

## Some Aspects of the Life and Work of John Ruskin

RUSKIN'S father was born in Edinburgh, but the family was not of Scottish origin. His grandfather was a Londoner who had migrated to Edinburgh and finally died near Perth. His son, John James Ruskin, was the father of John Ruskin. John James Ruskin, for business reasons, moved to London with his wife, whom he had married in Edinburgh, and found employment in the office of a wine merchant. He ultimately became a partner in the firm, and a man of considerable wealth. He was born in 1785, and died in 1864. The son, John, of whom we write, was his only child.

The home of Mr. and Mrs. John James Ruskin was in Brunswick Square, Bloomsbury, and there John was born on February 8th, 1819. He lived here until he was four years old, when his father and mother moved out into the country, to a house in Herne Hill, where there was a large garden and delightful surroundings. Here the boy lived for the next twenty years, after which the household moved to 51, Denmark Hill. He kept up a connection, however, all his life with Herne Hill as his cousin, Mrs. Severn, made it her home and he was always welcome there.

As to John Ruskin's education; to begin with, and until ten years of age, his sole tutor was his mother. She taught him Latin and even some rudiments of Hebrew in order to initiate him into the Word of God in that tongue. His mother read the Bible daily with him. They read alternate verses, she watching every intonation, not allowing a syllable to be missed or misplaced; a study in religion, in Bible literature, and an exercise in memory concentration and discipline. "My mother's daily readings," he said, "established my soul in life." She read the whole Bible with him from Genesis to Revelation with regularity and filled his mind with sacred truth. "The duty enforced upon me in early youth," says Ruskin, "of reading every word of the Gospels and prophecies as if written by the hand of God, gave me the habit of awed attention, which made many passages deeply grave to me." It is said that on the night before he was three years old he repeated to his mother the whole of the 119th Psalm, and as a boy he learned the whole of the fine old Scottish Paraphrases; to this kind of discipline he attributed the cultivation of his ear and his sense of style.

In hours of depression he always turned to the Bible and found a deep, sweet well of consolation and inspiration; he was distinctly a Bible Christian and student who tested all life's experiences by the Word of God. It coloured his thought and style and was woven into the texture of all that came from his pen. He knew it by heart, and quoted it from memory and, as far as can be ascertained, made only one mistake. In one of his many lectures he makes as many as sixty quotations from Scripture, and it is estimated that in his various books there are at least 5,000 references from the Old and New Testaments.

About the years 1878 to 1880 it was rumoured that Ruskin had become a Roman Catholic, but this was not true. Pressure and persuasion were being brought to bear upon him. Aubrey De Vere wrote to Coventry Patmore: "A man who believes as he does ought to be in the Roman Catholic Church." Cardinal Manning, who professed to be deeply interested in Ruskin and a close friend, wrote him flattering appreciations of each of his books as they were published, and one day invited him to lunch. Describing his experiences in a letter to Miss Beever, his friend and neighbour, he says: "I had soup and beef and hare and jelly and puff pastry like Papal pretensions—breathe on it and it was nowhere—raisins, almonds, cherries like kisses kept in amber, and he told me delicious stories all through lunch." On January 25th, 1878, he wrote to Cardinal Manning: "Your interpretation of the word 'Catholic' is much narrower than mine. I am afraid you are a long way yet, from being able to rejoice over the piece that was lost." He also wrote Coventry Patmore saying, "My Catholic Faith is wider than yours."

In early life Ruskin had been a strong Protestant, even narrow in his views, but the passing of the years gave him a clearer, stronger, faith in God, and a wider creed that made him tolerant and kind, but quite positive in his convictions, although he presented a beautiful stained-glass window to the Roman Catholic Church at Coniston, where he finally had his home. He lived and moved and had his being in God; his Christian life was life in the Spirit. Like the Psalmist, the presence of God was a great reality and joy to him. He saw Him in the face of Christ, as well as in every flower and shrub and tree. He beheld Him in the sunrise and sunset; the contemplation of morning and evening unveiled the magnificence and splendour of the glory of God. It was his habit in the summer time to awake about four o'clock in the morning and watch the sunrise and so become immersed in God until the beauty of the Lord our God was upon him. During his last illness, when feeble and weary, he was carried to one of the western towers of his home

at Brantwood, on Lake Coniston, that he might see the clouds and revel in the light and shade of the setting sun.

