

# An interview with Helen Edmundson, author of *Mary Shelley*

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13 June 2012

*Helen Edmundson is an award-winning playwright, particularly well known for her stage adaptations of classic novels such as Leo Tolstoy's Anna Karenina and George Eliot's The Mill on the Floss. Her version of Tolstoy's War and Peace was produced at the National Theatre in 1996.*

*She has written a number of other plays and film scripts, and is currently working on a new play commissioned by the National Theatre, as well as a film script on the life of Mary Magdalene.*

*The WSWS recently spoke to Edmundson about her play Mary Shelley.*

WSWS: What first drew you to the subject of Mary Shelley?

Helen Edmundson: The idea came to me after I had been discussing with friends about books we loved. One of my favourites was *Frankenstein*. But it was not a book I wanted to dramatise, as I had done with *Anna Karenina*, *The Mill on the Floss* and others.

The name of Mary Shelley was of course familiar to me, but I didn't know very much about her. I knew she was very young when she wrote *Frankenstein*, and I was interested to know how that came about. She was influenced by her father William Godwin and his political beliefs. Percy Shelley was a great admirer of Godwin's book, *Enquiry Concerning Political Justice* [1793]. As I carried out my research I came to realise that it was an important three-way relationship and I wanted to make this the centre of the play.

WSWS: The dialogue is very convincing and does not seem at all contrived. Was any of it derived from

letters or journals?

HE: Not much. I did a huge amount of research, and read everything I could lay my hands on. Mary's journal was very frustrating. She wrote about the details of her life, but you didn't get much sense of what she was thinking. Godwin's diaries were extraordinary. They were written every day and were codified when referring to different people. They are available online. Shelley was easier because he wore his heart on his sleeve, and of course there are the poems.

I read a lot of Godwin's writings and also some fantastic interpretations of his work including Don Locke's *A Fantasy of Reason* [1980]. Also Paul Foot's book *Red Shelley* [1980] and biographies of Mary.

Gradually, I began to build up some idea of their characters and beliefs. When I felt I had come to grips with where they were coming from, I was able to allow them to become real people.

WSWS: The theatrical device of having the characters moving around, so that the audience could glimpse them carrying out their daily tasks behind the scenes, I found so simple, but wonderful. The actors were always present.

HE: That was [director] Polly Teale's idea. It gives a unity to the play. She wanted everyone to feel that life was continuing. She wanted to immerse the audience in the life of this family on Skinner Street, where so much of the action takes place.

Godwin's love for Mary Wollstonecraft was very real. I wanted to make sure that I gave her a role, that she had a tangible presence. The play begins with her attempted suicide and the effect of her life on her daughter. At one time I thought I would bring her in more, but there wasn't space. But her influence is there.

Godwin's situation was very difficult. He was forced

by circumstances beyond his control to make unacceptable compromises. It's ironic that Shelley ended up being the teacher, telling Godwin that he couldn't back down, that he had to keep going. But Godwin had reached a stage in his life which was so complicated, with the demands of the children and the family, and of making a living. And the terrible threat of debtors' prison.

Godwin continued to write. In his children's books there was a covert message of the importance of education and social change. Deep down he had a powerful self-belief, or he wouldn't have been able to write *Political Justice*. But the downside of his tunnel vision was that it affected the lives of people around him quite badly. Having said that, I have a huge respect for people who have the courage of their convictions. Godwin was one of these.

WSWS: I was struck by the quality of the ensemble playing.

HE: It was a combination of Polly, the producer and the actors. She never takes any shortcuts. From the start there was a tremendous amount of research, with all the actors having to make their own independent research. There was a lot of improvisation as well.

When I visited rehearsals after about ten days it felt like a real family, with a family dynamic. All the actors worked so hard, physically, and on their character's emotional and mental lives.

WSWS: I was struck by the very warm response from the audience in Leeds. Has it been the same everywhere?

HE: I think it has. The play has certainly sparked a lot of discussion—how relevant these problems are for today's world, how Godwin and Mary fought so passionately for a new way of seeing and changing society.

I think the view that people are so stressed that they just want to be entertained, with nothing but musicals and comedies, is completely wrong. We should give audiences more credit than that. They will respond seriously if presented with serious work.

Plays look at how we choose to live our lives, whether simply for ourselves or with the consciousness of forwarding mankind.

Democracy may have come on since Shelley's time, but, on the other hand, wealth and property are still inherited, the divide between rich and poor is as great

as ever, and greed and selfishness have prevailed for as long as I can remember. And the Church still has a huge influence on morality.

It has also struck me that some of Godwin's seemingly outlandish claims in *Political Justice* don't seem so crazy any more. For example, the idea that mankind will one day defeat illness and become "immortal". Yes, we are a long way from that, but our scientific advances are allowing us to defeat illness on so many fronts and to live longer and longer.

And the dedication of scientists and their desire to improve the lives of all mankind have led to those advances—not far from the possibilities that Godwin was predicting and hoping for.



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