

Ten Letters by John Stuart Mill

The John Stuart Mill Library, at Somerville College, Oxford, has been fortunate enough over the last few years to acquire ten letters written by John Stuart Mill. They were first displayed together at the College in November 2021, and are the first major additions to the collection since it was received in 1905. The first three of the letters below were purchased in spring 2018 with the help of two of the library's major supporters, Mr Christopher and Mrs Margaret Kenyon. The other seven were acquired after a successful crowd-funding campaign in 2019 and receipt of a generous grant from the Friends of the National Libraries. The College is most grateful to these donors, and also to the prime mover in the acquisitions, Dr Anne Manuel, College Librarian and Archivist. The letters provide fascinating insights into various aspects of Mill's life, including penal reform, feminism, editorial work, the East India Company, his views on religion, and the Jamaica Question. A transcription of each letter follows, preceded by a brief introduction.¹

1. To Michael Davenport Hill

Hill was commissioner of the Bristol and district court of bankruptcy. He was a lawyer, and penal reformer, several of his suggestions on the treatment of prisoners being enacted in British law. This letter may concern the Penal Servitude Act of 1867, and Mill promises to bear Hill's point about the bankruptcy court in mind as the bill reaches committee.

Blackheath Park

May 1, 1867

Dear Sir

What you say on the subject of the officers of the Bankruptcy Court appears perfectly just, and I will bear it duly in mind when the Bill reaches the proper stage in Committee.

I am

Dear Sir

Yours very truly

J.S. Mill

2. To Mrs Mary Johnson

¹ I am greatly indebted to the notes provided by Mr Hamish Riley-Smith in his sale catalogues for the letters, and to Dr Anne Manuel and Ms Katherine O'Donnell for transcriptions of the letters.

The National Society for Women's Suffrage was founded in London in 1867. It had an Executive Committee of women, and Mill was on the General Committee. Branches followed at Birmingham, Edinburgh, and Manchester. This letter was read out at the first Birmingham Conference on Women's Suffrage on 8 May 1868, and published in *The Times* a few days later. This letter has only recently been rediscovered.

Blackheath Park, Kent

April 23, 1868

Dear Madam

I am very happy to hear that you have formed at Birmingham a branch of the National Society for Women's Suffrage, and I wish you most cordially all success in your important work. There is no movement to which I should be more happy to devote my time and labour than to this one, the consequences of which are likely to be so momentous and so beneficial to both sexes. The pressure of my occupations will, however, make it impossible for me to be present at the meeting to which you do me the honour to invite me. I am

Dear Madam

Very sincerely yours

J.S. Mill

3. *To Thomas Falconer*

This letter is to the nominal editor of the *London Review*, showing Mill's own editorial work on the third issue of 1835 (which included Mill's own favourable review of Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*). Falconer was a barrister and later a judge. He was, to speak strictly, sub-editor, and probably got the job through being the brother-in-law of Mill's close friend J.A. Roebuck. By early 1836, it was clear he was not especially competent, and in 1837 he was replaced. In his *Autobiography*,

Mill says that work on the *Review* took up most of spare time from 1834-1840. The letter itself explains why.

I[ndia] H[ouse] Saturday

3d Oct [1835]

My dear Falconer

I write to report progress. D'abond I wish you would by the first post, write to Pringle, to say that from the length to which some of our articles have gone, & the great quantity of matter not acceptable to light readers, which the number will contain, we are obliged to put it off his article to No.IV. which is the less to be regretted as matter of the kind will be likely to be more read then than now. You may add (if you will venture to do so on my testimony) that the article is very good, & will be useful to us. - I want him to receive the first notice of the postponement from us, & not from the advertisement.

We shall be out next week. The only matter not sent to press is my Postscript (which I think you will like) & the last half of Buller's article, which he promised sh^d have been here yesterday. What we have of it is very good, & pleasantly written. On the whole it is a good number. We shall rather exceed our 16 sheets, though we must omit the Nebulae. By the bye, Nichol sent to me by post the first sheet of the Nebulae, saying that an accident had rendered his MS. illegible & that he was obliged to recopy it: & would send by every post one sheet, using thereafter alternately Grote's & Roebuck's frank: consequently I have received no more, both being out of town. But as we have not room for it, that is of no consequence. Chapman goes on very well.

