

John Stuart Mill

John Stuart Mill's autobiography is remarkable in many ways, beginning with its story of his education by his father James Mill (1773-1836), the follower and associate of the utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham and the economic philosopher David Ricardo. A serious, free-thinking, conscientious Scotsman, James Mill recognized his little son's brilliance and began teaching him early. "I have no remembrance of the time when I began to learn Greek," Mill says on the third page. "I have been told it was when I was three years old."

His education continues to be the primary subject, which is part of what makes his autobiography so different. Until Mill's time, most autobiographies were stories of religious experience and conversion, in the traditions of Kempe and Bunyan, or records of the writer's works and achievements, like Gibbon's and Benjamin Franklin's. (It should be noted that though we think of Franklin's as a great American autobiography, he actually began it while he was living in England and was a British subject.) To be sure, education is inevitably an element of these earlier autobiographies, but Mill's education was entirely secular, not religious, and was a goal in and of itself, not a means to other goals like wealth or fame or good works. Chapter II continues with his moral education, still under the influence of his benign and yet and strong-minded father, and Chapter III is titled "Last Stage of Education, and First of Self-Education."

The fourth chapter describes some of the ways in which he put his education to use in promoting utilitarianism and political reform. But this work was now his effort to educate others, as he readily admits in the first two words of the title, "Youthful Propagandism."

It is Chapter V that describes the most surprising turn in his education. For many years, from 1821, when he was fifteen, he had so devoted himself to the cause of reform that "My conception of my own happiness was entirely identified with this object." But by "the autumn of 1826," when he was still only twenty, he had reached a "dull state of nerves" in which his life had become joyless and he felt "insipid or indifferent." So he asked himself how he would feel if all the "changes in institutions and opinions" which he was working for were suddenly accomplished. Would that bring "great joy and happiness"? "And an irrepressible self-consciousness distinctly answered, 'No!'" The result was an even greater dejection that he describes as lasting for two years, during which he continued to examine himself and look for other sources of happiness. But he did not begin to recover until the fall of 1828 when he began to read Wordsworth's poetry. He had earlier read Coleridge and Byron and other poets, but Wordsworth restored or gave birth to his "feelings." And thus began a further education that his father had not given him. He began to read romantic poets and philosophers and to see relationships between history and political institutions that he had seen before and to see errors in his father's philosophy.

He goes on to describe his friendship with Harriet Taylor that began in 1830. She was married, and remained married until her husband's death twenty-one years later, but they enjoyed a platonic relationship all that time. She united feeling and intellect and helped Mill to do so too and thus had a powerful influence on his later writing. He acknowledges this not only in the *Autobiography* but in his great essay, *On Liberty* (1859), which is famous for its advocacy of free trade and laissez-faire economics, but which also argues for the rights of the individual by saying that society as a whole profits from the freedom and diversity of all its members. Although he was already an advocate of women's rights, she was also an obvious influence on his *The Subjection of Women* (1869), another essay for which he is still famous. He protested that a woman's subjection to her husband made her legally no better than a slave, and as a member of parliament, Mill supported women's suffrage. He even wanted the word "man" replaced with the word "person" in the Reform Bill of 1867.

Thus Mill's reputation as a political philosopher and feminist continues to be very strong. But he also holds a very important place in the history of autobiography. He secularized it and emphasized the writer's education and intellectual history more than fame and works. Born in 1806, he looked back to Wordsworth (born in 1770) and looks ahead to Edmund Gosse (1849), who would also write a story of education and the influence of a very strong father.

Questions for Further Study:

1. Mill and Newman were almost exact contemporaries, and both wrote intellectual autobiographies, although otherwise very different ones. Which do you find more interesting and compelling. Why?
2. In describing his depression in the fall of 1821 (Ch. V), Mill compares it to “the state...in which converts to Methodism usually are, when smitten by their first ‘conviction of sin.’” This suggests that his *Autobiography*, even though secular, is also a conversion narrative, like Bunyan’s *Grace Abounding*. Compare the two books.
3. In *The Education of Henry Adams* (note the title), Adams refers to Mill a number of times and even describes arguing with him one night at a party in London over the advantages of protectionism vs. free trade. But he also describes Mill as “timid,” adding that “timidity...is high wisdom in philosophy.” This is an interesting comment, and Mill was a philosopher. Is his *Autobiography* timid? In what ways—style, argument, presentation of self, or some other feature?