

April 2019

Margaret Fison, 1817-1866: Mid-Victorian Reformer

David M. Fahey

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr>

Part of the [European History Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [History of Gender Commons](#), [Intellectual History Commons](#), [Public History Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Social History Commons](#), and the [Women's History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Fahey, David M. (2019) "Margaret Fison, 1817-1866: Mid-Victorian Reformer," *International Social Science Review*: Vol. 95 : Iss. 1 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.northgeorgia.edu/issr/vol95/iss1/1>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in International Social Science Review by an authorized editor of Nighthawks Open Institutional Repository.

Margaret Fison, 1817-1866: Mid-Victorian Reformer

Cover Page Footnote

David Fahey is a professor emeritus at Miami University, where he taught modern British history and world history from 1969-2009.

Margaret Fison, 1817-1866:

Mid-Victorian Reformer

Margaret Fison deserves to be remembered for what she wrote, what she did, and who she was.¹ A social reformer, she championed workingmen and women and criticized the upper and middle classes for their indifference to working-class problems. Her *Handbooks* about the new organizations supporting the natural and social sciences show her optimism about the future.² However, modern readers may be jolted by the anti-Catholic evangelical Protestantism that Fison combined with her mid-Victorian enthusiasm for science and social reform.

As well as being a writer, Fison was an activist who took to the field as an organizer for the related causes of health and temperance. Her life illustrated what a young widow from a provincial town could achieve. Her early death at age forty-eight helps explain her undeserved obscurity.

Born in a small market town in Norfolk the daughter of a prosperous merchant, Fison married a clergyman cousin when she was nineteen years old and was widowed by age twenty-nine. Beginning in 1845, Fison published a mixture of substantial volumes and short booklets, all of them infused with her Protestant religion and often anti-Catholic. Her earliest big book described her travels in western Europe with a dying husband. Her second major book proposed a plan for the self-education of young adults. She later published her best-known works, the two *Handbooks* popularizing the achievements of the natural and social sciences. Although well-read in four languages and something of a polymath, she modestly aimed, not at originality, but at being useful. In the 1861 census, Fison listed her occupation as "Author. Social Science."

Fison's early death and the miscellaneous genres in which she wrote help explain why she is not better remembered today. If she had written novels or poetry, an enterprising graduate

student might have devoted a thesis to her. Instead, other than a few didactic tales, Fison wrote non-fiction, and modern scholars who quote from her miscellaneous array of books fail to provide context.³ The only reference work acknowledgment of Fison's existence are five short lines in Brian Harrison's *Dictionary of British Temperance Biography* (1973), and even that entry lacks a date of birth. This paper shall attempt to reintroduce Fison to modern memory by providing an overview of her life, family, and good works. It shall acknowledge her anti-Catholic writings, but then also demonstrate her importance as a writer and an activist.

Fison's Life

Born October 25, 1817, Fison descended from an old Suffolk family that numbered many prosperous farmers, but her father James Fison (1784-1844) had relocated to Thetford in Norfolk, where he became the epitome of the thriving, provincial middle class.⁴ He was an alderman in the borough and once served as its mayor, while in business he was described as the emperor of wool buyers. In 1838, he led a resistance to high wool prices. A champion of Norfolk four-field agriculture, he contributed an article to *Chamber's Journal* on its behalf.⁵ At the time of his death his property was probated as worth just under £10,000. James Fison was a Wesleyan Methodist, and his daughter chose as executor of her will a brother described as a Dissenting minister. Despite this upbringing, Margaret Fison married an Anglican clergyman.

On January 10, 1837, Margaret Fison wed her first cousin once-removed, the Rev. William Fison (1804-1847), so her birth and married surnames were the same. Her husband had studied at St. John's College, Cambridge, where he received the B.A. degree in 1829 and the M.A. degree in 1832. The 1841 census records the couple as residing in Wilby, Norfolk, and by then having three children, twins (a boy and a girl) born in 1838, and a second son born in 1840. The Fisons lived in a tiny community, as in 1841 the civil parish of Wilby had only

twenty-two inhabited houses. In 1842, William Fison became perpetual curate at New Buckenham, Norfolk, which at the time of the 1841 census had a population of 716, including many Methodists.

In most ways, Fison was a woman typical of her time and class. In her belief, sacrifice of self was the duty of the Christian. “Your first step ... must be to curb your own spirit,” she wrote as an admonition to an older sister seeking to guide her younger siblings.⁶ In one of her last publications, she insisted that the most important role for women lay within the “sacred institution of the family.”⁷

Her husband's ill-health occasioned Fison's first major book, *Letters from the Continent to a Beloved Parent by a Clergyman's Wife*. It took the form of thirty-one letters, and included her watercolor illustrations. Published in 1846, it was a substantial volume, 457 pages. Publication was subsidized by subscription, including many purchases by the Fison clan, one of whom purchased twenty copies. The *Church of England Magazine* published extracts from the letters, including one about Rome in the May 13, 1847, number. The magazine editor praised Fison for being alive to the dangers of popery.

During her German travels, she relied mostly on French, “as we are but slightly acquainted with German.”⁸ Presumably this handicap was for spoken German, as she quoted German writers extensively in their own language. While there, she exchanged lessons with a German woman who was anxious to learn English. Fison must have been familiar with German-language scholarship, as in the epigraph of her book she endorsed a saying common in mid-nineteenth-century German theology: “The form that is untrue in its essentials, cannot contain the truth.” Her book's English printers mangled the German of the epigraph, making it unintelligible.⁹

Letters from the Continent may be considered an early autobiography. Despite her youth, Margaret Fison took responsibility for the details of a lengthy trip. To help her husband convalesce, the couple travelled in western Europe for a little over a year in 1843-44, leaving their young children with her parents. Margaret Fison was confident that they would enjoy an upbringing like that which she had enjoyed.

Beginning in Belgium, the couple travelled to some of the German states, Switzerland, Savoy and other Italian states, and finished in France. German spas and a Mediterranean winter did not help Fison's husband. Due to his ill-health, William Fison had difficulty walking distances or climbing many steps, so he had to enjoy the sights from a carriage. His wife sometimes walked without him, either alone or with a European companion.

