

A collection of Unitarian Women 18 August 2013, Barbara Clifford

Throughout our Unitarian history, our liberal communities have produced men and women who have had a vision of a better world and who fought against injustice in many ways. Some have smuggled slaves to freedom, some have marched and demonstrated, some have written books or essays, some have even written songs about justice. I start today with some fond memories connected with one particular song, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, written by the Unitarian, Julia Ward Howe. She was an abolitionist, born in America in 1819. She became one of the prominent women of her time, a popular lecturer and suffrage leader. Women, in spite of many barriers to action and much prejudice, were leaders in the move to abolish slavery.

So, why do I have such fond memories of this hymn? When John and I went to India on our honeymoon we first visited the tourist places - the Taj Mahal, The Red Fort, Bangalore, and the Palace at Mysore. We then visited our partner church in Madras and after this went to see the Unitarians in the Khasi Hills in northeast India. While with the Khasi Unitarians our host was Carleywell Lyngdoh, a small Indian man with a large smile. We attended their annual general meeting and John was one of the guest preachers, following which we made a tour of several of their churches and schools. We found that another British Unitarian minister was there at the same time - Rev Dick Boeke. On the tour, at every meeting and service, each visitor was expected to bring greetings from abroad and give a short talk. Whenever Dick Boeke spoke, he talked about Julia Ward Howe and her work for the abolition of slavery, finishing by singing a rousing rendition of her Battle Hymn of the Republic, everyone being encouraged to join in the chorus: Glory, Glory, Halleluja. By the end of the tour he had a backing group comprising John, myself, and even Carleywell.

In my sermon today I'll be talking about two Unitarian women who have helped to change and reform our world. Throughout the ages, and even today, it has always been hard for women to succeed in a male dominated society. Women were expected to be subservient to their fathers and were little more than property to be passed on to some man for them to become dutiful wives and mothers to ensure the next generation. Marriage was not an institution that respected women as loving partners in a relationship, but a political or financial institution in which women's wishes were at the bottom of the priorities.

Despite this, a small number of women defied social conventions and even the law, struggling to make something of themselves and in the process improve the world. Our Unitarian religion is one where respect for individuals spilled over to enabling women to become advocates for social reform, education, the abolition of slavery, penal and hospital reform, female suffrage, and latterly even feminism. They were poets, scholars, authors, and even at times broke the boundaries of professional work denied to women. Unitarian women were among the first to become doctors and ministers, often against strong prejudice even from within the Unitarian community.

We hear about Unitarian ministers in the past and the work these men did to make our world a better place, but we don't always hear about the women in their households - wives, sisters, daughters. A number of famous women have been brought up in Unitarian households, influenced by the relative liberality of this environment. So most of you

will have heard of Rev James Martineau. He was a minister and educator, born in Norwich in 1805 who lived virtually the whole of the century, dying in 1900. He was very influential inside and outside of the Unitarian movement through his writings and as Principle of Manchester New College.

But today we focus on his sister, Harriet Martineau, born in 1802, an age where few opportunities for women to do significant work presented themselves. She realised early on that, quote “I want to be doing something with the pen, since no other areas of action in politics are in woman's powers” end of quote. This quote is from her book, “*How to observe morals and manners*”, written in 1838.

Harriet came from a wealthy and well educated background. Her extensive family boasted a long line of surgeons. She was taught Latin, French, writing, and arithmetic by her older siblings and she and her sister were sent to a private school for two years where they received the same education as the boys. The Martineau's owned a textile manufacturing company and a wine import business.

In spite of the advantages her wealthy and educated family provided, she had an unhappy childhood, nervous and often ill and with a difficult relationship with her mother. When she was 12 she suffered deafness, a condition that stayed with her for the rest of her life. She was sent to stay with an aunt in Bristol where she was inspired by the family's intellectual studies and influenced by the teachings of Rev Dr Lant Carpenter, a Unitarian minister in Exeter and Bristol. Her father died in 1826, following which the family business failed. To avoid poverty, she and her sisters were forced to earn their living. By this time Harriet was already writing and had started a career in writing. Frequent topics included Abolition of slavery and Women's Rights and she was recognised for her skill as a writer. She also wrote successful fiction. In addition to her burden of frequent ill health, she was unlucky in love, her engagement to Erasmus Darwin, the brother of Charles Darwin, broke down, although they remained in friendly contact. She never married.

She was a keen observer and is considered by many the first female sociologist. On returning from a trip to America, she wrote a book, *Society in America* in which she criticised the treatment of women in the United States. She advocated for education for women so they would have some prospect in life besides that of marriage. She translated and summarised the first French book on sociology and insisted that social research had to look at the whole environment of people's lives including key political, religious, and social institutions and the role of women.