Molesworth wants to write on Orangeism & I should like him to do so, but as the Atlas man wants the same thing, & as it may be good to have a friend in the Atlas — will you tell me how I can manage to get a sight of some numbers thereof, that I may see how he writes. Nichol says his mode of treating the subject, being scientific & a priori, will not interfere with Wakefield's.

We are to print 1000 of Law Reform & sell it for 6^d. That was Chapman's ultimate opinion. We must distribute it very largely. Could not you send some to the agents for the Political Pamphlet?

I have set on foot a greater quantity of advertising than usual, as people complain of our not being advertised enough.

Ever yours

J.S. Mill

4. To William Cabell

With help from his father, Mill took up an appointment at the East India Company in 1823, and remained there for thirty-five years. Cabell was Senior Clerk in the 'Secret and Political Department'. These letters of Mill relating to his work have only recently come to light in the India Office Library. The letter concerns a lost report, and Mill is sending along another copy 'with a thousand apologies'.

Ex[aminer's] Off[ice]

Tuesday

My dear Sir

I was informed both at the time, & yesterday that the Report had certainly been sent. How it miscarried I cannot tell, but it is a most unlucky accident. I hope the accompanying copy of it will be in time. There was not time to get it again signed by the Chairs.

With a thousand apologies believe me ever truly yours

J.S. Mill

There now follow four unpublished letters about a proposed paper for the *London and Westminster Review* by the Rev. George Armstrong, in the late 1830s.

5. To Albany Fonblanque

Fonblanque was a radical journalist and editor-proprietor of the journal, *Examiner*. He and the journal nearly went bankrupt in 1833, and Mill helped to raise £1000 to save him. In the letter, Mill recommends a book for review. He mentions his correspondence with Armstrong about an article, asks Fonblanque himself to write for the *London and Westminster*, and compliments Fonblanque on the *Examiner*. Armstrong was a Unitarian minister, who sent a paper on 'Church and State Fallacies' to Mill, via Fonblanque, for the *London and Westminster*. It was never published. (Armstrong should not be confused with the journalist of the same name, born in 1836, whose efforts on behalf of the Westminster Conservative Association were largely responsible for Mill's electoral defeat in May 1868.)

Kensington

Tuesday

Dear Fonblanque

This little book, is written by a young man now at Cambridge & for a young man shews I think much observation, reflexion, & power of expression. It was given to me by a friend of the author, who also sends a copy to you on my intimation that you I think you will probably like it. If you do, perhaps you will say something about it, as I think of doing in the L & W.

I have been laid up for a week by a sore throat & fever, & am going to Brighton on Thursday to recruit.

The L & W sells well & seems to be generally liked. I am in communication with Mr Armstrong about his article. When shall I be able to say the same thing about any article of yours?

The Examiner has been admirable of late.

Ever yours

J. S. Mill

6. To George Armstrong

This letter is Mill's response to Armstrong. He appears to see some merit in Armstrong's paper, but says it is somewhat journalistic, as well as rather abstract and unconnected with contemporary events. He himself offers to edit it for Armstrong. He then explains why he thinks that Armstrong's dichotomy – either there should be no established church at all, or, if there is, no toleration of other creeds – is too extreme. Why, Mill asks, might the state not teach what it thinks best, but, accepting its fallibility, permit other religions? He also makes it clear that the policy of the *London Review* is that the state should never *endow* a sect of any kind, and so the *Review* would have to include an editorial caveat along with Armstrong's paper. There is still debate on whether Mill was an atheist, and it is interesting to see Mill's taking seriously the idea that there might be state teaching of religion.

Kensington April 19th 1836

My dear Sir

Your letter found me on a sick bed, from which I am only just risen. It is truly gratifying to me that you approve of the spirit and conduct of the *London Review* – and still more so that you are not disinclined to give your aid in rendering it more

deserving of that approbation. Your paper "Church & State Fallacies" seemed to me excellent both in matter & manner - but rather too much like what I presume was in fact viz. a continuation of papers published in a newspaper. The title, which it had in common with some of your writings in the Examiner would require to be changed - as to other change I think it need not be great - but the readers of reviews will bear with a more discursive mode of treating a great subject when it is introduced occasionally & à propos of something temporary, than when it looks or begins like an abstract discourse - what struck me as objectionable in the paper for a Review, is that the style was that of an occasional paper, & the abstract mode of treating the subject, that of a formal essay - which suggested the idea of hooking it on more closely to some of the occasions of the day.

