

**THE LESSONS OF A LIFE, HARRIET
MARTINEAU: A LECTURE DELIVERED
BEFORE THE SUNDAY
LECTURE SOCIETY, ST. GEORGE'S HALL,
LANGHAM PLACE, ON SUNDAY
AFTERNOON, 11TH MAR. 1877**

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The Lessons of a Life, Harriet Martineau: A Lecture Delivered before the Sunday Lecture Society, St. George's Hall, Langham Place, on Sunday Afternoon, 11th Mar. 1877 by Florence Fenwick Miller

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FLORENCE FENWICK MILLER

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THE LESSONS OF A LIFE:
HARRIET MARTINEAU.

A Lecture

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

SUNDAY LECTURE SOCIETY,

ST. GEORGE'S HALL, LANGHAM PLACE,

OR

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, 11th MARCH, 1877.

BY

FLORENCE FENWICK MILLER.

LONDON:

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SYLLABUS.

The lessons to be drawn from this Life are partly direct partly indirect.

A lesson for the Lecturer.

Indirect lessons from the moulding influences of Harriet Martineau's career:

- a. Her relationships—of birth and affection.
- b. Her religious growth.
- c. Her work, and the criticism it received.

Some of the direct lessons taught by her writings. Her political work, and its lesson for men. Her work for her sex, and its lesson for women.

Posthumous fame and influence.

THE LESSONS OF A LIFE :

HARRIET MARTINEAU.

ON a summery evening in the month of June, in last year, there was quenched one of the shining lights of our time. After such a lifetime as falls to the lot of but few human beings—still more of but few women; after a long life of physical suffering, and of such torture as could be inflicted on such a mind by misrepresentation, slander, and abuse of her convictions; but withal a life full of work, full of thought, full of purpose, and crowned with result—on that day Harriet Martineau ended her labours, and entered into eternal rest.

All England felt that one of the most remarkable women that ever lived had departed from amidst us. Perhaps she has had really no predecessor in history, if we except Deborah, who dispensed judgment from her seat under the palm-tree to all Israel. Other women have had an equal and a greater influence upon the course of events in their own time, but not under anything like analogous circumstances. Aspasia ruled by the impress of her great mind upon the great men who sat at her feet, and Madame de Pompadour and not a few others have ruled by the power which passion lent them over men who swayed the destinies of states; while Elizabeth of England and Catherine of Russia were placed by birth in a position which gave scope for the exercise of their natural powers of government. But Harriet Martineau was born to no high station; her influence was not the backstairs influence of the beautiful and intriguing favourite; she was not even hidden from view, while the credit of her thoughts and deeds was usurped, by any man whatever. She was a political power in our land; our highest statesmen asked and followed her wise counsel;

thinking for herself, and uttering her thoughts fearlessly, she gained respect for her opinions when she gave them her name, and wrote words winged with power to find their way straight to men's hearts even when they were not known as her utterances. Taking into account the effect of her acknowledged writings (such as her 'Tales in Political Economy,' and her 'Illustrations of Taxation'), the direct influence which she had with various leaders of politics, and the unknown extent to which she educated men as a leader-writer and reviewer, it will be seen how much she has impressed herself upon her time, and what political power she has exercised.

The story of such a life cannot fail to be fraught with both the keenest interest and the highest and most important lessons, over and above those which may be gained from every good biography. Probably no life, even the most insignificant, could be truthfully delineated without conveying some new thought, some fresh lesson, to the wise and careful student of human nature. But if this is so with even the careers which are as commonplace as the story of any one blade of grass, or any one grain of sand upon the sea-shore, how much more must it not be so when the subject of study is a life so full of variety and of individuality as that of Harriet Martineau?

The lessons which we may learn here, and carry away with us to our daily task, are of a twofold character. First, there are the lessons which are given indirectly by the moulding influences of her life. There is a keen interest in watching the growth of a flower, of a fish, or any other mere physical development; but there is far more in tracing the processes by which a mind has increased to its full strength and beauty. We cannot but eagerly strive to see how this one particular mind became greater than its fellows; what are the conditions which seem to have aided and what those which have trammelled its progress? Secondly, there are the direct lessons which this teacher of men spent her life in enforcing; the lessons taught in her written words, and living in the printed page upon which the eyes of so many have rested, and have yet to rest.

And foremost among these lessons is one for me in my present position—one which Harriet Martineau taught both by precept and example—that of complete candour in speaking

of the impressions produced upon me by her works and the record of her life. In the preface to her 'Biographical Sketches,' reprinted from the *Daily News*, she says:

"The true principle of biographical delineation . . . is to tell, in the spirit of justice, the whole truth about the characters of persons important enough to have their lives publicly treated at all . . . In old age, and on the borders of the grave, what do distinguished persons desire for themselves? How do they like the prospect of sickly praise, of the magnifying of the trifles of their days, of any playing fast and loose with right and wrong for the sake of their repute, of any cheating of society of its rights in their experience of mistakes and failure, as well as of gain and achievement? Do they not claim to be measured with the same measure with which they mete their fellows,—to leave the world, not under any sort of disguise, but delivering over their lives, if at all, in their genuine aspect and condition,—to be known hereafter, if at all, for what they are?"

After these words of precept for those who, in any way, shall speak of her life after she has ceased to be, there comes the example of her own biographical sketches. These short essays, which treat of a large proportion of the eminent statesmen, philosophers, and scientific and literary men and women who have died within the last fifteen years, are truly noteworthy for their candour, and a lesson in that respect to all future memoir writers. They are candid not only in blaming—candour which is all verjuice is only spite called by another name; but praise and appreciation are given to the worthy works and the noble qualities of even those who had proved incapable of reaching a high standard of moral and mental excellence in every respect. Two of these short memoirs are those of Lockhart and John Wilson Croker. A reference to the autobiography will show how bitterly Harriet Martineau felt the treatment which she received at the hands of these men (of which I must speak again farther on). But no reader of the notices of their lives would guess that the writer who gives them all the credit which was their due for wit and ability was a woman whom they had joined themselves together to pursue for years with insult, slander, and misrepresentation. On the other hand, her dearest friends, as Lord Durham, are treated with a calm, dispassionate consideration, answering that requirement of honesty laid down in the words which I have quoted.

The first lesson, therefore, which meets me is one for