

Ultimately, All Monuments Are Ozymandias

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The great philosopher John Stuart Mill probably did more than anyone to map out the proper boundaries of the individual and the state in the western model of political democracy. Furthermore, he talked not just of the state but of societal behaviour as it impacts on individuals. Through the power of thought his influence on the development of the modern world has been enormous, even if many have never heard of him. He was four generations ahead of his time; but that is in part true because his own writings helped shape the future. [This from the New Yorker](#) is a fine example of the received view of Mill among the modern liberal intelligentsia:

Mill believed in complete equality between the sexes, not just women's colleges and, someday, female suffrage but absolute parity; he believed in equal process for all, the end of slavery, votes for the working classes, and the right to birth control (he was arrested at seventeen for helping poor people obtain contraception), and in the common intelligence of all the races of mankind. He led the fight for due process for detainees accused of terrorism; argued for teaching Arabic, in order not to alienate potential native radicals; and opposed adulterating Anglo-American liberalism with too much systematic French theory—all this along with an intelligent acceptance of the free market as an engine of prosperity and a desire to see its excesses and inequalities curbed. He was right about nearly everything, even when contemplating what was wrong: open-minded and magnanimous to a fault, he saw through Thomas Carlyle's reactionary politics to his genius, and his essay on Coleridge, a leading conservative of the previous generation, is a model appreciation of a writer whose views are all wrong but whose writing is still wonderful. Mill was an enemy of religious bigotry and superstition, and a friend of toleration and free thought, without overdoing either. (No one has ever been more eloquent about the ethical virtues of Jesus of Nazareth.)

Yet for a living John Stuart Mill was Secretary to the Political Committee of the East India Company, and actively involved in the rapacious colonisation of India and the enforced opening of China to opium sales. How do we cope with this? Mill has possibly influenced my thinking more than any other political writer. I would start any political education with a reading of Mill's *On Liberty* and J A Hobson's *Imperialism: A Study*. But how do we process Mill's involvement with the East India Company? Should Mill's statue be ripped from Victoria Embankment Gardens and dumped in the Thames?

I do not ask that as a rhetorical question. It is a dilemma. Historians of thought have tended to deal with it by ignoring Mill's day job. I have read three biographies of Mill and I have a fourth, by Timothy Larsen, waiting to be started. Richard Reeves comes closest of Mill's biographers to addressing Mill's work for the East India Company but tells us almost nothing

on the subject that is not from Mill's own Autobiography. In his Autobiography, what Mill mostly tells us about his work for the EIC is that it did not take up too much of his time.

If Mill were a dentist, for biographers to ignore his day job and concentrate on his philosophy would make sense. But Mill's day job was governing a very significant proportion of the world's population. He did not just work at the East India Company, he was perhaps, as Secretary of the Political Committee, the most important civil servant there. Mill wrote and signed off detailed instructions to Governors General. He issued advice – which was expected to be followed – on trade and military affairs, and on governance. It is fascinating to me that in his Autobiography Mill systematically downplays his role in the East India Office, both in terms of his commitment and his importance within the organisation.

There has been much more written about Mill and the East India Company by Indian researchers than by western researchers, because it is of course an excellent illustration of the hypocrisies of western liberalism, that its figurehead was so enmeshed in the colonial project. Unfortunately, many of these studies lack nuance and tend to accuse Mill of being things he definitely was not, such as a racist. East India Company policies are ascribed to Mill which Mill was demonstrably and actively against, such as the anglicising project of Trevelyan and Macaulay. Mill did not view British culture as superior, and he was horrified by initiatives like the ending of communal land ownership in Bengal and the British creation of a Bengali landlord class there. I broadly recommend [this article](#) by Mark Tunick, though like almost everything published on the subject it suffers from the drawback of discussing what Mill wrote about governing India rather than the much harder task of discussing what he wrote in governing India. The subject needs solid analysis of Mill's thousands of minutes and despatches in the East India Company records.

Mill worked with Burnes to try to avoid the First Afghan War, but like Burnes he did not resign over it, nor over the appalling war crimes committed by the British in its prosecution. Mill had been the guiding hand behind the long Governor Generalship of Lord Bentinck and its policy of avoiding war and expansion; but Mill was still there administering when that ended, through the annexations of Sindh and Nepal and Baluchistan and the most aggressive period of Imperial expansionism. Mill was there for the opium wars.

So how do we come to terms with our past? If slavery is the touchstone of good and bad, Mill is fine. He was a dedicated and effective lifetime opponent of slavery, including in EIC territories, and was highly influential in assuring the UK did not recognise the Confederacy in the US civil war. But if you look at the atrocious crimes of British imperialism, the financial and economic rape of whole continents, the killing, torture, terror and physical rape, why would slavery be the only criterion to judge people?

I have chosen Mill because he was a demonstrably good man, and yet I perfectly understand why a person of Indian or Chinese heritage might want to dump him in the Thames. There are others Imperialists, like Napier, Gordon or Wolseley, with statues all over the country, whose deeds are not admirable to a modern eye, particularly as our society is now a great deal less homogenous and contains descendants of those whose cities were pillaged and people raped and slaughtered by these military prodigies.

I don't have all the answers. My life of Alexander Burnes tried to find a way to treat a remarkable man who lived by the mores of times not our own. The answer lies not in glorifying nor in destroying our past.

Monuments do not stand still. They are, ultimately, all of them Ozymandias. Destruction of historical artifacts is a bad thing; they are valuable tools for understanding the past, and of artistic and cultural value in themselves. But it is perfectly natural that in public spaces we wish to have public objects that reflect the mores of our own times. The important thing is to understand that the mores of the times do change; our great grandchildren will undoubtedly think we were quaint and had weird beliefs.

A thought on Edward Colston. His involvement in slavery was as a director of the Royal African Company. The Royal in that title is not meaningless; the company was set up specifically to make the monarch rich. A far more practical way to honour the memory of the slaves would be to abolish the monarchy. That would be a meaningful action.

A further thought. Living here in Edinburgh I find it absolutely infuriating that we have a major street named after the genocidal sadist the Duke of Cumberland. (Yes, Cumberland Street is specifically named after him). Respecting the past does not mean our society cannot move on. Street names and statues are signs of honour. There are plenty that should be removed from the street and placed in museums, where they can be explained and contextualised.

When Horatio Nelson helped to “free” the Kingdom of the Sicilies from Napoleon and restore its appalling autocratic monarchy, Neapolitan writers and intellectuals were shot and hung on Nelson’s flagship, anchored off Naples so the mob could not intervene to save them. Nelson watched some of the executions between bouts of shagging Lady Hamilton. I do not recommend toppling Nelson’s column; but I do advocate some real information about him in an education centre under the square.

UPDATE: I see that Liverpool University have just agreed to rename Gladstone Hall because Gladstone’s father was a slave owner. That is, I think, an appalling act of stupidity from what is supposed to be an institute of learning.

Very many thanks to the 700 people who have applied to follow virtually the criminal proceedings against me which start tomorrow. It is just a procedural court hearing tomorrow and I am worried that nothing much may happen. I do hope you will not get bored and give up on the rest of the case when it comes. In Julian Assange’s case, the behaviour of the judge has been outrageous even in the procedural hearings, but we should not take for granted that the same will happen here.

The court has been informing people they are not allowed to record, or to publish while the court is in session. That is true; but you can take notes, and you are allowed to publish factual accounts of what happened once the court closes.

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