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# Society in America

VOLUME 1

HARRIET MARTINEAU



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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge New York Melbourne Madrid Cape Town Singapore São Paulo Delhi

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781108003629](http://www.cambridge.org/9781108003629)

© in this compilation Cambridge University Press 2009

This edition first published 1837

This digitally printed version 2009

ISBN 978-1-108-00362-9

This book reproduces the text of the original edition. The content and language reflect the beliefs, practices and terminology of their time, and have not been updated.

# SOCIETY IN AMERICA

BY

HARRIET MARTINEAU,

AUTHOR OF "ILLUSTRATIONS OF POLITICAL ECONOMY."

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LONDON  
SAUNDERS AND OTLEY, CONDUIT STREET.  
1837.

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## INTRODUCTION.

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“ To seize a character, even that of one man, in its life and secret mechanism, requires a philosopher ; to delineate it with truth and impressiveness is work for a poet. How then shall one or two sleek clerical tutors, with here and there a tedium-stricken esquire, or speculative half-pay captain, give us views on such a subject ? How shall a man, to whom all characters of individual men are like sealed books, of which he sees only the title and the covers, decipher from his four-wheeled vehicle, and depict to us, the character of a nation ? He courageously depicts his own optical delusions ; notes this to be incomprehensible, that other to be insignificant ; much to be good, much to be bad, and most of all indifferent ; and so, with a few flowing strokes, completes a picture, which, though it may not resemble any possible object, his countrymen are to take for a national portrait. Nor is the



fraud so readily detected: for the character of a people has such a complexity of aspect, that even the honest observer knows not always, not perhaps after long inspection, what to determine regarding it. From his, only accidental, point of view, the figure stands before him like the tracings on veined marble,—a mass of mere random lines, and tints, and entangled strokes, out of which a lively fancy may shape almost *any* image. But the image he brings with him is always the readiest; this is tried; it answers as well as another; and a second voucher now testifies its correctness. Thus each, in confident tones, though it be with a secret misgiving, repeats his precursor; the hundred-times-repeated comes in the end to be believed; the foreign nation is now once for all understood, decided on, and registered accordingly; and duncce the thousandth writes of it like duncce the first.”—*Edinburgh Review*, No. xlvi. p. 309.

THIS passage cannot but strike upon the heart of any traveller who meditates giving to the world an account of the foreign country he has visited. It is the mirror held up before his face; and he inevitably feels himself, for the moment, “duncce the thousandth.” For my own part, I felt the truth contained in this picture so strongly, before I was acquainted with the passage itself, that I had again and again put away the idea of saying one word in print on the condition of society in the United States. Whenever I encountered half-

a-dozen irreconcilable, but respectable opinions on a single point of political doctrine; whenever half-a-dozen fair-seeming versions of a single fact were offered to me; whenever the glow of pleasure at obtaining, by some trivial accident, a piece of important knowledge passed into a throb of pain at the thought of how much must remain concealed where a casual glimpse disclosed so much; whenever I felt how I, with my pittance of knowledge and amidst my glimmerings of conviction, was at the mercy of unmanageable circumstances, wafted now here and now there, by the currents of opinion, like one surveying a continent from a balloon, with only starlight above him,—I was tempted to decline the task of generalising at all from what I saw and heard. In the intervals, however, I felt that this would be wrong. Men will never arrive at a knowledge of each other, if those who have the opportunity of foreign observation refuse to relate what they think they have learned; or even to lay before others the materials from which they themselves hesitate to construct a theory, or draw large conclusions.

In seeking for methods by which I might communicate what I have observed in my travels, without offering any pretension to teach the Eng-

lish, or judge the Americans, two expedients occurred to me; both of which I have adopted. One is, to compare the existing state of society in America with the principles on which it is professedly founded; thus testing Institutions, Morals, and Manners by an indisputable, instead of an arbitrary standard, and securing to myself the same point of view with my readers of both nations.