For her husband, the months on the continent were uncomfortable. He slept poorly, and consequently he sometimes arrived at the German spas at six in the morning. He was given a cup of boiling mineral water that he was often too ill to drink. As the season advanced, the Fisons decided to prolong their European trip to try a mild winter in Italy. They often struggled to find apartments with carpets, a fireplace, good beds, and not many steps to climb.

The *Letters from the Continent* depicted travels by train, coach, and boat, the scenery that Fison enjoyed and the architecture and works of arts in the great cities, particularly Florence and Rome, that impressed her. In the printed version of her letters she added excerpts from other authors in lengthy footnotes. She provided information not in the usual guide book: for instance, the price of produce at the market. She was excited when melons were on sale.

At a German spa, she and her husband became friends with an old French aristocrat who lived in retirement at Wiesbaden. This count had exiled himself from France with the Bourbon king at the time of the Revolution of 1830 and then had entered the service of a German prince.

When he retired, he had received an ample pension, most of which he devoted to charity. Fison never mentions the count's religion, but it seems unlikely to have been other than Roman Catholic. She emphasized that he was a gentleman, with the "politeness which characterized the old Regime," always happy to do what he could for the invalid and his wife.¹⁰

Other details hint at Fison's values. Although she admired the industriousness of German peasant women in farming, she regarded their homes as dirty. She deplored the lack of education in Italy for the poor, but in her opinion the quick-wittedness of the people made up for the absence of formal schooling. In Rome, while Fison was away on an errand, her husband traveled alone in a carriage that came upon a pool of blood, the site of a guillotine that had ended the life of a criminal. Not too tender-hearted, on several occasions Fison mentioned seeing galley-slaves who, she assured readers, were men guilty of serious crimes, as opposed to being religious or political dissenters. She was a determined sightseer. In a trip to Vesuvius, she described the group riding donkeys part of the way. When the beasts could go no further, Fison's husband rode in a chair. When this made him uncomfortable, the guides carried him in their arms to the mouth of the volcano.

Although Fison dedicated *Letters from the Continent* to her mother, the beloved parent to whom the letters were addressed was her father. He had been to Paris but not to the other places she visited, which explained her detailed descriptions. She wrote her first letter from Brussels in May 1843, and the last from Le Havre in May 1844. Her father awaited her return at Brighton. He died on June 21, about a month after her arrival. She wrote the preface to *Letters from the Continent* in October 1846 at her Cheltenham home. A few months later, her husband, whose ill health was the reason for their continental travels, died in greater London on February 5, 1847.

When William Fison died, he left his wife a widow at the age of twenty-nine. His will is not available, but whatever Margaret Fison received from him was not her sole income. When her father died, he had left her the rents of a house on King Street, Thetford. She also may have received other family help.¹¹ Presumably she was paid for her literary works, such as “Happiness of a Life Spent in God’s Service,” published in the *Church of England Magazine* in 1850.

Margaret Fison must have been comfortably middle class. For instance, in the mid-1850s she reported that she owned a Correggio that once had belonged to the aristocratic Ormonde family in Ireland.¹² Recently experts have determined that this painting, the “Virgin and Child,” was not the work of the great Renaissance artist.

As a sign of Margaret Fison’s energy and ambition, she operated a school toward the end of her husband’s life and continued it as a widow. An advertisement printed at the end of her *Letters from the Continent* announced that a clergyman’s wife offered to provide schooling for six young ladies, alongside her own daughter. The charge for a year was eighty guineas, reduced to sixty guineas for girls under the age of twelve. *Hunt & Co.’s City of Gloucester and Cheltenham Directory* (1847) listed Margaret Fison as operating a school at her residence. The 1851 census reported Margaret Fison as the head of a Cheltenham household consisting of sixteen persons, among them nine female scholars (born between 1833 and 1837), and her older son, William James. The household also included a governess, a cook, a lady’s maid, a housemaid, and a visitor. Her other children are not listed as residing in the household.

Fison’s younger son, Cecil Shuttleworth Fison, was a bit wild. He often walked barefooted to embarrass his mother whom he considered overly strict and formal. Around age sixteen he ran away to sea. Accepting him for the independent young man that he was, his

mother arranged for him to train as an officer. In 1861, he received a certificate as master and mate. He sailed on several ships as first mate and eventually as captain.¹³ In an unknown year, he emigrated to Australia where he continued his maritime career. In 1865, the year before his mother's death, he was master of the schooner "Cheetah" when it sailed from New Zealand to New South Wales. Eventually he settled in Queensland where he held many sea-related government offices such as shipping inspector and inspector of the oyster and other fisheries. He is credited with devising life-saving devices for coastal steamers. In 1867, he married a Sydney woman, Jane Jones, and their descendants live in Australia today. Cecil died in 1899 from a fatty degeneration of the heart.

Little is known about his older brother, William James, other than that he too emigrated to Australia, where he died in 1874 from pulmonary consumption. He married but had no children.¹⁴

Other than gifts of her belongings, Margaret Fison left her estate, valued at under £600, to her sons to be divided equally. Their sister had died earlier.¹⁵

Neither son lived with their mother at the time of the 1861 census when Margaret Fison resided at Brighton. A great-great-granddaughter Nancy Yesberg, who lives in Australia, provided photographs that show Fison to be a smiling, dark-haired woman in early middle age. The census listed her mother Mary (Barker) Fison as the head of household, perhaps because she reported independent means. There were no live in servants, but according to the census report, Margaret's daughter, Margaret Jane, lived with her mother and grandmother.



Margaret Fison reached the pinnacle of her career as a writer and reformer in the late 1850s and early 1860s. Fison published a short story in 1857, a predictably moralistic tale, “Influence and Its Responsibilities; or, The Swiss Pastor and the Young Englishman.”¹⁶ Her books on the natural and social sciences began as a freelance commission. In 1856, the editor of the periodical *Leisure Hour* engaged Fison to report on the sessions of the British Association at Cheltenham, where she lived. This appointment led Fison to write *A Sketch of the Rise and Progress of the British Association for the Advancement of Science*, published in 1856, and then the two *Handbooks*, published in 1859.¹⁷ By this time, Fison had become an activist for reforms that she saw as important for working men and women. She pioneered female advocacy of what today is known as healthful living.

