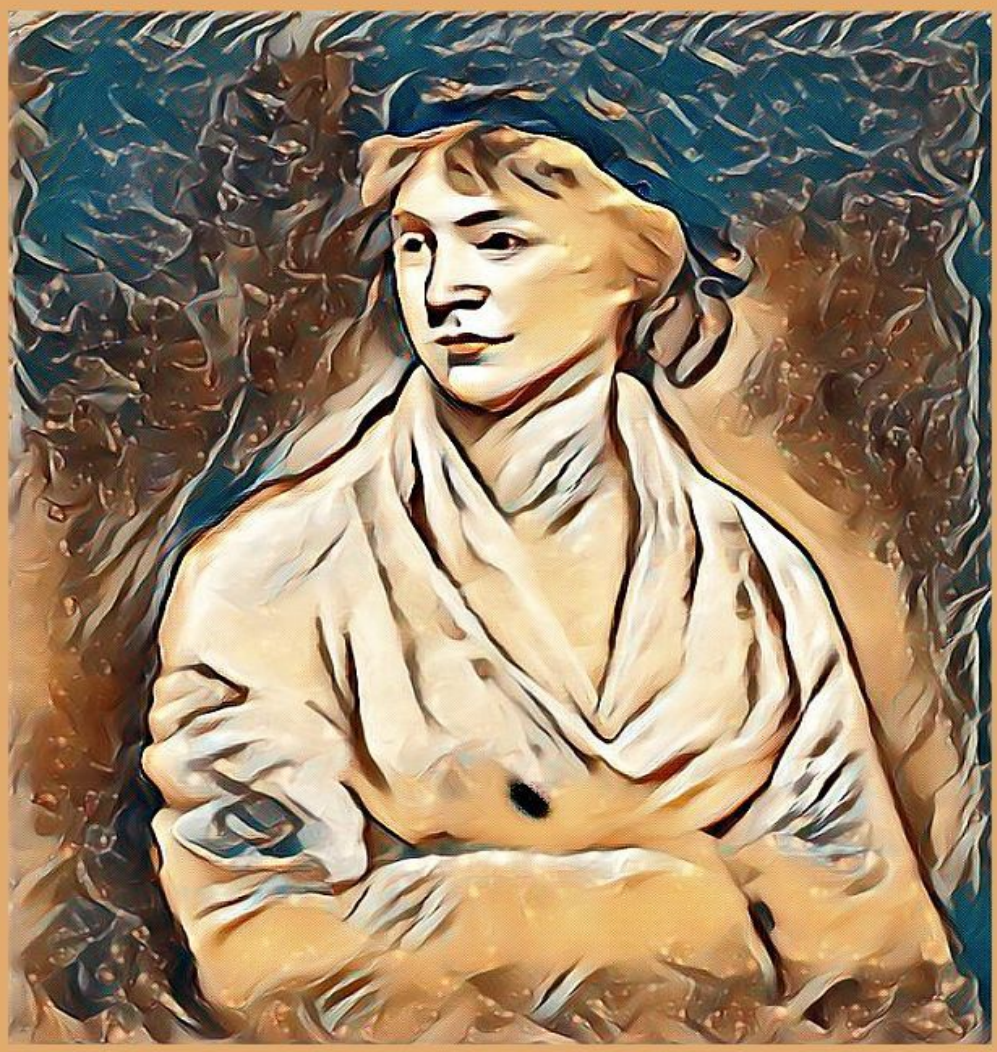
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT



LETTERS

WRITTEN DURING A SHORT RESIDENCE IN SWEDEN, NORWAY AND DENMARK

Letters written during a short residence in Sweden, Norway and Denmark

MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

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INTRODUCTION.

Mary Wollstonecraft was born on the 27th of April, 1759. Her father—a quick-tempered and unsettled man, capable of beating wife, or child, or dog—was the son of a manufacturer who made money in Spitalfields, when Spitalfields was prosperous. Her mother was a rigorous Irishwoman, of the Dixons of Ballyshannon. Edward John Wollstonecraft—of whose children, besides Mary, the second child, three sons and two daughters lived to be men and women—in course of the got rid of about ten thousand pounds, which had been left him by his father. He began to get rid of it by farming. Mary Wollstonecraft's first-remembered home was in a farm at Epping. When she was five years old the family moved to another farm, by the Chelmsford Road. When she was between six and seven years old they moved again, to the neighbourhood of Barking. There they remained three years before the next move, which was to a farm near Beverley, in Yorkshire. In Yorkshire they remained six years, and Mary Wollstonecraft had there what education fell to her lot between the ages of ten and sixteen. Edward John Wollstonecraft then gave up farming to venture upon a commercial speculation. This caused him to live for a year and a half at Queen's Row, Hoxton. His daughter Mary was then sixteen; and while at Hoxton she had her education advanced by the friendly care of a deformed clergyman—a Mr. Clare—who lived next door, and stayed so much at home that his one pair of shoes had lasted him for fourteen years.

