

Biography, their Subjects and the Construction of Self: The illuminating case of Harriet Martineau ¹

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the dialectic between the identity of the biographer and the production of the biographical subject. Harriet Martineau's role as a nineteenth-century woman reformer, writer and intellectual was generally acknowledged, but perceptions of historians and biographers about her worth as a historical actor varied enormously. What is interesting is that these historical and biographical evaluations generally drew on the same sources; her published books and her two-volume autobiography, the latter of which provided an acerbic commentary on the English, nineteenth-century literary scene and, so Martineau claimed, was written to set the records straight about her actions and beliefs. This paper considers the variety of discursive frameworks involving gender, class, religion and ideology which produced Martineau as both a subject of history and an object of text.

Briefly, Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) enjoyed a long and fruitful career as a feminist writer, journalist and political campaigner. The first and final public actions of her life illustrate the breadth and length of her career in public life. In 1832, at the age of thirty, she published a hugely popular introduction to the new nineteenth-century science of political economy which gave her financial security and earned her the reputation of 'popular educator'. Over thirty years later, in 1863, she published four letters in the **Daily News** alerting the public to the dangers of the Contagious Diseases Acts. These letters were to constitute the first shots in one of the main British feminist campaigns of the nineteenth century.

Perhaps not surprisingly, she was also a contentious figure - attracting much admiration from some (notably feminists), and considerable hostility from others. Her achievements as nineteenth-century woman reformer and innovator were generally recognised. However, in surveying her life and work, there was immense diversity in the evaluation of her importance, both between contemporaries and over time. For example, Martineau was commended and criticised by her contemporaries, depending on the form of their politics (she was a Radical and Unitarian); she was eulogised by feminists writing at the end of the nineteenth-century; and viewed as an interesting, if narrow-minded and sometimes unwise, nineteenth-century eccentric, in the first decades of the twentieth century. At the end of the 1950s, she was perceived of as second-rate and mediocre; and finally reclaimed once more by feminists from the 1970s onwards as an important 'foremother' of modern feminism.

My study of Martineau began as a somewhat celebratory, evaluation of a historically invisible, yet in her time, leading Victorian, middle-class female, intellectual. I was particularly interested in her views on education, and on female education. It ended up, however, as a complex investigation of the inter-relationship between Martineau's life and

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work and the evaluation of her achievements by historians and biographers (including my own). I adopted a multi-layered and multi-dimensional analysis which aimed to avoid what I viewed as the stereotyping, reductionism and uni-dimensionalism of other historians and commentators. On one hand, it was an investigation of Harriet Martineau as a *subject* of history and scholarship, drawing on her own writing to evaluate her intellectual contribution. Simultaneously, it treated her as an *object* of text, as perceived by herself in her autobiography, and as depicted by commentators and biographers.

As a subject of history, Harriet Martineau emerges as an active creator of ideas, an early advocate of women and a campaigner for other politically advanced causes. At the same time, the evaluation of her work by her contemporaries, biographers and historians, and the variety of designations awarded to her - crypto-feminist, masculinized bluestocking, nineteenth-century intellectual, 'foremother' of sociology and economics - produces her as a complex object of interpretation (Weiner, 1991).

The 'problem' of Martineau for historians has been that her specific historical positioning (shaped by gender, class, religion, politics etc.) cast her outside mainstream history, uneasily restricting her within the narrow confines of historical classifications of women. My evaluation of Martineau's worth as a historical actor could only be realised through analysis of the struggles over her textuality - in which I was also implicated. The study thus developed into an exploration of the 'power and knowledge relations that invest human bodies and subjugate them into objects of knowledge' (Foucault, 1977:28) It aimed to offer a fresh appraisal of Martineau's life and work, provide a case-study of the treatment of women by biographers and historians, and evaluate the role of textuality in this process. This paper concentrates on the latter two elements of the original study.