However if you & will honour me so far as to trust it in my hands, I will seize any occasion which may present itself & will promise to do the business by prefixing or omitting a very few words or sentences, more or less. In the substantial part of the paper as distinguished from the introduction there is only one thing which I venture to hope you will reconsider, & that is, the answer to the first fallacy - & the doctrine contained in it, that there should be either no establishment or no toleration, because either the state was _____ is no judge of creeds, or ought to anticipate the wrong. Now is this true? & if true, might we not say, there ought to be either no public schools & universities or no private education? May not the state be held so far a judge of the truth of creeds as to be empowered to teach that which it thinks best, yet not so infallible a judge as to be allowed to prevent all teaching but its own? I can conceive that it might be even desirable that the state should teach religion (provided it were philosophically & catholically, not dogmatically) but always odious that it should endow a sect. That doctrine has been the one hitherto taught in the London Review, & we should not like to put in what might seem a renunciation of it, without entering an editorial caveat.

Excuse the freedom of my remarks & pray treat mine with equal freedom.

Believe me my dear Sir with the greatest esteem & respect

Your obliged

J. S. Mill

7. To Fonblanque

This letter is later than no. 5 above. Mill tells Fonblanque that would like to publish Armstrong's article, but it will need some linking into a contemporary issue. He asks

Fonblanque to pass this information on to Armstrong, who perhaps never revised his piece.

I[ndia] H[ouse] Monday

Dear Fonblanque

Mr Armstrong's paper is excellent, & I earnestly hope we may be able to use it – not of course in the number which will appear next Thursday, but in the following. We have however been obliged to postpone so many articles, to make room for others of more temporary interest, that our insertion of this would be rendered greatly more probable by its being connected with something which may be exciting momentary attention at the time when it comes out. If you think Mr Armstrong would not mind retouching it with that view, we will give him timely notice.

You shall have your copy at the earliest possible moment. Can we hope for an article from yourself for next number?

Ever yours

J. S. Mill

I have written an article on temporary politics this time - in the form of the usual postscript.

8. To Armstrong

In the final letter of this quartet, we find Mill saying, presumably in response to a request from Armstrong, that he has, after quite a search, found Armstrong's paper and will send it back to him. They appear on good terms: Mill says that he is sorry to have missed Armstrong when he visited Mill's house, and hopes that they will find another opportunity to meet.

India House

13th August 1838

My dear Sir

I was ashamed to write to you until I had either found your paper, or ascertained that there was no longer any hope of finding it.

I am happy to say that after much search I have this morning succeeded in finding it, & it would accompany this letter, were it not that in the uncertainty whether you are still at Clifton, I think it more advisable to send this winged messenger (by no means a divine one) for news of your present local habitation, before committing anything more precious to the chances.

And now having in some measure discharged my conscience of a weight which has pressed heavily upon it for some time, permit me to express my obligation to you for the kind manner in which you continue to write to me, & for the excellent publication of which I have recently received a copy through Simpkin & Marshall & which I have read with the warmest sympathy. It will serve me on some occasion or other as a text from which to shew what men the present Constitution of the English Establishment drives to the necessity of separating themselves from it.

I have very much regretted the accidents by which, I, who am seldom out of town, have missed seeing you, who so seldom come to it - although you took the trouble of coming to this remote quarter of the town to confer on me the favour of a visit. I hope I may one day be more fortunate & may be able to meet face to face with one for whom I have long entertained so great a respect.

