

COMMUNICATION

The Making of J. S. Mill's *Collected Works*, and Its Aftermath

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Abstract

In 1973, a conference was held in Toronto to mark the bicentenary of James Mill's birth and the centenary of John Stuart Mill's death. By that time, Toronto had emerged as the centre of Mill studies. Between 1963 and 1973, the University of Toronto Press had published, in a scholarly edition, eleven volumes of Mill's *Collected works*. A further twenty-two volumes would appear in the eighteen years that followed. Only two of the nine presenters at the 1973 conference were members of a Philosophy Department. Philosophers had a modest part in the production of Mill's *Collected works*. Yet, philosophers came to dominate Mill studies in the decades after the Mill edition wrapped up in 1991. Philosophers contributed ten of the fourteen essays featured in *The Cambridge companion to Mill* (1998), edited by John Skorupski. Philosophers constituted twenty-six of the thirty-seven contributors to *A companion to Mill* (2017), published by Wiley Blackwell and edited by Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller. This communication explains the relative unimportance of philosophers in the creation of the *Collected works*, and comments on the forces shaping the subsequent pre-eminence of philosophers in Mill studies.

In 1973, a conference was held in Toronto to mark the bicentenary of James Mill's birth and the centenary of John Stuart Mill's death. By that time, Toronto had emerged as the centre of Mill studies. Between 1963 and 1973, the University of Toronto Press, guided by an editorial committee consisting principally of University faculty from various disciplines within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, had published a scholarly edition of J. S. Mill's *Earlier letters* (two volumes, 1963), *Principles of political economy* (two volumes, 1965), *Essays on economics and society* (two volumes, 1967), *Essays on ethics, religion, and society* (a single fat volume, 1969), and the *Later letters* (four volumes, 1972). Over the next eighteen years, a further twenty-two volumes would appear. Academic philosophers currently dominate the field of Mill studies. Two hefty 'Companions' to Mill exist. Philosophers contribute ten of the

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fourteen essays featured in *The Cambridge companion to Mill* (1998), edited by John Skorupski; philosophers are responsible for twenty-six of the thirty-seven essays in *A companion to Mill* (2017), published by Wiley Blackwell and edited by Christopher Macleod and Dale E. Miller. Only two of the nine presenters at the 1973 conference were members of a Philosophy Department.¹ Philosophers had a modest part in the production of J. S. Mill's *Collected works*. The first volumes of the latter rolled off the press sixty years ago. It has been 150 years since Mill's death. The moment is ripe for reflection on the making of the *Collected works* and the changes in Mill scholarship since that making.

J. S. Mill did his work before the age of disciplinary specialization. His intellectual range was vast. He wrote on logic, metaphysics, ethics, economics, social and political theory, ancient Greece, literature (poetic theory included), psychology, education, law, French history and historians. He often responded vigorously to the controversies of the day. His newspaper writings absorb four volumes of the *Collected works*. In the latter half of the 1830s, he ran the *London and Westminster Review*. By 1860, the author of *A system of logic*, *Principles of political economy*, and *On liberty* had become, in Stefan Collini's apt characterization, mid-Victorian England's pre-eminent public moralist.² The American Civil War moved Mill to write two fervent essays in support of the Northern cause. His intellectual and moral standing influenced his election to parliament in 1865. Be it inside or outside the House of Commons, he took a prominent part in debates over parliamentary reform, Ireland, and Governor Eyre's suppression of the Jamaica uprising. His championing of women's suffrage was vital to forwarding this cause during the second half of the 1860s. Learning of Mill's death in May 1873, the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick told a correspondent: 'I should say that from about 1860–65 or thereabouts he ruled England in the region of thought as very few men ever did: I do not expect to see anything like it again.'³ Elements of Mill's social, political, and moral thought inform contemporary commentary on a number of consequential matters. His ideas and conduct attract the interest of a mix of scholars whose disciplinary training varies. Few commentators have the wish or ability to tackle the entire scope of Mill's intellectual and practical activity. Most of the work done on Mill happens within discrete fields of inquiry.