The Study of the Self: Autobiography

Autobiography is comparatively new in the cultural lexicon, first used by the poet Robert Southey in 1809 when announcing an 'epidemic rage for auto-biography'. The conventional view of autobiography is that it offers a complex interplay between the present life and the life retrospectively reviewed at specific stages. It may be in the form of one coherent narrative or, as Spengemann (1980) suggests, it may consist of a variety of collected works including letters, diaries, and travel journals: specifically where 'the writer's self is either the primary subject or the principal object of verbal action' (p. xvi).

As Griffiths shows, there has been a recent explosion of interest in self - of autobiography, life-history, personal narrative as 'the politics of identity has come of age' (Griffiths, 1995:1). Less easy to resolve, as Griffiths also shows, is the precise relationship between politics and self-identity though she suggests that any autobiographical account will be 'both highly personal and highly political'.

Autobiography was a popular genre in the mid-nineteenth century, though when written by women, was often problematic. Some female autobiographers portrayed themselves as ambitious young women with clear career destinations in mind (Sanders, 1986). Yet, most dismissed their early ambitions as immature or egocentric; most tried to minimise what they saw as selfish impulses that thrust them into full and stimulating careers; and most tried to convince their readers that their professional acclaim was, initially at least, fortuitous and

unimportant (Sanders, op cit). According to Sanders (1989), to avoid the criticism of selfishness, nineteenth-century women autobiographers frequently claimed that they were writing for unselfish reasons; not for themselves but for other women or for the common good.

Harriet Martineau conformed to this pattern of autobiographical writing. She declared that the reason for her autobiography was to tell the truth about her life and her loss of faith for a new generation of readers. She portrayed herself as a hard-working woman, who by chance and good luck, created a successful series which brought her independence and a long and enjoyable career. However her autobiography had a mixed reception and she was not able to avoid the accusation of egotism. 'It is "I, I, I" from morning to night, from year's end to year's end' (Walford, 1892:49-50) and revealed 'colossal self-confidence': 'never was there such a woman with so firm a belief in herself; and seldom, let us in justice add, has so preposterous an egotism been allied with so luminous an intellect' (Davenport Adams, 1884:64).

The Study of Another Self: Biography

Biographical writing and its relationship to politics, self and identity is likely to be even more complex, as my Martineau study shows. Biography, ie the history of a particular human life, has a complex relation to both history as a discipline and feminist scholarship. It has often had a rather clandestine feel to it, claimed variously as gossip (by John Aubrey, quoted in Dick, 1949), a look through keyholes (by Samuel Johnson, quoted in Pimlott, 1990), and the selective illumination of a life (by Lytton Strachey in 1918). Others have seen it as higher art form, for example, in the case of early studies of saints, nobles and kings, where biographers used 'purification' to cleanse eminent persons of their faults (Whittemore, 1989), a noble and uplifting enterprise (by the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1810) and an immature though noteworthy art (by Virginia Woolf in 1927). Biographies are also popular with the general reading public, as any glance along bookstore shelves will testify.

Biographies of women have proliferated in recent years - Heilbrun (1989) noted that 73 new biographies of women had appeared on her bookshelf between 1984 and 1989 - due in part to the feminist project of creating a history of women. Feminists have also used the 'personal' of biography and autobiography to re-conceptualise what counts as historical evidence. For example, Stanley argues that:

feminism is concerned with reclaiming past lives of past women because in understanding our past we can better know and act on our present. And of course within this feminist work 'the personal', the realm of everyday life and of relationships and experience, is included to a large degree as well as what is conventionally seen as 'the political', those activities which men have defined as more important and significant for far too long. (Stanley, 1984:25)

By utilising the narrative, biographical accounts enable us to understand changes in historical perspective and social conditions at the same time as offering frameworks within which personal choices and apparently serendipitous events can be located and positioned. However, they are necessarily a selection, an ordering, a production. MacLure (1993) warns that auto/biographical accounts are concerned with shaping and claiming identity rather than

describing experience: people use them to defend attitudes and conduct, to make sense of themselves and others, to work out where they stand in relation to others. While they may be seen as evidence, they cannot be treated as revelations of the honest or unbiased 'self'.

In fact, Bromwich (1984) claims that biographies are more influenced by their writers than their subjects since biographers may radically alter the images of their subjects for market purposes: for example, as interest in subjects' work gives way to more detailed, vicarious interest in their lives. Shifts are certainly discernable in biographical approaches to Harriet Martineau as the next section shows.

