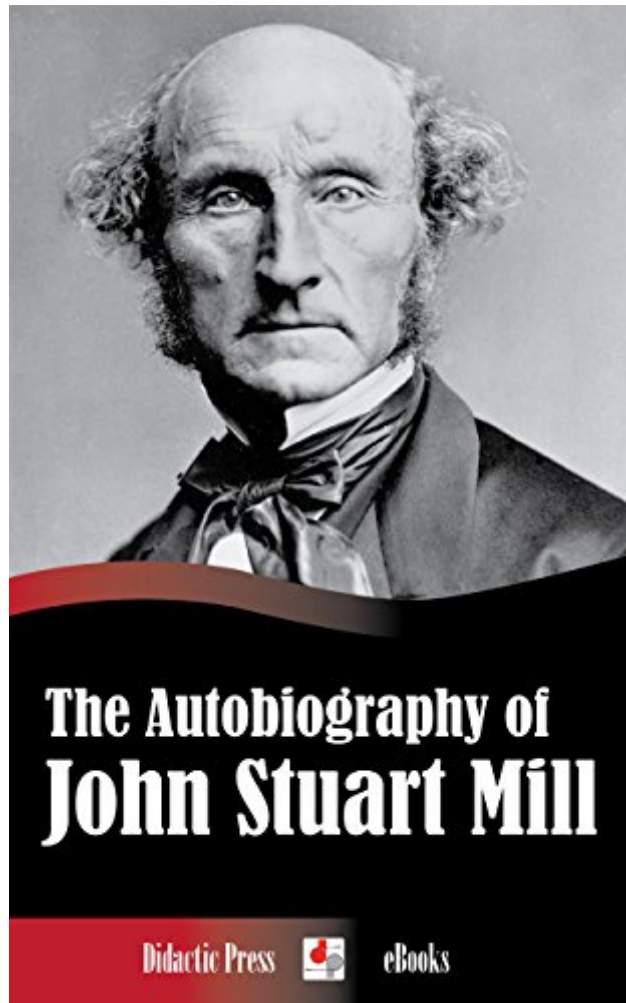


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The Autobiography Of John Stuart Mill (Illustrated)



Synopsis

It seems proper that I should prefix to the following biographical sketch some mention of the reasons which have made me think it desirable that I should leave behind me such a memorial of so uneventful a life as mine. I do not for a moment imagine that any part of what I have to relate can be interesting to the public as a narrative or as being connected with myself. But I have thought that in an age in which education and its improvement are the subject of more, if not of profounder, study than at any former period of English history, it may be useful that there should be some record of an education which was unusual and remarkable, and which, whatever else it may have done, has proved how much more than is commonly supposed may be taught, and well taught, in those early years which, in the common modes of what is called instruction, are little better than wasted. It has also seemed to me that in an age of transition in opinions, there may be somewhat both of interest and of benefit in noting the successive phases of any mind which was always pressing forward, equally ready to learn and to unlearn either from its own thoughts or from those of others. But a motive which weighs more with me than either of these, is a desire to make acknowledgment of the debts which my intellectual and moral development owes to other persons; some of them of recognised eminence, others less known than they deserve to be, and the one to whom most of all is due, one whom the world had no opportunity of knowing. The reader whom these things do not interest, has only himself to blame if he reads farther, and I do not desire any other indulgence from him than that of bearing in mind that for him these pages were not written...

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Customer Reviews

This book can be read in many ways, as a testimony of an unusual education, as a description of an era long gone by, and even as a sad love story. But it is above all a book about ideas, about the dramatic intellectual metamorphosis of John Stuart Mill. Mill went through three stages in his intellectual transformation. I'll call the first stage "technocratic optimism". In his youth, Mill was a zealous reformer, driven not by his love of humanity nor his nobleness, but by his conviction that utilitarian methods were all what it was needed to change the world. He denounced the "sentimentality", the "vague generalities" and the "declamations" of his intellectual rivals, who didn't share his optimism and accused him of being "hard-hearted" and "anti-population". The second stage can be called "matured skepticism". In his thirties and forties, after a bout of depression, Mill became less confident of his reasoning tools, more conscious of the complexities of social change, and more sensitive to individual suffering. He also became a more cautious reformer: "all questions of political institutions are relative, not absolute, and different stages of human progress not only will have, but ought to have, different institutions". Paradoxically his greater love for humanity made him a less zealous reformer. But Mill didn't become a conservative. He became a radical and entered the third stage of his metamorphosis, "radical liberalism". He chose a few worthy causes to fight for (the equality of women, the political rights of minorities, and the need of land reform in Ireland, etc.) and tried to advance them with unusual patience and strong determination.

Mill's remarkable childhood education prepared him to be one of the leading intellectuals of his day (far surpassing his father, James Mill, who was no slouch, but not in his son's league) but while I admire his erudition and achievements, one has to wonder if the deep depression he fell into in his mid-20s had something to do with that. Mill's contributions are better remembered than many of the other famous British intellectuals of the period--such as Herbert Spencer--whose particularly invidious version of the theory of Social Darwinism is best left languishing in obscurity. Who today remembers the prolific Spencer, whose collected works run to over 20 large volumes? Mill is frank

about his depression and how debilitating it was, and what a struggle it was to pull through it. But with the help of his best friend, he pulled out of it and went on to write many important works in philosophy, logic, political science, and economics. Mill's I.Q. was certainly very high (estimated by psychologist Katherine Cox using a modified ratio I.Q. method to be at least 200), but very likely his father's misguided efforts to produce a prodigy and homegrown, British Wunderkind (to compete with the legendary "Infant of Lubeck," no doubt :-)) were the cause of his long, serious depression. Mill's text on economics, which was called Political Economy back in those days (also the title of his book, if I remember right), was the longest running and most successful college text of all time, being used for the next 50 years until the 1920s when the "New Economics" of the day, championed by the field of microeconomics and the theory of the firm, made a more modern, updated text necessary.

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