But Mary Wollstonecraft's chief friend at this time was an accomplished girl only two years older than herself, who maintained her father, mother, and family by skill in drawing. Her name was Frances Blood, and she especially, by her example and direct instruction, drew out her young

friend’s powers. In 1776, Mary Wollstonecraft’s father, a rolling stone, rolled into Wales. Again he was a farmer. Next year again he was a Londoner; and Mary had influence enough to persuade him to choose a house at Walworth, where she would be near to her friend Fanny. Then, however, the conditions of her home life caused her to be often on the point of going away to earn a living for herself. In 1778, when she was nineteen, Mary Wollstonecraft did leave home, to take a situation as companion with a rich tradesman’s widow at Bath, of whom it was said that none of her companions could stay with her. Mary Wollstonecraft, nevertheless, stayed two years with the difficult widow, and made herself respected. Her mother’s failing health then caused Mary to return to her. The father was then living at Enfield, and trying to save the small remainder of his means by not venturing upon any business at all. The mother died after long suffering, wholly dependent on her daughter Mary’s constant care. The mother’s last words were often quoted by Mary Wollstonecraft in her own last years of distress—“A little patience, and all will be over.”

After the mother’s death, Mary Wollstonecraft left home again, to live with her friend, Fanny Blood, who was at Walham Green. In 1782 she went to nurse a married sister through a dangerous illness. The father’s need of support next pressed upon her. He had spent not only his own money, but also the little that had been specially reserved for his children. It is said to be the privilege of a passionate man that he always gets what he wants; he gets to be avoided, and they never find a convenient corner of their own who shut themselves out from the kindly fellowship of life.

In 1783 Mary Wollstonecraft—aged twenty-four—with two of her sisters, joined Fanny Blood in setting up a day school at Islington, which was removed in a few months to Newington Green. Early in 1785 Fanny Blood, far gone in

consumption, sailed for Lisbon to marry an Irish surgeon who was settled there. After her marriage it was evident that she had but a few months to live; Mary Wollstonecraft, deaf to all opposing counsel, then left her school, and, with help of money from a friendly woman, she went out to nurse her, and was by her when she died. Mary Wollstonecraft remembered her loss ten years afterwards in these “Letters from Sweden and Norway,” when she wrote: “The grave has closed over a dear friend, the friend of my youth; still she is present with me, and I hear her soft voice warbling as I stray over the heath.”

Mary Wollstonecraft left Lisbon for England late in December, 1785. When she came back she found Fanny’s poor parents anxious to go back to Ireland; and as she had been often told that she could earn by writing, she wrote a pamphlet of 162 small pages—“Thoughts on the Education of Daughters”—and got ten pounds for it. This she gave to her friend’s parents to enable them to go back to their kindred. In all she did there is clear evidence of an ardent, generous, impulsive nature. One day her friend Fanny Blood had repined at the unhappy surroundings in the home she was maintaining for her father and mother, and longed for a little home of her own to do her work in. Her friend quietly found rooms, got furniture together, and told her that her little home was ready; she had only to walk into it. Then it seemed strange to Mary Wollstonecraft that Fanny Blood was withheld by thoughts that had not been uppermost in the mood of complaint. She thought her friend irresolute, where she had herself been generously rash. Her end would have been happier had she been helped, as many are, by that calm influence of home in which some knowledge of the world passes from father and mother to son and daughter, without visible teaching and preaching, in easiest companionship of young and old from day to day.

The little payment for her pamphlet on the “Education of Daughters” caused Mary Wollstonecraft to think more seriously of earning by her pen. The pamphlet seems also to have advanced her credit as a teacher. After giving up her day school, she spent some weeks at Eton with the Rev. Mr. Prior, one of the masters there, who recommended her as governess to the daughters of Lord Kingsborough, an Irish viscount, eldest son of the Earl of Kingston. Her way of teaching was by winning love, and she obtained the warm affection of the eldest of her pupils, who became afterwards Countess Mount-Cashel. In the summer of 1787, Lord Kingsborough’s family, including Mary Wollstonecraft, was at Bristol Hot-wells, before going to the Continent. While there, Mary Wollstonecraft wrote her little tale published as “Mary, a Fiction,” wherein there was much based on the memory of her own friendship for Fanny Blood.

