

However, these are minor infelicities in a book which offers – and delivers – much more than a brief review can encompass. Both Ashgate and the general editors of The Nineteenth Century Series are to be congratulated for this fine addition to the series.

Jock Macleod

***“More precious than rubies”*: Mary Taylor: friend of Charlotte Brontë, strong-minded woman, by Joan Bellamy. Beverley, Yorks: Highgate, 2002.**

I presume that this is, if not fully then largely, a self-published book, and one must ask why. The name Mary Taylor is well known not only to nineteenth-century and particularly Brontë scholars, but also to general readers who might have read one of the host of Brontë biographies or made the pilgrimage to Haworth. More pertinently perhaps, Australasian Victorianists have had a proprietorial interest in Taylor because of her fifteen-year residence in New Zealand, where she became a successful businesswoman. She and her cousin Ellen Taylor built a general store into a successful enterprise which was to survive Ellen's early death from consumption and Mary's eventual return to England, and which also provided her with the funds to build a house in Yorkshire and, together with her inheritance from her father, to be financially independent for the rest of her life. That assumption of independence (she looked upon it as her right), her intelligence, and her later significant journalism advocating education, the vote and increased opportunities generally for women should have guaranteed that she was not always considered merely as a footnote to the Brontës. Sadly, however, that appears to have been the case, because this is the first full-length biography of Taylor. Bellamy concludes that this comparative neglect was not only because of her personal forthrightness and unwillingness to court publicity, but also because she “was born too early to take advantage of opportunities for the higher education and intellectual life for which she was so clearly fitted, and after her return from New Zealand she took the decision to return to her birthplace and family, to a cultural and political environment which was narrow, conservative, and losing the dynamism of its earlier stages of development.” The biography is therefore long overdue and is fully worthy of the publicity resources of a large academic publisher; alas, I fear that without such resources it will not receive as wide a readership as it so obviously deserves. It is another important example of those studies of nineteenth-century women which remind us that there were many and varied exceptions to the stereotype of the mid-Victorian woman and the aesthetic, economic and political generalisations which support that stereotype.

Bellamy begins by situating the Taylor family firmly within the geographic and economic Yorkshire landscape, in what is now – after Terry Eagleton and then Juliet Barker – a familiar approach, firmly establishing a Brontë geography which was as much industrial as wild moorland. In her only novel *Miss Miles* (not published until 1890) Taylor too saw her native county and the textile town of “Repton” as being liminally suspended between the old and the new and exhibiting all the tensions that this state encourages. Bellamy goes on to examine the evidence for seeing the Taylors as the genesis of the Yorke family in *Shirley*, as a prelude to her argument that Mary Taylor was genetically programmed to exhibit – and it is almost a cliché – that rugged Yorkshire individualism which manifested itself in religious dissent and radical politics.

Charlotte Brontë is a major figure in the first part of this study as the central focus of the friendship of the three young women – Charlotte, Ellen Nussey and Mary – who first met at Roe Head School and who continued to exchange letters for many years. Ellen Nussey was Gaskell’s chief source of information about Charlotte for the biography and was widely criticised for the very clear bias which Gaskell carried through to her *Life*. By contrast Mary Taylor always refused to engage in the nineteenth-century brush-with-fame game, even though she had probably seen a very different and more radical side of Charlotte than Ellen ever had. Some of the most poignant letters are those she wrote to Gaskell after the publication of the *Life* in which she angrily despaired of the complacency of critics in their acceptance of Charlotte’s sacrifices and their reluctance to accept that her genius might have been compromised in her womanly embrace of duty.

The last section of the biography is mainly concerned with Taylor’s journalism. Her travel articles and the book *Swiss Notes by Five Ladies* were particularly popular: these were based on many different journeys to Switzerland with parties of young women whom she encouraged to attempt quite hazardous mountain climbs, and in her late 50s she was still making regular visits to the continent and securing her reputation as an alpinist, despite criticism of her unchaperoned travels. However, she was more concerned with making a difference through her more politically inflected articles on women’s rights for the *Victoria Magazine* (a list of these is given as an appendix). Subjects ranged from the suffrage, work and education to respectability, marriage and the redundant woman. Her first article was a reply to a review of the work of Eugénie de Guérin, interestingly enough taking issue with that same acceptance of female sacrifice for which she had criticised the critics of Gaskell’s *Life of Charlotte Brontë*. Although Taylor was replying to a review in the *Victoria Magazine*, she is also in her choice of title – “A Philistine’s Opinion of ‘Eugénie de Guérin’” – implicitly criticising Matthew Arnold who had also reviewed de Guérin’s *Journal and Letters* in an earlier issue of the *Cornhill* and who had praised her quest for spiritual salvation and the sublimation of her worldliness (although he always asserted that her brother Maurice, the subject of one of his most important essays, was the greater genius).

This time, however, Taylor is infuriated not with the critics but with de Guérin herself. She writes: "Is it true that we are so placed on this earth that our life arranges itself without us? That we may wisely remain passive, assured that a superior power directs events? So far from it that there is no one so weak and incapable that their own exertions will not modify their condition."

When Charlotte Brontë wrote that Taylor "encouraged me and in her own strong, energetic language heartened me on," and later that "Mary's price is above rubies" she was pointing to the strengths that make Taylor an extremely appealing subject for a biography. She was indeed energetic, did not suffer fools gladly, and considered that women could without question hold up half the sky; Bellamy has wisely allowed her to speak copiously in her own voice, and this, together with contemporary letters and comments on Taylor's career and opinions, makes this biography a valuable addition to Brontë studies and nineteenth-century women's studies generally.

Barbara Garlick

***Mediating Criticism: Literary Criticism Humanized*, by Roger D. Sell.
Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamin Publishing Company, 2001.**

In a prior book (*Literature as Communication: The Foundations of Mediating Criticism*) Roger Sell offers a detailed critique of twentieth-century literary theory, clearing the decks for a theory of his own, startling in its simple cogency and common-sense: that literature is an attempted relationship, a communicative venture inviting the reader sympathetically to inhabit the beliefs, assumptions, experience of the writer. The task of the critic, then, is essentially one of mediation, which identifies the writer's historical situatedness, and enlists the reader's engagement, from the vantage point of his own time and place, with the writer. Now, a year later, comes the sequel in which Sell puts his theory into practice, unfolding the vision of "a generously humanizing literary appreciation," one which might rescue reading from the "conspiracy against the laity" he finds current in schools and universities. While he acknowledges a debt to many twentieth-century literary critics, he finds in the formalist tendencies of modernism a habit of de-personalising and de-historicising literature, and in structuralism and post-structuralism, a de-centring of the human subject that transfers agency and responsibility from real writers and real readers to language, society or culture.

He is not alone. As literary theory established itself as orthodoxy, the ancient debate about the moral value of literature began to be re-invigorated. Sell's is one of a growing number of voices calling for a renovated humanist criticism that restores the honest-to-goodness pleasures of reading. (Valentine Cunningham's recent *Reading after Theory* is another.) In finding in literature "the catalyst to human