

I

Childhood and Early Education: The Great Experiment (1806–1820)

THE TWO most important facts about the life of John Stuart Mill were that he was the son of James Mill and that he fell in love with Harriet Hardy Taylor. We shall begin our story with John Stuart Mill's (hereinafter referred to as "Mill") relation to his father (hereinafter referred to as "James Mill").

James Mill was the leader of a group of thinkers, known as the Philosophic Radicals,¹ who were intent upon a vast campaign of social reform. The other key figures included Jeremy Bentham and David Ricardo. What prompted their interest in social reform? During the last half of the eighteenth century, Britain had experienced the extraordinary economic transformation of the Industrial Revolution. The revolution succeeded not only in spurring economic growth but also in creating or uncovering an unprecedented number of political, economic, social, moral, and religious problems. The human and moral center of gravity had shifted. Just about every fundamental belief had to be rethought, and most institutions reformed.² The story of Mill's life is intimately tied to that reform and to the rethinking of liberal culture.

James Mill had been born in Scotland on April 6, 1773.³ His father had been a shoemaker. His mother had changed the original family name of Milne. His mother had great ambitions for him, and from the very first James was made to feel that he was superior and the center of attention. His intellectual prowess was recognized at an early age, and as a result he acquired as patrons Sir John and Lady Jane Stuart. They arranged for him to attend the University of Edinburgh so that he could prepare for the Scottish Presbyterian ministry, and they also arranged for him to tutor their daughter.

James Mill was seventeen at the time he served as the tutor of Wilhelmina Stuart. A special friendship developed with the daughter of

his patron, Sir John Stuart, a relationship that could never be consummated, given the social structure of the time. From this point on, James Mill was the implacable enemy of the class system in Britain. James Mill wrote of her that “besides being a beautiful woman, [she] was in point of intellect and disposition one of the most perfect human beings I have ever known.” Even Sir Walter Scott had fallen in love with her. James would later name one of his daughters Wilhelmina. This throws a great deal of light both on why Mill would later cherish his relationship with Harriet and on why he wrote of her with such lavish praise, in a manner not unlike his father’s. It also tells us something more about James Mill.⁴

Among James Mill’s university friendships could be counted Jeffrey Thomson, later editor of the Whig *Edinburgh Review*, and Henry Brougham, a brilliant political leader who would be allied with James Mill in the Great Reform Bill of 1832. James Mill was influenced by the lectures of Dugald Stewart, the reigning philosopher of the Scottish school of common sense, but he also read, in addition to theology, Plato, Rousseau, David Hume, Voltaire, and the works of Condillac and Hartley on the functioning of the mind. These were among the authors who formed James Mill’s mind, and they would do likewise for Mill.

James Mill was licensed by the Presbytery to preach. The parishioners considered his sermons to be a bit too learned. Unfortunately, the scripts of the sermons were eventually destroyed when the Mill family moved to Kensington. However, James Mill could not accept the doctrines of any church and abandoned his career in the ministry. In the early years of his marriage he continued to attend church and had all of his children baptized. By 1810, under the influence of Bentham and another friend, the Spanish general Miranda, he had given up all religious attachments. The other members of his family, including his son John, continued to attend. The young son was even heard to say to his aunt that “the two most important books in the world were Homer and the Bible.”

After briefly considering the possibility of a career in law, James Mill moved to London to pursue a career as a journalist. While in London, he met and married Harriet Burrow (on June 5, 1805) when she was twenty-three and he almost thirty-two. Harriet’s mother had taken over the management and ownership of a residence for “lunatics” from her late husband; she was an attractive woman whose daughter had inherited her beauty; there was a dowry of £400, and the couple was given a house by Harriet’s mother – 12 Rodney Terrace, Pentonville. During 1810 the

family lived briefly in the poet John Milton's former house. Until his appointment at India House, James Mill was under constant financial pressure, not the least of which was the pressure of paying his own father's debts. These debts had resulted from the bankruptcy of his father's shoe repair business following the loss of James Mill's mother and brother to consumption and his father's subsequent paralysis.

