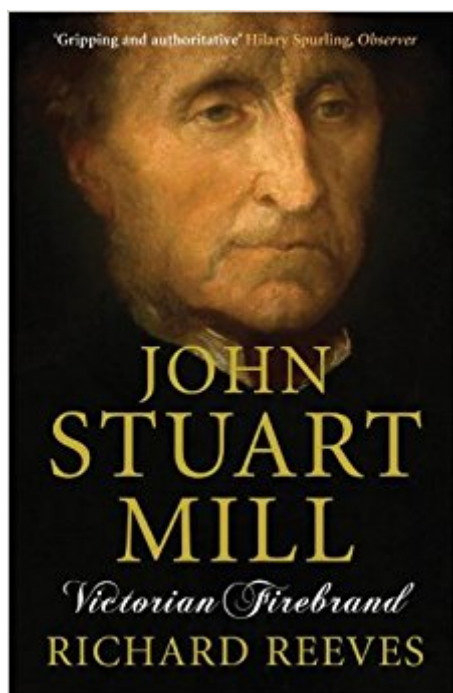


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# John Stuart Mill: Victorian Firebrand



## Synopsis

The definitive life of John Stuart Mill, one of the heroic giants of Victorian England—Richard Reeves' sparkling new biography can be read as an attempt to do justice to this eminent thinker, and it succeeds triumphantly. He reveals Mill as a man of action—a philosopher and radical MP who profoundly shaped Victorian society and whose thinking continues to illuminate our own. The product of an extraordinary and unique education, Mill would become in time the most significant English thinker of the nineteenth century, the author of the landmark essay *On Liberty*, and one of the most passionate reformers and advocates of his revolutionary, opinionated age. As a journalist he fired off weekly articles demanding Irish land reform as the people of that nation starved, as an MP he introduced the first vote on women's suffrage, fought to preserve free-speech, and opposed slavery—and, in his private life, for two decades pursued a love affair with another man's wife. To understand Mill and his contribution to his time and ours, Richard Reeves explores his life and work in tandem. The result is both a riveting and authoritative biography of a man raised by his father to promote happiness, whose life was spent in the pursuit of truth and liberty for all.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Richard Reeves' sparkling new biography succeeds triumphantly. Practically every aspect of Mill's life and thought is freshly presented. -- John Gray \* Independent \* Gripping and authoritative... Liberty, individualism and imagination were the essence of Mill's thought, and now that Mill's

liberalism seems to have finally run its course, Reeves spells out its implications with exemplary lucidity, thoroughness and brio. -- Hilary Spurling \* Observer \* Richard Reeves has assembled an impressive array of material and marshalled it with great style... the pace never slackens, the writing is slick and lucid. -- Phil Collins \* Daily Telegraph \* Meticulously explored... This is a masterpiece. \* Catholic Herald \*

Richard Reeves is a leading social and political commentator, writing regularly for the Guardian, New Statesman, Observer, and Prospect. He is a former Columnist of the Year and Young Financial Journalist of the Year and has held research fellowships at the Institute for Public Policy Research and the University of London.

This is a fascinating and compelling read which reflects considerable study and research by the author, Richard Reeves. John Stuart Mill is a fascinating character in many ways, although I suspect many today would find a lot of his views rather pedestrian in nature, given the current climate of what some call "a liberal society". However, his personal life would probably raise eyebrows among a majority of the populace, particularly his platonic relationship with a married woman whose husband apparently ignored the relationship to a great degree. The lady would subsequently become his wife. Surprisingly, given the vast amount of his published works amounting to some thirty volumes, Mill has only two major biographical works to his name. The first, *The Life of John Stuart Mill*, with a Pref. by F. A. Hayek was only published in 1954 while the second, *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: Their Correspondence and Subsequent Marriage*, examines the friendship and subsequent marriage of the two soul mates. Mill himself left us his *Autobiography* [[ASIN:0865976503 *The Collected Works, Vol. 1: Autobiography*...]] which, despite the author's well known sense of detachment and objectivity, does not do justice to his life. Mill also is a controversial character, as others who have made reference to his youthful exuberance to the promotion of contraception, have previously noted. He set an astonishing example, which others today would do well to follow, of not campaigning during the period prior to his election as a Member of Parliament for the Westminster Constituency. The main source of the controversy around Mill and his thought is to do with his portrayal as a Liberal, in the British sense of the word. Richard Reeves does not set out with an explicit aim to capture Mill and his views for the Centre Left ground but it is clearly part of his intention and I feel that some readers of this book may conclude that he has done so. A word of warning here. There are many who consider themselves to be on the "right" (perhaps even "Right") of the political spectrum who accuse Mill of being a Socialist. Indeed, I suspect many