In working according to this method, my principal dangers are two. I am in danger of not fully apprehending the principles on which society in the United States is founded; and of erring in the application to these of the facts which came under my notice. In the last respect, I am utterly hopeless of my own accuracy. It is in the highest degree improbable that my scanty gleanings in the wide field of American society should present a precisely fair sample of the whole. I can only explain that I have spared no pains to discover the truth, in both divisions of my task; and invite correction, in all errors of fact. This I earnestly do; holding myself, of course, an equal judge with others on matters of opinion.

My readers, on their part, will bear in mind that, in showing discrepancies between an actual condition and a pure and noble theory of

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society, I am not finding fault with the Americans, as for falling behind the English, or the French, or any other nation. I decline the office of censor altogether. I dare not undertake it. Nor will my readers, I trust, regard the subject otherwise than as a compound of philosophy and fact. If we can all, for once, allay our personal feelings, dismiss our too great regard to mutual opinion, and put praise and blame as nearly as possible out of the question, more that is advantageous to us may perhaps be learned than by any invidious comparisons and proud judgments that were ever instituted and pronounced.

The other method by which I propose to lessen my own responsibility, is to enable my readers to judge for themselves, better than I can for them, what my testimony is worth. For this purpose, I offer a brief account of my travels, with dates in full; and a report of the principal means I enjoyed of obtaining a knowledge of the country.

At the close of a long work which I completed in 1834, it was thought desirable that I should travel for two years. I determined to go to the United States, chiefly because I felt a strong curiosity to witness the actual working of republican institutions; and partly because the circumstance

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of the language being the same as my own is very important to one who, like myself, is too deaf to enjoy anything like an average opportunity of obtaining correct knowledge, where intercourse is carried on in a foreign language. I went with a mind, I believe, as nearly as possible unprejudiced about America, with a strong disposition to admire democratic institutions, but an entire ignorance how far the people of the United States lived up to, or fell below, their own theory. I had read whatever I could lay hold of that had been written about them; but was unable to satisfy myself that, after all, I understood anything whatever of their condition. As to knowledge of them, my mind was nearly a blank: as to opinion of their state, I did not carry the germ of one.

I landed at New York on the 19th of September, 1834: paid a short visit the next week to Paterson, in New Jersey, to see the cotton factories there, and the falls of the Passaic; and passed through New York again on my way to stay with some friends on the banks of the Hudson, and at Stockbridge, Massachusetts. On the 6th of October, I joined some companions at Albany, with whom I travelled through the State of New York, seeing Trenton Falls, Auburn, and Buffalo, to the Falls

of Niagara. Here I remained nearly a week; then, after spending a few days at Buffalo, I embarked on Lake Erie, landing in the back of Pennsylvania, and travelling down through Meadville to Pittsburgh, spending a few days at each place. Then, over the Alleghanies to Northumberland, on the fork of the Susquehanna, the abode of Priestley after his exile, and his burial place. I arrived at Northumberland on the 11th of October, and left it, after visiting some villages in the neighbourhood, on the 17th, for Philadelphia, where I remained nearly six weeks, having very extensive intercourses with its various society. My stay at Baltimore was three weeks, and at Washington five. Congress was at that time in session, and I enjoyed peculiar opportunities of witnessing the proceedings of the Supreme Court and both houses of Congress. I was acquainted with almost every eminent senator and representative, both on the administration and opposition sides; and was on friendly and intimate terms with some of the judges of the Supreme Court. I enjoyed the hospitality of the President, and of several of the heads of departments: and was, like everybody else, in society from morning till night of every day; as the custom is at Washington. One

day was devoted to a visit to Mount Vernon, the abode and burial-place of Washington.