Biography, History and Harriet Martineau

For my study, I grouped the commentaries and biographies of Martineau into six periods: 1820-76, responses to her work during her life-time; 1876-7, obituaries following her death; 1877-1914, commentaries and biographies including those from 'first-wave' feminism; 1914-1939, biographical accounts during the inter-war years; 1940-70, modern biographies pre-dating the modern women's movement; from 1970s onwards, 'second wave' feminist perspectives (Weiner, 1991). There was a particular concentration of material in the last decades of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, paralleling the developments of the two feminist movements. For the purposes of this paper, the periodisation has been reduced to three: contemporary, late nineteenth-century and twentieth century perspectives.

i) Contemporary Perspectives

Contemporaries who were critical of Martineau focused on her political views, inconsistencies as a writer, perceived deficiencies of personality, unmarried, female intellectual lifestyle and atypical activities as a woman.

For example, writing in the **Quarterly Review** immediately after the publication of Martineau's highly successful political economy series, Croker ridiculed her work not only because of perceived poor quality of writing and misplaced reforming zeal but also on the grounds of 'unfemininity'.

...worst of all, it is quite impossible not to be shocked, nay disgusted, with many of the unfeminine and mischievous doctrines on the principles of social welfare; of which these tales are made the vehicle. (Croker, 1833:136)

The most intense vitriolic was reserved for occasions when, as a woman, she wrote about 'unwomanly' topics such as population control and celibacy as a solution to overcrowding and unemployment. Again the **Quarterly Review** was outraged.

But no:- such a character is nothing to a female Malthusian. A woman who thinks child-bearing is a crime against society. An unmarried woman who declaims against marriage. (Croker, 1833:151)

To atone, Martineau was instructed to burn all her books except for one or two, abstain from writing until she had mastered a better set of principles and study the work of the popular novelist Maria Edgeworth in order to improve her writing style.

Contemporaries more favourably disposed to Martineau's ideas, were usually drawn from more politically progressive elements in British and American society, and were often as much concerned with defending her reputation against personal and abusive attacks from her detractors, than with a genuine appraisal of her contribution to nineteenth-century culture and ideas.

For example, writing in 1857, Holyoake expressed admiration of both Martineau's 'masculine' mind and her womanly attributes:

In spite of the vigour and grasp of her intellect, she is a true woman and proclaims
Home as peculiarly the female sphere of action. (Holyoake, 1857:9).

Similarly Horne, in 1844, suggested that Martineau's 'unshackled spirit' and 'mind keenly alive to the perceptions of all outward things' had been misinterpreted by her critics who had been decidedly 'ungentlemanly': the 'Quarterly Review...while enlarging on what did not appear as 'feminine', certainly forgot what was gentlemanly' (Horne, 1844:72-3).

In fact, cruel press caricatures about her appearance proved to be counter-productive. Her actual appearance could not but be contrasted favourably to 'the hideous Portrait... in the Fraser' reported Carlyle, who claimed to have been pleasantly surprised by the appearance of such a 'notable literary woman'. 'She pleased us far beyond expectation: she is very intelligent looking, really of pleasant countenance, was full of talk' (Carlyle, 1836, quoted in Sanders & Fielding, 1970:88).

ii) *Late Nineteenth Century Perspectives*

The perception of Martineau's achievements held during her lifetime were reflected in the obituaries immediately after her death. Martineau's gender became the battleground upon which her friends and enemies took up their positions. Holyoake and Payn referred both her greatness and womanliness. For Holyoake, it was Martineau's achievements as a woman which were of most importance. He claimed that she was one of only two women in the nineteenth century (the other was George Sand) 'who have been eminent in the same degree for profound sympathy with religious, social and political progress' (Holyoake, 1876a) though she was also 'the most womanly of public women I ever knew' (Holyoake, 1876b). Payn wrote that Martineau was *the* greatest among famous women though:

the side of her character I wish to dwell upon as having been overlooked in the notices of her life, was her motherliness, and her keen sense of fun. (quoted in Wheatley, 1957:391)

In contrast, more critical commentaries drew attention to the so-called masculine qualities of her character. In a period in which there was much discussion about whether eminent individuals were or were not geniuses, Richardson thought Martineau an 'interpretive genius'

though regretted that there were 'so many lines of masculine hardness in it [her autobiography]' even though 'we are pleased to trace a weakness here and there'. (Richardson, 1877;1112 & 1122-3).

