

Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War

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Recommended Citation

Cramer, Janet M. (2003) "Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War," *Civil War Book Review*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 4 .

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/cwbr/vol5/iss4/25>

Review

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Fall 2003

Martineau, Harriet and Logan, Deborah Anna Editor. *Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War*. Northern Illinois University Press, \$49.00 ISBN 875802923

Anglo-Abolitionist

Travel account reveals British perspective

Although Harriet Martineau may not be a familiar name to contemporary U.S. scholars, her travels in the United States made her familiar to politicians and social leaders in the antebellum years, so much so that her published opinions about U.S. life made her a target of pro-slavery agitators. They mean to hang you, a friend wrote to Martineau, as she prepared to travel to the Southern states in the 1830s. What this British-born journalist saw during those years so moved and enraged her that she would write on the topic of slavery for decades to come. As a result, Martineau's insights into U.S. life in the antebellum and post Civil War years are a welcome and needed addition to the collection of travelogues and other more well-known works, such as Alexis de Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, published in 1835. Unlike de Tocqueville, Martineau chronicles what she describes as the quintessential political contradiction of the United States — that a country founded on principles of democracy was sustained economically through the institution of slavery.

Writings on Slavery and the American Civil War is edited by Deborah Anna Logan, assistant professor of English at Western Kentucky University in Bowling Green. Logan, who is also the author of a forthcoming biography of Harriet Martineau, provides introductions to each section of this collection featuring background information about Martineau, the periodicals in which she published, and the content of the selections. Harriet Martineau (1802-1876) was a British writer and political economist. As Logan writes in her introduction, Martineau also believed in the positive, forward movement of social evolution leading to a moral state worthy of the human race. Martineau's social scientific

skills and her moral sensitivities provided her writings with detailed sociological analysis and impassioned commentary. In addition, she lived in one of the more fascinating and turbulent times of history, something she herself understood, as Logan explains in her introduction: Central to Martineau's keen sense of timing is her understanding of the significance of the historical moment even as it is unfolding and the importance of recording both the event and her place in its context.

Described as the first and greatest of women journalists, Martineau toured the United States following the publication of her *Illustrations of Political Economy* in England in 1832. That book contained various tales condemning the practice of slavery, tales that generated an unremarkable reaction in England where slavery was outlawed a year later. But in the United States, her anti-slavery sentiments would create a dangerous climate for Martineau. Logan writes, Martineau's arrival in the United States coincided with the vigorous rise of the abolitionist movement that had been gathering momentum for decades. . . . Though small, plain, deaf, and provincial, Martineau would experience admonishment and threats of retaliation. She cemented this fate further by continuing to write about what she saw in the United States and by translating astute observations into overt abolitionist participation through her writings, her involvement in the Boston Female Anti-Slavery Society, and her friendship with Maria Weston Chapman, who was nicknamed William Lloyd Garrison's lieutenant for her abolition efforts.

Martineau's vitriolic and highly engaged style was typical of journalists of the era, although contemporary readers might be surprised at the amount of opinion and emotion in the journalism selections. This emotion, however, provides rare and valuable insight into the political and social climate of U.S. life. Historians who are accustomed to poring over archives of personal correspondence will find the same rich material in this collection, as Martineau shares her thoughts, observations, and feelings about slavery, the persons who are enslaved, Southern life, and Northern sentiments. She was as critical about attitudes in the North as she was about the slave system in the South. The first lynching she witnessed was in Boston, and she was in the city to see the mob that dragged William Lloyd Garrison through the streets toward a boiling tar kettle. She wrote about watching houses burned to the ground in Pittsburgh because they belonged to free blacks. Her writings, as on pages 27 and 28, illustrate this paradox: At Baltimore and Washington again I was warned in various stealthy ways, of perils awaiting me in the South. I had no means of

ascertaining the justness of these warnings but by going on. . . . The threats proved idle, as I suspected they would. Throughout the South I met with very candid and kind treatment. I mention these warnings partly because they are a fact connected with the state of the country; and partly because it will afterwards appear that the stranger's real danger lies in the north and west, over which the south had, in my case, greatly the advantage in liberality.

In addition to the excerpts from her two books of travel writings, *Society in America* (published in 1837) and *Retrospect of Western Travel* (published in 1838), Martineau's articles in various newspapers and periodicals (such as the *Liberty Bell*, London's *Daily News*, *National Anti-Slavery Standard*, and the *Spectator*) are included in the collection, addressing such topics as the Fugitive Slave Law, the Colonization movement, the Missouri Compromise, Abraham Lincoln, William Lloyd Garrison, John Brown, the Morrill Tariff, and eventually the abolition of slavery. Her commentary on individuals such as Daniel Webster, Henry Clay, and John Calhoun confirms her knowledge of politics and of personalities. About Webster, for instance, on page 292, she writes, If the civil war is to be laid to the charge of any one man, that man is assuredly Daniel Webster. No man knew better than he the weakness of the citizens of the republic. . . . He availed himself of that weakness . . . for his personal purposes, when he might have turned his influence to the account of lifting his country out of its great perplexity.

Logan arranges Martineau's writings by publication outlet — book, newspaper articles, columns, and so on. This arrangement gives Logan the opportunity to comment on Martineau's various writing styles and uses of rhetoric, as well as the role Martineau played in the unfolding of history. The writings are arranged chronologically within these genres, but a topical organization — or at least a topical guide — may have been more useful. Although U.S. political life and slavery are constant themes throughout Martineau's writings, a different arrangement may have provided a more logical coherence to this collection.

Still, Logan achieves her goal of choosing selections that illustrate the range of Martineau's expertise on a wide variety of topics and that illustrate her role as a literary liaison between Britain and America. An appendix provides the itinerary of Martineau's U. S. visit and detailed end notes provide useful cross references and additional historical context. Logan's introduction and her annotations preceding each section give helpful background information to this

ample selection of Martineau's writings, providing excellent source material for historians interested in slavery, the Civil War, politics and political figures, women, rhetoric, and journalism.

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