

THE MARTINEAU SOCIETY

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 The
Martineau
Society

MARTINEAU SOCIETY TRAIL AND MEETINGS 9-11 September 1999

For this year's combined trail and AGM we assembled in London - staying in University of London student accommodation - for two days of highly enjoyable trips and tours in the continuing hot summery weather. On Thursday 9 September we were taken on a guided tour of the Houses of Parliament, which most of us had never seen before. We saw both the Lords' and the Commons' chambers (which looked much smaller than they do on the television) and heard about the formal procedures for the official State Opening of Parliament each November. Harriet Martineau certainly attended sittings, watching proceedings from the ladies' gallery, and she was also present at the coronation of Queen Victoria in Westminster Abbey. When we visited the Abbey after lunch, Sophia Hankinson read us extracts from Harriet's account of the day in her *Autobiography*. We then wandered round Poets' Corner and the tombs of many characters from English history. The afternoon was rounded off with a delicious tea hosted by Elisabeth Arbuckle at her Notting Hill lodgings, where the whisky-soaked fruit cake was particularly memorable!

The next day a smaller party travelled out to the Thames Barrier on a river boat (complete with entertaining commentary). Although there isn't the remotest connection between the Martineaus and the Millennium dome, we found this controversial landmark a sight worth seeing - as were all the new developments at Canary Wharf, and the more traditional sights closer to central London, including the rebuilt Globe Theatre, the Houses of Parliament, and St Paul's Cathedral.

In the evening, the Dickens Fellowship hosted a joint meeting with the Martineau Society at the Swedenborg Hall in Bloomsbury, at which Professor Ken Fielding, a renowned Dickens scholar, was the guest speaker. Ken's theme was 'Likeness in Unlikeness: Dickens and Harriet Martineau,' which argued that their shared interests included concern for the poor, mesmerism, international copyright, the United States, and the way fiction could be used as propaganda. The paper is summarized after this editorial in the Newsletter. Members of both societies thoroughly enjoyed this stimulating discussion of two writers whose uneasy partnership in journalism is still a relatively under-researched area of scholarship.

On the final day of the Trail, we met at Dr Williams's Library for the business part of the gathering: the Annual General Meeting, followed by four excellent short talks on widely differing aspects of the Martineaus, by Tony Cross, Sophia Hankinson, Deborah Logan, and Anka Ryall. Following a decision taken at the AGM, paper-givers now have a choice between submitting a summary of their argument for publication in the Newsletter or waiting for the full text to be published in a collection of 'Occasional Papers,' which will appear probably once a year. It was felt that this would be more satisfactory for everyone- paper-givers and readers - than the present practice of splitting up long articles over two or more issues of the Newsletter.

We are grateful to David Wykes for hosting our visit to Dr Williams's Library, and organizing refreshments and a visit to the library itself. Alan Middleton deserves special thanks for making all the complex arrangements for the Trail excursions and our accommodation in London.