On the 18th of February I arrived at Montpelier, the seat of Mr. and Mrs. Madison, with whom I spent two days, which were wholly occupied with rapid conversation; Mr. Madison's share of which, various and beautiful to a remarkable degree, will never be forgotten by me. His clear reports of the principles and history of the Constitution of the United States, his insight into the condition, his speculations on the prospects of nations, his wise playfulness, his placid contemplation of present affairs, his abundant household anecdotes of Washington, Franklin, and Jefferson, were incalculably valuable and exceedingly delightful to me.

The intercourse which I had with Chief Justice Marshall was of the same character, though not nearly so copious. Nothing in either delighted me more than their hearty admiration of each other, notwithstanding some wide differences in their political views. They are both gone; and I now deeply feel what a privilege it is to have known them.

From Mr. Madison's I proceeded to Charlottesville, and passed two days amidst the hospitalities of the Professors of Jefferson's University, and their

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families. I was astonished to learn that this institution had never before been visited by a British traveller. I can only be sorry for British travellers who have missed the pleasure. A few days more were given to Richmond, where the Virginia legislature was in session; and then ensued a long wintry journey through North and South Carolina to Charleston, occupying from the 2nd to the 11th of March. The hospitalities of Charleston are renowned; and I enjoyed them in their perfection for a fortnight; and then a renewal of the same kind of pleasures at Columbia, South Carolina, for ten days. I traversed the southern States, staying three days at Augusta, Georgia, and nearly a fortnight in and near Montgomery, Alabama; descending next the Alabama river to Mobile. After a short stay there, and a residence of ten days at New Orleans, I went up the Mississippi and Ohio to the mouth of the Cumberland river, which I ascended to Nashville, Tennessee. I visited the Mammoth Cave in Kentucky, and spent three weeks at Lexington. I descended the Ohio to Cincinnati; and after staying there ten days, ascended the river again, landing in Virginia, visiting the Hawk's Nest, Sulphur Springs, Natural Bridge, and Weyer's Cave, arriving at New



York again on the 14th of July, 1835. The autumn was spent among the villages and smaller towns of Massachusetts, in a visit to Dr. Channing in Rhode Island, and in an excursion to the mountains of New Hampshire and Vermont. The winter was passed in Boston, with the exception of a trip to Plymouth, for "Forefather's Day." In the Spring I spent seven weeks in New York; and a month in a farmhouse at Stockbridge, Massachusetts; making an excursion, meanwhile, to Saratoga and Lake George. My last journey was with a party of friends, far into the west, visiting Niagara again, proceeding by Lake Erie to Detroit, and across the territory of Michigan. We swept round the southern extremity of Lake Michigan to Chicago: went a long day's journey down into the prairies, back to Chicago, and by the Lakes Michigan, Huron, and St. Clair to Detroit, visiting Mackinaw by the way. We landed from Lake Erie at Cleveland, Ohio, on the 13th of July; and travelled through the interior of Ohio till we joined the river at Beaver. We visited Rapp's Settlement at Economy, on the Ohio, and returned to New York from Pittsburgh, by the canal route through Pennsylvania, and the railroad over the Alleghanies. I sailed from New York for England on the 1st of August, 1836, having then been absent just two years.

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In the course of this tour, I visited almost every kind of institution. The prisons of Auburn, Philadelphia, and Nashville: the insane and other hospitals of almost every considerable place: the literary and scientific institutions; the factories of the north; the plantations of the south; the farms of the west. I lived in houses which might be called palaces, in log-houses, and in a farm-house. I travelled much in wagons, as well as stages; also on horse-back, and in some of the best and worst of steam-boats. I saw weddings, and christenings; the gatherings of the richer at watering places, and of the humbler at country festivals. I was present at orations, at land sales, and in the slave market. I was in frequent attendance on the Supreme Court and the Senate; and witnessed some of the proceedings of state legislatures. Above all, I was received into the bosom of many families, not as a stranger, but as a daughter or a sister. I am qualified, if any one is, to testify to the virtues and the peace of the homes of the United States; and let it not be thought a breach of confidence, if I should be found occasionally to have spoken of these out of the fulness of my heart.

