

***“Criminals, Idiots, Women, & Minors”*: Victorian Writing by Women on Women, by Susan Hamilton. Second Edition. Ontario: Broadview Press, 2004. xxvii + 272. ISBN 1-55111-608-1. £12.99 (paper).**

Historians of the Victorian era are well acquainted with the influential role the mainstream commercial press played on the scope and tenor of public debates on political questions of the period. Likewise, feminist historians are equally aware that feminists at that time did not fare well in the mainstream press and that this gave rise to a separate specialist feminist press. Periodicals such as the *English Woman's Journal* (1858) and its successor the *Englishwoman's Review* (1865), the *Victoria Magazine* (1860), *Woman and Work* (1874), *The Woman's Gazette* (1875) and others have proven invaluable sources of contemporary feminist writings on debates on the Woman Question relating to women's employment, education and legal rights. Increasing numbers of these periodicals are indexed and available on microfilm in various research institutions. Less accessible, however, is women's contributions to the mainstream Victorian periodical press. Moreover, searching for this information amongst the overwhelming abundance of Victorian writings in the periodical press can be daunting.

With this in mind, Susan Hamilton has compiled *“Criminals, Idiots, Women, & Minors”*: *Victorian Writing by Women on Women*, titled after Frances Power Cobbe's 1868 article in *Fraser's Magazine*. Aimed primarily at the student of Victorian culture but of relevance to anyone working in the area of Victorian feminisms, Hamilton has collected essays on the status, place and concerns of Victorian women about their role in society. Deliberately including non-feminist Victorian women's voices in the debates, Hamilton's collection seeks to demonstrate how “the discussion in the mainstream press has a distinctive flavour that can only complement our understanding of the full range of Victorian feminisms articulated in the special periodicals.” This focus has the inevitable consequence that all of the writers included in the anthology are middle-class by birth and education. In acknowledging this, Hamilton comments “[t]heir writings do not in any way convey the complexity of all women's lives in Victorian England; but they can tell us a great deal about the specific investments that middle-class Victorian women had in the debate on women.”

Her main concern, as discussed in the Introduction, is to complement the sources more readily available in the specialist feminist periodicals. To this end, the central criterion for selection is that all the essays were originally published in the mainstream press rather than in the emerging feminist press. The authors' names will be familiar to feminist historians of the period: Anna Brownell Jameson, Harriet Martineau, Frances Power Cobbe, Eliza Lynn Linton, Margaret Oliphant, Helen Taylor, Millicent Garrett Fawcett and Mona Caird. Some of the selected essays will also be very familiar, particularly Eliza Lynn Linton's “The Girl of the Period” (1868) and “The Modern Revolt” (1870), Harriet Martineau's “Female Industry”

(1859), Frances Power Cobbe's "What Shall We Do With Our Old Maids?" (1862) and "Criminals, Idiots, Women And Minors" (1878), and Millicent Garrett Fawcett's "The Emancipation of Women" (1891). Brief informative biographical notes for each of the authors are complemented in this second revised edition with a useful Chronology and an additional essay by Frances Power Cobbe on "The Education of Women, and How it Would be Affected by University Examinations" (1862).

Does the collection succeed in reflecting what the Editor calls "the diverse, often contradictory" nature of Victorian feminism? The diversity of Victorian feminism is certainly evident in the careful selection of writings on working conditions for working-class women, the position of wives generally and the issue of married women's property rights, so-called "redundant" women, education, women's legal status and countering the opponents of women's rights. Also included are writings from noted detractors of the cause of women's rights Eliza Lynn Linton and Margaret Oliphant. Their views clearly illustrate the contradictory nature of positions within debates on the Woman Question. But Hamilton's claim that inclusion of non-feminist voices in the debates on the Woman Question can complement our understanding of the full range of Victorian feminisms is curious. Is she suggesting that these non-feminist, and indeed overtly anti-feminist voices are part of "the full range of Victorian feminism"? Hamilton's expressed aim is to attempt to shift the reader away from the accepted notion of Victorian feminism as relatively homogenous and consistent. This elision of Victorian feminism with writings by Victorian women about women sits uncomfortably and, in the absence of elaboration on these fundamental conceptualisations, Hamilton's point here is somewhat obscured.

A second question is whether this volume illustrates and supports the claim that there is a "distinct flavour" to discussions of the Woman Question in the mainstream periodicals. This is a difficult call. The tone in some of the pieces does present as quieter and less "strident" than some of that encountered in the dedicated feminist periodicals which could denote a strategic toning down effect. Distinctions in the tone and style of feminist writings have been identified between British and American writings on the Woman Question but Hamilton's collection is comprised only of British writers. If read chronologically, some development of ideas can be identified. Taken on its own, however, it is difficult to obtain any convincing distinctness of flavour that may have existed in the mainstream periodical press from reading this collection.

Issues of distinctiveness and conceptual definitions aside, this is a welcome collection of primary source documents that demonstrates clearly the diverse positions Victorian women held on the Woman Question.

**Jenny Coleman**

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