Mary Wollstonecraft and Newington Green: An Anthology

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Portrait of Mary Wollstonecraft, Photo credit: Walker Art Gallery
Newington Green in the 1780s was a pleasant, self-contained village in a rural setting, three miles north of the City of London. Many of the houses around the Green were substantial dwellings built in the Georgian era; the Green itself was encircled by a low fence, and sheep grazed under a grove of elm trees. To the North was a forest beyond which lay Stoke Newington. Since the late seventeenth century both Stoke Newington and Newington Green had been favoured places of residence for religious Dissenters, those who refused to conform to the practices of the Church of England and consequently suffered from various legal disabilities, including exclusion from civil and military office and the university system.

In 1708 a fine Nonconformist meeting house was built overlooking the Green. The Rev. Dr Richard Price (1723-91), a modest, kindly Presbyterian minister moved with his wife Sarah to 52 Newington Green in 1758, and by the 1780s had achieved international renown as an economic theorist and political
philosopher. He published a bestselling treatise in support of American independence in 1776 and went on to influence British government monetary policy. When Mary Wollstonecraft lived at Newington Green, Price’s presence made the locale a magnet for liberal politicians, visiting American statesmen, and fellow intellectuals and reformers. Other residents, famous in their day, will be introduced in due course.

Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) ran a small school for girls at Newington Green from the first half of 1784 to late September 1786 with the assistance of her younger sisters Eliza (also known as Bess, b. 1763) and Everina (1765-1843), and in its first year, her close friend Frances Blood (1758-1786). The school seems to have been immediately successful, attracting around twenty pupils, including some children who boarded along with their mothers. It is a huge loss that no record remains of the methods and syllabus at the school; they can only be reconstructed from Mary’s later writings on education. The early months must have been exhilarating, as a group of four penniless young woman, without prior experience or formal qualifications, somehow managed to launch a challenging but constructive and even idealistic enterprise, relying on their skills and intelligence and free of unsupportive or downright obstructive parents and siblings. Mary and Frances in particular would have thrived on the opportunity to mix with the distinguished intellectuals and artists in the neighbourhood, many of whom were generous and welcoming. Unfortunately no letters survive from this happier period. Frances suffered from what was then called consumption, probably tuberculosis, affecting her lungs. She left Newington Green in January 1785 in hope of restored health in the climate of Lisbon through marriage to wine merchant Hugh Skeys, a friend of Eliza’s former husband. Shortly after, scandal hit the school, when Frances’s brother George who was living nearby and had been placed in employment at a haberdashers business through the good offices of the Rev. and Mrs Clare, friends of Mary in nearby Hoxton, was charged with fathering the child of a servant girl and fled to Ireland. Mary believed in George’s innocence (the servant later claimed her employer was the father), but the event seems to have precipitated a downward spiral in the fortunes of the school. Our knowledge of this phase in her life mainly derives from letters written to George Blood (1762-1844), and in them references to Newington Green are coloured by frustration at the heavy responsibility of managing the practical side of the school business
single-handed as it started to fall apart, and feelings of loss and grief at the Frances’s departure and then her death. The extracts from nine letters to George and one to Eliza are prefaced here by a brief account in the Memoirs written by her husband William Godwin, immediately following Mary’s death in 1797.


Godwin mentions at the start the immediate cause of the plan to start a school: Eliza’s ‘illness,’ some form of mental and physical trauma or post-partum depression, which led her to leave her husband and baby with Mary’s assistance. He also indicates the family tensions involved, but also the opportunities that residence at Newington Green gave Mary for friendships with notable neighbours. He describes Richard Price’s kindness towards her, while emphasising that she was not a convert to Dissent but at this time a regular Anglican churchgoer, and would eventually pursue her own unorthodox and pantheistic variety of religious faith. He mentions Mrs Burgh, the widow of Price’s close friend James Burgh (1714-75), a Scottish Calvinist and political radical who supported freedom of speech and universal suffrage, had run a Dissenting academy locally, and written *Thoughts on Education* (1747), *The Dignity of Human Nature* (1754) and *Political Disquisitions* (1774). Hannah Burgh (née Harding, wrongly recorded as ‘Sarah’ in some biographies of Wollstonecraft; d. 1788) was instrumental in the establishment of the Wollstonecrafts’ school at Newington Green and continued to give practical and financial help throughout Mary’s time there. Godwin also refers to a third friend, the Revd John Hewlett (1762-1844), a young Anglican clergyman who ran a boarding school for boys in the nearby hamlet of Shacklewell and wrote on educational and religious subjects. He would eventually introduce Mary to his publisher Joseph Johnson, enabling the launch of her literary career with *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). Hewlett also brought about Mary’s meeting with the celebrated Samuel Johnson (1709-1784; no relation to Joseph), mentioned by Godwin.
Mary was now arrived at the twenty-fourth year of her age. Her project, five years before, had been personal independence; it was now usefulness. In the solitude of attendance on her sister's illness, and during the subsequent convalescence, she had had leisure to ruminate upon purposes of this sort. Her expanded mind led her to seek something more arduous than the mere removal of personal vexations; and the sensibility of her heart would not suffer her to rest in solitary gratifications. The derangement of her father's affairs daily became more and more glaring; and a small independent provision made for herself and her sisters, appears to have been sacrificed in the wreck. For ten years, from 1782 to 1792, she may be said to have been, in a great degree, the victim of a desire to promote the benefit of others. She did not foresee the severe disappointment with which an exclusive purpose of this sort is pregnant; she was inexperienced enough to lay a stress upon the consequent gratitude of those she benefited; and she did not sufficiently consider that, in proportion as we involve ourselves in the interests and society of others, we acquire a more exquisite sense of their defects, and are tormented with their untractableness and folly.

