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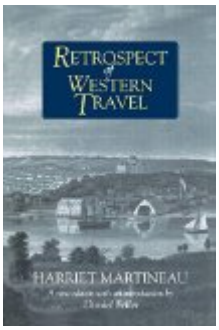
Harriet Martineau. *Retrospect of Western Travel.* Armonk, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2000. xxi + 202 pp. $92.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7656-0213-8.



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The Woman Journalist's View: Harriet Martineau's Jacksonian-Era Travel Narrative

Edited by Daniel Fuller, Harriet Martineau's *Retrospect of Western Travel* is once again available for historians, students, and the merely curious as an insight into Jacksonian-era America. Originally published in two volumes in 1838 by the London printer Saunders and Otley, this 2000 version has been abridged to half its original text, excising thirteen chapters and deleting most of the second-hand testimony, preferring Martineau's eyewitness accounts to those she did not observe firsthand. Clearly she was enamored with America and the idea of democracy, although she never hesitated in voicing her outrage over issues such as slavery and women's rights. It is easy to see why this narrative is considered one of the top early travel books on America: it is a fascinating glimpse into an era of progress, expansion, larger-than-life politicians, and the beginning factionalism over slavery. While earnestly moralistic in tone, even dour at times, Martineau's journalistic observations and interest in human affairs are almost as broad--and occasionally troubled--as the newly formed country itself.

Born in England in 1802, the sixth of eight children, Martineau's early life was marked by tragedy. A childhood illness left her impaired: she lost her sense of taste and smell, and became deaf by the age of twelve. In short order her brother and father died, along with the man to whom Martineau was engaged (he had gone mad; the causes of his death are not clear). Now free from the possibility of marriage, but impoverished by her father's death, Martineau turned to writing and became, by early-nineteenth-century standards, a spectacular success.

Martineau arrived in 1834 and stayed for almost two years. She was one of a large group of Europeans, such as Alexis de Tocqueville, who came over to observe and then report on this experiment in democracy called America. Complete with an ear trumpet for hearing, which often served as a conversation piece, she used her gender (and fame, at least with politicians and abolitionists) to her advantage in gaining access to many social institutions and homes. She traveled

up and down the east coast, south to observe conditions of slavery, then up the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers to Cincinnati, crossing over to see the Great Lakes region. All in all, she covered 10,000 miles of the new country. She also met with many political leaders, observed Congress, visited Harvard and the University of Virginia, and saw numerous scenic attractions. But her observations on slavery and abolition are by far the most interesting she makes.

Martineau first encountered slaves in Baltimore, then later in the Deep South. Several chapters address this issue, although "Country Life in the South" is the most compelling. Here she oddly shifts to the third person, as if to dramatize the horror slavery inflicted on her, and contrasts the slaves' poor quarters and degradation with the luxury and gaiety of the plantations in which their masters lived. It is an effective way of getting her point across, although the descriptions lean toward the dispassionate. I do find it troubling, however, that Martineau tends to describe slaves as "others." In recounting a group of slaves headed for the fields, for example, she both simultaneously expresses compassion and describes them as dull, shuffling animals. This attitude, though common enough in nineteenth-century works, tends to undercut her abolitionist message at such moments.

While truly angered at the tyranny of slavery, finding it antithetical to the principles of democracy, Martineau nevertheless believes the stories she has been told by southern whites about highly-sexed young female slaves who openly desire their masters or slaves who poison whites, commit violent acts, or are prone to intoxication. Yet at the same time she is clearly opposed to the horror of lynchings. For all her impassioned sermonizing about slavery, Martineau seems blind to the black holes in her belief system, the way she works to shine a light on the injustices of racism and slavery, yet still accepts the stories and stereotypes she hears about slaves (and Native Americans, I might add) at times. In some ways, she prefigures national characters such as Harriet Beecher Stowe, who fought passionately for abolition, yet still held questionable ideas about blacks.

She undoubtedly knew a great deal about the Removal of thousands of Native Americans to a land far from their ancestral homes, as the struggle was internationally known. She does indeed refer to a speech about the Cherokee that Henry Clay gave before the Senate, recalling it as the finest she had heard from him. This speech, punctuated by outbursts of abuse from a Georgia senator and observed by several Cherokee chiefs, rises and swells and wholly captures her with its oratory magnificence. Unfortunately, for all her concern for human rights, she is more interested in Clay's stylistics than in what he says about the division of Cherokee land to white citizens. One has to wonder why. Was she afraid that if she spoke out against Andrew Jackson's Removal policies that she might be excoriated by the press, or by the politicians she admired and socialized with? Did she decide she could only take on a few major struggles at a time? (Because he condensed the 1834 editions by half, possibly eliding information about the Removal, perhaps Daniel Fuller will set me straight on whether or not Martineau included more references to this issue in her original volumes.) As interesting as Martineau's narrative is, a mostly vacant space exists concerning the Indians, especially for a woman so outspoken and progressive.

In spite of my concerns, Martineau's book is important for a number of reasons: it serves to balance the more well-known European male perspective on early America left by writers such as de Tocqueville who hated slavery but thought it inevitable, with female sensibilities that combined compassion, intellect, and moral earnestness to confront the issue head on. Her book also makes many penetrating observations on early American life and politics, useful for those who study this era, although her near-constant praise

of American political leaders reminds us that the Jacksonian era was a far less cynical one. Finally, this volume points to female achievement in the early-nineteenth century, showing a woman who overcame great obstacles (handicaps, poverty, scorn from her family and the greater public for being a woman intellectual) to become one of the most noted journalists of her time. It is the hope of this reviewer that Martineau, with the help of Daniel Fuller's careful editing, will become more widely known, not only as an English abolitionist and journalist, but as a documenter of Jacksonian life in all its flaws and glories.