The Ladies' National Association for the Diffusion of Sanitary Knowledge promoted

good health among the working class. Its founding date is usually given as October 1, 1857, but sometimes as 1858.¹⁸ Fison was a member of the organization's central committee and served it as "a kind of roving resource person."¹⁹ The Fourth Report of the Association, published in 1861, listed the many towns where Fison had spoken, and added that "some of the meetings were attended by [Church of England] district visitors and other ladies working among the poor, others by the poor themselves."²⁰ In 1862 Fison sketched the history of the organization. She attributed its founding in part to a Hungarian-born physician Mathias Roth. The Sanitary Association tried to reach the working classes through lectures and tracts. It founded a free lending library and gratuitously offered a course of instruction for working-class teachers. Some branch organizations employed bible-women to teach sanitation. (Bible-women visited the homes of working-class families to instruct them in the scriptures and sell them copies of the bible paid in small installments.) The Manchester branch visited homes immediately after a birth.²¹ Fond of statistics, Fison pointed out that the Sanitary Association had distributed 468,000 tracts since its founding and 184,000 tracts in the previous year.²² An article published in the *Journal of Social Science* in 1866 updated the statistics: 760,000 tracts. In its first eight years, 442 people had joined the association, including twenty life-members, paying from £10 to £200. By 1866 there were only 295 members, including twenty-eight who had joined in the previous nine months. With a declining membership, the association was in financial difficulties. On average the central organization had an annual income of £360.²³

Filson regarded sanitary reform and temperance reform as inseparable. She was secretary of the Ladies' Association for Promoting Temperance. As Fison's title was not honorary secretary, she presumably was paid for her temperance work. Writing in 1862, she said that the organization had been founded eight years earlier, and by 1860 had developed into a national

association. Fison described the members of the executive committee in 1862 as “some of our most popular authors,” such as S.C. (Anna Maria) Hall, Sarah Stickney Ellis, and Clara Lucas Balfour.²⁴ Fison emphasized that the teetotal society encouraged the creation of counter-attractions to alcoholic drink.

Fison identified two examples of successful temperance work, that by Julia Bainbrigge Wightman in her husband’s parish at Shrewsbury and that by Mary Bayly in the Kensington Potteries. Wightman recruited a thousand men and women to join her teetotal society, while Bayly got 905 people to sign a teetotal pledge. Fison pointed out: “Sober men quickly begin to seek better homes.”²⁵

Committed to the betterment of the working classes, Fison was an early member of the council of the Working Men’s Club and Institute Union before its clubs sold alcoholic drink. The organizers of the Union, saluted the efforts of Fison and “other zealous friends of the working class,” such as Bayly, Wightman, and Adeline Cooper (later Harrison) for their work on behalf of working-class sobriety and uplift.²⁶

Fison’s Anti-Catholic Writings

Fison’s commitment to working-class reforms should not obscure her fervid hostility to the Roman Catholic Church, something typical of evangelical Protestants in the 1840s, 1850s and later. In his standard history of mid-Victorian anti-Catholicism, Denis G. Paz did not mention Fison, and he argued that women played little role in the agitation against Rome. The public sphere—especially politics—was for men. Moreover, much anti-Catholic argument was considered inappropriate for women. Paz described as evangelical pornography the prurient stories about priestly lasciviousness, the abuse of nuns in their convents, and the confessional as

a device to seduce women.²⁷ In contrast, Fison's criticism of the Roman Catholic Church was largely theological.

When Fison travelled on the continent for her husband's health, her secondary objective was to study the Roman Catholic Church. "One of the chief objects of this unpretending volume, is to bear a faithful testimony to the condition of these countries where Roman Catholicism reigns supreme." After she visited the Italian states, she described the Catholic Church in language that, she acknowledged, "may be considered perhaps as guilty of bigotry and intolerance."²⁸

Before her travels Fison had thought that Protestant anti-Catholic rhetoric was exaggerated. She later decided that living in England, she had obtained only an imperfect understanding of the Catholic Church: "it is where Popery is the avowed religion of the State, where *the man of sin* [the Antichrist] reigns supreme, that we must go to have a full idea of the state of that people who are under such government."²⁹ In contrast, Catholics in England, living under a Protestant government, had access to the Bible, albeit in what she considered a mutilated (Douai) translation. When Catholics from England visited Rome, they were appalled by its "gross superstition and ignorance."³⁰ Fison's analysis did not include working-class Irish Catholics in England.

Fison's vehemently anti-Catholic book, called *Giuseppe, the Italian Boy*, is sometimes described as a novel.³¹ It combined a religious tract with a story based on an episode in Fison's life. It claimed to depict her time in Rome in the winter of 1843, when the author traveled to be with an ill friend. In this account, Fison, and the woman who was her friend, stayed at an apartment owned by a widow with a young son named Giuseppe. In fact, the visit to Rome during which Fison met Giuseppe occurred in early 1844, when she travelled with her husband.

In both *Giuseppe* and *Letters from the Continent*, Fison shows contempt for the Roman Catholic religion and horror at its teachings. Popular devotions practiced by peasants and the urban poor, particularly women, offended Fison. People climbed the steps of churches on their knees, kissed crucifixes, kneeled before statues, and venerated (what she saw as) ridiculous alleged relics. More important, in her opinion, than such foolish superstitions, the Catholic Church placed Mary and other saints into an exalted position as intermediaries between the faithful and God. Christ alone, she insisted, was the mediator between sinners and God. She acknowledged that some priests denied that they wanted people to pray to Mary and the saints as if they were divine, but she argued that in practice this is what people did. As Fison could read Italian, she found in Giuseppe's religious instruction book that he was told that he could achieve salvation through good works such as prayers, fasts, and pilgrimages. As an evangelical Protestant, Fison believed that by faith alone, nourished by the Bible, was salvation possible. She respected Giuseppe's mother, however, for teaching him the Pater Noster or Lord's Prayer and did not complain about her also teaching him the Ave Maria or Hail Mary. Although she regretted their superstition, Fison did not look down upon the Italians. Like many English travelers, she felt an affinity with Italy.

