

Editorial: Holocaust Denial

Holocaust denial is, as the historian David Irving now knows to his cost, a crime in many countries in Western Europe. One wonders what the Millian attitude to this would be. Are the Austrians (and French and Germans) offending against Millian freedom of speech?

In Chapter Two of **On Liberty** (entitled 'Of the Liberty of Thought and Expression') Mill talks of freedom of 'opinion', inveighing against silencing 'opinion', even if 'the silenced opinion be an error'. Mill's animus might apply to scientific rationalists trying to keep creationist *opinion* out of institutions of learning, at least to the extent that opinion of that sort does not fly in the face of scientific fact, and limits itself to exploiting lacunae in Darwinian theory. But does Mill mean his doctrine to apply to the expression of historical *falsehood*? Mill's own examples are of differences of religious and metaphysical belief (opinion). But should we, in Millian spirit, welcome historical falsehood?

This is an interesting question, and not an entirely trivial one, as the propagation of historical falsehood may not be without effect in the wider world. We could of course mention the ready availability of **The Protocols of the Elders of Zion** in certain parts of the world, but phenomena nearer home are just as significant. Hollywood is perhaps the greatest falsifier of history in the modern world. To take three recent examples at random, think of the English-speaking Saracen in a film about Robin Hood; think of **Braveheart**; think of the portrayal of the British forces in the recent film of the American Revolution. These and similar things do matter precisely because they enter the consciousness of millions unconsciously and uncritically, and form or reinforce their prejudices.

It is hard to think of one as intellectually fastidious as Mill welcoming any of this. We do not imagine that he would have recommended sending Irving to prison, but it is hard to see him thinking of the propagation of historical falsehood making the same sort of contribution to what he calls 'the mental well-being of mankind' as vigorous debate about Christian morality or natural philosophy.