

Mary Wollstonecraft: 'Britain's first feminist'

1793: Reign of Terror – video transcript

[Presented by Amanda Vickery]

Here, in Paris, she and her ideas were welcomed by revolutionary intellectuals.

Wollstonecraft was even invited to play a part in designing the new society – submitting a paper to the Revolutionary Convention's new education committee. Those first months in Paris were euphoric, bubbling with possibility, for women as well as men.

But only a few months after her arrival in the city, the optimism of the Revolution began to falter. The shocking execution of Louis XVI triggered a terrifying cycle of blood-letting – much of which was spilt here, on what is now the Place de la Concorde.

Wollstonecraft was horrified by the barbarism and the betrayal of the revolutionary ideals.

At the height of the killing Mary was crossing this square when she slipped in a pool of blood that was dripping from the guillotine. Enraged at the descent of her beloved revolution into butchery, she burst into a tirade of such energy that a passer-by had to tell her to get a grip on herself or risk arrest.

Back in Britain, the establishment reacted with horror to the death of Louis XVI. The Westminster government immediately took draconian emergency measures to shut down all forms of liberal debate.

Within days Britain and France were at war.

Mary Wollstonecraft's 'A Vindication of the Rights of Woman' was now smeared with the blood of the guillotine. Its brief moment was past.

Clip from Suffragettes Forever! The Story of Women and Power, BBC Two