

'The John Millennium': John Stuart Mill in Victorian Culture

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Abstract

As one of the most well-known figures of the nineteenth century, John Stuart Mill was depicted extensively in journalism, pictures, life-writing and fiction. This thesis draws on a selection from these diverse and underexplored sources to offer a new perspective on Mill's presence in Victorian cultural and emotional life. It shows how Mill figured in fierce debates about science and culture in the mid- to late-nineteenth century, and how ideas of Mill's 'femininity' were used to both attack and commend him philosophically, politically and personally. Mill's 'Saint of Rationalism' label continues to belie the extent to which he was associated with ideas of passion, sensitivity, tenderness, feeling, and emotion in the nineteenth century. This project explores how such terms were invoked in relation to Mill as a philosopher and politician, but also how they related to readers' encounters with his works. More than any previous study, this thesis pays close attention to the interaction between verbal and visual depictions, and considers official images and caricatures of Mill alongside written accounts.

Though much scholarship emphasises that Mill's reputation went into decline after his death in 1873 (to be recovered in the late twentieth century), this thesis demonstrates the vitality and diversity of literary engagements with Mill in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. It offers case studies of three authors – Thomas Hardy, Mona Caird and Olive Schreiner – and reads both the form and content of their fiction as involved in recognisably Millian experiments in living. Exploring the Millian concepts that figure in novels by Hardy, Caird and Schreiner not only expands the sense of the philosophical context to their writings, but underscores the continued relevance of Mill to discussions of self-development and education, free discussion and intellectual independence. Finally, this thesis suggests ways in which work on representations of Mill could be developed to gain further insight into the cultural history of the philosopher, into interactions between philosophy and literature, and into the nineteenth-century definitions of liberal culture that inform twenty-first century debates.

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