MILL'S MISSED OPPORTUNITY:
Women and Women's Issues in the Political Economy Club of London

John Stuart Mill's contributions to the women's movement, in particular his fight to extend voting rights to women, is well known. "The question of women's suffrage was first brought before British electors in 1865, when [he] made it part of his 'platform' on contesting the Borough of Westminster" (Rover, p. 5). On June 7, 1866, Mill and Henry Fawcett presented the first petitions for women's enfranchisement to the House of Commons (*Ibid.*). Most famous, was Mill's proposal, on May 20, 1867, to ammend the Reform Bill then under consideration, striking the word "man" and inserting in its place the word "person" (Hansard, cols. 817 - 846). Though Mill's ammendment lost by a majority of 123 votes, he found 73 supporters for his proposal to enfranchise women householders. Thus the author of *The Subjection of Women*, was in the forefront of the early women's movement.

Yet, Mill's efforts on behalf of women did not extend directly into the most important organization of economists of that era -- the Political Economy Club of London. This is particularly curious since many of his fellow Club members were very active in the early women's movement in Britain. Mill was a member of the Club from 1836 until his death in 1873. He attended 138 meetings and introduced 32 questions into the Club's debates, his participation ranking him among the most active of the Club's members during its first hundred years (Henderson, Table 2, p. 155). However, none of the debate questions posed by Mill (nor for that matter, by anyone else during his membership dealt directly with women's issues.[1]

Even more significant was the opportunity Mill missed to help elect a woman -- Millicent Garrett Fawcett -- to membership in the Political Economy Club. On January 16, 1871, Sir Charles Wentworth Dilke, a member of the Club and an active supporter of women's suffrage wrote the following proposal to Mill:

> Would it not be a useful step in the direction of carrying out your hopes and views if an attempt were made to elect for the first time a woman to the Political Economy Club. I cannot but feel that Mrs. Fawcett's little book [*Political Economy for Beginners*]; her letter to "the Times" upon free schools; and her many articles both signed and annonymous give her a far better claim to membership of the Club than is possessed by many of its present members. At the same time I am too young and humble a member of the Club myself to venture to propose her. Thinking it possible however that you may also hold this view yourself I have ventured to write these few lines, without the knowledge either of Fawcett or Mrs. Fawcett, or indeed of any other person (Ms. at Yale University).

Dilke's comment that he was "too young and humble a member of the Club to propose her" probably refers to the fact that his election to membership in that organization, on May 7, 1869, was perhaps too recent for him, in good grace, to nominate another, especially a woman (see *Political Economy Club*, 1882, p. 233). So enamored was Dilke with Mrs. Fawcett's "letter to 'the Times' on free schools", that he led the debate at the next meeting of the Political Economy Club, on February 3, 1871, with the topic: "Would the institution of Free Schools have a tendency to pauperise the parents of the children who might be taught in them?" (*Ibid.*, p. 238). This question summarizes the basic thrust of Mrs. Fawcett's argument in "the Times" (Fawcett and Fawcett, pp. 50 - 69).[2] Also important, was the announcement of a membership

vacancy in the Club and a resolution to elect a new member at the next meeting, March 3, 1871. Thus the opportunity "to elect for the first time a woman to the Political Economy Club" was at hand.

Mill chaired the March 3rd meeting of the Club, but the effort to elect a woman apparently died before that meeting. [3] On January 17, Mill responded to Dilke's letter of the previous day:

> Of course Mrs. Fawcett has far better claims to be a member of the Political Economy Club than many of its present members, and I need hardly say that I should support her warmly if proposed. I think, however, that considering how perfectly well every one knows my opinions on the subject, the proposal would scarcely come with a good grace from me. It would have in some degree the appearance of wishing to impose my own opinions upon others. With regard to any one else proposing Mrs. Fawcett, I should say yes, at once, but with one proviso, that there is a probable chance of her being elected; for as I do not doubt we could succeed in a few years, it would be foolish to court failure now by undue haste. I think therefore, that the best course would be for you to take counsel with Mr. Newmarch, a hearty friend to women's suffrage, and the best judge of the probable learnings of the Club as a whole. If he thinks it judicious to put Mrs. Fawcett's name among the candidates, there will not be the smallest difficulty in finding friends to propose and second her among influential members of the Club less specifically associated with the women's movement than myself, and therefore in the particular case more suited for the purpose (Mill, p. 1797).

