# *Introduction*

In 1794, the young Norwich-based radical Thomas Starling Norgate provided one of the most inflammatory early arguments in favor of British women's rights. His two-part essay "On the Rights of Woman," published in the progressive periodical *The Cabinet,* likened woman's position in Britain to that of a "poor captive bird" struggling to break free from its cage. Only the "sympathizing humanity of a friend," Norgate observed, would prevent the "bird" from "singing itself to sleep."[1] To this end, he recommended that men help women secure equal education, increased legal rights, and even political suffrage—bold proposals at a time when the majority of Britons regarded women as "formed for the lighter duties of Life," because of the "delicacy of their Frames, the Sensibility of their Dispositions, and, above all the Caprice of their Tempers."[2] Little wonder, then, that Norgate was teased by his Norwich peers for being a "Champion of the fair sex." As the lawyer-in-training Thomas Amyot complained, after reading Norgate's *Cabinet* essays, "A virtuous wife and an affectionate Mother are perhaps the most amiable Characters in the Universe. To these Characters let every female aspire and let us hear no more of the *Rights of Woman*."[3]

Yet despite the unorthodoxy of his position, Norgate was not the only man in late Enlightenment Britain to explore women's rights. Rather, he was one of several dozen male reformers—broad-minded theologians, headmasters, historians, essayists, publishers, and politicians, based in London, Norwich, Manchester, Birmingham, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and elsewhere—who determined, at considerable risk to their reputations, that they too would need to become "champions of the fair sex."[4] To ignore the

rights of women (conceived in a wide range of formulations, some limited, others more expansive), while pursuing the rights of slaves, nonconformists, and the disenfranchised more generally, would be to perpetuate tyranny, and thus to compromise their vision of "perfecting" their nation, a goal that took on fresh urgency with the centennial celebrations of the Glorious Revolution in 1788 and the onset of the French Revolution in 1789. Guided primarily by this principle, men proposed educational reforms, assisted women writers into print, and used their specialist training in religion, medicine, history, and the law to challenge common assumptions about women's legal and political entitlements. These largely forgotten but foundational contributions are at the center of this book, which reconsiders men's late-eighteenth-century role in the making of modern British feminism, a feminism, that is, explicitly interested in promoting equal rights for women.[5]

The late eighteenth century has long been seen as a crucible for the formation of modern British feminism. This, after all, was the moment when Britons, pulled between the poles of tradition and revolution, engaged in an unsettling debate about the status and reach of the "rights of man." In the early stages of feminist historical inquiry, however, it was Mary Wollstonecraft, author of the commanding 1792 *Vindication of the Rights of Woman,* who received the lion's share of attention, with scholars routinely citing her as a woman ahead of and defiantly at odds with her times—the British counterpart to France's Olympe de Gouges. As Claire Tomalin explained in her absorbing 1974 biography, Wollstonecraft was a woman who "spoke up, quite loudly, for what had been until then a largely silent section of the human race."[6] Even today, the tendency to represent Wollstonecraft as an intrepid pioneer, the "founding mother" of British, and often Western feminism, persists in many quarters.[7]

In recent years, though, scholars have begun to adopt more nuanced and deeply historicist approaches to studying the feminism that emerged in Britain during this tumultuous period. The result has been a watershed in feminist and gender studies. While Mary Wollstonecraft still remains a crucial figure in treatments of late-eighteenth-century feminism, she is no longer cast as a lone crusader. Rather, as Barbara Taylor and others show, she was deeply imbedded within a radical culture, rooted in traditions of Rational Dissent (a theological approach that by the 1790s was becoming "synonymous" with "intellectual Unitarianism"), which nourished her proj-

ect and gave her ongoing sustenance.[8] What is more, Wollstonecraft herself is increasingly viewed as part of a larger community of "female Jacobins," a community that included Mary Hays, Mary Robinson, Amelia Alderson, and, to a lesser extent, Anna Barbauld.[9] Even those women typically viewed as harboring ideals antithetical to the feminist platform—such as the evangelical Hannah More—have recently been welcomed into the fold.[10] All of these women in their own ways and despite their considerable differences, scholars stress, explored the opportunities that might be opened up for women in a new revolutionary age, pregnant with possibilities.

