

Chapter 55

Harriet Martineau's Autobiography (1876-1885)

By late 1876 Chapman's facile pen had completed *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman*. The following January, Garrison thanked Chapman for lending him in advance the English three-volume imprint. In Boston in February, Ticknor printed the work "as is," admitting he hadn't read a word of it.¹

Though Martineau's last major publication managed to ruffle scores of feathers, in March a fourth edition of the work was said to be in preparation by Smith, Elder. Susanna Winkworth commented that Martineau's autobiography did not do her justice, being written when she was "a prey to embittering pre-occupations."² Matthew Arnold, who had seemed increasingly to value Martineau's opinions over the past twenty-odd years, condemned the work and claimed he had forgotten "Haworth Churchyard." While there were "things in it . . . not bad," Arnold did not want "to overpraise a personage so antipathetic to me as H.M." Indeed his first impression of the autobiography was that "in spite of her undeniable talent, energy, and merit - what an unpleasant life and unpleasant nature!"³

By contrast, Martineau's old supporter Holyoake raved over the three handsome volumes and pronounced *charming* Martineau's writing about her childhood, her eminent career and life-long self-direction. Her heretical undertakings seemed interesting. And though he thought Chapman demonstrated a skill and power of pen, he regretted the printing of a number of Martineau's letters.⁴

An early reviewer in the *Athenaeum* chastised Chapman for keeping this long looked-for work back for eight months. With Holyoake, he agreed that it had *not* been Chapman's duty to print personal letters and such even if wished for! As one of England's *most* important literary figures who used "clear and forcible" language, he thought Martineau "a pure and noble woman," truthful, though "self-willed, and at times . . . somewhat hard and unforgiving." Her autobiography demonstrated "a sort of innocent candour," like that of a French writer. Chapman should have "condescended to . . . furnishing us with an index," he grouched, instead of padding out the story of Martineau's life "in inflated English."⁵

The *Spectator's* unblinking three-part estimate of the autobiography opened with a list of Chapman's failures as an editor who disfigured the memory of Martineau. In the second part, the reviewer professed himself stunned by this woman writer (Martineau), "cool [and] inflexible in purpose," who nevertheless *entirely* misunderstood *herself*. In the third part, he warmly praised Martineau's tales, her "receptive understanding" and her "most effective work," her autobiography - its "vigour" being due to her "amazing self-confidence."⁶

In March and April, a *four*-part review in the Unitarian *Inquirer* censured Martineau's versions of "truth" and condemned her autobiography as a "bitter-sweet book . . . on which it has been our own painful duty to dwell." More brutally, Margaret Oliphant in the politically conservative *Blackwood's* attacked "the terrible instrument of self-murder . . . called autobiography" with its accompanying potential for "cowardly assault" on others. Martineau had produced literary works of "honest mediocrity," Oliphant condescended, but to attack her mother was unforgivable. Scorning the prize essays written for ungodly Unitarians, Oliphant

adequately summarized the rest of Martineau's *oeuvre*. Chapman's volume of memorials she declared a "muddle of folly, false enthusiasm, and . . . false sentimentality."⁷

In the heat of such reviews, a representative provincial newspaperman contributed a no-nonsense estimate of Martineau's work in a paper read before the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool. Objecting to the mottoes affixed to both Martineau's first and second volumes, Edward Richard Russell of the Liverpool *Daily Post* wondered if Chapman had added those. To have written and had printed two volumes of autobiography and then to choose as editor a philanthropic friend seemed an "eccentric fancy." He saw Martineau's major trait he as "[f]retful irritability," and he did not think her childhood harsh by current standards. In spite of Martineau's faults, he admired her good works and enthusiasm. Yet while the great ones "buzzed around" asking her help, *she* accepted the notions of the charlatan Atkinson.⁸

