



# Harriet Martineau (1802–1876)

*By David M. Levy and Sandra J. Peart*

## **Introduction**

Harriet Martineau was perhaps the greatest storyteller in the long tradition of liberal political economists. There is an engaging simplicity in her stories, told to educate the general public about basic principles of economics, the benefits associated with the division of labour and free trade, as well as alternatives to a nineteenth century system of enslavement in the US South. Her monthly serials, published under the umbrella title *Illustrations of Political Economy*, eventually brought her enormous celebrity and much-needed financial independence.

Unlike her contemporary, John Stuart Mill, with whom she shared the egalitarian commitment to liberty (Peart, 2021), Martineau wrote exclusively for a popular audience. Indeed, she was devoted to teaching the widest possible audience. When J.S. Mill's father, James Mill, was asked to advise the publisher Charles Fox about publishing Martineau's *Illustrations*, he recommended against publication on the basis that her fictional tales lacked scientific rigour. (Later in life James Mill admitted to Martineau that he had misjudged her ability to illustrate scientific principles using fiction.)

Although her writings were extremely successful in her lifetime, today only specialists know of Martineau's work, and those in economics tend to downplay her originality and sophistication. Indeed, as James Mill's judgement suggests, both her subject matter and her method of painting pictures in words proved controversial from the beginning of her career. Perhaps for that reason, Martineau disappeared from the scholarly landscape for close to a century after her death. Late in the nineteenth century, as eugenics and racism emerged and flourished among social scientists, Martineau's egalitarianism was forgotten and scholars lost the ability to appreciate her contributions.

When she was rediscovered late in the twentieth century, Martineau's anti-slavery activism and her long crusade for gender equity stood out dramatically. But the cost of a century of neglect is that fine scholars in an egalitarian tradition lost the context of her work and no longer recognized those whose work she disputed. Despite that, it is now sometimes straightforward to recover her intellectual adversaries. The nineteenth century essayist and historian, Thomas Carlyle, for instance, was one such opponent; his racism was positively flamboyant. W.R. Greg, whom Martineau pairs with Carlyle as a racist in her letter of November 17, 1868 (Martineau, 2007, 5: 233-235), has dropped out of the memory of all but the narrowest of specialists, despite his importance as the co-founder of eugenics (Peart and Levy, 2005). If we fail to appreciate that Martineau spent her life combatting the views of Carlyle, Greg, and others of the same ilk, we misunderstand her. If we know her opponents, her witness becomes a true story of a life spent combatting racism.

## An eventful life

Born in Norwich, England, on June 12, 1802, Martineau's life spans most of the nineteenth century. By the time of her death on June 26, 1876, she was well known amongst all the prominent intellectuals of her time. Her *Autobiography* reveals much joy at learning that the young Princess Victoria enjoyed her work. The same *Autobiography* portrays a desperately unhappy childhood. She began to grow deaf at the age of 11, requiring an ear trumpet by age 18. The death of the brother who had encouraged her to write was followed by her fiancé's madness and death. Her father's bankruptcy was followed shortly by his death. Notwithstanding, or perhaps because of these horrific events, she read voraciously, learned much, and traveled widely. Her command of French allowed her to translate, and reformulate, the French sociologist August Comte's *Cours de Philosophie Positive* in such an illuminating manner that Comte himself would advise his students to read her translation and not his original. Her fictionalized biography of the great figure of the Haitian rebellion, Toussaint L'Ouverture, dealt with slavery in Haiti; the example of Haitian slavery remained in the background of her discussions of the British and American debates (Martineau, 1841). Her interest in religious teaching is always in evidence. The first substantial financial reward from her writing came from three prize-winning essays that presented Unitarianism to adherents of other faiths.

## Illustrating Adam Smith's economics

Martineau opened her *Illustrations of Political Economy* with an explanation of how she would proceed. Her monthly "tales" or stories would be sequentially published installments, each with titles of their own, forming a coherent book entitled *Illustrations of Political Economy*. (For clarity in what follows, we shall refer to the installments by their individual titles.)