It would be nearly impossible to relate whom I knew, during my travels. Nearly every eminent

man in politics, science and literature, and almost every distinguished woman, would grace my list. I have respected and beloved friends of each political party; and of nearly every religious denomination; among slave-holders, colonisationists, and abolitionists; among farmers, lawyers, merchants, professors, and clergy. I travelled among several tribes of Indians; and spent months in the southern States, with negroes ever at my heels.

Such were my means of information. With regard to my power of making use of them, I have but a few words to say.

It has been frequently mentioned to me that my being a woman was one disadvantage; and my being previously heard of, another. In this I do not agree.

I am sure, I have seen much more of domestic life than could possibly have been exhibited to any gentleman travelling through the country. The nursery, the boudoir, the kitchen, are all excellent schools in which to learn the morals and manners of a people: and, as for public and professional affairs,—those may always gain full information upon such matters, who really feel an interest in them,—be they men or women. No people in the world can be more frank, confiding and affec-

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tionate, or more skilful and liberal in communicating information, than I have ever found the Americans to be. I never asked in vain; and I seldom had to ask at all; so carefully were my inquiries anticipated, and my aims so completely understood. I doubt whether a single fact that I wished to learn, or any doctrine that I desired to comprehend, was ever kept from me because I was a woman.

As for the other objection, I can only state my belief, that my friends and I found personal acquaintance so much pleasanter than any previous knowledge by hearsay, that we always forgot that we had heard of each other before. It would be preposterous to suppose that, received as I was into intimate confidence, any false appearances could be kept up on account of any preconceptions that could have been entertained of me.

I laboured under only one peculiar disadvantage, that I am aware of; but that one is incalculable. I mean my deafness. This does not endanger the accuracy of my information, I believe, as far as it goes; because I carry a trumpet of remarkable fidelity; an instrument, moreover, which seems to exert some winning power, by which I gain more in *tête-à-têtes* than is given to people who hear gene-

ral conversation. Probably its charm consists in the new feeling which it imparts of ease and privacy in conversing with a deaf person. However this may be, I can hardly imagine fuller revelations to be made in household intercourse than my trumpet brought to me. But I am aware that there is no estimating the loss, in a foreign country, from not hearing the casual conversation of all kinds of people, in the streets, stages, hotels, &c. I am aware that the lights which are thus gathered up by the traveller for himself are often far more valuable than the most elaborate accounts of things offered to him with an express design. This was my peculiar disadvantage. It could not be helped: and it cannot be explained away. I mention it, that the value of my testimony may be lowered according to the supposed worth of this circumstance.

Much is often said about the delicacy to be observed, in the act of revealing the history of one's travels, towards the hosts and other friends of the traveller, who have reposed confidence in him. The rule seems to me a very plain one, which reconciles truth, honour and utility. My rule is to speak of the public acts of public persons, precisely as if I had known them only in their public character.

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This may be sometimes difficult, and sometimes painful, to the writer ; but it leaves no just cause of complaint to any one else. Moreover, I hold it allowable and necessary to make use of opinions and facts offered in fire-side confidence, as long as no clue is afforded by which they may be traced back to any particular fire-side. If any of my American friends should find in this book traces of old conversations and incidents, let them keep their own counsel, and be assured that the conversation and facts remain private between them and me. Thus far, all is safe ; and further than this, no honourable person would wish to go.

This is not the place in which to speak of my obligations or of my friendships. Those who know best what I have in my heart to say meet me here under a new relation. In these pages, we meet as writer and readers. I would only entreat them to bear this distinction in mind, and not to measure my attachment to themselves by anything this book may contain about their country and their nation. The bond which unites us bears no relation to clime, birth-place, or institutions. In as far as our friendship is faithful, we are fellow-citizens of another and a better country than theirs or mine.