Fison's time with Giuseppe and his family ended abruptly after an intruder in the house frightened her. Rejecting Fison's farewell gift of a Bible, the family presented her and her friend with its most precious possession, a rosary that had been blessed by the Pope. Fison seems not to have complained about the Catholic rosary, perhaps seeing the beads simply an aid to counting prayers and not an occasion for idolatry (though in fact, the rosary was part of Counter Reformation veneration of Mary.)

In *Letters from the Continent* Fison presented a more nuanced picture than she did in *Giuseppe*. She wrote with disgust at seeing Belgian peasant women kneel before a gaudy altar adorned with a statue of Mary “holding a doll.”³² Nevertheless, she generally showed moderation in this work. When she missed the quiet English Sabbath, she blamed Protestants as well as Roman Catholics for the noise of business in German towns on Sundays. She was severe toward the Protestants of Geneva as untrue to the tradition of John Calvin. The men in France seemed only nominally Catholic, and she was unhappy with this religious indifference. She regarded the Catholics in Germany as less superstitious and intolerant than adherents of their religion whom she met later in her Italian journeys. Even in Bavaria, which had what she scorned as a bigoted government, Protestants had privileges. It was in the Italian states that she found the worst form—in her judgment—of Roman Catholicism. For instance, in Nice (then part of the kingdom of Savoy), she could not find a bookstore selling a translation of the Bible that ordinary people could read.

Fison spoke sympathetically about a few of the priests and nuns she encountered. In Germany, the monk Vater Carl struck her as intelligent, and in Florence her landlady furnished an introduction to a nun who a relation. Fison had a friendly meeting with the “simple-minded sisters” at their convent and was impressed with their work at a hospital.³³ Later she was present at the profession of a young woman entering the life of a nun. Needing directions in Naples, she fell into conversation with a friendly priest. When she told him about her disgust at the superstitions in Rome, he “allowed that there was a great need for a reformation in the Romish Church.”³⁴ Fison seemed almost sympathetic to the Pope when describing him as she saw him in the winter of 1844-1845. Born in 1765, Pope Gregory XVI was by that time an old man. He

was rudely treated by attendant cardinals, who she wrote, fiddled with his robes without regard to his wishes.

Fison's dislike of Roman Catholic theology did not make her dislike Roman Catholics as individuals. Her admiration and gratitude toward the old French count at a German spa town showed that she distinguished between a religion and its adherents.

Fison did not give her name as author in the publication of *Giuseppe* or *The Letters from the Continent*, but she signed her name to another anti-Catholic book, *Colportage: Its History and Relations to Home and Foreign Evangelism*. A Catholic periodical was outraged by its "rabid hostility to Rome" and quoted Fison as describing Catholics as "bound hand and foot by a corrupt priesthood and a false faith, the victims of a superannuated and rotten superstition."³⁵

One of Fison's later publications returned to the interrelated topics of Protestantism and Italy. Catholic rulers in Savoy had persecuted the Waldensians. Modern historians argue that the Waldensians had originated in the late Middle Ages, while in contrast Fison adhered to the ancient origins thesis. In a small book published in 1855, *The Evangelists of Italy, or the Mission of the Apostolic Waldensian Church*, she argued that the Waldensians were primitive Christians who from ancient times had been "preserved for a special purpose in the Divine Counsels; destined to fulfill a most important mission in the Evangelization of Italy."³⁶

Fison's Importance as a Writer and an Activist

What are we to make of Fison's diverse books? *Hints for the Earnest Student* advised how to build moral character and offered a guide to self-education. *The Secret of a Healthy Home* encouraged sanitary reform. *The German Shoemaker and His Family* was a translation of a moral tale.³⁷ *Letters from the Continent* was a travel memoir, while the anti-Catholic *Giuseppe* was a lightly fictionalized story from Fison's time in Rome.³⁸ *Colportage* was an expansion of

an American book by the Rev. Russell S. Cook on religious book-peddling. William Moon was a Brighton neighbor, which explains why Fison wrote a book about his alternative to Braille.³⁹

In 1859, near the end of her short career as a writer, Fison published the two books that are crucial to a reconsideration of her reputation: *Handbook of the British Association for the Advancement of Science* and *Handbook of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*. For her, the latter was the more important, as the organization was closely aligned with her desire to improve the material and moral condition of the working class.

The social science *Handbook* led Pauline M.H. Mazumdar and Sarah Richardson to their revaluations of Fison as a writer who mattered. In a six-volume collection of documents on the eugenics movement, Mazumdar devoted ninety-one pages to a facsimile excerpt from Fison's social science *Handbook*.⁴⁰ For Fison, sanitary reform was central to the improvement of working-class lives as it meant healthful living. To move beyond mere opinion, Fison turned to statistics, "the account books of a nation."⁴¹ In her opening chapter, she argued: "While statistics reveal that crime is not the necessary attendant upon poverty and low wages, they show that it is found most abundant in closely crowded houses, in ill-drained localities, while the morals of the poor quickly manifest improvement when sanitary reform has been carried out in their dwellings."⁴²

Like other Victorian reformers, Fison looked to statistics for proof about the evils that the country needed to address. She noted,

Statistics have revealed spiritual and physical destitutions sufficient to appal [sic] the hearts of any who fully realize the amount of suffering represented by such figures. The religious condition of the people, the education of their children, the wretched sanitary state of crowded neighbourhoods, the connexion of intemperance with crime, have all been tested and proved by statistical science, and the results brought before the consideration of a Christian people.⁴³

In Fison's campaign for sanitary reform, she dedicated to working men and women *Habit*

is *Second Nature: or, the Parents' Mission, Illustrated in the History of Jane and Nelly Dunn*, as the story that it contained was meant to appeal to working-class readers. A clean, orderly home and a moral home went together. An appendix outlined how to achieve good health, for instance, through cleanliness and fresh air.⁴⁴ The Ladies' Sanitary Association published her related 32-page *The Secret of a Healthy Home*.⁴⁵

In 1862, she presented a paper at an international temperance and prohibition conference on "Sanitary Laws: The True Basis of Temperance Work." Fison acknowledged: "many religious persons are still to be found who look with suspicion on scientific progress, and refuse to view it as the handmaid of Christian civilisation."⁴⁶ In disagreement, she declared: "Yet, as a witness to the sacred truths of religion, science claims a high position, and at the present moment with relation to health laws and Temperance reform, it has assumed an aspect of the deepest interest alike to the biblical student and the Christian philanthropist."⁴⁷

Another modern scholar, Sarah Richardson, argued for Fison's importance. *The Political Worlds of Women: Gender and Politics in Nineteenth Century Britain* identified Fison as one of a half dozen women, who, although not famous today, impacted the public life of nineteenth-century Britain.⁴⁸ Four of these women appear in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, while Fison and one other do not.

