

REVIEWS

which followed these negotiations, with several of us lined up behind Steel and MacLennan while they explained that the document would be ditched. As Paddy Ashdown put it – and the line up was his barmy idea – we looked like hostages about to be tortured. The facial expressions of Paddy, Malcolm Bruce, Alex Carlile, Charles Kennedy and Russell Johnston are the funniest thing since Monty Python.

A few things need correcting or qualifying for the record. The Ettrick Bridge meeting during the 1983 general election did indeed fail to secure agreement to drop the pretentious 'Prime Minister designate' status which had proved a liability in Roy Jenkin's uncharacteristically lacklustre election campaign; but the ensuing press coverage gave every impression that Steel had in practice taken over the role of campaign leader. Torrance claims that under Paddy Ashdown's leadership Steel was 'regularly deployed as an intermediary to prevent potential rows between Ashdown and his MPs': I have no such recollection. Steel was much more preoccupied with international politics and his plans for life after the Commons, including promoting the Scottish Parliament.

There is an interesting sidelight on Steel and the House of Lords. There was a proposal that peers

should be disqualified from sitting in the Scottish Parliament; Steel wrote opposing this restriction, seeing merit in an overlap 'pending reform of the Lords'. He has subsequently done his best to make sure that democratic Lords reform remains permanently in the pending tray, where it has been since 1911. Torrance describes his support for an appointed House as 'cautious' and 'realistic'. Others see it as wholly inconsistent not only with the platform on which he led the party but also with the reforming zeal on which his key earlier achievements were based.

David Steel helped to ensure Liberal survival in some very difficult times, and challenged the party to remember that its purpose is to achieve change, not merely to debate change. This book recounts the steps on the way, admits the flaws and the failings (including his problems with the cost of the Scottish Parliament building) and demonstrates that its subject is a good and able man, an extremely skilled communicator and a shrewd tactician who has given much to the party.

Sir Alan Beith has been the MP for Berwick-upon-Tweed since 1973. He was Liberal Chief Whip 1977–85, Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party 1985–88 and Deputy Leader of the Liberal Democrats 1992–2003.

individual human character and of social development. Ethology, the science of human character, was, says Rosen, at the centre of Mill's attempt 'to become a self-directing agent rather than a brute merely responding to internal or external stimuli' (p. 3). If this was the centre of Mill's intellectual concerns, it was because it also lay at the core of his personal ones. The internal brute instincts that Mill thought should be kept down were one's sexual urges. Self-direction required control of them as much as resistance to control by others. Mill's battle here was firstly against his father, who raised him to be the next generation's flag bearer for the Utilitarian creed; and then against Thomas Carlyle and Auguste Comte, both of whom sought to co-opt Mill to their respective campaigns. Mill managed to fight free against three opinionated and dominating men; against one attractive woman he did not. After one difference of opinion with his wife, he declared: 'As your feeling is directly contrary, mine is wrong and I give it up entirely'.¹

The basic point of Mill's ethology was that the individual could be improved and so society itself could advance. This led him to discuss the laws by which society

Reassessing John Stuart Mill

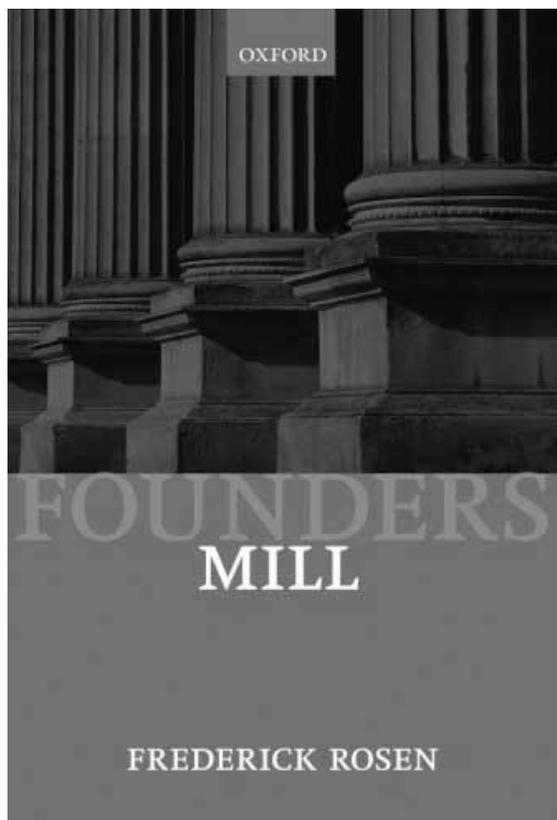
Frederick Rosen, *Mill* (Oxford University Press, 2013)

Review by **Michael Levin**

JOHAN STUART MILL'S *Collected Works* comprise thirty-three volumes, many of which are around 500 pages long. It is a massive collection. However three writings in particular are best known to students of Mill. Foremost is *On Liberty*, 1859, with its influential argument for freedom of speech. The other two writings appeared in 1861: *Utilitarianism*, Mill's attempt to modify the creed that he had been brought up with; and *Considerations on Representative Government*, with its advocacy of

proportional representation. Frederick Rosen's argument is that these famous works 'do not fit neatly together' (p. 1) and in any case misrepresent much of what Mill was really about. He suggests that putting matters right requires attention to two earlier works through which Mill originally attained fame: his *System of Logic* of 1843 and *Principles of Political Economy* of 1848.