became a system of social economy intended to work out in law,

His Christianity was more than a profession of faith; it in customs, in institutions. He was ever eager to help the poor and uplift the working-classes; some of his plans were impossible, but his sincerity of purpose no one could doubt. He not only saw the vision of better conditions, but he tried to translate his dream into practical experience. In the preface of his book, *Unto this Last* (1862), he lays down seven propositions, which suggest far-reaching and beneficent reforms. The reforms thus advocated were :

- (1) National schools for the young to be established at Government cost and under Government discipline over the whole country.
- (2) Every child to be taught some trade or calling.
- (3) In connection with these technical classes : Government Workshops to be established, at which, without any attempt at establishing a monopoly, good and exemplary work should be done, and pure and true substance sold.
- (4) Any person out of employment, to be set forthwith to work, at the nearest Government Workshop.
- (5) Such work to be paid for at a fixed rate in each employment.
- (6) Those who would work if they could, to be taught; those who could work if they would, to be set to penal work.
- (7) For the old and destitute comfort and home to be provided.

To these seven he adds further suggestions elsewhere; for example, Old Age Pensions, National Government Parcel Post, Nationalisation of Railways, and many other reforms.

Although reared in a home with every comfort, he has a compassionate sympathy for those who constantly face poverty and adversity. This is what he says about many among the working-classes. "The primary need is the organisation of labour. I pleaded for this in my book *Unto this Last*, and variously insisted on it through all my other books. As I grow older and have further experience and insight into life, nothing impresses me so much as the useless affliction of its anxieties and uncertainties, in that no one ordinarily is sure of daily bread or safe and calm in their daily toil." There you have the plea for security which Sir William Beveridge has so nobly and clearly put before our Government in the present day.

If one examines the seven principles laid down by Ruskin, one finds that every one of the points in his unauthorised programme has, by this time, been put into operation (whole or partial) or is a subject of discussion among practical politicians.

Nos. 1 and 2—Elementary and Technical Education.

(3) Government Workshops—we have them and anti-adulteration laws.

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- (4) Government work for unemployed—think of Labour Exchanges and all else in insurance and other benefits for workers.
- (5) Fixed wages—groups have wages scales if you take almost any form of employment—Municipalities, Agriculture, many industries and professions. Wages Boards have been instituted; more and more is this principle gaining ground.
- (6) Compulsion is not a pleasant thing to contemplate, but it is being done for the benefit of the slacker and the loafer.
- (7) Old Age Pensions—this is now the law of the land and homes are to be found in various parts of this country either free or at a low rental for aged people.

Ruskin had a wide and influential circle of friends among all classes. He was at all times an interesting guest, with a genius for friendship and a love of happy social life. Here, I give three illustrations.

Miss Mary Gladstone, afterwards Mrs. Drew, was an admirer of Ruskin's writings and had come to make his acquaintance through Burne-Jones and other common friends. Ruskin had dined with Mr. Gladstone in London and Mrs. Drew saw a favourable opportunity for suggesting to her father that he invite him to Hawarden. Ruskin was Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford for ten years, 1870-1878, and again in 1883-85, and published six volumes of lectures. He had just printed an Oxford lecture in the *Nineteenth Century* for January, 1878, and the paper profoundly stirred Mr. Gladstone, putting him quite in the mood to receive Ruskin. On the way, however, Ruskin's mind was filled with fear, wondering what the reception might be. His master, Carlyle, had sown seeds of doubt in his mind and given him uncertain views of the character of Mr. Gladstone. To Carlyle, Gladstone stood as the symbol of all with which he was at war, an enemy and a dangerous person. Ruskin, therefore, was timid and suspicious. The visit, however, was a great success. The host put his guest entirely at his ease. Mr. Gladstone retained throughout the tone of courteous and deferential reverence, as for a man whom he profoundly honoured, and Ruskin threw off every touch of the suspicion with which he had arrived, and showed with all the frankness and charm of a child his new sense of the greatness and nobility of the character of his host. The bearing of the two men was tolerant and gracious, each of them expressing his convictions with deference towards the other, and both of them displaying in perfection an old-world courtesy.

