

**Auto/biography as Historical Evidence:
Feminism and the cases of
Hannah Cullwick and Harriet Martineau**

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Introduction

Materialist feminism emerged in the 1970s from feminist critiques within marxism, contributing in particular to the development of theories about patriarchy, capitalism and ideology. It aimed to elaborate 'more specific understandings of the relation between the operation of power in the symbolic order and in other material practices' (Hennessy, 1993, p. xi). By the early eighties, materialist feminist theory began to make use of discourse analysis in order to understand more clearly the explicit intersections between class and gender; and more recently it has begun to explore how 'woman' as a discursive category is historically produced.

I first was attracted to materialist feminism when writing my doctoral thesis on the English nineteenth-century woman writer and reformer, Harriet Martineau, completed in 1991. I understood materialist feminism as a fusion of radical, marxist and poststructuralist feminist ideas:

which emphasises the shifting notions of womanhood and also its dialectical relationship to other social formations such as class, family, religion...that is, one which contends that all human action, including that of women, is the consequence of specific cultural, economic and social conditions and influences. (Weiner, 1991, p. 271)

Such theories had a profound effect on my study of Harriet Martineau which started as a somewhat celebratory, evaluation of an hitherto, historically invisible, yet in her time, leading Victorian, middle-class female, intellectual. It ended as a multi-layered investigation of the inter-relationship of Harriet Martineau's life and work and the evaluation of her achievements by historians and biographers (including my own).

Briefly, Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) enjoyed a long and fruitful career as a feminist writer, journalist and political campaigner. Her popular introduction to the new nineteenth-century science of Political Economy earned her the reputation of 'popular educator'. She was also a highly contentious figure - for while she was perceived with much admiration by some, she attracted considerable hostility from others. In surveying her life and work, I found immense diversity in the evaluation of her importance by historians. Whilst her role as a nineteenth-century woman reformer and innovator was generally acknowledged, Harriet Martineau was commended and criticised by

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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 (Weiner, 1991). What was so interesting was that most of these evaluations drew on the same sources; her published books and her two-volume autobiography (Martineau, 1877). How, I asked, could these differences in perception be understood?

I tried to address this question by developing a more complex form of analysis which aimed to avoid what I viewed as the stereotyping, reductionism and uni-dimensionalism of other commentators. Hence my study had a three-fold purpose: to offer a fresh appraisal of a woman's life and work; to consider Harriet Martineau as a case-study of how women are treated by biographers and historians; and to evaluate the role of textuality in this process.

My treatment of Harriet Martineau, therefore, was of necessity, multi-layered and multidimensional. 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 texts, 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, a role model for women and a campaigner for 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 - renders her a complex object of interpretation (Weiner, 1991).

I have drawn on my study of Harriet Martineau as a way into the discussion of the Hannah Cullwick papers because it gives, I hope, some indication of my likely stance and also of how a particular feminist perspective has been employed to study a woman who lived through some of the same period as did Hannah Cullwick and Arthur Munby. The rest of the paper is divided into three parts: a general discussion of the place of biography and autobiography within feminist scholarship; a personal account of autobiographical writing; and a perspective on the Hannah Cullwick papers.

Biography and Autobiography within Feminist Scholarship

Hannah Cullwick and Arthur Munby both wrote autobiographically and had biographies written about them (Hudson, 1974; Stanley, 1984). Before I consider what response might be made to the Cullwick papers, some consideration of past debates concerning the two genres might provide a useful conceptual framework. Biography, ie the history of a particular human life, and autobiography ie the history of a particular human life written by the subject, have a complex relation to both history as a discipline and feminist scholarship. Biography 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), as a noble and uplifting enterprise (by the poet, Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1810) and as an immature though noteworthy art (by Virginia Woolf in 1927).

Biographies of women have proliferated in recent years - Heilbrun (1989) notes that 73 new biographies of women 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, p. 25)

Autobiography is comparatively new in the cultural lexicon, first used by the poet Robert Southey in 1809 when announcing an 'epidemical 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. A view of autobiography more helpful to understanding the Cullwick papers, however, is that articulated by Spengemann (1980) who maintains that autobiography may also 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).