Richardson considered Fison's social science handbook as her most important book and her support for working-class reforms as her major contribution. Fison was an early publicist for social science.⁴⁹ Richardson said that she "related statistics on crime, education and sanitation into an argument for legislative changes intended to lead to the moral and physical improvement of the working class."⁵⁰ Influenced by John Stuart Mill's political economy, she spoke out for peasant proprietorship of land and for savings banks. Sixty years before women had acquired the

parliamentary vote, Fison emphasized the role of women in forming public opinion.⁵¹ In 1862 Fison helped found a savings bank in Brighton.⁵²

A third scholar, Lilian Lewis Shiman, focused on Fison the activist, bringing out of obscurity Fison's work for temperance in the early 1860s.⁵³ Fison was an active secretary for the brief-lived Ladies' Temperance Association. Shiman credited Fison with holding more than a hundred meetings in the first year of the existence of this pioneering organization and with founding twenty-two branches of the Association, and attributed its subsequent decline to Fison's death while in her forties.⁵⁴ Anticipating Shiman's assessment, Mary E. Docwra in her history of women in the temperance movement, published in 1897, said that Fison's early death "deprived the Temperance movement of an efficient and talented worker, who had awakened an interest in influential [upper middle-class] circles, which had not hitherto been reached."⁵⁵

Fison devoted several pages in her social science handbook to the problem of working-class drinking and emphasized abstinence from alcoholic drink as part of a wholesome diet. Fison probably had herself become a teetotaler late in the 1840s or early in the 1850s. In a travel memoir written in the mid-1840s, she criticized gambling and smoking at German spas, but not alcoholic drink. At one point, she nonchalantly commented: "the vin ordinaire is very cheap."⁵⁶

Much of what little we know about Fison's temperance work appears in the jubilee history of the National Temperance League, an organization that had engaged her as an agent in 1860. The jubilee history praised Fison for bringing the temperance movement to the attention of 20,000 women and others at drawing-room conversaciones and school-room meetings. A League report explained that Fison attempted to bring "the Temperance and sanitary elements into all existing machinery for evangelizing the masses, and with this view ... she has met, by request of different clergymen and ministers, their varied staff of workers, comprising district

visitors, ragged and Sunday School teachers, City, Town and female missionaries, scripture-readers, colporteurs, etc.”⁵⁷ Fison’s connection with the National Temperance League is underscored by her being a patron of the League’s annual soiree, held on May 21, 1863.⁵⁸

Fison’s work for the League got a brief mention recently in Andrea Geddes Poole, *Philanthropy and the Construction of Victorian Women’s Citizenship*.⁵⁹

In the summer of 1861 Fison presented “an excellent paper” in which she argued: “The time is at hand when all classes will recognize in the self-help and self-reliance of Total Abstinence, the principle that alone can elevate the working classes.”⁶⁰ In Dublin, she read a paper on “Woman’s Responsibility in Relation to Intemperance.” At a meeting in central London, she spoke with “a clear voice,” on “Sanitary Influences, as Connected with the Adoption of Temperance Principles.”⁶¹

Other arguments support Fison’s importance. She should be remembered as a champion of working men and women, especially rural laborers, who dared to challenge laissez-faire orthodoxy. She saw a strong central government as their friend, condemned those who opposed progress, “actuated by either interest, ignorance or prejudice,” and praised those who worked for progress as the Creator’s “intelligent instruments.”⁶² She denounced Boards of Guardians that during an outbreak of cholera ignored the advice of medical officers and the orders of the Board of Health. Applied to “crying evils,” “the strong hand of authority” bolstered the “liberty of the subject,” including that of the poor.⁶³ Insisting on the rights of the working class, she looked forward to the time when “the individuality of the poor man’s child shall be equally respected and developed with that of the rich.”⁶⁴ She called for the reform of property law to encourage the poor to acquire land, blaming pauperism on the difficulty in becoming landowners. She regarded the Law of Settlement as imposing a kind of serfdom by its discouragement of labor

mobility, making it almost impossible for a rural laborer to improve his lot. Fison wrote extensively about juvenile reformatories as well as the rehabilitation of adult convicts, and she was highly concerned about the state of the workhouses. “Let the women in England who seek a mission,” she wrote, “turn to the workhouse.”⁶⁵

Fison had a deep concern and affection for the working class. In a letter dated November 24, 1860, she asked the *British Workman* for canvassing bills, seeing the newspaper “as the pioneer for my favorite Sanitary and Temperance work among my working brothers and Sisters.”⁶⁶ Lamenting the plight of the working class, she had harsh words for those with property and influence: “the responsibility for the existence of such evils [as intemperance, crime, disease, and pauperism] rests mainly with the upper and middle classes of society ... by their indifference and inaction.”⁶⁷

Overlapping with her social science *Handbook*, Fison’s natural sciences handbook was outspokenly religious. It was also racist. Modern readers may wince when Fison championed the sciences as handmaids of what she calls Christian civilization. The concluding section of the science *Handbook* argued that civilization is based on Revelation.⁶⁸ Fison assumed a hierarchy of peoples with Anglo-Saxon Protestants as their benevolent leaders. Although she associated “the influence exercised by the Anglo-Saxon race over the whole earth ... with the fulfillment of the design of Divine Providence,” she did not despise peoples outside the Anglo-Saxon race.⁶⁹ It would have been impossible for her as a science writer not to recognize the contributions of the Germans, the French, and the Italians. In her opening chapter in the *Advancement of Science*, Fison mentioned Bunsen, Laplace, and Galvani.

