Harriet Martineau and Ireland

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INTRODUCTION

The Victorian sociologist–novelist Harriet Martineau visited Ireland on two different occasions, first in 1832 and again, twenty years later, in 1852, just six years after the Great Famine of 1846, when the country was still very much visibly affected by that event. Her latter journey covered some 1,200 miles and encompassed all four provinces that make up the island of Ireland, north and south. Martineau was not the first foreign visitor to nineteenth-century Ireland, of course, but she provided one of the few genuinely socio-logical interpretations during this time period. This chapter, then, examines Martineau's Irish writings and her contribution to our sociological under-standing of nineteenth-century Ireland.

The chapter takes the following structure. We begin by offering a brief biographical introduction to Harriet Martineau in which Martineau's sociological credentials are delineated. Following this we comment on the methodological orientation that guided Martineau's sociological investiga-tions of Ireland. We then briefly outline the spatial organisation of her travels and the socio-historical context in which she wrote, and go on to discuss her work under the headings of religious divisions and class/gender relations. We chose to focus on these two domains of social life because of their pro-minence in her work and the insightfulness of her observations with respect to them. Two of Martineau's texts on Ireland – *Ireland* (1832), a didactic novel in her massive *Illustrations of Political Economy*, and her non-fiction *Letters from Ireland* (1852) – provide the focus for the chapter. The *Illustrations* employs fiction to demonstrate and explore the application of economic principles in concrete settings, an approach that John Stuart Mill initially opposed but later recanted in light of Martineau's wildly successful treatment (Martineau 1877, II: 1; Hill 2004; Logan 2004). Martineau's later work, though described as 'letters' from Ireland, took the character of impressionistic

day-to-day field reports written for publication at the invitation of Frederick Knight Hunt, editor of the *Daily News* (Martineau 1877, II: 405–7). Her Irish accounts were composed in various settings ranging from 'a quiet chamber at a friend's house, or amidst a host of tourists, and to the sound of the harp, in a *salon* at Killarney' (Martineau 1877, II: 407). She considered writing the letters anonymously but in the end chose to write them under her own name. Taken together, they provide a survey account of the country. The final section of the essay examines the civil reform programme proposed by Martineau for the economic improvement of Irish society. Throughout we include excerpts from Martineau's original work to give the reader a sense of her writing style and abilities and to communicate her ideas directly.

The abiding impression one gets from reading even a selection of Martineau's work is that she feels Ireland is a country performing well below its potential and that, despite the signs of 'barbarism' evident, there also exist many indications of 'civilisation'.[1] A good example of this comes from her Galway letters:

> as to the aspect of Galway, the place seems to have been furnished with a vast apparatus for various social action, for which there is no scope. Here is the railroad, with, as yet, very little traffic. Here is this canal, with, as yet, no trade. Here is a nobly situated port, with, at present, no article of export. (Martineau 1852: 87)

As she prepared to leave Ireland at the end of her sojourn and took a 'rear view mirror' look at it, Martineau eloquently contrasts contemporary times with the distant past:

> in casting back a last look upon Ireland as her shores recede, the traveller naturally thinks of that remarkable island as she once was, in contrast with what she has been since, and with what she is now. There was a time when Ireland gave light – intellectual and moral – to the nations of northern Europe; when she was the centre of the Christian faith, whence apostles went forth to teach it, and where disciples of many nations came to learn it. She had a reputation for scholarship and sanctity before England and Scotland were distinctly heard of. Few nations then stood so high as the Irish; and few have ever sunk so low as she has since sunk. (Martineau 1852: 212)

Yet for all this, her writings are imbued with a strong sense of hope that the fortunes of the country will improve. Convinced of the country's wealth of natural resources and its underachievement as a nation, she feels that the Irish people have only to make a go of it if they want to see their country prosper into the future. The topics she took up in her writings were as varied

as the places she visited – the Ulster linen industry, the Derry–Coleraine railway line, the Bog of Allen in Leinster, and west of Ireland emigrants. Covering gender relations, tenant–landlord relations, social stratification, law, organisations, and work, and institutions such as the family, education and religion, one can say that 'all human life' is here.

Unlike other nineteenth-century travel writers, Martineau did not write with the intention of enticing people to come to Ireland (Hooper and Young 2004) in a 'Let's Go Ireland' manner. Rather her focus is documenting and analysing its economic exigencies and conditions. To this end, Martineau felt that Ireland's economic prosperity could be better secured within rather than outside the union with Britain. She also took the view that the ills of Ireland were primarily economic rather than political in nature, writing early on in her work that 'though it is my business to treat of the permanent rather than of the transient cause of the distress of Ireland, – of her economy rather than her politics, – I have been perplexed by some of the difficulties which at present beset all who would communicate with the public on her behalf' (Martineau 1832: i). But, in claiming this, she arguably understated the long-term entanglements between political and economic issues and problems as played out in the specifically Irish context. Politics are not completely dis-avowed, however, and one finds frequent mentions of it throughout her work.

A BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF HARRIET MARTINEAU (1802–76)

Harriet Martineau was born in Norwich, Norfolk, England, on 12 June 1802. She had multiple identities as a novelist, sociologist, and public intel-lectual. She was socialised into a Unitarian religious tradition and both her parents – Thomas and Elizabeth Rankin Martineau – were devout Unitarians. Her parents sent her to a co-educational private school in Norwich (where the family lived) for two years, followed by 15 months at a boarding school in Bristol, though she was largely home-schooled and self-schooled and her formal private schooling amounted to only slightly more than three years. In the main her early life was unremarkable except for the fact that her father died when she was 24 years of age and this, together with the sudden death of her fiancé, meant that she began early adulthood as an independent woman. The years 1832 to 1834 marked an important period in her life; during this time her first major work appeared – *Illustrations of Political Economy* – witnessing the launch of a remarkable sociological journey (Hill 1989, 1991; Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale 2001; Hoecker-Drysdale 1992).

In 1834 she embarked on an ambitious tour of the United States and wrote a landmark ethnography and comparative study, *Society in America* (1837), based on her observations. While in America she travelled widely

and consulted with both cultural elites like Ralph Waldo Emerson and William Ellery Channing as well as ordinary people. Her work on America was guided by the methodological principles later set down in *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838), the first systematic treatise on sociological methods (Hill 1989). Interestingly, Martineau was a contemporary of Alexis de Tocqueville, the subject of comment in another essay in this collection, and her American work received much less attention, undeservedly, than his (Hill 2001). One of her especially significant sociological achievements was a translation/condensation in 1853 of Auguste Comte's *Cours de philosophie positive*. A move to the English Lake District in 1845, prompted by failing health, led her to turn her attention to the English north and culminated in her *Complete Guide to the English Lakes* (1855). Between her two visits to Ireland, she overcame a major illness (Martineau 1844, 1877, II: 145–174) and showed a strong resolve by coming back to Ireland a second time (Hill 2004). Martineau died in Cumbria in 1876; among the hills and lakes she dearly loved (Hill 2004), leaving a prodigious record of published and unpublished work (Logan 2002a, b; 2007; Rivlin 1947). In sum, by the time Martineau visited Ireland for the second and last time, she was an accomplished sociologist, political economist, and well-known writer and world traveller. The *Illustrations* and subsequent works attracted a wide, often appreciative and sometimes critical, audience.

MARTINEAU'S IRISH ITINERARY

Travel in nineteenth-century Ireland was a difficult endeavour. Little is known about Martineau's first visit in 1832, but her 1852 trip is thoroughly outlined. Though suffering from a hearing disability, Martineau travelled around the country by means of railway and post-car (a horse-drawn one) and mostly with a travelling friend, her niece (Hooper 2001: 6). She didn't find the going easy and in her autobiography indicated her belief that her failing health at the time was the beginnings of a 'fatal malady' (Martineau 1877, II: 407). Her self-diagnosis was overly pessimistic, however. The Irish trip was obviously less fatal than Martineau surmised, as she lived and worked productively for nearly a quarter century after her visit to Ireland. Surprisingly, her Irish observations do not receive as much attention in her autobiography as one might expect. Like any visitor to a strange new country, Martineau's experiences were a mixture of serendipitous encounters, unexpected difficulties, and confirmed expectations. The beauty of the country struck her very much and time and again we find references in her letters to the Irish landscape. Of Connemara, she writes that 'there are few things in the world more delightful than a drive at sunset, in a bright autumn

evening, among the mountains and lakes of Connemara . . . the air here, on such an evening, is like breathing cream' (Martineau 1852: 92).

Most visitors to modern-day Ireland come first through Dublin but Martineau entered Ireland via Lough Foyle. Her earlier letters have to do with Northern Ireland and she has a good deal to say about Donegal and Derry and settler–native relations. From the northern part of the island, she travelled down to Dundalk and then on to Dublin and from the capital city travelled across to Galway on the west coast taking in midland counties Kildare and Queen's County (now County Laois) along the way. Extensive references in her letters to the Bog of Allen, which Martineau refers to as 'the Irish California' (Martineau 1852: 77), stretching through most of Leinster, reveals the interest she took in bogs both for their quiet and tranquil beauty and capacity to function as a source of economic betterment. But it also points to the fact that she may well have considered America as a frame of reference for her work on Ireland.

Along the west coast she travelled through counties Mayo (stopping in Ballina, Westport, Newport and Castlebar and travelling to Achill Island), Galway and Clare (stopping in Clifden, Ballyvaughan and Ennistymon) and then on to Kerry (stopping in Cahirciveen, Kenmare, Valencia Island, and the Dingle Peninsula), Cork, eastwards to Tipperary towns such as Clonmel, and further east to Waterford and Wexford where the visitor was impressed by the signs of industry. Islands, long attracting the attention of foreign observers of Ireland, also caught Martineau's attention and she visited three islands along the west coast – Aran, Valencia and Achill.

