

# NINETEENTH-CENTURY GENDER STUDIES

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## Remembering Mary Wollstonecraft: A Conversation

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Mary Wollstonecraft (1759-97), author of *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), has been an inspiration for feminist campaigners for generations. Her varied, ground-breaking publications and eventful life story have remained relevant at every turn in the history of the struggle for gender equality and yet commemorative gatherings, permanent physical tributes and a named society dedicated to her legacy have hitherto been lacking. In 2019 Bee Rowlatt and Emma Clery came together, with Roberta Wedge, to organize “A Celebration of Mary Wollstonecraft” marking the 260<sup>th</sup> anniversary of her birth, supported by the University of Southampton and the Institute of English Studies, University of London. The event was hosted by St Pancras Old Church, a place connected with Wollstonecraft's life and death. It was attended by academics, activists and enthusiasts, and took the form of a series of open conversations, concluding with a theatre performance (see “A Celebration of Mary Wollstonecraft”).



Figure 1. Maggi Hambling, “For Mary Wollstonecraft”. © Ioana Marinescu.

<2>Bee is a broadcaster, author of *Talking About Jane Austen in Baghdad* (2010) and *In Search of Mary: The Mother of All Journeys* (2015) and, since 2020, Consultant Events Producer at the British Library. In 2019, Bee wrote and produced *An Amazon Stept Out* as the capstone of a 10-year fundraising campaign by “Mary on the Green” for a statue dedicated to Wollstonecraft on Newington Green ([www.maryonthegreen.org](http://www.maryonthegreen.org)). The sculpture by Maggi Hambling was unveiled in November 2020. Bee continues to promote Wollstonecraft’s legacy via The Wollstonecraft Society, a registered educational charity campaigning for gender equality and human rights ([www.wollstonecraftsociety.org](http://www.wollstonecraftsociety.org)).

<3>After fifteen years as Professor of Eighteenth-Century Literature at the University of Southampton, Emma is now Chair Professor in English at Uppsala University. She has published on women’s writing of the long eighteenth century since the early 1990s, and Mary Wollstonecraft is currently the main focus of her research. In March 2021, Emma signed a contract with Oxford University Press to serve as General Editor of a six-volume scholarly edition of the works of Mary Wollstonecraft, a project expected to run for ten years. Emma has launched a literary society, The Mary Wollstonecraft Fellowship, as a forum for all interested in her life and writings ([wollstonecraftfellowship.home.blog](http://wollstonecraftfellowship.home.blog)).

<4>**Emma Clery:** The art critic of the *Guardian* newspaper, Jonathan Jones, wrote in 2016, with reference to the “Mary on the Green” campaign among others: “quite apart from their artistic archaism and historical oversimplifications, bronze statues make useless memorials. Write history, make films, put on plays – there are so many good ways to keep the radical past alive. The dead art of statuary is not one of them” (Jones). This made me wonder if my chosen form of remembering – the traditional format of the scholarly edition – could also be open to being regarded as a regressive and elitist “dead art.” The volumes will potentially only sit in reference libraries and behind pay walls requiring institutional subscriptions. I wondered if we could start out by considering why we think these modes of commemoration and celebration are important, nonetheless?

<5>**Bee Rowlatt:** I remember that article by Jonathan Jones because I was utterly demoralized by it and I thought how on earth can he have reached that privileged position of saying “We’re bored of statues,” when so many people haven’t ever been represented that way. Yes, we’re bored of certain kinds of statues, but what about affording that luxury of getting bored of statues to other parts of the world and sections of humanity, instead of the same sorts of people being celebrated over and over again. He missed a large part of the argument.

<6>**Emma Clery:** What about his point that there are other, better ways of commemorating radical lives?