Fison contributed a paper to the 1858 meeting of the British Association section on economic science and statistics. As she was a woman, a man read it for her. Fison was proud of

the paper, entitled “Importance of a Colonial Penny Postage Viewed in Relation to the Advancement of Science and Christian Civilization.” Fison printed it in full in her science handbook. She emphasized the need of Australian emigrants for religious instruction mailed from the home country. Penny postage for Canada would encourage the United States to provide the same nominal rate for mail to Britain. “Who can calculate the beneficial results to the human race of such an intercourse between the two great Protestant nations of the world?”⁷⁰

What does not appear in Fison’s science book shows its limitations. It is ironic that Fison’s religiously colored handbooks appeared in the same year as Charles Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species*, and that while writing on the eve of the American Civil War, Fison waxed poetic about the Anglo-Saxon race without condemning slavery in the United States.

Fison’s science volume is more than an exposition of religion and Anglo-Saxon superiority. She criticizes the stubborn unwillingness of British workers and masters to apply scientific knowledge. She angrily describes British schools as deplorable, those for the middle class as well as those for the poor, and she champions the idea of the Swiss educationalist Emanuel De Fellenberg, who combined agricultural labor with academic study. Outside the science *Handbook*, Fison presented several papers on what she called the “Institutions of Fellenberg” and published a related article, “The Institutions of Hofwyl,” in the *English Woman’s Journal* in 1862. Earlier she had proposed schools for young farmers that would offer both agricultural instruction and the liberal arts.⁷¹

In 1862 Fison presented a paper, “The Women of Great Britain: Their Work in Social Reform,” at the London meeting of the Congrès International de Bienfaisance.⁷² Her paper at the philanthropic meeting immediately followed one by Florence Nightingale. As the London meeting was held concurrently with that of the Social Science Association, it attracted more

auditors than previous meetings at Brussels and Frankfurt, including many more women, almost twenty per cent of the public who attended, with most of them being married.⁷³

Not surprisingly, Fison began her paper with a tribute to the Social Science Association for its “recognition of women as associated workers in the great aims and objects of social reform.”⁷⁴ Her view of the role of women was far from radical. For wives and mothers, it was the home. “My estimate of woman’s mission and sphere is entirely a home one.”⁷⁵ She welcomed the surplus of single women. In addition to providing emigrants for the colonies, single women allowed “a much larger infusion of the female element into our hospitals, prisons, lunatic asylums, municipal and parochial work.”⁷⁶ Their role will be “making homes for the outcast and the desolate.”⁷⁷ Fison described three ways women could find suitable work: among the inmates of institutions “who are wholly withdrawn from their homes, and are too often the victims of degraded ones”; among “the masses of our crowded cities, or the poor in any neglected district, from whom, as a rule, the criminal and so-called dangerous classes are drawn”; and “to obviate the difficulties and dangers to which her own sex is exposed,” for instance, by education and practical training.⁷⁸ Fison additionally mentioned service as writers, a category that she did not confine to single women. She gave as examples books such as Julia Wightman’s *Haste to the Rescue* and Mary Bayly’s *Ragged Homes, and How to Mend Them*.

Fison singled out famous women reformers and their reforms. She regarded Elizabeth Fry as not only a prison reformer, but as “the Christian woman who was pre-eminently the pioneer in woman’s work in social reform.”⁷⁹ Other celebrated women included Florence Nightingale for hospitals, Louisa Twining for workhouses, Catherine Marsh for navvies, Mary Carpenter for reformatories, Ellen Ranyard for bible-women, and Mary Bayly for the Kensington

potteries. Fison devoted several pages of her brief paper to her own special reforms, sanitation and temperance:

In England many Christian people have ignored the two great obstacles to the progress of the gospel, viz., the sanitary condition of the people, and their habits of intemperance. I own, after years of practical work, I have arrived at this conclusion, that until we all unite to remove these external hindrances, we never shall reach the heathenism in our midst.”⁸⁰

Conclusion

Fison’s career ended several years before her death at the early age of forty-eight. In the final three years of her life Margaret Fison disappeared from public view. Her last publication was a two-part article in 1863, published in the *Church of England Temperance Magazine*, “Our Agricultural Labourers: Their Present Position and Prospects.”⁸¹ The last time a newspaper mentioned Margaret Fison appears to have been the *Brighton Gazette*, November 19, 1863.⁸²

During part of the missing years she was in France with her invalid daughter, Margaret Jane. Australian relatives have water colors dated July 1864 that the mother painted in southwestern France, for instance, at Pau and Eaux Chaudes.⁸³ Genealogist Charles Fison believes that Margaret Jane died near Cannes, date unknown. Her mother must have remained in France until her daughter’s death. Had Margaret Fison by that time become ill herself? When she returned to England it was to her childhood home, perhaps because her own mother had left Brighton for Thetford where she died in 1865. When Margaret Fison herself died on September 22, 1866, it was at her birthplace of Thetford, Norfolk.



It is tempting to speculate about what she would have done if she had lived in good health for another two or three decades. Perhaps she might have established a durable women's temperance organization. Perhaps she might have written several more substantial books.

What is beyond mere speculation is that Fison was a woman of culture and learning. Her *Handbooks* for the natural and social sciences establish this, but one should look also at *Hints for the Earnest Student* to recognize Fison as self-educated in many disciplines. Intended for young people who had completed their formal education, the standards in the book must have been impractical for most of such readers. What they depict is Fison's own intellectual universe. As *The Earnest Student* focuses on building moral character, the most important book for study was the Bible. "Devote the commencement of each day's study to the Word of God."⁸⁴ Fison did not forget to warn against the Roman Catholic Church. "This revival of mediaeval taste *has become one dangerous pathway to Rome.*"⁸⁵

Fison demonstrated her wide reading with numerous biographical sketches and abundant quotations, for instance, from Hannah More, “one of my favourite authors.”⁸⁶ For her program of study, she advised: “Do not be alarmed at the comprehensiveness of the plan I would place before you.”⁸⁷ For note-taking, she urged: “be careful that you seize the most important idea or fact.”⁸⁸ She advised early rising. *Hints for the Earnest Student* looked at history, with a case study of classical Greece, and at natural philosophy, including astronomy and geology. She investigated Taste: “the common view taken of the cultivation of the fine arts is far below their true value.”⁸⁹ A footnote recommended buying painting materials at Messrs. Ackerman’s in the Strand, presumably where she purchased hers.⁹⁰

Fison encouraged the study of foreign languages. “Let your aim to be, to grasp at fresh fields of thought, a larger circle of knowledge,” and the ability to communicate with others.⁹¹ At home and apparently unaided, Fison had learned to read French, Italian, and German and to speak the first two languages. In what may be an autobiographical passage she said: “I have known more than one young lady residing in a country town, unable to secure masters, who made most respectable progress in French, German, and Italian, by her own exertions.”⁹² In her extensive reading lists, she had sections on books in these languages. Predictably, she censored them to exclude writers whom she considered to be atheists such as “that miserable character” Rousseau and Voltaire whom “no one can admire.”⁹³ The French list instead included Montesquieu and Chateaubriand who, although Catholics, were professed Christians.

