

The Martineau Society

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President: Mrs. Sophia Hankinson
Chairperson: Prof. Ruth Watts
Secretary: Mrs. Jane Bancroft
Treasurer: Prof. Gaby Weiner
Newsletter Editor: Mr. Bruce Chilton

Contents

	Page
<i>Editor's Note</i>	2
<i>“Nineteenth-Century British Travelers in the New World”</i> editor Christine DeVine Book Review by Elisabeth Sanders Arbuckle	3
<i>“Harriet Martineau and Social Conflict: Political Economy into Fiction into Melodrama” (Part 2)</i> by John Vint	4
<i>“The Age of the Female Novelists”</i> by Sharon Connor	9
<i>“Harriet Martineau’s “Society in America”: An Influential Text”</i> by Stuart Hobday	14
<i>“Harriet Martineau and Sociology”</i> by Gaby Weiner	19
<i>Report of the Inaugural Harriet Martineau Lecture for Norwich UNESCO City of Literature – Ali Smith’s “The Hour and the Woman”</i> by Bruce Chilton	24
<i>List of Recent New Members</i>	26
<i>Martineau Society Contact Information</i>	27

Martineau Society Subscription Information:

Yearly subscriptions are due on January 1st.

* UK: Individual members £20 // Concessionary rate £10 // Institutional membership £45. Life membership rate is £200.

* Overseas: Individual members \$37.50 // Concessionary rate \$25. This may be paid in dollars to Prof. Elisabeth Arbuckle, Condo. Montebello M526 Trujillo Alto PR00976 USA.

Editor's Note

Members of the Martineau Society, including your Editor, were surprised and delighted at the interest in the inaugural Harriet Martineau lecture at Norwich Playhouse in May. Well done to our member, Stuart Hobday, who drew the attention of the Norwich Writers' Centre to the neglect of Harriet even in Norwich, the city of her birth. Moreover, it seems the proposal for an annual lecture series named after Harriet enhanced the successful application by Norwich to become the 2013 UNESCO City of Literature.

After the review by Elisabeth Arbuckle of a new book, "Nineteenth Century British Travelers in the New World", this Newsletter looks at many aspects of Harriet's life and writings. John Vint completes his survey of Harriet's expansion of her views of political economy into fiction and melodrama. Sharon Connor contributes a revised version of the paper given at the Society's Conference at Bristol in 2012, as does Stuart Hobday. Sharon looks at female novelists in the nineteenth century while Stuart examines *Society in America*.

Stuart's article and the article submitted by Gaby Weiner complement each other in looking at Harriet Martineau's contribution to Sociology, "the study of human society and its problems" according to the Shorter Oxford Dictionary.

Many thanks to our contributors to this Newsletter. As ever, the errors are all the responsibility of your Editor who blames them on the inclement weather described as "spring" here in the east of England. This prolonged winter makes us look forward to the Martineau Society Conference in July.

You may be reading this Newsletter before the Society's annual Conference in Oxford on 25 – 28 July, 2013. If so, please forgive this advertisement. It may be there are still places at the Conference for members to fill as delegates. Do look at the Society's website for full details.

The Conference programme is full and varied with papers on Harriet's ideas and writings and with looks at contemporary figures including Daniel O'Connell, Elizabeth Jesser Reid and Elizabeth Gaskell. As well as these learned contributions, the Conference has opportunities for fun! The Social Evening will be happy exotica. The auction for the Society's funds following our annual dinner will be great amusement if previous years are reliable guides. If you have items of possible interest to the Society's members and suitable for the auction, please send them to our Treasurer, Gaby Weiner.

Do enjoy the Newsletter.

Book Review

***“Nineteenth-Century British Travelers in the New World”* editor Christine DeVine**

Review by Elisabeth Sanders Arbuckle

The essays in this critically-oriented collection survey a range of well-known British travelers to America beginning with John Muir and Robert Louis Stevenson and concluding with Henry James. In the opening essay, Matthew Kaiser claims that the two Scotsmen found in California the fulfilment of a boyhood love of the highlands, while Keiko Nitta sees James's return to America as a melancholy experience. Unsurprisingly, Harriet Martineau figures prominently in several of the studies including Deborah Logan's on "Transatlantic Abolitionism," Kendall McClellan's on Martineau and Canadian traveler Isabella Bird (author of *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*), and Elizabeth Deis's and Lowell Frye's on British travelers and the "condition of America" question in the 1830s. Essays on other travelers Martineau knew (or knew about) comprise those on Frances Wright, Dickens, Fanny Trollope, Fanny Kemble and Basil Hall.

Logan helpfully updates her study of Martineau's "transatlantic abolitionism" in *The Hour and the Woman*, summarizing Martineau's later journalistic fight against racial, sexual and social slavery. McClellan notes the frequent comparison of Martineau's *Society in America* to Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America* and contends that Martineau's work seems "frequently to target mother England." Deis and Frye consider

the travel narratives of Hall, Trollope, Martineau, Fanny Butler (Kemble) and Frederick Marryat in Jacksonian America and look at reviews of their works by critics such as William Empson, John Wilson Croker, Bulwer-Lytton and John Stuart Mill (Mill urging the need for a study of “liberty”). Additionally relevant for Martineau scholars, John McBratney notes Dickens’s valuing of her “American” books and traces the failure of his “Transatlantic Dream.” Susan Casteras treats British artists’ frequent sympathetic portrayal of American slaves, seemingly calculated to skirt an ambiguity towards the *sides* in the American Civil War, reminding us of Martineau’s crusade in the *Daily News* to steady public sympathy for the North.

In her introductory essay, Christine DeVine notes the nineteenth-century penchant for travel writing, including that of women travelers. Such texts reflected highly debated issues of the time: “slavery, politics, gender, identity formation, and constructions of nature.” All of the essays in the collection feature copious footnotes; the book is handsomely produced and includes a wide-ranging bibliography.

Nineteenth-Century British Travelers in the New World. Christine DeVine, ed. 2013. Ashgate Publishing, Farnham, Surrey, UK. Number of pages is 334. The book includes 13 black and white illustrations. UK price is £60.00. US price is \$104.95 ISBN 978-1-4094-2726-1

Harriet Martineau and Social Conflict: Political Economy into Fiction into Melodrama (Part 2)

John Vint

The first part of this paper was published in the previous issue.

Factory Lad

The plot of the melodrama 'The Factory Lad' by John Walker, produced at the Surrey theatre in October 1832 is similar to that of 'The Hill and the Valley', namely the destruction of machinery and the firing of the factory – in this case a cotton mill.

