

## Attention Mary Wollstonecraft fans!

How quickly can the worldwide admirers of Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-1797) transcribe a ten-minute interview? Enjoy listening, and enjoy the satisfaction of contributing a small chunk of text. This is a wiki: if you are reading this, you can edit it too. Can you add one sentence? The programme was on BBC Radio 4, so the sound quality is excellent.

It was part of *Woman's Hour*, on Thursday 10 March 2011, and the speakers are Jenni Murray, presenter; Barbara Taylor, historian; and Roberta Wedge, from Mary on the Green, the group campaigning for a sculpture of Wollstonecraft. Part of the interview was transcribed by the [Islington Tribune article](#) on the unveiling of a plaque to the early human rights campaigner, and those sentences have been pasted in below; you may wish to change them if you hear something different.

Add in whatever sentences you wish; they don't have to be exactly where the last editor finished. And don't worry about absolute accuracy, because it is easy for someone coming later to revise your work. Also, for support, **look at the top right hand corner** of this window. If you see "<Person> is viewing", you can click on the double arrows and chat with whoever else is looking at this document at the same time.

The whole piece begins with a one-minute excerpt from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792). Here is the permalink to the radio clip:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p00fkW8k>

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*My own sex, I hope, will excuse me, if I treat them like rational creatures, instead of flattering their fascinating graces, and viewing them as if they were in a state of perpetual childhood, unable to stand alone. I earnestly wish to point out in what true dignity and human happiness consists—I wish to persuade women to endeavour to acquire strength, both of mind and body, and to convince them that the soft phrases, susceptibility of heart, delicacy of sentiment, and refinement of taste, are almost synonymous with epithets of weakness, and that those beings who are only the objects of pity and that kind of love, which has been termed its sister, will soon become objects of contempt.*

*Dismissing then those pretty feminine phrases, which the men condescendingly use to soften our slavish dependence, and despising that weak elegance of mind, exquisite sensibility, and sweet docility of manners, supposed to be the sexual characteristics of the weaker vessel, I wish to show that elegance is inferior to virtue, that the first object of laudable ambition is to*

*obtain a character as a human being, regardless of the distinction of sex; and that secondary views should be brought to this simple touchstone.*

**Presenter (JM)'s lead-in:**

**I suppose you could describe Mary Wollstonecraft as the mother of British feminism. In 1792 she published *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in which she set out a manifesto for women's liberation.**

**Well, there is a plaque to mark the site of the girls' school Wollstonecraft set up in North London, but there is no statue to celebrate the influence she had on the push for the emancipation and education of women and girls.**

**Roberta Wedge is a member of the group Mary on the Green, which is campaigning for a statue at Newington Green. Barbara Taylor is professor of modern history at the University of East London. Barbara, she was sort of rediscovered in the '70s by second wave feminism. How much has she dipped in and out of favour since the late eighteenth century?**

**BT:** In the late 18th century itself she was a very well-known writer, but her reputation was very much tarnished immediately after her death by a set of revelations about her unorthodox sexual history particularly. That meant she fell out of favour even with first wave feminism, very concerned as they were - Victorian feminists - with respectability. But the rise of mass feminist organisation in the late 19th, early 20th century brought her to the fore, particularly the women's suffrage movement: big banners in women's suffrage marches "Mary Wollstonecraft pioneer". Her reputation continued at a sort of steady level, I think, throughout the 20th century. A lot of interest in her, especially among women writers, Virginia Woolf particularly. The rise of the women's liberation movement in the 1970s really brought her to the fore again, although our attitude to her was...um... ambivalent, I think one could say, in the first instance.

**JM: Why?**

**BT:** Mary Wollstonecraft was a woman of her time. Her views on sex were perhaps rather prim from our vantage point. She considered herself a spokeswoman for the middle class and regarded women of the middle class, as she said, in the most natural state. We were a more radical generation, perhaps, so at first I think we saw her as a bit of ...um... a prig, but longer investigation and better acquaintance with her, I think our view of her changed over time.

