

A Celebration of Mary Wollstonecraft April 2019 Report by Charmain Kenner

Many thanks to WSG member [Emma Clery](#) who organised this fascinating day and invited our group; the following report is by Charmian Kenner, one of a number of WSG members who attended.

A [celebration](#) of [Mary Wollstonecraft \(1759-1797\)](#) held on 27 April 2019, the 260th anniversary of her birth, invited us to consider her ‘in the round’ by discussing her life, work and legacy through research in history, literary criticism, politics and philosophy; and by experiencing representations of Wollstonecraft through art, film and drama. We met in the atmospheric Old St Pancras Church in London, with participants sitting on either side of the aisle that Wollstonecraft walked down to marry William Godwin, and with a lunchtime visit to the original site of her grave in the churchyard. Participants came from around the UK and as far afield as Japan and the US.

A theme throughout the event was how Wollstonecraft’s thinking prefigured and fed into ideas and struggles of today. Hannah Dawson focused on Wollstonecraft’s central concern with freedom, or rather women’s lack of it, since economic dependence on men meant vulnerability and loss of self, leaving women obsessed with beauty as their only asset to hold the male gaze – a condition from which we have yet to entirely escape. Wollstonecraft’s argument that women were playing a part assigned to them by society, rather than this being their authentic nature, links directly with today’s views on gender as a construct we can change. Catherine Packham pointed to connections between Wollstonecraft’s critique of modernity, in particular the late eighteenth-century social and economic order, and analyses by current theorists such as Thomas Piketty. Laura Kirkley highlighted Wollstonecraft’s cosmopolitan outlook, seeing humans as globally interdependent with shared moral obligations, exemplified in her support for Native Americans and her criticisms of empire.

A rousing discussion of ‘What would Mary do?’ with Shrabani Basu, Charlotte Gordon and Bee Rowlatt, imagined multiple possibilities for a contemporary Wollstonecraft, from having a strong social media presence to speaking out on modern slavery and refugee issues, to being a campaigning member of the academy. The latter position was impossible to achieve in her lifetime, and Andrew McInnes reminded us of the tensions in being a ‘philosophesse’ in the late eighteenth century, when women thinkers were both celebrated and stigmatised, though Wollstonecraft tried to take a gender neutral position and establish herself as a philosopher first and foremost. Isabelle Bour pointed out that Wollstonecraft’s reception was different in France at the time, where her life was not seen as scandalous, and she was appreciated as an intellectual in the mode of Germaine de Staël. Translations of Wollstonecraft’s work were popular with moderate Girondin revolutionaries and her ideas became part of progressive French thought.

Janet Todd and Lyndall Gordon, whose studies led the way in research on Wollstonecraft, both contributed to the day. Lyndall Gordon, looking for missing pieces in the jigsaw of Wollstonecraft’s life, shared her latest investigations into

Mary's stay in Hamburg, where she seems to have discovered a fraud that shook her faith in lover Gilbert Imlay. Janet Todd relished the burgeoning interest in Wollstonecraft studies, compared to the 1960s when her proposed PhD on Wollstonecraft was deemed 'too obscure'. She also warned us against making Wollstonecraft, who characteristically was 'always prickly' and swam against the mainstream, into a 'national treasure'. Speakers and audience at the conference agreed that Wollstonecraft sustains us today with her resilience in the face of life's challenges, both personal and political.

A number of organisations carry on Wollstonecraft's legacy. The Mary Wollstonecraft Fellowship celebrates her writing with talks and events; the [Mary Wollstonecraft Philosophical Society](#) disseminates her work and that of other women philosophers of the period, including through university curricula; the Wollstonecraft Society promotes education in schools; Mary on the Green fundraises to place a statue of Wollstonecraft by Maggie Hambling on Newington Green; and New Unity has a Heritage Lottery funded project at Newington Green Meeting House, '[Uncovering the Dissenters' Legacy at the Birthplace of Feminism](#)'.