HISTORY AND HISTORY: J.S. MILL ON THE GREEKS*

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I intend in this article to look at Mill on the Greeks, rather than the Greeks on Mill; that is, Mill's interpretation of the Greeks rather than the impact of the Greeks on Mill. Before doing this two features of Mill's own background ought briefly to be noted as they cast light on Mill's treatment of the subject matter. First, the political dimension: Mill's early membership of the philosophical radicals gave him a view of politics as a struggle between the party of "the people" and the party of the aristocracy (the Tories and Whigs were merely a sub-division of a basic aristocratic interest). This political division reflected the existence in society of two forces, social and moral as well as political - the conservative and the reforming elements. This dialectical phenomenon reflected itself also in the intellectual life of a society, giving rise to progressive and to conservative thinkers, the former like Bentham subversive and critical questioners, the latter like Coleridge defending ancient and neglected truths. This view of the tension in society between tradition and change is the basic perspective through which Mill sees much of the Greek experience. It also brings us to the second feature worth noting in his own background, and that is the philosophical dimension: the upholding of reason as the source of political and moral knowledge, as against God, nature, or tradition. In this respect too Mill looks to the Greeks for confirmation of this basic conflict.

To say that these two views on the nature of political and philosophical conflict lead to Mill's views on the Greeks is not of course to deny that his interest in and study of the Greeks preceded this. It is well known, to say the least, that Mill read widely in the classics from early childhood, but his mature views do reflect the ideas
of divided society bequeathed him by Bentham and James Mill. So much as a preface; rather than merely describing or summarising Mill's writings on the Greeks, I should like now to discuss how far his views on the Greeks acceded with what he claimed was the proper mode of historical enquiry. We know that he held definite ideas on the use and study of History, originating in large part from his reaction to the debate between Macaulay on the one side, and his father and the utilitarians, on the other. As we shall see he also believed in the importance of Greek history. What then is the relationship between his study of history and his writings on History?

First, what was Mill's view of History? Rebelling against utilitarian orthodoxy which stressed analysis of human nature and deduction therefrom without serious attention to the past, Mill acknowledged the force of Macaulay's attack both on the limited view of human nature held by Bentham and James Mill, and on the use of deduction as the sole method in politics. Where Bentham and the elder Mill analysed human nature in terms of pleasure and pain and then proceeded deductively towards the form of government best able to maximise the happiness of the community, Macaulay reacted against the neglect of history and put forward Induction as the alternative method, which could allow for the variety and change to be seen in the past. Although J.S. Mill recognised that the study of politics must be related to a particular historical context, nevertheless history cannot dispense with hypothesis. Further, the generalisations which history affords us are themselves unreliable without the added explanatory deduction from the more fundamental laws of human nature. So history is the starting point, but for it to fulfil its role in a scientific study of society it must be verified by showing its consistency with the principles of human nature. Ultimately, having understood particular ages separately we should be able to discover the laws to