Men, too, have begun to make some appearances in these discussions, even if the part they play is usually an indirect or supporting one.[11] Already by 1985, Jane Rendall had observed in her seminal *The Origins of Modern Feminism* that a "small number of men" in Britain, France, and the United States "were also drawn to speculate on the possibilities of social change," although she defined feminism itself as "the way in which women came, in the period from the late eighteenth to the mid nineteenth century, to associate together . . . and then to recognize and to assert their common interests as women."[12] In the past decade, scholars have become more attuned to this male presence, observing that certain men not only supported women's rights during this formative stage but also provided crucial assistance to leading female feminists such as Wollstonecraft and Hays.[13] In more implicit but no less significant ways, historians have also suggested that men, in their roles both as Rational Dissenters and as stadial theorists (philosophers committed to charting the successive stages of human development), fostered egalitarian thinking, in essence establishing the conditions in which modern feminism could later flourish.[14]

Historians of feminism are not the only ones to take note, albeit often in limited ways, of British men's early interest in women's rights. Historians of eighteenth-century radical reform, and of radical culture more broadly conceived, have also suggested that at least certain progressive men found feminism compelling. While stressing that British radicals as a whole were profoundly masculinist in their orientation, concerned as they were first and foremost with *male* sociability and *male* liberation (namely, though not exclusively, in the form of universal male suffrage and annual parliaments), scholars concede that there was, as E. P. Thompson put it in his landmark 1963 *The Making of the English Working Class,* a "small intellectual coterie" or, as he explained elsewhere in the book, "stubborn minority tradition," within British radicalism that was interested in female emancipation. For Thompson, this "coterie" included not just Wollstonecraft but also her

husband, William Godwin, artist William Blake, and agrarian reformer Thomas Spence.[15] Since the publication of *The Making of the English Working Class,* Godwin, Blake, and Spence have thus received some attention as feminist thinkers and activists.[16] A few more names—Dissenting reformer John Jebb, publisher Joseph Johnson, and utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham—have also been added to the list as radicals who, if they did not make feminism a priority, at least supported women's rights.[17]

Even with historians' increasing recognition that some men grappled with women's rights in late-eighteenth-century Britain, however, we still know surprisingly little about the breadth and depth of these men's feminist activities, let alone how many men gravitated toward feminist positions and for what reasons.[18] With just a few exceptions for the more notable figures—for example, Godwin, Blake, Spence, Bentham—their feminist ideas have received only cursory treatment, and those treatments we have overwhelmingly emphasize men's failures and limitations, or what Blake scholar Helen Bruder describes as the "missed opportunity" for male radicals in feminism.[19] What is more, there has been little discussion of the ways in which these men understood women's rights within the broader context of their radical commitments, and of how radical culture itself, in its material forms, helped promote a feminist dialogue. There is, in other words, a gap between the recognition that some British men were attracted to feminism during the late eighteenth century and a working understanding of what their feminism was and of the particular climate in which it developed.

On one level, therefore, this book has a recuperative goal. In the pages that follow, I will identify who the main male feminist interlocutors were and how they were connected, as well as what positions they adopted and why they adopted them. Careful review of sermons, essays, memoirs, minute books, and correspondence, many heretofore unexamined, reveals that the men who embraced women's rights included provincial journalists, Unitarian missionaries, political activists, university educators and even a progressive biblical critic. Moreover, they were supported in their efforts by extensive and often overlapping networks of friends and associates, the very networks that sustained radical reform initiatives more generally. By and large, their feminist "turns" were not private revelations but public and highly social acts, forged in response to particular ideologies, events, conversations, memberships, aspirations, and even rivalries.

The views held by these men were extremely wide ranging, in terms of both scope and content. Drawing on the range of languages available to British reformers at the end of the eighteenth century—Lockean liberal-

ism and sensationalism, Paineite republicanism, intellectual Unitarianism, Rousseauian sentimentalism, conjectural historicism, and English constitutionalism—they advanced different and sometimes competing interpretations of what "women's rights" meant, the grounds on which such rights should be based, and the ends to which they should be pursued. As with any attempt to call into question long-held views, views, moreover, in this instance that were grounded in custom, law and Scripture, the tenor of their conversation was necessarily searching. "In *what* and *where* this sexual difference lies?" queried the Norwich poet John Henry Colls in his "Poetic Epistle Addressed to Mrs. Wollstonecraft," one of many texts that strove to disentangle culture from biology.[20]

While some men focused exclusively on expanding female education, others targeted legal policies and political rights. There were even those who sought to erase, or at least ease, the material and linguistic signifiers of sexual difference. The artillery officer Alexander Jardine, a close friend of William Godwin, for example, took on the issue of clothing in his 1788 *Letters from Barbary, France, Spain, Portugal & C.*, recommending that women exchange their dresses for breeches.[21] The prominent Norwich Unitarian minister William Enfield, formerly a tutor at the Dissenting Warrington Academy, went so far as to advocate the adoption of "homo" as a common appellation for men and women. "Both men and women should certainly, in the first place, regard themselves, and should be treated by each other, as human beings," Enfield explained in his review of Wollstonecraft's *Vindication of the Rights of Woman*.[22]

