

The Life of John Ruskin

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This is a strange book, or rather a strange publication, ordered on Amazon, otherwise I would never have come across it. It is written by the father of Collingwood, who was an assistant to Ruskin in Coniston (in the Lake District), and after his death one of his executioners. The book seems to have been written shortly after his death, some sources indicates that it was written even before¹, and that the last chapter or so is an add-on. The book in my hand has copyright 2008, and contains no editorial information at all, none about when the book was first published nor about the editorial policy if any, in particular not on what texts it is based. Furthermore the typography and lay-out is simply atrocious. The font is small and hard to read, the lines are not flushed right and go almost to the edge of the page, and worst of all, the text is running blindly with no regard for position, thus a chapter head announced in bold capital letters can very well appear at the every end of a page. This ugliness makes the physical reading very hard and uncomfortable. It is a shame because Ruskin himself took great care to find pleasant fonts to suit the text and to have a nice pleasing lay-out. As to the text itself it is more of a compilation than a narrative, a kind of elaborated CV in which we follow the activities of Ruskin year by year, involving travels at an early age with his parents down to the continent, lectures in his middle and late ages, and various movements and causes he initiated or engaged in. The whole presentation also has the appearance of a scrap book, in which fragments of letters or other suitable citations are pasted. Only occasionally at the end are we treated to a few snapshots of his life, which have an endearing interest. His marriage and subsequent annulment of the same to his once wife are dismissed in a few lines, and his later aborted love-affair in later age is mentioned in passing with no particulars and no names. It is the work that matters, and maybe there is much to be said for this, on the other hand if it is presented sequentially as episodes in a life, the absence of human interest is felt as frustrating.

It is hard to summarize a life but often it is unavoidable. Ruskin was a celebrity in his times, born the same year as Queen Victoria and dying just a year ahead of her, he may be seen as a quintessential Victorian phenomenon. Of course he was in many ways Victorian and may hardly have emerged in another time. It is very hard to think of him as making his mark in the 18th century, or in the 20th, he needed the Victorian mentality (whatever is meant by that) to become appreciated. Consequently his reputation dipped in the decades following his death, and has only in later years had something of a revival, as the treasures which the Victorian Age after all has to offer are becoming appreciated.

He was the son of cousins of Scottish descent. His father had, unlike his paternal grandfather, a good business sense and had as a successful merchant acquired a hefty

¹ In the Wikipedia note on the author, it reveals that he published his biography already in 1893 and much of it reads as if the subject is still alive.

accumulation of wealth enabling the career of his son, and which when inherited after his death, with Ruskin already in his mid-forties, squandered through generosity and ill-conceived schemes. John Ruskin was an only child and pampered by his parents delighted with and proud of his mental precocity as they invariably were. This initially took the form of the writing of poetry but was later superseded by his true forte, that of drawing and painting. As a poet he was competent and conventional, as a draughtsman striking enough to attract attention and subsequent admiration already during his years at Oxford, opening many a door. But of course his talents and accomplishments were not of the order of the very best, and thus instead of becoming an artist of his own, he became a champion of other artists, notably Turner and later on the Pre-Raphaelites, painters who initially were met with resistance and incomprehension and thus ridicule. His monumental works on 'Modern Painters' started out with explaining and extolling Turner, many of whose paintings he (and his father) acquired. The work on Modern Painters resulted into several volumes which established his position as an arbitrator of taste and would undergo several editions and in old age provide him with a comfortable income. But his interest and energies went deeper than that.

As noted above, already as a child he was taken on ambitious trips by his parents. And taking a trip in those days was far different from now and typically involved months of travel. This gave to the enterprise a seriousness which nowadays is absent. The age of tourism started in the late 18th century and would set the agenda for cultural tourism ever since with its emphasis on 'sights'. Of course initially it was a rather exclusive affair, the spectacle of mass tourism only coming into its own after WW II, and the Ruskin family belonged to the privileged. The young Ruskin distinguished himself for writing journals replete with poems and drawings exhibiting a maturity well beyond that of his years. Nowadays people snap pictures with impunity, it is quite another thing to painstakingly create your mementoes with paper and pen, rather than pressing a button. Their travels took them not only to Brussels and Paris, but further south to Switzerland and the Alps and down to Italy. It was travels during which he not only came to appreciate the riches of art and architecture not to be found in his native lands, but foremost, initially at least, to appreciate to the point of fascination and awe the wildness of nature and the sublimity of its scenes, and we are now mainly talking about the Alps, which made a deep and lasting impression on him. This also sparked an interest primarily in geology and secondarily in natural science as a whole. He was never scientifically inclined, but more focused on the visual aspects of geology, which also were a prerequisite for its deeper understanding. Thus he would befriend professional geologists such as Buckland, even attending geological conferences although he admitted that he was out of his depth. The formative experience of his continental travels in the fold of the family resulted in his later youth to striking out on his own and liberated by being solitary engaging in more serious study of the art works. Later he took his young bride for an extended visit to Venice, at the time occupied by Austrian troops, fearful that those would not only debase but even destroy treasures he felt incumbent to embark on a project of systematic documentation, which in retrospect may seem to have been unnecessary, and in particular it was foolish to neglect his young bride at this juncture. But maybe the marriage encouraged by both families, the Ruskins for the desire to liven up the life of a young too serious student liable to melancholy, the

Grays for an opportunity to dip into the Ruskin fortune, may have been moribund from the start given the difference in temperaments. The young bride ostensibly repaired to her parents in Scotland shortly after their return to London and then brought a suit which eventually resulted in an annulment on the grounds of incurable impotence. It is true that Ruskin finding her face charming enough had felt repugnance for her body, the specific source never having been revealed and hence prime material for speculative embellishment becoming part of the Ruskin legend. A year later she eloped with the painter Millais, a protégé of Ruskin, and hence a public scandal was launched.