of those same people have little familiarity with his works. Reeves, unlike his illustrious predecessors, makes Mill come alive within the pages of this work. He provides a vivid picture of the life of Mill which is far from being dry as dust and fills out the two dimensional outline with which many are familiar into a robust three dimensional figure with an unusual life and lifestyle, which, although distant from that of most English eccentrics, places him towards that sort of characterisation. We are faced with a narrative which is sympathetic to Mill's experience as a child of being torn away from his mother's arms and placed under the ruthless eye of his father, a cold, distant man, who teaches Mill a classical education from an early age and which causes emotional and psychological trauma later in life. It is this pairing of the human side of his life with the intellectual journey which makes for such compelling reading and makes it difficult for the reader to put the book down long enough to make a cup of tea or coffee. The author writes in such a way as to bring home the dramatic events in Mill's life in such a way that we are almost in awe at the way that the objective Mill deals with those events whereas we, mere mortals, would struggle to deal with them. I am very appreciative too, of the treatment Mill and Harriet Taylor receive at the biographer's hands. Whilst he questions the notion of the platonic relationship, he holds up a clear picture of the intellectual nature of their relationship and one can almost imagine the conversations between the two being very detached and objective. Reeves makes clear the affection that Mill has for Harriet and makes explicit the esteem that Mill had for her, so much so that he articulates views which run somewhat contrary to his documented thought, and sustains those views even beyond her death. It does seem to me that the clarity with which some view Mill's position on the political spectrum is not an accurate viewpoint. Although he remains, to me at least, predominantly a Classical Liberal, his individualism is the key to his understanding. In many respects setting him up as the archetypal libertarian is bound to fail as no one's thought can be so pure. While there are clear signs of a social democrat Mill exhibited by his support for Representatives for (and not of) the working classes and his enthusiasm for co-operatives, they are in no way dominant. Richard Reeves has done a tremendous service to the restoration of John Stuart Mill as one of the giants of British thought by portraying a man with an enormous intellect whose works will be discussed and debated for many years to come. At the end of this superb book, I hope readers will not find a conclusion but a renewed interest in finding out more about this Victorian Firebrand.

I cannot imagine the amount of effort it must have required to evaluate all the relevant material needed to write this book. Roland Barthes once quipped that a biography is a novel that dare not speak its name. If I had to name one biography that would make that aphorism less applicable, it

would be this one. The second part of the book title might mislead one to think that this is a page turner, but it is not. When a thoroughly written book is written about a thoroughly reflective writer, the necessary exposition dilutes any feeling like suspense. As the book reveals the flaws in some of Mill's statements, this book isn't a lengthy adulation, but it generally seems to be a gallant defense of Mill. This book sweeps away two of the lingering myths about JSM: the idea that he never said anything aphoristic and that he was emotionally numb. The flaws in this book are minor overall. I point out that the endnotes and bibliography of the book are far more generous than the index. I cite this single example: One of the most memorable things that Mill ever said about conservatism (pp 374-375) can't be found using the index, even though the index makes eight other entries under 'conservatism' that reveal nothing as memorable as what can be found on those two pages. I also wish that the book had attempted to show more about Mill's stances on social issues that are still contentious in the current decade (like animal rights.) Unfortunately, the greater number of words are written about Mill's stances on issues that are nearly settled (slavery and women's suffrage.) I realize that the author's aim was to explain to readers how stances that are uncontroversial today are only so because of the earlier confrontation by thinkers like Mill. I suppose, like all other great biographies, the book's thoroughness didn't end my curiosity but incited even more. I wish I had been introduced to Mill through this book when I was an undergraduate rather than starting with Utilitarianism. Of all the non-fiction books I've read in the past few years, I feel like this one has taught me the most about any person or any age. I wish I could have written it. There's a superb review of this book found in the NY Times.

A very good look back on the life of the famous public thinker and activist. Richard Reeves provides the basic information necessary for a modern reader to understand John Stuart Mill's impact on his own age and afterwards, especially as related to the concept of personal liberty and the fight for women's rights. While his unusual personal life (e.g., an unequalled childhood education and a long love interest with a married woman who, upon widowhood, became his wife) is covered by Mr. Reeves, the main thrust of this book is Mill's thinking and actions related to the great liberal issues of 19th century Britain. One area I did find lacking in Mr. Reeves' otherwise strong effort is the absent of analysis on Mill's direct impact on India given the subject of this biography's long career in a leadership post at the East India Company.

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