Mill had enormous influence at the Club, and, had he determined to nominate Mrs. Fawcett, he most likely could have brought off her election. [4] We can count the following members who attended the March 3rd meeting as most likely to support such a move:
Dilke.

W. Newmarch -- "a hearty friend of women's suffrage."

Edward W. Watkin -- an M.P. who had voted for Mill's ammendment in the Commons on May 20, 1867, (Hansard, *op. cit.*).

L.H Courtney -- an original member of the Radical Club and leading proponent of women's suffrage in the Parliament.

Thomas Hare -- also active in the women's movement, he was one of the speakers at the first public meeting in support of women's suffrage held on July 17, 1869 (Mill, p. 1624, footnote 3).

W.T. Thornton -- a member of the Committee of the London National Society for Women's Suffrage (*Ibid.*, pp. 1849 - 52).

Thomas Hankey -- had voted in favor of the "Married Women's Property Bill" on June 10, 1868 (Fetter, p. 199).

Support might well have come from two other members in attendance that evening had Mill pressed the issue:

Edwin Chadwick -- whom Packe describes as part of Mill's "little band of followers" and to whom Mill had written often concerning the women's movement (Packe, p. 475).

C.P. Villiers -- another long-time friend of Mill's (see his biographical notice in *D.N.B.*, vol. xx, pp. 318 - 323).

That leaves five members present at the March 3rd meeting whose likely votes are an open

questions -- J.M. Macleod, Jacob Waley, G.W. Norman, W.R. Greg, and R.R. Torrens (the son of Col. Robert Torrens). But that does not end the issue, for two other "hearty friends of women's suffrage" were members of the Club, though absent that evening -- J.E. Cairnes and T.E. Cliffe Leslie. It might well have been possible to get them to come to this meeting, had Mrs. Fawcett's nomination been seriously contemplated. (It would not, of course, have been in "good grace" for Henry Fawcett to have been at a meeting where his wife was to be nominated for membership. He was absent from both the February 3rd and the March 3rd meetings.)

As no correspondence between Dilke and Newmarch survives concerning the proposed nomination of Mrs. Fawcett to the Club, we can only speculate on whether Dilke contacted him as Mill suggested. If so, what was Newmarch's response? There is indirect evidence that Dilke's proposal died well before the March 3rd meeting. There is a very brief note from Mill to Dilke, dated March 2, 1871, stating that: "Mr. J.S. Mill will dine with the Radical Club on Sunday March 5" (Mill, p. 1808).[5] Had any plot to nominate Mrs. Fawcett to the Club been afoot, Mill would have known that he could contact Dilke directly the next evening, at the Political Economy Club meeting.

Mill's expectation of success "in a few years," was completely mistaken. No women were elected to membership during the first century of the Club's existence. Only the February 2, 1912 meeting of the Club is noteworthy. According to the minutes of that meeting:

> This dinner took place, by the kind invitation of Lord Brassey to the members of the Political Economy Club, at his own house...and the Club was honoured by the presence of ladies for the first time in its history, namely, Countess Brassey, Lady Helen Brassey, and Lady Evelyn Dawnay
> (*Political Economy Club*, 1921, p. 167).

Otherwise, no women attended the Adam Smith Centenary dinner on May 31, 1876 (the Club's most celebrated meeting), nor the Club's own Centenary celebration (and 700th meeting) on November 2, 1921, nor any other meeting of the Club during its first century (*Political Economy Club*, 1882, pp. 257 - 258, and 1922, pp. 8 - 9). Furthermore, it was not until the May 1, 1918 meeting that the Club directly confronted women's issues. At that meeting Mr. Herbert Samuel introduced this question, which remains an important issue in our time: "Should men and women receive equal pay for equal work?" (*Political Economy Club*, 1921, p. 193)[6]

It is most surprising that John Stuart Mill missed innumerable opportunities to directly introduce women's issues into the meetings of the Political Economy Club of London during his 37 year tenure in the most important organization of economists in Britain. It is most likely that he did bring his concerns for women's political and economic interests into many of the Club's debates, but he did not make those issues a matter of direct, primary concern by introducing such topics as the focus of any of the meetings. More interesting still was Mill's missed opportunity to seek the election of Mrs. Fawcett to the Club's membership, fearing "that there is a probably change of her being elected." His tentativeness was based on, what proved to be, the false hope that he did "not doubt we could succeed in a few years, [and