Despite fathering nine children with her – four boys and five girls – at regular two-year intervals over a twenty-year period,⁵ James Mill became contemptuous of his wife's lack of intellect and her weakness of character.

The one really disagreeable trait in [James] Mill's character, and the thing that has left the most painful memories, was the [contemptuous] way that he allowed himself to speak and behave to his wife and children before visitors. When we read his letters to friends, we see him acting the family man with the utmost propriety, putting his wife and children into their due place; but he seemed unable to observe this part in daily intercourse.⁶

In commenting on James Mill's book *The Analysis of the Human Mind*, Bain noted that "the section on the Family affections is replete with the ideal of perfect domestic happiness: and, if the author did not act up to it, as he did to his ideal of public virtue, the explanation is to be sought in human weakness and inconsistency."⁷

It was there at Rodney Terrace that Mill was born on May 20, 1806, and christened John Stuart in honor of James Mill's former patron. Although James Mill might have been bitter about the class barrier that had prevented him from courting Wilhelmina, he was ever mindful of the importance of patronage for social mobility. An expanding family – they ultimately had nine children – and general economic difficulties plagued the Mills until the success of James Mill's *History of British India* in 1818. Despite burdens and obstacles that would have crushed a lesser man, including his unorthodox political views, James Mill achieved both financial security and a significant place in the employment of India House in 1819. Along with Edward Strachey⁸ and Thomas Love Peacock, James Mill was one of three outsiders brought in to deal with the escalating demands of the correspondence between the directors in the home office and Indian officials.

James Mill had started writing an essay on India in 1806 in order to prove a specific point, namely, that the East India Company had mis-handled and monopolized foreign trade. He did not realize at the time

that the essay would take twelve years to complete and become a work of ten volumes.⁹ The East India Company (“John” Company, in common parlance) was a quasi-autonomous commercial enterprise that would rule India in conjunction with the crown until 1857. In 1818, the possibility arose of gaining the chair of Greek at Glasgow University, but being unwilling to sign the confession of faith, James Mill could not pursue an academic career. At the same time, James Mill established a personal relationship with several members of the board of governors of India House in the hope of obtaining employment. It was his friends Joseph Hume and David Ricardo who called to the attention of George Canning, then president of the India Board, the publication of the history. This was enough to offset the opposition of the Tory members of the board. James Mill’s expertise on India, his organizational skills, and his industriousness would eventually permit him to rise to the position of chief examiner in 1830.

In addition to his career at India House, James Mill became one of the leaders of the reform movement known as Philosophic Radicalism, and among his political friends were Bentham, Ricardo, Grote, and Francis Place. Grote described James Mill at their first meeting as follows:

He is a very profound thinking man, and seems well disposed to communicate, as well as clear and intelligible in his manner. His mind has, in deed, all that cynicism and asperity which belong to the Benthamian school, and what I chiefly dislike in him is the readiness and seeming preference with which he dwells on the *faults and defects* of others – even of the greatest men! But it is so very rarely that a man of any depth comes across my path, that I shall most assuredly cultivate his acquaintance a good deal farther.¹⁰

One of the most remarkable aspects of the final published version of Mill’s *Autobiography* is that he talks about his mother only indirectly. One might suggest that this is not surprising, as the *Autobiography* is primarily about Mill’s intellectual and moral development. Even if this is so, it points to the fact that his mother played no major role in his intellectual and moral development. From what little evidence we have, it appears as if she conformed to the eighteenth-century notion of women as genteel and useless. Mill’s indirect comment about his mother is his pointing out what a mistake it was for his father to have married early and had a large family before being capable of supporting them. Mill attempted to draw a moral lesson from this, noting that such behavior on his father’s part was later to be criticized by James Mill himself, not only as imprudent but also

as inconsistent with the kind of advice that the Philosophic Radicals were to give members of the working class.

Although Mill never directly mentions his mother in his published *Autobiography*, he does give us an account of her in an unpublished draft, an unflattering reference that Harriet Taylor Mill had him remove for the published version.