Ken Fielding: 'Likeness in Unlikeness': Dickens and Harriet Martineau

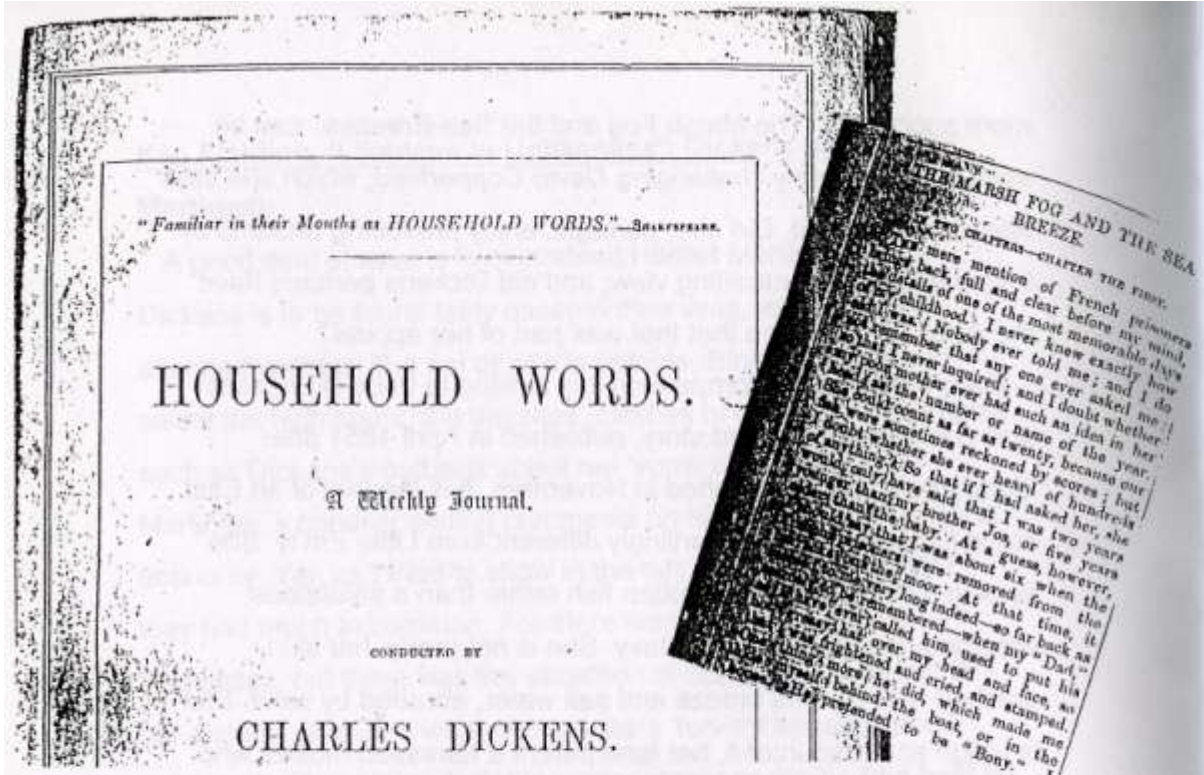
A good deal of what is known about Harriet Martineau and Dickens is to be found fairly easily in their lives, letters, and assorted writings. But not all of it is reliable. Biographers like to select the high spots, the disputes, clashes of opinion, and remarks such as Dickens's outburst about her 'vomit of conceit,' and Martineau's condescending comments on his ignorance of political economy. Yet, as I tried to show in the talk before the last AGM, they had much in common. For there were not just personal likenesses, but there was the attraction of opposites. Dickens, to her distrust, favoured what she saw as a 'fervent benevolence,' tempered with a strong belief in personal responsibility. She held by stern principles of self-help, but recognised the obligation to help the unfortunate. This can be seen in the many articles she wrote, at Dickens's invitation, for his weekly *Household Words*, until the sudden explosion which blew them apart over what she called *The Factory Controversy*, or Dickens's campaign for 'meddlesome legislation' to enforce legal requirements to fence dangerous machinery.

Even before this final rupture, Martineau may have wanted to stress their differences. For, once Dickens invited her to contribute to his journal by writing short fiction, she seems to have determined to take up themes which were unrelentingly grim and realistic. It seems possible that she did so deliberately. Her story 'The Sickness and health of the People of Bleaburn' (in three parts) is about an epidemic, and the acceptance of death; 'Woodruffe the Gardener' is about failure, and accepting responsibility. And the

more successful 'The Marsh Fog and the Sea Breezes,' can be seen as deliberately challenging *David Copperfield*, which she says she much admired. Did she, perhaps, enjoy provoking Dickens by taking a sharply contrasting view; and did Dickens perhaps have the good sense to see that that was part of her appeal?