METHODOLOGICAL ORIENTATIONS

Martineau was methodologically ready for her work in Ireland. Guided by the principles elaborated in *How to Observe Morals and Manners*, she paid great attention to what she terms the 'observation of things' by which she meant all manner of observable behaviours and artifacts, including archival material and documentary sources. Within this framework, discourse (i.e. face-to-face interview data) was important, but secondary (Hill 1989; Martineau 1838: 63, 222–30). She notes the rarity of finding 'information given by anybody' being validated by the 'independent testimony of anybody else' (Martineau 1852: 214) and thus questions the independent reliability of interview data.

As part of her preparations for her countrywide tour of Ireland, Martineau drew on the work of the Dublin Statistical Society and the Belfast Social Inquiry Society, two early sociological organisations, to provide her with sensitising concepts before she set out to make her own observations

and inquiries. She was especially influenced by Professor William Hancock, a key figure in the Dublin Statistical Society and met with him in Dublin to discuss her work (Martineau 1852: iv). Hancock was professor of political economy at Trinity College Dublin, author of *Impediments to Prosperity in Ireland* (1850),[2] and a disciple of Adam Smith's *laissez-faire* approach. Through his work with the Dublin Statistical Society, Hancock sought to bring the insights of political economy to bear in ameliorating Ireland's social problems. Martineau's work reflected this emphasis on social improvement and sought to draw attention to the constraints and barriers to Ireland's future economic betterment.

Another feature of Martineau's methodological approach is her use of demographic data which she supplies on various towns and villages encountered in her journeys. This data comes from the 1841 Census, the first comprehensive national census carried out in Ireland (Bourke 1999: 32), and, in itself (along with the earlier Ordnance Survey mapping of the country in 1836), a major example of early sociological work on the part of the state to map the demography of the island (Gray 2005).

During her journeys she kept detailed notes in a travel journal and she was careful to do this as soon as possible after leaving the field. She also consulted local key informants and a variety of sources including census data, historical studies, and government reports. Beyond acquainting herself with this documentary material, Martineau was convinced of the need to do on-the-ground empirical sociology and this meant actually going into the field for extended periods of time, immersing herself in people's everyday lives and seeking to understand the social world from their standpoint. To be sure, sometimes this could generate unsettling feelings in the researcher as Martineau explains in a letter of 21 September 1852: 'a few days of observation of how the people live, merely by our going to see them, are sad enough to incline one to turn away, and never come again' (Martineau 1852: 150). Collectively, though, such data sources provided the basis for a rich description of Irish social life and lent to her writings a strong and powerful sense of immediacy and realism well captured in her early fictionalised account of poultry keeping:

> The fowls and pigs disappeared at the same time; and to all the hubbub which disturbed the morning hours, the deep curses of Sullivan, the angry screams of his wife, the cackling of the alarmed poultry, the squealing of the pigs, and the creaking of the crazy cars, there succeeded a hush, which was only interrupted by the whirring of Dora's wheel. (Martineau 1832: 20)

It is, of course, a long intellectual journey from Martineau's fact-based fictional account of 1832 to her direct observational report of 1852, but her attention to detail and empirical veracity show clearly throughout her writings.

SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXTS

Nineteenth-century Ireland was a very poor society. Pre-famine Ireland was marked by a number of important economic, demographic and political features (Ó Tuathaigh 2007). Economically, Ireland was an agricultural-based society with little or no industrial base, with the exception of Belfast, and an even weaker market economy. And, as Martineau observes, it was a society with some class distinctions:

> Between the policy and the operation of the penal laws about religious matters, there was created a great gap in Irish society where there should have been a middle class . . . Even now, it is a curious spectacle to the English traveller, – the attempts of the Irish to sell food to each another. (Martineau 1853: 37)

The potato crop was the mainstay of the farming economy, aided by a favourable climate and soil for production, and consumption of the food cut across class lines (Ó Gráda 2000). Subdivision of land meant that many peasants farmed on very small holdings, a practice that proved disastrous when the potato famine struck.

In the post-famine period, although the population was now drastically reduced through death and outmigration, Ireland remained an agriculturally-based society. Production of the potato reduced significantly after the famine (Ó Gráda 2000). Agricultural labourers still comprised a substantial section of the population. Most lived in miserable cottages and cows and poultry were the major kinds of livestock (Bourke 1999). In Ulster, flax growing was more common and generated an important linen-making industry which exported its goods to Belfast and beyond to neighbouring Britain, representing, according to Jane Gray, a form of 'capitalism before the factory' in which women (and children) were to the forefront (Gray 2005: 3). Family life in post-famine Ireland was marked by low rates of marriage but within marriage by high rates of fertility. The subdivision of land, which was common before the famine, gave way to a new practice of passing on the farm to a single inheriting son, usually the eldest, who, with land in hand, made an attractive match for a dowried partner. The other non-inheriting siblings were faced with the choice of either emigrating or staying on the farm as relatives assisting (Ó Tuathaigh 2007; Ryan 1965). Thus, inheritance customs crucially shaped marriage and fertility patterns in Irish society and resulted in an unusual pattern of late marriage and high fertility within marriage.

