

1816 and 2020: The Years Without Summers

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[See table of contents](#)

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Article abstract

The WPHP Monthly Mercury is the podcast for the Women's Print History Project (WPHP), a bibliographical database that seeks to provide a comprehensive account of women's involvement in print in a long Romantic period. The podcast provides us with an opportunity to develop in-depth analyses of our data. The December 2020 episode, "1816 and 2020: The Years Without Summers," explores women's writing in the WPHP inspired by 1816, known as the Year Without a Summer, when abnormally cold weather, exacerbated by the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, led to crop failures and typhus and cholera epidemics. Often remembered as the cold and fog-laden year in which an 18-year-old Mary Shelley came up with the idea for *Frankenstein*, 1816 was a year of catastrophe more generally. In this episode, hosts Kate Moffatt and Kandice Sharren explore how the bibliographical metadata contained in the WPHP can uncover a wider range of voices writing about catastrophe. Our findings, which include political writing, travel memoirs, and poetry, reveal the lived experiences of women in a tumultuous time. We conclude by meditating on the nature of literary production during catastrophe, and how our own experiences during the upheavals of 2020 influenced our approach to the books that we uncovered.

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Romanticism on the Net

1816 and 2020: The Years Without Summers

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Abstract

The *WPHP Monthly Mercury* is the podcast for the Women's Print History Project (WPHP), a bibliographical database that seeks to provide a comprehensive account of women's involvement in print in a long Romantic period. The podcast provides us with an opportunity to develop in-depth analyses of our data. The December 2020 episode, "1816 and 2020: The Years Without Summers," explores women's writing in the *WPHP* inspired by 1816, known as the Year Without a Summer, when abnormally cold weather, exacerbated by the aftermath of the Napoleonic Wars, led to crop failures and typhus and cholera epidemics. Often remembered as the cold and fog-laden year in which an 18-year-old Mary Shelley came up with the idea for *Frankenstein*, 1816 was a year of catastrophe more generally. In this episode, hosts Kate Moffatt and Kandice Sharren explore how the bibliographical metadata contained in the *WPHP* can uncover a wider range of voices writing about catastrophe. Our findings, which include political writing, travel memoirs, and poetry, reveal the lived experiences of women in a tumultuous time. We conclude by meditating on the nature of literary production during catastrophe, and how our own experiences during the upheavals of 2020 influenced our approach to the books that we uncovered.

Biographical Note

Kandice Sharren completed her PhD in English at Simon Fraser University in 2018. Her research investigates the relationship between the material features of the printed book and narrative experimentation during the Romantic period. She is the Lead Editor for the *Women's Print History Project*.

Kate Moffatt has been the Firm Editor for the *Women's Print History Project* since 2016. She completed her MA at Simon Fraser University in 2019. Her research focuses on women's pedestrianism in the long eighteenth century.

Podcast Episode Description

1. As 2020 draws to a tumultuous close, join hosts Kate Moffatt and Kandice Sharren as they look back—all the way to 1816. Often remembered as the cold and fog-laden year in which an 18-year-old Mary Shelley came up with the idea for *Frankenstein*, 1816 was a year of catastrophe more generally, known colloquially as “The Year Without a Summer” or “Eighteen Hundred and Froze to Death.” This double episode, peer reviewed by *Romanticism on the Net*, explores how the bibliographical metadata contained in the WPHP can help us uncover a wider range of voices and genres, including political writing, travel memoirs, and poetry. These works reveal the lived experiences of women in a time of upheaval, but also provide an opportunity to meditate on the nature of literary production during catastrophe, especially how our own experiences during the upheavals of 2020 shaped our response to the books that we uncovered.
2. If you're interested in learning more about this topic, we have compiled a list of resources and suggestions for further reading, available here:
<https://womensprinthishistoryproject.com/blog/post/58>

“1816 and 2020: The Years Without Summers”

3. The *WPHP Monthly Mercury* dives into the details of working on *The Women's Print History Project*, a bibliographical database that traces women's involvement in print between 1700 and 1836. Sharing the stories of prolific and not-so-prolific women authors and the oft-widowed women publishers, printers, and booksellers of the period, as well as the rabbit-hole-filled processes of recovery and the adventures of our research assistants,

our project manager, and our primary investigator, “The WPHP Monthly Mercury” centres the discovery of women and their work.