The Scottish novelist Margaret Oliphant also took up the theme of Martineau's unwomanliness and limited ability in a deftly crushing summary of her work:

The verdict of the world will not, we think, be so high. She was a very sensible woman; yet not very much a woman at all, notwithstanding her innocence and honest love of Berlin wool. She was a very clever writer, with a most useful, serviceable working faculty, and as little nonsense in her as could be desired. (Oliphant, 1877:490)

Only those who saw her most clearly as a reformer and campaigner, for example, Florence Nightingale or members of the emerging women's movement, concentrated on her achievements rather than the fact that she was a woman. Nightingale wrote of Martineau thus:

She was born to be a destroyer of slavery, in whatever form, in whatever place, all over the world...whether in the fruits of any abuse - social, legislative, or administrative, - or in actual slavery; or it be the Contagious Diseases Acts, or no matter what, she rose to the occasion. (Letter quoted in Chapman, 1876: 479)

'First wave' feminists re-discovered Martineau as a 'foremother' of the women's movement later in the century. Both Miller (1884) and Pratt (1997) saw their subject as an innovator: Pratt, because of her article on female education in 1859 which led to the establishment of the Society for Promoting Employment for Women; and Miller, for Martineau's path-clearing achievements as a female role model. Miller was the first of Martineau's biographers to identify and list her range of activities on behalf of women, though Miller was also quick to leap to her heroine's defence from the 'vile attacks' of the **Quarterly Review**. Like others, one aim of Miller was to confirm her subject's womanliness. Miller hinted that though Martineau's betrothal had clearly come to nothing, Martineau's experience of love (and her virginity, one supposes) had led to 'womanliness of nature [which] remained fresh and true and sweet to the end of her days because of it' (Miller, 1884:51).

A new failing emerged in this period linked to the emergence of the new science of psychology: that of 'egocentrism'. As we have already seen, both Walford (1892) and Davenport Adams (1884) criticised Martineau's autobiography for over-use of the first person and of excessive self-confidence. Walford further described her as 'prejudiced, jealous, exacting and inordinately egotistical' (Walford, 1892:49).

iii) Twentieth Century Perspectives

Biographical writing on Martineau during the first part of the twentieth century tended to concentrate on the exploration of her character as a Victorian intellectual and on her psychological make-up though she was also included in a number of collections of lives

concerning, for example, women pioneers or Victorian celebrities. Bosanquet, the author of the main biography of this period, was particularly interested in Martineau's personality: her stated aim was to relate 'Miss Martineau's life and opinions...to the personal influences which so clearly and powerfully affected her' (Bosanquet, 1927:vii). Bosanquet speculated about her subject's 'unconscious impulses' of love, her perpetual emotional adolescence, her filial jealousy; and remarked also on Martineau's 'inflexible purpose' and lack of feminine charm. Here, Martineau was produced as a sexual failure: 'her sex was nothing but a hindrance, inspiring real men of business with an instinctive distrust of the thin, pale, deaf young woman who wanted them to publish her stories for her' (Bosanquet, 1927:48).