Even without a full comparison it is striking to trace likenesses and contrasts in her third story, published in April 1851 after *Copperfield* had just finished in November. It is the tale of an East coast fisherman's child startlingly different from Little Em'ly. She lives in a hovel stinking of rotten fish rather than a salubrious upturned boat fit for Mas'er Davy. She is not pretty: her skin cracked with the sea breeze and salt water, abraded by sand. She is rough and resourceful; her lone parent a harassed mother who has taken to drink, rather than a benevolent uncle; her chief resource is her keen eyesight which makes her useful to smugglers (including her mother) who need a sharp look-out. Her father has been press-ganged, since it is the time of the Napoleonic wars as in Martineau's and Dickens's childhood; and she knows of the local French prisoners, ready to barter for food with their delicately carved fragments of bone, such as one used to see in the old Tollhouse Museum at Yarmouth, before it was burned down in the Second World War.

Both Dickens and Martineau are aware of their childhood years, when Harriet knew the east coast at Yarmouth and Cromer, as she did later at Tynemouth: much more familiar with it than Dickens. Her world shows its harshness: its grinding poverty, the unhealthiness and squalor of the fisher people's lives, their difficulties in marketing fish, and disgusting cottages in which no



one has a single cotton sheet even for a sick child's bed. It is a tremendous contrast with Peggotty's idyllic boat, 'beautifully clean inside,' walls 'whitewashed as white as milk,' as the 'completest and most desirable bedroom ever seen' - for David's exclusive use, no doubt dispossessing Emily. Molly's mother, who is innocent of cooking, lives under a rotten thatch, surrounded by garbage and stinking fish. Peggotty's hut is as unreal as his catching lobsters and crabs, which he could never have found off Yarmouth: as unreal as the tarred 'Peggotty's Hut' one used to see on the Yarmouth sands before the war, with its display of paintings of Dickensian characters. It is as likely as David's delightful picture of a home that 'might have been Aladdin's palace, roc's egg and all,' one of 'wonderful charm...a perfect abode, and with the most enviable possessions the world could afford.' They are both

extraordinary writers: she for her reality and moralism, he for the delightful ability to convey the sense of how something might appear to a child. The contrast extends to his graceful prose as attractive as the improbable little mirror in David's bedroom, edged round with oyster shells, with a little blue mug beside it, while she is comparatively unvarying, direct, and stark. It would be easy to go into more detail, not forgetting the way that the children in her tale are always taking refuge from their wretched home under their father's old upturned boat.

All the same, there were likenesses with Dickens and he knew it. He was delighted with her Christmas tale for 1852, 'The Deaf Playmate's Story,' a compliment to be asked to contribute. He did not have, he said, 'a shadow of doubt' about it. 'It is certain to sell...very affecting - admirably done - a fine plain purpose in it - quite a singular novelty. For the last story...it will be great. I couldn't wish for a better.' It was 'Dickensian.'

So, too, is her short series of 'Deaf Mutes,' 'Idiocy Again,' and 'Blindness.' The one on deafness came from her personal experience, but all three are full of intelligent good sense. 'Idiots Again' came soon after 'Idiots,' which had been by Dickens and his sub-editor W. H. Wills. They are exactly at one in sympathy and understanding. Dickens adds an exceptional footnote to one of her pieces about two actual children whom they both knew: Laura Bridgman of *American Notes* and a Swiss boy, deaf and dumb, and also blind from birth, whom Dickens claims as 'an old acquaintance of mine.' In the general absence of concern for the handicapped at the time, such united action is remarkable. Elsewhere, we have had it suggested in the *Dickensian*, that Esther Summerson, the heroine

of *Bleak House*, may have owed something to Martineau's *Life in the Sick Room*, which tells how, when she fell ill, she retired to live on her own with a single servant, and what she learned from it.