That rarity in England, a really warm-hearted mother would in the first place have made my father a totally different being and in the second would have made the children grow up loving and being loved. But my mother with the very best intentions only knew how to pass her life in drudging for them. Whatever she could do for them she did, & they liked her, because she was kind to them, but to make herself loved, looked up to, or even obeyed, required qualities which she unfortunately did not possess. . . . I thus grew up in the absence of love and in the presence of fear: and many and indelible are the effects of this bringing up in the stunting of my moral growth.¹¹

This sounds very much like a plea for a mother of character who would have stood up for him against his father's harshness and at the same time would have introduced an element of affection based upon strength. For the rest of his life, and despite the fact that his mother always doted on him, Mill would remain as contemptuous of his mother as his father had been.¹²

What we do know about his mother, Harriet Barrow Mill, is that when she married James Mill at the age of twenty-three she was very pretty, and that Mill inherited her aquiline appearance. She was described by one of her husband's professional associates as "good-natured and good-tempered, two capital qualities in a woman," but also as "not a little vain of her person, and would be thought to be still a girl."¹³ One of Mill's sisters, also named Harriet, describes her mother as follows:

Here was an instance of two persons, as husband and wife, living as far apart, under the same roof, as the north pole from the south; from no 'fault' of my poor mother most certainly; but how was a woman with a growing family and very small means (as in the early years of the marriage) to be anything but a German Hausfrau? How could she 'intellectually' become a companion for such a mind as my father?¹⁴

A later acquaintance, Mrs. Grote, described the relationship as follows: "He [James Mill] married a stupid woman, 'a housemaid of a woman', and left off caring for her and treated her as his squah but was always faithful

to her.”¹⁵ Another visitor described her as “a tall, handsome lady, sweet-tempered, with pleasant manners, fond of her children: but I think not much interested in what the elder ones and their father talked about.”¹⁶

Mill offered the following reflection on his father’s relationship with his mother:

Personally I believe my father to have had much greater capacities of feeling than were ever developed in him. He resembled almost all Englishmen in being ashamed of the signs of feeling, and by the absence of demonstration, starving the feelings themselves. In an atmosphere of tenderness and affection he would have been tender and affectionate; but his ill-assorted marriage and his asperities of temper disabled him from making such an atmosphere. It was one of the most unfavourable of the moral agencies which acted on me in my boyhood, that mine was not an education of love but of fear.¹⁷

The importance of affection and the inability of James Mill to express affection is a repeated theme in Mill’s *Autobiography*:

The element which was chiefly deficient in his moral relation to his children was that of tenderness. . . . If we consider further that he was in the trying position of sole teacher, and add to this that his temper was constitutionally irritable, it is impossible not to feel true pity for a father who did, and strove to do, so much for his children, who would have valued their affection, yet who must have been constantly feeling that fear of him was drying it up at its source. This was no longer the case later in life, and with his younger children. They loved him tenderly: and if I cannot say so much of myself, I was always loyally devoted to him.¹⁸

Early Education

James Mill spent a considerable period of time almost every day in educating his own children. As an example of his father’s commitment to education, the largest part of the first chapter of Mill’s *Autobiography* focuses on what has become the most famous early childhood reading list of all time. Mill was taught Greek at the age of three. At the age of five, Mill accompanied George Bentham on a visit to Lady Spencer, the wife of the head of the admiralty, whereupon Mill discoursed on “the comparative merits of Marlborough and Wellington.”¹⁹ Mill read Plato in Greek by the age of seven; he read the histories by Robertson, Hume, and Gibbon at the same time; at the age of eight, he studied Latin; Newton’s *Principia Mathematica* was mastered by the age of eleven, the classics of

logic by twelve, and the rigors of higher mathematics, Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*, and David Ricardo's *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* by fourteen. At the age of fifteen, Mill was introduced to the writings of Jeremy Bentham, and this was soon followed, at age sixteen, by the philosophical works of Locke, Berkeley, Helvétius, and Condillac. Among the many authors Mill cites are Plutarch, Virgil, Ovid, Lucretius, Cicero, Homer, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes, Thucydides, Tacitus, Juvenal, Polybius, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Milton, Spencer, and Dryden.

