

Harriet Martineau: a short biography by Gaby Weiner

Harriet Martineau was a writer and journalist, initially celebrated as a populariser of political economy and as a campaigner for progressive causes including women's equality and the abolition of slavery. More recently she has been reclaimed as a foremother of sociology and an important nineteenth century thinker and philosopher.

Early Years

Harriet Martineau was born in 1802, the sixth of eight children, into a Norwich Unitarian family. Her parents, Thomas and Elizabeth Martineau, belonged to the dissenting manufacturing middle classes and were direct descendants of the Huguenots. They were Unitarians, a factor that was to have immense influence on Martineau's intellectual development. At the time of her birth, her father was a manufacturer of bombazines (twilled silk and cotton cloth) but later his death and the failure of the family business, were triggers for Martineau's eventual writing career. The house in Magdalen Street, Norwich, in which the Martineau family lived still exists, and provides a reminder of the level of prosperity and bourgeois existence of families of the newly emerging middle class in the first decades of the nineteenth century.

Martineau's childhood was unhappy. She described her childhood as one where she was mainly unloved as a sickly, withdrawn, diffident and fearful child. She reports having neither sense of taste nor smell. The inheritor of a Huguenot protestant culture, grounded in opposition to the autocratic rule of the Catholic Church, she was given a wide home education which was unusual for a girl in Victorian England. She studied Classics, languages, English composition and mathematics. Later she attended two Unitarian schools; the first, with her sister Rachel, was an 'excellent' local school run by an ex-

minister Isaac Perry. She wrote how this learning 'fills a disproportionate space in the retrospect of my existence, - so inestimable was its importance'. Her second Unitarian school was run by Lant Carpenter, Unitarian minister and theologian, father of the reformer, Mary Carpenter. This Bristol school caused her to feel homesick despite her unhappiness at home. As an adolescent, deafness was added to her disabilities but she was able to hear with the aid of a celebrated ear trumpet. Initially her family unsympathetically told her that "none are so deaf as those that won't hear" '.

At the end of her formal education, she continued to read and study, often getting up early in the morning and reading long into the night, to allow for the completion of her daytime domestic duties. She studied astronomy, mathematics, languages, the natural and physical sciences, as well as the major debates emerging from Europe including the writings of John Locke, Jeremy Bentham, Emmanuel Kant and Friedrich Hegel. Martineau was steeped in British and European thought and used this knowledge as a background to her future work on social and economic issues.

Unitarianism

In her youth Martineau was interested in Unitarian religious and philosophical questions. Modern Unitarianism dates historically from the Reformation though the uni-personality of God was occasionally voiced in the early church and Judaism. Unitarianism had become influenced by science and rationalism. Unitarians believed in the humanity rather than the divinity of Christ.

At the time of Martineau's birth, non-conformists were denied access to offices of prestige and power. Though Unitarian numbers never rose above 50,000 in Britain, they were well-represented among political radicals. They

rejected doctrines of original sin in favour of a 'fresh more generous view of humanity for all'. Influenced by the Enlightenment and the French Revolution Unitarians, according to Martineau, believed 'the human race [to be] advancing under the laws of progress'. Although this was a progressive rather than a radical or violent movement, Unitarianism was the natural ally of politically progressive causes including the abolition of slavery and women's emancipation. Daughters of Unitarian families receive a broadly liberal education like their brothers. Consequently, women connected to Unitarianism were among the most eminent of the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Writing Career

Martineau was joined by other female polymaths and who combined science writing with other literary forms including George Eliot, Beatrice Webb and Millicent Garrett Fawcett, who, like Martineau, produced fiction and non-fiction. They focused on the needs of women and on the conditions of the working classes and the poor. The rise of political economy that Martineau was to interpret, was a response to new concerns about class and capitalist economy.

