

# Mary's Birthday

## An encounter with Mary Wollstonecraft

This CD celebrates the pioneering work of the Eighteenth Century feminist writer Mary Wollstonecraft. In preparing it all the members were struck again and again by the enduring insight and relevance of the author's ideas.

*Original Stories for Children:* Mary Wollstonecraft wrote this work in 1787-8 as a commission for a work to take advantage of a growing market for children's books. As you will hear, the work was very different from the type of work loved by parents and children today. It shows sides of Mary than those we know from her radical feminist works, and from her description of motherhood found in her *Lessons [for Fanny]*. You will also meet one of the great, though lesser known characters of English literature, Mrs Mason.

The dialogue is off set by children's songs and rhymes of the period. These are, in order of presentation:

*Jacky; The Master; The cock crows in the morn; Elsie Marley; A little cock sparrow; Three children; Come when you're called.*

## An Afternoon in Paris:

Mary Wollstonecraft moved to France in 1792, inspired to do so by the creation there of a new revolutionary society. In this scene she meets and exchanges ideas with Olympe de Gouges, another outstanding feminist writer, who is perhaps less well known in England than she should be.

The extracts from her play *Black Slavery*, and her *Declaration of the Rights of Woman* are often still startling in their modernity. But as you will hear, great minds do not always think alike.

Songs: *Ça ira; La Guillotine.*

**Mary's Birthday:** This piece was originally created to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Mary's birth and was performed close to the writer's tombstone in St Pancras Old Churchyard. Mary Wollstonecraft wrote *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* during the last four months of 1791, at a speed which has amazed many commentators.

So we imagined that at her birthday tea in 1791, Mary could have been formulating the ideas which came so quickly later in the year. There are some contrasting comments from a visiting male authority on the subject.

Songs: *Sorry the Day; Man, Man, Man.*

Other than the introductory comments, nearly all the script of the album consists of the words actually written by Mary Wollstonecraft (and in the second item by Olympe de Gouges), but presented in dramatic form. With one exception, all the music dates from the period or before. The lyrics of the two songs in French are given here. The English version is meant to catch the spirit of the lyrics rather than be a word for word or archaic translation.

## Ça Ira

Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Le peuple en ce jour sans cesse répète,  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Malgré les mu ns tout réussira.  
Nos ennemis confus en restent là  
Et nous allons chanter « Alléluia ! »  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,

*It'll work out !  
Today the people are constantly repeating  
It'll work out !  
We'll succeed in spite of the traitors to our cause  
We are getting the better of our enemies  
And we will be singing Alleluia !  
It'll work out !*

Avec plaisir on dira :  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira !  
Ça ira, malgré les mutins tout réussira.

*We'll joyfully repeat  
It'll work out !  
We'll succeed in spite of the traitors to our cause*

Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Le peuple en ce jour sans cesse répète,  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Malgré les mu ns tout réussira.  
Nos ennemis confus en restent là  
Et nous allons chanter « Alléluia ! »  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,

*It'll work out !  
Today the people are constantly repeating  
It'll work out !  
We'll succeed in spite of the traitors to our cause  
We are getting the better of our enemies  
And we will be singing Alleluia !  
It'll work out !*

Celui qui s'élève on l'abaissera  
Celui qui s'abaisse on l'élèvera.  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Tout Français s'exercera.  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira !  
Ça ira, malgré les mulins tout réussira.

*The high will be brought down  
And the lowly will be lifted up  
It'll work out !  
All French people will strive  
It'll work out !  
We'll succeed in spite of the traitors to our cause*

Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Les aristocrates à la lanterne ;  
Ah ! ça ira, ça ira, ça ira,  
Les aristocrates on les pendra.

*It'll work out !  
String up the aristocracy  
It'll work out !  
We'll hang the aristocrats*

## La Guillotine

Guillotiner  
Médecin  
Politique,  
Imagine un beau matin  
Que pendre est inhumain  
Et peu patriotique  
Et sa main  
Fait soudain  
une machine  
humainement qui tuera,  
Et que l'on nommera  
Guillotine

*Guillotine  
Doctor  
Politician  
Decides one fine day  
That it is inhumane to hang people  
And unpatriotic  
So he  
Quickly designs  
A machine  
Which will kill humanely  
And which will be called  
The guillotine*

## Acknowledgements and sources:

The brief title of Mary Wollstonecraft's work for children is *Original Stories from Real Life*. A scanned version of the original book can be obtained by going to the Google/books site. The songs and rhymes in this section were: *Jacky* (lyric trad, music Edward Lee); *The Master* (lyrics anon. tune is a variant of *Over the Hills and Far Away*); *The cock crows in the morn* (trad children's rhyme); *Elsie Marley* (variant of *Nancy Dawson*, trad.; the theme was used in *The Beggar's Opera*); *A little cock sparrow* (trad children's rhyme); *Three children* (lyric trad, music Edward Lee); *Come when you're called* (trad children's rhyme). The descriptive passage from *Original Stories* was set to music by Edward Lee.

Olympe de Gouges' *Declaration* can be downloaded in English at [www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/decwom2.html](http://www.library.csi.cuny.edu/dept/americanstudies/lavender/decwom2.html) and in French at [www.philo5.com/Mes%20lectures/GougesOlympeDe-DeclarationDroitsFemme.htm](http://www.philo5.com/Mes%20lectures/GougesOlympeDe-DeclarationDroitsFemme.htm) Her play can be downloaded in English at [http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/other\\_works.htm](http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/other_works.htm) and in French at [http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/literary\\_works/esclavage.pdf](http://slavery.uga.edu/texts/literary_works/esclavage.pdf)

One of the many variants of the lyrics of *Ça ira* can be found at [http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ah\\_!\\_ça\\_ira](http://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ah_!_ça_ira).

The song can be heard in an original version at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMi5gDI34NE&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YMi5gDI34NE&feature=related) There is also a well-known modified version by Edith Piaf at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rauZMrXqRu0&feature=related](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rauZMrXqRu0&feature=related)

The song *La guillotine* can be heard at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZW0kAQ\\_F38](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XZW0kAQ_F38)

Interestingly, this anonymous song (originally a minuet theme) appeared first in the Royalist newspaper *Les Actes des Apôtres* in 1789 to satirise the new invention of Doctor Guillotin. At that point they did not foresee the use to which it would soon be put.

The text of *Mary's Birthday* is taken entirely from *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman*. The text is readily available either for download from Google/books or in printed form in Penguin Classics or Oxford World Classics. The lyrics and music of *Sorry the Day* are unknown but are believed to have originated in Ireland. The lyrics of *Man, Man, Man* were written by Peter Mottaux to a tune by Henry Purcell, for use in the play *The United Lovers* by Thomas Scott in his play *The Mock Marriage* (1696).

Grateful acknowledgement is made of the help of the staff of the Cecil Sharp House Library. We are especially grateful for the chance to consult a range of sources and notably *Broadside Ballads* (ed Lucie Skeeping, Faber 2005), *My Song is My Own* (Kathy Henderson, Frankie Armstrong and Sandra Kerr, Pluto Press, 1982), *The Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes* (Iona and Peter Opie, editors, Oxford University Press, 1951).

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