

Mary Wollstonecraft: 'Britain's first feminist'

1759: A Woman's Place – audio transcript

[Voice of Professor Karen O'Brien]

Mary Wollstonecraft's childhood experience was one essentially of downward social mobility and instability.

Her father became increasingly brutal, drunk and blatantly unfaithful to his wife. So this clearly marked her early sense of what a family dominated by a tyrannical father might look like.

In addition to that, she was the eldest daughter but there was an older brother and, very early on in her life, she learned that her brother was going to inherit a very large slice of the family fortune and she was to inherit nothing.

I think this very deeply shaped her sense not only of patriarchy, but of fraternity, as it was termed in the French Revolution – the relationships between brothers and sisters which should by natural instinct, according to her, be equal, but are in fact unequal.

Clip from In Our Time, BBC Radio Four