In my view, autobiographical accounts can be helpful in furthering understanding about how historical events are played out. By utilising the narrative structure of biography, they can help us 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. Goodson argues for this approach to be adopted in understanding the work of teachers:

we have to reconnect our studies of schooling with investigations of personal biography and historical background: above all we are arguing for the reintegration of situational with biographical and historical analysis. (Goodson, 1981, p. 69)

However, as we see in the discussion about the Cullwick papers, autobiography-as-knowledge can be highly problematic. Autobiography is necessarily a selection, an ordering, a shaping. MacLure (1993) uses the term 'biographical attitude' to describe recent interest in 'person-oriented genres' for educational research. Biographical attitude, according to MacLure (p. 331)

describes a 'slant' or posture towards issues of research, policy or development which places the biographical subject and her or his lived experience at the centre of the analytic frame.

However, MacLure warns that autobiographical accounts are concerned with 'claiming identity' rather describing experience and that people use them to defend attitudes and conduct, to make sense of themselves and their actions, to work out where they stand in relation to others. What is important is that while they may be seen as evidence, they cannot be treated as revelations of the honest or unbiased 'self'.

Personal Experience of Autobiography

In my own brief engagement with autobiographical writing, I selected some of the events and influences in my life (personal and professional) set against the main cultural and political changes in Britain over the past two decades, in order to provide an indication of how my ideas on education and feminism had originated and developed. Since one of my main arguments has been that ideas and beliefs are formed and shaped by and within their specific historical context, I intended the autobiographical snapshot to be a means of locating my ideas in a specific temporal and cultural frame (Weiner, 1994).

I recounted my birth and family background, my early marriage and entry into higher education and academic life, and the educational theoretical and policy frameworks that shaped the twists and turns of my professional track (for a discussion of 'track' in autobiographical writing, see Lomax, 1994). It told of my dilemmas and successes - less so, of my disappointments, failures and misadventures; and of my intellectual and career trajectory rather than my personal life and loves. On looking back, the narrative of my life that I offered is strongly cemented by chronology and sequence, giving perhaps a rather false picture of intentionality and purpose.

I greatly enjoyed writing autobiographically (a form of therapy perhaps!) and had to guard against writing too much or too widely or off-track. I redrafted again and again choosing words and phrases carefully - it seemed more important than ever in autobiographical writing to convey precise meanings and explanations. I ended with a careful statement about my current intellectual position which included a rejection of previously held unitary notions of feminism and confessed uncertainty about future forms of feminism.

At the end of my short piece, I attempted to convey the partiality of the perspective on my life that I had offered, and invited the reader to see my account as a deliberate construction of an identity. I also invited readers to treat my account with caution and suspicion by suggesting that they might wish to focus, as Sanders (1989) suggests, on the interesting questions in women's autobiographical writing: on the 'absences' in my autobiographical account; on what was stressed or left out; on any evasiveness in portraiture; on the existence of a sub-text; on what to accept at face value and how much to read between the lines - and, accordingly, then to make their own evaluations and to draw their own conclusions.

There has been a great deal of 'I' in this paper, and for women, this element of autobiographical writing has proved problematic. Historically, women have found it difficult to find a language or form of expression which does not lay themselves open to accusations of unwomanliness, since the act of writing defies the conventions and stereotypes of womanhood - of selflessness, modesty, and passivity. Certainly I was warned against autobiography as 'self-indulgence' by a colleague, and in Harriet Martineau's case, her

autobiography was viewed by one commentator as indicative of extreme egotism. 'It is "I, I, I" from morning to night, from year's end to year's end' (Walford, 1892, pp 49-50) .

Another saw Martineau's autobiography as evidence of '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, p. 64).

According to Sanders (1989), to avoid this 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's declared reasons for her autobiography were to tell the truth about her life and her loss of faith for a new generation of readers. Hannah Cullwick claimed that she wrote her diaries because her lover, Munby, wished her to do so and in order to give him an insight into her daily life and work. It would seem difficult to pin down the precise reasons for writing autobiographically in the same way as it is difficult to ascertain the precise reasons for most forms of human action.

A Perspective on the Hannah Cullwick Papers

How might responses to the Hannah Cullwick papers be shaped by specific forms of feminism or by debates about biographical and autobiographical writing mentioned above? In this section, I suggest ways in which feminists (and other critical researchers) might draw on the Hannah Cullwick papers to both create histories which position women centre-stage and to maintain their critique of dominant epistemological forms.

