

A Vindication of the Rights of Mary Wollstonecraft

Robin Richmond, November 17, 2020



From left: Maggi Hambling *Mary on the Green* with the Unitarian Church behind; one of the many placards under the statue; detail

Last week, on a gloomy Saturday morning, I braved the wind and the rain and took a walk down to Newington Green, a small park on the borders of Islington and Hackney. This isn't my regular stomping ground, nor one of my daily London Lockdown walks, but I had a mission, and once there, the long, great and numinous history of my adopted city came to the surface of my mind. Newington Green as a place is freighted with meaning in the long political and moral history of London. A hotspot in the city – a geological metaphor used in volcanology – the intellectual “thermal plumes” that emanate from the Green are very powerful. It has been locus of radical thinking for centuries. The simple, almost dour Unitarian Church that presides over the Green was founded by the English Dissenters in 1708. Any Islingtonian who has an interest in local history knows something of its origins.

It is no coincidence that Mary Wollstonecraft, the author of the great *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (1792), created a boarding school for girls here on the Green in 1785. She was an admirer of Richard Price, the reformist who preached in the Unitarian church here. It was his eloquent sermons expounding religious freedom of thought that inspired her first tract, *The Vindication of The Rights of Man* in 1790, the year before the great Thomas Paine published his *Rights of Man*. If Mary is the godmother of what we now call Feminism, Price might almost be considered to be the godfather.

The history of the Green gets more interesting yet. A few doors down from the Church is the historic Mildmay Club – once known as The Mildmay Radical

Club, which was set up in 1862 on the Green. This was formed as an alternative gathering place for the working man in contrast to the hoity toity Gentleman's Clubs from which he was excluded. It is one of the very few 19th century London Working Men's Clubs left in existence, and is a poignant reminder of times gone by. The building - as much dedicated to social progressiveness as Price's church and Mary's school next door - still smells faintly of long extinguished cigarettes and long extinguished political discussion. It is a gem.

So, the Green has a very special place in the social history of London and in the history of the Church, labour, human rights and progressive radicalism. Recently, many column inches have raved and ranted and many trees have been felled to discuss the new statue commissioned from the artist Maggi Hambling to celebrate the life and work of Mary Wollstonecraft. This was unveiled last week on the Green to much opprobrium, and hence my rainy visit to inspect this controversial and much discussed piece of public art. With a clear heart and an open mind. As the artist herself and the well-meaning patrons of the new statue have stated, it is "not *of* Mary but *for* Mary". It is not supposed to be a portrait but a tribute.

We heedlessly walk by statues of famous people all the time in London (90% of them honouring men) and Mary Wollstonecraft deserves this belated honouring of her contribution to the idea of freedom of expression and female agency more than most. It is appropriate to find it in the very place in London that we associate with her eloquent radicalism, but this is not the statue that accomplishes this aim. Mary died too young, at 38, in childbirth, giving life to Mary Shelley, the future author of *Frankenstein*. This is, of course, a novel about the dangers of hubris, and hubris is the word that came to me last week standing in the mud on the Green in the pouring rain. Dr. Frankenstein creates his monster in an excess of self-confidence and arrogance which are the dictionary definitions of hubris. This statue is a monument not to Mary Wollstonecraft but to hubris.

A statue of Mary Wollstonecraft is long overdue. But it is not this statue. It's the artist's aim that her work should depict Everywoman. This is not Everywoman. This is a kitsch, brittle, little naked Barbie doll with pert breasts, oddly copious pubic hair and a generic face, all of which perch on a Rodin-like wave of abstracted female forms. Take away the dolly bird and the statue might have worked better. A veritable monument to bad taste, with a shiny cheap-looking silver patina on the bronze, which will probably deteriorate in the London weather. I very much hope that this statue will not last, as it is an affront to the historic place where it has been set. It's a bad use of the crowd-funded money collected for its creation. It's bad feminism. It's bad art.

More importantly, it is an affront to its subject matter, and the statue is begging to be tagged by the testosterone-fuelled adolescents of the borough. It has already been "interfered with" by its numerous critics. T-shirts have been draped over

her, and placards placed against her base. Protests abound. Not one to advocate the toppling of statues – as happened in Bristol on June 7th of this tumultuous year with the bronze of the 18th century Atlantic slave trader Edward Colston – I find myself hoping that some brave suffragette will unseat the dolly bird.

Maybe I will.

You heard it here first.

I will let you know about my bail.

“I do not wish women to have power over men, but over themselves.”
Mary Wollstonecraft