Other comparisons can be made, which show that Martineau was far from just turning out 'pot-boilers' for *Household Words*, as she has been accused of doing, and though she was frank about writing for Dickens because she was paid. Some of the articles on Ireland are commonplace; but one at least on 'The Irish Union' (6 November 1852) about workhouses, is strikingly direct about 'the famine time.' It is equal to the best descriptive journalism of the time, by the Mayhews, W. H. Russell on the Crimean War, or Dickens himself, undraped by doctrine or glazed with moralising approval. We have to do without sentiment. She is too taken up with telling how it is to deal with questions of calculating political economy.

At one point there was a break in her contributions, while she finished her translation and shortening of Auguste Comte's six-volume *Positive Philosophy*. Dickens replied to her letter ('for the pleasure of corresponding with you') about her starting again: 'I must write a few words in reply...I am anxious to see the results of your Comte labours and require a good deal to counterbalance your total abstinence from *Household Words* for so long a time' (19 April 1853). He mentioned his hope of having her 'powerful and useful aid' to plans for national secular education, which both strongly supported. He called attention to his own paper on 'Homes for Homeless Women,' which aimed (as she would have liked) to take up fallen women, dust them down, and send them for export to the colonies. They shared an interest in 'Pet Prisoners' as Dickens

called them, and in one of his pieces he refers to what she had written on gaols in Philadelphia. In other places in *Household Words* her 'excellent' children's stories are mentioned, her advice on how to run a small farm, and in Mrs Gaskell's words her having the 'honoured name of Martineau (see Anne Lohrli, *Household Words: A Weekly Journal 1850-59* (Toronto 1973).

One topic always drew powerful writing from her, and that was American slavery, which she turned to with tremendous effect in 'Freedom and Slavery' (22 July 1854). It calls for attention as an example of why she made her reputation as the most outstanding woman journalist of the day, or perhaps of any day. It is also of interest because of its association with Dickens, who has not unreasonably been thought to have lost a keen concern for the abolition movement in later years.

Her topical article struck at the Fugitive Slave Law, by which runaway slaves could be re-arrested and reclaimed even from states which declared they should be free. Such was the current case in Boston, in June 1854, when Anthony Burns, who had escaped from Virginia, was sought out, arrested, and was to be handed back to his master after his case was heard. With presidential encouragement for the decision, Burns was escorted to the waiting revenue-cutter. Dickens's *Household Narrative* for June 1854 briefly notes that he was taken by an armed guard of foot, horse, artillery, and police, through a crowd which 'took no pains to conceal its detestation.' Martineau writes: 'The poor slave was handcuffed. He no doubt knew that the last fugitive who had been carried back had been flogged every day with the greatest number of lashes that human patience could endure without death, as an

example to runaways. Alas! It may too probably be so with himself even now. Dickens wrote to Wills that he was 'very anxious to know what is become of the Massachusetts Slavery Question, on which a great deal of importance to the whole world seems to hang...I know nothing of the world presenting such a prodigious moral phenomenon, as the whole procedure of the last seizure' of Burns. It was an astounding story, as described by Martineau, of the arrest, the shooting of one of the police, tolling bells in neighbouring towns, black-draped streets, with armed Irish volunteers assisting the Federal triumph over Boston resistance. No 'pot-boiling' here, nor signs of Dickens's back-sliding.

There is more might be told of their alliance as well as their differences, fittingly concluded after Dickens's death when their mutual friend James Payn reviewed Martineau's *Autobiography* in 1877 in *All the Year Round*. It is a favourable verdict, balanced, appreciative, regretting the split, and remembering her as 'genial, tender, and sympathetic.'

