

John Stuart Mill's odd combination: philosopher kings & *laissez faire*

Andrew Kemp reviews

John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand

by Richard Reeves
(Reeves Atlantic Books,
2007, 616 pages)

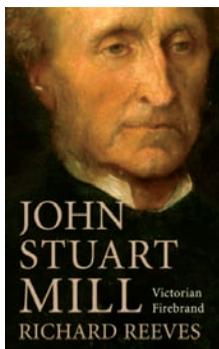
To many, John Stuart Mill was the greatest 'public intellectual' of the last 200 years. His topics of interest were limitless—his *Collected Works* span 33 volumes. His written word remains staggering in its intensity of thought.

And so preparing a biography of John Stuart Mill is an enormous task. The polymath is a dying breed, and a good biography of Mill would require several experts in the field of philosophy, economics, politics and history.

Richard Reeves is a social and political commentator, and perhaps recognising his own limitations, has written a biography that concentrates on the character and values of Mill. This is not an intellectual biography. The reader will not learn of Mill's influence on modern neoclassical economics, or of the finer details of his *System of Logic*. The reader will, however, come away with a clear idea of who Mill was as a person, and how his values directed his intellectual conduct.

Seen in this light, Reeves succeeds remarkably well in achieving his intended aims.

There is a clear theme running through *Victorian Firebrand*. Reeves makes a deliberate effort to move Mill out of 'left' and 'right' labels of political thought and place him squarely in his own time. It is not necessarily what Mill thought that made him the giant he is today, but the disciplined manner



in which he formed his own opinions.

Reeves argues that open-mindedness was perhaps Mill's strongest virtue. Perhaps in rebellion to the strict utilitarian upbringing which he received, Mill rejected any single philosophical model of institutions that could direct the endeavours of government. Rather, Mill saw that philosophy 'was to supply, not a set of model institutions, but principles from which the institutions suitable to any given circumstances might be deduced'.

Where his contemporaries would identify the radical rationalism of Bentham and romantic conservatism of Coleridge as conflicting opposites, Mill would rather describe them as 'competing counterparts'.

Of course, like all great intellectuals, Mill struggled to understand those whose ideas deviated from his own. His vulnerability lay in his impatience for reform. His dissatisfaction with the radicals in British parliament was evident by the 1830s—'now would be the time for knitting a powerful party', he wrote, 'and nobody holds the scattered threads of it in his hands except me'.

There was occasionally a self-pitying arrogance to Mill's writing. Economist Thomas Sowell has gone so far as to suggest that Mill's central idea in *On Liberty*—the tyranny of the majority—was born out of his own anger in not being listened to enough. Reeves also hints at this. Whatever his motives, Mill's work was always alight with pas-

sion, and was always directed towards a passionate audience. He deliberately did not write for the less well-educated, and it was the illiterate class that initially made Mill averse to the prospects of universal suffrage.

Indeed, the idea of Plato's 'philosopher kings' often underpins Mill's perception of the proper structure of society. Particularly in his early years, Mill saw great advantages in having a small but influential intellectual class having the ears of the government. But this elitist attitude did not however dominate Mill's philosophic and political thought. He was not altogether sympathetic to the redistribution of wealth, noting that 'all classes are ready enough, without prompting, to believe that whatever ails them is not their fault, but the crime of somebody else'.

Mill was generally opposed to state welfare provision and a paternalistic government. In this however, his biographer is more sympathetic to Mill's ideological opponents. Reeves argues that 'the working classes in the 1840s were a very long way from the personal economic circumstances necessary for any reasonable conception of individual choice and agency'.

Indeed, sometimes Reeves empathises with the sentiments of the very people Mill explicitly hated: 'the social reformers of the age worried about how to get workers more food, money, leisure and health. Mill worried about how to get them more freedom'.

If Reeves is trying to argue that because Mill was arguing for X, he was not thinking about Y and Z, than perhaps a ninth edition of Mill's *The System of Logic* is in order.

Reeve's book is a worthy introduction to Mill's life and his ideas. But it is far from a definitive biography, preferring to focus on the events that formed Mill's ideas rather than carefully looking at his intellectual achievements.

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