The 1930s, 1940s and 1950s were reasonably quiet decades for publications on Martineau; until two full biographies appeared within three years of each other using newly available sources of evidence. Wheatley (1957) claimed to restore the reputation of a Victorian figure 'so frequently misrepresented and misunderstood' (Wheatley, 1957:11) whereas Webb (1960) wanted to use Martineau as a case-study to illuminate the early Victorian period. Wheatley used newly available unpublished correspondence to write a personal biography, charting often in minute detail, each period in her subject's progression through life and perceived changes in her subject's morale and emotions. Stereotypes continued to abound: once again Martineau's 'analytical, masculine' qualities were referred to: as also were her womanly qualities:

she possessed a large, loving heart...she was incomparably loyal in her affections and friendships, and...was sympathetic beyond the capacity of many purely intellectual women. (Wheatley, 1957: 394)

In contrast, Webb's more scholarly biography cast Martineau as a typical early Victorian: prey to fashion, hypochondria and over-activity. For Webb, Martineau 'reflected and magnified some powerfully symptomatic contemporary concerns. This is why she is so much talked about and why she is useful to historians' (Webb, 1960:20). Significantly, Webb designated Martineau as second-rate, able only to mix with second-rate people like herself:

Harriet Martineau was the perfect example of the limited intellect secure enough in its convictions to challenge its betters. The phenomenon has always existed and will always exist, the bane of genius - and perhaps its salvation. (Webb, 1960:179)

Both Wheatley and Webb recorded Martineau's activity on women's issues, though Webb noted that many of her friends found her feminist views entirely incomprehensible, and were put off by her shrillness of tone and deliberately uncompromising stand. One suspects that Webb shared their views!

Most recently, however, more interest has been expressed in Martineau's work than ever before. From 1981 onwards, five volumes were published, devoted wholly or for the most part to Martineau; her autobiography and a novel were reissued in 1983 to much acclaim, and a great number of academic articles have also appeared. This new Martineau 'industry' is part of the renewed interest in women's issues arising out of 'second-wave' feminism. Significantly, the most notable feature about this body of work is the more detailed analysis it

provides of the precise nature of Martineau's contribution to a whole range of disciplines and spheres connected to women. It also displays a relative lack of interest in Martineau's emotional life, personality or appearance.

Discussion

The aim of this paper has been to show the importance of textuality in the historical construction of a life. Riley (1988) draws attention to the volatility of the category of woman, which she suggests, is historically and discursively constructed and is always dialectically related to other social categories, which themselves are continually changing.

Women such as Harriet Martineau regarded themselves only sometimes as women: at other times they identified with class, ethnicity, religion or other factors. Martineau's perception of woman changed over her lifetime. In her earliest writing, she emphasised woman as *an equal being to man*, socially, politically and educationally; later she focused on woman as *economically independent*; and towards the end of her life, she identified more with woman as *self-contained*. Clearly these shifts in meaning depended on wider cultural and ideological changes and on Martineau's altered material circumstances and discursive positioning.

A focus on textuality thus reveals the instability of 'woman' as a historical category, providing the possibility for a systematic examination and struggle over that instability. Thus, as we have seen, an examination of Martineau's positioning in texts, written by herself and others, has enabled the identification and deconstruction of the producers of biographical texts and the exposure of the method by which biographical subjects are produced (rather than described). Scott (1988) offers post-structuralism as a 'powerful analytic tool' to aid the deconstruction of knowledge 'produced by cultures and societies of human relationships, in this case those between women and men' (Scott, 1988:2) - and to encourage questions about how hierarchies are constructed and legitimated historically.

Instead of attributing a shared meaning to cultural concepts, post-structuralists insist that meanings are not fixed in a culture's lexicon, but are rather dynamic, always potentially in flux. (Scott, 1988:5)

The aim therefore of this paper has been to provide support, first, for the claim that biography or the writing of lives is a highly subjective medium, and second, that an appreciation of a life can only be achieved in the full knowledge of discursive and cultural frameworks in which subject and the biographer are situated. Even then, texts will be interpreted in different ways, filtered through the selective and subjective eye of the reader.

Thus, given their discursive positionings, it comes as no surprise that it has been feminists and other politically progressive individuals and groups who have sought to restore Harriet Martineau to prominence. In contrast, conventional male (and several female) scholars and historians have either diminished the achievements of women such as Martineau or avoided them altogether. One might speculate about the reasons for this: lack of interest in or empathy with, women, and conscious or subconscious interest in maintaining patriarchal domination of epistemology are but two. Additionally the historical treatment of women as generally inferior to, or different from, men can only be identified and challenged with

knowledge of specific prevailing ideologies about, and discourses on, women and their relationship with men.

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