Wittily returning Martineau's vitriol over *his* attack on "Ella of Garveloch," Abraham Hayward of the *Quarterly* mocked her self-esteem and the exaggeration of her accomplishments. Sneering at her religious opinions, he belittled the political economy tales and challenged her estimates of contemporaries.⁹

More temperately in *Macmillan's*, John Morley quoted Charlotte Brontë that Martineau was both "warm and hard-hearted" - a key to her opposing "character and opinion." Worthy as well as arbitrary and insular, Martineau should finally be viewed as a "character of large thoughts and much generous purpose." Echoing the *Spectator*, Morley described Chapman as a no-doubt noble abolitionist but one lacking in literary gifts.¹⁰

Holyoake meanwhile must have written to James to ask about the quarrel with his sister. "There was no apology or reconciliation possible after such an act or any attempt, - after that unfortunate article in the [']Prospective Review' as the writer in the last week's Athenaeum terms it," James snapped. Holyoake then turned to Atkinson for an explanation, who answered a bit cryptically:

The Quarterly refers to the brother's conduct as what she never could have expected however much she must have anticipated adverse criticism on account of the materialistic tendency of her opinions.

Atkinson was *sorry* Chapman's volume was not "better thought of as a literary work." *He* would have taken up the pen where Martineau stopped, finished the biography and added others' opinions of her. Chapman, moreover, made "too much of Martineau's 'life's sorrow.'" Citing the "Revue Politique et Littéraire" on Martineau's "liaison intellectuelle avec M Atkinson," he firmly denied that Martineau was in *love* with *him*.¹¹

Somewhat tardily in July, the *Westminster* named Martineau one of "the most extraordinary woman of the present century" and her autobiography "the most remarkable book of the season." Martineau had dared to tell the truth with "strict honesty and impartiality," the reviewer asserted (probably John Chapman, now living in Paris and practising medicine). Moreover, he approved of Maria Chapman's publication of the supplementary letters.¹²

Another of the major journals, the *Nineteenth Century*, acknowledged in August the favourable estimates of Martineau's autobiography. William Rathbone Greg, the reviewer, complained that the work pained him and that Maria Chapman's memorials seemed "needless, tasteless and unsound." By making too much of her importance and owing to her ill-nature, she failed to see that by not *hearing* she missed much - especially through her habit of laying

down her trumpet when she disagreed with a speaker. He thought her defense of her conversion to agnosticism unseemly and was surprised by her cheerfulness at the idea of personal extinction.¹³

Earlier in May, an American reviewer of the autobiography in the *New York Inquirer* opened with mild sarcasm: "Great as Miss Martineau's talents were . . . she says she had no genius, and I agree with her." Though reasonable, she was incapable of profound judgments and had no "poetic insights" into character. The "greatest . . . and the last of her secularistic school," she would remain "rather as a warning than as an example."¹⁴ Also in May, a reviewer in the *Atlantic Monthly* began wittily "The bad end to which persons who misbehaved toward Harriet Martineau came . . . ought to be a warning." Her autobiography was, "a hard-hearted book" that he nevertheless found "abundantly entertaining" with "the most interesting gossip about all sorts of people and events." The *events* of Martineau's life, told with a "stern simplicity," were in contrast to Maria Chapman's memorials, which were "interesting and . . . not wanting in perception and judgment [but] out of taste."¹⁵

An autopsy of Martineau's body by James King revealed the facts of her tumor and awakened new interest in her medical history. In a talk published in the *British Medical Journal*, T. Spencer Wells claimed that Greenhow and Clarke, who first examined Martineau, had mistaken a "dermoid cyst" low down in the pelvis behind the uterus for an enlarged and retroverted uterus - but the tumour had been ovarian from the first, of slow growth but no doubt causing great suffering.¹⁶

Travelling for his health, William Lloyd Garrison arrived in Liverpool in June 1877. To rapt audiences there and at Manchester, Oxford and London he spoke on causes like total abstinence, repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts and the struggle for abolition. At Birmingham in July, he stayed with Frank and visited Martineau's grave. After touring Scotland, he stopped at Ambleside, where he found The Knoll occupied by "sympathizing friends . . . Mr. and Mrs. W.H. Hills."¹⁷

