

Mary Wollstonecraft

(*1759 London - †1797
Somerstown)

When the French Revolution started, everybody was talking about the „Rights of Man“ (such was the title of Thomas Paine’s influential pamphlet from 1791) in a very literal sense, which meant that women were usually not even mentioned in that context. It’s true, there always had been voices in favour of women’s rights, but the book that really triggered off a modern liberal feminist movement was “A Vindication of the Rights of Woman”, which was published in 1792. The author was Mary Wollstonecraft, who had already been member of several radical political circles before. She thought that women were trapped into an intricate system of oppression and that only education and enlightenment could help them out of it. Therefore she demanded full civil and political rights for women: “Women ought to have representatives, instead of being arbitrarily governed without any direct share allowed them in the deliberations of government,” she said.

Her general outlook was generally that of liberal individualism. Equal rights and equality before the law were her political creed. One can doubt, whether today she would be in sympathy with some modern brands of feminism that focus on affirmative action and quotas. Later in her life she married the individualist anarchist author



William Godwin, although both had previously denounced marriage as an oppressive institution. Their daughter Mary later married the poet Shelley and became famous as the author of “Frankenstein”.

Literature:

- Carol H. Poston (Editor): *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman: An Authoritative Text; Backgrounds; The Wollstonecraft Debate; Criticism* (Norton Critical Editions), Cambridge 1998
- Claire Tomalin: *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft*, New York 1975.

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