She lamented that political economy was infrequently studied in spite of its evident importance. The "way in which the necessaries and comforts of life" are "best procured and enjoyed by all" is obviously significant, yet political economy was rarely studied by "the mass of the people." In the preface to the work included in the first installment, *Life in the Wilds*, she attributed this neglect to the difficulty of the subject matter (Martineau, 1832a: iv-v). Martineau's intention, and her life's work, was to correct that neglect by offering

simple yet sound lessons for all to comprehend. Her stated procedure was to illustrate the whole system by starting with uncomplicated ideas and adding complexity:

Each tale will therefore be usually, if not always, complete in itself, as a tale, while the principles it exhibits form a part of the system which the whole are designed to convey. As an instance of what we mean: the scene of the first tale is laid in a distant land, because there is no such thing to be found in our own country as Labour uncombined with Capital, and proceeding through many stages to a perfect union with Capital. In the next volume, which treats of the operation and increase of Capital, the scene is laid in a more familiar region, because Capital can be seen in full activity only in a highly civilized country. (Martineau, 1832a: xvi-xvii)

In the preface, Martineau also drew a contrasting picture of (first) a medieval family exhibiting vast disparity of wealth and (second) a modern family exhibiting little. Then she generalized, articulating an egalitarian vision of liberalism that explained the disparity of wealth by “errors of national management”—impediments to free trade—and insisted that it is the “duty of the people” to correct those mistakes:

If it has been an important service to equalize the lot of the hundred members of a great man’s family, it must be incalculably more so to achieve the same benefit for the many millions of our population, and for other nations through them. This benefit cannot, of course, be achieved till the errors of our national management are traced to their source, and the principles of a better economy are established. It is the duty of the people to do this. (Martineau, 1832a: v)

In placing much blame for sluggish growth and inequality on national mismanagement, Martineau proved a faithful student of Adam Smith.

Indeed, in Martineau’s view ignorance of the principles of political economy proved to be the critical barrier to a sound understanding of economic

prosperity and progress. She praised Smith's *Wealth of Nations*, "a book whose excellence is marvellous when all the circumstances are considered," but while she found the work "engaging [for] the learned," it was neither "fitted nor designed to teach the science to the great mass of the people." Political economy lacked the practical lessons to illustrate these principles for the masses, to explicate "the science in a familiar, practical form" (Martineau, 1832a: xi).

Martineau next offered an example of the sort of lesson she sought to convey to the masses—teaching about the importance of property rights "to the prosperity of a people." In her view, it would be helpful to do more than simply state the significance of secure property rights to the creation of wealth. Instead of this "dry, plain way" of conveying the principle, Martineau urged a new way of teaching using "the story of a merchant in Turkey, in contrast with one of a merchant in England" to illustrate the consequences of insecure property rights and "impress the memory and engage the interest in a much greater degree" (Martineau, 1832a: xi).

As noted, Martineau added complications as the series unfolded. Like Smith, she began in a society without physical capital: *Life in the Wilds* opens in a small settlement in southern Africa that the natives have raided, taking or destroying the physical capital, but killing only a few inhabitants. She introduced the persistent theme from the *Wealth of Nations*, natural equality, when she explained how the bushmen were "hunted down like so many wild beasts" by the British and Dutch. They became "fierce and active in their revenge," a reaction that would have been mirrored by the Europeans had the tables been turned:

If we may judge by the experiments which have been tried upon the natives of various countries, it seems probable that if Europeans were driven from their homes into the mountains, and exposed to the hardships of a savage life, they would become stunted in their forms, barbarous in their habits, and cruel in their revenge. (Martineau, 1832a: 4)

Her characters soon learn the advantages of specialization and exchange, adapting their considerable skills to their new environment without physical capital. Lacking books, their religious services are conducted by those who best remember the old words. Moreover, their discussions articulate Smith's economics to guide their decisions about how the group ought to move forward. As the story draws to a close, a wagon drawn by oxen arrives at the settlement. The wagon is loaded with tools, a loan arranged by a character who had escaped the raid and fled in search of assistance. Tools, not machinery, were bought on credit, he explains, because the settlers can make machines with the tools. Bibles and gospels are provided as gifts. In the early nineteenth century, a key question that preoccupied political economists such as David Ricardo, T.R. Malthus, and Karl Marx, was whether the introduction of machines in the production process, especially in textiles, would reduce the overall demand for labour and leave some workers permanently unemployed. This question arises in Martineau's story as the settlers wonder whether the new machines will displace workers and create hardship.