The project upon which she now determined, was no other than that of a day-school, to be superintended by Fanny Blood, herself, and her two sisters.

They accordingly opened one in the year 1783, at the village of Islington; but in the course of a few months removed it to Newington Green. Here Mary formed some acquaintances who influenced the future events of her life. The first of these in her own estimation, was Dr. Richard Price, well known for his political and mathematical calculations, and universally esteemed by those who knew him, for the simplicity of his manners, and the ardour of his benevolence. The regard conceived by these two persons for each other, was mutual, and partook of a spirit of the purest attachment.
Mary had been bred in the principles of the church of England, but her esteem for this venerable preacher led her occasionally to attend upon his public instructions. Her religion was, in reality, little allied to any system of forms; and, as she has often told me, was founded rather in taste, than in the niceties of polemical discussion. Her mind constitutionally attached itself to the sublime and the amiable. She found an inexpressible delight in the beauties of nature, and in the splendid reveries of the imagination.

But nature itself, she thought, would be no better than a vast blank, if the mind of the observer did not supply it with an animating soul. When she walked amidst the wonders of nature, she was accustomed to converse with her God. To her mind he was pictured as not less amiable, generous and kind, than great, wise and exalted. In fact, she had received few lessons of religion in her youth, and her religion was almost entirely of her own creation. But she was not on that account the less attached to it, or the less scrupulous in discharging what she considered as its duties. She could not recollect the time when she had believed the doctrine of future punishments. The tenets of her system were the growth of her own moral taste, and her religion therefore had always been a gratification, never a terror, to her. She expected a future state; but she would not allow her ideas of that future state to be modified by the notions of judgment and retribution. From this sketch, it is sufficiently evident, that the pleasure she took in an occasional attendance upon the sermons of Dr. Price, was not accompanied with a superstitious adherence to his doctrines. The fact is, that, as far down as the year 1787, she regularly frequented public worship,
for the most part according to the forms of the church of England. After that period her attendance became less constant, and in no long time was wholly discontinued. I believe it may be admitted as a maxim, that no person of a well furnished mind, that has shaken off the implicit subjection of youth, and is not the zealous partizan of a sect, can bring himself to conform to the public and regular routine of sermons and prayers.

Another of the friends she acquired at this period, was Mrs. Burgh, widow of the author of the Political Disquisitions, a woman universally well spoken of for the warmth and purity of her benevolence. Mary, whenever she had occasion to allude to her, to the last period of her life, paid the tribute due to her virtues. The only remaining friend necessary to be enumerated in this place, is the rev. John Hewlet [sic], now master of a boarding-school at Shacklewel [sic] near Hackney, whom I shall have occasion to mention hereafter.

[…]

It was during her residence at Newington Green, that she was introduced to the acquaintance of Dr. Johnson, who was at that time considered as in some sort the father of English literature. The doctor treated her with particular kindness and attention, had a long conversation with her, and desired her to repeat her visit often. This she firmly purposed to do; but the news of his last illness, and then of his death, intervened to prevent her making a second visit.
Letters from Newington Green

This section includes extracts from Mary Wollstonecraft’s letters written at Newington Green, all of them addressed to George Blood apart from the final two, which are addressed to her sister Eliza Bishop. No letters remain from the first year at Newington Green; they begin in July 1785, and include some news from the neighbourhood. In those that have survived, there is very little sign of what must have been a revolution in her ideas about society and politics at the time, and nothing at all about her educational practice at the school. The letters instead reveal her state of ill health and depression as she attempted to fulfil the role of a dutiful single woman, sacrificing her intellectual aspirations and personal contentment in an effort to support her siblings and the Blood family, and eventually faced bankruptcy and the possibility of imprisonment for debt. This experience, as much as her contact with Price and his circle, would help to define her feminism.

1. Scandal at the Green

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, July 3rd [1785]

George knew the neighbourhood of Newington Green, having lodged nearby while working for a wholesale haberdasher in Cheapside. He had just moved to Ireland to avoid a paternity suit. Mary believed him to be innocent, but it would appear from this extract that her lodger Mrs Campbell (referred to in another letter as a ‘cousin’) did not, and Mrs Poole, the wife of George’s former employer, evidently wanted to avoid paying his final wages on the grounds of his immorality. Mary’s complaints about ill health have been dismissed by some biographers as posturing; however, it is clear that she suffered acutely from the round of petty cares and time spent in the company of women she regarded as bigoted gossips. She was also disappointed in the negative reaction of her old friends the Reverend Mr Clare and his wife, who had arranged George’s employment at Poole’s. ‘The Poet’ seems to be a reference to Samuel Rogers (1763-1855), whose father the wealthy manufacturer and banker Thomas Rogers (1735-93) lived at No. 56 Newington Green, and who was at this time a budding author publishing his first writings in the Gentleman’s Magazine. Mary would later review his popular long poem The Pleasures of Memory (1792) very favourably in The Analytical Review.

