2005

Harriet Martineau’s Ambleside as A Sociological Laboratory

Michael R. Hill
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, michaelhilltemporary1@yahoo.com

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub

Part of the Family, Life Course, and Society Commons, and the Social Psychology and Interaction Commons

Hill, Michael R., "Harriet Martineau's Ambleside as A Sociological Laboratory" (2005). Sociology Department, Faculty Publications. 349.
http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/sociologyfacpub/349

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Sociology, Department of at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in Sociology Department, Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.
Harriet Martineau’s Ambleside as A Sociological Laboratory

Michael R. Hill

Harriet Martineau was a pioneering experimental sociologist in the best sense. In a wide variety of social venues, Martineau undertook constructive, consequential, and innovative actions specifically designed to explore and demonstrate social capacities and possibilities, often in concert with her Lake District neighbors. For three decades, from 1846 to her death in 1876, Ambleside witnessed the outcomes of numerous investigations and projects that Martineau championed. This presentation identifies several of Martineau’s sociological experiments.

The Chicago sociologists, Robert Park and Ernest Burgess, gained notoriety among sociologists by congratulating themselves for having conceptualized “the city as a laboratory.” Mary Jo Deegan has shown, however, that the “laboratory” concept was widespread at Chicago well prior to the time that Park and Burgess promulgated their abstracted version of “laboratory” imagery. Important sociological corollaries to “the laboratory” as a scientific motif are the concepts of “mapping,” “hypothesis,” and “experiment,” and here too the precedence of *Hull-House Maps and Papers* (1895), George Herbert Mead’s 1899 concept of “the working hypothesis,” and Frances A. Kellor’s *Experimental Sociology*, published in 1901, exemplify an earlier, more humane approach to systematic sociological thought at Chicago. Jane Addams and the Hull-House sociologists lamented the abstracted “laboratory” perspective adopted by the Park and Burgess school of Chicago sociology. Addams, for example, conceptualized her visitors to Hull-House as “neighbors,” never as guinea pigs, lab rats or impersonal others. In Harriet Martineau’s projects and investigations, Martineau was herself often the subject of her own experiments, biographically and experientially. And, Martineau’s neighbors and household members were much more co-participants than subjects in Martineau’s experiments – and Martineau always took each person’s welfare very much to heart. All together, Martineau’s many projects provide instructive examples of lived, experiential, co-operative approaches to sociological experiment and inquiry. And, I think it fair to assert, that in the conduct of these experiments, Ambleside served as Harriet Martineau’s primary sociological laboratory – in the best progressive and humane sense.

Martineau’s experiential and practical experiments at Ambleside included:

– Active professional life as an independent writer in several genres.
– Active intellectual life as a professed non-believer.
– Organization and maintenance of a full-fledged rural household.
– Design and construction of her working home, The Knoll.
– Organization and implementation of a scheme to build homes for working people.
– Organization and delivery of several series of lectures for working people, including techniques for speech-making as a deaf person.
– Extensive experiential/participant observation and historical/topographical research in the Lake District.

Throughout these experiments, Martineau proceed logically and carefully, embracing – rather than rejecting – research into social questions in which she had deep personal interest. She understood her intellectual and practical investigations as socially purposeful activities and each reflected her abiding faith in the possibility of human social improvement.
SELECTED REFERENCES


New cottages for Ambleside workers, constructed by Martineau’s Building Society