

BOOK REVIEW JURISPRUDENCE

JOHN STUART MILL: Victorian Firebrand

By Richard Reeves

ISBN: 978 1 84354 643 6
Atlantic Books

Price: £30

.....

J S MILL – ‘The most open-minded man in England’

A GREAT BOOK ABOUT A GREAT MAN

A review by Phillip Taylor MBE, Barrister-at-Law, Richmond Green Chambers,

Although he was a Liberal, don't get confused by his 'open-mindedness' when leading Victorian Liberal William Gladstone labelled the great John Stuart Mill as such. I suspect all students will have tremendous affection for Mill even though not everyone will necessarily care for liberals.

In this short review, I will concentrate on the value of the book for the jurisprudence undergraduate because Richard Reeves has produced the first proper and worthwhile study of Mill for 50 years which will be of great benefit to scholars aiming for a 'First'.

Content of the Book

The first thing to do is look at the index at the back because the 15 chapters, plus the prologue and epilogue, give you the essence of the man as a human being while some careful cross-referencing with the likes of Bentham and Co. will give you your legal learning and quotes.

Look specifically at chapters 11 ('On Liberty') and 12 ('To Hell I Will Go') because Reeves offers some useful 21st century quotable insights into our 'Victorian Firebrand' and some of his overt political failings, such as his opposition to the introduction of the secret ballot! Frankly, I have never thought of Mill as a 'firebrand' as the world he left us with was unquestionably better for his efforts as Reeves acknowledges... and, as he concludes, it still is.

Utilitarianism

This masterly work gives Mill his proper place in jurisprudence and the wider field for

his utilitarianism, described by Reeves as, "a word with a divided personality, meaning one thing in common use and the opposite in formal philosophy". What I found particularly inspiring with this biography is the political and historic context in which Mill has been placed because, to understand the value of philosophy and the importance of jurisprudence either as a tutor or learner, is clearly to understand also the historical period in which the thoughts first prevailed, and I am not talking Plato here.

Mr Reeves manages to succeed with his task magnificently throughout the 487 pages and the massive details contained in the notes afterwards. Of particular delight, as a break from the prose, are the splendid series of illustrations and the photographs which firmly place this book at the forefront of both legal and political biography. It is a work which I felt at home with from the outset, written in readable English with the detail needed (and without the footnotes). I am sure that great American, Benjamin Franklin, whom Mill so clearly admired, would agree entirely.

As some commentators have acknowledged, this work is long overdue but it does give us the complexities and contradictions of the man together with his ideals which many of us would like to have if we had our feet firmly taken out of the cemented ground. Will Hutton feels the book comes at a timely moment 'when both socialism and liberalism have lost their way!' Hmm! I would not really equate today's Liberal Democrats or New Labour in any way, shape or form with John Stuart Mill- Mill was a man of his time just, as my forebears were liberals and radicals while I am a radical Tory in the modern David Cameron tradition as contemporary politics continues to be turned on its head ideologically.

The Baby

I will end where Reeves begins...which is a defining moment for Mill in the 1823 St James's Park walk and the discovery of the newly-killed baby, which led to the sort of behaviour which singles Mill out as the highest-ranking philosopher of his century and someone we need a great many more of today: human being, an activist and a thinker.

This authoritative work illustrates that the problems faced by Mill in the 19th century have similar relations today when one reads of his passion for reforms of alcohol, gambling, prostitution (and their Lordships), and whose life was spent in the pursuit of truth and liberty, and the promotion of happiness for all. It is a remarkable story and Richard Reeves gives us a new insight into this radical reformer who's shaping of Victorian England has so many messages left still unread now: it is a great read as well as being a great book about a great man - I am a fan, and you will be, too, when you read the book.

© Phillip Taylor 2008

-ends-

Kind regards

Phillip