4. We are fast approaching the end of this (incredibly long) year. 2020 has been a year of climate crisis, of political upheaval, of a global pandemic; on a smaller scale, it has been a year of working from home, of finding new ways of forming community, and of learning how to function in a world that looks drastically different from years past.
5. In this peer-reviewed episode of *The WPHP Monthly Mercury*, hosts Kandice Sharren and Kate Moffatt put 2020 and its many catastrophes into conversation with 1816, known as “the Year Without a Summer,” the unusually cold year during which Mary Shelley began to pen *Frankenstein*. More generally, 1816 was, like 2020, a year of catastrophes, marked by riots, political upheaval, and typhus and cholera epidemics set against a change in the weather that we now know was caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora in Indonesia. This episode uses the WPHP to explore what other works exist about those years beyond what might be called the “1816 canon” — think Lord Byron, Mary Shelley, John Polidori. Looking at Elizabeth Heyrick’s *Exposition of one principal cause of the national distress*, Helen Maria Williams’s *Letters on the events which have passed in France since the Restoration in 1815*, Charlotte Caroline Richardson’s *Harvest*, Jane Waldie Watts’s *Sketches descriptive of Italy in the years 1816 and 1817*, and Frances Jane Carey’s *Journal of a Tour in France in the years 1816 and 1817*, we examine how women writers acknowledge global background catastrophe, what they can tell us about the voices we hear

and the voices we do not, and how our own experiences this year have shaped our readings of their works.

6. Including reflection pieces of the hosts' own experiences of 2020, as well as considerations of how the year's seemingly-endless disasters have had far-reaching and severe consequences whose effects have been distributed unevenly across gender, class, race, and geography, Episode 7: "1816 and 2020: The Years Without Summers" considers the intersection of print, production, and processing in both 1816 and 2020.

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WPHP entries mentioned in this episode, in the order they are referenced:

[Jane Waldie Watts](#) (Person)

[Sketches Descriptive of Italy](#) (Title)

[Mary Shelley](#) (Person)

[Frankenstein](#) (Title)

[Elizabeth Heyrick](#) (Person)

[Exposition of one principal cause of the national distress](#) (Title)

[Frances Jane Carey](#) (Person)

[Journal of a tour in France](#) (Title)

[Helen Maria Williams](#) (Person)

[Letters on the events which have passed in France Since the Restoration in 1815](#) (Title)

Romanticism on the Net #74-75 (Spring-Fall 2020)

[Charlotte Caroline Richardson](#) (Person)

[Harvest, a poem](#) (Title)

[Percy Bysshe Shelley](#) (Person)

[George Gordon Byron](#) (Person)

[William Wordsworth](#) (Person)

[James Henry Leigh Hunt](#) (Person)

[Political Writing](#) (Genre)

[William Darton, Joseph Harvey, and Samuel Darton](#) (Firm, publisher/bookseller)

[Baldwin, C. Cradock, and W. Joy](#) (Firm, publisher/bookseller)

[Immediate, Not Gradual, Abolition](#) (Title)

[Elizabeth Heyrick, Mother of Immediatism](#) (Spotlight)

[Travel Writing](#) (Genre)

[Elizabeth Isabella Spence](#) (Person)

[Letters from the North Highlands, During the Summer 1816](#) (Title)

[John Taylor and James Augustus Hessey](#) (Firm, publisher/bookseller)

[John Murray \[ii\]](#) (Firm)

[Poetry](#) (Genre)

[Jane Austen](#) (Person)

[Persuasion](#) (Title)

[The Last Man](#) (Title)

[Emma](#) (Title)

[Northanger Abbey](#) (Title)

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