The first Act of the play is set outside the mill and a group of five workers appear leaving the factory as the clock strikes eight on Saturday evening. They are awaiting their pay – the first from their new employer who is the son of their former master. They engage in some light conversation concerning their former employer who was seen as a poor

man's friend who would not desert the workers in times of need nor 'prefer steam machinery and other inventions to honest labour'. They hope that their new employer will be as kindly: a vain hope as it transpires. We are immediately introduced to the leading character George Allen who is portrayed very sympathetically as a sensible, hardworking man with a family to support. The new master of the factory 'Squire' Westwood arrives saying that he has something to tell them and one of the five men, Hatfield, declares that the old master always spoke his mind. Westwood informs them that there is less demand for the cotton and that the looms must be propelled by steam.

The men argue that the old master cared for the workers and would not turn them out even if it meant he had less profit. Westwood argues that steam will do the work more cheaply and asks them – do you not buy where you please, at the cheapest place? Hatfield says that there is no point in arguing – iron doesn't have feeling. Claiming to feel insulted Westwood tells them to get their wages and depart forever. The argument continues and Allen rushes out crying 'My Wife! My children!' and eventually followed by the men issuing threats.

The next scene takes place in Allen's house where his wife and two daughters are making lace and are about to prepare the supper. Allen rushes in full of anger and tells them the bad news that he has been turned out – 'that steam – that curse on mankind, that for the gain of a few, one or two, to ruin hundreds, is going to be at the factory!'

The men then meet in a public house – 'The Harriers' (landlord - a Mr Tapwell!) to discuss their intentions. They are joined by Will Rushton, an outcast and a poacher who becomes the leader of the group and they drink to the 'destruction of machinery'.

In the next scene the sacked workers and Rushton meet armed with various weapons and proceed to the factory where they break the machinery and set fire to the works in a scene reminiscent of 'The Hill and the Valley'. Eventually the group are caught and brought before the magistrate – Mr Justice Bias and his clerk Cringe (one begins to get a sense of whose side the playwright Walker is on!). In the courtroom Rushton accuses Justice Bias of corruption and Westwood gives his evidence. Bias orders the men to go before the Assizes (the higher court) to be judged. Rushton then shoots Westwood, the soldiers level their muskets at him and Allen, with his wife in his arms, and the other men all react with shock. The curtain falls to the sound of Rushton's hysterical laughter. As Vernon says it is clear that after their moment of triumph the men will all follow Westwood to their deaths.

The Factory Strike

The plot of the 'The Factory Strike', written by G. F. Taylor and put on at the Royal Victoria in London in 1838 also resembles that of 'The Hill and the Valley' – a factory is burnt and like in the 'The Factory Lad' the owner is murdered. The play opens with a group of workers sitting in the public house 'The Pig's Head' (landlord – a Mr Tim Guzzle!) discussing various matters. A man enters named Harris who is to play the role of troublemaker in the drama. He reports that someone they know has been sacked from a nearby factory which has introduced machinery, and when he took to begging the parish authorities put him in prison. Harris goes on that 'machinery is getting everywhere; true, our employers hold off; still we may expect it, or worse' (p8). The

men ask him to propose a toast; well he replies 'here's may manual labour never be cut down by machinery!', and the men all cheer (p9). Soon the employer Mr Ashfield enters and the men all rise and bow. He is there with a purpose and the text of the play continues:

ASHFIELD. My friends, being informed that you were passing your evening here, I have come to address a few words to you, and to set your mind at rest on a subject which present agitates ye: you know full well the feelings of myself and partners respecting machinery; it is not our wish to see the industrious labourers unemployed, still I assure you that our best exertions cannot keep pace with the powerful rivals who effectually oppose us; our business rapidly falls off, and total ruin threatens us. I now therefore, for myself and fellow partners, promise you employment without the aid of machines; but it must be at a reduced scale of wages.

There were cheers but some murmurings and Ashfield says that although some may moan he will be willing to open the books for their inspection. He leaves and the men led by Harris begin to incite the men with suggestions that the books could be false and that rather than accept lower wages he would rather burn the factory down. A worker named Warner (so named because he serves to warn the men!) enters and Harris proposes a strike. Warner counsels against – the employers 'propose as a last resource, a reduction of wages, and shall we basely frustrate their noble intentions? No, let us rather assist them, and not work their ruin and our own downfall' (p11). Harris and several others go to Ashfield and ask to see the books. Ashfield replies that his partners will not agree so he must withdraw his promise. Harris argues that unless the books are seen there will be a strike and Ashfield goes to ask his partners one more time. While he is away Warner again beseeches his fellow workers not to strike. When Ashfield returns he apologises but his partners refuse the request. The men then say that they will strike and Ashfield says that in that event he will commence the use of machinery. In the end the factory is burnt and in the attempt to stop them Ashfield is murdered.

Act II of the play is set three years later. Warner is still unemployed and the other men have become highwaymen. Ashfield's son returns to reclaim his property but after some further twists in the plot he is also murdered by the highwaymen and Warner is unfairly imprisoned for the crime. Eventually the killers are exposed and Warner is released.

Conclusions

The discussion of industrial conflict has taken us from theory to fiction and then to drama. Our findings can be grouped under two main headings. The first relates to the similarities and continuities between the three forms, and the second to the role of political economy in these attempts to popularise.

Similarities and continuities

We have seen that the two tales from Harriet Martineau were based on contemporary

principles of political economy. The settings reflected contemporary life and the realities of capitalist competition and technological change. There was great emphasis placed upon the notion of harmony of interests between workers and capitalists which was prevalent among political economists of the time. More specifically in 'The Hill and the Valley' she reveals an awareness of the Ricardian argument that in the short run the introduction of machinery may be harmful but also the generally accepted notion that in the long run it will be of benefit via its impact on productivity. In 'A Manchester Strike' she makes even more use of political economy in her explicit employment of the wages fund doctrine.

With regard to the continuities from Martineau to the two melodramas - as Sally Vernon has argued, the plays contained many of the same elements of plot and character that could be found in the two Martineau's *Tales* – 'The Hill and the Valley' and 'A Manchester Strike' as well as the first tale 'Life in the Wilds' (1977, pp124-125).

Popularisation and pedagogy: ideology or analysis

Between the principles of political economy at one end of the scale and the dramas at the other a considerable transformation has occurred. There is a substantial loss of explicit theoretical economic content matched by an increased importance of plot and character, and social and political sentiments. There is some continuity in the context – the changing nature of competitive capitalism, the impact of machinery, and the consequences of these forces on wages but this is not theorised in the dramas and would be familiar to an audience unacquainted with political economy. What was important for both political economists and the dramatists was the reception of their ideas. For the political economists their audience was the relatively highly sophisticated group of economists – members of the Political Economy Club – who while not agreeing on everything and indeed disagreeing vehemently on some issues nevertheless shared many ideas and a commitment to intellectual argument and debate. The dramatists were more conscious of their audiences and were careful to put on productions that would be in tune with their sympathies and sentiments.