The post-famine period was also marked by the intensification of the Poor Law, administered in each local area by Poor Law unions, and designed to alleviate the poverty and destitution of labourers. On her

journey around the island, Martineau visited a number of workhouses, the Ennistymon workhouse in County Clare for example, and wrote warmly, for the most part, about the condition of these buildings representing state authority. She writes, 'the visitor . . . enters the workhouse gates without that painful mingling of disgust and compassion in his mind which is one of the most disagreeable feelings in the world' (Martineau 1852: 158).

The many villages that Martineau visited would have taken a simple form with the chapel or church at their centres and surrounded by a public house, post office, and a small bundle of houses. The chapel, usually in gothic style, was the hub of the village and was marked out from other buildings by iron railings (Bourke 1999).

Culturally, an old world of folk beliefs and practices such as those centred on wakes was giving way, in the post-famine period, to a new world based on standardisation and regularity (Bourke 1999). At one point in the *Illustrations* Martineau mentions the Irish custom of wakes, the traditional cultural practice of paying homage to the dead, which, she opines, 'rank so high among social obligations in Ireland' (Martineau 1832: 70). Such is the importance of funerals in Irish social life that it has sometimes been described as a funerary culture (Bourke 1999: 131). Describing the character of Dan, Martineau writes:

> He gave notice, at the same time, to his captain and comrades, that when a blaze should be seen on the cliff, and the funeral lament heard, all would be ready for their reception at the wake: – the burning of the bed of his deceased before the door, and the utterance of the death cry, being the customary mode of invitation to the wakes of the Irish poor. (Martineau 1832: 70)

Wakes, as Gibbons reminds us, tended to be associated with story-telling, dancing, drinking and sexual adventure, and for these reasons, often provoked the ire of clergy (Gibbons, 2002, p. 69). At another point Martineau mentions fairies, another key feature of this old world. On her visit to Achill Island her account reveals that 'it was by mere accident that we discovered that, of all the population of the Catholic village of Keel, there are no adults who dare go out after nightfall, *for fear of the fairies*' (Martineau 1852: 123, our emphasis). Storytelling too, around a fire or more likely in a public house, was very common for socialising and educating the next generation (Bourke 1999), as this account from Martineau suggests: 'many a laughing party may be seen round a huge pile of smoking potatoes, in a dirty cabin' (Martineau 1852: 128). But these cultural practices – story-telling, wakes and belief in the fairies – were declining as the world of the railway, mechanised agriculture, and print culture (Bourke 1999) become more and more important.

So when Martineau returned to Ireland in the mid-1800s she came to a society in transition. She did not come under the aegis of a government or funding agency and funded her travel expenses from her own personal resources. This intellectual freedom allowed her to focus on people's everyday concerns and to detail the small print of Irish people's social worlds. Above all, she saw herself as a liberal and a 'lady of very superior qualifications' (Martineau 1877: 4) who could bring the insights of the then hegemonic political economy perspective to bear wherever she ventured – America, the Middle East or Ireland. In what follows we examine her insights and observations in two specific domains – religious divisions and class/gender relations – and, following this, offer an assessment of Martineau's contribution to our understanding of nineteenth-century Ireland.

The first thing that should be noted about Martineau's orientation to Ireland was her sympathetic attitude towards its people. In the preface to her work on the 'Green Island', for instance, she announces a strong sympathy with the plight of the Irish poor (Martineau 1832). She visited the country, as she puts it herself, as an 'indignant witness of her wrongs' and proceeds to document and discuss these in a way that would 'most serve the cause of the Irish poor' (Martineau 1832: ii), revealing early on, from her vantage point as a foreign stranger, the practical import of her work (Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale 2001). The bold assertion that 'Ireland has been and is misgoverned' leaves no room for ambiguity (Martineau 1832: iii), though the blame seems to lie more on the Irish than the English side. She is even more explicit about her intentions in another part of the opening section of her work:

> the purpose of my title is to direct the work into the hands of those whom it most concerns; and my personages are few because it is my object to show, in a confined space, how long a series of evils may befall individuals in a society conducted like that of Ireland, and by what a repetition of grievances its members are driven into disaffection and violence. (Martineau 1832: ii)

Only by knowing about the grievances of the poor, according to Martineau, could one understand their consequences in rebellious acts of various kinds that have marked Irish history and, in turn, motivate and inspire government action to redress these grievances. Not all people were positively disposed to her work, though, and one reviewer in the Scottish periodical, *Edinburgh Review*, while seeing some merit in Martineau's account, overall finds it deficient:

> In this tract are to be found many of the characteristics of Miss Martineau's other publications; – an adherence to her general principles, carried, perhaps, too far, – great distinctness and power in enunciating them . . . Still, though this tale is

very able, yet, taken on the whole, it is not attractive. It appears to us to deal too
much in shadows; and where a light is thrown in, it is rather that of a torch, or of
an explosion, than of the noonday sun. (*Edinburgh Review* 1833: 252)

RELIGIOUS DIVISIONS

One of the features of nineteenth-century Ireland that attracted noteworthy
attention from Martineau was religion and specifically the role in Irish
society and culture of both the Catholic Church and the Church of Ireland.
She was particularly drawn to what she terms the 'theological strifes of Ireland'
(Martineau 1852: 152). While she recognises the important role of the
church in social life, she clearly implicates it in Ireland's underdevelopment:

The world sees, and Ireland feels, that all her peace and progress (and it is not
premature to speak of peace and progress now) are owing to influences quite
apart from both Churches; while the obstacles, the discouragements, the dis-
sensions with which she has to contend, are owing to the faults of the one or the
other Church, or their mutual strife. (Martineau 1852: 220)

This line of argument, in which religion as ideology stands in the way of
economic progress and modernisation, is difficult to square, however, with
the emphasis Martineau places on education, largely provided in and through
the Catholic Church, as a mechanism for bettering the island: 'we must look
for hope and help to that power which will never disappoint us – to
education. Of all the new features of Irish life, this is the most important . . .
It is a *leading out of*. Education will lead the Irish people out of their woes;
and it will lead them up to the threshold of a better destiny' (Martineau 1852:
211). She notes the 'eagerness for learning' among the Irish poor (schools
were then funded by the state, under the National School Act of 1831, but
were run and controlled by the Catholic Church) but commented how little
use this human capital was put to in terms of improving the material
conditions of the land and generating badly needed economic capital.

Regional variation in religious cleavages surprised her and she seemed
puzzled by the apparently friendly Catholic–Protestant relations in Dublin
and the seemingly strong religious cleavages animating life along the west of
Ireland Atlantic coast. Competition for the hearts and minds of the island
people of Achill, County Mayo, between the newly established Protestant
mission, on the one hand, and the Catholic Church, on the other, led by the
formidable Dr John McHale, then Archbishop of Tuam, or the 'Lion of the
West' as he came to be known,[3] is a good example of this inter-religious
rivalry between Gael and Gall. Faced with strong Protestant proselytising,

Archbishop McHale consecrated a new Catholic chapel on the island to help energise the devotional life of the Catholic faithful (Martineau 1852: 121). On her journey from Dublin to Galway, Martineau offers this short account of the national seminary at Maynooth, the training ground of the priesthood she frequently takes issue with: 'the college at Maynooth appears to be surrounded by gardens and thriving plantations; and some old trees hang about the neighbouring ruins of the ancient castle of the Fitzgeralds of Leinster, and clothe the entrance to the estate of the Duke of Leinster' (Martineau 1852: 75).

In this poverty-ridden society, Martineau notes the religious fervour of its people and the esteem and symbolic power of priests within it even if she is critical of their role as moral entrepreneurs (Cohen 1980).[4] A good example of the great respect for clergy is given in this fictionalised passage about a home visitation of Fr Glenny:

> Dora came curtseying to the door to invite him to repose himself on the turf seat within; her mother rose feebly to pay her reverence as he entered, and hoped he would be pleased to remain till her husband and Dan returned. (Martineau 1832: 37–38)

Beyond the national seminary at Maynooth, her letters are peppered with references to various chapels and cathedrals encountered on her journeys. In the Lough Foyle region, we are told 'we find a Company building a handsome Catholic chapel', the term chapel being more widely used than church in nineteenth-century Ireland and around which whole villages tended to grow (Bourke 1999: 5). The Irish poor looked to the Catholic priest as much for advice on worldly matters, such as making enough money to preserve their livelihood, as they looked to him for the receipt of the sacraments:

> After more words of exhortation and comfort, the priest gave Dora a small present of money, and expressed his hope of seeing them all at mass in the morning, after which he would converse further with them on their affairs. (Martineau 1832: 43)

Adherence to church norms about the regular use of the confessional as the source of absolution from one's sins was a key feature of the Irish Catholic habitus (Inglis 1998). In Martineau's narrative, non-confessed sins and worries about her husband's Whiteboy activism weighed heavily on Dora's conscience, so much so that she felt the need to turn to Fr Glenny, who alone could bring relief to her anguish. This passage reveals the strong influence of the church in the moral lives of ordinary people:[5]

> Again and again, in her solitude, she had meditated a night's expedition to Father Glenny's dwelling . . . she was more than ever distressed at her own spiritual state . . . her conscience so burdened with an accumulation of sins. (Martineau 1832: 81)

In the main, Martineau characterises Catholic priests negatively and their influence as malevolent, seeing them as an impediment to the quest for reviving a central place for truthfulness in Irish life – contrasting this with the role of the National School system – (Martineau 1852: 215) and as thwarting the ability of Irish peasants to gain 'knowledge and independence' (Martineau 1852: 216). She attributes the 'fear and hatred' of the Irish to the dominance of the Catholic Church and 'a priesthood as theirs for their moral guides' (Martineau 1852: 214). Looking to the future, she predicts the demise of the Church's power and confidently claims 'that priesthood is obviously destined to decline. It may become more noisy and quarrelsome as it declines, but its power for mischief would soon be over' (Martineau 1852: 219).

