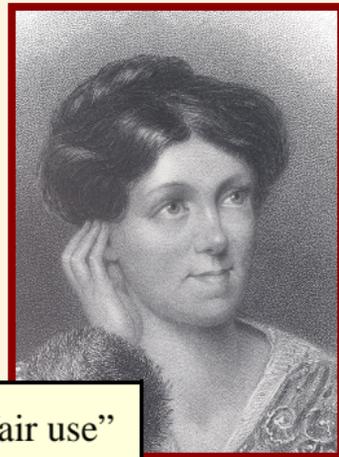


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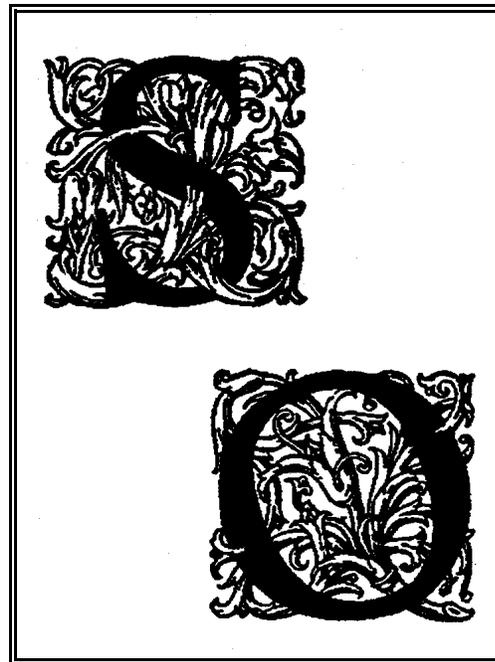
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The HMSS Special Issue:

**PROCEEDINGS OF THE 2002 HARRIET
MARTINEAU SOCIOLOGICAL
SOCIETY BICENTENNIAL SEMINAR
IN AMBLESIDE**

**A Documentary Symposium
on Harriet Martineau**

On Edward Lombe, Translating Auguste Comte, and the Liberal English Press: A Previously Unpublished Letter

Harriet Martineau

Edited with an Introduction by Michael R. Hill

Sociologically speaking, Harriet Martineau wrote an important letter to one of her publishers, John Chapman, on 23 April 1851. Here, she announced her “*notion*” to translate Auguste Comte’s *Philosophie Positive*. The end result was no small matter in the history of sociology: Martineau’s translation, underwritten by Edward Lombe and published by Chapman, effectively introduced Comte’s founding sociological treatise to large numbers of English-speaking readers for the first time in a comprehensive and detailed manner. It was a brave project, all the more so given Martineau’s assessment of the state of English publishing. The full story of the Comte-Martineau connection lies beyond the scope of this introduction, especially as a nicely drawn account is readily provided elsewhere by Susan Hoecker-Drysdale.¹ The complete text of Martineau’s letter is furnished below. Mary Jo Deegan and I purchased this unique Martineau letter from Phyllis Tholin, an Evanston, Illinois, bookseller specializing in works related to early women writers. The manuscript was at one time owned by Clement King Shorter (1857-1926), a prolific writer on Victorian literature and a former editor of the *Illustrated London News* and, later, the *Sphere*.² Shorter (or some previous owner) had the four-page letter expertly “tipped in” to the first volume of a handsome, quarter-bound copy of the London second edition of Martineau’s *Autobiography*. We consider it a special privilege to hold this letter in stewardship for future disciplinary historians.

Martineau’s letter opens, in reply to a query posed by John Chapman, with an estimate of the character of Edward Lombe, a wealthy country gentleman. Chapman apparently appraised Lombe of Martineau’s growing interest in translating Comte and Lombe subsequently provided £500 to support work. Chapman, who in 1851 published the controversial *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development* by Henry Atkinson and Harriet Martineau, brought out the latter’s two-volume edition of Comte in 1853.

Martineau’s *Autobiography* and her preface to Comte’s *Positive Philosophy* provide vital particulars about her decision to translate and condense Comte’s massive work. The following letter adds to those details. An extract, below, from Martineau’s *Autobiography*, describing her activities during the month of April, 1851, provides an instructive prologue showing the chronological context of the letter:

My course of lectures on English History finished on the first of April: and on the eighth, I set off the last proof-sheet of my history.³ On the fourteenth, my nieces left me; and there was an interval before my spring visits which I employed in a close study of the first volume of Comte’s work. On the twenty-fourth, the book arrived from London; and I am amazed, and somewhat ashamed to see by my Diary, that on the twenty-sixth, I began to “dream” of translating it; and on the next night (Sunday the twenty-seventh) sat up late,—not dreaming, but planning it.