For a political economist, then, the purpose of writing was to persuade other economists of the rigour and validity of one's theoretical ideas without regard to sentiments, although there may be general sympathy for the plight of the working classes. For the dramatist, the purpose was to entertain and involve the emotions of the audience, and if there were to be any inherent lessons these would be gained by engaging with the artistic aspects of the production not with any theoretical, didactic material.

For Harriet Martineau things were a little more difficult than for either the political economist or the dramatist – in a sense she was constrained between the competing demands of the two genres. She wished to teach key aspects of economic theory as well as to reach out to the hearts and minds of people via fiction in order to persuade them of certain truths. This has resulted in some criticism of her work as literature. For example, Deirdre David has argued that in Martineau's work 'the characters speak like the embodiment of the stiff principles that they are' (1987, p42). There is little scope for the characters to develop spontaneously as they might in the works of a great novelist such as Dickens for example. For the political economist the stiffer the principles the better; for the theatre owner or playwright the audience reaction was paramount.

Harriet accepted the former and cared little for the latter – her ambition was not to reinforce existing sentiments but to change them.

With regard to Martineau's employment of Classical political economy we can agree with Henderson that Martineau's writings were an accurate reflection of the Classical literature (1995, p77). The *Illustrations* did not contain any path breaking ideas although the tale *Demerara* on slavery is generally thought to be ahead of its time. John Stuart Mill argued in a letter to Carlyle that Martineau pushed the argument in favour of laissez faire to absurdity¹ but on the whole if there was criticism to be levelled for her portrayal of political economy it should be also partly levelled at the economists themselves. They put forward quite profound and wide-ranging propositions – such as the wages fund doctrine – but politely refrained from attempting to apply them in a popular context. Harriet, by contrast, took the bull by the horns and did not shirk what she thought was her duty – to educate the people in the true laws of political economy as seen through the Necessarian eyes of a Unitarian.

Despite the constraints she faced Harriet was remarkably successful in the short run, although it did not last. What does remain is a question – despite the difficulties and criticism, has anyone popularised economics *via fiction* as successfully since?

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¹ J. S. Mill to Thomas Carlyle, 11 and 12 April 1833. Quoted in Henderson 1995 (p90).

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John Stuart Mill, carte de visite, 1884.

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The Age of the Female Novelists

Sharon Connor

In her article for *Blackwood's Magazine* in 1855, Mrs Oliphant proclaimed that:

This, which is the age of so many things – of enlightenment, of science, of progress – is quite as distinctly the age of the female novelist.¹

Margaret Oliphant considered that the new wave of female novelists tackled the ‘vexed questions of social morality, the grand problems of human experience’, and attributed Charlotte Brontë as being at the forefront of this new form of writing, which was taking the literary world by storm. I would suggest that this form of female novel writing had begun more than a decade before the publication of Brontë’s works; and that there was not a deluge of female writers as suggested by some, predominantly male, critics - but rather that there was a qualitative not a quantitative shift in the writing being put forward for publication.

Mrs Oliphant quite rightly identified the era as an age of ‘science, of progress,’ In a climate that was dealing with the impact of huge social shifts created by the industrial revolution, and was increasingly enthusiastic in its reliance on facts and statistics – the fiction produced by female writers provided a form of human connection, an antithesis to the culture of facts, in which the books were being produced. In her essay ‘Women in France: Madame de Sablé’, George Eliot expressed how the female writer creates a subtlety and depth that male authors were unable to express: She wrote:

In art and literature, which imply the action of the entire being, in which every fibre of the nature is engaged, in which every peculiar modification of the individual makes itself felt, woman has something specific to contribute. Under every imaginable social conditions, she will necessarily have a class of sensations and emotions – the maternal ones – which must remain unknown to man².

Eliot is here suggesting that the best women writers were not attempting to imitate or compete with male writers, but instead were producing something original and distinctly female or ‘maternal.’

The Victorian social commentator W.R. Greg accused female writers of ‘flooding’ the literary market, with fiction that was ‘imperfect and superficial.’³ The more recent work of sociologist Richard Altick challenges Greg’s argument that there were an increasing number of female authors. Altick’s research shows that the proportion of female authors, which averaged 20% of published novels, remained consistent throughout the nineteenth century. Victorian criticism of women writers focused very much on their limited life experiences, suggesting that they were little more than pale imitators of men. There were also some, predominantly male, critics such as Greg, who viewed women writers as dangerous, suggesting that their influence filled impressionable female readers minds with unrealistic and superficial ideas. Yet I think it was the very different type of writing being offered by female authors, and indeed the originality and quality of writing that proved so popular with the reading public. What was seen by many, often male, critics as a flaw or weakness in female writing, that of focusing on the personal

¹Oliphant, M. ‘Modern Novelists – Great and Small,’ *Blackwood’s Magazine* May 1855.

² From *George Eliot. Selected Critical Writings* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1992) p. 37

³ Greg, W.R., ‘False Morality of Lady Novelists’ *National Review* January 1859.

experience, proves to be its very strength. Writing several years after the publication of *Deerbrook* Dora Greenwell, in her article for the *North British Review*, described the novel as 'a living soul, a living voice', through which women could write, unrestrained by past patriarchal conventions.

I believe that in fact the issues of 'ordinary existence'⁴ in fiction can be traced back to the late 1830s with the publication of Harriet Martineau's *Deerbrook*. In her introduction to the Penguin 2004 edition of the text, Valerie Sanders explains that, 'The public of the 1830s liked 'silver-fork' novels set in aristocratic circles, or 'Newgate' novels set in the underworld, or anything by Dickens.'⁵ Although an established journalist, Martineau struggled to find a publisher for her novel, which did not fit into the fashionable literary trends of the period. *Deerbrook* focused on the middle class, domestic lives of Hester and Margaret Ibbotson, and their friends and relatives. The novel undoubtedly engaged with many of the socio-political issues that were capturing the attentions of the public at this period, particularly the emerging debates surrounding marriage, employment opportunities for women and exploring the plight of the never-to-be-married woman. But Martineau's fiction offers more than just a form of social realism; it says what in any other medium would be the unsayable. In her autobiography, Martineau acknowledged how she had become constrained by factual writing, and longed for what she described as the freedom of fiction. The following two extracts are examples of the freedom of Harriet saying the unsayable. This first extract comes at the point when Margaret Ibbotson hears that the man she is secretly in love with, Philip Enderby, has become betrothed to another woman. Martineau's writing exemplifies the internal struggles of the individual, which demands close reading to fully appreciate the subtle shifts of self as they unravel:

She was stripped of all her heart's treasure, of his tones, his ways, his thoughts, - a treasure which she had lived upon without knowing it; she was stripped of it all - cast out - left alone - and he and all others would go on their ways, unaware that anything had happened! Let them do so. It was hard to bear up in solitude, when self-respect was gone with all the rest; but it must be possible to live on - no matter how - if to live was appointed. If not, there was death, which was better. (p. 263)

Margaret has not had Philip taken away, (he was never openly hers) but 'his tones, his ways, his thoughts,' are now lost. They had become a secret pleasure to her, this essence of Philip had become a treasure 'which she had lived upon without knowing it' and now consciously acknowledges its existence only at the point of loss. Margaret sees herself as now 'left alone', but this 'alone' is a sense of isolation with her feelings, in her grief at her loss, not only of her attachment to Philip but with her sense of loss of self respect. Her emotional turmoil is unknown to anyone, and there is almost a sense of disbelief that she had suffered such a crisis yet those around her would continue 'unaware' with their everyday lives. It is almost inconceivable that such a momentous event could happen, yet everyone else remains the same and can continue with their daily business untouched. Her sense of emotional aloneness over this situation is

⁴ Oliphant. M. Ibid

⁵ Martineau. H. *Deerbrook* (Penguin: London, 2004) p.xiv

exacerbated by her shame making it seem an experience that is impossible to share. There is a sense of shame at her sudden awareness of her sexual feelings for Philip, whom she had safely compartmentalized as a friend, and shame of an ego that had become dependent on a relationship that was undeserved, and not instigated by any overt intimation from Philip. Margaret's tone of shock and incredulity is stopped and controlled by the resolute 'Let them do so.' There has been no outward change externally for Margaret; this has been an internal upheaval. Her tone moves from an agitated and emotion driven syntax to one of hopeless resignation as she faces her future. Margaret believes she has lost her future hopes of happiness, embodied in 'all the rest', that fuller future now 'gone.' There is no acknowledgement of a return to the self she was before her attachment to Philip. There is a desperate need for belief expressed that Margaret can overcome her crisis and move on, but the vagueness of what that life can possibly hold, and that it would be a lesser life than the one she had believed lay ahead of her is conveyed in 'no matter how', giving that life an air of existence rather than life fully lived.

Margaret's sense of helplessness over what form that life may take and what control she might have over its outcome is revealed by the double use of the resigned 'if'. 'Life' ahead is unimaginable, but she finds comfort that 'there was death, which was better'. Death would end her internal suffering, but to view it as 'better' suggests that her unnamed and unfocused future as an unloved, unmarried woman is a worse prospect than death to Margaret. This example of the unsayable, allows for the raw pain of unrequited love, and the emerging fears at the prospect of a life to be spent alone, to be heard.

In *Deerbrook*, Martineau also controversially contests the ideological imperative that marriage was the panacea to all life's problems for women. She challenges what I would describe as the arrival fallacy of marriage – the belief that getting married automatically bestows a solution to all earlier unhappiness, resulting in a life of perfection. This is controversially explored in her portrayal of Hester, who within months of her marriage to Edward Hope, tells her sister Margaret of her disappointments in married life:

But, Margaret, mind what I say! Never marry, Margaret! Never love, and never marry, Margaret! [...] I assure you, you might trust me not to complain of my husband, I have no words in which to say how noble he is. But O! It is all true about the wretchedness of married life! I am wretched, Margaret! [...] I have no hope left. I am neither wiser, nor better, nor happier, for God having given me all that should make a woman what I meant to be. (pp. 241-2)

Hester had suffered from a propensity towards what is described in the text as an 'unamiable' nature, taking the form of jealous outbursts and low self esteem, seeing offences and insults by others when none has been intended. Marriage 'should' have cured Hester of this; it was her last hope of overcoming her disconsolate disposition. As married, in which she supposedly has 'all' that should have made her a perfect woman, Hester is not simply just disheartened by the failure of marriage to have cured her ill temper. She is vehemently warning her unmarried sister against ever taking a similar

step, to do so is to face a 'wretched' life that is totally without hope of ever improving, hope being something which had still existed as a single woman. Yet I feel Hester is being somewhat hard on herself, as she venerates her apparently blameless 'noble' husband. We as readers know Hester's instincts of feeling unloved to have some validity. Unbeknown to Hester, Edward Hope had married her because of social pressures whilst secretly being in love with her sister, Margaret.

Charlotte Brontë, whom Oliphant was to claim 'propounded' this original form of fiction contacted Harriet Martineau, to express her admiration of the originality of *Deerbrook*, and the long lasting impact it had on her. Writing under her professional male pseudonym, Currer Bell, she wrote:

17 November 1849

(Haworth)

Currer Bell offers a copy of "Shirley" to Miss Martineau's acceptance, in acknowledgement of the pleasure and profit ~~she~~ he has derived from her works. When C.B. first read "Deerbrook" he tasted a new and keen pleasure, and experienced a genuine benefit in his mind. "Deerbrook" ranks with the writings that have really done him good, added to his stock of ideas, and rectified his views of life.

A great friendship grew between Charlotte Brontë and Harriet Martineau, which lasted until Brontë severed that friendship after Harriet's review of Brontë's last completed novel, *Villette*. In her 1853 review for the *Daily News* Harriet had criticised the book for its 'prevalence of one tendency, or one idea, throughout the whole conception and action. All the female characters, in all their thoughts and lives, are full of one thing, or are regarded by the reader in the light of that one thought – love.' The implication that *Villette* was overly focused on romantic love is a criticism that could also be extended to Martineau's *Deerbrook*, although I believe that this would be a very simplistic and reductive way of reading either text. In her autobiography written in 1855, Harriet appeared somewhat embarrassed by her earlier work, she wrote:

I know the book to have been true to the state of thought and feeling I was then in, which I now regard as imperfect and far from lofty. (Vol 2, p. 116)

The truth of her 'thought' and 'feeling' is so important here. I began, and will close with a review by Margaret Oliphant. In her 1877 review of Harriet's autobiography, Mrs Oliphant declared Harriet to be 'not very much of a woman at all' (496). I suggest that to find the woman, and the beginnings of the thoughts and feelings of human experience – the maternal - in fiction, one must turn to *Deerbrook*.

(This is a revised version of the paper given at the annual meeting of the Martineau Society at Bristol, 12 – 15 July, 2012. Ed.)



Margaret Oliphant [Wiki Commons](#)

Harriet Martineau's "Society in America": An Influential Text

Stuart Hobday

Harriet Martineau wrote and published three texts within a year of her return from America in 1837. These were *Society in America*, *Retrospect of Western Travel* and *How to study Morals and Manners*. This was a time when Harriet was at the height of her fame both in Britain and America. *Society in America* was the central work of these three, encapsulating her thoughts on the state of America as she had found it on her journeying. What I would like to suggest in this paper is that this text had a far reaching influence on both subsequent historical events and in the western history of philosophical ideas. This was as much to do with the time and the place as the text itself.

