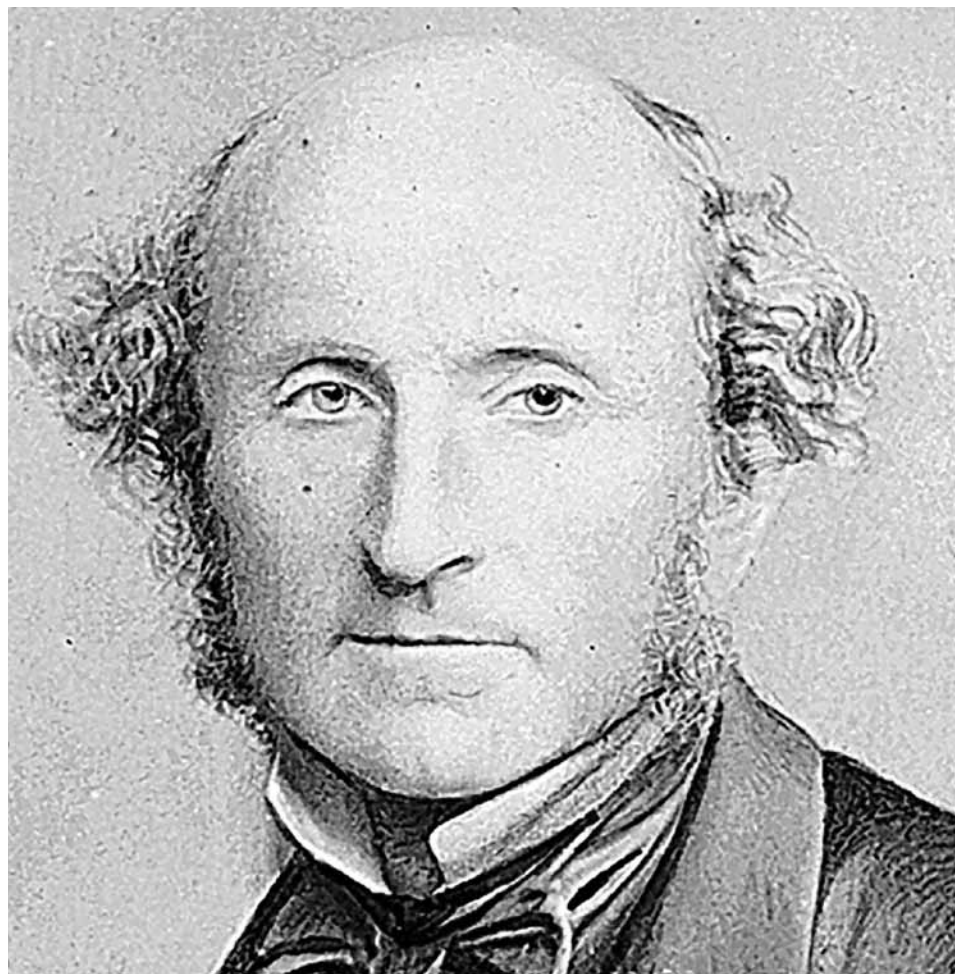


JOHN STUART LIBERAL FATHER

Liberalism and feminism meet powerfully in the life and work of John Stuart Mill. No liberal has been more consistent and forceful in their support for women's rights. No feminist has founded their views so firmly on liberal grounds. The history of the relationship between the Liberal Party and the campaign for women's rights – especially the suffrage movement – is a fairly inglorious one. Mill represents the only significant exception. It is appropriate that next to Mill's grave



in Avignon a small plaque has been added reading: 'En hommage de John

Stuart Mill, Défenseur des Femmes'. **Richard Reeves** analyses Mill's views and their impact.

JARVIS MILL FATHER OF FEMINISM

THE ATTITUDE of Liberals such as Gladstone and Asquith towards the women's movement can be described at best as one of scepticism. Campbell-Bannerman was supportive in theory, but non-committal in practice. The Liberal administrations of all three failed to deliver for women; in the end, it was a coalition government, under Lloyd George's leadership, that legislated to include women in the parliamentary electorate in 1918 – although even then not on equal terms.