‘…How troublesome fools are! Mrs Campbell (who has all the constancy that attends on folly - and in whose mind, when any prejudice is fixt it remains forever) has long disliked you - this confined ill-humour has at last broken out, and she has sufficiently railed at your vices, and the encouragement I have given them – and this to the Morphys, who she is very intimate with – they have repeated her stories to their neighbours – so they have ran all over the Green –
and I am assured in a very gross manner – I called on Mrs Poole she was very rude – as you know the woman you can easily conceive how she would behave – I believe she would have scolded me in the true vulgar female stile – if I had not assumed the Princess – Mrs Carter was full of enquiries and impertinently curious – The Poet [Samuel Rogers?] was the only one that seemed at all concerned about you – The Clares affected total ignorance and were dreadfully afraid their good name should be sullied on account of their recommending a person who left his place so hastily - I have been very ill, and gone through the usual physical operations, have been bled and blistered, yet still am not well; my harassed mind will in time wear out my body. I have been so hunted down by cares, and see so many that I must encounter, that my spirits are quite depressed. I have lost all relish for life, and my almost broken heart is only cheered by the prospect of death. I may be years a-dying tho’, and so I ought to be patient, for at this time to wish myself away would be selfish…’

2. The Deserted Village

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, July 20th [1785]

Again, this extract provides a window onto Mary’s sense of isolation even in the midst of a busy household. She was on the fringes of the intellectual set of Newington Green and Stoke Newington. Here, in addition to John Hewlett and his wife, she refers to James Sowerby (1757-1822) who lived in Stoke Newington close by, a naturalist who would become celebrated for his botanical illustrations, and John Coakley Lettsome (1744-1815), a Quaker doctor who was also a fellow of the Royal Society. She describes Newington Green in late summer as a ‘deserted village,’ an allusion to the famous poem of that title by Thomas Gray; ‘social comforts drop away’ is quoted from Samuel Johnson’s poem ‘On the Death of Dr Robert Leven (1783). The pleasure Mary takes in the infrequent ‘rational’ company of Friendly Church, the nephew of Mrs Burgh, is marred by the presence of ‘tattling females’ at
home. Frances (‘Fanny’) Blood marry an Irish wine merchant, Hugh Skeys in February 1785 and they moved to Lisbon to alleviate her ill health (she suffered from tuberculosis). Janet Todd notes in her edition of the correspondence that Miss Mason was an assistant at the school, possibly related to ‘an old Beverley connection’ of the same name, whom Mary regarded highly (Todd, 2003, 56).

…The Hewletts have been in the country this vacation, so that it is some time since I saw them – Sowerby is full of business – [He did] a picture for Dr Lettsome that has [done great] service to him – you know his is [one] of [the few] good creatures – He sometimes visits the deserted village and I try to smile – but some how or other, my spirits are fled, and I am incapable of joy – Nothing interest [sic] me – yes, I forgot, humane rational [Friendly] Church can please me – but business and many other things prevents him calling often, and when he does, I seldom enjoy his company, we have so many tattling females – I have no creature to be unreserved to, Eliza & Averina are so different, that I could as soon fly as open my heart to them – How my social comforts have dropped away – Fanny first – and then you went over the hills and far away – I am resigned to my fate but ‘tis that gloomy kind of resignation that is akin to despair – My heart – my affection cannot fix here and without some one to love this world is a desert to me – Perhaps tenderness weaken[s] the mind, and [it] is not fit for a state of trial…We have lost Miss Mason – She is a good girl and I was sorry to lose her…

3. **Labour and Sorrow.**

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, August 14th [1785]

Our family is still the same – but my ‘social comforts drop away’ – for I now seldom see Church or any other rational creature who I can love – Labour and sorrow fill up my time, and so I toil through this vale of tears – and all this leads to an end which will be happy if I faint not – Mrs Roebuck behave[d] much better than she did, as to my cousin Campbell – she is still the same in every sense of the word – and as to the girls they tease and please me by turns…

4. **The Visit to Lisbon.**

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, September 4th [1785]

Mary had learned that her friend Fanny Skeys was pregnant and due to give birth, and now planned to go to Lisbon to visit her. The postscript to the letter acknowledges Mrs Burgh’s support of the plan, lending Mary money, and also touches on the endless complications and difficulties of the school and boarding house enterprise and its precarious nature. According to Janet Todd (2001, p. 62), Mrs Cockburn was a
schoolmaster’s widow who also ran a boarding-house and evidently helped to find lodgers for the Wollstonecraft sisters, but must have doubted (with cause) that the business would run effectively in Mary’s absence.

…return I must to this delight[ful] spot – My spirits are very much harried – vexations and disappointments have as usual continual[ly] occurred – Church tells me I shall never thrive in the world – and I believe he is right – I every day grow more and more a proficient in that kind of knowle[d]ge which renders the world distasteful to me – well, well, but we’ll meet in Lisbon and talk over all our past griefs – I wish I had fairly weathered the storms that I have to encounter on shore, I would willing[ly] compound for one at sea. Mrs Campbell left us today – we have lost a good lodger and been disappointed with respect to one that we had reason to expect to fill her place – our affairs here do not wear the most smiling aspect – But somehow or other Prov[idence w]ill, I trust enable us to struggle through – Averina is grown indefatigable in her endeavors to improve herself – and altogether she assists me very much in the school and house – I have been plagued with bad servants added to the other cares that attend the management of a family – All these things, I hope, will tend to improve my temper and regulate my mind – I am grown quite meek and forbearing…

P.S.