CLASS AND GENDER RELATIONS

Martineau's letters from Ireland provide an important and rare insight into a society convulsed by a massively traumatic event, the Great Famine of 1846, or 'Black Famine' as it has come to be known (Ó Gráda 2000). Her earlier letters do not give us a good sense of these events because they provide accounts of the Ulster experience, which was less affected by the famine than the western coastal regions. Early on, the picture that emerges from the letters is of a relatively prosperous and industrious country, but this story changes radically as Martineau's journey takes her to the west of Ireland speckled with 'rows of deserted cottages' and 'wrecks of habitations', stark and visible reminders of the horrors of the 1846 Famine (Martineau 1852: 77). At the same time, ruins of castles, monasteries and churches in places like Athenry register and summon up an earlier 'land of saints and scholars' Ireland.

Her account begins with the Lough Foyle region, near present-day Derry, and reveals how class relations were given spatial form. Catholics tended to live on poorer mountain land, from which they undoubtedly had a great view of the world around them, while Protestants, or more precisely, Scottish Presbyterians descended from Ulster planters, tended to live on land more favourable for tillage and farming. Property relations between the Anglo-Irish landowners and native Irish tenants loom large in *Illustrations*. Irish tenants found it difficult to raise enough income from meagre crop and potato production and the sale of animals to pay their landlords, and

sometimes resorted to using child labour to generate additional monies. Overcrowding among tenants and eviction were common grievances also. Some peasants joined the ranks of secret agrarian societies like the Whiteboys to challenge the landlord system that impoverished them. Societies such as these operated in a clandestine manner and used the methods of terrorism to challenge the colonial hegemony of the Anglo-Irish gentry (Murphy 2001). In Martineau's narrative, Dora's desire to conceal the whereabouts of her husband and especially his membership of the Whiteboys, after intensive interrogation from English soldiers, reveals Ireland as a society of secrecy and hidden truths (Murphy 2001) and helps to explain why the ruling Protestant elite kept tenants under constant close observation:

> She was next questioned about the shipwreck: and here she was safe. She knew nothing of the matter but by hearsay, and could not answer a single question. Then came inquiries whither her husband had gone. She did not know; from place to place, she supposed, as he did before he married (p. 84) . . . The officer was not so sure of this when he saw how earnestly she glanced from time to time towards some particular spot in an opposite direction from the alder bush. It was an artifice; for Dora now began to be cunning, and to wish an end to this visit, lest her husband should appear from the beach . . . A soldier was left to guard her till their return. (Martineau 1832: 84, 88)

The other soldiers, though, set off to negotiate their way through the hazardous bog, a metaphor, as Trumpener points out, of Anglo-Irish attitudes towards the Irish – as a hard to understand, recalcitrant people (Murphy 2001: 148). For Trumpener, the bog, at once a mnemonic device and a constantly shifting landscape, stands as an 'emblem for Ireland's intractable national character' (Trumpener 1997: 47).

Martineau's account of Dora's romantic plans reveals the importance of instrumental things like land as much as expressive factors like love in the making of a marriage match in nineteenth-century Ireland:

> (Dan) had been long in love with Dora, and would have married her out of hand, if he had had so much as half an acre of ground to marry upon. (Martineau 1832: 7)

Inheritance of the family farm allowed a newly married couple to raise a family but, without it, marriage was either postponed or abandoned altogether.

Martineau seems to suggest that unequal class relations influenced people's orientations to the law. Irish hostility to legal codes came under criticism from Martineau and she seemed to be disappointed by the low respect for the law among the people, observing that:

> We have had frequent occasion to regret the high walls which surround all the
> pretty places in the neighbourhood of the towns we have last visited . . . we have
> been told the reason – that the people have so little idea of the law being instituted
> for just and mutually protective purposes . . . we should like much more to see the
> people learning that the law is meant to be every honest man's friend, and
> guarding it accordingly. (Martineau 1852: 215)

Irish antipathy to law, as Gibbons notes, was a common target of attack by
nineteenth-century civil reformers, both Irish and English (Gibbons 2002:
15), and to the extent that this is true Martineau was in step with opinion at
the time. Against wretched circumstances of dire poverty and destitution, it
is not surprising that some peasants took to stealing to meet basic
subsistence needs, justified on the basis that it was necessary to provide for
one's family dependants, and that a minority seized upon violent means
to effect political change (Martineau 1832: 62). Martineau mentions the
violence of the secret agrarian group, the Whiteboys, at various points in the
Illustrations. In an account of their plundering of a ship marooned at night
along a barely visible but highly dangerous and rugged west coast, she notes
that the aggressive actions of the Whiteboys did not find a receptive
audience in county Mayo towns like Ballina and Killala. This description of
the travels of survivors of the shipwreck points to a strong rural–urban
cleavage with respect to indignation about agrarian violence in nineteenth-
century Ireland and the limits of 'popular' support for rural agitation:

> As they went along the road, and through small villages, they met with little
> sympathy in any of their complaints against whiteboys; but the townspeople were
> of a different temper, and Ballina and Killala soon rang with the tidings of the
> horrible outrage, which had been committed on the coast. (Martineau 1832: 74)