Mill's views were well in advance of his time. In the opening paragraph of his most sinewy polemic, *The Subjection of Women*, published in 1869, he declared that his argument was, simply:

That the principle which regulates the existing social relations between the two sexes – the legal subordination of one sex to the other – is wrong in itself, and now one of the chief hindrances to human improvement; and that it ought to be replaced by a principle of perfect equality, admitting

no power or privilege on the one side, nor disability on the other.¹

Mill's support for women did not end with the ballot. He wanted women and men to be treated completely equally in all matters of law, employment, education and sexual relations. He even campaigned to criminalise marital rape, an advance which it would take more than a century to achieve in the UK.

The difference between Mill and the Liberal establishment on the issue of women's rights is of historical importance in and of itself: had the Liberal Party been more 'advanced', to use Mill's preferred prefix, the cause of women's rights would undoubtedly have been accelerated. Some measure of suffrage could have been achieved in the nineteenth century. But is also throws some important light on the foundations of their liberalism. Mill's radical brand of liberalism was founded on the belief that all individuals should be equally free to 'work out their own destiny under their own moral responsibility'. For Mill, the sex or skin colour of an individual was irrelevant. A good

liberal was de facto an anti-racist and a supporter of women's rights. This is not to say that Mill was apolitical: he knew that equality for women was a minority view and cause, and was careful in the timing of his own interventions. But in the end the cause of liberty could not be separated from the cause of gender equality. The road from *On Liberty* led inevitably to *The Subjection of Women*.

For the political leadership of the Liberal Party, women's rights were at best a distraction and at worst a threat to the orderly, Whiggish progress which they often preferred. As late as 1892, quarter of a century after Mill moved his historic amendment to substitute the word 'person' for 'man' in the 1867 Reform Act, Gladstone was describing the argument for political equality for women as a 'novel' one.² The nineteenth-century Liberals were a sometimes uncomfortable coalition between the Whig and Radical wings. On women's rights, the Whigs were in the ascendancy.

To be fair, there were also a number of major nineteenth-century figures who would have described themselves as radical

John Stuart Mill
(1806–73)

but were also blind to the case for women's equality, including James Mill. In his influential *Essay on Government*, published in 1820, Mill senior argued that women could be satisfactorily represented by their husbands or fathers – a view from which his eldest son even then violently dissented, describing it as 'an error as grievous as any against which the essay is directed'.³

The question of how far one group in society could be represented in Parliament by another was one of the key dividing lines between John Stuart Mill's position and the Liberal leaders. Asquith, whose claim to greatness is diminished by his attitudes towards gender equality, declared in 1892 that 'women operate by personal influence, and not by associated or representative action'.⁴

This was a view of democracy strongly at variance with Mill's. He insisted that every group in society had to be represented in Parliament – this was in fact the basis for his support for working-class suffrage. Women's issues could not be represented by their menfolk. Women had to be granted the vote so that they could protect their own welfare. Their interests could not, as the anti-reformers insisted, be seen as safe in their hands of their fathers, husbands and brothers. Dramatic demonstration of this was provided by the fact that these men were themselves all too often the brutal abusers of women, and were often lightly punished. During the 1867 debate Mill declared:

I should like to have a return laid annually before the House of the number of women who are annually beaten to death, kicked to death, or trampled to death by their male protectors: and in an opposite column, the amount of sentences passed, in those cases in which the dastardly criminals did not get off altogether. I should also like to have, in a third column,

the amount of property, the unlawful taking of which was ... by the same judge, thought worthy of the same amount of punishment. We should then have an arithmetical estimate of the value set by a male legislature and male tribunals on the murder of a woman, often by torture continued through years, which, if there is any shame in us, would make us hang our heads.⁵

Mill also destroyed the argument that women worked through indirect influence, the one still adumbrated by Asquith in the quote given above. In the parliamentary debate, he delivered a devastating analysis:

I should like to carry this argument a little further. Rich people have a great deal of indirect influence. Is this a reason for refusing them votes? Does anyone propose a rating qualification the wrong way, or bring in a Reform Bill to disenfranchise all who live in a £500 house, or pay £100 a year in direct taxes?⁶

Another critical area of disagreement between the reformers and the refusers concerned the nature of women themselves. In particular, many of the liberals opposed to women's rights argued that it would either damage their feminine qualities or that these qualities rendered them less capable of democratic participation. Gladstone, in particular, was worried about delicacy. In 1892 he expressed his fear – in a private letter – that involving women in politics would mean inviting 'her (woman) unwittingly to trespass upon the delicacy, the purity, the refinement, the elevation of her own nature, which are the present sources of its power'.⁷ Asquith similarly suggested of women that 'their natural sphere is not the turmoil and dust of politics, but the circle of social and domestic life'.⁸

Mill did not deny that women were currently different, and in some ways inferior to men. But he insisted that this was the result of their subjection rather than a justification for it.

