Shalyn Claggett. Equal Natures: Popular Brain Science and Victorian Women's Writing

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Equal Natures: Popular Brain Science and Victorian Women's Writing opens with an anecdote about professional phrenologist Mrs. Hamilton delivering a speech on women's rights, which functions as an expansion point into Shalyn Claggett's argument that the prefix *pseudo* now attached to the popular science of phrenology has served to obscure its cultural importance as a point of feminist resistance to nineteenth-century biological determinist claims about women's inferiority. In the hands of women practitioners and writers, phrenology became an equalizer on which to build a case against women's oppression when it was used to subvert essentialist arguments. Claggett makes a compelling claim that to understand this aspect of the nineteenth-century feminist movement, we must recognize the cultural impact of the popular sciences. She begins *Equal Natures* by orienting the reader to the history and practice of phrenology, and its suitedness as a tool of subversion. Subsequent chapters focus on how the work of Charlotte and Anne Brontë, Harriet Martineau, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and George Eliot uses phrenological principles to combat oppressive theories of innate identity "that to them seem dangerous, inequitable and immoral" (17). *Equal Natures* is a valuable addition to the body of scholarship that calls our attention to women writers' engagement with aspects of nineteenth-century popular culture to challenge existing power structures and advocate for equality.

In "Feminist Phrenologists and the Battle for the Brain," Claggett illustrates the environment that allowed women to thrive in phrenological communities. Phrenology was a science in which biological essentialism could be used to advocate for rather than against social equality. Phrenology also offered women an opportunity to gain status as scientists in phrenological societies and publications, whereas this access was denied by institutional gatekeeping in other areas of scientific exploration. The example of Lydia Fowler demonstrates Claggett's argument on the erasure of work done by women in the phrenological movement. Fowler, the first American woman to earn a medical degree and "the first female professor at the American medical school" has been "largely erased from medical history due to her association with phrenology" (37). Important to Claggett's argument is that phrenology did not establish different methods for reading the male and female skull. Phrenological training materials offered a gender-neutral skull, allowing women to read their own heads for the same faculties as men. Domestic roles and duties of the private sphere were absent from the lists of mental "organs" and professions that could be read on the skull. Claggett concludes by recalling the reader to her central claim that while phrenology "lost its battle for legitimacy" (56) it was used strategically for social and political gain in the growing women's movement.

The discussion of Charlotte and Anne Brontë contrasts the way the sisters employ phrenological discourse to different ends in *Jane Eyre* and *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*. Claggett asserts that Charlotte Brontë is reform-minded in *Jane Eyre*, employing phrenology to support the idea of a natural social organization based on mental fitness and capability. In contrast, Anne Brontë's work aligns with the radicalism of women hoping to use the phrenology

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for women's social and cultural liberation. *Tenant* contradicts the ideological perspective that a woman held influence over the moral character of her husband, and the legal basis for men's custody rights to their children by using phrenological discourse to reveal the flaws in both. Claggett shows that Brontë used popular science to feminist ends, but that Anne's work uses the phrenological essentialist argument in a way that radically challenged women's social and cultural roles.

Claggett's section on Harriet Martineau is an outlier for its focus on a writer of nonfiction, and its emphasis on the popular science of phrenology as a counternarrative to a religious rather than secular power structure. The argument centers on a conflict between theism and materialism, and Martineau's own experience with phreno-mesmeric healing which influenced *Letters on Mesmerism* and *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature*. Claggett extends Martineau's own use of the religious models of confession and conversion into her analysis of these works. Martineau frames *Letters on the Laws of Man's Nature* as a rhetorical confessional that Claggett argues is designed to bring the reader into the experience of the power dynamic between confessor and confessed subject and carry the reader with her through the conversion to materialism. Although Martineau's nonfiction writing sets her apart from the other authors covered, Claggett's overall argument benefits from the additional perspective on the radicalism of women phrenologists beyond the presence of phrenological discourse in fiction.