Continuing echoes of Martineau's quarrel with James surfaced with the publication of Florence Fenwick Miller's sympathetic biography in 1884. Dismissing Chapman's volume as "little more than a repetition, in a peculiar style" of Martineau's own story, Miller acknowledged her indebtedness to James and to Catherine Turner for new materials. For information about the last years of Martineau's life, she was most obliged to "the dearest friend of Harriet Martineau's maturity . . . Mr. Henry G. Atkinson." Miller censured Elizabeth Martineau's treatment of her exceptional, unhappy, child, citing the character of the mother in *The Crofton Boys*, who "would promptly and sternly intimate her disapproval of [any] indulgence of the feelings," as a portrait of Martineau's mother. Elizabeth had then prevented her daughter from going to see the dying Worthington and showed jealousy of Martineau's social success in London. Finally, Miller gave a brief but clear account of Martineau's vast output of periodical writing after 1855.

In late December a series of letters in the *Daily News* began with Miller's defense of her biography against a protest by H.M. Greenhow, Dr. Greenhow's son. Next day James's long letter defending his mother, "The Early Days of Harriet Martineau," appeared, to be followed by a further letter from Miller. "Mrs. Fenwick Miller appears to us to have justified all her statements," argued the Unitarian *Inquirer*, regretting that the controversy had not been undertaken "at the time of publication of the 'Autobiography.'"¹⁸

Perhaps owing to frustration at Victorian sensibilities, interest in Martineau seemed to fade quickly until ground-breaking works in the twentieth century like Robert K. Webb's *Harriet Martineau: A Radical Victorian* (1960), preceded by John Cranston Nevill's *Harriet Martineau* (a socialist interpretation, 1943) and Vera's Wheatley's *The Life and Work of Harriet Martineau* (1957). Today an awakened interest in Martineau, both as a commentator on her times and as an early, unabashed, feminist, have led to an ever increasing cascade of publications on this remarkable woman.

¹ *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography with Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman* [London: Smith, Elder, 1877] (Boston: James R. Osgood, late Ticknor & Fields, and Fields, Osgood; 1877); see HM to Ticknor and Fields, 19 March 1861, chap. 46; WLG to MWC, 18 January 1877, *William Lloyd Garrison* 4: 268-70; R.H. Ticknor to H.H. Clark, 15 February 1877, BPL, Ms.Am.1072 (384).

² The source of Susanna Winkworth's comment has been mislaid.

³ MA to George David Boyle, 11 March 1877, *The Letters of Matthew Arnold* 4: 359-60 (see Valerie Sanders, "Harriet Martineau and the Arnolds," *MSN*, 23 [December 2007]: 4-10); for Boyle's call on Martineau in 1862, see chap. 48; for "Haworth Churchyard" (1855), see *The Poems of Matthew Arnold*, ed. Kenneth Allott (London: Longmans, Green, 1965) 389-97 (Arnold's elegiac poem on Martineau and the Brontës was written after the Brontës' death and when Martineau thought she was dying; Chapman included a shortened version of "Haworth Churchyard" in "Memorials" [*Auto.* 3: 362-64]).

⁴ George Jacob Holyoake, "Harriet Martineau's Autobiography," *The Secular Review: A Journal of Daily Life*, 18 March 1877: 49-50.

⁵ "Harriet Martineau's Autobiography," *Athen.*, 17 March 1877: 343, col. 1 - 346, col. 2 (Rivlin [50] records an index to both volumes of the American, two-volume, edition but not to the Memorials).

⁶ "Mrs. Chapman on Harriet Martineau. [First Notice]," "Harriet Martineau. [Second Notice]" and "Harriet Martineau's Autobiography. [Third Notice]," *Spec.*, 10, 17 and 24 March 1877: 311-12, 342-43 and 376-77.