¹ Susan Hoecker-Drysdale, “Harriet Martineau and the Positivism of Auguste Comte,” in *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical & Methodological Perspectives*, edited by Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale (Routledge, 2001: 169-89).

² See, for example, Clement K. Shorter, *Victorian Literature: Sixty Years of Books and Bookmen* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1897). While considering Martineau “one of the most versatile of Victorian writers,” he erred seriously in suggesting that, “None of her work has stood the test of time” (p. 180).

³ Martineau gave formal lectures to Ambleside working men in close and presumably useful concert with finishing the manuscript for her *History of England during the Thirty Years’ Peace*.

Ambleside
April 23^d [1851]

Dear Mr. Chapman¹

Mr. Lombe² is a man of (reputed) considerable wealth, & one of the first country gentlemen in Norfolk. My attention was first fixed on him many years ago, when he was almost a young man,—by the singular coolness & courage he showed about losing his leg. The knee was diseased, & my uncle (the eminent surgeon)³ put the case before him, precisely as the doctor viewed it. He set down the pros & cons, as to the chances of recovery, in his pocket-book; took a day to consider; resolved to lose the limb; & on that day 6 weeks was at a county ball, walking admirably with a spring leg. Such incidents show men. —Mr. Lombe's chief interests are, I believe, charitable;—in a very enlightened way. He is a mighty benefactor in his neighbourhood. Just now, he is abroad (or was, very lately)⁴ & the Lindleys⁵ are filling his place, & carrying on his good works. From his friendship with Hickson,⁶ & support of the *Westminster*⁷ it is clear that his tendencies are thoroughly liberal, & I have an impression that he wishes some knotty & delicate questions (eg, Mr. Greg's article on prostitution)⁸ to be treated well, in defiance of prudery & timidity, & for the sake of the welfare of society. But I could not prove this.⁹ —If I let my house this summer, I shall go into Norfolk;¹⁰ & if he sh^d be returned, I may possibly see him. But I don't think he is coming back yet.

My notion about Comte w^d be that if any quarterly c^d be found brave enough, a careful & finished sketch of his Philosophy sh^d be given there, & be followed up by an abridged English version.¹¹ But pray don't say that I am meditating any such thing.¹² I must study &

¹ John Chapman, 1822-1894, subsequently published, in November, 1853, Martineau's translation and abridgement of Auguste Comte's *Positive Philosophy*. Chapman succeeded William Hickson as the owner and editor of *The Westminster Review*.

² Edward Lombe, 1800-1852, was a country gentleman with an estate of 15,000 acres who supported various liberal initiatives and subsequently underwrote the Comte translation project.

³ Philip Meadows Martineau, brother of Thomas Martineau (Harriet's father). Harriet's Uncle Philip practiced in Norwich where he was, in her estimate, "the most eminent provincial surgeon of his day,—in some departments, if not altogether" (Harriet Martineau, *Autobiography*, 3rd edition, Boston: James R. Osgood, 1878, I: 76).

⁴ Lombe was visiting Italy.

⁵ Joseph Lindley was Edward Lombe's agent. Joseph's sister, Caroline Lindley, was a benefactress to educational projects.

⁶ William Edward Hickson, 1803-1870, was a writer on education and music who, from 1840 to 1852, owned and edited *The Westminster Review*. The January, 1851, number of *The Westminster Review* (Vol. 54, No. 2: 413-15) reported that Edward Lombe sent £500 to Hickson in October, 1850, in support of efforts to organize schools specifically limited to secular education.

⁷ *The Westminster Review* was a quarterly journal published, under various titles, from 1824 to 1914.

⁸ William Rathbone Greg, 1809-1881, wrote a detailed review of recent studies on prostitution for *The Westminster Review* (Vol. 53, July 1850: 448-506).

⁹ Of Lombe, wrote Martineau, "He was [at that time] a perfect stranger to me" (see her preface to the *Positive Philosophy*).

¹⁰ The distance from Ambleside to Norfolk is approximately 150 miles.