### **Illustrating the evils of slavery**

Martineau's stories combine a compelling narrative with an explicitly didactic conclusion (or preface, in the case of her first installment). Her fourth installment, *Demerara*, published a decade following the slave rebellion in Demerara in South America, repeats the anti-slavery argument that property is a conventional right and "Man has no right to hold Man in property." The economics lesson is equally unsurprising for anyone who has read Smith: because the product of their labour does not affect their wealth, enslaved persons have little incentive to work diligently. The story features a character, Alfred, who has *also* read Smith and given thought to this incentive problem associated with using enslaved labour. Alfred offers a solution to this problem: task-work with wages:

Mr. Bruce meanwhile was looking alternately at two gangs of slaves at work after a rather different manner. He was standing on the confines of two estates; and, in a field at a little distance, a company of slaves was occupied as usual; that is, bending over the ground, but to all appearance scarcely moving, silent, listless, and dull. At hand,

the whole gang, from Cassius down to the youngest and weakest, were as busy as bees, and from them came as cheerful a hum, though the nature of their work rather resembled the occupation of beavers.

“Task-work with wages,” said Alfred, pointing to his own gang; “eternal labour, without wages,” pointing to the other. “It is not often that we have an example of the two systems before our eyes at the same moment. I need not put it to you which plan works the best.” (Martineau, 1833b: 69-70)

Martineau observed such a link between effort and income in the American South.

In their study of US slavery some 150 years later, Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman discovered the payments that linked wages to output that Martineau had predicted in *Demerara* (Fogel and Engerman, 1974: 239-242).

Martineau was invited to visit the US South with the hope of changing the views she had expressed in *Demerara*. Not only did she hold fast in her opposition to the system of enslavement, but she also observed and told about the horrors associated with the sexual abuse of slaves. In a world of strong gendering, she was allowed to speak candidly with white women on plantations and she retold their stories of slave “harems” flourishing in an alleged Christian society:

Every man who resides on his plantation may have his harem, and has every inducement of custom, and of pecuniary gain,\* to tempt him to the common practice. Those who, notwithstanding, keep their homes undefiled may be considered as of incorruptible purity (1837, 2: 112).

Martineau’s footnote, marked by \*, continues, “The law declares that the children of slaves are to follow the fortunes of the mother.” Plantation owners were thus able to sell and bequeath their own enslaved children. Martineau discussed the consequences of mixed-race children:

A gentleman of the highest character, a southern planter, observed, in conversation with a friend, that little was known, out of bounds, of the reasons of the new laws by which emancipation was made so difficult as it is. He said that the very general connexion of white gentlemen with their female slaves introduced a mulatto race whose numbers would become dangerous, if the affections of their white parents were permitted to render them free. The liberty of emancipating them was therefore abolished, while that of selling them remained (1837, 2: 118).

As early as 1837, then, Martineau treated race as more than simply black or white. Instead, she observed the many children born to enslaved black women who had been abused by their white owners and concluded that there were many racial categories determined within the system of slavery itself.

### **Illustrating T.R. Malthus's economics**

Martineau's writings on slavery were not her only ones to generate controversy. Indeed, her work on population growth proved extremely controversial. In her autobiography she reports (Martineau, 1877, I: 200-220) on the intense criticism that followed the publication of her sixth installment, *Weal and Woe in Garveloch* (1833c). In this installment, she sketched the fundamental Malthusian doctrine that population growth will be disastrously high if the costs associated with raising children are not borne by parents but are rather spread to society at large (1833c: 97-98). Of course, in new countries such as America with very high labour productivity, ten children may bring wealth and honour, and twenty children may double that (1833c: 99). Like Malthus, Martineau held that in older countries this rate of doubling was unsustainable and some check to population growth was required. The didactic conclusion employed Malthus's terminology to make the point. The fundamental "preventive check" in Malthus's account is delay of marriage, while the "positive check" in his account is an increase in child mortality rates. Martineau put the case succinctly:

By bringing no more children into the world than there is a subsistence provided for, society may preserve itself from the miseries of want. In other words, the timely use of the mild preventive check may avert the horrors of any positive check. (Martineau, 1833c: 140)

In Martineau's view, ordinary people will learn about the need for the preventative check and delay marriage until they are able to afford to raise a family. The misery and death attendant on overpopulation will thereby be averted:

The positive checks, having performed their office in stimulating the human faculties and originating social institutions, must be wholly superseded by the preventive check before society can attain its ultimate aim—the greatest happiness of the greatest number. (Martineau, 1833c: 140)

Martineau's use of Malthus's terminology drew an abusive caricature and pointed criticism from *Fraser's* (MacLise and Maginn, 1873), which held that matters such as procreation were rightly "veiled with the decent covering of silence" in society (115), referred to her "perverted talent, or, at least, industry" (115), and opined that her writing generated a "disgust nearly approaching to horror" (113).

While *Weal and Woe* focused on the difference between private and societal interests in the context of population growth, it is important to notice that Martineau considered the economist's general case of a divergence between private and collective interests in many guises throughout her *Illustrations of Political Economy*. Her third installment, *Brooke and Brooke Farm*, describes a village with a large area in which the villagers graze their cattle in common. The problem with this common ownership—something economists today refer to as the tragedy of the commons—is that, since no one owns the grazing land, no one has a private interest in ensuring it is well kept. This results in overgrazing that sadly causes under-nourished cattle. Early in the story we learn that Parliament has (wisely) passed an act of enclosure so the land will be held privately. Martineau emphasized that everyone who had a right to the

commons before the new law was put in place was to be compensated in the new, and in her view superior, arrangement. In this, she followed J.S. Mill's insistence on compensation (Peart, 2021) for reforms that harm some but are nonetheless sound overall.

### **The dismal science**

As noted above, Martineau followed Malthus and other nineteenth century political economists in her preoccupation with the potential misery brought about by overpopulation. Along with her position on slavery, Martineau's writings eventually earned the ire of the influential nineteenth century intellectual Carlyle, who famously attacked political economy as the "dismal science" in his essay, "Negro Question" ([Carlyle], 1849). As two of the most prominent essayists of their time, Carlyle and Martineau initially enjoyed a cordial relationship, but that cordiality deteriorated into antipathy as a result of Martineau's sympathies for enslaved people in America.

Indeed, in his *Reminiscences* Carlyle described how they were introduced when Martineau returned from America and began her book, *Society in America*, and he criticized how she was "full of N\* fanaticisms" (Carlyle, 1881: 437-8). In an 1849 essay, Carlyle used the phrase "sweet blighted lilies, they are holding up their heads again" cruelly to describe the well-being of Blacks in Jamaica. He continued with, "Our beautiful Black darlings are at last happy; with little labour except to the teeth..." (1849, 671). His words seem to be taken from Martineau's report of "An epitaph on a negro baby in Savannah" (1837, II: 222) to mock her description of the hopes of the baby's heartbroken parents for the final resurrection. Carlyle also vehemently opposed the coalition of political economists and Christian activists (whom he dubbed "Exeter Hall" after their meeting house on the Strand in London) who united for the purposes of advocating for emancipation. Martineau embodied that combination. We have described her egalitarian political economy above; about Christianity, she wrote: "In it may be found a sanction of all just claims of political and social equality; for it proclaims, now in music and now in thunder,—it blazons, now in sunshine and now in lightning,—the fact of the natural equality of men. In giving forth this as its grand doctrine, it is indeed 'the root of all democracy'..." (1837, 2: 315).

## Conclusion

Harriet Martineau was one of the greatest nineteenth century advocates of the system of natural equality that anchors classical liberalism. For her, natural equality expressed the liberal position that there are no innately superior people to direct the rest of us. Her works illustrate that prosperity is closely associated with the free interchange of goods, that people work best when they are free to choose their vocations, and that ordinary people are capable of choosing when and whom to marry. When a fulsome history of nineteenth century racism is finally written, we shall find Harriet Martineau at the center of opposition to racism and the attempt to establish a liberal and egalitarian order.

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