Mill did not deny that women were currently different, and in some ways inferior to men. But he insisted that this was the result of their subjection rather than a justification for it. Society's laws, customs and institutions were designed to make women less than they could be. 'What is now called the nature of women is an eminently artificial thing – the result of forced repression in some directions, unnatural stimulation in others,' he wrote. 'It may be asserted without scruple, that no other class of dependents have had their character so entirely distorted from its natural proportions by their relation with their masters.'⁹

It has to be said that Mill was cautious about revealing the full extent of his feminism. *Subjection* was published when he was sixty-three, and retired from both his administrative role at the East India Company and from parliamentary politics. In his previous publications, the space devoted to the question of women's suffrage expanded steadily, from a footnote in his 1835 *Rationale of Representation*, through a paragraph in *Thoughts on Parliamentary Reform* in 1859 to a robust, three-page treatment in his 1861 *Representative Government*, in which he insisted that gender was 'as entirely irrelevant to political rights, as difference in height, or in the colour of hair' and predicted that within a generation, 'the accident of sex, no more than the accident of skin' would have ceased to be 'sufficient justification for depriving its possessor of the equal protection and just privileges of a citizen'.¹⁰

But when he did put all of his cards on the table, both in the 1867 parliamentary debate and in *Subjection*, the impact was huge. *Subjection* was a declaration of Mill's deepest convictions about gender equality, the issue which, as his friend and protégé Alexander Bain judged, was the one 'which of all others

most engaged his feelings'. It was also a distillation of the major currents of Mill's thinking: the innate equality of all human beings; the corrosive power of dependency; the triumph of reason over custom; the intrinsic value of individual liberty; and the role of institutions and social customs in shaping character. He did not pull his punches, declaring, for example, that: 'Marriage is the only actual bondage known to our law. There remain no legal slaves, except the mistress of every house.'¹¹

Mill saw the relationship between husband and wife as a space where oppression was articulated or liberation represented. The marital relationship is at the heart of Mill's analysis of power in *Subjection*. For him, liberty for women, as well as moral regeneration for men, would come not from a rejection of marriage, but its rejuvenation. As things stood, Mill believed, the marriage contract was little better than the one between a Louisiana plantation-owner and his black slave. Indeed, because of the social climate repressing women, it was in some ways worse: 'I am far from pretending that wives are in general no better treated than slaves' he wrote, 'but no slave is a slave to the same lengths, and in so full a sense of the word, as a wife is.'¹²

For Mill, marriage was 'the citadel of the enemy' – the principal site of women's subjection, and an institution which repressed wives, disfigured the character of men and provided a daily lesson in despotism to children. To Mill, the personal was deeply political. The oppressive potential of marriage lay precisely in its intimate nature: 'Every one of the subjects lives under the very eye, and almost, it may be said, in the hands, of one of the masters.'¹³

Unsurprisingly the book 'burst like a time bomb into the sexual arena' in the words of the social historian Jose Harris, and remained a 'bible of the women's

movement' until the First World War.¹⁴ Translations into French, Danish, German, Italian, Polish and Russian followed almost immediately. The book found its way into some unlikely hands. Visiting a Russian aristocratic household in the summer of 1869, two of Mill's American friends were warmly received by the four daughters of the house when they mentioned their association with Mill. The young Russians declared that the *Subjection* was their bible. 'Yes,' said the eldest, 'I sleep with that book under my pillow.'¹⁵

For Mill, of course, speeches and books were not enough. He was a man of action. Millicent Fawcett described him as the 'principal originator' of the movement for women's suffrage, to which he gave 'the best powers of his mind, and the best years of his life'.¹⁶ Along with his stepdaughter Helen Taylor, Mill was deeply involved in the practicalities of the suffrage campaign, raising money, gathering petitions, giving speeches and using his position as one of the globe's most sought-after correspondents to propagandise for the cause. Half of the letters from the last four years of his life related directly or indirectly to women's issues. Mill and Helen were the moving spirits behind the establishment of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage, a branch of the existing organisation that had strong sections in Manchester and Birmingham.

