

‘James Mill on the French Revolution’

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Selected Publications:

‘James Mill’s treatment of religion and the “History of British India”’, *History of European Ideas* (December 2008, 34:4)

‘An “*impérialiste libéral*” ? J.B. Say on colonies and the extra-European world’, *French Historical Studies* (Spring 2009, 32:2)

‘A Scottish Jacobin: John Oswald on commerce and citizenship’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* (April 2010, 71:2)

Introduction to the Paper:

This paper is an extension of a topic briefly touched upon in my doctoral dissertation on the Scottish Enlightenment and the French Revolution. James Mill, in spite of his Scottish upbringing, wrote and lived in England between 1802 and his death in 1836. For this reason his views on political reform are usually examined from the perspective of his well-known connections with English radicalism and utilitarianism. In particular, the only scholarly study concerned with Mill’s views of the French Revolution (Joseph Hamburger’s influential *James Mill and the Art of Revolution*) barely considers Mill’s contemporary experience of the revolutionary decade, and interprets Mill’s public condemnation of revolution in the 1820s in light of his assumed ‘abhorrence’ for the events of the 1790s.

I take the opposite approach in this paper, by focusing on Mill’s contemporary and near-contemporary assessment of the French Revolution. The paper examines the specific political context in which Mill experienced the Revolution, as well as several of his early works written between 1803 and his meeting with Bentham around 1807-8. These little-

known writings suggest that the young Mill was far from being a harsh critic of the Revolution. Rather, he saw the Revolution as a positive, albeit humanly and economically costly, step in the inevitable progress of society.

Mill's contemporary views of the Revolution, I argue, were shaped not only by his education in 'Scottish Enlightenment' thought, but also by his background in 'Popular' Presbyterian social and political thought. His assessment of the Revolution is, accordingly, characterised by a strong emphasis on the role of religion, and of individual morals, in the social and political sphere. These elements were not abandoned by Mill after his meeting with Bentham, I suggest, but rather re-worked and integrated into Mill's new utilitarian outlook.

Bibliographical note:

Some of the texts discussed in the paper are not easily found in libraries. They are now, however, available online:

- Mill, James (1803), 'View of the Progress of Revolutionary Principles in France', *Literary Journal*, 1 (10).

Mill's early articles were often published anonymously. For identification I have relied on the attributions of A. L. Lazenby and R. A. Fenn, in Lazenby, A. L. (1972), 'James Mill: The Formation of a Scottish Emigre Writer', unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sussex, and Fenn, R. A. (1987), *James Mill's Political Thought* (London: Garland Publishing).

The *Literary Journal* is available online from the British Periodicals Collection.

- Villers, Charles de (1805), *An Essay on the Spirit and Influence of the Reformation of Luther*, trans. James Mill (London: C. and R. Baldwin).

Mill translated and annotated Villers' essay. The text is available in full on Google Books.

- Mill, James *Common Place Books*, ed. Robert A. Fenn (online edn.).

Mill's common place books gather notes taken between 1806 and the mid-1820s – quotations taken from his current readings, scraps of reflections, reminders and outlines of future arguments. As Mill did not always arrange his notes in chronological order, it is not always possible to precisely date specific extracts. The full text has been recently made available at <http://www.intellectualhistory.net/mill/>.