Harriet spent 18 months in America and in that time was determined to see as much as possible. Although she subsequently played down her purpose it seems clear that she had a report in mind from the outset, a report that would analyse how this young country was shaping up in the light of its constitutional ideals which had been laid down 50 years earlier. Harriet had been a particular follower of Tom Paine who had also hailed from Norfolk and she would have been acutely aware of the ideological influence Paine attempted to impose as part of the founding fathers process. Indeed it is an interesting

comparison that both of these characters from Norfolk chose to get involved in an ideological judgemental relationship with the developing US and both also spent time there influencing the culture, making contacts and being hands on with their ideology. In 1835-7 at the time of Harriet's visit, the North / South divide was growing in America and was increasingly defined by the institution of slavery. This issue came to dominate her journey and subsequent writing but from the outset Harriet was interested in the politics, economics, criminal justice, habits and social life. Indeed the breadth of her approach was part of the basis for the subsequent influence of *Society in America* as she took an analytical view of the whole developing society. Her trip itself can be delineated by the occasion in Boston where she spoke out publicly against slavery as an institution being widely reported as describing it as an abomination. This came a year into a trip and subsequently she faced vitriol and danger and it was no longer safe for her to travel freely.

On her return there was much "publisher demand" for her inevitable report on her travels. She was offered the sizeable sum of £900 for her initial analytical text which she wanted to entitle *The Theory and Practise of Society in America* and it was her publisher who insisted on the abbreviated title. It was published in three volumes in 1838 and was widely read and reviewed. It was immediately recognised as an outspoken opinionated text which attacked the institution of slavery head on and painted a picture of America which, despite her protestations of admiration, was not flattering, with slavery as the insidious and pervading institution poisoning American life.

The text also proceeded to exclaim reservations about, amongst other things, the distrust of politicians, the predominance of charlatans in business, the compromised morality of businessmen and politicians, the manners of people in general, the treatment of children, the overly vested interests of property classes, the lack of authors, literacy and literature, the shrill tone of newspapers, the ineffectiveness of the prison system and the bad influence of religion. As regards slavery she was accusatory of those who hosted the system but also was explicit in accusing slave owners of sexual activity with female slaves.

It reads now as a curious mixture of analysis and personal experience but also represents the frustrations of an ideologue. Someone whose high expectations of a new society have not been met. In this sense it lays out a vision of what the country could be if it showed more adherence to its constitution. In many ways it can be seen as an accurate predictor of subsequent events. Slavery became America's defining issue in the 19th century only resolved by the vicious bloody conflict of the Civil War. Moreover the United States which emerged from the Civil War became a country increasingly aware of its ideological birth and the American constitution and Bill of Rights have only increased in the consciousness of Americans.

Society in America was widely read and reviewed. It came at the height of Martineau's fame and indeed the controversies and negativity it engendered undoubtedly began a receding of her fame. Typically she was not concerned with this and the tone of the book can almost be seen as a long self-destructive suicide note to her reputation in

America. Predictably, she was widely lambasted in America. Reviews claimed she was ill informed and biased but many were vitriolic and personal. One called her a 'sour old crabapple' and picked on her deafness as a cause of being ill informed. In Britain it was also negatively reviewed as by Disraeli who concluded: "There is something infinitely ludicrous in the vanity and presumption with which this lady squares the circle of American morals and discovers the longitude of impending civilisation of a new world!"

Not all of the response was negative. Behind negative public reviews there is evidence that amongst the growing number of intellectually-minded people the book was well regarded. It perhaps went well with those who valued idealism whilst much of the popular press was dominated by vested interest and a view that women should keep quiet about such things. The Darwin / Wedgwood circle responded well to it, Florence Nightingale later spoke positively of it and Charles Dickens called it the best book written on America. Deborah Logan has summed up the critical response and suggests that the vitriolic press reviews prove how threatened some were: "Not all of the reviews were negative, although those are the ones that provide the most revealing evidence of Martineau's political impact."

Society in America is often quoted as one of the founding texts of sociology. It was one of the first books to take a detached analytical view of a nominated society. It lays the basis for an evidential approach to how a society can function better. Even having the word 'Society' in the title seems to represent the oncoming modern approach which would come to dominate the 20th century. We see here the beginnings of an ideological approach to institutions, governance, values, morals and social life taken as a whole. It is surely one of the first widely read texts to place racial issues, women's rights, economics and morality as at the heart of creating a better society. It is not difficult to see that these things have become the norm in modern life across the western world and increasing across the wider world. It is a precursor to declarations of human rights which was eventually driven by a liberal ideology which sociological discourses from 20th century universities were driving.

The text has been the subject of much sociological discourse often compared favourably with the more popularly known work of Alexis de Tocqueville. Much sociological analytical angst has been spent analysing issues of race, identity, early feminism and Harriet's own personal disgust at the sight of slaves. I believe the text should be seen within the context of its time. Western life was extremely male dominated, slavery was a deeply embedded institution in the States with powerful vested interests. Harriet can be seen as a visionary who had developed clear values based around human rights and dignity of individuals. She set a ball rolling which was centred on the study of using evidence to create a better society.

Charles Darwin had recently returned from his voyage on The Beagle when he moved into lodgings on Great Marlborough Street next door to his brother Erasmus. The years 1836 – 39 are now recognised as the crucial years when he disseminated his findings and came up with the idea of natural selection. This coincided with Harriet being a close friend of Erasmus whilst she was the focus of attention. This was when she wrote *Society in America* and had to deal with the storm of criticism which followed. Darwin

witnessed this process at close hand and wrote in letters of her as an 'Amazon' and that it was best to think of her as a man. James Moore and Adrian Desmond in their recent book 'Darwin's Sacred Cause' however give Harriet much credit for radicalising the impressionable young Darwin.

It is interesting to note that neither Martineau nor Darwin was in a world where there was any divide between social and natural sciences. They were both intellectually curious in a world where the extent of scientific enquiry was growing all the time and the implications of mankind being part of nature were beginning. Harriet had a view of progressive nature played out in a grand historical sweep in which societies which would get better for people to live in. Darwin tied humans closer to animals and was less ideologically optimistic. Indeed Darwin's brief response to Martineau's work in his notebooks at this time can be seen as an outline for a twentieth century world of tension between social and natural sciences. He noted that "Moral feelings are as natural to people as herding instincts are to deer. Yet however fixed mankind's 'conscience or instinct' might seem to be, it can be changed and improved."

Similarly to Darwin it is not difficult to see that Harriet had an Influence on Dickens. Like Darwin he was a bit younger than Harriet and his fame grew after this period in the 1840s. Her direct radical writing in *Society in America* would have set a clear example to these developing minds. There was a moral crusade to be made that overrode the moneyed interests so prevalent at this time. Dickens later wrote that *Society in America* was the best book on the subject and he would later carry out his own tour of the States.