1. A Case-Study

My view is that the collection of papers on Hannah Cullwick which includes her diaries, Munby's diaries and papers, and the Hudson and Stanley biographical overviews together provide an illuminating case-study of a complex set of class and gender relationships at a specific historical and cultural period. As Stake points out, in a case-study, strategic decisions need to be made about interpretation:

The...researcher faces a strategic choice in deciding how much and how long the complexities of a case should be studied. Not everything about the case can be understood - how much needs to be? Each researcher will make up his or her mind. (Stake, 1994, p. 238)

My interpretive decision on the Hannah Cullwick papers is that they create a strong narrative and provide some illumination on the different sets of practices of both the original writers Hannah Cullwick and Joseph Munby, and their biographers. As I saw in my study of Harriet Martineau, it also seems clear that a full appreciation of texts can only be achieved in the full knowledge of the discursive and cultural frameworks in which writers are located: in this case, of Hannah Cullwick and Joseph Munby, writing in the nineteenth-century, and Derek Hudson and Liz Stanley, interpreting texts from late twentieth-century standpoints.

2. Hannah Cullwick as a Subject and Object of Text

Like Harriet Martineau, the Hannah Cullwick papers produce Hannah Cullwick as both a subject and object of text, created by herself, created by Munby, by Hudson and Stanley, and by this symposium. As such, they enable us to scrutinise history-making as well as history itself. For example, from Hannah Cullwick's writing, we can attempt to derive meaning about what it was like to be 'in service' in early and middle Victorian England; and we can read her original account alongside other commentaries on her writing which may (or may not) subscribe to our understanding of, or perspective on, historical processes. As a feminist, I may be interested in the set of papers by, and on, Hannah Cullwick at a number of levels:

- as providing a visible presence of women in history;
- as offering an insight into class and sexual relations in Victorian society;
- as illustrative of the powerful narrative presence of autobiography (and biography) within women's history;
- as an important contribution to working-class history;
- as a complex study of the category of 'woman';

and so on.

What I cannot derive from this corpus of work is specific insight into 'reality' or 'truth' beyond the evident facts that Hannah and the other actors in the narrative were born and died, were married (or not), had certain jobs, occupations, friends and families etc. Neither do I have any sense of the 'ordinariness' of Harriet Cullwick (claimed by Stanley) or the specific sexual nature of the Cullwick/Munby relationship. From my late twentieth-century feminist perspective, however, I cannot but recoil from the apparent ritualistic subservience of Cullwick to Munby as illustrated by her wearing of a padlock around her neck and her reference to him as 'Massa', which, according to Stanley (p. 13) 'both of them took to be the black slave pronunciation of "master", to signify that her primary servitude was to him'. Is this truly indicative of the 'ordinary' or usual relationship between the sexes in Victorian England, or might this be viewed as a metaphor represented by a quite extraordinary relationship, which nevertheless illuminates class, sexual and racial practices in Victorian times?

3. Broader Sense of Womanhood

The Cullwick papers also provide a broadening of our understanding of how notions of womanhood need to be understood within specific historical and cultural frames. Stanley is right to point out that in the Hannah Cullwick papers, we gain access to 'the last generation' of women who did heavy manual labour. We see in the Cullwick and Munby diaries that the version of femininity adopted by this group of women defied the conventional femininity of their class, for example, by allowing them to go alone to public houses, walk the streets without molestation and celebrate the breadth of their biceps. This version of femininity is certainly different from those challenged and/or adopted by middle-class women such as Harriet Martineau who had to 'prove' their femininity by showing that they were 'proper ladies' before their work was taken seriously.

In my view, then, the Cullwick papers provide an important addition to the knowledge that we already have about working-class femininity which transforms conceptions of what it

meant to be a woman in the Victorian period, and thus, what it means to be a woman today.

4. Contribution of Auto/Biography to historical and feminist scholarship

Like Stanley, I hold the view that personal texts such as those produced by Cullwick, Munby and Martineau, have an important contribution to make. They offer accessible and immediate (ie contemporary) narratives which offer, not the 'truth' but carefully chosen identities and representations. They should thus be read alongside other historical accounts and analyses rather than as an authentic substitute. Also like Stanley, I suggest that such accounts are 'deeply political in nature', providing access to the private micro-spheres within which practices involving 'sex, class, race, power, labour, diet, housing, sanitation, employment, poverty, theft, fun, commitment, friendship...' (p. 25) were/are constituted and re-constituted.

What seems to me to be distinctive about materialist feminism which I hope has come through in the above discussion, is that it is a form of feminism which strives to reconcile the macro and micro of human action. It thus aims to retain an understanding of the broader patterns of domination and subordination without sacrificing the importance of discourse and the multiple positionings of women (and other human beings) within a variety of discursive frameworks. As Hennessy puts it:

material feminists need to insist on one of the strongest features of feminism's legacy - its critique of social totalities like patriarchy and capitalism - without abandoning the differential positioning of women within them (p. xii)

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