to their children
137 rather than **tyrants**⁷. Essentially family members were all
138 regarded as rational beings and children should be able to

139 judge their parents like anyone else. Family relationships
140 therefore became educational ones.

141

142 Conclusion

143 *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* covered a wide range of
144 topics relating to the condition of women. Not only did she
145 argue for women’s equality with men in education but she also
146 called for their equality within the law as well as their right to
147 parliamentary representation. As Jane Roland Martin has
148 commented in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries
149 reformers looked to co-educational schooling - and it became a
150 “fact of life” for many millions of people. The problem is that
151 “this great historical development turned out to be a carrier of
152 old inequities and the creator of new problems for women”
153 (2001: 71-2). Not only it is necessary to ensure that co-education
154 is “girl and women friendly” it is also necessary to design
155 education for both sexes that “incorporates the virtues of
156 rationality and self-governance that Rousseau attributed to
157 men and also the virtue of patience and gentleness, zeal and
158 affection, tenderness and care that he attributed to women”
159 (*op.cit.*). Mary Wollstonecraft was a pioneer for women. She led
160 the way for feminists and her book is a classic that still
161 inspires many today.

162

163 Burke, B. (2004) *Mary Wollstonecraft on education, the encyclopedia*
164 *of informal education*, www.infed.org/thinkers/wollstonecraft.htm.

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⁷ Tyrant: tiranno