The book also had a direct Influence on the Abolitionist cause in America led by William Lloyd Garrison. At times under siege, Garrison took great heart from his British celebrity supporter and reprinted her writing in his *Liberator* newspaper. It is also notable that Martineau influenced the involvement of women in the Abolitionist cause, a factor that was to grow through the nineteenth century and be important to the ultimately successful and historic crusade.

Conclusion

Harriet Martineau's *Society in America* is I believe, one of several books she wrote which has been subsequently, very underestimated. It was an unusually outspoken text for the time and it had a detached idealism which would influence the growth of social analysis. It was widely read and reviewed at the time and had a wide political impact. It firmly placed the issue of slavery at the heart of America's future and was prescient. The book had a direct positive influence on Garrison and his growing Abolitionist cause. It talked of human rights, rights for women, rights for African Americans, rights for children and of a progress through human nature, democracy and moral values. It influenced many of the nineteenth century's greatest individual figures including Darwin, Dickens and Florence Nightingale infecting them with what has been described as 'moral courage'. It is also true that the book represents a turning point for Martineau symptomatic of her writing career. Its directness and radicalism turned many

establishment figures against her and her reputation in America was diminished. Her fame began to wane. Despite this I would contend that the forces of progress she was encouraging were to gradually envelop all of human life and *Society in America* was a key vehicle of these messages and as such has been an enormously influential text.

(This is a revised version of the paper given at the annual meeting of the Martineau Society at Bristol, 12 – 15 July, 2012. *Ed.*)



Charles Darwin [Wiki Commons](#)

Harriet Martineau and Sociology

Gaby Weiner

Since the early 1990s a number of researchers including members of the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society have recognised and explored Harriet Martineau's sociological work (e.g. Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale, 2001). This short paper draws on one such study, my doctorate completed in 1991, which among other things explored Harriet Martineau's contribution to Sociology. I argued in the thesis that she had been grossly underestimated as an early sociologist, as in other disciplines, and that one of my tasks was therefore to bring her work into the public gaze.¹ This paper is one such attempt.

Harriet Martineau was the first woman sociologist (Rossi, 1974, 124), and a 'founding mother' of sociology (Riedesel, 1981, 77). She shared with Alexis De Tocqueville (1805-59), the French political theorist and her contemporary, the wish to describe and explain the points of difference and similarity between the young American nation and her own more stratified country of origin. She used an institutional framework, noticeable in the section headings of *Society in America* (1837) to trace the ways in which moral values are determined by institutional structure. For example, she observed the impact of marriage and family life on American women, noting their vigour beforehand, and their rapid ageing afterwards.² Her methodology textbook *How to Observe* (1838) is regarded as the 'first book on methodology of social research' (Lipsett, 1962) and in fact, the comparative perspective she developed is remarkably similar to that used by social scientists today.

When Harriet Martineau travelled to the United States in the early 1830s, she was a rarity; a lone female visitor³ to the new democracy. Yet hers was not the visit of a tourist. While in America she kept a voluminous journal recording meticulously details of her stay such as names, dates, events, and observations. She opted for a 'scientific' approach to observation and discussed the similarities between scientific exploration and discovery and how to survey social manners and morals. She postulated that observers should be objective, impartial, and aware of their own prejudices. Further, they needed to be clear about the aims of observation and adopt a relative rather than a moral analysis of social institutions.

The observer who sets out with a more philosophical belief, not only escapes the affliction of seeing sin wherever he (*sic*) sees a difference, and avoids the suffering and contempt and alienation from his species but, by being prepared for what he witnesses and aware of the causes, is free from the agitation of being shocked and alarmed, preserves his

¹ Doctoral theses are not widely read, so in order to make public Martineau's work, I produced a variety of academic and non-academic articles, including several in the Martineau Society *Newsletter*.

² *Society in America* (3), pp. 105-151. Here Harriet Martineau scrutinises the social, economic, occupational and marital position of American women far more rigorously than she was ever to attempt in respect of their British counterparts.

³ In fact she travelled with a companion, Louisa Jeffrey, a young woman whom she had known in London, and who offered to accompany her in return for expenses other than the cost of her passage (Webb, 1960)

calmness, his hope, his sympathy; and is thus far better fitted to perceive, understand, and report upon the morals and manners of the people he visits (Martineau, 1938, pp22-3).

Briefly, according to *How to Observe*, the traveller should:

- begin with a set of principles (theoretical framework) that would direct his or her observations;
- develop beforehand a set of questions to be answered through observation and interview;
- be objective yet sympathetic to the subjects under study;
- attempt to have a representative sample of subjects; and
- develop a systematic study of social institutions.

She gave useful tips such as advice on the preparation of questions and the desirability of keeping a daily journal. As to interviewing, she advised always to have a notebook at hand though never to take notes during an interview.

She focused in her own observations on those social and political institutions which she believed were indicative of a country's social characteristics. These included the political system and government, the economy, religion, women and the family. For example, under the heading 'Politics' sub-headings included: 'parties', 'general and state government', 'office', 'newspapers', 'apathy in citizenship', 'allegiance to law', 'sectional prejudice', 'citizenship of people of colour', and 'political non-existence of women'. In her comparison of American and European society, she generally found favour with the American experiment because North America in the 1830s was not burdened with the medieval baggage of hereditary aristocracy, class division and state religion.

However for her, among the contradictions between American ideals and practice were the continuation of slavery and the subordination of women. She argued in *Society in America* that since a fundamental principle of the Declaration of Independence was that 'governments derive their just powers from the consent of the governed'; the existing situation for women and black people was politically untenable.

The democratic principle condemns all this as wrong; and requires equal political representation for all rational human beings. Children, idiots and criminals...are the only fair exceptions.' (Martineau, 1837, 200)

Her premise was that genuine freedom means individuals having control over their own destinies, and that, fundamental to this is the right to political representation. Lack of representation for women was not only unfair but degrading:

It is pleaded that half the human race does acquiesce in the decision of the other half, as to their rights and duties...Such acquiescence proves nothing but degradation of the injured party. It inspires the same emotions of pity as the supplication of the freed slave who kneels to his master to restore him to slavery, that he might have his animal wants supplied, without being troubled with human rights and duties (Martineau, 1837, 203-4)

In her view, solutions to social injustice took different forms. She argued that it was primarily through the efforts of 'philanthropists' that abolition of slavery would end 'the race problem' (Martineau, 1837, 110). Yet, the emancipation of women was most likely to be achieved through the efforts of women themselves;

Methods of charity will not avail to cure the evil... It lies deep: it lies in the subordination of the sex: and upon this the exposures and remonstrances of philanthropists may ultimately succeed in fixing the attention of society; particularly of women. The progression of emancipation of any class usually, if not always, takes place through the efforts of individuals of that class: and so it must be here (Martineau, 1837, 307).