Joan Rees: Harriet Martineau, Florence Nightingale, and Egypt

The Association for the Study of Travel in Egypt and the Middle East (ASTENE) recently held a conference in Cambridge which I attended. One hundred and fifty people participated and twenty countries were represented, including an Egyptian contingent. The conference lasted three days and included a very full programme of talks arranged in concurrent sessions twice a day (three times on one day!). Obviously it was impossible to go to all of the talks but as far as I know no substantial reference was made in any of them to Harriet Martineau. This, a pity in some ways, was to some extent, in

fact, a compliment - at least she was not the target of the animosity directed by the Egyptians at Florence Nightingale. Full of admiration as she becomes for the treasures and the ideas of Ancient Egypt, in the letters which she wrote home to her family during her journey up the Nile, Florence Nightingale makes no bones about her disgust at what she sees of contemporary Egyptians and more than once goes so far as to apply non-human imagery to them. Not surprisingly young Egyptians from the University of Cairo do not take kindly to this and made their feelings clear at the conference. It is notable that Harriet Martineau evidently gave no handle for this kind of response. She was aware of the degraded state of the Egypt of her time but her response was to look for the causes of degeneration, to examine as far as she could the conduct of government and to lay the blame there, where she believed it belonged. For individual Egyptians - the members of her crew, for instance - she had respect and sympathy, and even when on two occasions she herself received rough treatment, she put the blame on herself rather than the perpetrators. In one instance, she thinks, she had unwittingly put temptation in the way of needy people, and in the other she had offended religious sensibility. She was larger-minded than the generality of her contemporaries, and the contrast with that other undoubtedly great woman, Florence Nightingale, makes the point clear.

Two general points about the conducting of conferences in case they become applicable to the Martineau Society in future: 1) length of papers. It was laid down in the guidelines for the ASTENE event that papers should last no longer than twenty minutes with ten minutes left for questions and discussion. Though the total

allowance of thirty minutes was observed by the chairpersons at each session, hardly any speaker limited his/her paper to twenty minutes, thus leaving no time for discussion. This was a pity, though not so exasperating as the tendency to offer papers which were much too long and were consequently read at break-neck speed, impossible sometimes to follow at all. Perhaps a solution would be to specify the maximum number of words for a paper? ii) Almost all the talks were accompanied by slides. Sometimes they were useful, quite often they were not, but merely a distraction and time-wasting. A good talk should be able to hold the attention of an audience for more than twenty minutes without visual 'aids', especially those which do not significantly aid at all. This is a point which might usefully be drawn to the attention of potential speakers to the advantage of everybody.

[Ed: I agree with the above strictures - in fact, I think the Martineau Society has done rather well in avoiding these problems of paper-delivery so far!]

Deborah Logan: 'Fancy-work and Bluestockingism'

[continued from the previous Newsletter]

The needle-and-pen theme of course carries over into Martineau's writing, particularly in her non-fiction journalism. Her needleworking expertise leads her correctly to identify the gender of the author of *Jane Eyre*, a topic of much intense debate among literary circles. The gender-evasive 'Currer Bell,' claims Martineau, is definitely a woman, which is made obvious by a minor but very telling detail: 'I had made up my mind...that a certain passage in "Jane Eyre", about sewing on brass rings, could have been written

only by a woman or an upholsterer' (*Autobiography* 2:323-4). Similarly, her article 'Female Industry' displays an experiential dimension and understanding of domestic tasks that can be achieved only by one who has been so trained. In this she has an advantage over male writers on the topic, who traditionally have little interest in, and no experience of, the activities of "the spindle side" of the house' (*Edinburgh Review* 109, April 1859, 295) where women are employed with domestic tasks. Part of Martineau's aim in this article is to bring to the public's awareness the fact that 'a very large proportion of the women of England earn their own bread' (294), with a view toward scrutinizing the problems and issues this unrepresented class of workers must deal with in order to make a living. By providing a brief historical overview of Englishwomen and work, she also aims to disprove the false 'supposition...that every woman is supported (as the law supposes her to be represented) by her father, her brother, or her husband' (297). Martineau's prophetic insight into the economic plights of working women reflects a problem that continues to exist today: the devaluation of women's work. Seen in this context, Martineau's championing of domesticity does not, as some suggest, prove her lack of feminism, rather it asserts her recognition of the central place domestic labour holds in the broader economic realm.