Interestingly, sites of popular culture such as wakes and weddings were
often attended by the recruiting sergeants of the Whiteboys, infusing these
rituals with a strong political meaning (Gibbons 1998).[6]

In addition to class relations, Martineau was also interested in the status
of women and their social relations with men. The industriousness of Irish
women impressed her a good deal and she noted that it was 'the industry of
the women which is in great part sustaining the country' (Martineau 1852:
65) and that 'the employment of the least in the place of the most able-
bodied is one of the peculiarities which marks the anomalous condition of
Ireland' (Martineau 1852: 65–6). The range of women's work, extending far
beyond the private sphere of the household, also surprised her: 'we observe
women working almost everywhere. In the flax-fields there are more women
than men pulling and steeping. In the potato fields it is often the women who

are saving the remnant of the crop' (Martineau 1852: 69). Martineau also makes reference to the keeping of poultry, an important economic activity in nineteenth-century Ireland, and an especially important source of income for women (Bourke 1999).

Her next destination point, Galway, is described as a strange place, owing to the practice of using seaweed as a form of manure. A visit to the village of Claddagh in Galway is vividly recalled by Martineau with forensic-like detail and makes some reference to Irish mothers, mentioning their practice – unsavoury in Martineau's eyes – of removing lice from the heads of their children:

> The cottages are in rows; and there are streets or alleys, where grass springs between the stones, or moss tuffs them, and where a stunted elder-bush, or other tree, affords a strange little patch of verdure in the dreary place . . . nettles, docks, and grass grow to the height of two feet, and the thistle and ragwort shed their seeds into the thatch . . . but infinitely worse is the inside. Some have no windows at all. Voices are heard from the interior of one where there was no window, and where the door was shut . . . elsewhere we saw a litter of pigs wallowing in the mud close by the head of the bed. Many mothers in the street, and even in the fish-market, were performing that operation on their daughter's heads or on their own persons, which is apt to turn English stomachs in Naples or Lisbon. (Martineau 1852: 84–5)

Martineau's observations on Irish bogs reveal her concern for bettering Irish society. The bogs, she feels, represent an enormous economic asset that could transform the country's fortunes, if only they were speedily reclaimed for agricultural use: 'if it were probable that the substance which occupies nearly 3,000,000 of acres of the surface of Ireland could be turned into wealth, the fact would be of such incalculable importance to the whole people – and to our whole empire – that no degree of earnestness could be ridiculous or misplaced' (Martineau 1852: 78).

Although Martineau demonstrates in her writings a great eye for empirical detail, she goes beyond mere description by attempting to explain why things are as they are in Ireland. In her account of Galway, for example, she attempts to explain the lowly position of the city, in terms of 'the absence of a middle class of society' (Martineau 1852: 89). Commenting on class location in the city, she observes that two groups make up the aristocracy – old families, on the one hand, and college professors and officials, on the other (Martineau 1852: 89) – with a missing population in between. It is this absence of a stable middle class that Martineau feels prevents the city, with many infrastructural advantages such as transport links, from realising its potential as an economic hub.

MARTINEAU'S IRISH CIVIL REFORM PROGRAMME

Schooling, religious belief and practice, family inheritance, the subdivision of land, tenant–landlord relations, absentee landlordism, and agrarian violence in nineteenth-century Ireland, were all topics that attracted Martineau's interest and sociological comment and constituted her empirical concerns. But she was as much interested in changing the way people organised their everyday lives as in understanding them; and, as a way out of Ireland's economic ills, she comes down, in the final analysis, to endorsing education and capital development as viable solutions to Ireland's miseries and as key to reconfiguring Anglo-Irish relationships. The emphasis on education was understandable given that the ability to read and write was crucial to participation in the newly emerging modern world (Bourke 1999). But not everyone could take advantage of education and Martineau endorses emigration as a safety valve for a population whose needs ran ahead of its resources – 'the clearance of the land by a method which secures the maintenance of the inhabitants seems to us a very great good' (Martineau 1852: 205) – allowing those that remain behind to sustain a livelihood that they would not be able to do otherwise, thus stabilising social and economic relations.

She tells us 'of the Irishman's passion for land' as being explainable in terms of the symbolic meaning of land as a source of 'power, independence, and dignity' (Martineau 1852: 217). But Martineau sees this as a constraint on the country's ability to modernise and prosper. For her, this preoccupation with land led to 'habits of slovenly cultivation, of dependence on the potato, and of consequent idleness' (Martineau 1852: 216), all traits that did not fit well with a modernising agenda. For this reason, Martineau advocated a more rational organisation of economic life; Ireland's economy more than its politics being her key concern, centred around 'regular and punctual labour' and greater 'observance of hours and rules' (Martineau 1852: 217). In this view, Ireland stands at a critical switch point in her economic trajectory – one road leading to modernisation through agricultural improvement, the other to a pastoral society of continued stagnation and decline. In this view, the world of oral culture, of encapsulating knowledge about geography, moral codes, and sources of danger in story and myth, is viewed as backward and regressive, standing in stark contrast to the orderly world represented by censuses, maps, and written records.[7]

