



***Contested Liberalisms: Martineau, Dickens and the Victorian Press,***  
By Iain Crawford.

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At its heart, *Contested Liberalisms* has a relatively simple thesis: despite their shared commitment to social reform, and the role the press could play in this, Harriet Martineau and Charles Dickens exemplify “fundamentally incompatible” (1) versions of what it meant to be a liberal journalist in mid-Victorian England. Crawford’s thesis starts from their famous 1855-56 quarrel over the proposed Factory Act. This was a quarrel whose causes have largely been couched in the terms employed by Fielding and Smith in their influential “Hard Times and the Factory Act” (1970), as one in which Martineau represented “the inhuman school of political economy”, as distinct from Dickens’s “deep concern both for the individual and for the quality of working-class-life” (12). The great strength of *Contested Liberalisms* is that it reveals a much more complicated and historically nuanced picture of their differences.

Crawford develops this picture in two ways. The first of these, and the major focus of the book, is to locate their conflict in the mid-1850s as part of a much longer and wider set of arguments about the role of the press in relation to social reform and what might constitute a liberal society, from the 1830s through to the 1860s. Second, and related to this, he is concerned with the distinct ways in which their projects as authoritative “liberal” writers and journalists feed into their attempts to incorporate working class readers into a liberal society. In this context, Martineau’s and Dickens’s experiences of America and the American press in the late 1830s and early 1840s is given particular weight as a key moment in the longer story because, as Crawford notes, they both “visited America after the material, economic and political conditions necessary for the creation of a mass-market press in the United States had come into being” (120), conditions which were not to develop in the United Kingdom for another two decades. Whereas Martineau “saw the cause of liberal progress as inextricably transatlantic”, Dickens “turns away” from America and “lays the foundation of a position of support for state-maintained political order that he would maintain throughout the remainder of his career” (140).

The differences between Martineau’s and Dickens’s accounts of the press “as an essential agent of social progress” (22) are explored through various issues that recur throughout the decades covered by the book. The most important of these, and the two I will touch on here, are their conceptions of (a) history; and (b) the place of women as agents of progress.

Martineau’s commitment to “the master narrative of historical progress encoded in stadial theory” (18), a theory of sequential stages developed by Adam Smith and central to much of the thinking of the Scottish Enlightenment, is well known. Crawford adds a new dimension to this account of Martineau by showing how her reading of Schiller enabled her to fix on “public discourse” (31) (potentially manifested in the press) as the means by which Smith’s notion of a “community of sentiment” could be embodied (33). For Martineau, the press

became the vehicle for realising those liberal ideals of individual freedom and social unity that characterised the next stage of stadial progress, and Crawford reads her positive accounts of the press in *Society in America* (1838) as exemplifying this view of history. By contrast, Dickens's view of history was much less optimistic and was to become "increasingly sceptical" (19) in the 1850s and '60s. Unlike Martineau, "Dickens returned home disillusioned with the young democracy, scathing in his assessment of its prospects and deeply ambivalent about its newspapers" (95), an argument Crawford develops through careful readings of both *American Notes* (1842) and *Martin Chuzzlewit* (1842-44). If the United States represented a vision of modern history unfolding, its saturation with the ideology of individualism brought to the surface the differences between Martineau's and Dickens's views on the state as an agent of historical change.

During her visit to the United States, Martineau not only embraced the abolitionist cause, but also spent considerable time examining the position of women within American culture, arguing in *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1837-38) that "the standing of women is the most revealing indicator of a society" (56). Focusing on her belief in "the value of women's engagement in work beyond the home as an essential condition for the advance of a liberal society" (211), Crawford offers a valuable analysis of the way Martineau's responses to the condition of American women "significantly complicate the stadial optimism she had recorded about the continent itself and the economic advances being created through capitalist expansion" (57). On the one hand, the Lowell factories offered practical evidence of the advancement of women through employment, but on the other, the vast bulk of women Martineau encountered, exemplified what Crawford terms "republican motherhood", a role congruent with Dickens's "sentimental definition of female lives as framed by their domestic roles and contained within familial structures" (109). For Crawford, Martineau's aspiration for women to have full liberal agency, as distinct from Dickens's "marginalising of female agency" (189), illustrates the former's fuller and more inclusive version of liberalism. He goes on to demonstrate how this fundamental difference shaped their liberalisms in the 1850s and '60s, a period when Martineau optimistically noted a shift starting to occur in the social positioning of women in Britain.