Believe me

My dear Sir

Most truly yours

J.S. Mill

9. To Pastor Louis Rey

Mill's house in Avignon was near Rey's church, and Harriet Taylor Mill was buried there in 1858. Rey has an indirect connection with the Mill Library. He was present at Mill's death, in 1873, and later undertook a Power of Attorney for the sale of the house and property of Helen Taylor, Harriet's daughter and Mill's step-daughter. He would not, however, have been involved in the sale of Mill's books, which were left to Somerville, for the use of the students. In this letter, Mill is asking the Pastor for an introduction to M. Dollfus, a cotton manufacturer in Mulhouse, so that Mill could see what the philanthropic factory owners had done for their workers, in building houses, organizing health care, and so on. Mill did visit Germany in 1865, but we do not know whether he made it to Mulhouse.

Blackheath Park

le 13 août 1865

Cher Monsieur

Je vous remercie de bon coeur de vos félicitations, et je vous prie de vouloir bien servir d'interprète auprès de M. Faure, à mes sentiments de reconnaissance de l'aimable lettre qu'il m'écrivit de Naples.

J'aurais une faveur à vous demander. Nous allons faire une tournée en Allemagne au commencement de Septembre, et nous désirons la terminer par une visite à Mulhouse afin de voir les belles choses que MM Dollfus et d'autres fabricants philanthropes y ont faites pour l'éducation et pour l'amélioration morale, intellectuelle, et physique des ouvriers. Pour cela des lettres de recommandation nous seraient très utiles, et j'ose m'adresser à votre bienveillance amicale pour nous en donner. Ce sera une faveur dont je vous serais on ne peut plus reconnaissant. Ma fille vous prie de la rappeler au bon souvenir de Madame Rey et de Madame Faure, et je demande la permission d'ajouter mes hommages respectueux.

Votre bien dévoué.

J.S. Mill

Dear Sir,

I would like to thank you wholeheartedly for your congratulations, and I ask you to pass on my regards to M. Faure, as well as my gratitude for the kind letter that he wrote to me from Naples. I would ask a favour of you: we are taking a tour of Germany at the start of September, and would like to stop at Mulhouse for a quick visit in order to see the wonderful things that Messrs Dollfus and the other philanthropic manufacturers have been doing for the education and moral, intellectual and physical betterment of their workers. For that, your letters of recommendation would be most useful, and I dare to appeal to your kind benevolence in furnishing me with them. It would be a favour for which I could not be more grateful. My daughter asks to be remembered fondly to Mme. Rey and Mme. Faure, and I would also like to add my respectful compliments.

Your faithful servant,

J.S. Mill

10. To Edwin Arnold

Arnold was leader writer, and later editor, of the *Daily Telegraph*. Mill was a member of the Jamaica Committee, formed in 1865 to protest against the ruthless suppression of a violent uprising among the black peasantry at Morant Bay, in Jamaica. The colonial governor, Edward Eyre, had approved the court martial, brutal punishment, and summary execution of a large number of rebels. Mill became the leading member of the Committee, opposing Eyre's supporters, who included Carlyle, Ruskin, Charles Kingsley, Tennyson, Dickens, and many others. Despite the efforts of the Committee and many others, and the bringing of charges against Eyre, Eyre was never found guilty, and the Committee was wound up in the spring of 1869. Despite its failure, the Committee had been the catalyst for the most important public debate in the Victorian era about the limits of state power. The *Telegraph* had invited Mill to contribute a paper on another subject, having supported him previously during his electoral campaign. Mill expresses his gratitude, but says that he is unable to write for a paper with which he is, on a matter of such great importance, at 'open war'.

Blackheath Park

Jan 31st 1866

Dear Sir

It is a very tempting offer to place the great circulation of the *Daily Telegraph* at my disposal for so important a purpose as the one you mention. As a mark of confidence in me, it deserves my thankful acknowledgments, and I cannot be supposed to be ill affected to a journal which gave me such able and powerful support at the Westminster election. But it is totally impossible for me to have any personal connexion with a paper which takes the part the *Telegraph* does on the Jamaica question. Not only every principle I have, but the honour and character of England for generations to come, are at stake on the condign punishment of the atrocities of which, by their own not confession, but boast, the Jamaica authorities have been guilty; and I cannot, while that question is pending, select as my special organ on another subject, a paper with which, on a matter of such transcendent importance, I am at open war.

I am Dear Sir

Very truly yours

J.S. Mill