Political representation apart, the other major factor determining women's low social and political position was the relationship between inadequate education and 'economic dependency'. Women, she said, were excluded from the public life because their education fitted them primarily for domestic pursuits, marriage and family life.

Marriage is the only object left open to women. Philosophy she may only pursue fancifully, and under pain of ridicule: science only as a pastime, and under a similar penalty. Art is declared to be left open: but the necessary learning, and, yet more, the indispensable experience of reality, are denied to her. Literature is also said to be permitted: but under what penalties and restrictions? Nothing is thus open for women but marriage (Martineau, 1837, 108-9)

A further sociological achievement, however, still remained before her, in which she acted 'as a catalyst in the birth of sociology' (Riedesel, 1980, 61). This was the translation into English of Auguste Comte's great work *Cours de Philosophie Positive* (1830-42), which she commenced in 1851 and finished within two years. It was more than just a translation. She rewrote and condensed the book with the full approval of the author and when completed, two volumes replaced the original six. 'So well was her work accomplished', reported an early biographer Florence Fenwick Miller (1884, 218), 'that Comte himself adopted it for his students' use, removing from his list of books for Positivists his own edition of his course and instead, recommending the English translation by Miss Martineau'. It remains a main English translation in modern reference books; for example, in Chamber's *Biographical Dictionary* (Thorne and Collocott, 1974).

Comte's Positivism recognised knowledge of the world and of society as a consistent whole. Thus, like science, human behaviour is dictated by natural laws of society. For example, human thought processes were said to pass through critical stages - theological, metaphysical and, finally, positivist or experimental. Comte's appeal to Harriet Martineau rested on his 'scientific' rather than metaphysical approach to the unification of knowledge. Similarly, Comte did not share Harriet Martineau's commitment to social justice yet her theoretical perspective on the world accorded with his - as can be seen in her preface to the translated volumes:

We find ourselves suddenly living and moving in the midst of the universe - as part of it, and not as its aim and object. We find ourselves living, not under capricious and arbitrary circumstances, unconnected with the constitution and movements of the whole, but under great, general laws, which operate on us as part of the whole (Martineau, 1853, 10)

Above all, her affinity with Comtean Positivism was based on his affirmation of the importance of evidence and empirical methods. She was critical of those that declaimed without evidence:

Pride of intellect surely abides with those who insist on belief without evidence and on a philosophy derived from their own intellectual action, without material and corroboration from without, and not with those who are too scrupulous and too humble to transcend evidence, and to add, out of their own imaginations, to that which is, and may be, referred to other judgements (Martineau, 1853, 10).

Much of her other writing could also be described as sociological, for instance, on women, education, employment conditions and so on. Given such sociological insights and achievements, we might well ask why her work appears so rarely in the discipline excepting perhaps as a footnote in sociological history. It is true that her writings were rarely intended to be scholarly – she was a determinedly popular writer - and she had little direct impact on the discipline save the Comte translation which was the closest she came to inclusion within institutional sociology. Yet, her early understanding of sociological methodology and theory is exceptional as is the quality of sociological work that she left behind (Rossi, 1974).

It comes as no surprise that female theorists have been rendered invisible within sociology as in other disciplines, and rarely treated as major contributors to sociological thinking, Beatrice Webb notwithstanding. And it is notable that it was feminist sociologists such as Alice Rossi who first directed attention to Harriet Martineau's sociological legacy. Harriet would, no doubt, have regarded the attempts by women such as Rossi and other feminist sociologists to re-assess her own work, both as a necessary effort by women and a positive measure of social progress at last being made.

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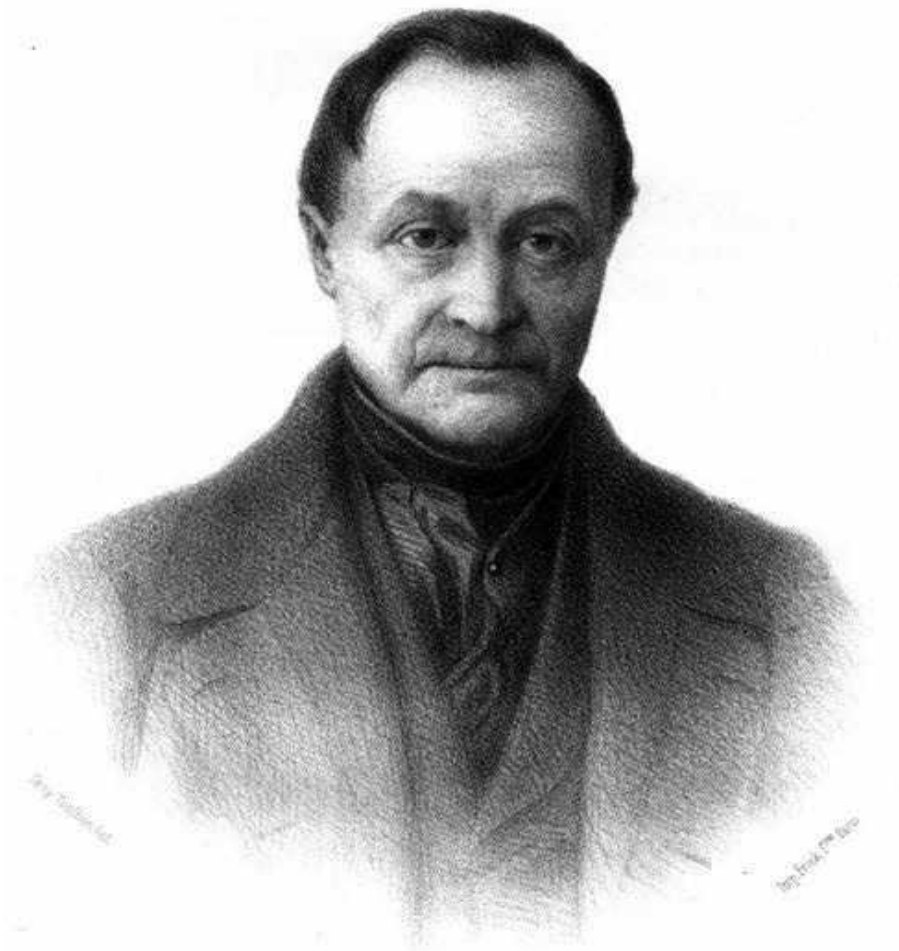
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Auguste Comte [Wiki Commons](#)

***Report of the Inaugural Harriet Martineau Lecture for Norwich UNESCO
City of Literature – Ali Smith’s ‘The Hour and the Woman’***

Bruce Chilton

The first Harriet Martineau lecture had an enthusiastic promoter. Stuart Hobday of the Martineau Society persuaded Chris Gribble, the Chief Executive of the Norwich Writers’ Centre, that Harriet Martineau’s name should mark Norwich’s adoption as a City of Literature and Chris persuaded an “outstanding contemporary writer”, Ali Smith, to present Harriet in the new lecture series.