<7>**Bee Rowlatt:** That’s the interesting question: it’s important to look at the process, as much as the end product. I’ve thought a lot about this, and also feel like I’ve been on a journey, as I should have done because it’s taken ten years! I began from the position of looking at an imbalance in representational statues. There were loads of men, very few women (twenty-five non-royals in the whole of the UK). That struck me as a very obvious situation that needed to be rebalanced. I think part of the reason I was upset when I read Jonathan Jones’s critique of statues, was that something in me agreed with what he was saying. There is something dusty

about very traditional statuary form. But I was annoyed because the particular injustice with which I'd chosen to tangle still hadn't been addressed.

<8>In the course of this journey of discovery, I've come round to agree with certain aspects of the critique in the article. I do think we should also commemorate in different ways, other more original, and perhaps, more collaborative ways, and consider celebrating not just individuals on a pedestal but collective ideas. There are many more exciting ways of doing that, not even in three-dimensional solid figures. It could be an event, a fleeting moment that can capture people's imaginations and fix something in their minds, capture a moment in time. The plan is that the Wollstonecraft Society will provide a space for this kind of alternative dynamic commemorative work.

<9>**Emma Clery:** At the same time, your choice of the sculpture by Maggi Hambling, rather than a more traditional, representational design seems to represent an opening up of conversation, rather than simply a finished monument.

<10>**Bee Rowlatt:** In the heat of the moment, there was a media and Twitter backlash against the sculpture (after the unveiling on 2 November 2020) and people got angry with us for being experimental rather than providing what they wanted, which was a traditional statue of Mary Wollstonecraft (see Nairne, Jeffries, Brown). It's a position I'm sympathetic to, because that's where I started – I felt like we (at the Mary on the Green Campaign) leap-frogged that debate and ran off into a different future of, Where else can commemorative artworks go? At the same time, while blazing that trail, we got a lot of financial and visibility support for the other campaigns which are still fighting for more traditional representations of amazing women; the Mary Anning campaign amongst others. Eventually, I feel our campaign both provided traditional commemoration and something different. The question became part of that journey, as to what are the more compelling ways to engage the public and to draw people in, and encourage curiosity, rather than something that might have been more acceptable.



Figure 2. Maggi Hambling,

“For Mary Wollstonecraft” (detail). © Ioana Marinescu.

<11>There’s also the question of, who is the art by? Is the artist a woman? What is that woman trying to say, is she trying to do something new? That’s as much part of the artistic event as the 3-D artwork itself. So there’s that story also feeding in. I’d like to see more work by women about women, triggering these more complex conversations around representation, even while completely agreeing that we also need more conventional statues of women, and supporting campaigns towards that. We went somewhere different and if I’m honest it took me a while to catch up. When we realized how much detail there was in the naked figure of the woman in the Maggi Hambling sculpture, there were concerns. I wasn’t sure that I understood it. I wasn’t sure what the artwork was trying to do. It was when I was thrown into the furnace of the debate, and had to defend it, that I grew to love it more and more. The heat of the attacks from female critics

was curious. There were strange echoes of the reception of [William] Godwin's *Memoirs of the Author of Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1798) that made me defiant and want to fight for this artwork.

<12>**Emma Clery:** Drawing a comparison between statuary and the collected scholarly edition, the mode in which I'm choosing to commemorate Wollstonecraft, there are arguments to be made against engaging in the laborious business of these forms of remembrance. But would we say that if these are the benchmarks, the measure of cultural value in our society, then it's essential that women start to be represented more equally in these modes, even if they could be considered outdated? As said, a scholarly edition may only be consulted by a small minority.

<13>**Bee Rowlatt:** I beg to differ – if it's not there as a reference for students, it's a terrible loss, a terrible injustice. The existence of an archive is so important. This is another way of extending life. There's a record there, that is publicly available, for the public good: a very Wollstonecraftian ideal. Furthermore, as a greater number of people are drawn to her (which I think is not just confirmation bias, because we're both obsessed by her) more people are working on her, more people are drawn to her legacy. She's an iconic figure who presents a different face to successive generations. Your provision of a core set of fully researched texts is a vital resource. You can argue that as an act of memorialization a scholarly edition is more democratic and more widely accessible and even more useful as more people can access it. It has a shelf life and a universality that a fixed artwork doesn't have. This artwork is in London. Your monument can travel.