Mr. Gladstone spoke of Ruskin as exceedingly interesting in conversation and, in some respects, an unrivalled guest. Ruskin, on his side, left Hawarden almost persuaded to be a Gladstonian. To a friend, Ruskin wrote: "I have had two happy, very happy days at Mr. Gladstone's—happy chiefly in enabling me to end all

doubt in my own mind as to his simple and most kindly and unambitious character, and therefore to read all that he says and does in its due light. It's very beautiful to see him with his family, and his family with him; and his quite naïve delight in showing me his trees went *straight to me heart.*"

In September, 1878, Ruskin again visited Hawarden. During a conversation with Mr. Gladstone, which turned into an argument, Ruskin attacked his host as a "leveller," saying, "You think one man is as good as another, and all men equally competent to judge aright on political questions, whereas I believe in an aristocracy." Mr. Gladstone replied, "Oh dear, no! I am nothing of the sort. I am a firm believer in the aristocratic principle—the rule of the best: let the best people, not by birth or by money, but by character, have the power." "I am," said Gladstone, "an out and out *inequalitarian.*" This confession was greeted by Ruskin with intense delight and the clapping of his hands in triumph. After Ruskin left Hawarden, Gladstone recorded in his diary: "There is no diminution of charm in Ruskin; he still has a charming and modest manner."

Another person with whom Ruskin had a close and intimate friendship was Prince Leopold, Duke of Albany, who suffered from a painful malady all his life and died a comparatively young man. He warmly appreciated and came strongly under the influence of Ruskin at Oxford, attending his lectures, which drew overflowing audiences. Ruskin was a frequent guest at dinner parties given by the Prince when, whatever the company might be, the Prince almost invariably seated the Professor by his side. The acquaintance thus formed ripened into an affectionate friendship.

Out of term the Prince corresponded with Ruskin on books and pictures and their common love of music. Frederick Myers said of them: "There was one heart." The Prince's affection went out to Ruskin with a loving reverence, such as he never felt for any other man. In his first public address he extolled the character, gifts and service of Ruskin on behalf of his fellow men: "We have seen a man in whom all the gifts of refinement and genius meet, who has not grudged to give his best to all, in gifts, in teaching and sympathy, and has spread among the labourers of rural England the power whereby they may draw the full measure of instruction and happiness from this wonderful world in which rich and poor alike can gaze." These words were a comfort and inspiration to Ruskin; he wrote "very beautiful in themselves. I had no conception he saw so far into things or into *me.*"

On New Year's Day, January 1st, 1878, Ruskin went to Windsor on a visit to Prince Leopold and found him very unwell.

His presence was a great stimulus and comfort to the Prince. Before Ruskin left Windsor the Prince and he attended worship in St. George's Chapel, and Ruskin described the experience as "a very lovely service," the music, the architecture and the sermon creating in the mind of Ruskin a picture of perfect beauty, which was intensified by the character of his pupil and companion, of whom he said, "he was very full of good."

From Windsor Ruskin went to London for a few days to visit Carlyle, whom he called his master, Carlyle looking upon Ruskin as his disciple. A visitor to Chelsea describes Carlyle as reclining on a sofa while Ruskin knelt on the floor, leaning over Carlyle. They talked intimately and affectionately on political and economic questions. In his diary Ruskin writes: "There is one man in England to whom I look for steady guidance—Thomas Carlyle." He laid his various schemes and plans before Carlyle and acted often on his mature judgment; in fact, he relied on Carlyle in times of weakness and depression—an hour spent with Carlyle always renewing his strength and filling him with fresh resolve. In the home, Mrs. Carlyle said no one could manage Thomas so well as Ruskin. Carlyle sometimes took a fiendish delight in saying outrageous things, running counter to all that Ruskin cared for and valued, but Ruskin was patient, forbearing, even kind under assault, and would treat Carlyle like a naughty child. He would put his arms round about him, look into his face with a winsome smile, saying, "Now this is too bad, Mr. Carlyle," and with such tenderness in approach, Carlyle became like Ruskin himself, soft and gentle, and brought back to a sweeter frame of mind.

These two men were in striking contrast: Carlyle rugged, stern, forceful, even domineering, Ruskin refined, gentle and courteous. Carlyle was reared as one in a family of ten, where money was not plentiful, and when he entered Edinburgh University for his Arts Course, he travelled on foot from his home at Ecclefechan, in Dumfriesshire, one hundred miles, to reach the Capital; whereas Ruskin was an only child and reared in a home with wealthy parents, under conditions of affluence and comfort. Despite the differences, in early social surroundings and temperament, they were loving friends. Once they had a quarrel, but it was soon forgotten. Ruskin was always pleased when Carlyle came to see him. After one of his visits, Ruskin's father said to a friend, Professor Norton: "His spirits became exuberant."

Mrs. Carlyle died April 21st, 1866, and was taken home to Haddington and buried in the Chancel of the old Abbey Church. Her death was a great blow to her husband, and in a fit of depression he wrote to Ruskin: "Come and see me, the only

light of my life has as if gone out." This appeal met with a whole-hearted response, and Ruskin's diary for 1866 reports many visits.