On another level, however, this book intends to do more than recover these men's feminist contributions, rich as they are in and of themselves. Including men more fully in the early women's rights conversation also deepens our understanding of late-eighteenth-century constructions of gender, and especially of manhood and masculinity. This moment is generally regarded as one in which men embraced a chivalric or gallant model of masculinity that explicitly harkened back to medieval ideals. Within that context, to be a man was to be the protector of women; indeed, guardianship was seen as constitutive of masculine identity.[23] The leading male advocates of women's rights during this period, though, made the daring choice to define their own manhood in starkly different terms. As they asserted, real "manliness," a term that they employed frequently to shore up their feminist arguments, was predicated less on protecting and defending women than on acting humanely and rationally (behavior that was construed as fundamentally at odds with chivalry, with all of its "ceremonies

of adoration . . . unsupported by reason"[24]). On these grounds, it was the men who adopted a chivalrous stance toward women that were considered "unmanly," not those who supported women's rights. Such arguments did not always win these men many friends; more than a few recorded a strong sense of alienation from the majority of their sex, even from those within their reformist circles. Yet they simultaneously took pride in their position. In seeking to rescue women from their metaphorical cages, they were also redefining for themselves what it meant to be truly enlightened men living in a truly enlightened nation.[25]

In revealing these men's earnest even if sometimes frustrated attempts to reimagine gender roles, this book thus also highlights the degree to which the early women's rights conversation in Britain was a fundamentally collaborative effort. The men who embraced women's rights were not just fellow travelers, helping to create the right conditions for modern feminism to develop. Rather, they were central participants, working together with women to create more "perfect" selves and a more "perfect" culture in which sexual discrimination might be minimized. Many, in fact, used their positions and power to initiate and expand arguments in support of women's rights, ensuring that concrete efforts were made to translate egalitarian theories into social practices. Although sometimes also motivated by personal drives and desires, they insisted that women's rights were of national consequence, as of much import to men as to women. This book confirms, then, that the link between sex and feminism needs to be denaturalized.

Finally, just as a focus on these men helps to decouple sex and feminism, so it also calls heightened attention to the place of feminism *within*, instead of alongside, late Enlightenment British culture. While many radicals did not endorse women's rights, there was a more dense and intricate feminist vanguard than previously thought, one that extended well beyond the Wollstonecraft-Godwin circle. What is more, this vanguard, or at least its most energetic participants, believed that securing women's rights, however variously understood, was crucial to the project of "perfecting" their nation. For many of the men advocating women's rights, as for the women with whom they corresponded, feminism was not an ancillary concern, to be treated gingerly and with profound hesitation. Rather, it was seen as an integral part of the broader radical reformist platform, one that included curbing the slave trade, achieving civil rights for religious Dissenters, and extending the franchise. In the words of William Hodgson, a physician active in the London Corresponding Society, it was within the context of a

"general struggle" for freedom that it would be "a scandalous omission to overlook the injuries of the FAIRER PART OF THE CREATION."[26] This book thus serves as an important corrective to those who charge that enlightened thinkers in Britain were neither truly egalitarian nor universalist in their conceptions of self and society. While not apologizing for the British Enlightenment's shortcomings, I do show that a core group of men wrestled with the meaning of the "man" at the center of so many of their arguments.

Who, exactly, were these men, and what were their relationships? Why did they choose to elaborate plans for female emancipation? How did they approach this potentially intractable subject? Those are the questions taken up in this book, which I develop and probe over the following five chapters. Chapter One, "Becoming Champions of the Fair Sex," lays the foundation for this investigation by delving into the lives and worlds of the men at the center of this study. Situating these men within the late British Enlightenment, a philosophical movement "press[ing] for the completion of commitments half-fulfilled" by the Glorious Revolution, this chapter charts the various influences that encouraged them—against the odds—to embrace women's rights.[27] The centennial celebrations of the Glorious Revolution, followed soon after by the outbreak of the French Revolution, made the "rights of man" the rallying cry of reformers across Britain. Yet most radicals refused to extend those same rights to women, even as they gathered in their clubs and societies to argue for the abolition of slavery and the slave trade, religious toleration, and the expansion of the electorate. What, then, distinguished those men who took up the cause of women's rights from their peers? As I demonstrate, a particular and unyielding commitment to perfectibility, or progress through reason, lay at the heart of most men's decision to become feminist advocates. It was not just perfectibility, however, that informed their thought and actions. In deciding to tackle this contentious matter, many of these figures were also guided by their religious beliefs (chiefly Rational Dissent) and their own experiences of ostracism, as well as by personal exchanges and interactions with women, both at home and abroad.