Martineau's first published articles, in the influential Unitarian periodical *Monthly Repository*, concerned women, two in 1822, on 'Female Writers of Practical Divinity' and a third in 1823 on 'Female Education'. In the mid 1820s, a quadruple blow ironically provided Martineau with unforeseen opportunities for personal and intellectual fulfilment. The family business collapsed, her oldest brother, Richard and her father died as did her fiancé. Martineau regarded her escape from marriage with relief. She wrote '... and many a time

did I wish... that I had never seen him.' Now, virtually deaf, Harriet was deputed to stay at home with her mother. She initially earned a little money through 'fancy sewing' but, while she was always careful not to belittle women's domestic skills, her literary ambitions dominated. She had to earn money and gain independence. She supported her family with her writing. She produced articles in the Unitarian *Monthly Repository*; books of devotional exercises, prayers and theological discussions published in 1826, 1830, and 1831; moral tales published in 1827, 1828 and 1829 and a children's book published in 1831. Martineau also won all three prizes in a Unitarian essay competition in 1829. In 1830 and 1831 she wrote nearly a hundred further 'articles, reviews, tales, poems and sketches' for the *Monthly Repository*.

National fame and financial security arrived after the publication of a series of books *Illustrations of Political Economy* which, at first edition, even outsold Charles Dickens. The aim was to interpret for lay readers, in monthly fictional instalments, the principles of political economy as advocated by James Mill and his son John Stuart Mill, for those who supported free trade and *laissez-faire* policies. Martineau's work was a best-seller not only because it was readable and engaging but because it articulated the optimistic, visionary ideas of an emerging, potentially powerful, educated middle class. She was lionised by London's literary and intellectual elite. Her networks included writers and reformers and politicians who consulted her about the 1832 Reform Bill. In just over two years, she completed 34 volumes in the *Illustrations* series and other commissioned works on government and the Poor Law.

She financed a trip to the United States and enjoyed celebrity until she publicly allied herself to the anti-slavery cause. As an Abolitionist hero she narrowly

escaped lynching. On her return in 1836, she published three books on her experiences. *Society in America*, *How to Observe Morals and Manners* and *Retrospect of Western Travel*.

During the 1850s, Martineau worked as an editor and writer for the *Daily News* where Charles Dickens was the first editor at its 1846 launch. Her reportage favoured brevity and clarity. A competitor to the aristocratic, conservative *Times*, *The Daily News* was aimed at the middle class and educated working class. It advocated improvement of education, civil and religious liberty and equal legislation. As Martineau wrote 1,642 articles for the newspaper she earned a reputation, not only as a fine journalist but also as a highly influential campaigner and reformer.

In 1855, she believed that death was near which provoked her to write her *Autobiography* at breakneck speed in three months. She lived for another twenty years continuing to six leaders a week for the *Daily News* for ten years. She also wrote for the *Westminster*, *Edinburgh* and *Quarterly Reviews* and for other popular journals including Charles Dickens' *Household Words*.

She died at seventy-four. Her *Autobiography* was published posthumously and was widely read as a commentary on her era. The English, American and European Press all paid tribute to her fine work as a writer, journalist, social observer and political campaigner. The editor of the *Daily News* printed the obituary that she herself had written over twenty years before. Abolitionists in the United States regarded her as the most constant spokesperson for their cause on both sides of the Atlantic. By the end of her life she had broken with Unitarianism and organised religion and was truly her own woman. The *English*

Woman's Review described her as 'one of the greatest women that our generation has known'.

Gaby Weiner has been researching the life and achievements of Harriet Martineau since the 1980s and completed a PhD in 1991 entitled 'Controversies and Contradictions: Approaches to the Study of Harriet Martineau (1802-76)'. In 2017, she co-edited with Valerie Sanders a collection entitled *Harriet Martineau and the Birth of the Disciplines* and she is currently working on a book for Routledge on Harriet Martineau as a foundational sociologist. For more information about Harriet Martineau, please go to the Martineau Society website at <https://martineausociety.co.uk>.