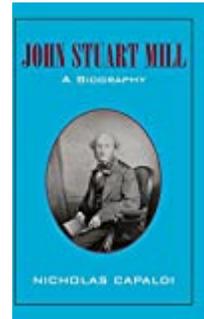




**Nicholas Capaldi.** *John Stuart Mill: A Biography.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. xx + 436 pp. \$27.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-62024-6.



**Reviewed by** H. S. Jones (Department of History, University of Manchester)

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### Mill against the Enlightenment Project

“Few lives,” in the words of the Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, “have been more closely scrutinized than that of John Stuart Mill.” But the absence of an authoritative modern biography has long remained a regret and a puzzle. The last biography was published fifty years ago by the former county cricketer Michael St. John Packe. Since then a Mill industry has developed in universities across the English-speaking world, led by the late John Robson and his collaborators at the University of Toronto, whose edition of the *Collected Works* stretches to thirty-three volumes. A major conference, to commemorate the bicentenary of Mill’s birth, is to be held at University College London in 2006. A new biography is overdue, and Nicholas Capaldi’s study is doubly useful, for it not only provides a fresh account of the life, but also attempts a synthetic interpretation of Mill’s thought. While the Mill industry has generated hundreds of monographic studies of Mill’s logic, his political economy, his religious thought, his conception of liberty, democracy, utilitarianism, socialism, nationality, and a host of other subjects, there remain relatively few full-scale (as opposed to introductory) attempts to grapple with the totality of his thought. We can be certain

that Capaldi does not offer the last word on the subject. But he has risen to the challenge of writing a biography which is at the same time a major revisionist account of Mill’s thought.

Capaldi is an American conservative who holds the Legendre-Soule Distinguished Chair in Business Ethics at Loyola University, New Orleans. He is known as a critic of affirmative action programs and as an advocate of the revival of the natural law tradition in the wake of the collapse of the so-called “Enlightenment Project.” We might have expected an unsympathetic or, at best, an ambivalent account of Mill from these quarters. Conservative commentators on Mill have seen him as the progenitor of 1960s advanced liberalism, one who valued liberty for the enlightened few but had little time for the freedoms of the backward many who remained attached to traditional beliefs and practices. This was famously the argument of Maurice Cowling in *Mill and Liberalism* (1963). Proponents of laissez faire have tended to view Mill as an apostate whose elitist disdain for the vulgarities of capitalism led him into far too many compromises with socialism. American conservatives alarmed at the

erosion of traditional moral values have tended to see Mill—at least, the Mill of *On Liberty*—as an enemy who did not see that freedom flourished within, rather than in opposition to, an inherited moral framework. Gertrude Himmelfarb made herself the mouthpiece of this point of view in her *On Liberty and Liberalism* (1974). Himmelfarb warmed to the early Mill, the author of the essays on “The spirit of the age,” “civilization,” and “Coleridge.” This Mill understood that social order depended on the existence of acknowledged authority, and he cherished a moderate liberty which respected law, custom, and tradition. For Himmelfarb these were themes that recurred in Mill’s more sophisticated writings to the end of his life. But *On Liberty* was written under the baneful influence of Harriet Taylor, for whom authentic freedom must entail individual self-assertion in the face of social convention. Hayek shared Himmelfarb’s distinction between these two liberal traditions. Like her he identified with the moderate and classical liberalism of Montesquieu, Burke, Tocqueville, and Acton, and doubted whether Mill really belonged in this company.

Capaldi defies expectations and depicts a coherent and systematic Mill who should be acceptable to the American Right. One reason why a biographical account of the development of Mill’s thought is needed is that commentators have remained divided about the depth of his conversion to romantic and historicist points of view in the wake of his famous mental crisis. Major commentators such as Alan Ryan and William Thomas have on the whole seen Mill as renovating rather than abandoning the empiricist tradition in which he was reared. Mill produced a softer, more sophisticated, and perhaps less radical version of utilitarianism, but for the most part these commentators maintain that he retained his allegiance to that tradition, and to the Enlightenment conception of a reformist social science. Capaldi goes much further in emphasizing Mill’s permanent debt to romanticism. He even concludes, provocatively, that “Mill was the greatest of the English Romantics” (p. 365). For Capaldi, this assimilation of romanticism placed Mill on the right side of the argument: Capaldi, the critic of the “Enlightenment Project,” has previously rebutted “all extant versions of the claim that meaningful human action can be explained naturalistically” (p. 395 n. 3), and is sure that there is “ultimately no point in talking about a social ‘science’ as opposed to social studies.” He sees Mill’s *System of Logic* and his *Principles of Political Economy* as successful in acquiring the status of authorities because they were both sufficiently ambiguous to offer something to all sides.