The next four chapters concentrate on questions of process, mapping *how* certain men took on particular women's rights issues. These chapters also consider the central debates and divisions that emerged in the course of these feminist conversations, drawing attention in several instances to

the challenges that men (as well as women) encountered in trying to think their way out of patriarchy. Chapter Two, "Cultivating Woman," examines men's attempts to legitimate – and initiate – equal education for men and women, perceived by many as the most important step that could be taken to liberate the "fair sex." It also traces the disagreements that arose between them on the question of intent. Some reformers, who for heuristic purposes I label "instrumentalists," insisted that women who received an equal education would exclusively benefit the family. Others, whom I describe as "egalitarians," suggested that learned ladies would directly and actively contribute to the public good.[28] To illustrate this tension, I turn to Anderson's Institution, founded in accordance with the wishes of scientist and natural philosopher John Anderson in Glasgow in 1796. Anderson hoped that the school would provide female students with "such a stock of general knowledge" as to make them the "most cultivated in all of Europe."[29] At the same time, he was adamant that the education offered women at his institution would only better prepare them for their domestic duties.

For some of those men who identified female education as serving a broader purpose, it was only logical that they facilitate women's entrance into public life, and help them secure greater cultural and economic autonomy. Chapter Three, "Publishing Woman," draws attention to men's endeavors to support women as they entered the professions, with a specific emphasis on the literary marketplace. Of course, women of letters had long found ways into print without men's assistance—Elizabeth Montagu of the Bluestocking Circle is a striking example. But even the most talented women writers could encounter obstacles in their attempts to go public with their work; many lacked the networks, insider knowledge, and, often, confidence needed to submit materials to editors and publishers. As I argue, certain men within the "literary public sphere" were keenly aware of those obstacles and strove to ease women's entrance into print. Several prominent writers offered extended meditations on the value of female authorship, while key booksellers and literary critics helped women to establish professional connections, navigate the publishing process, and negotiate financial terms and contracts. To be sure, there was money to be made in these pursuits. But men also assisted aspiring female authors because they believed that women had a right to write and needed ways to maintain financial independence.

Even these initiatives, however, did not accord women the full range of rights and opportunities that certain reformers deemed necessary. Just as efforts to provide women with equal education raised questions about the

objectives of that education, so efforts to encourage women toward greater independence raised questions about the very legal and political systems that conspired to make women economically and socially vulnerable in the first place. Why did women have so little control over their property? Why were husbands expected to provide for their wives? Why was society itself structured around the institution of marriage? Those are the central questions addressed in Chapter Four, "Revising the Sexual Contract," which illuminates some men's struggles to create more equitable property arrangements and marital relations, concentrating especially on the problem of the *femme coverte,* or legal status of the married woman. Taking advantage of their training in and exposure to stadial theory, biblical criticism, and legal commentary, scholars, social reformers, theologians, and novelists examined the laws, customs, and traditions surrounding domesticity, only to conclude that here, too, were institutions in need of rational revision. In response, they proposed reforms that ranged from arguments for female control over property to demands for more flexible divorce and custody laws to the abolition of marriage itself.

Given the links between the family and the state, it should not entirely surprise us that some of the most democratic-minded men would extend their egalitarian critiques to the political sphere as well. In late-eighteenth-century Britain, less than 20 percent of men had the right to vote, and all women were excluded from formal participation in national politics. For the subjects at the center of the final chapter, "Imagining the Female Citizen," these exclusions were of critical concern. Seizing on natural rights theory, constitutionalist rhetoric, and sensibility, these ultraradicals launched a campaign to overturn a limited conception of citizenship, emphasizing instead the sexes' shared capacity for political engagement. This truly was a radical argument, as politics had long been held to be a bastion of male privilege. Wollstonecraft herself, after all, had only "hinted" at the possibility of female suffrage.[30] In providing a range of arguments for male *and* female citizenship, then, these men helped to launch a debate that would continue through the Victorian and Edwardian periods.

The conclusion charts these men's paths into the nineteenth century. Although some abandoned feminism after the revolutionary moment had passed, there were several who continued to support and work for domestic reform, remaining attentive to questions of women's rights. As Thomas Starling Norgate remarked toward the end of his life, in 1859, many of his "sober hints" regarding women's status were still "worthy of attention."[31] During the first decades of the nineteenth century, certain men lobbied for

the passage of a Reform Bill that included women, and schooled younger male reformers in their egalitarian arguments. This next generation, in turn, often incorporated such arguments into their own speeches and pamphlets. As a result, the men themselves became models for subsequent generations of progressive male reformers, who recognized that they had a particular responsibility to speak out in the name of "half the human race."[32] What emerges over the course of this examination, then, is a vital and long-standing feminist tradition, one in which men repeatedly identified women's rights as firmly within their provenance.