Carlyle died February 4th, 1881, and Ruskin mourned with the deepest sorrow at the loss of his master, and said: "I have no Carlyle to depend on now." The passing of Carlyle left him very much alone in the world.

There is another outstanding personality to whom I would draw attention. Ruskin had considerable personal contact with C. H. Spurgeon, though he cannot be called a close friend. In his biography of Ruskin, Sir E. T. Cook says: "Ruskin had often sat at the feet of Spurgeon, and saw much of him in private life. One would like to have a report of their conversations, but such exists only in Spurgeon's memoirs, and he takes care to let the heretic dog have the worst of it." For some time Ruskin had been influenced by Bishop Colenso of Natal, a very fine man, but an extreme "critic" of both the Old and New Testaments, who was deposed from his see by his Metropolitan Bishop Gray of Capetown, but reinstated by the Archbishop of Canterbury. Spurgeon stood for the orthodox position. Ruskin, at this time, was an ardent disciple of Colenso, although he never gave up his deep love and confidence in the Word of God. He was, however, attracted to Spurgeon and took many of his friends to hear him preach. There is a cartoon in *Punch*, March 28th, 1857, of Ruskin sitting at Spurgeon's feet in the attitude of close attention. The memoirs record an interview with Ruskin in which Spurgeon had to defend himself from an aggressive attack on himself, on the Apostle Paul and the Scriptures. As a rule Ruskin had a great charm in manner, full of reverence, respect and old-world courtesy. Occasionally he could be critical, harsh, even malicious, but Spurgeon could hold his own, and so he did, kindly and victoriously, in this instance. Ruskin must have had hidden somewhere in his heart a secret admiration for Spurgeon, for he afterwards presented him with a complete and valuable set of his works, and a donation of one hundred guineas in response to an appeal for a new place of worship.

Both men in their different spheres of service were prophets of the most high God, men with a spiritual vision in a materialistic age. Ruskin's parents hoped he might become a preacher, and dedicated him as a child to the ministry of the Church. His father, in after years, with tears in his eyes, used to say: "He might have been a Bishop." His life was full and strenuous; he was industrious, prodigal, indefatigable. His literary output was immense. I have not referred much to his books—they are so many and so varied; his collected works were published in

thirty-nine volumes. His work was done finally amid much ill-health, sorrow and recurring disablements; he suffered from brain weariness, overdone through extreme application to work. Four times towards the end of his life he was brought very low, but a reserve of physical strength carried him through to old age; he had an indomitable spirit. He spent himself lavishly for others—himself, his powers, his money, his peace; he gave generously of his means to struggling artists, poor authors and literary workers, friends in failing health needing to see specialists, and many others in times of trouble.

When Ruskin's father left him a fortune of £130,000 he gave away £17,000 to poor relations. He founded the Guild of St. George, a kind of primitive Agricultural Community, a forerunner of our modern smallholdings—to this scheme he gave a first donation of £7,000, and was a large contributor during its short existence. He also gave £5,000 as an endowment to support a Drawing Master at Christ Church, Oxford; here he had taken his Degree in 1842 and the Newdigate Prize for Poetry in 1839. He gave away the greater part, if not all, of the fortune he inherited from his father. With the passing of the years his books had a wide circulation both in this country, America, in Europe and elsewhere; these brought him an income of at least £4,000 annually. He had no love for money, and has set a noble example of sacrifice, service and generosity.

“For the sake of others who have not known him as I have, I would declare my conviction,” wrote Professor Norton, “that no other Master of Literature, in our time, has more earnestly and steadily endeavoured to set forth for the help of those whom he addressed, whatsoever things are true, honest, just, pure and lovely; or in his own life more faithfully tried to practise, the virtues which spring from the contemplation of these things, and their adoption as the rule of conduct.”

Towards the end of his life his eyesight failed, and his cousin, Mrs. Severn, bought him a large-type Bible, which he read, or had read, constantly up to the day of his death. The end, for which he had waited long, came suddenly and peacefully. In the morning of the 20th January, 1900, he sank into an unconscious state, the breathing lessened in strength, until at 3.30 in the afternoon it faded away in a peaceful sleep. So passed one of the noblest souls of the nineteenth century, of whom his biographer writes: “He rose with the sun and before breakfast carefully studied the Scriptures, so that the Bible is the indispensable handbook to any close study of his works.”

WILLIAM KIRK BRUCE.