The publisher of Mary Wollstonecraft’s “Thoughts on the Education of Daughters” was the same Joseph Johnson who in 1785 was the publisher of Cowper’s “Task.” With her little story written and a little money saved, the resolve to live by her pen could now be carried out. Mary Wollstonecraft, therefore, parted from her friends at Bristol, went to London, saw her publisher, and frankly told him her determination. He met her with fatherly kindness, and received her as a guest in his house while she was making her arrangements. At Michaelmas, 1787, she settled in a house in George Street, on the Surrey side of Blackfriars Bridge. There she produced a little book for children, of “Original Stories from Real Life,” and earned by drudgery for Joseph Johnson. She translated, she abridged, she made a volume of Selections, and she wrote for an “Analytical Review,” which Mr. Johnson founded in the middle of the year 1788. Among the books translated by her was Necker “On the Importance of Religious Opinions.” Among the books abridged by her was Salzmann’s

“Elements of Morality.” With all this hard work she lived as sparely as she could, that she might help her family. She supported her father. That she might enable her sisters to earn their living as teachers, she sent one of them to Paris, and maintained her there for two years; the other she placed in a school near London as parlour-boarder until she was admitted into it as a paid teacher. She placed one brother at Woolwich to qualify for the Navy, and he obtained a lieutenant’s commission. For another brother, articled to an attorney whom he did not like, she obtained a transfer of indentures; and when it became clear that his quarrel was more with law than with the lawyers, she placed him with a farmer before fitting him out for emigration to America. She then sent him, so well prepared for his work there that he prospered well. She tried even to disentangle her father’s affairs; but the confusion in them was beyond her powers of arrangement. Added to all this faithful work, she took upon herself the charge of an orphan child, seven years old, whose mother had been in the number of her friends. That was the life of Mary Wollstonecraft, thirty years old, in 1789, the year of the Fall of the Bastille; the noble life now to be touched in its enthusiasms by the spirit of the Revolution, to be caught in the great storm, shattered, and lost among its wrecks.

To Burke’s attack on the French Revolution Mary Wollstonecraft wrote an Answer—one of many answers provoked by it—that attracted much attention. This was followed by her “Vindication of the Rights of Woman,” while the air was full of declamation on the “Rights of Man.” The claims made in this little book were in advance of the opinion of that day, but they are claims that have in our day been conceded. They are certainly not revolutionary in the opinion of the world that has become a hundred years older since the book was written.

At this the Mary Wollstonecraft had moved to rooms in Store Street, Bedford Square. She was fascinated by Fuseli

the painter, and he was a married man. She felt herself to be too strongly drawn towards him, and she went to Paris at the close of the year 1792, to break the spell. She felt lonely and sad, and was not the happier for being in a mansion lent to her, from which the owner was away, and in which she lived surrounded by his servants. Strong womanly instincts were astir within her, and they were not all wise folk who had been drawn around her by her generous enthusiasm for the new hopes of the world, that made it then, as Wordsworth felt, a very heaven to the young.

Four months after she had gone to Paris, Mary Wollstonecraft met at the house of a merchant, with whose wife she had become intimate, an American named Gilbert Imlay. He won her affections. That was in April, 1793. He had no means, and she had home embarrassments, for which she was unwilling that he should become in any way responsible. A part of the new dream in some minds then was of a love too pure to need or bear the bondage of authority. The mere forced union of marriage ties implied, it was said, a distrust of fidelity. When Gilbert Imlay would have married Mary Wollstonecraft, she herself refused to bind him; she would keep him legally exempt from her responsibilities towards the father, sisters, brothers, whom she was supporting. She took his name and called herself his wife, when the French Convention, indignant at the conduct of the British Government, issue a decree from the effects of which she would escape as the wife of a citizen of the United States. But she did not marry. She witnessed many of the horrors that came of the loosened passions of an untaught populace. A child was born to her—a girl whom she named after the dead friend of her own girlhood. And then she found that she had leant upon a reed. She was neglected; and was at last forsaken. Having sent her to London, Imlay there visited her, to explain himself away. She resolved on suicide, and in dissuading her from that he

gave her hope again. He needed somebody who had good judgment, and who cared for his interests, to represent him in some business affairs in Norway. She undertook to act for him, and set out on the voyage only a week after she had determined to destroy herself.

The interest of this book which describes her travel is quickened by a knowledge of the heart-sorrow that underlies it all. Gilbert Imlay had promised to meet her upon her return, and go with her to Switzerland. But the letters she had from him in Sweden and Norway were cold, and she came back to find that she was wholly forsaken for an actress from a strolling company of players. Then she went up the river to drown herself. She paced the road at Putney on an October night, in 1795, in heavy rain, until her clothes were drenched, that she might sink more surely, and then threw herself from the top of Putney Bridge.

