

William Godwin Biography

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Biography

The English political theorist and writer William Godwin (1756-1836) was a libertarian anarchist and utopian proponent of a natural, rational, secular society.

William Godwin, son of an Independent minister, was born on March 3, 1756, at Wisbeck, Cambridgeshire. Trained for the ministry at Hoxton Academy, a Dissenting college, he became a Sandemanian minister in East Anglia and the Home Counties from 1778 to 1783. The Sandemanians, a radical, fundamentalist sect expelled by the Presbyterians and accepted by the Independents, continued to influence Godwin's secular thought even after he became an atheist. In particular, he retained Sandemanian doctrines of communal property, of opposition to the authority of church and state, and of the progressive reform of individual character and conduct.

Godwin's earliest work, published anonymously, was a prospectus for a private school, *An Account of the Seminary That Will Be Opened ... in Surrey* (1784). This revealed his characteristic belief in an egalitarian society which would form human nature through a continuous educational process, benevolently encouraging individual reason, justice, and moral law. Godwin developed these principles in his most important work, *An Enquiry concerning the Principles of Political Justice and Its Influence on General Virtue and Happiness* (1793). In part a refutation of Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* (1790), the *Enquiry* rejected property and power as just foundations for political society. Living in a time of rapid industrial development, Godwin longed for a simple communal economy in which individuals would progress indefinitely toward increasing rationality and equity.

Of Godwin's 35 other works the most important are *The Adventures of Caleb Williams* (1794), a social novel; *The Enquirer* (1797); *History of the Commonwealth of England* (1824); and *Thoughts on Man* (1831). He died in London on April 7, 1836.

Godwin's personal life seldom approached his philosophical ideals of individual nobility and generosity. In 1797 he married the radical feminist Mary Wollstonecroft, who died 6 months later. Left with an infant daughter, he married Mary Jane Clairmont in 1801. His life was rarely conventional, but he was outraged when his daughter, Mary, went to live with the married Percy Bysshe Shelley, long Godwin's financial supporter and committed disciple.

The influence of Godwin's writings on his younger contemporaries was considerable. Such disparate figures as the utopian socialist Robert Owen, the radical Francis Place, the socialist economist William Thompson, and even Karl Marx were impressed by Godwin's political and economic thought.