

Whose life is it anyway?: Mill's *Autobiography* and its legacy

Mill's *Autobiography* is generally acknowledged as one of the most remarkable of the nineteenth century. Its existence has inevitably set the agenda – explicitly or implicitly – for biographers from Alexander Bain to Leslie Stephen, Michael St. John Packe and, most recently, Nicholas Capaldi. Reading the *Collected Works*, however, it is evident that the *Autobiography* was initially conceived and written with very immediate aims, which were in some ways obsolete even on first publication twenty years later. The result is a generally fair but recognisably skewed work, where many aspects of Mill's life are ignored, and the period after 1840 – in essence Mill's public life – is summarily glossed over in just one chapter.

This paper will look at ways in which Mill's *Autobiography* is a less-than-accurate representation of his life overall. It will analyse some of Mill's assertions – such as those regarding his atheism, his mental crisis, his relationship with Harriet Taylor – but will also look at some of the details and events which he downplayed or omitted. The overall aim will be to put the *Autobiography* in its proper context as a document which must continue to inform biography, but which falls short of a legacy as the definitive 'life'.

K.C. O'Rourke