She was rescued, and lived on with deadened spirit. In 1796 these “Letters from Sweden and Norway” were published. Early in 1797 she was married to William Godwin. On the 10th of September in the same year, at the age of thirty-eight, Mary Wollstonecraft Godwin died, after the birth of the daughter who lived to become the wife of Shelley. The mother also would have lived, if a womanly feeling, in itself to be respected, had not led her also to unwise departure from the customs of the world. Peace be to her memory. None but kind thoughts can dwell upon the life of this too faithful disciple of Rousseau.

H. M.

LETTER I.

Eleven days of weariness on board a vessel not intended for the accommodation of passengers have so exhausted my spirits, to say nothing of the other causes, with which you are already sufficiently acquainted, that it is with some difficulty I adhere to my determination of giving you my observations, as I travel through new scenes, whilst warmed with the impression they have made on me.

The captain, as I mentioned to you, promised to put me on shore at Arendall or Gothenburg in his way to Elsineur, but contrary winds obliged us to pass both places during the night. In the morning, however, after we had lost sight of the entrance of the latter bay, the vessel was becalmed; and the captain, to oblige me, hanging out a signal for a pilot, bore down towards the shore.

My attention was particularly directed to the lighthouse, and you can scarcely imagine with what anxiety I watched two long hours for a boat to emancipate me; still no one appeared. Every cloud that flitted on the horizon was hailed as a liberator, till approaching nearer, like most of the prospects sketched by hope, it dissolved under the eye into disappointment.

Weary of expectation, I then began to converse with the captain on the subject, and from the tenor of the information my questions drew forth I soon concluded that if I waited for a boat I had little chance of getting on shore at this place. Despotism, as is usually the case, I found had here cramped the industry of man. The pilots being paid by the king, and scantily, they will not run into any danger, or even quit their hovels, if they can possibly avoid it, only to

fulfil what is termed their duty. How different is it on the English coast, where, in the most stormy weather, boats immediately hail you, brought out by the expectation of extraordinary profit.

Disliking to sail for Elsineur, and still more to lie at anchor or cruise about the coast for several days, I exerted all my rhetoric to prevail on the captain to let me have the ship's boat, and though I added the most forcible of arguments, I for a long the addressed him in vain.

It is a kind of rule at sea not to send out a boat. The captain was a good-natured man; but men with common minds seldom break through general rules. Prudence is ever the resort of weakness, and they rarely go as far as they may in any undertaking who are determined not to go beyond it on any account. If, however, I had some trouble with the captain, I did not lose much time with the sailors, for they, all alacrity, hoisted out the boat the moment I obtained permission, and promised to row me to the lighthouse.

I did not once allow myself to doubt of obtaining a conveyance from thence round the rocks—and then away for Gothenburg—confinement is so unpleasant.

The day was fine, and I enjoyed the water till, approaching the little island, poor Marguerite, whose timidity always acts as a feeler before her adventuring spirit, began to wonder at our not seeing any inhabitants. I did not listen to her. But when, on landing, the same silence prevailed, I caught the alarm, which was not lessened by the sight of two old men whom we forced out of their wretched hut. Scarcely human in their appearance, we with difficulty obtained an intelligible reply to our questions, the result of which was that they had no boat, and were not allowed to quit their post on any pretence. But they informed us that there was at the other side, eight or ten miles over, a pilot's dwelling. Two guineas tempted the

sailors to risk the captain’s displeasure, and once more embark to row me over.

The weather was pleasant, and the appearance of the shore so grand that I should have enjoyed the two hours it took to reach it, but for the fatigue which was too visible in the countenances of the sailors, who, instead of uttering a complaint, were, with the thoughtless hilarity peculiar to them, joking about the possibility of the captain’s taking advantage of a slight westerly breeze, which was springing up, to sail without them. Yet, in spite of their good humour, I could not help growing uneasy when the shore, receding, as it were, as we advanced, seemed to promise no end to their toil. This anxiety increased when, turning into the most picturesque bay I ever saw, my eyes sought in vain for the vestige of a human habitation. Before I could determine what step to take in such a dilemma (for I could not bear to think of returning to the ship), the sight of a barge relieved me, and we hastened towards it for information. We were immediately directed to pass some jutting rocks, when we should see a pilot’s hut.

There was a solemn silence in this scene which made itself be felt. The sunbeams that played on the ocean, scarcely ruffled by the lightest breeze, contrasted with the huge dark rocks, that looked like the rude materials of creation forming the barrier of unwrought space, forcibly struck me, but I should not have been sorry if the cottage had not appeared equally tranquil. Approaching a retreat where strangers, especially women, so seldom appeared, I wondered that curiosity did not bring the beings who inhabited it to the windows or door. I did not immediately recollect that men who remain so near the brute creation, as only to exert themselves to find the food necessary to sustain life, have little or no imagination to call forth the curiosity necessary to fructify the faint glimmerings of mind which entitle them to rank as lords of the creation.