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Harriet Martineau

Born 3rd July 1802

Never married

Died from bronchitis 1876

More widely known than James her older brother

More rigid in views than James

Always an outsider

A medium impact fish in a large pool – but ripples on

She is nineteenth century humanist and feminist



- Daughter of textile manufacturer from Norwich
- Father had married eldest daughter of sugar refiner of Newcastle
- Parents **Unitarians**, **Norwich** based
- Unhappy child and much indigestion
- Sometimes suicidal thoughts in **wishing to reach heaven**
- Imagined angels would take her from **Octagon Chapel** through skylight windows
- **Mother distant** personality

- Unitarians: women to obtain a good education but **not university**

Notes on Harriet Martineau

- Learnt reading, numbers, Latin, music
- Went to new Unitarian school, included French
- After closure, learnt Classics at home

- Went to Bristol for 2 years in 1818
- There learnt about Joseph Priestley/ David Hartley/ John Locke from Lant Carpenter (**cause and effect**, and **no free will**)
- **Progressive deafness** with great loss by 16

Became **campaigner on women's causes** in USA and Britain

First piece: *Female Writers in Practical Divinity* in Unitarian journal, *Monthly Repository* 1822

1823 *Monthly Repository*, 'On Female Education' (written anonymously)

Article was first of many on **education** and over **6,000 articles** on the condition of women (in several countries) – articles for example on girls schooling, girls education in the home and higher education for women

- **Financial failure and death of father in 1829** – Harriet moved to London
- Earned money from needlework
- Continued to write for *Monthly Repository*

Became **economically independent from writing**

1832 from Ireland (with James) wrote monthly series, 'Illustrations of Political Economy' – **economics as a developing subject put into fiction** to popularise it. This brought her fame.

She **did not endorse Robert Owen** and his socialism

- Two years in the USA travelling 1834–1836 and kept a journal
- Lost Americans' favour with (early) **anti-slavery stance**
- In Britain published *Society in America* (1837)
- Strong criticism of not meeting its democratic principles
- Especially on women in the chapter 'The Political Non-existence of Women'
- Made **analogy between women and slaves**

- Retrospect of Western Travel
- *How to Observe Manners and Morals*

Novel *Deerbrook*

- 1839 **Venice but ill**
- Returned to Britain and Tynemouth to rest
- Refused offer of support from Lord Melbourne

Novel *The Hour and the Man* based on a black liberator in Haiti

Children's books

Life in the Sick Room

Notes on Harriet Martineau

- After **mesmerism** got well, though it a co-incidence
- She wrote letters on Mesmerism in *Athenaeum*
- Friction with her physician and family (1844)

1846 **new house**: *The Knoll* at **Ambleside** was built. It became her base up to death.

- But to **Egypt** and **Palestine**, with the Yates, returned 1847
- Wrote *Eastern Life Past and Present* which said the religions were human made not divine

The History of England during the Thirty Years Peace 1816–1846

- 1852 translated **Auguste De Comte** *Positive Philosophy* into English
- Describes his 'tedious repetitions'
- 6 volumes became 2
- **Utilitarian** echoes
- Continuation of **First cause** but in **sociology**
- Comte gets Martineau's translation back into the original French

- Hers an '**evolutionary naturalism**' close to Comte
- She adopted this **social science method** and made her thoroughly atheistic; **social science replacing theology** completely
- Agrees that 'evolution' is the principle of social change
- Agrees that mechanisms of **cause and effect** explain human action
- Disagrees to the effect that **knowledge is constructed and verified by human experience** (remains of Unitarianism?)

- Wrote first 1852 to *London Daily News* from Ireland as **foreign correspondent**
- **Leader writer** (1642 articles) in *London Daily News*
- Other subjects included foreign affairs, cousin marriages and agriculture

Book: *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature and Development* (1851) with sceptic Henry G Atkinson (he the main contributor) and **rejected theism**. James Martineau called it "**Mesmeric Atheism**" in the *Prospective Review* (rather a nasty title given her experience).

1859 'Female Industry' in *Edinburgh Review* **advocated paid employment for women**

1866 signed John Stuart Mill MP's **petition for women's suffrage**

1869 **Last work**: Ladies Campaign for the **Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act** (women could be examined by police on the suspicion of prostitution). She gave wordy support to campaigners including Josephine Butler.

- She wrote her **obituary** in 1855 (!) published in 1876
- Autobiography 1879
- She saw her life as a **populariser of existing ideas** but she **gave them focus** and thus was forefront of their promotion

Compare with brother...

James Martineau

Born 1805, died 1900

Less widely known than his sister Harriet

Broadened his views

Within tolerated dissent

He was a largish fish in a small pool

Century plus later he needs wider rediscovery, unlike Harriet



- ◆ As a baby **heard religious views from pious sister**
- ◆ Completing grammar school in Norwich **went to Bristol** after Harriet
- ◆ There learnt about **cause and effect** etc. from Lant Carpenter too

- ◆ Failed engineer (training)
- ◆ Unitarian ministry **student** at **Manchester College** (York) from 1822
- ◆ Ministry at Eustace Street, **Dublin** 1832

- ◆ Refused state support with promotion

Ministry at Liverpool

- ◆ Started with views **accepting the Divinity of Christ**
- ◆ Later believed that **Jesus was fully human**
- ◆ Jesus reflected God in human form
- ◆ **Human conscience** guides to right action
- ◆ **Human reason** guides to (critical) understanding of biblical truth

1836 wrote *Rationale of Religious Inquiry* defending human reason

1839 lectured with others on *Unitarianism Defended* in Liverpool

- ◆ 1840 **Professor of Mental and Moral Philosophy** at **Manchester College**
- ◆ **Principal Manchester College** (London) 1869–1885
- ◆ Taught ethics and morals up to 1885 (though a short gap)

Types of Ethical Theory (1885)

The Seat of Authority in Religion (1890)

He maintained a **high and dry theism**, the essential truth, one that left the bible as its illustrator, as Christ too was God's illustrator.

Source:

Yates, Gayle Graham (1986), 'Harriet Martineau and Her Brother James', in *Faith and Freedom*, Summer 1986, Vol. 39, Pt. 2, No. 116.

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See main sources:

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