…5[th September] I have been teased to death this morning – Mrs Cockburn has taken it into her head to oppose my going to Lisbon, and Mrs Burgh has so warmly espoused my cause they have almost quarrelled about it – I shall ever have the most grateful sense of this good old woman’s kindness to me, indeed I feel an affection for her – Mrs C carries it so far as to say she’ll prevent our having three very advantageous lodgers (which I expected to have) if I do not promise to stay – I am not to be governed this way – I should have been sorry to have acted contrary to Mrs B’s judgment, because I esteem… [rest of letter missing].

5. Financial Trouble

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, February 27th [1786]

Fanny gave birth and November, but she died soon after. Mary arrived in Lisbon on the day of the birth, nursed her friend on her deathbed, and remained for a month afterwards in a state of heartbreak. When she arrived back at Newington Green in January 1786 the school was close to collapse. Some of the boarders, Mrs Disney and her two children and Mrs Morphy, had departed without paying their bills, and the Wollstonecraft sisters had no way of settling expenses. By the end of February Mary was considering closing it down and finding alternative employment for her sisters,
with some expectation that she herself might be imprisoned for debt. She begins by declaring that she won’t try to leave the country to avoid prosecution.

…I am indeed very much distressed at present, and my future prospects are still more gloomy – yet nothing should induce me to fly from England – My creditors have a right to do what they please with me, should I not be able to satisfy their demands. I am almost afraid to look forward, tho’ I am convinced that the same Providence that brought me through past difficulties, will still continue to protect me. Should our present plan fail, I cannot even guess, what the girls will do. My brother, I am sure, will not receive them, and they are not calculated to struggle with the world – Eliza in particular, is very helpless – Their situation has made [me] very uneasy, - and as to your father and mother, they have been a continual weight on my spirits – you have removed part of the load, for I now hope you would be able to keep them from perishing, should my affairs grow desperate, - and this hope, has made me very grateful – for often I have thought of death as the only end of my sorrows and cares, I earnestly wished to see them settled before I went to rest – Indeed I am very far from being well, I have a pain in my side, and a whole train of nervous complaints, which render me very uncomfortable – My spirits are very low, and [I] am so opprest by continually [sic] anxiety ‘tis a labour to me to [do] any thing – my former employments are quite irksome to me – If something decisive was to happen I should be better; but ‘tis this suspence, this dread of I cannot tell what, which harasses me.

6. Introduction to Joseph Johnson

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, May 1st [1786]
This letter records a crucial event in Mary’s life: the start of her association with the bookseller Joseph Johnson, of St Paul’s Churchyard in the City of London. While other neighbours had agreed to lend money as she struggled to pay off creditors, the Rev. John Hewlett arranged the sale, in return for a £10 copyright fee, of Mary’s first publication *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787). She dedicated this sum, which was fairly generous for a short work by a novice writer, to relocating the father and mother of her friend Frances Blood in their native Ireland, where Mr Blood had been offered work.

…let me not forget to mention to you an act of disinterested kindness – Mr Hewlett exerted himself to obtain the money for your father in a way that has insured him my esteem – you never saw a creature happier then [sic] he was when he returned to tell me the success of his commission – the sensibility and goodness that appeared in his countenance made me love the man. How I love to receive acts of kindness from my fellow-creatures – My heart would fain hold all the human race, and every new affection would add to its comfort but for the better alloy which will mix itself with every thing here –

**7. ‘I believe I shall continue some time on the Green’**

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, May 22d [1786]

One of the lodgers, Mrs Disney, whose three children attended the school, had left without settling account, and this caused particular difficulty for Mary. While her sisters were preparing to find new employment, she indicates in this letter her desire to remain at Newington Green and attempt to continue teaching on her own with a smaller group of pupils. She would be relieved of the burden of running the household, and have some time to devote to studies and sociability.

…My affairs are hastening to a crisis – The money that is due to me on account of the Disneys, would, very nearly, have discharged all my debts; but I have little hopes of getting it – and this disappointment distresses me beyond measure, as some of my creditors cannot well afford to wait for their money – as to leaving England in debts I am determined not to do it – The Will of Heaven be done! I am now grown quite patient – Tell your father and mother, the scheme with respect to Cork, is not practicable. Averina, and Eliza, are both endeavouring to go out into the world, the one as a companion, and the other as a teacher – and I believe I shall continue some time on the Green. I intend taking a little cheap lodging, and living without a servant, and the few scholars I have will maintain me, I have done with all worldly pursuits, or wishes I only desire to subsist, without being dependant on the caprice of an [sic] fellow-creature, I shall have many solitary hours; but I have not much to hope for in life, and so it would be absurd to give way to fear. Besides, I try to look on the best side, and not to dispound [sic]. While I am trying to do my duty in that
station in which Providence has placed [me], I shall enjoy some tranquil moments – and the pleasures I have the greatest relish for, are not intirely [sic] out of my reach.

