

THE BIOGRAPHIES OF MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT

Florence Boos

One Woman's "Situation": A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft by Margaret George; pp. 174. Urbana, Chicago, and London: University of Illinois Press, 1970, \$6.50.

Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography by Ralph M. Wardle; pp. 366. Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1951 (Bison paperback, 1966, \$1.90).

Mary Wollstonecraft: A Biography by Eleanor Flexner; pp. 307. New York: Coward, McCann and Geoghegan, Inc., 1972, \$8.95.

The year after Mary Wollstonecraft's death William Godwin published his *Memoirs of the Author of A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, an excellently written tribute to his wife's character which combined his own recollections of her with what she had told him of her childhood and whatever information he could gather from friends and contemporaries. The *Memoirs*, a beautiful work in themselves, narrate an unconventional life with remarkable honesty, and very nearly preclude the need for any additional biography of Mary Wollstonecraft. Godwin did not have access to all of her letters, however, and, his own inevitable biases and preferences aside, Wollstonecraft's own recollections of the past were incomplete and (very infrequently) inaccurate. It is also very unfortunate that Godwin did not publish all the letters and materials he possessed, since Wollstonecraft's nineteenth century descendents were considerably less eager to publicize their distinguished/notorious relative, and intensely concerned with suppressing evidence of her departures from propriety. Many Wollstonecraft letters were destroyed, including those indicating her attraction to Henry Fuseli, and Godwin's biographer, Charles Kegan Paul, cooperated with the Shelley family in silently excising allusions to Fuseli from at least one letter and memorandum. In 1927, W. Clark Durant republished the *Memoirs* with enthusiastic prefatory remarks; attacking the practice of referring to Mary Wollstonecraft as Mary Godwin, he exclaimed,

Give this lady's brilliant genius a possible chance to arise from those dark troubled waters of the River Lethe in which it has been for so long undeservedly submerged. Remove that false label! (xi)

Durant added a preface and supplement of more than two hundred pages of information gathered from Wollstonecraft's contemporaries, additional letters, reviews, and miscellaneous sources. Enough material had become available for another biography. Mary Wollstonecraft and the origins of feminism were not then fashionable topics for study, however, and no more biographies appeared for another twenty-three years.

In 1951, after consulting the Wollstonecraft letters, Ralph M. Wardle produced a careful work, *Mary Wollstonecraft: A Critical Biography*, combining material from Godwin and from Wollstonecraft's letters with historical background on feminism and extended comments on each of Wollstonecraft's writings. Two more recent biographies have also appeared, reflecting the recent revival of interest in feminists and women writers; each contends with the problem of how not to overlap Wardle.

Margaret George's *One Woman's "Situation": A Study of Mary Wollstonecraft* is a highly idiosyncratic essay rather than an extended biography, and relies on Godwin, Wardle, and the printed letters for documentation. She justifies her book in part by criticism of Wardle's neglect of sexual-political issues:

In developing these points, Wardle treats Mary as someone to whom he is attracted across the years, a fascinating individual and an interesting and informative historical personality -- who just happens to be a woman. (12)

This is untrue. Wardle's language suggests prior assumptions about family-and-sex roles that would today be recognized as sexist (the same could be said of most feminists of the time, male or female), but he clearly recognizes the heroic qualities of her resistance to eighteenth century misogyny, and lists the repressive circumstances she overcame with thoroughness and distaste. George attempts to describe her as a "pre-historic" woman, an exception to but also part of "the history of the 'passive and negative'" which constitutes the story of women before their own history can be worked out. In general she condescends to Wollstonecraft, although there are puzzling, at times effusive shifts in tone:

But any sort of introduction would insist on the certainty of Mary's historical reputation, based on her stunning contribution to liberal ideology, indeed, to general modern consciousness. (4)

Because she hadn't solved her most pressing problems, hadn't worked anything out for herself, she could hardly be an historical force, could hardly lead or guide others. Her story is an

illumination, a mirror, of the others, in its incoherence, confusion, and indecision a magnification of the others. (170, concluding sentence; underlinings mine)

(on a mildly brooding and confessional letter to Johnson:) What did Mary want from Johnson in this strange, troubled letter? Love, fatherly affection, total approval, male support for the weak female she was, his strength to quiet her "wayward" heart, to correct the "great defect" in her mind -- surely all these things. On the edge of her leap into freedom, she was a frightened, unloved child. Perhaps she was reaching too far. Perhaps she didn't really want independence and the terrible responsibility of her own life (on a later letter in which she speaks of new projects:) It was a new day, a different mood, and another Mary -- tough, determined, in charge of herself and her future. (82, 83)

Although deprecating psychoanalytic terminology in her introduction, she uses it throughout as a basis of judgement and speculation; of Wollstonecraft's abusive and tyrannic father, she writes:

He was her male model, and her image of power and freedom -- of the freedom, that is, to exercise one's will without restraint She saw herself in her father, saw warmth and passion and spontaneity as her deepest nature, her "former nature", as she much later told Gilbert Imlay (30)

Evidence? I cannot agree with Eleanor Flexner's bibliographic description of this book as an interpretation of Wollstonecraft's life "from the viewpoint of today's feminists".