¹¹ Auguste Comte, 1798-1857, French author of the massive *Cours de philosophie positive* (1830-1841) and ostensibly the first writer to employ the term "sociology" (or, to be technically precise: "sociologie"); see especially, Auguste Comte, *Physique sociale (Cours de philosophie positive, Leçons 46 à 60)*, Paris: Hermann, 1975). An epitome, in French, was prepared by Émile Littré, *Analyse raisonné du Cours de Philosophie Positive d'Auguste Comte* (Utrecht: Kemink, 1845). For details, see Stanislas Aquarone, *The Life and Works of Émile Littré, 1801-1881* (Leyden: Sythoff, 1958). In 1852, G.H. Lewes wrote a set of articles on Comte in *The Leader* and these he enlarged and published as *Comte's Philosophy of the Sciences* (London: Bohn, 1853). Martineau, for one, was not sanguine in her views on *The Leader*. T.H. Huxley, in his *Westminster Review* (Vol. 61, January 1854: 254-58) comment (continued...)

think much before I c^d make up my mind to do it; & I want a holiday in the first place. I have worked excessively hard for 3 ½ years; and I now must rest a while.¹ Mr. Atkinson² will look back through the Edinburgh for the article on Comte³ but I have no idea that an Edin. reviewer w^d dare to present him as he is.

I will think over what you ask about support for a liberal quarterly. My connexions lie (oddly enough) among the moderate Church folk (just now frightened out of their wits) and the old Unitarians.⁴ I hear everywhere of a large and “infidel” public, as it is called, – of tens of thousands of “socialists” & “atheists” (cant names) who have a literature of their own; but I can’t say that I really know any thing about them. I do know, well, several men & women, of a high order of mind, who hold opinions like my own; but some keep the fact a secret, & others don’t want to stir. They don’t see social effect of the positive part of our beliefs, or they don’t value it. I fear there are very few who value speculative thinking or practical reform w^h has any obstacles to surmount. And just now, a sort of epidemic fear seems to have overspread society,—such as I never remember to have seen the like of. What I have said about my connexions is an answer to your last question too about cheap reprints. I sh^d like to see them; but I have no means of knowing,—or ever guessing,—what their reception w^d be. —The failure (for so it is) of “the Leader”⁵ tells nothing, as to the demand for liberal thought, for it has quailed, & is neither one thing nor another. In spite of its name, it is stumbling on behind the multitude for whom it was apparently intended, while it is too heretical for the rest of society. A periodical w^h is neither conformable nor independent & consistent, cannot succeed: & this is very well.

I am, dear Sir, truly yours

H. Martineau

¹¹(...continued)

on the respective efforts of Martineau and Lewes, praised Martineau’s translation of Comte over the shorter summary prepared by Lewes. The *Westminster Review* (Vol. 61, July 1854: 173-94) also published a full and generally favorable review of Martineau’s translation specifically.

¹² Chapman apparently let it be known that Martineau was thinking about making a translation inasmuch as Edward Lombe subsequently sent Martineau a generous stipend to support her translation and condensation of Comte’s *magnum opus*. Lombe died in 1852 before the completed manuscript went to the printers in 1853.

¹ Martineau had then just completed the *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development*, with Henry Atkinson, as well as her massive *History of England*. She was not long idle, however, noting in her preface to Comte’s *Positive Philosophy*, that “I began, in the spring of 1851, the analysis of this work, in preparation for a translation.”

² Henry G. Atkinson, circa 1815-1884, was co-author, with Harriet Martineau, of *Letters on the Laws of Man’s Nature and Development*, published by John Chapman in 1851.

³ A likely candidate for Atkinson’s search was: David Brewster, “M. Comte’s Course of Positive Philosophy,” *Edinburgh Review*, Vol. 67 (July) 1838: 271-308. Brewster (1781-1868) was an active and influential scientist.

⁴ On Martineau’s links to Unitarianism, see Pat Duffy Hutcheon, “Harriet Martineau and the Unitarian Connection,” in *Harriet Martineau: Theoretical and Methodological Perspectives*, edited by Michael R. Hill and Susan Hoecker-Drysdale (New York: Routledge, 2001: 23-40).

⁵ *The Leader*, a weekly co-founded by G.H. Lewes, ran from March 30, 1850 to November 24, 1860. Lewes published Martineau’s “Sketches from Life” in *The Leader* during 1850 and 1851. Lewes is probably best known for his association with George Eliot; see *Mr. George Eliot: A Biography of George Henry Lewes*, by David Williams (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983) and Rosemary Ashton, *G.H. Lewes: A Life* (Oxford, 1991).