

Excerpt from: Emma Cheatle, 'Between Landscape and Confinement: Situating the Writings of Mary Wollstonecraft' (2017), in *Hélène Frichot, Catharina Gabrielsson, Helen Runting (eds), Architecture and Feminisms*, London: Routledge

<Figure 1

Postcard 1. Section of map, showing north of Euston Road and Somers Town of St Pancras by John Thompson, c. 1803. (King's Cross and north of Euston Road). Public Domain. Postcard and text by Emma Cheatle, 2016.>

## Landscape

Shortly after the first stage of the French Revolution, Wollstonecraft wrote her first pamphlet *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (1790) in swift response to Burke's *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (1790). Burke had supported the American Revolution but condemned the overturn of monarchy, stating that the French had 'shown themselves the ablest architects of ruin'.<sup>1</sup> Wollstonecraft was well-versed in Burke's earlier *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1756) where he proposed that aesthetics was a dichotomy of the sublime (massive or masculine / landscape) and beautiful (feminine or soft / detail). Her 'vindication' instead invoked an everyday pastoral, the landscape of the *sans-culotte*: 'I shall not,' she stated, 'attempt to follow you through "horseway and footpath"'.<sup>2</sup> Despite not *following* Burke, she identified with, and borrowed, his use of architectural terms: 'Attacking the *foundation* of your opinions, I shall leave the *superstructure* to find a centre of gravity on which it might lean till some strong blast puffs it into the air'.<sup>3</sup> Wollstonecraft called her pamphlet 'effusions of the moment', and incorporated ideas of air throughout, to blow apart arguments, or to re-balance them.<sup>4</sup> Conceptualisations of gas and air were newly understood in the eighteenth century and by 1789 their different constituents signified political states.<sup>5</sup> Burke likened 'wild gas' (oxygen) to the explosive nature of the French Revolution and 'fixed air' (carbon dioxide) to the rational reason of the 1688 Glorious Revolution in England.<sup>6</sup> For Wollstonecraft a revolutionary *blast* enabled a mere *puff* to easily, and wittily, knock over a shoddily built argument. Further, the references appear to be influenced by the destruction of buildings in Paris, as well as the structure of the guillotine. Using abundant exclamatory punctuation, Wollstonecraft's breathless style reinforced her explosive intent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Statement made in a Parliamentary debate, 9 February 1790. See Edmund Burke. *Reflections on the Revolution in France: A Critical Edition*, ed. J. C. D. Clark. (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 66–67.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Men* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1790), 145.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid*, 145, my italics.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid*, iii.

<sup>5</sup> Steven Connor, *The Matter of Air: Science and the Art of the Ethereal* (London: Reaktion, 2010), 65–66.

<sup>6</sup> Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution*, 7.

Wollstonecraft published anonymously to gain a hearing.<sup>7</sup> Only when the pamphlet rapidly sold out did Wollstonecraft reveal herself. She soon became known as a radical female voice and followed her success with the polemic *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792).<sup>8</sup> Although criticised for lacking a clear structure *Rights of Woman* offers a clear challenge to the roles women were confined to, calling particularly for educational equality.<sup>9</sup> References to landscape continue: women are ‘flowers planted in too rich a soil’ (31) and therefore, quoting Rousseau: “‘how can they leave the nursery for the camp!’” (218). Air also remains important. Thomas Beddoes, radical physician and Wollstonecraft’s friend, had already linked the idea of feminist equality to the balanced constituents of air.<sup>10</sup> Wollstonecraft’s text, decrying the lazy, ‘voluptuousness’ of wealth, stirs up this ‘still sultry air’ (212). Where *Rights of Men* calls for the destruction of the edifice that stifles its occupants, *Rights of Woman* demands ‘the sharp invigorating air of freedom’, seeking to ventilate it; open a window to let in fresh air.<sup>11</sup> Wollstonecraft’s voice here seemed less revolutionary: rather than complete demolition she proposed a new equilibrium within the same structure.

*Rights of Woman* was written in just six weeks before Wollstonecraft was swept onwards into the continuing events in France.

