

## Greatest of the Liberal philosophers

Richard Reeves: *John Stuart Mill, Victorian Firebrand* (Atlantic Books, 2007)

Reviewed by Eugenio Biagini

THIS IS the first full-length biography of the great Victorian philosopher since the publication of Michael St John Packe's work more than fifty years ago.<sup>1</sup> In the meantime Mill has inspired hundreds of publications by some of the world's leading scholars in disciplines ranging from logic and political theory to economics and social history. Almost every single aspect of his life and work has attracted not only specialist attention, but also debate, greatly stimulated by the publication of the monumental *Collected Works*.<sup>2</sup>

The task of producing a major reassessment of Mill's life and work in the twenty-first century was therefore a daunting prospect for any single writer. It is symptomatic of the topicality and relevance of Mill's ideas for the wider public that such a task was attempted not by a professional historian or philosopher, but by a journalist and former government advisor on welfare reform. This is also very appropriate: for journalism and advising on (and indeed making) public policy were two of the many ways in which Mill exercised his influence during a career which spanned the central decades of the nineteenth century and was only interrupted by his sudden death in 1873. By then he was regarded as the greatest Liberal of his age. A hundred and thirty-four years later he was voted 'the greatest Liberal' in a poll sponsored by the present *Journal*. Moreover, although many of his views were controversial during his own lifetime, most of them have since become accepted features of the way we understand democratic life, to the extent that his

authority is frequently invoked by libertarian Conservatives and Fabian socialists as much as by Liberal Democrats. How can we account for such a dramatic and long-lasting impact?

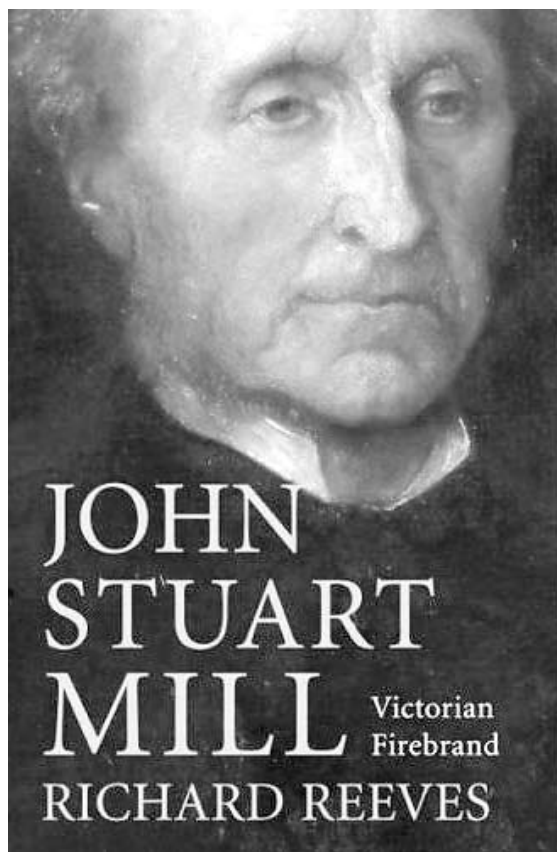
Mill was a political and constitutional theorist, logician, economist, civil rights campaigner, social reformer, imperial administrator and an MP for the constituency of Westminster (1865–68), then one of the few 'democratic' boroughs in the country. His hobbies included botany, which turned him into a keen environmentalist and a champion of biodiversity (pp. 234–35). But what is truly exceptional about him is not that he took such an active interest in so many different disciplines and fields of political activity, but that he *excelled* in all of them, to the extent of setting new standards among academics while also reshaping popular opinion. Thus his *Principles of Political Economy* (first published in 1848, then widely revised in successive editions until 1873), became and remained a main textbook in British and Irish universities for a whole generation. Its abridged popular edition sold tens of thousands of copies, and inspired the publication of similar works by some of Mill's disciples (including Henry and Millicent Fawcett), which in turn fired the reforming zeal of late-Victorian labour leaders.

