

**THE LOVE LETTERS OF
MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT
TO GILBERT IMLAY, WITH
PREFATORY MEMOIR**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649640195

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Cover @ 2017

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ROGER INGPEN

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Edition. 2 Vols. A. CONSTABLE & Co.

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ILLUSTRATED WITH PORTRAITS

Philadelphia
J. B. LIPPINCOTT COMPANY
London: HUTCHINSON & CO.

1908

PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN

PR
5841
W82
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PREFACE

I

OF Mary Wollstonecraft's ancestors little is known, except that they were of Irish descent. Her father, Edward John Wollstonecraft, was the son of a prosperous Spitalfields manufacturer of Irish birth, from whom he inherited the sum of ten thousand pounds. He married towards the middle of the eighteenth century Elizabeth Dixon, the daughter of a gentleman in good position, of Ballyshannon, by whom he had six children: Edward, Mary, Everina, Eliza, James, and Charles. Mary, the eldest daughter and second child, was born on April 27, 1759, the birth year of Burns and Schiller, and the last year of George II.'s reign. She passed her childhood, until she was five years old, in the neighbourhood of Epping Forest, but it is doubtful whether she was born there or at Hoxton. Mr. Wollstonecraft followed no profession in particular, although from time to time he dabbled in a variety of pursuits when seized with a desire to make money. He is described as of idle, dissipated habits, and possessed of an ungovernable temper and a restless spirit that urged him to perpetual changes of residence. From Hoxton, where he squandered most of his fortune, he wandered to Essex, and

then, among other places, in 1768 to Beverley, in Yorkshire. Later he took up farming at Laugharne in Pembrokeshire, but he at length grew tired of this experiment and returned once more to London. As his fortunes declined, his brutality and selfishness increased, and Mary was frequently compelled to defend her mother from his acts of personal violence, sometimes by thrusting herself bodily between him and his victim. Mrs. Wollstonecraft herself was far from being an amiable woman; a petty tyrant and a stern but incompetent ruler of her household, she treated Mary as the scapegoat of the family. Mary's early years therefore were far from being happy; what little schooling she had was spasmodic, owing to her father's migratory habits.

In her sixteenth year, when the Wollstonecrafts were once more in London, Mary formed a friendship with Fanny Blood, a young girl about her own age, which was destined to be one of the happiest events of her life. There was a strong bond of sympathy between the two friends, for Fanny contrived by her work as an artist to be the chief support of her family, as her father, like Mr. Wollstonecraft, was a lazy, drunken fellow.

Mary's new friend was an intellectual and cultured girl. She loved music, sang agreeably, was well-read too, for her age, and wrote interesting letters. It was by comparing Fanny Blood's letters with her own, that Mary first recognised how defective her education had been. She applied herself therefore to the task of

increasing her slender stock of knowledge—hoping ultimately to become a governess. At length, at the age of nineteen, Mary went to Bath as companion to a tiresome and exacting old lady, a Mrs. Dawson, the widow of a wealthy London tradesman. In spite of many difficulties, she managed to retain her situation for some two years, leaving it only to attend the deathbed of her mother.

Mrs. Wollstonecraft's death (in 1780) was followed by the break-up of the home. Mary went to live temporarily with the Bloods at Waltham Green, and assisted Mrs. Blood, who took in needle-work; Everina became for a short time housekeeper to her brother Edward, a solicitor; and Eliza married a Mr. Bishop.

Mr. Kegan Paul has pointed out that "all the Wollstonecraft sisters were enthusiastic, excitable, and hasty tempered, apt to exaggerate trifles, sensitive to magnify inattention into slights, and slights into studied insults. All had bad health of a kind which is especially trying to the nerves, and Eliza had in excess the family temperament and constitution." Mrs. Bishop's married life from the first was one of utter misery; they were an ill-matched pair, and her peculiar temperament evidently exasperated her husband's worst nature. His outbursts of fury and the scenes of violence of daily occurrence, for which he was responsible, were afterwards described with realistic fidelity by Mary in her novel, "The Wrongs of Women." It was plainly impossible

for Mrs. Bishop to continue to live with such a man, and when, in 1782, she became dangerously ill, Mary, with her characteristic good nature, went to nurse her, and soon after assisted her in her flight from her husband.

In the following year (1783) Mary set up a school at Islington with Fanny Blood, and she was thus in a position to offer a home to her sisters, Mrs. Bishop and Everina. The school was afterwards moved to Newington Green, where Mary soon had an establishment with some twenty day scholars. After a time, emboldened by her success, she took a larger house; but unfortunately the number of her pupils did not increase in proportion to her obligations, which were now heavier than she could well meet.

While Mary was living at Newington Green, she was introduced to Dr. Johnson, who, Godwin says, treated her with particular kindness and attention, and with whom she had a long conversation. He desired her to repeat her visit, but she was prevented from seeing him again by his last illness and death.

In the meantime Fanny Blood had impaired her health by overwork, and signs of consumption were already evident. A Mr. Hugh Skeys, who was engaged in business at Lisbon, though somewhat of a weak lover, had long admired Fanny, and wanted to marry her. It was thought that the climate of Portugal might help to restore her health, and she consented, perhaps more on that account than on any other, to become his wife.