Yet, there was a time when virtually all scholars interested in Mill had some notion of what was happening in Mill studies. The action in Toronto was the reason. The textual editor of the *Collected works*, throughout its history, was John M. Robson, a Toronto product who became a junior member of its

¹ The presentations at the conference gave rise to a published volume: John M. Robson and Michael Laine, eds., *James and John Stuart Mill: papers of the centenary conference* (Toronto, 1976). The list of contributors, which provides the professional affiliation of each, is found at pp. 161–2.

² See Stefan Collini, *Public moralists: political thought and intellectual life in Britain 1830–1930* (Oxford, 1991), ch. 4, pp. 121–69.

³ Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 178.

English faculty in the late 1950s. His mentor was A. S. P. Woodhouse. A member of the Royal Society of Canada, founding member and sometimes chairman of the Humanities Research Council of Canada, and editor of the *University of Toronto Quarterly* for thirteen years, Woodhouse was one of Canada's most influential professors of English in the two decades before his death in 1964. An internationally acknowledged authority on Milton, Woodhouse had a profound feel for the ideas literature depicts and the historical context in which it is produced.⁴ *Puritanism and liberty*, his definitive edition of the Army Debates in England (1647–9), remains an invaluable source for historians of this tumultuous period.⁵ A course on Victorian thought figured among Woodhouse's Toronto offerings. He urged Robson to consider taking up Mill as a dissertation subject, the seed for what ultimately became *The improvement of mankind*, Robson's classic 1968 study of Mill's social and political thought. Although he did not live long enough to see the publication of a work that had 'A. S. P. W.' as one of its two dedicatees, Woodhouse did take part in the planning of Mill's *Collected works* in the early 1960s. Robson had the ear of another distinguished humanist in Toronto's Department of English, F. E. L. Priestley, whose scholarly leanings had much in common with those of Woodhouse. Priestley had edited a three-volume edition of William Godwin's *Enquiry concerning political justice*.⁶ Treating the third edition of Godwin's work (the last published during the author's lifetime) as the copy-text, Priestley devoted an entire volume to a critical introduction, supplementary notes and variant readings of the first and second editions. Robson devised his own system for recording substantive variants among editions of the same work;⁷ he followed Priestley in choosing as copy-text the last edition printed in the author's lifetime. Priestley would serve as general editor of Mill's *Collected works* until 1971, at which point Robson added the general editorship to his established post as textual editor. (Priestley's membership of the editorial committee continued until his death in 1988.) This triumvirate – Woodhouse, Priestley, Robson – combined a technical expertise in the handling of primary texts with an immersive interest

⁴ For additional details on Woodhouse's scholarly career, see F. E. L. Priestley, 'A. S. P. Woodhouse (1895–1964)', *Proceedings and Transactions of the Royal Society of Canada*, 3 (1965), pp. 183–8.

⁵ *Puritanism and liberty: being the army debates (1647–9) from the Clarke manuscripts with supplementary documents* (London, 1938; 2nd edn, Chicago, IL, 1950).

⁶ F. E. L. Priestley, ed., *Enquiry concerning political justice and its influence on morals and happiness by William Godwin* (3 vols., Toronto, 1946; repr., Toronto, 1969).

⁷ A colossal undertaking in the case of *A system of logic and Principles of political economy*. Eight editions of the former appeared between 1843 and 1872. Inclusive of the changes made between the manuscript press-copy and the first edition, Robson counted a total of 4,822 substantive variants (for the table showing the number of changes made from one edition to the next, see J. M. Robson, ed., *A system of logic ratiocinative and inductive* (2 vols., Toronto, 1973), *Collected works*, VII, p. lxxix). Seven editions of Mill's *Principles of political economy* were published between 1848 and 1871. Inclusive of the changes made between the manuscript of the press-copy and the first edition, the total of substantive variants came to 3,472 (for the table showing the number of changes made from one edition to the next, see J. M. Robson, ed., *Principles of political economy* (2 vols., Toronto, 1965), *Collected works*, II, p. lxi). The Toronto edition of these imposing treatises makes all of these variants visible to the reader.

in the history of English thought. One of them, Robson, possessed an unrivalled knowledge of Mill's corpus. Robson's way of doing things helped create a community of Mill scholars, within which philosophers did not predominate.

