1859 Journalism: Harriet Martineau's "Female Industry"

Charles Petzold, May 30, 2009
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If you've spent any time in Victorian England, you've undoubtedly run into Harriet Martineau. She's one of those persons who shows up everywhere there seems to be something important happening.

There she is in the summer of 1830 at the dinner party where John Stuart Mill meets Mrs. Harriet Taylor. Two years later she can be spotted at Charles Babbage's home for a demonstration of a working component of his unfinished Calculating Engine. "All were eager to go to his glorious soirées;" she later wrote in her autobiography, "and I always thought he appeared to great advantage as a host. His patience in explaining his machine in those days was really examplary. I felt it so, the first time I saw the miracle, as it appeared to me..."

While Charles Darwin is sailing around the world aboard the *Beagle*, his older brother Erasmus is making the acquaintance of Harriet Martineau, who later spends much time with the Darwins and Wedgwoods, inspiring them with her strong anti-slavery politics. Some even think that marriage might be in the future for Erasmus Darwin and Harriet. (Harriet Martineau never married.)

When the controversial pseudo-scientific *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* is published anonymously in 1844, Harriet Martineau is suspected of being the author. (So is Charles Babbage, Augustus De Morgan, Charles Lyell, Charles Darwin, Lady Lovelace, and many others.) In 1845 Harriet Martineau meets the 25-year old Mary Ann Evans, and inspires the younger woman to become a professional writer and move to London, which she does to achieve great success under the pseudonym George Eliot.

All this time, Harriet Martineau is writing dozens of novels and stories, and thousands of articles for periodicals, becoming the most famous female English journalist of the 19th century.

Harriet Martineau was born in 1802 to a Unitarian household. At the age of 20 she contracted otosclerosis, and as she aged she became increasingly deaf — requiring her to use an ear trumpet for most of her life — with no sense of smell and a defective sense of taste. Her father's business collapsed in the financial crisis of 1825–

26, leaving the family poor and Harriet in the position of needing to earn an income. As a deaf woman, she couldn't teach and she had already been writing, so she began writing more, with fame and notoriety soon to follow.

Her *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1832—35) consisted of nine volumes of stories that explored various concepts of economics of the sort preferred by free-trade Whigs. She traveled to America and was threatened with lynching after speaking out against slavery, writing about her experiences in the three-volume *Society in America* (1837) followed by the three-volume *Retrospect of Western Travel* (1838). She wrote books on education, mesmerism, and history, became a follower of Comte, and published *The Positive Philosophy of Auguste Comte, Freely Translated & Condensed by Harriet Martineau* (1853), which was then translated back into French because her condensation and elimination of repetition managed to improve on the original.

In 1858, Harriet Martineau began writing for *The Edinburgh Review* — standard reading for politically progressive households of the period, and one of several periodicals of the era that featured what seemed to be book reviews, but were actually long, often unsigned, essays. For the October 1858 issue, Harriet. Martineau contributed "The Slave Trade in 1858", one of her many articles about slavery.

Harriet Martineau's major contribution to the literature of 1859 was an April 1859 article for *The Edinburgh Review* focusing on another subject she was passionate about — the political and economic mistreatment of women in "Female Industry".

"Female Industry" is a fascinating artifact, mostly for the vision it gives us of the wide scope of jobs women performed in England 150 years ago. As Harriet Martineau indicates, English law of the period assumed that "every woman is supported ... by her father, her brother, or her husband." But this was no longer the case. With the rise of the middle class, many women were working outside the home for their own subsistence, unfortunately for wages that would not allow them any type of retirement.

How many women are we talking about? Using census figures and other data, Harriet Martineau comes to a conclusion towards the end of her article that I find astonishing:

> Out of six millions of women above twenty years of age, in Great Britian, exclusive of Ireland, and of course of the Colonies, no less than half are industrial in their mode of life. More than a third, more than two millions, are independent in their industry, are self-supporting, like men."

Apparently English men and women of the time were also astonished, following court cases that resulted from a new limited ability for women to obtain divorces that had only been in effect in England following the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857.

> The proceedings in the new Divorce Court, and in matrimonial cases before the police-magistrates, have caused a wide-spread asonishment at the amount of female industry they have disclosed. Almost every aggrieved wife who has sought protection, has proved that she has supported her household, and has acquired property by her effective exertions.

Toward the beginning of the article, Harriet Martineau makes it clear that for working women, "their work should be paid for by its quality, and its place in the market, irrespective of the status of the worker." She then methodically analyzes industry by industry, examining the work that women do in that industry, indicating its difficulty, and at times (when she has the data available) showing a wide discrepancy in wages between male and female workers.