Who else but a modern original writer could introduce Harriet Martineau? Ali Smith kept repeating the name, Harriet Martineau, to make sure no-one forgot it. On Tuesday, 14 May 2013, at the Norwich Playhouse it was unlikely anybody in the packed house would. And Ali Smith said she wanted the name to go out through the building of the Norwich Playhouse theatre, out through Norwich and throughout the whole of the UK to ensure there was no future danger of forgetting it.

Did you know that Elizabeth Fry, the prison reformer who became so famous her picture appears on the UK’s £5 note, was born in Norwich? Of course you did. But did you know that Harriet Martineau was born in the same room in Gurney Court, an old house in Magdalen Street, some 22 years later? Moreover, as Elizabeth Fry and Florence Nightingale have, so far, been the only women celebrated on Bank of England notes, there is need for a third and more. Ali Smith said that woman should be Harriet Martineau! It’s all about what’s on the money!

Did you know, asked Ali Smith, that Virginia Woolf in 1931 said the road she had followed as a writer had been cut by Fanny Burney, George Eliot, Jane Austen and Harriet Martineau? And that Harriet was, in Woolf’s words, “the direct source of my freedom and pecunious liberty as a writer”?



Virginia Woolf Wiki Commons

Ali Smith poured endless facts and observations on Harriet Martineau on an audience which clearly became enthralled by her oratory. Not only was it extremely rapid-fire oratory, for which she apologised, but often it sounded more like enthusiastic poetry than prose. How Harriet was born into a family of Unitarian free-thinkers, had little formal education and, yet, when her father died and poverty beckoned, dashed off the political economy pamphlets which made her an overnight celebrity. How Harriet by her efforts and her many roles, kept her celebrity for half a century and beyond.

So why is Harriet Martineau now so little known? Her travels and her writings were so extraordinary. This woman, quoted Ali Smith, was “a role model for history...made an astounding contribution”. Charles Darwin was amazed by her.



Ali Smith (waving *Martineau Society* pamphlet) with Stuart Hobday

Did Harriet Martineau win success because or in spite of being a woman? Erasmus Darwin advised his brother, Charles, to see her as a man. Margaret Oliphant wrote “Harriet is less affected by her sex than any man or woman I know”!

So what sort of person was she? Ali Smith described Harriet's recovery of good health through mesmerism from what was diagnosed as ovarian cancer as a "denial of her doctors – either mesmerism cured it or you doctors were wrong!" Yet, within a short time, Harriet was building her own house and small farm in Ambleside and exploring the Middle East. She visited harems in Damascus which she found appalling because the regime was so boring! Harriet's response was to urge the harem doctor to give all the women skipping ropes! Harriet was irrepressible! *Eastern Life, Present and Past* came out in 1848 and was followed by many more publications, including contributions to Dickens' *Household Words*.

In 1852, Harriet began writing almost 2000 leader articles for the national *Daily News* newspaper. By 1855, Harriet felt ill again and, expecting death, prepared her autobiography. "She wrote her autobiography at breakneck speed according to Gaby Weiner" and her own obituary but, according to Ali Smith, it was her writing and her interest in so many subjects which kept her alive for another two decades. How to observe morals? How to treat others? How to treat disabilities?

Ali Smith told her audience that she had yet to read *Deerbrook* but considers *The Hour and the Man* to be Harriet Martineau's supreme work, a book packed with ideas for progressive social change in her nineteenth century world.

So how would Harriet Martineau look at today's events? What would she make of how inequality in the UK has grown since 1979 to the point, should present trends continue, Victorian standards will return within 20 years? What would she make of today's questions? How would she react to the return of poverty to Greece and Spain? Ali Smith concluded Harriet Martineau shaped understanding through her writing on so many issues. Hers was a "questioning voice" society needs today!

To read further reports and to listen to Ali Smith's lecture go to -

<http://www.writerscentrenorwich.org.uk/itsallaboutthemoney.aspx>

List of Recent New Members (UK unless stated)

Lyn Holt, Maiko Ohtake Yamamoto (Japan).

The Martineau Society

The Martineau Society was founded in the early 1990s by members of the Octagon Chapel, Colegate, Norwich, to foster interest in the descendants of Gaston Martineau, surgeon and Huguenot refugee who settled in Norwich in 1695.

Their skills developed in many fields: medicine, art, writing, engineering, education, religion and industry and the Society publishes papers on their lives and correspondence with others in these fields and with their other contemporaries.

The Society is a registered charity (no. 1064092) and holds an annual conference which includes an AGM, papers and visits to places connected with the Martineau family. The Society issues *The Martineau Society Newsletter* twice each year, containing scholarly articles and news of events and publications.

Contact Information

www.martineausociety.co.uk

Elisabeth Arbuckle

elisabeth.sanders.arbuckle@gmail.com

Jane Bancroft

jane.bancroft@btinternet.com

Bruce Chilton

bruce_chilton@hotmail.com

Sophia Hankinson

sophia.hankinson@btinternet.com

Valerie Sanders

V.R.Sanders@hull.ac.uk

Barbara Todd

btodd06@btinternet.com

John Vint

j.vint@mmu.ac.uk

Robert Watts

watts372@btinternet.com

Ruth Watts

watts372@btinternet.com

Gaby Weiner

gaby.weiner@btinternet.com

The Martineau Society Newsletter submissions of 2,500 – 3000 words or less may be sent to Bruce Chilton, Newsletter Editor:

*by email and as an attachment, preferably in Microsoft Word, to:

bruce_chilton@hotmail.com

*by post to:

22 Marston Lane, Norwich NR4 6LZ, UK

phone: 0044 (0)1603 506014

Please note: Submission must be made on the understanding that copyright will be shared to the extent that **The Martineau Society** may publish them in the Society newsletter and elsewhere, wholly or in part, including through the Society's websites. Otherwise, copyright remains with the authors of the individual contributions.

Harriet Martineau carried her ideas of political economy so far that, like the Quaker, John Bright, she was opposed not only to the Factory Acts, but to the compulsory fencing of machinery. But Harriet Martineau, though she retained her Radical political faith, had lost her Radical religious faith. Her brother, James Martineau, on the other hand, while becoming less Radical in his political views, had become more Radical in his social views, and had revolted against the prevailing ideas on this subject as expressed in popular utilitarianism.

Raymond Holt **The Unitarian Contribution to Social Progress in England, 1952**



Harriet Martineau [Wiki Commons](#)