II

The planning committee for the *Collected works*, created in 1960, included only one philosopher, R. F. McRae. Chaired by Priestley, the committee's other academic members (two representatives from the University of Toronto Press also participated) were Woodhouse and Robson, Vincent Bladen and Alexander Brady (both political economists), the historian James Conacher (an authority on the Victorian political system), and William Line, of the Psychology Department.⁸ Over the course of the three decades it took to complete the edition, only three philosophers, McRae, D. P. Dryer, and F. E. Sparshott, served on its editorial committee. Sparshott arrived in Toronto in 1950. Some thirty years later, he recalled his

astonishment...at discovering how large Mill loomed in the curriculum, and how many of its scholars in a variety of departments were Mill experts. Dr. Robson has been able to draw on a range of talent and scholarship, and a depth of interest in his own back yard that could probably not be matched anywhere else.⁹

In 1965, Robson started up the *Mill News Letter*, which would be published twice yearly between 1965 and 1988. (Beginning in 1971, he shared the editing with Michael Laine, a friend and colleague in the Department of English, Victoria College). Sent, without charge, to all those expressing an interest in Mill, the *News Letter* kept readers informed of progress on the *Collected works* while printing short articles and notes, announcements of recent and forthcoming books dealing with Mill, reports on work afoot treating the great man, queries from readers, requests from Robson for aid in clearing up certain points pertaining to Millian manuscripts and texts, book reviews, and a running bibliography of works about Mill. Philosophers submitted articles and contributed book reviews; books and articles written by philosophers got noticed. But most of the material carried by the *News Letter* came from Victorianists (historians and literary scholars) and intellectual historians with a keen interest in social, political, or economic thought. Whatever their disciplinary affiliation, recipients (some 800 in total) and contributors, the latter being a sizeable subset of the former, shared in a collective enterprise whose character and purpose were shaped by the humanistic cast of mind typified by Woodhouse, Priestley, and Robson.

⁸ Jean O'Grady examines the origin of the *Collected works* in her essay "Congenial vocation": J. M. Robson and the Mill Project', in Michael Laine, ed., *A cultivated mind: essays on J. S. Mill presented to John M. Robson* (Toronto, 1991), pp. 4–8.

⁹ Francis Sparshott, review of J. S. Mill's *An examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy*, *English Studies in Canada*, 7 (1981), p. 240.

Francis Mineka, a scholar in the same mould, edited Mill's *Earlier letters*, the two volumes inaugurating the *Collected works* (together with Dwight Lindley, he went on to edit the four volumes of *Later letters*). Mineka, a professor of English at Cornell, had begun this work years before the first stirrings of Toronto's interest in producing a variorum edition of Mill's writings. Cornell University Press magnanimously passed the text Mineka had prepared to the University of Toronto Press, enabling an auspicious launch of the *Collected works* in 1963. Many of the letters that wound up in Mineka's hands had been assembled by F. A. Hayek, who in 1951 had published the extant correspondence between Mill and Harriet Taylor in a book titled *John Stuart Mill and Harriet Taylor: their friendship and subsequent marriage*. Hayek provided a brief introduction to the *Earlier letters*. The author of *The constitution of liberty* (1960) was unquestionably a philosopher as well as an economist of towering stature. The aim of the introduction he wrote for Mill's *Earlier letters* had no connection with philosophy or economics.¹⁰

III

Some twenty scholars (Hayek aside) had some part in forging the introductions written for the *Collected works*. Only four of these were philosophers. McRae, a specialist in the history of philosophy, did the introduction for Mill's monumental *System of logic ratiocinative and inductive*. He also constructed the analytical subject index for the two volumes (persons and works cited in Millian texts received meticulous coverage in separate bibliographic indexes). Dryer wrote one of the two introductory essays (excluding Robson's textual introduction) for Mill's *Essays on ethics, religion, and society*. The editorial committee assumed that Dryer's introduction would incorporate commentary on each of the major items in the volume. He instead confined his analysis to Mill's *Utilitarianism*, a limitation that necessitated the drafting of an additional essay whose breadth and historical approach fulfilled the ends Priestley and Robson considered essential.¹¹ Priestley himself took on this task.¹² Sparshott, who agreed to write the introduction to Mill's *Essays on philosophy and the classics* (published in 1978), was no orthodox academic philosopher. During his lifetime, he published thirteen volumes of poetry and did a stint as president of the League of Canadian Poets. Having read Greats at Corpus Christi College Oxford, and then done post-graduate work in analytic philosophy, Sparshott was equipped to handle, with equal facility, Mill's commentary-translations of Platonic Dialogues, his reviews of George Grote's writings on ancient Greece, and his essays '[Richard] Whately's Elements of Logic', '[Samuel] Bailey on Berkeley's Theory of Vision', and '[Alexander] Bain's Psychology'. His dazzling introduction delighted Robson.¹³