<14>**Emma Clery:** In a sense, since she was above all a writer, her words are her best memorial. They're her legacy to future generations. Yet I think the sculpture on Newington Green is extremely important. It takes you back to the famous Virginia Woolf lines, "she is alive and active, she argues and experiments ... even now among the living" (Woolf, 163). It spurs that sense of her as still dwelling among us as a presence, in the space she once inhabited. It breaks down the temporal division.

<15>**Bee Rowlatt:** It is quite lovely, given that it was once her neighborhood and where she taught in the mid-1780s. When you approach the square, when you walk towards Newington Green, the Wollstonecraft sculpture shines like a beacon, a silvery fire. You catch sight of it before you get there, like a lighthouse. You could say that artwork and the scholarship are complementary. A campaign like "Mary on the Green" gives a helpful shove, leading people to Wollstonecraft's ideas, which are the vital thing.

<16>**Emma Clery:** That's a nice way to describe the synergy between the popular and the academic presence of Wollstonecraft. There is an increasing impulse, in universities, to present research to the wider public, and engage people outside the academy. Mary Wollstonecraft is an ideal figure for this kind of work, bridging past and present, bringing together academia, activism, and people with a broad interest in history, politics and literature. The "Celebration of Mary Wollstonecraft" in 2019 was supported by funding from the Public Engagement unit at the University of Southampton (see "A Celebration of Mary Wollstonecraft").



<17>**Bee Rowlatt:** We are obviously appreciative of each other's efforts to commemorate Wollstonecraft, but I do wonder what Wollstonecraft herself would have made of it. I don't think she would have wanted to be put on a pedestal, as a statue. She probably wouldn't have been that interested in the artwork. She surely would have been interested in a new edition of all her writings.

<18>**Emma Clery:** I wonder! The letters were private of course, and very few writers I imagine look forward to private papers being pored over and discussed publicly. Plus, she was self-deprecating about her publications. In her letters she sometimes expresses disappointment about the final product, complaining as in the case of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*, for instance, that she'd been rushed, and could have done better. Many of her works are fragments of larger unfinished projects. She would probably be astonished by the scholarship that has grown up around her words. As a woman, she was denied a formal education and had to school herself. Her work was produced in often very difficult and limiting circumstances. And it was very often topical, a spontaneous response to current affairs. She wrote for the moment. She may not have expected it to endure as it has, and probably hoped her ideas would soon become self-evident. She might have been surprised at how necessary and relevant they still are. The writings collectively are a monument to an extraordinary life and mind, even if they are imperfect or unfinished. The format of a scholarly edition is in some respects at odds with her output. To attempt this project of presenting it according to strict protocols is strange at some level. Yet part of the value of this, for the team of editors, will be the experience of being immersed in her words, line by line, and attempting to reconstruct the inspirations, influences, pressures and remarkable acts of reconfiguration that produced them. A distinctive aspect of this new edition, as opposed to the 1989 Pickering and Chatto collected works edited by Janet Todd and Marilyn Butler that was so important to the first wave of scholarship on Wollstonecraft, is that her works will be organized chronologically, so you can see the whole intellectual journey unfolding, the growth of a mind across the ten years of her publishing career. Her best-known works will mingle with other much less well-known writings from the same time, for instance the two *Vindications* [*A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) and *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*] placed in the context of her prolific translation and reviewing work, so you can get a much fuller, more holistic sense of what she was reading and thinking at any given moment.

<19>**Bee Rowlatt:** Her life was cut short. There was a lot that was unfinished, and so much to be anticipated. The loose ends are related to the injustices she faced as a woman. Her life was taken away, her voice was silenced posthumously. That in itself also propels this urgent need to memorialize her, to bring together what we've got, to see it as a whole, and as a work in progress.

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