Crawford's analysis of the fundamental differences between Martineau and Dickens over their conceptions of history and attitudes to women, extends to his account of their views on the role of journalism in an emerging mass culture, and especially how they attempted to position themselves as authoritative journalistic voices.

Here, however, the differences are less clear-cut. Both, for example, were deeply troubled by the tyranny of public opinion. Even so, Crawford's unstated but underlying preference for Martineau's brand of liberalism is apparent. Her analysis of the American press, for example, is "more complex and nuanced than those of her compatriots", including Dickens (72). With new forms of popular journalism being taken up by British working-class radicals in the 1840s and 1850s, Crawford draws attention to the ways in which Martineau and Dickens both attempted to "find a vehicle that would reach a broad mass-market readership and advance the liberal project" (212). In the former's case, this involved working with Charles Knight to launch the *Weekly Volume* in 1844, an enterprise warmly greeted by Dickens. With the creation of *Household Words* in 1850, Dickens most fully realised "the power he could achieve through combining" fiction and journalism (173) in reaching readers across the classes. Lacking Dickens's flair as a novelist, however, Martineau came to doubt her own capacities, sensing "the hopelessness of operating on the minds of the working class in any degree as authors from their own order could do" (211). Despite their shared

commitment to this broad endeavour, Crawford sees it “foreshadow[ing] one of the key differences” (209) within their versions of liberalism, that over the place of women’s employment in working-class society.

In a book devoted to the “contested” nature of Martineau’s and Dickens’s liberalisms, Crawford’s case is both enlightening and largely convincing. The following quotation encapsulates his argument neatly: “allied with him in their shared broad commitment to the liberal project, she nevertheless struggled to reconcile the undeniable fact of his unmatched celebrity, his palpable ability to unite an extraordinary range of the population into a common readership and their fundamental differences over both the role of the state and the part to be played by women in advancing stadial progress” (201). It is an argument supported by meticulous and extensive archival evidence and a deep grasp of the historical particularity of that evidence, combined with a sensitivity to the developing issues and ideas as Crawford takes us from the early 1830s through to the early 1860s. The clarity of the book’s argument is helped by useful summaries of chapter sections which begin each chapter.

Apart from a couple of slight quibbles (I found the frequent use of locutions like “unnoticed in previous scholarship” unnecessary, and a few of the readings of primary documents used to support the argument a bit of a stretch), the only issue I have with this very fine book is its conception of the liberalism which is “contested” by Martineau and Dickens. Its focus on whether women should be regarded as full liberal agents is certainly apposite, but constructing the difference between Martineau’s and Dickens’s liberalism primarily as one between her belief in individual agency and his in the role of the state as an agent of change surely neglects many of the complex and variable attitudes and beliefs that comprised mid-century liberalism. The grounds of liberty and freedom, for example, and growth (as distinct from progress), might have fitted well into the kinds of contestation between this “curious dyad” (266). Moreover, while Crawford recognises their changing views in relation to state agency, his argument here seems at times to contradict itself. Thus despite her long-standing commitment to *laissez faire* individualism, Martineau is portrayed as having “growing confidence in the ability of the state to enact liberal progress” (234) in the early 1850s, yet just a short time later when she splits with Dickens over the Factory Act, she reiterates “the foundational liberal principle that the capacity of the state to effect such cultural and social change was neither significant nor indeed desirable” (280). It would have been useful had Crawford drawn out more clearly why Martineau was able to hold these apparently contradictory positions at much the same time. Despite these minor caveats, *Contested Liberalisms* offers a richly detailed account of the tensions within the Victorian liberal press from the 1830s to the 1860s, and provides much food for thought for press historians as well as for scholars of Martineau and Dickens.

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