Some indication of the extent and rigor of this regimen can be gathered from the following summary. In 1814, at the age of eight, Mill was reading Thucydides, Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Phoenissae*, Aristophanes' *Plutus* and the *Clouds*, and the *Philippics* of Demosthenes in Greek; in Latin, he was reading the *Oration for Archias* of Cicero, as well as the *Anti-Verres*. In mathematics, he was studying Euclid and Euler's *Algebra*, as well as Bonnycastle's *Algebra* and West's *Geometry*. In 1814, he also began reading Ferguson's *Roman History*, Mitford's *Grecian History*, and Livy (in English). At the same age of eight he was himself writing a history of the united provinces from the revolt from Spain, in the reign of Phillip II, to the accession of the *Stadtholder*, William III, to the throne of England. He also wrote a history of Roman government to the Licinian Laws. The latter were significant in Roman history for promoting democratic reforms, such as mandating that at least one consul had to be a plebeian.

The 1815 reading list included (in Greek) the *Odyssey*, Theocritus, two orations of Aeschines, and Demosthenes' *On the Crown*. The Latin reading list included the first six books of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the first six books of Livy's *Bucolics*, the first six books of the *Aeneid*, and Cicero's *Orations*. To the works in mathematics were added Simpson's *Conic Sections*, West's *Conic Sections* and *Spherics*, Kersey's *Algebra*, and Newton's *Universal Arithmetic*. In 1816, he was reading (in Greek), Xenophon's *Hellenica*, Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*, Euripides' *Medea*, and Aristophanes' *Frogs*; in Latin, he read Horace's *Epodes* and Polybius. In mathematics, he studied Stewart's *Propositions Geometricae*, Playfair's *Trigonometry*, and Simpson's *Algebra*. By 1817, Mill was reading Thucydides in Greek for the second time, Demosthenes' *Orations*, and Aristotle's *Rhetoric* (for which he made a synoptic table). In Latin, he read Lucretius, Cicero's *Letter to Atticus*, *Topica*, and *De Partitone Oratoria*. In mathematics, he began an article on conic sections in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Euler's *Analysis of Infinities*, Simpson's *Fluxions*, Keill's *Astronomy*, and Robinson's

Mechanical Philosophy. At an age when most adolescents today are just beginning to think about higher education, Mill had already completed what would today be considered the most rigorous honors program in existence.

What is curious about this extensive reading list are the omissions. Much of the Scottish Enlightenment is omitted, except for Robertson's history and Smith's *Wealth of Nations* (doubtless misread). There is no work by David Hume other than the *History*. There is almost no moral philosophy; even the works of Cicero chosen avoid his moral pieces. There is no theology.

Mill did have a number of good things to say about his early education. Among the important analytical skills he acquired from his father was the ability to dissect arguments in order to discover their strengths and, especially, their weaknesses. In later life, Mill was to become a formidable advocate and polemicist. The practice of the Socratic method – not only upon others but also, by internalization, upon himself – enabled him to critique his own position before submitting it to others. This capacity for self-criticism and self-analysis could have a destructive impact upon the practitioner, but it could also have a liberating and ennobling effect. Many years later, in the essay *On Liberty*, Mill would emphasize the morally transforming effect on character of the willingness to examine every side of every argument. Perhaps the most positive lesson of Mill's early education was his coming to learn, in true Socratic fashion, the importance of discovering the truth for oneself. As he put it in the *Autobiography*, "a pupil from whom nothing is ever demanded which he cannot do, never does all he can."

There was one cardinal point in this training, of which I have already given some indication, and which, more than anything else, was the cause of whatever good it effected. Most boys or youths who have had much knowledge drilled into them, have their mental capacities not strengthened, but overlaid by it. They are crammed with mere facts, and with the opinions or phrases of other people, and these are accepted as a substitute for the power to form opinions of their own: and thus the sons of eminent fathers, who have spared no pains in their education, so often grow up mere parroters of what they have learnt, incapable of using their minds except in the furrows traced for them. Mine, however, was not an education of cram. My father never permitted anything which I learnt to degenerate into a mere exercise in memory. He strove to make the understanding not only go along with every step of the teaching, but, if possible, preceded it. Anything which could

be found out by thinking I never was told, until I had exhausted my efforts to find it out for myself.²⁰