⁷ "Harriet Martineau's Autobiography. With Memorials by Maria Weston Chapman," *Inquirer*, 24, 31 March, 7 and 14 April 1877: 189-90, 205-206, 221-23 and 237-39; Margaret Oliphant, "Harriet Martineau," *Blackwood's* 121 (April 1877): 472-96 (see Valerie Sanders, "Harriet Martineau, Margaret Oliphant, and That Review," *MSN* 36 (February 2015): 4-9).

⁸ Edward Richard Russell [later Baron Russell, of the Liverpool *Daily Post*], *The Autobiography and Memorials of Miss Harriet Martineau. A Paper read before the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool, April 16th, 1877* (n.p., n.d.) [in 1874 Russell published a review of John Stuart Mill's autobiography]; the mottos on the title pages were:

"Etiam capillus unus habet umbram suam" - PROVERB

"And this dear freedom hath begotten me this peace,
that I mourn not that end which must be,
nor spend one wish to have one minute added
to the uncertain date of my years"—BACON

⁹ Abraham Hayward, "Harriet Martineau's Autobiography," *QR* 143 (April 1877): 484-526.

¹⁰ John Morley, "Harriet Martineau," *Macmillan's* 36 (May 1877): 47-60.

¹¹ JM to Holyoake, 23 March 1877, BL Add. MS. 42,726, f. 29-30; HGA to Holyoake, 20 June 1877, BL. Add. MS. 42,726, f. 31-32 (Hayward [see note 9] had referred to James as the "instrument" of the Unitarians' animosity to *Letters on Laws* [523]); in the chapter, "The Life Sorrow" (*Auto.* 3: 313-330), Maria Chapman described the publication and resulting outcry over *Letters on the Laws*.

¹² "Harriet Martineau," *WR* 108 (July 1877): 65-101; Martineau's break with John Chapman came after she had completed her autobiography (which she let him read), and he may have been relieved to find no added reference to that event.

¹³ William Rathbone Greg, "Harriet Martineau," *Nineteenth Century* 2 (August 1877): 97-112.

¹⁴ (Probably) Henry Whitney Bellows [Unitarian clergyman and editor], "Our Contemporaries. Harriet Martineau," *New York Inquirer*, 26 May 1877: 342.

¹⁵ "Recent Literature," *Atlantic Monthly* 39 (May 1877): 624-68.

¹⁶ T. Spencer Wells, "Remarks on the Case of Miss Martineau," *British Medical Journal* 5 May 1877: 543, cols. 1-2; see Anka Ryall, "Medical Body and Lived Experience: the Case of Harriet Martineau," *Mosaic* 33/4 (December 2000): 35-53.

¹⁷ Garrison visited Birmingham on 7 and 8 July and The Knoll at Ambleside on 12 August 1877: *William Lloyd Garrison* 4: 281 and 284 (Ellen must have let The Knoll for the holiday season, as Martineau thriftily intended).

¹⁸ Florence Fenwick Miller, *Harriet Martineau* (see chap. 2, note 5): vi, vii and 9; "Mrs. Fenwick Miller's Biography of Harriet Martineau," *DN*, 3 January 1885, 3, col. 2 (letter from H.M. Greenhow; reported in the *Inquirer*, 10 Jan 1885: 24, col. 3); JM, "The Early Days of Harriet Martineau" (see chap. 2, note 5), written in response to Miller's biography (partly quoted in *Christian Life*, 3 January 1885: 5, cols. 2-3); Miller's reply to James's last statement, *DN*, 8 January 1885: 3, col. 4 (rptd. *Inquirer*, 10 January 1885: 24, col. 3); the *Spectator* heatedly attacked Miller for proposing Martineau as an example for women (see "Emancipated Women," *Spec.*, 27 December 1884: 1729, col. 1--1730, cols. 1-2).