



# The Writer's Journey

In the Footsteps of the  
Literary Greats

Travis Elborough



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## Mary Wollstonecraft Soothes a Broken Heart in Scandinavia



Mary Wollstonecraft (1759–1797) departed from Hull, England, for Gothenburg, Sweden, in late June 1795. Only one month earlier, Wollstonecraft had attempted to commit suicide. The fearless author of the radical feminist text *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* was driven to try to take her own life by an unhappy love affair with the unscrupulous American businessman Gilbert Imlay. Her decision to go to Scandinavia on Imlay's behalf and to resolve a financial matter involving a missing ship and a nefarious cargo of silver, turned (in her mind at least) on the notion of the pair being reconciled afterwards. Besides the money, for Imlay the scheme most likely had the more brutal advantage of simply getting the troublesome author out of his hair for a while. He perhaps convinced himself (mistakenly) that some time in the icy north might also help cool her ardour.

As a woman travelling with a one-year-old child and her French nursemaid in tow, Wollstonecraft made for an unlikely emissary to dispatch to the Nordic countries on business. If today Sweden, Norway and Denmark have admirable records on gender equality, the picture was considerably less rosy two hundred years ago. Wollstonecraft was to report that Swedish women were shocked and rather baffled that she should even have wanted

to go out walking alone and recounts being gently reprimanded by one of her first hosts in the country for asking 'men's questions'.

Wollstonecraft was born in Spitalfields, then an affluent suburb to the east of the City of London inhabited by large numbers of Protestant French Huguenot immigrants who worked in silk. Wollstonecraft's grandfather was a former weaver who'd prospered at the mercantile end of the trade, and the family was comfortably off at the time of the author's birth. Unfortunately, Wollstonecraft's father, Edward, a moody, capricious alcoholic, squandered their fortune pursuing the pipe-dream of becoming a gentleman farmer. In the first of a series of disastrous moves that would find them variously residing in Barking in Essex and in a village outside Beverley in the East Riding of Yorkshire, he shifted the family to Epping Forest in Essex to play at being a country squire. It was at school in Beverley that Wollstonecraft received a formative lesson in sexual inequality. While her brothers were treated to lessons in Latin, history and mathematics at the local boys' grammar school, she and her sister were taught only simple arithmetic and needlework at its neighbouring institution for girls.

In 1783 Wollstonecraft founded a progressive day school for girls with her friend Fanny Blood



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in Newington Green, London; an area that also included a Unitarian chapel where Mary herself, along with other religious dissenters, worshipped, and where meetings calling for political reform and the abolition of slavery were held. Her first published work appeared two years later. Wollstonecraft's literary debut was to be a 162-page pamphlet on women and pedagogy entitled *Thoughts on the Education of Daughters*. Following its positive reception, its publisher, Joseph Johnson, agreed to keep its author supplied with batches of reviewing and translation work, and produced all of her subsequent books, allowing Wollstonecraft, extremely unusually for a woman in this period, to stop teaching and earn her living by writing alone.

Since neither writer nor publisher believed in letting material go to waste, her Scandinavian venture resulted in yet another book, *Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark*. Appearing in 1796, it was to be both the last book published in Wollstonecraft's lifetime and also the most critically acclaimed and commercially successful of her career. Comprised of twenty-five letters written to the anonymous father of her child, the book's basis were the very real, somewhat more emotive and occasionally downright testy private missives that she sent to Imlay over the course of her journey up the coast of Sweden into Norway and then back down into Denmark on to Hamburg in Germany, where she caught a boat back to England.

### MARY WOLLSTONECRAFT SOOTHES A BROKEN HEART IN SCANDINAVIA

▼ Fjord near the town of Risør in the province of Aust-Agder, Norway.





Leaving her daughter in the nursemaid's charge at Gothenburg for several weeks, Wollstonecraft was to visit Larvik (Laurvik), Kvisström (Kvistrum) and Strömstad in Sweden before crossing into Norway and travelling to Oslo (then Kristiania), where she marvelled at the liberties enjoyed by that country's citizens under their Danish king. She was perhaps happiest in Tansberg in Norway, where she settled for a while at the end of July and enjoyed walking, riding on horseback and swimming in the sea, and got down to writing for Johnson. Her literary endeavours here a further form of liberation from Imlay, and the fresh air and dramatic landscape a tonic to her physical and mental wellbeing.

*Letters Written During a Short Residence in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* was to serve as a blueprint for a whole mode of romantic wanderings, with its first-person narrative of a forlorn, melancholy traveller spurned by her lover, journeying through remote and forbidding places. While Wollstonecraft's own emotional state is often reflected in her poetic portrayal of the rocky terrain, the book brims too with nuggets of sociological detail about the laws and customs of the Swedes, Norwegians and Danes she meets.

Wollstonecraft's descriptions of the waterfalls at Fredrikstad in Norway and Trollhättan in Sweden have been said to have provided Samuel Taylor Coleridge with the partial inspiration for his poetic rendering of the mythic river at Xanadu. And her daughter Mary Shelley's decision to send her monster-making Victor Frankenstein up into the frozen wastes of the northern hemisphere has similarly been credited with drawing on her mother's account of her excursion into the frostier parts of these territories.

It is a great tragedy that after finally extricating herself from Imlay and forming a mutually fulfilling partnership with the social philosopher and political thinker William Godwin, Wollstonecraft was to die within ten days of giving birth to Shelley. Godwin would, however, speak for many admirers of her final work in stating that, 'Perhaps a book of travels that so irresistibly seizes upon the heart of its reader never, in any other instance, found its way to the press.'

◀ TOP Engraving of Oslo (then Kristiania), c1800.  
 ▶ BOTTOM Engraving of Gothenburg, Sweden, c1800.

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