



“Wollstonecraft’s influence down the decades in Britain and the rest of the world is immeasurable. She has become an inspiration to women everywhere”

*Jeremy Corbyn, leader of the Labour party, chooses*

# Mary Wollstonecraft

1759–97

Mary Wollstonecraft was a London-born philosopher and an early advocate of women’s rights. She is best known for her book *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792) in which she argued that women are not naturally inferior to men. Wollstonecraft had an unconventional private life before marrying the philosopher William Godwin. She died 11 days after the birth of her second daughter, Mary, who would find fame as the author of the novel *Frankenstein*.

### When did you first hear about Wollstonecraft?

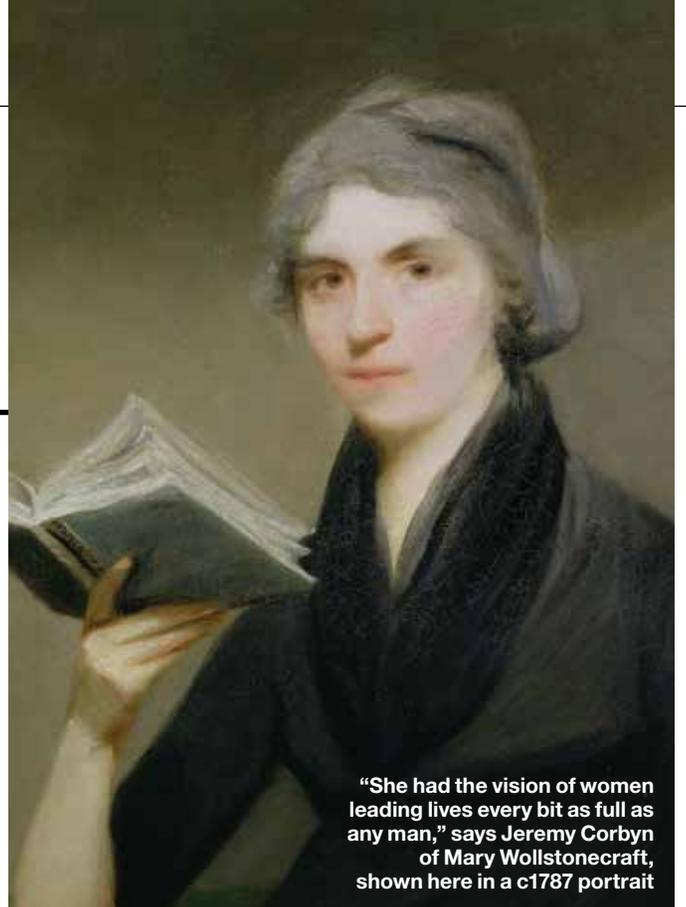
Years ago, probably in the 1970s or 1980s, when I learned about her through the women’s rights movement. I was immediately intrigued by her, in part because she helped found a school in the progressive Dissenting [separated from the Church of England] community of Newington Green, which is in my constituency. I just find that entire period in English history fascinating.

### What kind of person was she?

I think she was a complex person – partly as a result of the stress and hardship that she experienced – who gave deep thought to women’s place in the world. I believe that she wrote her famous book, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, not in an attempt to disempower men but to empower women – the two things are different. She was also religious and worshipped at the Newington Green Unitarian Church, London’s oldest Nonconformist place of worship still in use.

### What made her a hero?

Firstly, her opening of a school that aimed to give girls an education every bit as good as that enjoyed by boys, a novel idea at the time. Then there’s the fact that (unlike a lot of people this side of the Channel) she was excited by the radical opportunities the French Revolution could bring. Yet unfortunately she died before the end of the revolution.



“She had the vision of women leading lives every bit as full as any man,” says Jeremy Corbyn of Mary Wollstonecraft, shown here in a c1787 portrait

Thirdly, her influence down the decades in Britain and the rest of the world is immeasurable – she has subsequently become an inspiration to women everywhere, including my Mexican-born wife!

### What was Wollstonecraft’s finest hour?

One of her finest hours has to be the writing and publication of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, in which she put forward the argument for a society where men and women enjoyed equality – again, a novel concept in her day and age. It was Mary who had the vision of women leading lives every bit as full as any man.

### Is there anything you don’t particularly admire about her?

I’ve never read anything negative about her – although I get the impression that she could be quite a difficult and distant person. You can’t escape the feeling that she could have achieved so much more but for the tragedy of dying so young.

### Can you see any parallels between Wollstonecraft’s life and your own?

I think we share a belief in treating people with respect, regardless of their gender, race or religion.

### If you could meet Mary Wollstonecraft, what question would you ask her?

What was it that led you to take such risks and take such abuse in order to write such an amazing book? **IT**

*Jeremy Corbyn was talking to York Membery*

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► Melvyn Bragg and guests discuss Mary Wollstonecraft in this episode of BBC Radio 4’s *In Our Time*: [bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00pg5dr](http://bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00pg5dr)