Mary Elizabeth Braddon's use of phrenology in two of her earliest works, *The Trail of the Serpent* and *The Doctor's Wife*, illustrates a conflict between innate identity and public perceptions. In *Serpent*, evidence of physiological knowledge undermines socially constructed institutional power during a murder investigation. The novel is bookended by two phrenological readings, which Claggett contextualizes with examples of real-life phrenological readings of criminal skulls. Phrenology frames the narrative in which natural knowledge is ultimately triumphant over knowledge stemming from artificial systems of authority. Claggett's reading of *The Doctor's Wife* brings Braddon into conversation with the larger theme of phrenology as a tool to critique "woman's unequal position in Victorian society" (149). Protagonist Isabel is shown through a phrenological reading to possess a great deal of intellectual potential, but she is stifled by her socially prescribed role as a housewife and the patriarchal control of her husband. The assessment of the role phrenology plays in both novels speaks on the importance of turning our attention to this understudied aspect of Victorian popular culture if we are to fully understand the social and political context of women's writing.

George Eliot is significant as the only writer covered who makes use of phrenology and of biological determinism in general as a skeptic in "The Lifted Veil," "A Minor Prophet," and *Daniel Deronda*. "The Lifted Veil" and "A Minor Prophet" show the dangers of basing institutions of future betterment on biological determinism on the personal level of individual education and in terms of proto-eugenic broad scale social reorganization. Claggett's discussion of *Daniel Deronda* centers on Mordechai's visionary desire to use Daniel's superior form as a physical vessel for his own message. The latter might appear to be a diversion from the central premise of the book, but interrogates the concept of reliance on generalizations about human physicality to build a better future. The chapter closes with a return to the premise of feminist determinism with the Princess and her claim to have lived her life according to her nature, even when it was at odds with societal and family expectations.

Claggett does not overlook the racist and classist implications and implementations of phrenology. The progressive use of phrenology is presented as one avenue the practice offered to subvert aspects of social inequity. Her acknowledgment of the damage done by proto-eugenic beliefs emphasizes the underlying argument that because popular sciences were eventually disproven, their social and political uses by women's rights advocates have been understudied or ignored. The afterword provides contemporary context with a brief overview of the way women neuroscientists continue to grapple with the relationship between the material brain and the idea of self. *Equal Natures* will be valuable in several areas

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of nineteenth-century cultural and literary studies as Claggett draws from reform literature, treatises on education, philosophical and religious discourse, and the ongoing Woman Question debates.

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Feargal Cochrane. Belfast: The Story of a City and its People

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Feargal Cochrane is the author of several academic studies of the Northern Ireland conflict and its partial resolution in the so-called peace process. His new book, described as "a love letter of sorts" (xxi), is a more personal and loosely textured work. There are personal anecdotes, like the day in 1969 when the parents of the four-year old Feargal realized he could no longer be allowed to play outside with his beloved toy gun. Local references are glossed with mentions of *Blackadder* and *Line of Duty*. At times the rhetoric becomes positively fanciful: "if you grew up in Belfast during the 1970s or 1980s you were probably either a poet yourself, or you knew one who lived on your street" (19). But behind the informal tone lies a serious point. Irritated by outside observers who present the violence of recent years as the result of "some geographically specific psychosis" (2), Cochrane sets out to show instead that the violence of the last half century can be understood as a response to deep-rooted political, economic, and cultural forces.

Cochrane's desire to substitute historical context for superficial labels is commendable. The problem is that, offering to lead the reader through the city's history, he is a less than reliable guide. The Irish Parliament did not, in 1720, decide unregistered Catholic priests should not be castrated, but instead branded on the face (55). Castration was proposed by the Irish privy council as an alternative to branding—quite probably as part of a complicated parliamentary maneuver—and neither penalty was ever enacted. Protestants of the Church of Ireland were not "in effect the landed gentry" (55). As the late A.C. Hepburn established many years ago, Anglicans in Belfast were on average less prosperous than Presbyterians, and on some measurements of economic status were closer to the city's disadvantaged Catholic population. The sacramental test prevented Presbyterians holding an office of trust or profit under the crown. It did not deny them the right to vote (57). The claim that Presbyterian religion and ecclesiastical organization predisposed its adherents to democracy, making them "innately individualistic and suspicious of group-think" (53) ignores recent studies of the rigid discipline exercised by the kirk session. Presbyterian church government, as Ian McBride has pointed out, is in fact best seen as oligarchic rather than egalitarian. The violent and explicitly anti-Catholic preaching of the Presbyterian clergyman "roaring" Hugh Hanna was anything but "what we would now refer to as a form of 'dog whistle' politics" (93). The opening of the Crumlin Road gaol in 1845 was indeed a response to the growth of the town's population (137). But it was also a consequence of an important landmark in Belfast's history, its replacement of Carrickfergus as the county town.