Another list—that of important mid-Victorian women reformers—should include Margaret Fison. Despite her limitations, she wrote books that mattered, was a pioneering activist, a friend of workingmen and women, and an example of what a country woman could make of herself. Her neglect is a puzzle.

In the inscription to her book, *Hints for the Earnest Student*, Fison described herself: “I have been, and still am a seeker ... I offer a few gatherings from past hours of delightful study, happy if but to some earnest seeker I bring one thought which may arouse or strengthen the dawning of intellectual life.”⁹⁴

ENDNOTES

¹ Cynthia Belasie, Nancy Burstein, Mary Fuller, and David Gutzke read various drafts. Charles Fison provided family information, while Nancy Yesberg furnished photographs of her great-great-grandmother, water colors that she had painted in July 1864, and family anecdotes.

² *Handbook of the British Association for the Advancement of Science; Handbook of the National Association for the Promotion of Social Science*, both published in 1859 by Longman, Green, Longman, and Roberts.

³ For an instance of citation of one of Fison’s books, look at Victor E. Neuburg who says that Fison’s *Colportage* (1858) “offers a substantial contemporary view of religious tracts and what it was hoped they would achieve.” *Popular Literature: A History and Guide* (Routledge, 2014; originally published in 1977), 292.

⁴ Confusingly, there were other Fisons active in business at Thetford, including a family headed by a different James Fison who established a fertilizer company in 1808. Today Fisons is a multinational company that produces horticultural chemicals and much else.

⁵ *Gentleman’s Magazine* (1844), 108; *Farmer’s Magazine* (1838), 136-37; *Science*, 43 note.

⁶ *Hints for the Earnest Student; or, A Year-Book for the Young* (Sampson Low and Son, 1850, revised edition, 1854), 44;

⁷ “*The Women of Great Britain: Their Work in Social Reform*,” *Congrès International de Bienfaisance de Londres. Session de 1862* (1863) 2: 111.

⁸ *Letters from the Continent to a Beloved Parent by a Clergyman’s Wife* (Seeley, Burnside, and Seeley, 1846), 55.

⁹ I owe this paragraph to my colleague Erik Jensen who explained that the epigraph should have read: “Die in ihren wesentlichen Bestimmungen unwahre Form, kann den wahren Inhalt nicht in sich schliessen.”

¹⁰ *Letters*, 77.

¹¹ Several family members died in the mid-1840s and early 1850s and may have left her a legacy: her father, 1844, her mother-in-law and a great-aunt (her father’s aunt), both 1846, her husband, 1847, her father’s next youngest brother who had no children, 1849, and another great-aunt (her father’s aunt), 1852). I owe this information to Charles Fison.

¹² “Ormonde Correggio,” *Notes & Queries*, Jan. 27, 1855, 64-65.

¹³ Nancy Yesberg to the author, April 14, 2017.

¹⁴ His wife was Carolyn Jane Grimstone.

¹⁵ Codicils show a middle-class household with a family bible, clothing, and furniture, as well as an author’s book copyright. Codicils gave to various family members, among other things,

watercolor paints and a sketch book (reminders of the illustrations that she contributed to several of her books), a microscope (a reminder of her scientific interests), and a portrait of herself. I am grateful to Charles Fison for sharing his copy of the will and its codicils.

¹⁶ *Cheltenham Literary Annual* (1857): 1-7.

¹⁷ *Science*, ix. Fison published two articles about the British Association in *Leisure Hour* during 1856. *Science*, 115 note. The two *Handbooks* are discussed favorably in the *North British Review* 32 (1860): 264-66, with the reservation that Fison bordered on hagiography.

¹⁸ Lawrence Goldman, *Science, Reform, and Politics in Victorian England: The Social Science Association 1857-1886* (Cambridge University Press, 2002), 121.

¹⁹ *English Woman's Journal*, May 1, 1861, 194-95; Anne Hepplewhite, "The Public Vocation of Women: Lectures to Ladies on Sanitary Reform in England, 1855-1870" (M.A. thesis, Simon Frazer University, 1996), 36.

²⁰ For Fison's sanitary work, see Patricia Hollis, ed., *Women in Public, 1850-1900: Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* (Routledge, 2013), 241-42.

²¹ Goldman, 121.

²² "Women of Great Britain," 115.

²³ *Journal of Social Science* (1866), 157, 286, 479-80.

²⁴ Hall and Ellis sometimes wrote temperance fiction, for instance, Hall, *Boons and Blessings* (1875); and Ellis, *Family Secrets* (1842). Balfour wrote numerous anti-drink books such as *Morning-Dewdrops, or the Juvenile Abstinence* (1853). Hall contributed the introduction to *Women's Work in the Temperance Reformation: Being Papers Prepared for a Ladies' Conference Held in London, May 26, 1868*.

²⁵ "Women of Great Britain," 118.

²⁶ Laurence Marlow, "The Working Men's Club Movement, 1862-1912: A Study of the Evolution of a Working Class Institution" (Ph.D. dissertation, Warwick, 1980). 688, qtd. 162-63.

²⁷ Denis G. Paz, *Popular Anti-Catholicism in Mid-Victorian England* (Stanford University Press, 1992), 275-76. In *The Protestant Crusade in Great Britain, 1829-1860* (Clarendon Press, 1991), John Wolffe also failed to mention Fison.

