

## Deerbrook: True Love and Purple Pros<sup>1</sup>

*Deerbrook* was in its day a pioneering and innovative novel. This can be gauged from the fact that Harriet Martineau had difficulty in finding a publisher, though she was a well established writer by this time. In 1839, the reading public was conditioned to romances, high adventure, and the fantasies of the aristocratic novel. She was, thus, breaking new ground by wanting to write about middle class life with an apothecary as a hero, and a heroine who came from Birmingham. However she was taken aback at her publication difficulties:

I was not aware then how strong the hold on the public mind which "the silver-fork school" had gained...People liked high life in novels, and low life, and ancient life: and life of any rank presented by Dickens...but it was not supposed that they would bear a presentment of the familiar life of every day (Martineau's *Autobiography*, 1877, vol. 2: 114-5).

As the first novel of an already established writer, *Deerbrook* was well received by the literary journals and drew favourable comparison with the works of Jane Austen. For example, a review in the *Athenaeum* assessed it as "a village tale, as simple in its structure and unambitious in its delineations, as one of Miss Austen's; but including characters of a higher order of mental force and spiritual attainment than Miss Austen ever drew - save perhaps *Persuasion*".<sup>2</sup> It went into two editions though was not a best seller as was overshadowed by the outpouring of 'domestic' fiction which followed in the 1840s and 1850s. *Deerbrook's* literary merits were compared with the works of the 'golden' novelists of the day, such as Charlotte Bronte, Elizabeth Gaskell and George Eliot, and its reputation judged 'minor' rather than 'major'<sup>3</sup>

*Deerbrook* pre-figured George Eliot's work. Set in a rural village among the professional middle classes, Harriet Martineau attempted to blend the personal lives of two sisters with social comment and analysis of the village to which they have come to live. Village life is portrayed as a hive of gossip, innuendo and personal rivalries within the context of closely observed class differences. Its author revealed her political and class affiliations in her portrayal of the upper classes as self-publicising, corrupt and bigoted, and the 'workies' as deprived, superstitious and easily led. Her main (middle class) characters thrive on a succession of crises, and though she was careful to distinguish between hardship and destitution (the latter on which she laid the blame for riots, crime and social unrest), their happiness increases in proportion to their ability to become self-sufficient.

The book was interpreted in two different ways; as the forerunner to the newly emerging domestic novel and as a vehicle of sexual self-expression. Harriet Martineau pioneered the 'domestic' novel. *Deerbrook* and other 'domestic' novels emerged as the consequence of numerous influences in the early nineteenth century; radicalism, reform, evangelicalism and romanticism. These values, according to Colby<sup>4</sup> were reflected in the creation of a new genre

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<sup>1</sup> Conference dinner presentation, annual meeting of the Martineau Society, Edinburgh, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Unattributed (1839) *Athenaeum*, 597, 6, April, pp. 254-6

<sup>3</sup> Showalter, Elaine. (1979) *A Literature of Their Own: British Women Novelists from Bronte to Lessing*. London, Virago Press, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Colby, Vineta (1974), *Yesterday's Women*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 212:

The shifting of attention from aristocrat to middle-class family life, from leaders of men to simply employers of men - businessmen, matrons managing their servants, governesses educating their children, clergymen guiding their flock - all this was the material of Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope as much as of the Brontes, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, and - to put her in such exalted company - Harriet Martineau.

- the bourgeois love story, parochial, domestic and filled with the minutiae of daily living<sup>5</sup>. Certainly, these features are present in *Deerbrook*, for example, in Harriet Martineau's portrayal of the duties of the newly-wed Hester:

She saw at once the difference in the relation between tradespeople and their customers in a large town like Birmingham, and in a village where there is but one baker, where the grocer and the hatter are the same personage, and where you cannot fly from your butcher, be he ever so much your foe. Hester therefore made it her business to transact herself all affairs with the village tradesmen. She began her housekeeping energetically, and might be seen in Mr. Jones's open shop in the coldest morning of January, selecting her joint of meat; or deciding among brown sugars at Tucker's, the grocer's.

(Martineau, Harriet (1839) *Deerbrook*. London: Smith, Elder & Co: 197-8)

Harriet Martineau also used *Deerbrook* as a vehicle to dwell on some of the most intimate parts of her personal experience, real or imaginary. Figs (1982) for example, claims that Harriet Martineau allows the following discussion between two of the main characters of the book, Margaret who is the heroine and the less beautiful of the Ibbotsen sisters and Maria, the crippled governess, to explore issues of love and sexual passion.

(Maria) I was speaking of love - the grand influence of a woman's life, but whose name is a mere empty sound to her till it becomes suddenly, secretly, a voice which shakes her being from the very centre - more awful, more tremendous than the crack of doom.

(Margaret) But why? Why so tremendous?

(Maria) From the struggle which calls upon her to endure, silently and alone; - from the agony of a change of existence which must be wrought without any eye perceiving it. Depend upon it, Margaret, there is nothing in death to compare with this change; and there can be nothing in entrance upon another state which can transcend the experience I speak of. Our power can be but taxed to the utmost. Our being can be strained till not another effort can be made. This is all that we can conceive to happen in death; and it happens in love, with the additional burden of secrecy...

The struggles of shame, pangs of despair, must be hidden in the depth of the prison-house. Every groan must be stifled before it is heard: and as for tears - they are a solace too gentle for the case. The agony is too strong for tears...

It is not so strange as at first sight it seems. Every mother and friend hopes that no one has suffered as she did - that her particular charge may escape entirely, or get off more easily. Then there is the shame of confession which is involved: some conclude, at a distance of time, that they must have exaggerated their own sufferings, or have been singularly rebellious or unreasonable. Some lose the sense of the anguish in the subsequent happiness; and there are not a few who, from constitution of mind, forget

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<sup>5</sup> The shifting of attention from aristocrat to middle-class family life, from leaders of men to simply employers of men - businessmen, matrons managing their servants, governesses educating their children, clergymen guiding their flock - all this was the material of Dickens, Thackeray, and Trollope as much as of the Brontes, George Eliot, Mrs. Gaskell, and - to put her in such exalted company - Harriet Martineau (Colby, p. 212).

altogether 'the things that are behind'. When you remember, too, that it is this law of nature and providence that each should bear his and her own burden, and that no warning would be of any avail, it seems no longer so strange that while girls hear endlessly of marriage, they are kept wholly in the dark about love  
(Martineau H., (1839), *Deerbrook*, London, Edward Moxon, p. 159-60, 160-1)

It is difficult to know what to make of these passages given that Harriet Martineau was extremely critical of women writers such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Charlotte Bronte for being the victims of passion<sup>6</sup>. It was these passages, however, which Charlotte Bronte recognised as an influence on her own writing<sup>7</sup>. As an experienced author and aware of the book's selling potential, Harriet Martineau may have been writing about purely imaginary and fictionalised feelings in order to increase book sales. Some of the more lurid passages give the impression that this certainly could have been the case. On the other hand, she may well have been remembering past romantic feelings, necessarily kept secret because of the social conventions of the time. She wrote *Deerbrook* in her mid-thirties, as a relatively young woman. She could have been describing feelings she had, say, for her brother James, or for William J. Fox, the editor of the *Monthly Repository*, with whom she spent many hours, or for her doomed fiance James Worthington, or for someone she met during her stay in London.

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<sup>6</sup> See Martineau, Harriet. (1877), *Autobiography*. Vol. 1, p. 400.

<sup>7</sup> Letter from Charlotte Bronte to Harriet Martineau, quoted in Martineau, Harriet (1877) *Autobiography*. vol. 2, p. 323