Anyway his sojourns in Venice gave rise to another multi-volumed work titled 'The Stones of Venice'. In this work he introduced the Gothic spirit, meaning that what was new with the Gothic style was that the details of the arts were left to the discretion of the workmen. What was lost in perfection, was gained in meaningfulness. Art cannot be perfect, he preached, perfection is inimical to art. The classical approach was to reduce the workman to a mere tool, training him to do certain simple things to perfection. Thus depriving him of his own creative initiative, blunting his imagination, and in the end impoverishing him. This led to a deep social consciousness and he was seized with a passion to educate the common man and hence enrich his life and enhance his humanity. Thus he started evening classes for the workmen to learn to draw. Not to make artists out of them but to make the more fulfilled and happier. When he was elected to become the first Slade professor of Art at Oxford he was not content, as most men may have been, with just discharging his duties to give a dozen lectures during the academic year but single-handedly developed the discipline of art appreciation, donated works of arts to the university for that purpose and started to teach students drawing. The latter was not such a success. The growing celebrity of the professor drew enough crowds of curious students, but attendance dipped when he was absent. As the author explains, the schedules of the undergraduates were too filled with lectures, exercise and social life, to give much space left for drawing. His interest and concern for the working man would not leave him, and later in life he would start the Guild of St. George, still in existence, and also for a few years publish public letters aimed at the working man and known as his 'Fors'. Ruskin was both a conservative and a socialist. Conservative in the sense of disdaining politics as well as resenting the technology of modern life. He was also a friend of Carlyle whose temperament he shared. Socialist in his concern for the masses and a different economical order, in which interest on loans would be considered as usury, and competition and markets abolished. Being supplied with a minor fortune he could personally indulge in his idealistic visions with at least initial impunity. Now idealized visions of the socialist persuasion often combined with non-establishment religious movements, such as Quakerism, were very prevalent in the 19th century as a reaction against the industrialization. Marx thought of them as sentimental and ineffective, and admittedly many of those social experiments such as collective farms failed², although the underlying ideas have weathered such repeated setbacks. Once again the basic idea is the impoverishment of the life of an individual enmeshed in modern technology and consumerism. Ruskin noted with alarm the degradation of the environment as well as its relentless uglification, particularly noticeable in an overcrowded and rapidly developing country as Britain. He did not like to travel by train, although he was of

² Cf. the 'Blithedale Romance' by Hawthorn, reviewed in a previous volume

course sometimes forced to do so. He admitted that it is one thing to connect major centers by railroads, but no reason to make a finer mesh, as the laying of rails disturbed the landscape, whose beauties were best appreciated by foot. His conservatism at times turned so extreme that he resented widespread literacy. When he found that one of his workmen could not read nor write he was delighted, arguing that this only strengthened his commitment to his craft. One may surmise that his ideas were met not only with skepticism but considered cranky, yet their sincerity and earnestness won the enthusiastic appropriation of men such as Tolstoy and Gandhi, who of course cannot be freed of the charges of crankiness themselves. Anyway it is this aspect of Ruskin, and aspect which at the time was thought to be more of an embarrassment than anything else, is what he will mostly be remembered for and lies at the heart of his recent revival. That he wrote in a flowery style of great ease and elegance, may no longer be held against him but felt as charming.

The last decade or so of Ruskin's life was spent in decline. The author refers to brain fevers which left him temporarily in a confused mental state, not to say insanity, but from which he initially recovered, but later on succumbed to. The last years he must have been for all purposes demented, a sad, but not an unusual ending of a life. Recently there has been speculation that his condition with migraine headaches might have been connected with small strokes, a genetic disorder, a condition usually making its debut in your forties and fifties, occasionally delayed to your sixties . One should always be leery of posthumous diagnoses, especially those of the long dead.

The book is as already noted a compilation, but occasionally enlivened, as noted, by some eye-witness reports. He was not a short man, but stood at 5 feet ten or eleven, but started in his sixties to stoop. When he lectured at Oxford just over fifty, his wavy hair was still thick and abundant and unaffected by any trace of graying. His face was still that of a young man, unbearded but with light whiskers. A lengthy and wordy description of his appearance follows, which might as well be conveyed by a photograph, and indeed the photos of him in his late forties reveal the features and bearings of a virile man, not the one who would be taking to his heels when confronted with a naked young woman with a right on his undivided attention.

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