¹⁰ For Hayek's introduction, see Francis E. Mineka, ed., *The earlier letters of John Stuart Mill, 1812-1848* (2 vols., Toronto, 1963), *Collected works*, XII, pp. xv-xxiv.

¹¹ For Dryer's introduction, see J. M. Robson, ed., *Essays on ethics, religion, and society* (Toronto, 1969), *Collected works*, X, pp. lxiii-cxiii.

¹² Priestley's introduction precedes Dryer's, and occupies pp. vii-lxii.

¹³ For Sparshott's introduction, see J. M. Robson, ed., *Essays on philosophy and the classics* (Toronto, 1978), *Collected works*, XI, pp. vii-lxxv.

Robson understood that only a scholar schooled in philosophy could take on the introduction for Mill's *An examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy*. The student of Mill possessing an aptitude for mastering Mill's massive exposition and criticism of Hamilton's logic and metaphysics could be excused a want of inclination. Robson turned to Alan Ryan, of New College Oxford, author of *The philosophy of John Stuart Mill* (1970) and *J. S. Mill* (1974), the first a careful, lucid, and closely argued analysis of Mill's impressive attempt to construct a rational ethical system based on a coherent theory of scientific explanation, human action, and social science, the second a general study (in Routledge's Author Guides series) offering a balanced and cogent assessment of Mill the autobiographer, logician, social philosopher, political economist, political theorist, and metaphysician. Robson admired both. Ryan delivered, writing an introduction rich in analysis and historical detail.¹⁴

The volume appeared in 1979, before Ryan reached his fortieth birthday. Few academic philosophers attain the prominence he subsequently acquired. In addition to the abundant scholarly work that won him election to the British Academy in 1986, he participated in BBC broadcasts and wrote scores of essays for the *New York Review of Books*, the *London Review of Books*, and the *Times Literary Supplement*. He became, in effect, a public intellectual. An authority on the tradition of liberal political thought (in both Britain and America), Ryan carved out a space for himself as one of its contemporary exponents. Less exotic than Sparschott, he is an uncommon breed of philosopher.

Given the diverse nature of Mill's oeuvre, the organizing principles formulated by the planning and editorial committees, and the pivotal place of historical context in the scholarship personified by Woodhouse, Priestley, and Robson, the prevalence of non-philosopher humanists (joined by three political economists) among the cast of introducers makes sense. Why ask a philosopher to introduce or edit Mill's correspondence or his newspaper writings? His treatise on political economy or essays on economics? His writings on French history or English politics? His journals, debating speeches, autobiography, or literary essays? His writings on India? The content of the volume *Essays on equality, law, and education* (1984) did not rule out the enlisting of a philosopher. Neither did it require one. An intellectual historian of great promise, Stefan Collini, was Robson's (inspired) choice.¹⁵ A specialist in

¹⁴ For Ryan's introduction, see J. M. Robson, ed., *An examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy* (Toronto, 1979), *Collected works*, IX, pp. vii–lxvii. In transmitting his introduction to Robson, Ryan remarked: 'I hope that without alteration, it will do the trick; it has put me off scholarship for life, I fear – the idea of coming to definite conclusions about the accuracy of Mill's account of Hamilton's account of [Thomas] Brown's account of [Thomas] Reid's account of Hume made me feel positively ill!' (Ryan to Robson, 30 Mar. 1978, Mill Project MS, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto, box 124, O-R, 1961–89).