8. ‘My fate at Newington Green’

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, 6 July [1786]

George was urging her to come to Dublin and make another attempt at running a school; in her reply she draws on hard-won experience, regarding the need for more capital and the prejudices of potential clients when it came to a young woman without means. She indicates she has experienced sexual harassment from creditors.

…I must again repeat to you I am determined to earn my own subsistence, nay, I hope to save money to pay my debts, which worry me beyond measure – Here, I am afraid, I never shall be able – and I am exposed to insults which my unprotected situation naturally produces – yesterday one of my creditors behaved to me with great rudeness – but ‘tis vain to talk of it – I must have patience – and yet the loss of Mrs Disney’s money is a very severe blow, for it would almost have paid all I owe and removed from my mind a weight of anxiety which sinks my spirits and renders me unfit to bustle or enter on any new undertaking – you may mention these things to Mrs Shirley and tell her [I] am afraid a school would not succeed (and this fear arises from experience) without I could take a house and set off in a genteel style – Poverty will oftener raise contempt than pity – and my fate at Newington Green too plainly proves to me that to gain the respect of the vulgar, (a term which I with propriety apply to the generality however weighty their purses) – you must dazzle their senses – and even not appear to want their assistance if you expect to have it – a favourite author of your’s, says, ‘That pity is the most short-lived passion and that a speech dictated by wisdom herself, would not be attended to, if the person who delivered it was poor. The drapery is what catches the superficial eye – and the necessary appendage – wealth, will go much further than the most shining abilities to make a person respected…

9. Closure of the School

MW to George Blood, Newington Green, 25 Aug [1786]

…I am now writing in the school with the children – whom I now intirely [sic] manage myself – and I have eleven of my old flock…

10. The Friendship of Dr Price and Mrs Burgh.

Just a month after reporting to George her attempt to maintain the school solo, Mary
had bowed to the inevitable and accepted the offer of a position as governess to the
three eldest daughters of Lord and Lady Kingsborough, at their estate in Mitchelstown
in north Cork in Ireland. She was very reluctant to return to a state of dependency in a
wealthy household (‘being dependant on the caprice of a fellow-creature’ as she put it
in a previous letter, no doubt thinking of her time as a companion to Mrs Dawson),
but the offer of £40 per annum salary was generous, and as this letter shows, she was
ever mindful of the debts that Mrs Burgh had settled on her behalf. Her former
assistant Miss Mason had apparently returned to help make ready her wardrobe for
the new job. In saying farewell to Newington Green, Mary thought chiefly of her
friendships with Mrs Burgh, Dr Price and Mr Hewlett. Their kindness and
supportiveness were never forgotten, and it was her loving respect for Richard Price
that would motivate her first effort at political polemic, *A Vindication of the Rights of
Men* (1790).

MW to Eliza Bishop, Newington Green, 23 Sept [1786]

…Poor Mason has been with me this day or two – I do not know what I should
have done without her – I could not have made a great coat or have done any
thing which required thought. I have settled my affairs much better than I could
have expected – Mrs Burgh has been as anxious about me as if I had been her
daughter – I have paid all my trifling debts and bought all the things I think
absolutely necessary – Mrs Price died the other day – and Dr P. intends soon
leaving the Green – He has been uncommonly friendly to me. I have the
greatest reason to be thankful – for my difficulties appeared insurmontable [*sic*]
– This is the last letter I shall write to you from this Island…Sept 28th…Mr
Hewlett – desired me to give his love to poor Mrs Bishop – he would have said
compliments if his wife had been by – He has [been] very unwel [*sic*] – Poor
tender friendly soul how he is yoked! You can have no conception of Mrs
Burgh’s kindness – we are to dine with her to-morrow – She has enabled me to
pay Hinxman and the rest of my creditors – but I told you so before --

Adieu my dear girl
And believe me to be your
Affectionate friend & sister
Mary Wollstonecraft
Selected quotations:
Mary Wollstonecraft’s connection with Newington Green

Charlotte May: a portrait of Newington Green.

The ‘banker-poet’ Samuel Rogers, who was in his early 20s at the time Mary Wollstonecraft lived at Newington Green, left an evocative description of the Green in his unfinished memoirs, with which its mention of the ‘curfew-bell’ (see Thomas Gray’s ‘Elegy in the Country Churchyard’) underlines that it was a bucolic village, and not a suburb of the capital. This quotation shows he shared with Mary a Romantic tendency to melancholy, but also gives an insight into his early exposure to the social pleasures of the neighbourhood, and particular his enjoyment of the company of distinguished older residents like James Burgh and Richard Price. According to his own account he was undistracted by the usual pleasures of youth and may have had little to do with the attractive young women who ran the school for girls; he left no mention of Mary or her sisters. He was a tenacious perfectionist, and could take up to a decade to finish a poem, writing alongside his profession as a banker.