Eleanor Flexner's *Mary Wollstonecraft: A biography* reveals extensive research into the records of the Wollstonecraft family and the background of Wollstonecraft's associates. She retraces each discovery or interpretation of Wardle, and in a number of cases discovers more data, however miscellaneous. For example, she clarifies the sources of the Wollstonecraft family income and the details of their numerous financial quarrels; she discovers that Edward Wollstonecraft stole a small legacy from his daughter and enumerates the various wills and gifts which affected their lives. Flexner adds information concerning Joseph Johnson's circle, Wollstonecraft's stay in France and her travels, and the objects of her various heterosexual attractions. She is conscientious in describing

and noting her sources, an aid to any future biographer or interpreter; more important, she is careful to state which are her opinions and to differentiate them from those of Godwin or other commentators. She is generally more skeptical of Godwin's *Memoirs* and of other sources than is Wardle; her biography creates interest by its implicit suggestion that there are still open questions of fact and bias. A person who wishes to learn what is unknown as well as known about Wollstonecraft's life should read both biographies, possibly concurrently; each is careful and without blatant bias, yet they differ in innumerable small points and interpretations. Some examples: Flexner admires Wollstonecraft's mother but Wardle follows Godwin in dismissing her as supine; Wardle prefers Wollstonecraft's rationalism but Flexner emphasizes the religious fervour of her writings and life. Wardle generally sympathizes with Mary in family quarrels; Flexner is more critical. Frequently Flexner will admire an action or statement which Wardle condemns, and vice versa. Wardle presents something slightly closer to an official version, that is, Wollstonecraft's life as seen by herself and Godwin; this is not a criticism of Wardle, however, since in this case I feel the official version may be as accurate as any. Flexner intentionally limits herself to biography in her title (whereas Wardle's is a "critical biography"), although the analyses of Wollstonecraft's works which she does present are good; Wardle is somewhat rambling in style and includes less background data on Wollstonecraft's works, but his serious commentary on everything she wrote is one of the best features of his book.

I have only two small criticisms of Flexner's biography. At several points she seems to assume the hereditary transmission of character traits; she enjoys tracing the recurrence of characteristics in the same family. Within any small group of persons some will display aggressive energy, some melancholia and dependency, and so forth; I cannot see that this expresses family resemblance. Flexner is surprisingly proud of the "one other striking figure" which the Wollstonecraft family produced, Mary's nephew Edward Wollstonecraft, an Australian land developer whom Mary might well have classed with Imlay and the other accumulators of fortune whom she denounced in her *Letters Written ... in Sweden ...* and her letters to Imlay. Also in interpreting Wollstonecraft Flexner asserts that Wollstonecraft's emphasis on duty, God, religion, and motherhood were ignored by later feminists. I have two objections to this. First, some allowance must be made for cultural relativism; many who were devout in 1790 might not be so if living today. Second, it is exactly this pious, dutiful quality of Wollstonecraft's character and arguments which the British Victorians, at least, emphasized to the point of distortion (see Mrs. Fawcett's introduction to her 1891 edition

of *A Vindication*). The reception of Wollstonecraft's life and works by the 19th and 20th century woman's movement might well be a revealing study and an interesting if depressing indicator of later feminist values.

A comparison of Wardle's and Flexner's biographies reveals again the extent to which biography, however conscientious, cautious in tone, or well-documented, must consist of a congeries of small interpretations and assumptions by the author. Now that two good biographies exist, I think that what is next needed for the study of Wollstonecraft's life is a collected edition of her own letters. Wollstonecraft's letters are thorough, direct, highly self-analytical, and often beautiful in style; one should judge her character and intelligence only after reading her own descriptions of her motives and mind. Virtually every extant letter which she wrote has been published, but they are scattered inconveniently; she herself published her *Letters Written ... in Sweden ...*, Godwin published her letters to Imlay, Wardle her letters to Godwin, and the Pforzheimer Library collection of Shelley manuscripts, published as *Shelley and His Circle*, edited by Kenneth Cameron, includes letters by Wollstonecraft in three out of four volumes (incidentally with good prefatory biographical material; that in volume four is by Flexner). I am uncertain whether a chronological compilation of these various editions and letters is possible, but the result would simplify a reading of Wollstonecraft letters and partially demystify her life. Another study of Wollstonecraft as an intellectual and writer would also be useful; her life seems to attract more attention than her works and opinions. Flexner's *Mary Wollstonecraft* nevertheless appears at a very useful time, when early feminists and women writers are becoming objects of increasing interest, and it should encourage further study of Wollstonecraft and her associates.

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THE LANGUAGE OF SEX IN A VINDICATION OF THE RIGHTS OF WOMAN

Janet M. Todd, University of Puerto Rico

One of the clearest linguistic pointers to the position of women in society is the use of the word "man" to mean humanity. Employed in this way, "man" is supposed to include woman; yet because of its other limited meaning of "male" the term frequently appears exclusive. Mary Beard has noted that there is in "man" "an ambiguity amounting to double talk or half talk," and she shows that "innumerable rights of person and property may turn upon the mere meaning of 'man' in laws, ordinances, and judicial opinions..."¹