

A Brief History of the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society — The Introduction to *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives*

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THIS BOOK has an interesting history—rather appropriate since it covers an important segment of the history of sociology. I first became acquainted with what were some of its middle beginnings in October, 1996. Reading in an ad hoc newsletter about a proposed working seminar of the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society (HMSS) on Mackinac Island, Michigan, I contacted Michael Hill, the newsletter editor, expressing my desire to participate. The “cosmopolitan community of scholars” is one of my focal interests, and I was pleased to find sociologists actually working with Martineau’s biography and writings to the extent of coming together for a working seminar. This sounded like a time and place for meeting scholars studying a major contributor to such a community. I knew of Martineau from having taught history of sociology at Loyola University Chicago, where most of my colleagues and students had not heard of her and were surprised at the excellence of her *Society in America*. Most colleagues were instead familiar with—or at least had heard more about—Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*.

The 1997 HMSS seminar, its location, contributors and content were fantastic or, in my grandchildren’s language, “awesome.” Mackinac Island is situated in Lake Michigan in the straits between upper and lower Michigan, and is reached only by boat or plane. Mission Point Resort, on the island, is a charming place to meet in the late spring. Mackinac was chosen by the organizers because it was one of the places that Harriet Martineau actually visited while on her carefully planned and extensive trip through the United States. In fact, she vividly described her visit in early July, 1836, in the unabridged version of her *Society in America*:

The island looked enchanting as we approached, as I think it always must, though we had the advantage of seeing it first steeped in the most golden sunshine that ever hallowed lake or shore

The next morning all was bright. At five o’clock we descended the ship’s side, and from the boat could see the commandant and his dog hastening down from the garrison to the landing-place. We returned with him up the hill, through the barrack-yard; and were joined by three members of his family on the velvet green slope behind the garrison. No words can give an idea of the charms of this morning walk. We wound about in a vast shrubbery, with ripe strawberries under foot, wild flowers all around, and scattered knolls and opening vistas tempting curiously in every direction. “Now run up,” said the commandant, as we arrived at the foot of one of the knolls. I did so, and was almost struck backwards by what I saw. Below me was the Natural Bridge of Mackinaw, of which I had heard frequent mention. It is a limestone arch, about one hundred and fifty feet high in the centre, with a span of fifty feet; one pillar resting on a rocky projection in the lake, the other on the hill. We viewed it from above, so that the horizon line of the lake fell behind the bridge, and the blue expanse of waters filled the entire arch. Birch and ash grew around the

bases of the pillars, and shrubbery tufted the sides, and dangled from the bridge. The soft rich hues in which the whole was dressed seemed borrowed from the autumn sky.

But even this scene was nothing to one we saw from the fort, on the crown of the island; old Fort Holmes, called Fort George when in the possession of the British. I can compare it to nothing but to what Noah might have seen, the first bright morning after the deluge. Such a cluster of little paradises rising out of such a congregation of waters, I can hardly fancy to have been seen elsewhere. The capacity of the human eye seems here suddenly enlarged, as if it could see to the verge of watery creation. Blue, level waters appear to expand for thousands of miles in every direction; wholly unlike any aspect of the sea

And so Martineau continues. Mackinac, suffice it to say, is a beautiful and historic place, one that clearly made a favorable impression on Martineau in 1836 and on those who attended the HMSS seminar in 1997.

Martineau was not, however, the only important woman to visit the island in its early days. For example, Dr. Alice Hamilton, a Hull-House resident, once spent her summers on Mackinac, and helping to orient the HMSS seminar participants to this particular bit of history, Mary Jo Deegan presented an illustrated slide lecture on “The Distinguished Cottagers from Mackinac Island—the Hamilton Sisters.” Rounding out the historical briefing of the seminar members, a representative of the Mackinac Island State Park Commission provided a concise history and description of the island.

I realized the first day of the seminar that the presenters were no amateurs, but sociologists having extensive familiarity with Martineau and the people connected to her. The speakers expressed sorrow that Martineau has been seriously neglected in comparison to Alexis de Tocqueville (the latter had actually been less prepared and less well organized to observe American society). Formal presentations on Martineau’s Unitarian background and involvement, her collaboration with Florence Nightingale, her writings on work and occupations in the 19th century, the meaning of her concept of “Things” in connection with Émile Durkheim’s work, her systematic exploration of the “morals and manners” of people she observed and analyzed—in spite of her own deepening hearing loss, combined to indicate a complicated picture of this early feminist thinker and sociologist. Adding counterpoint and useful contrast, a paper on Victoria Woodhull, another early woman social theorist, was also presented.