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thus] it would be foolish to court failure now by undue haste." Without a member as influential as Mill to press the matter, women remained excluded from the Political Economy Club during the remainder of its first century.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]   At first glance, there appears to have been a debate question concerning women's issues at the March 3, 1859 meeting of the Club. Charles Morrison introduced this question: "What would be the probable Economical consequences in this Country of a Government based on Universal Suffrage?" (*Political Economy Club*, 1882, p. 198). Mill did not attend this, or any other meeting of the Club in 1859, as he mourned the recent death of his wife, Harriet. In any case, this debate most probably centered around the issue of universal manhood suffrage, rather than our present notion of universal suffrage. This becomes clear when we consider this letter from Mill to Dilke, dated May 28, 1870:

> But I think it would be a great mistake to merge the women's question in that of universal suffrage. Women's suffrage has quite enemies enough, without adding to the numbers all the enemies of universal suffrage. To combine the two questions would practically suspend the fight for women's equality, since universal suffrage is sure to be discussed almost solely as a working men's question; and when at last victory comes, there is sure to be a compromise, by which the working men would be enfranshised without the women, and the contest for women's rights would have to be begun again from the beginning, with the working men inside the barrier instead of outside, and therefore with their selfish interests against our cause instead of with it. Thus women's enfranchisement would be thrown back for a whole generation, for universal suffrage is not likely to be obtained in less time than that; and at the end of the generation we should start again in a more disadvantageous position than we are at present (Mill p. 1728).

[2]   Mrs. Fawcett's article surely did not appeal to Mill as much as Dilke thought, at the time. Dilke himself recognized this in his 1897 article on Mill, in which he said:

> ...there was divergence of views upon great numbers of questions of practical politics, which came up between 1866 and Mill's death, between Mill, who had deliberately departed from his previous opinions, and Fawcett, who continued in them, and had amplified and expounded them. As an example of the completeness of the breach, one may take the conflict of opinion

between Mill and Fawcett [and his wife, Millicent Fawcett] upon the subject of freedom of the public schools... The article by Mrs. Fawcett which was published in *The Examiner* on [Mill's] death, and which represents the effect of his teaching as a practical politician, while able and true, does not touch...free schools, and was written, indeed, by one who was strongly opposed to Mill's latest views with regard to the gratuity of public education... (Dilke, p. 631-632).

3   Instead of Millicent Fawcett, the members elected George John Shaw Lefevre (later Lord Eversley) to the Club at the March 3, 1871 meeting (Political Economy Club, 1882, p. 238). Lefevre was elevated to the status of "honorary member by his admission to the Cabinet" at the March 6, 1885 meeting (*Ibid.*, 1899, p. 12). He was an active participant in the Club's meetings, introducing 14 topics for debate, and was still listed as a member 49 years later, at the end of the Club's first century (see Henderson, Table 6). Lefevre, an M.P. from Berks County, was one of the 73 supporters of Mill's proposal to enfranchise women on May 20, 1867 (Hansard, *op. cit.,* col. 845). Thus, although the members missed this opportunity to elect a woman to the Club, they chose instead one who was sympathetic to women's rights.

4   The extent of Mill's enormous influence at the Club has been put best by an old friend and fellow Club member, L.H. Courtney, in these words:

I have mentioned Mr. Mill and any note of the members of the club at that time must put him in first place. He never indeed gave any sign of claiming authority, but it was almost unconsciously conceded to him and it is an illustration of the position he held that, on his death, one enthusiastic friend proposed that the vacancy should never be filled up so that we might always be reminded of the gap among us (*Political Economy Club,* 1921, p. 326).

In fact, the vacancy left by Mill's death was "filled up" by the election of William Stanley Jevons (See Henderson).

5   That Mill did not object to women being members of organizations like the Political Economy Club is best indicated by his membership and active participation in the Radical Club. Originally founded at Fawcett's suggestion, "the first rule of the Club will be that women are eligible to become members of it" (Mill, pp. 1698 - 1699 footnote 2).

6   F.Y. Edgeworth, who attended this meeting, found this question interesting enough to re-introduce it into the February 2, 1921 meeting of the Club (Political Economy Club, 1922, pp. 3 - 4).

7   I wish to thank my wife, Judith, and my daughters, Julie and Jennifer, for their suggestions and encouragement in developing this note. I take full responsibility for any errors which may have crept into it.

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