

100th Anniversary of the Passage of the 19th Amendment

By Mary Lyle, Director of Education

August 18th marks the 100th Anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment to the United States Constitution. This very simple and straightforward proclamation, was won with great deal determination and sacrifice.

When we think about the Women's Suffrage movement we of course identify with its most famous leaders— Susan B. Anthony, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and Alice Paul in America and Emmeline and Christabel Pankhurst in Great Britain. These women deserve the recognition for their tireless efforts in the face of great opposition. Their steadfast determination finally won the day.

But there is one woman, however, who deserves to be remembered as one of the earliest advocates for women's rights. She is Mary Wollstonecraft, best known today as the mother of Mary Shelley, the author of *Frankenstein*. Mary Wollstonecraft was an accomplished writer who penned political essays, histories, and novels. She embraced The Enlightenment ideals and determined to make her way on her own terms.

Born in London in 1759, the second of seven children, Mary became the protector of her mother and younger siblings, who were often the victims of her father's drunken abuse. She managed to help them throughout her life, sharing what little she had. But Mary's strong-minded character made it impossible for her to live the kind of life prescribed for most women in Mary Wollstonecraft's financial position.

The best alternative for a decent but poor woman was to become a governess—that is until she could find a "good provider" and become his wife. Mary tried the "respectable" route and took a position as a governess for a year. But she knew that she had more to offer the world and decided to turn her talents to writing. This was not a



conventional choice, since there were not many women writers who supported themselves.

Mary worked as a journalist and a translator of German and French texts. It was during this time that she met her future husband William Godwin, an esteemed philosopher, but she had her heart set on another. The liaison resulted in an illegitimate child and Mary being left to fend for herself. She and Godwin would eventually marry several years later.

The French Revolution gripped Wollstonecraft's imagination and she went to France in 1790 to report on it first-hand. In her *Vindication of the Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft defended the revolution maintaining that it had liberated ordinary French citizens by allowing them to achieve a sense of self-reliance, which was never available under the corrupt aristocratic system.

Hers was an idealistic view of the best outcome for the revolution, but the essay was well received and made Wollstonecraft a bankable writer.

In 1792 Wollstonecraft writes *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, which lays out the arguments for Wollstonecraft for the fair and equal treatment of women. She states that women needed access to the same education as men, and that women should not be treated as subservient or traded like property. Wollstonecraft's rational, logical arguments and gave her the stature among her literary peers.

Mary Wollstonecraft married William Godwin in 1797 after having a previous, unhappy affair which produced one illegitimate child. She died at the age of 38 only eleven days after giving birth to her second child, Mary Godwin Shelley. After her death, Godwin published *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which he revealed many of Mary's private indiscretions and emotional challenges. Whether Godwin's text was intended to destroy his wife's legacy or not, her reputation suffered.



One of the brightest minds of the early nineteenth century, Jane Austin created characters who share many of Mary Wollstonecraft's ideas. The independent-minded Elizabeth Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, or the morally incorruptible Fanny Price in *Mansfield Park*, are two examples of the kind of women Wollstonecraft would have admired.

As we celebrate the 100th Anniversary of the passage of the 19th Amendment, we need to remember that the struggle for equal rights began even earlier. My next article will remember the first organized women's rights convention held in 1848 in Seneca Falls, New York.

SOURCE:

Wollstonecraft, M. (2020, July 02). *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects*. Retrieved July 20, 2020, from <http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/3420/pg3420-images.html>

Zimet, S. (2020). *Roses and Radicals: The epic story of how American women won the right to vote*. New York: Puffin books.