¹⁵ Robson's invitation to Collini was occasioned by the sudden death in 1980 of John Rees, who had said yes to Robson's request that he write the introduction (see Robson to Rees, 9 June 1980, and Rees to Robson, 26 June 1980, Mill Project MS, box 124, O-R, 1961–89). A historian of political thought, and Professor of Political Theory and Government at University College Swansea (now Swansea University), Rees had written the important monograph *Mill and his early critics* (Leicester, 1956) and numerous articles dealing with the argument of *On liberty*.

political philosophy could have been called upon to write the introduction to Mill's *Essays on politics and society* (1977), which include *On liberty* and *Considerations on representative government*. Such might have happened had not Alexander Brady, a historically minded professor of political economy, undertaken the job. Involved in the planning of the *Collected works*, Brady then became a member of its editorial committee. Etiquette prescribed that Brady, a highly respected scholar and Robson's senior by a big margin, be granted the assignment. He produced a substantial and serviceable introduction.¹⁶

The mix of introducers suggests that philosophers were recruited only when their services were thought indispensable. More telling yet is the make-up of the team Robson assembled in 1976, the year he secured a major editorial grant from the Canada Council that provided for the hiring of a full-time post-doctoral fellow, a full-time research assistant, a part-time editorial assistant, and two part-time graduate students. The dissertation of the post-doctoral fellow had examined an issue in the political history of nineteenth-century Britain; the research assistant had done graduate work in French literature at Columbia and Oxford; the part-time editorial assistant had completed a degree in English at Toronto; one of the graduate students was pursuing a doctorate in the field of American literature, the other in the field of British imperial history. Robson evidently saw no point in making a philosopher part of the team. If he did not bring a philosopher on board to help with the editing of *Essays on philosophy and the classics* and *An examination of Sir William Hamilton's philosophy*, consuming preoccupations of the late 1970s, he presumably never would. He never did.

The reasons for Robson's aversion to hiring philosophers can be adduced from a book review he wrote for the *Journal of Modern History*. The book in question was Fred Berger's *Happiness, justice, and freedom: the moral and political philosophy of John Stuart Mill*, published by the University of California Press in 1984. Robson thought the book 'merits high commendation for anyone wishing to appreciate Mill's views as they bear upon late twentieth-century philosophical concerns' (the implication being that historians might prefer a different kind of book on Mill). Berger, the reviewer points out, 'is a philosopher and writes for philosophers'. Philosophers tended to 'write in a timeless world of concepts, and even Berger does not deal in the concrete, except when chipping away at texts. That Mill was a nineteenth-century writer hardly affects his argument.'¹⁷ In the introduction to his book Berger says that one of his prime concerns was to 'reconstruct' (Berger's emphasis) Mill's 'textual position in ways that remove unclarities or ambiguities, and that substitute sound for defective arguments'.¹⁸ Robson asserts that the 'reconstruction' done by

¹⁶ For Brady's introduction, see J. M. Robson, ed., *Essays on politics and society* (2 vols., Toronto, 1977), *Collected works*, XVIII, pp. ix–lxx.

¹⁷ John M. Robson, review of Fred Berger's *Happiness, justice, and freedom*, *Journal of Modern History*, 57 (1985), p. 550.

¹⁸ Fred Berger, *Happiness, justice, and freedom* (Berkeley, CA, 1984), p. 2.

philosophers should instead be understood as ‘construction’. What they construct, he says, is

a fiction; most of the philosophers with whom Berger battles are not concerned with Mill but with ‘Mill,’ a character who shares some good and some bad lines with the historical Mill, but who is made to say what the real Mill ‘should’ have said, and what his quoted statements (but not his unquoted ones) ‘commit him to saying’.

The latter Mill, Robson alleges, ‘generally has a very bad time; indeed, I have come away from several books in recent years wondering why they bothered to write about such a weak and perverse thinker’.¹⁹ He felt no need to add that the books he had in mind had been written by philosophers.