In the late 1860s Mill became convinced that the cause of women's rights was on the brink of serious political gains. 'I am in great spirits about our prospects, and think we are almost within as many years of victory as I formerly thought decades,' wrote an excited Mill in 1870 to his new friend, the radical politician Charles Dilke.¹⁷ And he predicted that 'within nine years, by a very simple process of arithmetic, we should have the measure passed by unanimity

through the House of Commons, and then we might defy the Lords!'¹⁸

When it looked as though Disraeli might throw his parliamentary weight between the fight for women's votes, Mill was sufficiently excited to put aside party politics. He was in any case disenchanted with Gladstone, in whom he had vested great hopes of radicalism, and declared:

The time, moreover, is, I think come when, at parliamentary elections, a Conservative who will vote for women's suffrage should be, in general, preferred to a professed Liberal who will not ... the bare fact of supporting Mr Gladstone in office ... does not now give a man a claim to preference over one who will vote for the most important of all political improvements now under public discussion.¹⁹

As it turned out, Dizzy did not rally to the cause, and in fact 1870 represented the high-water mark of the campaign for women's votes. Nobody of Mill's stature took up the cause following his death in 1873, and Gladstone, Campbell-Bannerman and Asquith were far from progressive on the issue. It would take Lloyd George, in this and many other spheres a true heir to Mill's liberalism, to make the first leap. When women finally won parity with men, in 1928, the elderly Millicent Garrett Fawcett, having witnessed the historic vote from the Commons gallery, led a delegation of women to the statue of John Stuart Mill on the Embankment, where a wreath was laid in his memory.

Richard Reeves is the director of Demos and author of John Stuart Mill – Victorian Firebrand, published by Atlantic Books. This article draws on some of the material in Chapter 14. richard.reeves@demos.co.uk.

For endnotes, see p.55

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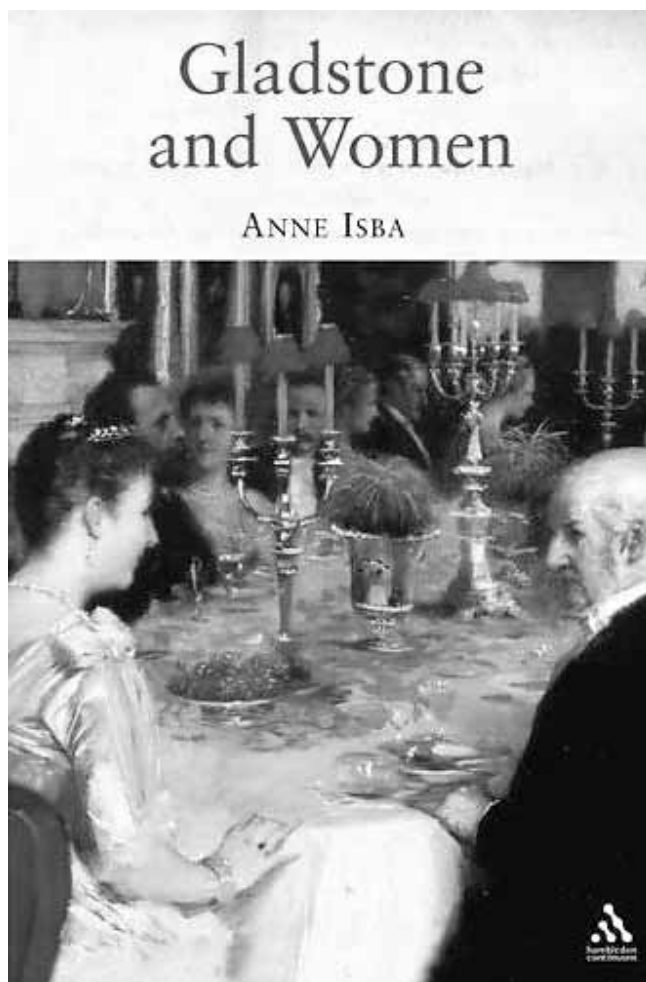
simply expected to be – an example of how crippling the Victorian doctrine of separate spheres could be for middle and upper-class women.

