CHAPTER 1

George Grote, The Philosphic Radical and Politician

Bruce Kinzer

Just as George Grote sought to give his age, and posterity, a new history of Greece, so too did Philosophic Radicalism, the school of politics to which he belonged in the 1830s, seek to give a new political order to nineteenth-century England.1 How did Grote become a member of this school? What led him to set aside his work on the history of Greece in order to take up a political career? What were his political hopes and aspirations? Why, in the end, did these prove unrealizable? Such questions must be at the heart of any study of Grote, Philosophic Radical and Politician.

The story must begin with Grote’s introduction to James Mill, most probably in 1819, an introduction brought about by David Ricardo.2 By this time Mill’s association with Jeremy Bentham went back a decade, the former having 1

There are two standard treatments of the politics of the Philosophic Radicals, each excellent in its way: Joseph Hamburger, Intellectuals in Politics: John Stuart Mill and the Philosophic Radicals (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1965), and William Thomas, The Philosophic Radicals: Nine Studies in Theory and Practice, 1817–1841 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979). Hamburger, a ‘lumper,’ provides a penetrating analysis of the doctrine, goals, and actions that made the Philosophic Radicals a distinct and coherent political group in the decade after the passage of the Reform Act of 1832. As the book’s subtitle indicates, he gives more attention to J.S. Mill than to any other single Philosophic Radical. At no point does Hamburger offer an extended commentary on Grote’s thoughts respecting strategy or tactics. Thomas, a ‘splitter,’ trains his practiced eye on “personalities and episodes in the history of the group which came to be called the Philosophic Radicals” (1). Differences within the group matter more to Thomas than what its members had in common. He gives thirty-three pages to a chapter titled “George Grote and the Ballot.” The broad scope of two older works of significance, Élie Halévy, La Formation du Radicalisme Philosophique, 3 vols. (Paris: Alcan, 1901–04), translated into English by Mary Morris under the title The Growth of Philosophic Radicalism (London: Faber and Faber, 1928), and Leslie Stephen’s The English Utilitarians, 3 vols. (London: Duckworth, 1900) precluded their giving detailed and systematic treatment to the political activity of the Philosophic Radicals in the 1830s. M.L. Clarke’s valuable George Grote: A Biography (London: The Athlone Press, 1962) includes a chapter on Grote’s parliamentary career (chapter 3, 49–74) that provides an illuminating summary of his political activity during the 1830s, without, however, attempting a full-scale evaluation of the broader significance of Grote’s political conduct in that decade.

2 For the dating of this introduction, see Clarke, George Grote, 20n.
acquired a reputation as a formidable exponent of Benthamite doctrine. He had also recently published his multi-volume *History of British India*, the writing of which had taken ten years to complete. The force of Mill's intellect, personality, and argumentation often had a remarkable impact on those who found themselves in his presence, including men whose own power of thought greatly impressed their contemporaries. Thirty years after Mill's death Grote sought to convey the qualities of mind, character, and speech that had made him such an authoritative figure. “His unpremeditated oral exposition was hardly less effective than his prepared work with his pen; his colloquial fertility on philosophical subjects, his power of discussing himself, and of stimulating others to discuss, his ready responsive inspirations through all the shifts and windings of a sort of Platonic dialogue,—all these accomplishments were, to those who knew him, even more impressive than what he composed for the press.” Grote went on to note Mill’s “strenuous character, earnest convictions, and single-minded devotion to truth.” The combined force of such attributes gave Mill “a powerful intellectual ascendency over younger minds.”

In temperament, if not in opinion, Grote and Mill differed markedly. A letter Grote wrote to his close friend George Warde Norman in May 1819 attests to this difference.

I have breakfasted and dined several times with Ricardo, who has been uncommonly civil and kind to me. I have met Mill often at his house, and hope to derive great pleasure and instruction from his acquaintance, as he is a very profound thinking man, and seems well disposed to communicate, as well as clear and intelligible in his manner. His mind has, indeed, all that cynicism and asperity which belong to the Benthamian school, and what I chiefly dislike in him is, the readiness and seeming preference with which he dwells on the faults and defects of others—even of the greatest men! But it is so very rarely that a man of any depth comes across my path, that I shall most assuredly cultivate his acquaintance a good deal farther.

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