Given the content and rigor of Mill's education, no reader could possibly confuse this with those contemporary critiques of memorization that suggest a strict dichotomy between the acquisition of content and the development of critical skills. Mill is here advocating not an either/or but a both/and. Some indication of this can be gathered from a later (1835) critique of the "system of cram." Mill specifically attacks the French mathematician Joseph Jacotot for a method that "surpasses all former specimens of the cram method in this, that former cram-doctors crammed an unfortunate child's memory with abstract propositions [without] meaning; but Jacotot . . . actually makes the unfortunate creature get by rote not only the propositions, but the reasons too."²¹ In opposition to this, Mill suggests instead a method of "cultivating mental power." Throughout his life, and most significantly in *On Liberty*, Mill advocated the liberating effects and the moral transformation that accompanies the self-critical examination of all ideas.

In addition to his required reading, Mill was required to render a *compte rendu*, a daily written summary of what he had discussed that day with his father. Later, he helped his father correct the proofs of the *History of British India*, thereby gaining additional valuable editorial and writing skills. It was in the editorial process that Mill thought that his father almost treated him as an equal. Despite all this, Mill insisted that his father never allowed him to become conceited.

In the midst of this pedagogical regimen, Mill found the time and had the interest to read other things on his own, such as history. He referred to this as his "private reading." This private reading was also accompanied by "private" writing, that is, writing without "the chilling sensation of being under a critical eye."²² The ominous nature of this remark is borne out by the critical comments that Mill later makes about his father's educational program.

His education was for the most part academic and cerebral. Mill faulted his father for being too abstract and not giving enough concrete examples of the principles he espoused. Mill had little contact with his peers in play situations and remained deficient all his life in things requiring manual dexterity. But beyond this is revealed the harshness and impatience of a too-demanding parent. James Mill, as his son tells us, "was often, and much

beyond reason, provoked by my failures in cases where success could not have been expected.” “I was constantly meriting reproof by inattention, inobservance, and general slackness of mind in matters of daily life.”²³ This impression is borne out by another witness, who described James Mill’s teaching method as “by far the best I have ever witnessed, and is infinitely precise; but he is excessively severe. No fault, however trivial, escapes his notice; none goes without reprehension or punishment of some sort.”²⁴ The same witness goes on to describe a particular situation.

Lessons have not been well said this morning by Willie and Clara [Mill’s younger sisters]; there they are now, three o’clock, plodding over their books, their dinner, which they knew went up at one, brought down again; and John, who dines with them, has his books also, for having permitted them to pass when they could not say, and no dinner will any of them get until six o’clock. This has happened once before since I came. The fault today is a mistake in one word.²⁵

James Mill, according to Bain, did make one attempt to give his son something more than an academic upbringing.

Having been in his youth, a full-trained volunteer, he had a due appreciation of army discipline, in giving bodily carriage. He, accordingly, engaged a sergeant from the adjoining barracks, to put them [his male children] through a course of marching drill; while John was practiced in sword exercise. Very little came of this, as far as John in particular was concerned; he was, to the end, backward in all that regarded bodily accomplishments, saving the one point of persistence as a walker. The fact, no doubt, was, that his nervous energy was so completely absorbed in his unremitted intellectual application, as to be unavailable for establishing the co-ordinations of muscular dexterity.²⁶

One of the more interesting criticisms Mill makes of his father’s system is that Mill was forced to teach his younger siblings, a responsibility that lasted into his early thirties. Among other things, Mill was forced to turn down social invitations, such as one to accompany the Grotes on a vacation, because, as his father said, John was needed to teach the younger children. Mill notes here, somewhat cryptically, that the “relation between teacher and taught is not a good moral discipline to either.”²⁷ We are left wondering what he meant by that. Mill “often acted the part of mediator between his father and his elder sister.”²⁸ The household, in addition to the parents and Mill, himself consisted of Mill’s five sisters – Wilhelmina Forbes, Clara, Harriet, Jane, and Mary – as well as his three brothers – Henry, James Bentham Mill, and George. Despite this demanding role, Mill always had