Most historians write for historians; most philosophers write for philosophers. The rightness of this arrangement is self-evident. Robson’s aim, apropos the *Collected works*, was to do what he could to ensure that introductions written by philosophers showed a proper sensitivity to historical context and rendered the analysis offered in language intelligible to philosophers and non-philosophers alike.²⁰ Sparshott and Ryan, Robson knew, could (and would) bring this off. They consistently treated Mill as ‘a nineteenth-century writer’, and did so in limpid prose. While Berger failed on the first count (not the second), Robson praised the ‘thorough care’ he gave ‘a great range of Mill’s writings, paying heed to the direct context and showing sympathetic interest in Mill’s argument’.²¹

IV

Robson might have hoped that reviewers of volumes in the *Collected works* would at least have a familiarity with ‘a great range of Mill’s writings’. This was almost certainly not the case with a couple of Canadian philosophers, Brian Keenan and George Grant, who, in 1977, reviewed the recently published *Essays on politics and society*. Keenan’s review appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*; Grant’s in one of Canada’s major newspapers, the

¹⁹ Robson, review of *Happiness, justice, and freedom*, p. 551. In a letter to William Thomas from this time, Robson employed more colloquial language in discussing what he deemed ‘the standard philosophic approach’ to Mill. ‘I find almost all philosophic analysis of that kind interesting only as being about “Mill,” rather than Mill, and the former is a dull sloppy twerpt [sic] who has little to recommend him except a catalogue of errors’ (Robson to Thomas, 23 Oct. 1984, Mill Project MS, box 125, S-U, 1956–90). Thomas, a Christ Church Oxford historian whose seminal work *The philosophic radicals: nine studies in theory and practice* (Oxford, 1979) Robson deeply valued, would write the volume on Mill (1985) for Oxford University Press’s Past Masters series. Another historian, John Dinwiddy, wrote the volume on Bentham (1989) for the same series.

²⁰ In his early correspondence with Stefan Collini, Robson observed that ‘philosophers (and others), as you will well know, often seem to write as though the historical context had no bearing on meaning’. In Robson’s view, ‘the interpretation of Mill [should] be made in the light of his times; as I read your work, this is exactly what you do’ (Robson to Collini, 18 Nov. 1981, Mill Project MS, box 120, C-F, 1934–89).

²¹ Robson, review of *Happiness, justice, and freedom*, p. 550.

Globe and Mail. Neither individual had contributed anything to the existing scholarship on Mill (neither, so far as I can tell, ever did). A superficial acquaintance with a sampling of Mill's output proved an adequate safeguard against any hint of humility. Keenan and Grant lacked the 'sympathetic interest' needed to apprehend the intellectual acuity and ethical force embedded in Mill's aggregate body of work.

Neither reviewer shied away from issuing bold pronouncements. Keenan: 'Mill's theoretical perspective in all its tension and apparent contradiction is a mirror of Canada's psyche...To paraphrase Plato's happy metaphor, Canada is Mill writ large.' This was, apparently, the singular warrant for the vaulting editorial ambition shown by Robson and the University of Toronto Press. 'From a philosophical perspective, one would be hard pressed to justify this fine new edition of Mill's works. In epistemology, psychology and logic Mill really makes no great advance on Hume, James Mill or his predecessors.' As for Mill's 'social and political writing', Keenan is disposed to accept the notion that it amounts to little more than 'disguised Benthamism'. Hence, Keenan deduces that 'the sustained interest in Mill in Canada, and thus the justification for the present series is, of course, that Mill, more than any other thinker, represents the actual political theory and practice of this country'.²² The *Globe and Mail* reached a great many more readers than the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*. That the newspaper asked Grant to review Mill's *Essays on politics and society* is not altogether surprising. His solemn and thought-provoking *Lament for a nation* (1965), a compelling political tract no less than a philosophical statement, had become a central text in the debate over Canadian identity. In Grant's conception, the connection between Mill and this identity was unproblematic. In the first paragraph of his review he asserts that 'university life in Canada, before the American invasion of the sixties, was largely congruent with Mill, the archetypal British bourgeois philosopher. This was true, not only of our intellectual life, but of our politics'.²³ The problem of justice was Grant's primary moral and philosophical concern. Mill, he declares, 'dons the robe of justice, while at the same time his account of the whole leaves no reason why anybody should take seriously an appeal to justice'. Mill wears the 'mantle of the tireless preacher...without any seeming recognition that if what he is preaching is taken seriously there is no reason why it is good to be just'.²⁴ Such is the message Grant takes from Mill's *Utilitarianism*, a work that did not form part of the *Essays on politics and society*, the volumes purportedly under review. Grant welcomes the publication of Mill's essays on Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, yet says that the 'pedantry of his expository style combines with the flat substance of secularism, so that he achieves the very difficult result of making de Tocqueville appear a bore'.²⁵ Of the central principle articulated in *On liberty*, Grant observes: 'To let this principle lie before one and ponder its truth is first to ask what is being said in it about

²² *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, 1 (1977), p. 141.