Rosen believes that Mill was more concerned to be a scientist than a moralist. In the *Logic* Mill attempted a science of both



moved forward and to praise the eccentric French intellectual Auguste Comte as the only person to have previously attempted such a task. He described Comte as 'one of the great intellects of our time, whom I regard with the most esteem and admiration' (p. 100). Comte had argued that societies moved forward through theological and metaphysical stages before reaching the ultimate positivist one. He believed in phrenology, a once popular pseudo-science that now seems risible, and also practised what he called 'cerebral hygiene', that is not reading anyone else's writings so as to keep his own mind clear. Ultimately Mill came to reject Comte's vision of a society where the rulers declare they know best and so can do the thinking for everyone else, whilst Comte's assumption of female inferiority ran directly counter to Mill's ethology. Rosen reminds us that Mill's falling out with Comte has left a much stronger impression than his earlier significant deference.

In the concluding section Rosen outlines the thinkers who, in his opinion, provided Mill's intellectual roots. They are overwhelmingly Greek and British. Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, James Mill, Bentham and

Adam Smith are among those mentioned. This categorisation is unusual in downplaying the French thinkers Mill admired. He once wrote that in 'political philosophy the initiative belongs to France at this moment' because of 'the far more elevated terrain on which the discussion is engaged'.² Rosen's elevation of Comte is accompanied by the implicit downgrading of other Frenchmen whose writings were also significantly influential: in Henri de Saint-Simon, Mill found the division of history into critical and organic periods; in François Guizot, a sense of the development of civilisation and its causes; and in Alexis de Tocqueville, an account of how modern democracy gives rise to a dangerous mass society.

One of the pleasures of the political economy of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries is that it covered much broader ground than much of the academic economics that succeeded it. So Mill's *Principles of Political Economy* is economics within a general social science context. Rosen makes the case that the foundations of *On Liberty* are here clearly apparent, most significantly in the belief that a majority could be despotic. Where, then, does this leave *On Liberty*? It seems

to be undermined on all sides: its arguments were elaborated earlier and its principles are best understood by their later application in Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, 1869. As for its contents, Rosen rejects the interpretation of Mill as someone who believed that 'freedom of expression alone would lead to truth' (p. 9) and also repudiates the notion that the designation of a category of self-regarding actions can serve to defend individual liberty. This book, then, stands out among recent scholarship for its downgrading of the work that others have seen as Mill's most durable contribution.

Rosen wants Mill regarded 'more as a profound "contemporary" thinker than as an obscure Victorian moralist' (p. 259) and is bold enough to suggest where he can be placed in terms of today's political issues. We are told that Mill would have rejected the idea that regime change in Iraq could lead to democracy and would also have denied the view that greater economic growth would increase happiness. What about multiculturalism? Rosen thinks that Mill would have been against it in that multiculturalists are illiberal in accepting despotism within the family. We here touch upon one

of the most difficult and fascinating issues in liberal theory, still not sufficiently addressed in recent writings – that of the extent to which liberals should tolerate other's illiberal practices.

Rosen does not claim originality but makes it clear that he picks up on the long-neglected judgments of Alexander Bain, Mill's close friend and first biographer. Following Bain, Rosen thinks Mill's *Logic* was his 'greatest work' (p. 101) yet ends on rather a downbeat assessment of its value: 'Even where he is open to criticism, Mill provides an excellent guide to logic and methodology, though his conclusions or their applications to numerous topics seem in retrospect to be mistaken' (p. 259). This book is significantly different from recent commentaries on Mill and as such is likely to be the focus of much attention.

Michael Levin is Emeritus Reader in Politics at Goldsmiths, University of London, and author of J. S. Mill on Civilization and Barbarism (Routledge, 2004).

- 1 Quoted in P. Rose, *Parallel Lives* (London, 1994), p. 139.
- 2 *John Stuart Mill Collected Works*, vol. xxxiii (Toronto, 1986), p. 446.

Letters

continued from page 17

Ben Spoor MP (*The Times*, 27 December 1928), whose chronic alcoholism had led to heart and liver problems and to his being found dead in his hotel room, quotes the Coroner as saying that he 'had actually been certified insane ... and confined in homes.' How is it that this had not led to the forfeiture of his seat? Spoor was the Labour Government's Chief Whip during its first government in 1924 and his state of health was disastrous for the day-to-day organisation of the difficult parliamentary arithmetic needed to maintain the government.

Michael Meadowcroft

Elections of the 1920s

The report by Graham Lippitt (*Journal of Liberal History* 82, spring 2014) on the meeting on 10 February 2014 on the general elections of 1922, 1923 and 1924 prompts me to have a closer look at the Liberal and Labour statistics for 1923.

Taking account of the Liberal and Labour MPs elected unopposed and assuming that the votes for such candidates would otherwise have been at least as much as for such candidates in other constituencies, I would reconstruct the 'crude' statistics as follows:

1923 General Election –

Labour 4,439,780 + 41,414
(adjustment for unopposed returns) = 4,481,194
Liberal 4,301,481 + 106,090
(adjustment for unopposed returns) = 4,407,571
Accordingly, the gap between Labour and Liberal was, in reality, much less than the 'crude' 138,299, although allowance would have to be made for some other facts.

Labour did not contest 176 constituencies and Liberals did not contest 146 constituencies in Great Britain. G.M.L. Davies (Christian Party, University of Wales) and O.E. Mosley (Independent, Harrow) took

the Labour Whip and Rhys Hopkin Morris (Independent Liberal, Cardiganshire) took the Liberal Whip in the new Parliament.

I take the view that Asquith might have, at least, addressed the possibility of forming a minority Liberal administration in early 1924.

Dr Sandy S. Waugh