Each contributor to the seminar and thus to this book has other publications on closely related subjects. Michael R. Hill, co-editor of this volume, has written *Archival Strategies and Techniques* (1993) and edited Harriet Martineau’s *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1989). Hill and Mary Jo Deegan co-edited *Women and Symbolic Interaction* (1987) and Charlotte Perkins Gilman’s *With Her in Ourland: Sequel to Herland* (1997). Hill is originator and editor of *Sociological Origins*, a new journal devoted to the history of sociology. He also has an extensive bibliography of Harriet’s publications in a variety of sources. Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, also a co-editor of this volume, has studied and written extensively from the numerous Martineau publications on work and occupations, treating work as subject and as agency, and is the author of *Harriet Martineau: First Woman Sociologist* (1992). She equates Martineau’s theories with those of Karl Marx, Max Weber, Émile Durkheim, Thorstein Veblen and Charlotte Perkins Gilman. Mary Jo Deegan has frequently written about early women sociologists, including *Jane Addams and the Men of the Chicago School, 1892-1918* (1988), *Women in Sociology: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook* (1991), and several analyses of other women and men sociologists, especially George Herbert Mead, Alfred Schutz, and W.I. Thomas. Pat Duffy Hutcheon is author of *Leaving the Cave: Evolutionary Naturalism in Social-Scientific Thought* (1996). Lynn McDonald authored *Early Origins of the Social Sciences* (1993), *The Women Founders of the Social Sciences* (1994), and *Women Theorists on Society and Politics* (1998). Patricia Madoo Lengermann with Jill Niebrugge-Brantley published *The Women Founders: Sociology and Social Theory 1830-1930* (1998), which summarizes and adds to their prior work in several sources.

Martineau's recent ascendancy in at least a few sociological circles lags somewhat behind Martineau's earlier popularity and fame among the literate public in England and America. Indeed, as I peruse my personal library, I see that the earliest discussion of Harriet Martineau in my possession is contained in Elbert Hubbard's *Three Great Women: Being Little Journeys*, "done into a book by the Roycrofters at their Shop which is in East Aurora, Erie County, New York, in the Month of April, Year Nineteen Hundred Eight." Hubbard's handsome example of arts and crafts printing also includes little journeys on Elizabeth Barrett Browning and Madame Guyon. It is high time, of course, that Martineau's contributions are remembered and discussed by today's sociologists.

The memorable 1997 seminar on Mackinac Island was followed in successive years by presentations at professional meetings and social events in members' homes, including in Toronto during the meetings of the American Sociological Association (ASA), in Montréal during the World Congress of the International Sociological Association, and, most recently, in a hotel suite in Washington, DC, again during the annual meeting of the ASA. Divers members of HMSS helped form a new ASA section on the History of Sociology, and several were voted its officers in 2000 during the section's first elections.

Volunteering to participate in any organizational activity often results in an invitation to work, and I ended up being asked to write the preface for this volume on Harriet Martineau, composed at core of revised versions of the earlier Mackinac papers. To help set the historical context of this endeavor, I contacted Michael Hill for information on the origins of HMSS and received an extensive response, of which the following is both a verbatim and an abridged version:

In early 1996, Michael R. Hill, with the support of his colleague and life-partner, Mary Jo Deegan, wrote to scholars interested in Harriet Martineau and proposed forming an organizational structure to be called the Harriet Martineau Sociological Society. The envisioned organization would specifically encourage research and scholarly exchange on the sociological work of Martineau and other early women sociologists. Hill suggested that all interested persons meet at the upcoming 1996 mid-term meeting of the International Sociological Association (ISA) Research Committee on the History of Sociology (RCHS) in the Netherlands.

In Amsterdam, the RCHS session organized by Lynn McDonald included three especially relevant papers. Susan Hoecker-Drysdale presented "Analyzing Harriet Martineau's Letters on Science," Patricia Lengermann and Jill Niebrugge spoke on "Engendering Social Theory: Early Women Sociologists Theorize Domestic Service," and Michael R. Hill read a paper on "A Methodological Comparison of the American Studies of Harriet Martineau and Alexis de Tocqueville." These presenters, together with Lynn McDonald, Mary Jo Deegan, John Drysdale, Pat Duffy Hutcheon, Linda Rynbrandt and Rosalind Sydie, comprised the first HMSS caucus. In due course, after Amsterdam, followed Mackinac, Toronto, Montréal and Washington, DC. Thus, our HMSS history continues, presumably for many years to come.

This book is a very important contribution to the history of sociology, both because it provides us with extensive analyses of an almost forgotten sociological pioneer and because it includes a comparative tie-in to the theories of other sociological pioneers and to American and British history and scholarship.