²³ William Christian and Sheila Grant, eds., *The George Grant reader* (Toronto, 1998), p. 129.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 130.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 130–1.

human beings. Why are human beings such as to merit regimes of freedom? It was indeed these kinds of questions that Mill did not ask.²⁶

Robson surely considered the 'Mill' these philosophers constructed, for their own purposes, a 'fiction'. He did not hold that philosophers were incapable of knowing the Mill he knew; such knowledge, however, could only be gained through an investment neither Keenan nor Grant had made. Stefan Collini writes, in his book *English pasts*: 'Mill is sometimes singled out as a quintessentially English thinker. In its crudest form this judgement is made up of equal parts of ignorance and prejudice, often laced with a dash of hostility.' Keenan and Grant evince the equal parts, along with the lacing (more than 'a dash', in Grant's case). Collini furnishes the corrective, stating that Mill

was the least parochial of writers, and, with due allowance for the simplification inherent in such epitomes, one could as well say of him what Engels said of Marx, that the development of his thought combined English political economy, French Socialism, and (via Carlyle and Coleridge) German philosophy, as well as many other things.

All thirty-three volumes of the *Collected works* appeared before Collini wrote these words. He proclaimed the result 'one of the most distinguished editions in modern scholarship'.²⁷

The *Collected works* had spawned the *Mill News Letter*. By 1986, with the completion of the former in sight, a decision had to be made about the latter. The Bentham Project, based at University College London, had started around the same time as the Mill Project. Its lifespan would extend far beyond the three decades it took to finish Mill's *Collected works*. The *Bentham Newsletter* began in 1978 as an annual publication. In autumn 1986, Robson opened conversations with Frederick Rosen, then general editor of Bentham's *Collected works*, about a merger of the Bentham and Mill newsletters.²⁸ The upshot was the founding, in 1989, of the journal *Utilitas*. Welcoming 'articles, notes, discussions, and reviews on all aspects of utilitarian thought and its historical context', *Utilitas* was something both more and less than the newsletters it superseded.²⁹ It would contain less about the Bentham and Mill editions and a lot more about the development of utilitarianism and its relevance to contemporary themes across various disciplines. Rosen, its first editor (Robson acted as 'Consultant Editor' between 1989 and his death in 1995), was a historian of political thought and Bentham specialist. For a number of years, a significant proportion of the articles published in *Utilitas* focused on Bentham or Mill. This proportion diminished over time. Philosophers currently saturate its editorial

²⁶ Ibid., p. 132.

²⁷ Stefan Collini, *English pasts: essays in history and culture* (Oxford, 1999), p. 143.

²⁸ These conversations resulted in a formal proposal submitted by Rosen to Robson in January 1987 (the new journal was to be based in London, not Toronto). Robson accepted the proposal the following month. See Rosen to Robson, 8 Jan. 1987, and Robson to Rosen, 10 Feb. 1987, Mill Project MS, box 130, *Mill News Letter*, 1967–90.

²⁹ The quoted phrase appears in the journal's statement of editorial policy; see *Utilitas*, 1 (1989).

committee and predominate among its contributors. As a species of publication, *Utilitas* bears small resemblance to the *Mill News Letter*.