I was born – not in a great town – nor yet where the curfew-bell was unheard at nightfall – on a summer evening – my parents, not noble yet not ungentle –
eminent as were my ancestors in the best days of England for fervour of religion, high-mindedness, souls above this world – nor would I exchange them with the noblest in Europe – From my earliest years I was melancholy to sadness – yet I had dreams that made amends for all. […]

My constant wish has been to live with those who were eminent – I always inclined to the society of those older than myself – who had left the conflict - & whose bustle was over – the young whose minds were full of youth, breathing the essence of the early flowers in spring-time – a young man, who is not young a coxcomb – always my aversion – the greatest resource and consolation of my life has been my turn for verses – a crowd, a bustle cannot prevent me – in an instant I am at work.

E.J. Clery: *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787)

Mary Wollstonecraft’s first published work was the direct product of her work experience to that point, and above all her time running the school at Newington Green. My first extract from Godwin’s *Memoirs* explains the circumstances of publication. The second, from the work itself, is a reflection on the difficulties of gaining economic independence for a woman in the position of Mary, her sisters, and her friend Frances Blood. Although Mary was certainly not ‘fashionably educated,’ the passage anticipates the impassioned autobiographical elements in her novels and her Scandinavian travelogue.


The period at which I am now arrived is important, as conducting to the first step of her literary career. Mr. Hewlet [sic] had frequently mentioned literature to Mary as a certain source of pecuniary produce, and had urged her to make trial of the truth of his judgment. At this time she was desirous of assisting the father and mother of Fanny in an object they had in view, the transporting themselves to Ireland; and, as usual, what she desired in a pecuniary view, she was ready to take on herself to effect. For this purpose she wrote a duodecimo pamphlet of one hundred and sixty pages, entitled, Thoughts on the Education of Daughters. Mr. Hewlett obtained from the bookseller, Mr. Johnson in St. Paul's Church Yard, ten guineas for the copy-right of this manuscript, which she immediately applied to the object for the sake of which the pamphlet was written.
From *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters* (1787), ‘Unfortunate Situation of Females, Fashionably Educated, and Left Without a Fortune’.

Few are the modes of earning a subsistence, and those very humiliating. Perhaps to be an humble companion to some rich old cousin, or what is still/worse, to live with strangers, who are so intolerably tyrannical, that none of their own relations can bear to live with them, though they should even expect a fortune in reversion. It is impossible to enumerate the many hours of anguish such a person must spend. Above the servants, yet considered by them as a spy, and ever reminded of her inferiority when in conversation with the superiors. If she cannot condescend to mean flattery, she has not a chance of being a favorite; and should any of the visitors take notice of her, and she for a moment forget her subordinate state, she is sure to be reminded of it.

Painfully sensible of unkindness, she is alive to every thing, and many sarcasms reach her, which were perhaps directed another way. She is alone, shut out from equality and confidence, and the concealed anxiety impairs her constitution; for she must wear a cheerful face, or be dismissed. The being dependant on the caprice of a fellow-creature, though certainly very necessary in this state of discipline, is yet a very bitter corrective, which we would fain shrink from.

A teacher at a school is only a kind of upper servant, who has more work than
the menial ones.

A governess to young ladies is equally disagreeable. It is ten to one if they meet with a reasonable mother; and if she is not so, she will be continually finding fault to prove she is not ignorant, and be displeased if her pupils do not improve, but angry if the proper methods are taken to make them do so. The children treat them with disrespect, and often with insolence. In the mean time life glides away, and the spirits with it; 'and when youth and genial years are flown,' they have nothing to subsist on; or, perhaps, on some extraordinary occasion, some small allowance may be made for them, which is thought a great charity.

The few trades which are left, are now gradually falling into the hands of the men, and certainly they are not very respectable.

It is hard for a person who has a relish for polished society, to herd with the vulgar, or to condescend to mix with her former equals when she is considered in a different light. What unwelcome heart-breaking knowledge is then poured in on her! I mean a view of the selfishness and depravity of the world; for every other acquirement is a source of pleasure, though they may occasion temporary inconveniences. How cutting is the contempt she meets with!—A young mind looks round for love and friendship; but love and friendship fly from poverty: expect them not if you are poor! The mind must then sink into meanness, and accommodate itself to its new state, or dare to be unhappy. Yet I think no reflecting person would give up the experience and improvement they have gained, to have avoided the misfortunes; on the contrary, they are thankfully ranked amongst the choicest blessings of life, when we are not under their immediate pressure.

How earnestly does a mind full of sensibility look for disinterested friendship, and long to meet with good unalloyed. When fortune smiles they hug the dear delusion; but dream not that it is one. The painted cloud disappears suddenly, the scene is changed, and what an aching void is left in the heart! a void which only religion can fill up—and how few seek this internal comfort!

A woman, who has beauty without sentiment, is in great danger of being seduced; and if she has any, cannot guard herself from painful mortifications. It is very disagreeable to keep up a continual reserve with men she has been formerly familiar with; yet if she places confidence, it is ten to one but she is deceived. Few men seriously think of marrying an inferior; and if they have honor enough not to take advantage of the artless tenderness of a woman who loves, and thinks not of the difference of rank, they do not undeceive her until she has anticipated happiness, which, contrasted with her dependant situation, appears delightful. The disappointment is severe; and the heart receives a wound which does not easily admit of a compleat cure, as the good that is
missed is not valued according to its real worth: for fancy drew the picture, and
grief delights to create food to feed on.