That part of the book which might be thought to pull in the ‘general reader’ is the chapter, ‘Fallen Women’, on Gladstone’s efforts to rescue prostitutes. Paradoxically this is one of the less effective chapters. Since the publication of his *Diaries* we have known that Gladstone engaged in this; and that, finding some part of it sexually exciting, would on occasion scourge himself. What is desperately needed is context. We need to know far more about rescue work engaged in by other men of his age and class, and with comparable religious beliefs. The proliferation of refugees for fallen women suggests that Gladstone wasn’t wholly alone in his concern. What we need to know was not that he engaged in rescue work but to what extent he was exceptional in roaming the streets personally, in testing his faith, his moral sense and self-control in these ways.

For the political historian the meat in this book is the discussion of Gladstone’s relationship with Queen Victoria. It shows just how wayward and difficult a monarch she was and how far she attempted to push the royal prerogative, for example trying but consistently failing to make Gladstone give the Prince of Wales a minor government post. Comparison of Victoria’s treatment of Gladstone after 1880 with that before 1874 also makes it clear how outrageously Disraeli flattered her. Plainly this made it easier for him to manage his sovereign. But did he also realise how difficult he would make life for the premiers who followed him? Perhaps he did – and didn’t care.

The reader already well versed in the history of nineteenth-century England will find the material for some interesting case studies in this book. The lack of such a background may make the going harder for anyone else.

Dr Gillian Sutherland is Fellow, Lecturer and Director of



Studies in History, Newnham College, Cambridge. Her most recent book is Faith, Duty and the Power of Mind: The Cloughs and their Circle 1820–1960 (CUP 2006). She

is among those teaching a final-year paper called ‘The Politics of Gender: Great Britain and Ireland 1790–1990’.

John Stuart Mill: Liberal Father of Feminism (concluded from p. 15)

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| <p>1 John Stuart Mill, <i>The Subjection of Women</i> (London: Longmans, 1869). <i>Collected Works of John Stuart Mill</i>, University of Toronto Press, 33 vols., Vol. XXI, p. 261. Hereafter all references to the <i>Collected Works</i> will appear as <i>CW</i>.</p> <p>2 <i>Female Suffrage. A letter from the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone, M.P., to Samuel Smith, M.P.</i> Pamphlet (pub. John Murray, London, 1892). Quoted in Constance Rover, <i>Women’s Suffrage and Party Politics in Britain,</i></p> | <p>1866–1914 (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 119.</p> <p>3 <i>Autobiography</i>, <i>CW</i> I, p. 107.</p> <p>4 <i>Parl. Deb.</i> 4 S. vol 3, c.1513 quoted in Rover p.123.</p> <p>5 ‘The Admission of Women to the Electoral Franchise’, <i>CW</i>, XXVIII, pp. 158–9.</p> <p>6 <i>Ibid.</i>, p. 157.</p> <p>7 <i>Female Suffrage. A letter from the Rt. Hon. W. E. Gladstone, M.P., to Samuel Smith, M.P.</i> Pamphlet (pub. John Murray, London, 1892). Quoted in Constance Rover, <i>Women’s Suffrage and</i></p> | <p><i>Party Politics in Britain, 1866–1914</i> (London: Routledge, 1967), p. 120.</p> <p>8 <i>Parl. Deb.</i> 4 S. vol. 3, c.1513 quoted in Rover p. 123.</p> <p>9 <i>Subjection</i>, <i>CW</i>, XXI, p. 276.</p> <p>10 <i>Representative Government</i>. <i>CW</i>, XIX p. 479.</p> <p>11 <i>Subjection</i>, <i>CW</i>, XXI, p. 323.</p> <p>12 <i>Ibid.</i> p. 323</p> <p>13 <i>Ibid.</i> p. 325.</p> <p>14 Jose Harris, <i>Private Lives, Public Spirit: Britain 1870–1914</i>. London: Penguin, 1993, p. 28.</p> <p>15 M O N C U R E C O N W A Y,</p> | <p><i>Autobiography</i> (Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin & Co., 2 vols, 1904), vol. 2, p. 165.</p> <p>16 Millicent Fawcett in H. R. Fox Bourne, <i>John Stuart Mill: Notices of his Life and Works</i>, London: Dallow, 1873, pp. 60–61.</p> <p>17 Letter to Charles Dilke, 28 May 1870, <i>CW</i>, XVII p. 1728.</p> <p>18 Letter to Charles Kingsley, 9 July 1870, <i>CW</i>, XVII, p. 1744.</p> <p>19 Letter to George Croom Robertson, 5 November 1872, Charles Kingsley, 9 July 1870, <i>CW</i>, XVII p. 1917.</p> |
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