This analysis of Ireland's situation might be interpreted by some scholars as representing a crude caricature of the Irish as lazy and feckless and incapable of showing any signs of industry and commerce or of a capacity to govern themselves. But Martineau is full of praise for the Irish character, reminding us of its globally recognised 'fine qualities'. Towards the end of her letters she offers an extended and highly complimentary assessment of the Irish people:

there is nothing the matter with the original structure of the country. The land is good enough: the sea is fruitful enough . . . there is nothing the matter with the country. And there is nothing the matter with the men in it . . . employ them at task-work – at secure work and they soon show themselves as industrious as anybody. (Martineau 1852: 213–14)

But she singles out the lack of respect for law and truthfulness, thrown into sharp relief in the country's court system, as a major vice of the people and as 'the natural product of the fear and hatred in which the people have lived for centuries, with such a priesthood as theirs for their moral guides' (Martineau 1852: 214). This is a good example of Martineau's curious tendency (a Martineaunian 'set piece' perhaps), evident at different points in her writings, to lavish praise on the subjects of her analysis and, almost in the same breath, to put forward a very strong critique.

CONCLUSION

Through her wide-ranging and discerning writings, Harriet Martineau offers the reader a rare sociological and important insight into Irish society and culture. The author's objective of carrying out a 'good study of the Paddies' (Martineau 1852: 2) is indeed realised. Crucially, her work bears on pre- as well as post-famine Ireland and for this reason we get a unique 'before' and 'after' account of what it was like to live in Ireland during these two important periods in nineteenth-century Irish history. She feels this event is assured a place in Irish collective memory by reminding us that 'the people cannot be expected to forget what they have seen in ghastly years just over' (Martineau 1852: 213). Of all the issues that Martineau engages with, it is perhaps the land question that looms the largest, which, she claims, helps to explain certain features of the Irish character, the chief ones being economy with the truth, a tendency towards idleness, potato dependency, and poor agricultural techniques. Though at times this comes close to a 'nothing-good-can-come-out-of-the-Irish' position common among foreign observers imbued with the myth of Ireland (Ryan 1965: 77), Martineau exhorts the Irish people to turn to the modern world – associated with such things as waged labour – to lift them out of their current impoverished social condition.

Though here not expressly comparative, Martineau's earlier work on America provided a comparative and international frame of reference for her Irish writings. She sometimes mentions, for example, and draws a comparison between the conditions of the Irish landed poor and indentured black slaves in America. But she is struck by how much better things would

be if the landed poor took to waged 'work on some social labour which requires an observance of hours and rules' rather than the unwaged, unsystematic labour on the land.

Now, Martineau is increasingly mentioned in sociology theory textbooks and other writings as an early pioneer in the discipline and the first female sociologist (Hill 1989, 1991; Hill and Hoecker-Drysdale 2001; Hoecker-Drysdale 1992). In nineteenth-century studies too, her contribution is increasingly noticed and commented upon. Less well known and recognised is the important contribution she made to nineteenth-century Irish studies, though she was recently mentioned as an early pioneer of Irish sociology (Conway 2006; Share, Tovey and Corcoran, 2007: 6–7). We hope this chapter helps to introduce the person and her work to Irish sociologists and to a wider audience. While many may well take issue with her diagnosis of Ireland's ills as having to do largely with 'economical and religious causes' and her marginalisation of a sharp political analysis, she is no doubt eloquent and provocative in putting forward her analysis. Towards the end of her work, her description of Ireland as a 'country which has begun to taste of peace and progress' was accurate in its thrust if not in its timing. More broadly, the text from the *Illustrations* and *Letters from Ireland,* the focus of this chapter, exemplify the general features of Martineaunian sociology: concern with everyday social life, direct empirical observation, a desire to make sociology socially useful, a strong commitment to bettering society, and independence of thought (Hill 2005) – all important traits with continuing relevance to and topicality in contemporary social science.

Notes

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1   It should be pointed out that Martineau's use of words such as barbarism and civilisation, and the word 'Paddy' to denote the Irish, suggest a colonial world view. Words like barbarism and Paddy were in common currency among nineteenth-century political elites and were frequently seized upon in descriptions of colonised subjects like the Irish, contrasting with the 'civilisation' of the colonial centre (de Nie 2004).

2   We owe this point to Eamonn Slater.

3   For an interesting biography of Dr John McHale, Catholic Archbishop of Tuam, see Andrews (2001).

4   The concept of moral entrepreneur comes from the work of Stanley Cohen (see Cohen 1980).

5   For a discussion of declining Catholic Church influence in Irish society from the nineteenth-century golden age of Irish Catholicism to the contemporary era, see Inglis's case study of the 'Kerry Babies' (2003).

6   Gibbons notes that the use by the Whiteboys of wakes and other social gatherings of ordinary people to recruit and organise pointed to the 'integration of rituals of resistance into the everyday rounds and folk customs of rural life' in nineteenth-century Ireland (Gibbons 1998: 41).

7   See William Smyth's monumental study, from the perspective of a cultural geographer, of how map-making was a key element of the English colonial programme (Smyth 2006).

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