Though I warn parents to guard against leaving their daughters to encounter so
much misery; yet if a young woman falls into it, she ought not to be
discontented. Good must ultimately arise from every thing, to those who look
beyond this infancy of their being; and here the comfort of a good conscience is
our only stable support. The main business of our lives is to learn to be virtuous;
and He who is training us up for immortal bliss, knows best what trials will
contribute to make us so; and our resignation and improvement will render us
respectable to ourselves, and to that Being, whose approbation is of more value
than life itself. It is true, tribulation produces anguish, and we would fain avoid
the bitter cup, though convinced its effects would be the most salutary. The
Almighty is then the kind parent, who chastens and educates, and indulges us
not when it would tend to our hurt. He is compassion itself, and never wounds
but to heal, when the ends of correction are answered.

**Barbara Gold Taylor: the significance of Richard Price.**

In 1789 the Newington Green minister Dr Richard Price delivered a sermon, later
published, in which he celebrated the coming of the French Revolution (*A Discourse
on the Love of our Country*, 1789, reviewed admiringly by Wollstonecraft in *The
Analytical Review*, ). Here is Mary Wollstonecraft, in her *A Vindication of the Rights
of Men*, vigorously defending Dr Price against Edmund Burke’s attack on him in
*Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790).

From *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).
In reprobating Dr Price’s opinions you might have spared the man; and if you
had had but half as much reverence for the grey hairs of virtue as for the accidental distinctions of rank, you would not have treated with such indecent familiarity and supercilious contempt, a member of the community whose talents and modest virtues place him high in the scale of moral excellence. I am not accustomed to look up with vulgar awe, even when mental superiority exalts a man above his fellows; but still the sight of a man whose habits are fixed by piety and reason, and whose virtues are consolidated into goodness, commands my homage—and I should touch his errors with a tender hand when I made a parade of my sensibility. Granting, for a moment, that Dr Price’s political opinions are Utopian reveries, and that the world is not yet sufficiently civilized to adopt such a sublime system of morality; they could, however, only be the reveries of a benevolent mind. Tottering on the verge of the grave [Price died in 1791], that worthy man in his whole life never dreamt of struggling for power or riches; and, if a glimpse of the glad dawn of liberty rekindled the fire of youth in his veins, you, who could not stand the fascinating glance of a great Lady’s eyes, when neither virtue nor sense beamed in them, might have pardoned his unseemly transport,—if such it must be deemed.

I could almost fancy that I now see this respectable old man, in his pulpit, with hands clasped, and eyes devoutly fixed, praying with all the simple energy of unaffected piety; or, when more erect, inculcating the dignity of virtue, and enforcing the doctrines his life adorns; benevolence animated each feature, and persuasion attuned his accents; the preacher grew eloquent, who only laboured to be clear; and the respect that he extorted, seemed only the respect due to personified virtue and matured wisdom.—Is this the man you brand with so many opprobrious epithets? he whose private life will stand the test of the strictest enquiry —away with such unmanly sarcasms, and puerile conceits.—But, before I close this part of my animadversions, I must convict you of wilful misrepresentation and wanton abuse.

Bee Rowlatt: Mary Wollstonecraft’s ‘Decided Tone’.

Wollstonecraft’s *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* is an ambitious document, which shows her experimenting and finding her voice as a writer. It's peppered with knowing asides and references to her own tone and style. She was of course a complete unknown at the time of writing, and famously she nearly bottled out of writing this response to Burke, but was cajoled on by Johnson. She adopts a very aggressive stance in going into battle with such a renowned establishment figure, she knows there can be no sign of weakness (even though it was initially published anonymously). This was an act of courage but also of careful scholarship, and she gets the pitch just right. She proves she can hold her own against a bellowing, educated gentleman. Her confidence originated in part from her friendships with the Rev. Dr Richard Price and Hannah Burgh at Newington Green, and the esteem they showed for her when she was an obscure and penniless school teacher. This Vindication is a landmark piece of writing in the history of human rights. But it is lit up with flashes of her plain-talking (and very funny) authorial voice, not to
mention the blistering take-downs that are a regular feature of her later and more well-known work. Here she shows the sympathy for working women of different classes which stemmed from her own struggles to earn a living. When she mocks Burke's over-blown response to the French women she's almost saying "Calm down dear!"

From *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790).

I speak in this decided tone, because from turning over the pages of your late publication, with more attention than I did when I first read it cursorily over; and comparing the sentiments it contains with your conduct on many important occasions, I am led very often to doubt your sincerity, and to suppose that you have said many things merely for the sake of saying them well; or to throw some pointed obloquy on characters and opinions that jostled with your vanity…

A sentiment of this kind glanced across my mind when I read the following exclamation. ‘Whilst the royal captives, who followed in the train, were slowly moved along, amidst the horrid yells, and shrilling screams, and frantic dances, and infamous contumelies, and all the unutterable abominations of the furies of hell, in the abused shape of the vilest of women.’ Probably you mean women who gained a livelihood by selling vegetables or fish, who never had had any advantages of education.

**Anna Birch: Newington Green to Parliament**

A brief hint in *A Vindication of the Right of Woman* establishes Mary Wollstonecraft as a trail blazer in asserting women’s right to vote. Like many outspoken women today she anticipated that she might not be taken seriously, but nevertheless created a feminist space about 125 years before Nancy Astor, the first woman to take her seat in the House of Commons. Sadly, she didn’t make good her promise to pursue the idea ‘at some future time’ before her untimely death.