The history of women's work outlined in 'Female Industry' demonstrates their consistent contributions from pre- to post-industrial society. In centuries past, she notes, women 'plied the distaff' while tending herds; with the introduction of the spinning wheel in 'every house and hovel,' women were expected to spin during the 'intervals of other business' (296). Martineau remarks, "It

stops a gap, and so must needs be" was the reason assigned by the men' - both examples offering an early indication that women's hands must never be idle and that needleworking was the most portable and therefore the most amenable activity for this purpose. Even gentlewomen were not exempt from this stricture. Able to afford servants to perform their 'plain' and household sewing, this class of women cultivated the craft of tapestry weaving and fancy-work, the very uselessness of the occupation subject to Martineau's drollery: while others run her household, the gentlewoman oversees her garden and kitchen 'without much interruption to the grave labour of stitching the siege of Troy, or the finding of Moses, in coloured wools or silks.' Yet she does not deny that the combination of leisure and embroidery led to the creation of a specifically feminine art-form. In addition to the ideological complexities inherent in the conjunction between women, leisure and work, and hours spent sewing (unpaid labour), there is the aesthetic component, which she terms 'the mystery of the silkwomen and spinners.' This 'mystery' was compromised and nearly destroyed by the regulation and institutionalizing of male-dominated trades resulting from industrial capitalism. However, although the practice as a skilled craft declined as a result, the demand for qualified silkwomen outside the home increased, and those working for hire created 'one of the earliest branches of female industry' (297).

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Most notable about these economic developments is that, in the midst of great social changes, both the status of women and attitudes about the worth of their work remain static. The need for and the supply of female industry continues to increase, yet 'our ideas, our language, and our arrangements have not altered...We go on talking as if it were still true that every woman is, or ought to be, supported by father, brother, or husband: we are only beginning to think of the claim of all workers, - that their work should be paid for by its quality, and its place in the market, irrespective of the status of the worker' (298). The 'artificial depreciation' of women's work must cease since the pressures of social and economic change are inevitable and failure to adapt merely because of the custom of social myopia will have culture-wide ramifications. Devaluation affects the women who work for wages as well as those whose unpaid domestic labour is essential to the functioning of a capitalist economy; it also affects the men and institutions whose economic well-being depends on both. Outlining men's prejudice against working women, Martineau notes that 'the jealousy of men in regard to the industrial independence of women...shows itself with every step gained in civilisation; and its immediate effect is to pauperise a large number of women who are willing to work for their bread; and...to condemn to perdition many more who have no choice left but between starvation and vice' (329).

Martineau's strong language - 'to pauperise' and 'to condemn to perdition' - refers both to the idea of *unpaid* needlework as a sign of propriety and morality, and to what is perhaps the most significant complicating factor, economics. Although needleworking is



intimately tied to notions of women's respectability, as a paid profession it was popularly affiliated with falling and fallen women. The introduction of remuneration into the equation indicates, to some, a direct line to prostitution, since only those who are confined to the domestic realm, where their unpaid labour is not tainted by 'filthy lucre,' are secure from the vices and temptations of the marketplace. (In no sense is this the case for Martineau, whose stint as a seamstress occurred while living at home with her family, which avoided her having to pay for lodging and food out of her earnings). This line of thought is worth scrutinizing, since most women knew some mode of needlework and therefore sewing was the most logical employment choice. The profession's links with prostitution, real and metaphorical, are complex: many lower-class women (whose potential for sexual promiscuity was assumed by virtue of their class) sought sewing employment because it was more genteel and respectable than factory or domestic work (see Gaskell's *Mary Barton*). For this class, seamstressing signified upward class-mobility. For middle-class women, employment of any sort, *for remuneration*, was a 'step down' in social status, although