In many ways this appreciation of the enduring impact of romanticism on Mill is welcome. It is unfortunate, however, that Capaldi presents that romanticism in terms of a repudiation of a reified “Enlightenment Project.” He uses this term repeatedly, and consistently capitalizes it. No one in Mill’s time spoke of “the enlightenment,” let alone a capitalized “Enlightenment Project,” and while no intellectual historian can be imprisoned by the language available to his subjects, there is a problem in this case. The coming to terms with the “revolt of the nineteenth century against the eighteenth”—as he put it in his essay on Coleridge—was a vital thread in Mill’s intellectual development. But for the biographer what was most important about it was what it tells us about Mill’s self-consciousness. It is confusing to describe Mill’s relationship with his Benthamite heritage in such alien terms.

The key chapter for the reader who is chiefly interested in Capaldi’s interpretation of Mill thought, as opposed to his narrative of Mill’s life, is chapter 9, dealing with the “Memorial Essays” which Mill wrote as a tribute to his widow following her death in 1858. Here Capaldi expounds his central argument that the pivotal concept in Mill’s moral, political, and social thought was “autonomy.” The freedom to which Mill was fundamentally committed was not the “negative” freedom that consists in the absence of external constraints, whether imposed by law or convention. Rather, it was freedom as an internal condition, freedom as self-rule. (This is an important distinction, but Capaldi may confuse readers by labeling the former “liberty” and the latter “freedom,” so defying everyday usage.) Mill’s recognition of the central value of autonomy owed much to Harriet Taylor, but he had also absorbed it from his encounter with the German Romantics, and above all with Humboldt.

There is a common view that a tension ran through Mill’s thought. On the one hand, in *On Liberty* he was the champion of individual liberty and the rights of the individual against an intrusive public opinion; but he was also deeply attached to the superiority of altruism over self-interest, and essays such as “Considerations on Representative Government” display Mill’s profound concern to nurture civic virtue. Capaldi dissents from this interpretation. “It is a misunderstanding of individuality,” he writes, “to see it as opposed to the notion of a cultural whole. One cannot be an autonomous individual on one’s own, for individuality requires the support of a liberal culture. In seeking this context for myself, I necessarily seek it for others” (p. 287). Whereas a host of commentators have set out to show, against Mill, that meaningful liberty depends upon the social environment,

Capaldi argues that this was precisely Mill's point.

The importance of this book for Mill historiography should be clear by now. Hitherto, those writers who have emphasized the systematic quality of Mill's work have done so by arguing that fundamentally he remained loyal to utilitarian ethics and empiricist epistemology. Commentators who have been more impressed by the extent of his concessions to conservative politics and romantic aesthetics have highlighted the unresolved tensions at the heart of his work. Capaldi is the first to depict Mill's outlook as systematically romantic. It is unlikely that he will persuade all his readers, but he puts the case forcefully and cogently, and his book will have to be taken seriously.

There are, inevitably, a few slips. It was, of course, Pius IX, and not Pius XI, who was the pope who overreacted to the events of 1848 and became a trenchant reactionary (p. 342). The Baden Powell who contributed to the liberal Anglican volume of *Essays and Reviews* in 1860 was not the founder of the Boy Scouts, but his father, Savilian Professor of Geometry at Oxford (p. 350). The editor of that volume was H. B. Wilson and not Mark Pattison (p. 350). The final chapter, "Last Years (1869-1873)," comes across as rather hurried, and the two paragraphs on Mill's reputation and the two on his significance scarcely do justice to their themes. But these criticisms detract only marginally from a book which must be considered a tour de force.

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