²⁸ *Giuseppe, the Italian Boy* (B. Wertheim, 1846), 22.

²⁹ *Giuseppe*, 10.

³⁰ *Giuseppe*, 23.

³¹ An American bookseller's publication recently described *Giuseppe, the Italian Boy* as "a relatively popular little anti-Catholic novel." *Little Professor*, July 2, 2010.

³² *Letters*, 23.

³³ *Letters*, 274.

³⁴ *Letters*, 378.

³⁵ Qtd. In *Pro Ecclesia del Church and State Review*, Sept.1, 1864, 92.

³⁶ Qtd. In Michael W, Homer, "Seeking Primitive Christianity in the Waldensian Valleys: Protestants, Mormons, Adventists and Jehovah's Witnesses in Italy," *Nova Religio: Journal of Alternative and Emergent Religions* 9, no. 4 (May 2006), 6.

³⁷ *The German Shoemaker and His Family, or, Blessings of Industry: A Narrative Founded on Fact* appeared under the auspices of the Church of England Sunday School Institute. For a taste of *The German Shoemaker*, see the excerpt, "Improvement of Time," in *Church of England Magazine* 19 (1845): 287.

- ³⁸ The book was reprinted in Boston in the following year by the Massachusetts Sabbath School Society.
- ³⁹ *Darkness and Light, or, Memorials of Two Blind Deaf Mutes: with Facts Relating to the Origin of Moon's System of Reading for the Blind and its Success in Answer to Prayer* (Wertheim, Macintosh, and Hunt, 1859).
- ⁴⁰ Pauline M.H. Mazumdar, ed. *Eugenics Movement: An International Perspective*, 6 vols. (Routledge, 2006), vol.1, part. 2: 9-34; 68-78; 163-218.
- ⁴¹ *Social Science*, 206.
- ⁴² *Social Science*, 11.
- ⁴³ *Social Science*, 11-12.
- ⁴⁴ Brighton Tracts for the People, on Subjects Connected with Social Progress, Part II (Brighton, William Simpson; London Wertheim & Macintosh, 1861).
- ⁴⁵ I have not been able to consult this booklet, but see *English Woman's Journal* 7 (1861): 194-195.
- ⁴⁶ *Proceedings of the International Temperance and Prohibition Convention, Held in London, September 2nd, 3rd, and 4th, 1862* (Caudwell, 1862), 211.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁸ Published by Routledge, 2013.
- ⁴⁹ Richardson cites a contemporary book review in the *Leader*, Nov. 26, 1859.
- ⁵⁰ Richardson, 4.
- ⁵¹ Richardson, 9-10.
- ⁵² Peter Turner Winskill, *The Temperance Movement and Its Workers* (Blackie, 1891-92), 2: 36.
- ⁵³ Lilian Lewis Shiman, *Women and Leadership in Nineteenth-Century England* (St. Martin's Press, 1992), 111, 113, 222.
- ⁵⁴ For the founding of branches, Shiman cites the *Temperance Advocate*, July 27, 1861, the organ of the British Temperance League.
- ⁵⁵ Mary E. Docwra, *A Glimpse at Woman's Work for Temperance in the Victorian Era* (Women's Total Abstinence Union, [1897]), 14.
- ⁵⁶ *Letters*, 63.
- ⁵⁷ William Gourlay, "National Temperance": *A Jubilee Biograph of the National Temperance League Instituted 1856* (Richard J. James, 1906), 332-33. The temperance reformer and historian Dawson Burns offered a different interpretation of Fison's entry into temperance work. "Mrs. W. Fison, who was engaged in the delivery of addresses to ladies on social questions, became much interested in the Temperance question, in which she afterwards gave a large measure of her attention." (James) Dawson Burns, *Temperance History* (National Temperance Publication Depot, 1889-91), 1: 443. Burns is the source for Fison's date of death that Harrison used.
- ⁵⁸ *British Friend*, March 1863, 7 in advertising pages.
- ⁵⁹ Published by University of Toronto Press, 2014, 80.
- ⁶⁰ Gourlay, 260.
- ⁶¹ *Clerkenwell News*, May 7, 1862, 2.
- ⁶² *Social Science*, 15.
- ⁶³ *Social Science*, 18.
- ⁶⁴ *Social Science*, 19.
- ⁶⁵ *Social Science*, 217.

-
- ⁶⁶ Qtd. In *Western Temperance Herald*, January 1, 1861, capitalization as in original.
- ⁶⁷ *International*, 21.
- ⁶⁸ *Science*, 215.
- ⁶⁹ *Science*, 2.
- ⁷⁰ *Science*, 140-44.
- ⁷¹ *Science*, 37.
- ⁷² *Congrès International de Bienfaisance de Londres. Session de 1862* (1863) 2: 111-20.
- ⁷³ Stijn Van de Perre, "These Mutual Lessons of Nation to Nation': The International Philanthropic Congresses of 1856, 1857 and 1862," 10.
http://www.canonsociaalwerk.eu/1849_Ducpetiaux/philantropische_congressen.pdf
- ⁷⁴ "The Women of Great Britain," 111.
- ⁷⁵ "The Women of Great Britain," 112.
- ⁷⁶ "The Women of Great Britain," 112.
- ⁷⁷ "The Women of Great Britain," 112.
- ⁷⁸ "The Women of Great Britain," 112.
- ⁷⁹ "The Women of Great Britain," 113.
- ⁸⁰ "The Women of Great Britain," 118.
- ⁸¹ 109-12, 185-88.
- ⁸² *Brighton Gazette*, Nov. 19, 1863, 6.
- ⁸³ Yesberg to author, April 14, 2017.
- ⁸⁴ *Hints*, 148.
- ⁸⁵ *Hints*, 256.
- ⁸⁶ *Hints*, 257.
- ⁸⁷ *Hints*, 144.
- ⁸⁸ *Hints*, 181.
- ⁸⁹ *Hints*, 222.
- ⁹⁰ *Hints*, 415.
- ⁹¹ *Hints*, 206.
- ⁹² *Hints*, 207.
- ⁹³ *Hints*, 130, 138.
- ⁹⁴ *Hints*, inscription.