At the school for girls she would have tested her ideas on education which, as she explained in *Rights of Woman*, should be linked to citizenship, emancipation and independence. At this time, a critical mass of radicals was drawn to Newington Green. Lyndall Gordon in her biography *Vindication: A Life of Mary Wollstonecraft* vividly describes the lively debates in this circle on the constitution of the new American republic in 1780s, and at the same time Dr Richard Price was at the centre of a campaign for reforms that would give Dissenters full civil rights. These discussions may have planted the seed of her conviction that woman should have representation in Parliament; one hundred years before the suffragettes. In 1787, she would write to her sister Everina 'I am... going to be the first of a new genus...I am not born to tread in the beaten track.'

The new track beaten out by Wollstonecraft resulted in her most famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Written during the early revolutionary burst of activity in France this determining publication moved Wollstonecraft into the world of political discourse. Over 220 years later her treatise has a place in broadcaster Melvyn Bragg’s list of a dozen ‘British books that Changed the World’. She firmly held the belief that women’s rights are human rights and argued that the rights of women and men are one and the same. Her attitude was demonstrated both in
her life and in her writing and led to the idea of women’s suffrage: the right of women to have a vote and therefore the right to be in Parliament. Wollstonecraft’s influence in politics and the battle for full franchise are embedded in her role as a radical thinker and philosopher. In her introduction to the centenary edition of Rights of Woman Millicent Garrett Fawcett (first female statue on Parliament Square, 2018) says ‘She claims for women the right to share in the advantages of representation in Parliament, nearly seventy years before women’s suffrage was heard of in the House of Commons.’

From *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Ch. IX, ‘Of the Pernicious Effects Which Arise from the Unnatural Distinctions Established in Society’. I may excite laughter by dropping a hint, which I mean to pursue at some future time, for I really think that women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed, without having any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of Government.

Copy owned by the American suffragist Susan B. Anthony (1820-1906).

**Hannah Dawson: radical ideas on education**

These passages from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* express her belief that education must be inclusive.

From *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), Ch. XII, ‘On National Education’.

The only way to avoid two extremes equally injurious to morality, would be to contrive some way of combining a public and private education. Thus to make men citizens two natural steps might be taken, which seem directly to lead to the desired point; for the domestic affections, that first open the heart to the various modifications of humanity, would be cultivated, whilst the children were nevertheless allowed to spend great part of their time, on terms of equality, with other children. I still recollect, with pleasure, the country day school; where a boy trudged in the morning, wet or dry, carrying his books, and his dinner, if it were at a considerable distance; a servant did not then lead master by the hand, for, when
he had once put on coat and breeches, he was allowed to shift for himself, and return alone in the evening to recount the feats of the day close at the parental knee. His father’s house was his home, and was ever after fondly remembered; nay, I appeal to many superior men, who were educated in this manner, whether the recollection of some shady lane where they conned their lesson: or, of some stile, where they sat making a kite, or mending a bat, has not endeared their country to them?

But, what boy ever recollected with pleasure the years he spent in close confinement, at an academy near London? unless, indeed, he should, by chance, remember the poor scare-crow of an usher, whom he tormented; or, the tartman, from whom he caught a cake, to devour it with a cattish appetite of selfishness. At boarding-schools of every description, the relaxation of the junior boys is mischief; and of the senior, vice. Besides, in great schools, what can be more prejudicial to the moral character than the system of tyranny and abject slavery which is established amongst the boys, to say nothing of the slavery to forms, which makes religion worse than a farce?...

Can it then be a matter of surprise that boys [in public boarding schools] become selfish and vicious who are thus shut out from social converse?[…]

But nothing of this kind could occur in an elementary day-school, where boys and girls, the rich and poor, should meet together. And to prevent any of the distinctions of vanity, they should be dressed alike, and all obliged to submit to the same discipline, or leave the school. The school-room ought to be surrounded by a large piece of ground, in which the children might be usefully exercised, for at this age they should not be confined to any sedentary employment for more than an hour at a time.

**Miriam Al Jamil: continuing debate on the education of daughters.**

The plot of Amelia Opie’s *Adeline Mowbray* (1805) hinges on the disastrous consequences arising from a mother's misguided principles on how to educate her daughter. Opie had been Wollstonecraft's friend, knew her writings on the subject and clearly based the conflict in the novel between personal beliefs and society's expectations on a critique of Wollstonecraft’s and Godwin's ideas about marriage. Wollstonecraft's early teaching experience, particularly in Newington Green, shaped her interest in women's education but she also maintained that a woman's primary concern should be her domestic duties. Was Opie therefore unfair in her caricature of Wollstonecraft's ideas on women's education?
Amelia Opie, Adeline Mowbray, or, The Mother and Daughter: A Tale (1805), ch.1.

All Mrs. Mowbray's ambition had settled in one point, one passion, and that was EDUCATION. For this purpose she turned over innumerable volumes in search of rules on the subject, on which she might improve, anticipating with great satisfaction the moment when she should be held up as a pattern to mothers, and be prevailed upon, though with graceful reluctance, to publish her system, without a name, for the benefit of society.

Bibliography