

J.S. Mill's views on historiography: historical fragments from some neglected essays

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J.S. Mill should not be regarded as a historian in se since his pure historical writings are fragmented and loosely connected. However, history plays an instrumental role in his thought, both as evidence and as analysis. Additionally, although at several points in his writings seems to be concerned with the history of historiography, his thoughts on this issue were neither systematised nor explicitly presented. Mill's views are partially elaborated in his review of Michelet's History of France published in the Edinburgh Review on January 1844, and et passim in other related essays. Concretely, in discussing Michelet's historical essay, Mill provides a brief but illustrative sketch of how historical knowledge is historically developed. This sketch is ontologically related to his Comtean idealism according to which scientific thought is subject to perpetual intellectual transformations. He believes that historical science and thought is changing thus "always becoming more possible; not solely because it is better studied but because, in every generation, it becomes better adapted for study". According to his scheme, we may observe three distinct periods in historical writing: The first stage is characterised by the mere translation of historical sources and is superficial in its epistemology, the second attempts to regard former historical ages with the eye of the contemporary observer while the third one has as its aim not simply to compose histories, but to construct a science of history. The paper examines Mill tripartite distinction while it attempts to connect his theory of history with a modern social theory in understanding past and contemporary events.