needleworking's association with respectability promised to preserve at least the pretence of gentility, in theory, if not in practice. But in reality, regardless of their class backgrounds, women needleworkers were so severely exploited by this profession that many resorted to occasional or 'casual' prostitution as a temporary means for making ends meet. Offering a significant commentary on the morals and manners of the time, those whose economic burdens were especially serious - perhaps they had children or ill, ageing and incapacitated family members to support - sometimes turned to 'full' prostitution, the period's most lucrative profession for women, in order to meet their financial needs. Respectability forgotten in the struggle to survive, such women perpetuate the stereotype linking the needleworking trades with prostitution; yet few social critics ventured to explore the socio-economic dynamics underpinning the exploitation of women in a *laissez faire* political economy. Martineau is one of the few who understands that economics, not immorality, lies at the root of the period's prostitution epidemic. The solution, she argues, resides in accepting women's need to work, putting aside 'the jealousy of men,' and helping women to find respectable employment through which they can earn a decent wage.

But men are not the only impediments to female industry: women are themselves also to blame for resistant attitudes toward working women. Martineau quotes a newspaper account of a shop-owner who defied convention by hiring women to work at the counter of a mercer's (sewing notions) shop. Reasoning that women workers could surely cut and measure women's goods for women customers better than men could, the owner was surprised when

business fell off as a result; interestingly, reinstating male sales clerks proved that women preferred to do business with men because they 'could not trust the ability of their own sex...the ladies had no faith in female ability, even behind the counter' (312). Given the increasing number of women employed in the public realm, which Martineau estimates at about one and one-quarter million, 'the condition, claims, and prospects of such a section of the population ought to be as important and interesting to us as those of any class of men in the community' (320). The prejudicial social attitudes illustrated by women consumers refusing to buy from women workers suggests how deeply ingrained is the inclination to devalue women's work and dismiss it as worthless or, worse, disreputable. This is exacerbated by the *theory* that conventional gendered divisions of labour are what distinguish (unpaid) domestic from (paid) factory work; in *practice*, however, women who work in factories all day for pay must still work at home for free, an expectation not extended to their male counterparts.

A typical rhetorical strategy of Martineau's is to point out the sensibleness of her argument, then to illustrate how certain people fail to perceive its logic - that readers may see themselves or someone they know in her example is gently implied - and finally, to offer a convincing example of the viability of her proposal once freed of such attitudinal impediments. The illustration offered in 'Female Industry' is the utopian Lowell, Massachusetts community of women sewing-factory workers. The four-thousand cotton-mill workers are so hard-working and self-sufficient that they had, through communal efforts, built a church as well as a school where they attended lectures, and established a periodical, 'The Lowell

Offering.' Despite their seventy-hour work-weeks, these 'literary spinsters' - she refers to their occupation, not their marital status - maintained neat, clean homes and were always well-dressed; they read books, studied music, and cultivated flowers, while 'the Savings' Bank exhibits their provident habits' (323). In other words, these women are middle-class in appearance and values and in the feminine 'accomplishments' common to the leisure class, but they are working-class in terms of economic reality - they are, after all, confined within factories for seventy hours a week.

As a solution to class and gender inequities, Martineau's combining middle-class cultivation and morality with working-class utility is a consistent theme throughout her writing, and it is both an innovative and problematic one. Her alternative vision breaks through perceptions of class as innate and unchangeable, which is especially advantageous to the lower classes who were assumed to be primitive and promiscuous. That the Lowell women prove to be not only educable but capable of cultivating aesthetic interests demonstrates Martineau's emphasis on wholesome domesticity combined with education. Martineau's prototype, comprising the best qualities of both classes, serves as a model for the citizens of post-industrial society in which privilege and class exploitation are less and less accepted as means for maintaining social hierarchies.

Denis Martineau

It is with great sadness that we have to report the death of one of our members, Mr Denis Martineau, who died on 30 June 1999. An obituary will follow in the next Newsletter.

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An updated and corrected list of members' E-mail addresses

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NEWSLETTER CONTRIBUTIONS:

Articles, book reviews, letters, notes and observations, for the next Newsletter should be sent by the end of February to the Editor:

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Enquiries regarding the Society, especially new membership, should be addressed to the Secretary:

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Newsletter Index

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