Of course, of all of his works, it is *On Liberty* (1859) which has been and continues to be the one most widely read. This is not surprising, not only because of the intrinsic value of this 'little book' (as Mill called it), but also because liberalism was certainly the key dimension of

his thought and whole mind-set. Liberty was at the root of his attitude both to democracy and gender equality and to the 'socialism' with which he toyed throughout his career. As Reeves argues:

[It] was Mill's liberalism that shaped his response to socialism ... He was vehemently opposed to centralised state control of the economy, but was a strong supporter of socialism in the form of collective ownership of individual enterprises, competing in a market economy. In the final analysis, the best system was the one which provided for the 'greatest amount of human liberty and spontaneity' ... Mill was a liberal, a democrat and a socialist – in that order. (p.7)

Here we find a further reason why Mill continues to exert a powerful fascination on modern Liberals, especially in this country and the rest of Europe, where 'liberty' is closely linked to a degree of social democracy.



This link, which came to dominate Liberal politics in the days of Beveridge and Keynes, was first identified by Mill, for whom finding the right balance between individualism and social responsibility was a moral imperative as well as the main question in modern social engineering.

Reeves brings to life this extraordinary figure in a sympathetic but critical biography, a comprehensive study which reveals – ‘warts and all’ – the multifaceted personality of this philosopher–man of action. It must be said that there are not many ‘warts’, but Mill was no saint, let alone ‘the Saint of Rationalism’ as Gladstone dubbed him – at least not in the sense of being only motivated by some cool utilitarian calculus of costs and benefits. On the contrary, he was passionate to an excess, often allowing his emotions to drive him beyond prudence. His personal austerity and principled approach to public affairs were somehow ‘saintly’, but Reeves puts them in context and shows how Mill could also be extremely prickly and unforgiving, especially when it came to what he perceived as affronts to his beloved friend, intellectual partner and (eventually) wife, Harriet Taylor. It did not help that she was also touchy and self-centred. Reeves offers a persuasive reassessment of their relationship and her influence on him. This is an area which has attracted considerable debate, largely because Mill was always extravagantly generous in his praise of Harriet’s gifts and contribution to his intellectual development. Weighing carefully the evidence, Reeves suggests that she should not be regarded as either the instigator of Mill’s most radical views (for example on gender equality and ‘socialism’), or as a boastful mediocrity. Instead, Harriet was for him primarily an intellectual companion,

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who constantly stimulated and encouraged him to explore new ideas and venture into uncharted and difficult territories, even when this involved standing up to public opinion and challenging contemporary political correctness.

One of the areas in which Mill was a resolute ‘nonconformist’ was in his attitude to racial prejudice. In a famous revisionist account, Mehta has criticised Mill for his ‘Orientalist’ attitudes to India.<sup>3</sup> An Orientalist he may have been, but without any consistent sense of imperial superiority; in fact he was often critical and dismissive of the claims and pretensions of the European powers, arguing, for example, that ‘the characteristic of Germany is knowledge without thought; of France, thought without knowledge; of England, neither knowledge nor thought’ (cit. pp.220–21). In his days he was in fact criticised for his racial egalitarianism, an attitude which was perceived as out of step not only with public opinion, but also with what the majority regarded as ‘a fact’ – namely, the notion of a cultural (or even biological) superiority of the ‘white man’ over the rest of the human species.

Mastering a bibliography which is not only vast but also multidisciplinary – ranging from the history of political

and economic thought to social and political history and gender studies – Reeves has produced a lucid and perceptive synthesis, which pays equal attention to Mill’s life and the development of his ideas. The book has a predominantly chronological structure, but each chapter has also a strong thematic focus, which enables the author to study the various dimensions and developments of Mill’s thought and career in their historical and biographical context. The result is a great historical biography, which the general reader will find riveting and the professional academic indispensable.

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- 1 M. St J. Packe, *The Life of John Stuart Mill* (Seker & Warburg, 1954); but see also the recent short biography by W. Stafford, *John Stuart Mill* (Macmillan, 1998).
- 2 John Robson et al (eds.), *The Collected Works of John Stuart Mill* (33 volumes, University of Toronto Press and Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965–91).
- 3 U. Singh Mehta, *Liberalism and Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1999). See also Lynn Zastoupil, *John Stuart Mill and India* (Stanford University Press, 1994).

## Social Liberalism

Duncan Brack, Richard S. Grayson and David Howarth (eds.):  
*Reinventing the State: Social Liberalism for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*  
(Politico’s, 2007)

Reviewed by Neil Stockley

**R**EINVENTING THE State appeared on the eve of the Liberal Democrats’ 2007 autumn conference. This was a difficult time for the party.

Its then leader, Sir Menzies Campbell, was achieving little traction with the public and the Liberal Democrats were languishing in the opinion polls.