<Figure 2

Postcard 2. The Great Dust-Heap, next to Battle Bridge and the Smallpox Hospital King’s Cross, London. Watercolour painting by E. H. Dixon, 1837, courtesy of Wellcome Library, London. Postcard and text by Emma Cheatle, 2016.>

In 1795 Wollstonecraft had returned to London from France after nearly two years packed with change and productivity. While witnessing and documenting the ongoing bloody turmoil of the French Revolution, in which many of her friends were killed, she had fallen in love with American businessman Gilbert Imlay, become pregnant and borne a baby girl, Fanny.<sup>12</sup> After the birth, Imlay’s interest in Wollstonecraft had waned and she was alone for increasingly long periods. On her return to London she found him living with another woman. Within days, she made her first suicide attempt. Imlay, perhaps to provide her with a sense of purpose (and out of guilt), persuaded her to travel to Scandinavia. She set off the following week, in what must have been a very fragile state, alone except for her maid and one-year

<sup>7</sup> Many women writers, from Aphra Behn to George Eliot, published anonymously or under male pseudonyms from the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries. This was not always due to prejudice – men also published anonymously – although for women that was probably the key reason. See John Mullan, *Anonymity: A Secret History of English Literature* (London: Faber and Faber, 2007).

<sup>8</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* [1792] (London: Fisher Unwin, 1891), page numbers hereon in brackets.

<sup>9</sup> William Godwin, *Godwin on Wollstonecraft* [1798], ed. Richard Holmes (London: Harper, 2005), 40; Claire Tomalin, *The Life and Death of Mary Wollstonecraft* (London: Penguin, 1992), 136.

<sup>10</sup> Connor, *Matter of Air*, 60–65.

<sup>11</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Woman*, 72–73.

<sup>12</sup> Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1794).

old Fanny. The trip, purportedly to negotiate one of Imlay's ongoing business problems, became a search for strength and recalibration in the Scandinavian landscape. The ensuing *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway and Denmark* (1796), based on letters written to Imlay during the trip, is extremely beguiling. As Godwin later wrote: 'If ever there was a book calculated to make a man in love with its author, this appears to me to be the book'.<sup>13</sup>

In *Rights of Men* Wollstonecraft argued that Burke's notion of 'beauty' had been used to cripple women into feminine sensibilities. She instead asserted that, as exhibited in the natural world, the sublime and beautiful were interdependent: and the same should hold for men and women, in public and private life.<sup>14</sup> *Letters Written in Sweden* offers a lyrical writing utterly immersed in the landscape and its people. Every page is a response to the places on Wollstonecraft's journey – the result is intense, critical, meditative, and creative. Enthralled by the vast sublime she traces the beauty of detail, repeatedly outlining their concomitance: 'the rocks which tossed their fantastic heads so high were often covered with pines and firs [...] The eye stole into many a covert where tranquillity seemed to have taken up her abode' (29). We follow her from the 'wild grandeur' of 'terrific oceans', 'menacing rocks' and 'closing chasms' to trees and foliage of 'dazzling verdure' which 'relieved and charmed my eyes' (28, 29, 32), to rest where the 'prattling of the sea amongst the pebbles has lulled me to sleep' (49).<sup>15</sup>

Against this backdrop of the natural landscape, she scrutinised and compared the buildings, everyday objects and social practices to those of Britain and France. The 'clean airy' towns with canals and 'rows of trees' provided a welcoming, if staid, contrast to Paris' bloody, collapsing streets. She was as vexed by the bad teeth of the women as she was reassured by the simple domesticity of plain meals in small houses and farms.<sup>16</sup> Most of all though, the voyage around Scandinavia instigated a deepened understanding of the relationships between landscape, politics, place, and the personal, with which she began to associate her own identity and sanity.

<Figure 3

Postcard 3. The Polygon, Somers Town, 1850. Public Domain. Postcard and text by Emma Cheatle, 2016.>

<Figure 4

Postcard 4. From Mary Wollstonecraft, *Lessons*, 1798. Public Domain. Postcard and text by Emma Cheatle, 2016.>

<Figure 5

---

<sup>13</sup> Godwin, *Godwin on Wollstonecraft*, 60–61. The original letters plead, at times angrily and plaintively, with Imlay. In the publication Mary Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written in Sweden Norway and Denmark* [1796] (Oxford: Oxford World Classics, 2009), Wollstonecraft crafts these into a moving, mesmerising text. Page numbers hereon in brackets.

<sup>14</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Rights of Men*, 105–108.

<sup>15</sup> Wollstonecraft, *Letters Written in Sweden*, 28, 29, 32, 49.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, 13, 57, 100.

Postcard 5. Postcard and text by Emma Cheatle, 2016. Copyright Emma Cheatle, 2016.>