

## Mary Wollstonecraft, 1759-1797



Intellectual and writer, Mary Wollstonecraft was born in London, the second of six children. Her father, was a family despot who bullied his wife. He spent a fortune in various unsuccessful ventures at farming. At the age of nineteen Mary went out to earn her own livelihood. In 1783, she helped her sister Eliza escape a miserable marriage by hiding her from a brutal husband until a legal separation was arranged. The two sisters established a school, an experience from which Mary drew to write *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters: With Reflections on Female Conduct, in the More Important Duties of Life* (1787). Mary became the governess in the family of Lord

Kingsborough, living most of the time in Ireland. After her dismissal, she settled in London and determined to take up a literary career.

In 1788 she became translator and literary advisor to Joseph Johnson, the publisher of radical texts and became acquainted with and accepted among the most advanced circles of London intellectual and radical thought..

In 1792, she published her *Vindication on the Rights of Woman*, an important work which, advocating equality of the sexes, and the main doctrines of the later women's movement, made her both famous and infamous in her own time. She ridiculed prevailing notions about women as helpless, charming adornments in the household. Society had bred "gentle domestic brutes." "Educated in slavish dependence and enervated by luxury and sloth," women were too often nauseatingly sentimental and foolish. A confined existence also produced the sheer frustration that transformed these angels of the household into tyrants over child and servant. Education held the key to achieving a sense of self-respect and a new self-image that would enable women to put their capacities to good use.

Mary Wollstonecraft was a radical in the sense that she desired to bridge the gap between mankind's present circumstances and ultimate perfection. She was truly a child of the French Revolution and saw a new age of reason and benevolence close at hand. Mary undertook the task of helping women to achieve a better life, not only for themselves and for their children, but also for their husbands. Of course, it took more than a century before society began to put her views into effect.