**JM: Roberta, you're absolutely, I would say, almost besotted with her. Why a statue?**

**RW:** I think it's important that we recognise significant women everywhere and Mary Wollstonecraft was a very significant woman -- both in Britain and internationally -- for women's rights absolutely, but more broadly for what we would now call human rights. She was an intellectual celebrity before she wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, with her book 14 months previously *A Vindication of the Rights of Men*, what we would now call human rights, in the context of the French Revolution. And she was also a pioneering educator, a pedagogue. Her first book, *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*, was written while she was at Newington Green. And it was quite pivotal, those few years that she spent in this little isolated village, a couple of miles from London at that point. A village of Rational Dissenters, people who were outside the mainstream, prosperous merchants, some of them, and all of them valuing hard work, education, women, sobriety - very different from the violent father that she'd grown up with.

**JM: Well, what were her early influences in childhood, Barbara?**

**BT:** She had a very difficult childhood. She was born in Spitalfields, which at that time had a lot of prosperous small merchants. Her father ran a silk weaving manufactory. At first the family looked set fair for a sort of middling middle class life, but her father aspired to be a gentleman farmer and he was also an alcoholic. The family just slid down hill quite steadily in the course of Mary's childhood. According to Mary, he was quite a brute. She would throw herself between her mother and father to protect her mother. So her disaffection with the male sex, at least the worst examples of it, began very early.

**JM: Roberta, one of the things she argued is that we should let our heads rule our hearts. To what extent did she singularly fail to follow her own advice?**

**RW:** Indeed. She loved widely if not wisely, absolutely true. She had these affairs with Gilbert Imlay in Paris very well-known that she fell madly in love with this tall dark handsome American adventurer. But before that, when she was growing up, she had, as Barbara has said, a tough time, little education. She fell in love with, I would say, with a library which had a girl attached to it, and became very fast friends with that girl and her family, Jane Arden, and educated herself partly through that, in Yorkshire. And then

when she came back to London, she fell very obsessively I would say, you could call it in love, with another girl. She wrote to her saying, when I love, I love entirely, and when we grow up I would like us to live and work together. Now the only way that she could do that was by opening a boarding school for girls. That gave her a house and a home of her own as an unmarried woman. She did this in Newington Green, this little different village of Dissenters where she could live with her best friend Fanny and with her younger sisters, one of whom she rescued from an abusive marriage.

**JM: She did Barbara try to kill herself. Twice, I think, jumping into the River Thames. Why? What drove her to such despair?**

**BT:** Well there's a question! Ostensibly a broken heart. Indeed, she had certainly suffered very much in her relationship with Gilbert Imlay, that Roberta has referred to, who was something of a philanderer. But Mary's relationship with Mary was often quite dark. I think the legacies of her childhood were very painful and complicated ones. There's a lot of evidence of self-dislike and so on in her letters.

**JM: She died from puerperal fever after giving birth to Mary Shelley. She married William Godwin, and he wrote about her. Why did he write the book that he wrote?**

**BT:** He adored her. And Godwin was a truth teller. And he was a naïve man. And he believed that he was sharing with the world a vivid portrait, as indeed he drew, of a woman who in some sense could rise above and triumph over the vicissitudes of ordinary life and indeed even the values that dominated conventional society, none of which he shared. He was himself very unconventional in his views. He was very shocked and taken aback at the reaction to the book.

**JM: So it was a miscalculation?**

**BT:** It was a miscalculation on his part. I'm not actually even sure though. Godwin was used to riling people up. He had a tremendous sense of principle, and a certain indifference to public opinion. I'm not convinced that he might not have done it even had he been able to foretell the consequences.

**JM: So Roberta what progress are you making towards the statue?**

**RW:** Well, we are making quite a bit of progress. There have previously been plaques to her on buildings in Camden where she lived with -- actually she didn't live *with* Godwin, she lived *near* him; even when they married, they lived in separate houses --

she was quite a character -- but to make the statue the Newington Green Action Group, which is a little group of neighbours, and as Margaret Mead, said “never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world; indeed nothing else ever has”, has decided that after refurbishing the Green, which was a bit of an overgrown traffic island 10 years ago, they decided that the cherry on the cake of that award-winning urban green space will be a statue of Mary. So we've got a lot of organising behind us already. We've got a long time scale, a realistic time scale, because it will take a lot of organising and fundraising. We've started off with a letter to the editor of The Guardian on Tuesday signed by 75 MPs and peers, which is a great start.

**JM: Roberta Wedge and Professor Barbara Taylor, thank you both very much indeed for being with us.**