> The professional dairywoman ... has been about the cows since she was tall enough to learn to milk, and her days are so filled up, that it is all she can do to keep her clothes in decent order. She drops asleep over the last stage of her work; and grows up ignorant of all other knowledge, and unskilled in all other arts. Such work as this ought at least to be paid as well as the equivalent work of men; indeed, in the dairy farms of the West of England the same labour of milking the kine is now very generally performed by men, and the Dorset milkmaid, tripping along with her pail, is, we fear, becoming a myth. But even in Cheshire the dairymaids receive, it appears, only from 8*l*. to 10*l*. a-year, with board and lodging. The superintendent of a large dairy is a salaried personage of some dignity, with two rooms, partial or entire diet, coal and candle, and wherewithal to keep a servant — 50*l*. a year or more. But of the 64,000 dairywomen of Great Britain, scarcely any can secure a provision for the time when they can no longer lean over the cheese tub, or churn, or carry heavy weights.

For anyone who believes that "equal pay for equal work" was a concept developed by feminists in the 1970s, Harriet Martineau's article reveals just how long this concept was successfully resisted and suppressed. Low-paid work takes an enormous toll on the women, and Martineau finds that maids of all work are particularly susceptible to medical and financial problems:

> The physician says that, on the female side of lunatic asylums, the largest class, but one, of the insane are maids of all work (the other being governesses). The causes are obvious enough: want of sufficient sleep from late and early hour, unremitting fatigue and hurry, and, even more than these, anxiety about the

> future from the smallness of the wages.... Too often we find that the most imbecile old nurses, the most infirm old charwomen, are the wrecks and ruins of the rosy cooks and tidy housemaids of the last generation. This ought not to be.

"Female Industry" was published without a byline (as many articles of that era were published), and the anonymous author of the article at times speaks from a male perspective — perhaps to sound a little more objective about the subject. (At one point the article even mentions "a letter from Harriet Martineau"!) Yet, the article does not look disapprovingly on working women. Martineau clearly feels that female industry is inevitable with the rise of the middle class. She seems to enjoy seeing women work outside the home, and argues that they be allowed to engage even in those occupations jealously guarded by the men.

> From our youth up, some of us have known how certain of the wisest and most appreciated of physicians have insisted that the health of women and their children will never be guarded as it ought to be till it is put under the charge of physicians of their own sex. The moral and emotional considerations involved in this matter need no discussion.

Given that millions of English women were already supporting themselves by their work, it would be useless to try to stop the trend. Instead, female industry must be nurtured with education and opportunities. She concludes:

> With this new condition of affairs, new duties and new views must be accepted. Old obstructions must be removed; and the aim must be sent before us, as a nation as well as in private life, to provide for the free development and full use of the powers of every member of the community. In other words, we must improve and extend education to the utmost; and then open a fair field to the powers and energies we have educed. This will secure our welfare, nationally and in our homes, to which few elements can contribute more vitally and more richly than the independent industry of our countrywomen.

Harriet Martineau was a woman of strong opinions, not only about political and economic issues but about religious ones. From the beginnings of her Unitarian background, her religious beliefs gradually fell away, until an outright atheism was revealed in *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851), co-authored with Henry G. Atkinson, a book that one wit summed up as "The doctrine seems to be this: There is no God, and Harriet is his prophet."

She was very ready for Charles Darwin's *Origin of Species*, published later in 1859. In one letter she wrote,

> What a book it is! — overthrowing (if true) revealed Religion on the one hand, & Natural (as far as Final Causes & Design are concerned) on the other. The range & mass of knowledge take away one's breath. (quoted in Adrian Desmond & James Moore, *Darwin: The Life of a Tormented Evolutionist*, p. 486)

To Darwin's cousin Fanny Wedgwood, Harriet Martineau wrote,

> One might say "thank you" all one's life without giving any idea of one's sense of obligation.... we must all be glad that he has set the world on this great new track. (quoted in Janet Browne, *Charles Darwin: The Power of Place*, p. 92)

The only problem that Martineau found with the book was the religious terminology that Darwin seemed to use too much! As she continued in her letter to Fanny,

> I rather regret that C.D. went out of his way two or three times ... to speak of "the Creator" in the popular sense of the First Cause ... It is curious to see how those who would otherwise agree with him turn away because his view is "derived from" or "based on" "Theology" ... It seems to me that having carried us up to the earliest group of forms, or to the single primitive one, he & his have nothing to do with how those few forms, or that one, come here. His subject is the "Origin of Species," & not the origin of Organisation; & it seems a needless mischief to have opened the latter speculation at all. — There now! I have delivered my mind. (Desmond & Moore, p. 486-7)

Nothing, but nothing, could prevent Harriet Martineau from delivering her mind.