V

The world of Mill studies too now differs from what it once was. The changes track broader trends in humanities scholarship. The publication of the *Collected works* coincided with the heyday of Victorian studies, whose visibility, relative to other fields, has faded in recent decades. The research programmes of today's Victorianists typically shun 'elite' figures such as Mill. Valuable work on Mill continues to be done by literary scholars and intellectual historians (especially historians of political and economic thought). Taken together, however, these individuals lack the cohesiveness and density needed to form an identifiable body of Mill scholars. Only within the discipline of philosophy does there exist something approximating such a community. Its members, in many instances, belong to the International Society for Utilitarian Studies (which originated in 1986 as the International Bentham Society). One of the benefits of membership is a subscription to *Utilitas*. *Utilitas* encourages submissions from political theorists and historians of political or economic thought; the Society welcomes such scholars to its ranks. Be this as it may, philosophers have a commanding presence as contributors to the journal and as members of the Society. There is nothing surprising in this order of things. Philosophy musters many more Millians than the historical profession. A radical change has occurred in university history curricula since the 1960s. Evolving priorities discouraged departments from searching for an intellectual historian specializing in Mill (or in anything else, unless the anything be digital humanities). The turns in literary studies of the last half century mean that only vestiges survive of the tradition exemplified by Wodehouse, Priestley, and Mineka. An introductory course in ethics remains a staple of philosophy departments in North America and the United Kingdom. Of the texts commonly assigned, probably none figures with greater regularity than Mill's *Utilitarianism*. *On liberty* is often a core text in political philosophy courses. Being a Mill specialist in philosophy is no handicap. Reference works containing an entry for Mill almost invariably start with the declaration that he was a 'philosopher'. John Skorupski (an eminent Mill scholar) says, in his introduction to the *Cambridge companion*, that the importance of Mill's ethical thought 'is matched in the nineteenth century only by Hegel and Nietzsche'.³⁰

Readers of Skorupski's book *English-language philosophy, 1750–1945* learn that 'Mill's presence in nineteenth-century politics and culture is so immense that it can be hard to focus on him simply as a contributor to the British philosophical tradition'.³¹ Some philosophers grasp the expanse and intensity of Mill's practical concerns, and try to take the measure of their significance. The fact remains that most of the problems academic philosophers interested in Mill set for themselves say little about his impact on the politics and culture

³⁰ John Skorupski, *The Cambridge companion to Mill* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 2.

³¹ John Skorupski, *English-language philosophy, 1750–1945* (Oxford, 1993), p. 33.

of his time. Nor do these problems illuminate the cardinal aspirations impelling Mill to act as he did. Mill's quest for intellectual authority was inseparable from his pursuit of the moral, social, and political ends he judged favourable to human betterment. Tactical considerations often governed what he said and when he said it. A good example: he condemns the sway of 'custom' when espousing the cause of sexual equality; custom wears a benign face when Mill, a member of the Commons Preservation Society, opposes further enclosure of common land by individual landlords.³² Mill's powerfully demonstrated fitness for abstract thinking does not mean that theorizing is what he was chiefly about. If theorizing is not what he was chiefly about, then the current distribution of disciplinary influence within Mill studies has worrying implications for our understanding of the historical Mill.

The historical Mill was at the heart of John Robson's enterprise. In 1991, the University of Toronto Press published *A cultivated mind: essays on J. S. Mill presented to John M. Robson*, edited by Michael Laine. The name of nine of its ten participants had appeared on a title page of the *Collected works*, as a co-editor or introducer (or both). The lone philosopher in the bunch was Alan Ryan. (In tone and touch, there is little to choose between his essay 'Sense and sensibility in Mill's political thought' and the pieces he wrote for the *London Review of Books* or the *New York Review of Books*.) All contributors to the festschrift appreciated that Robson's Mill was a Victorianist's Mill. Most of those who knew the Robsonian moment in Mill studies will soon pass from the scene (many already have). Robson's creation, the Toronto edition of Mill's *Collected works*, will last.

Acknowledgements. I wish to thank Stefan Collini and Brian Harrison for their telling comments on an earlier version of this communication. I am also grateful to Alan Ryan for allowing me to quote from one of his letters to John Robson.

³² For Mill's hostility to custom, in the former instance, see John M. Robson, ed., *The subjection of women*, in *Essays on equality, law, and education* (Toronto, 1984), *Collected works*, XXI, pp. 270, 271–2; for his sympathetic treatment of custom, in the latter case, see John M. Robson and Bruce L. Kinzer, eds., *Public and parliamentary speeches* (2 vols., Toronto, 1988), *Collected works*, XXIX, pp. 426–7.

Cite this article: Kinzer B (2023). The Making of J. S. Mill's *Collected Works*, and Its Aftermath. *The Historical Journal* 66, 1177–1188. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0018246X23000298>