I strongly believe that something good can come from bad experiences; and the life of Harriet Martineau illustrates this. In spite of poor health for much of her life, she used the intellectual opportunities of her environment to make a meaningful life. She learnt a lot from her contact with Rev Lant Carpenter, who provided her with a good foundation and inspired her dedication to the Unitarian value of personal freedom - leading her to write extensively on social and political affairs in support of freedom and dignity. Her deafness led her to write about disabilities; the impact of the change in family fortunes and breakup of her relationship gave her motivation and strength to persevere so that when she died in 1874 she was a self-sufficient and quite wealthy lady. Charles Darwin described a conversation with her: “She was very agreeable and managed to talk on a most wonderful number of subjects, considering the limited time. I was astonished to find how little ugly she is, but ... she is overwhelmed with her own projects, her own thoughts and own abilities.”

Harriet must have known her contemporary, Mary Carpenter, although I've not discovered anything that links the two women except Mary's father, Rev Lant Carpenter, minister of Lewins Mead Unitarian Chapel in Bristol. Lant Carpenter had contact with a radical Hindu movement, the Brahma Samaj, that sent leaders to Bristol in 1830 and this contact influenced Mary's thinking. She met Raja Rammohun Roy in Bristol before he died there of meningitis. Mary was born in 1807 and she died in 1877, almost the same life period as Harriet. By the time Mary was 20 she had taught in her father's school and had been a governess on the Isle of Wight. Then she and her mother opened a small school for girls. Very aware of the poverty in Bristol, she founded a Working and Visiting Society in 1835 and by 1846 had opened a school in a Bristol slum, helping to start the "ragged school" movement. This led to her focus on young offenders and her study of poverty and offending in other countries. In 1851 she published a book about reformatory schools that brought in financial support for her work and that year she opened a mixed reformatory school and one for girls only a couple years later. She had great influence through her work and writings and was one of the lobbyists that got the Youthful Offenders Act of 1854 passed as well as Industrial Schools Acts in 1857, 1861, and 1866. Her approach combined a genuine concern and love of children with an understanding that moral training must run in parallel with learning a trade - in other words work was a means to an end, not an end in itself. She recognised that patience was required because change in behaviour would not come about through force. She was ahead of her time in wishing to minimise corporal punishment and in recognising that self-respect was key to any reformatory system.

India was then part of the British Empire and in 1866 she finally followed up on contacts made in Bristol when she was a young woman and made the first of four trips there in 10 years, writing reports on the education and status of women there and on penal policy. Her visits to India and the various liberal religious people she contacted did not always go smoothly - she was considered very abrasive and full of herself. But she did important research on the status of women. She founded the National India Association in 1870, the purpose of which was to promote India in Britain. She was a great influence for a liberal approach to the social ills produced by poverty in Britain, India, the USA, and France.

These two 19th-century women were real powerhouses - exercising great influence at a time when women did not have a vote. It is interesting that neither woman married - marriage would in fact have given their husbands tremendous power over their activities and even their resources. They were also both described as "pushy", and Harriet as aloof, not surprising when they were competing with men in a man's world.

Women's issues over the years have been bound up with children's issues. Even in today's "modern" society, women are usually the main carers in families for both the young and the elderly. That these two British Unitarian women had such an effect on attitudes and practices has helped to shape where we are today.

I believe that although their Unitarian beliefs were important, it was their access to education that gave them the knowledge and skills they were able to use to address problems such as delinquency and poverty. Mary Carpenter was responsible for opening a "ragged school" in Bristol in 1846. Only this week I watched a television programme on such a school set up by Dr Bernardo in London, the emphasis to house orphaned and homeless children. During this period many women died during childbirth due to lack of medical knowledge and poverty. In the programme I watched, "Who do you think you

are?”, a well known actress was tracing her ancestors and came across records of three brothers being orphaned and taken into the poor house. The youngest was 4 years of age, very underweight and small for his years due to lack of food and nourishment. The three boys had been sent to Canada with thousands of other children by the Bernardo Society, hoping they would find foster parents who owned farms and they would work on them to earn a living. In some cases there was a positive ending when children did find security and happiness, but many others just found hard work and punishment, little more than legal slavery in return for the tremendous upheaval of transportation to another continent.

Mary and Harriet, on the other hand, saw poverty and determined that providing education and guidance to the children was the best course. Both of them worked and used their considerable skills to point up the need for change to the existing structures - educational and penal and social. Harriet concentrated more on freedom issues, Mary on personal growth issues, but both tried to bring their Unitarian understanding of human nature into practical effect.

And this is the thought I wish to put today: examples such as Mary and Harriet can provide inspiration for us. The impact of poverty, lack of education, and criminality are just as real today as they were 150 years ago. They did not sit back and say, “well, if I were a man I might be able to do something”; they used what skills and opportunities they DID have. As a congregation we may be small and limited to small steps, but there are things we can do to influence our world for the better if we are creative and determined to do something, which I believe as Unitarians we should do.

Amen