

THE CENTENARY OF RUSKIN

BY J. C. WRIGHT

JOHN RUSKIN was born on the eighth of February, 1819, at 54 Hunter Street, Brunswick Square, London. His father was a wine merchant, who appears to have had fine tastes; he loved books and pictures, and devoted a considerable amount of money to their acquisition. From him the boy learned those lessons in life which he was destined to teach in later years. And young Ruskin very early exhibited indications of coming greatness. When he was about four the family moved to a house on Herne Hill, "a rustic eminence four miles south of the 'Standard in Cornhill.'" Here he was among the green fields and hedgerows. Though brought up with few luxuries, he spent frequent holidays at Perth and Croydon with his aunts.

We are told the boy was educated at home, his mother "drilling him in Bible reading and Bible study." His father intended that he should be a bishop, but the only indications he gave in that direction was by preaching sermons at home, his text being, "People, be good." It is said that by the age of seven he was compiling books on electricity, and at nine puzzling his head about mineralogy. To his mother he was indebted for his grounding in Latin grammar, but when he reached eleven, he was put to Greek under a tutor.

The most distinguishing feature of Ruskin's young life was his remarkably correct etchings of Cruikshank's, and when he saw the fine vignettes of Turner, his enthusiasm knew no bounds. His artistic tastes were still further whetted by travel up the Rhine with his father, and over the Alps to Milan and Genoa.

Returning home he was entered as a gentleman commoner at Christchurch, Oxford. Here he attempted poetry, and won the Newdigate prize for English verse in 1839. But it would appear the strain upon his physical strength was too great, for he was stricken down by sickness, and was taken in haste to Italy. In the next two years he gradually gained strength, returned to Oxford, and passed his final examinations.

In the following year the first volume of his great work *Modern Painters* was issued. It was something entirely new. Its aim was

to show that art means something more than pleasing arrangement of lines and colours, and that the best artist is he who conveys the highest ideas of truth and of beauty. His teaching fell on unwilling ears—nay, more; it produced a feeling of aversion towards the author, who certainly abused every artist except Turner. To Ruskin, Turner was, “beside Shakespeare and Verulam a third star in that central constellation, round which, in the astronomy of intellect, all other stars make their circuit.” His *Modern Painters* was followed by *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, in which he emphasises the relationship of art and religion. *The Stones of Venice* was published three years later: it teaches “the dependence of all human work or edifice, for its beauty, on the happy life of the workman,” and its aim is to show how art is conditioned by human wants and surroundings, and by human virtues and vice. It describes the early Venetian buildings, and shows the debasement of architecture during the Renaissance period.

During the next seven years Ruskin’s work in lecturing and writing was relieved by visits to Italy and Switzerland, and later to Germany, where he studied the German and Italian paintings in the picture-galleries of Berlin, Munich, and Nuremberg. On his return he completed two books which reveal his teaching perhaps more accurately than any of his works. These are *Unto this Last* and *Sesame and Lilies*. The former shows the dependence of national wealth upon the principles of justice, mercy and admiration, and that the laws of life, if followed, always lead to happiness. In *Sesame and Lilies* the guiding and purifying influence of women is expressed in language at once rare and beautiful. We quote a brief paragraph which it may be well for us to remember in these days: “We are foolish, and without excuse foolish, in speaking of the superiority of one sex to the other, as if they could be compared in similar things. Each has what the other has not; each completes the other, and is completed by the other; they are in nothing alike, and the happiness and perfection of both depends on each asking and receiving from the other what the other only can give.”

But Ruskin did more than write books, or deliver lectures. Like *Chaucer’s Parson*, he was one who,

“Christes lore, and His apostles twelve
He taught, but first he folwede it himselve.”

He showed the practical side of his own life by spending the whole

of his considerable fortune on public and private charities ; he appointed Miss Octavia Hill to manage his London property on principles which have since been adopted by philanthropists generally ; he presented his drawings and minerals to various public galleries and museums ; he inspired co-operative undertakings, and endowed a Guild which had for its primary object the redeeming of waste lands peopled by well-ordered lives.

There was hardly a branch of practical life that Ruskin did not touch. As a social reformer he maintained " that no great arts are practicable by any people unless they are living contented lives, in pure air, out of the way of unsightly objects, and emancipated from unnecessary mechanical occupation." To carry out his designs, he formed the Guild of St. George. The ideas underlying the Guild he desired to see developed in a practical form—he wished to prove that " food can be got out of the ground, and happiness out of honesty " ; but, unfortunately, the industrial part of the undertaking was not sufficiently tried to warrant success. There was, however, one branch of the Guild which was destined to be widely useful—the St. George's Museum, near Sheffield, which contains specimens, copies and casts " of the truly greatest of human art of the times of the highest development in each branch, and from those parts of the world where they best flourished."

Another interesting industrial experiment was inaugurated by Ruskin. He endeavoured to introduce hand-spinning and weaving of linen in Westmorland. People said : " It won't pay ; no one wants linen to last fifty years ; it's fantastic, unpracticable, sentimental, and quixotic." Ruskin turned a deaf ear to these rebuffs ; and in Langdale Valley he took a cottage, and made it into a spinning school. With the help of friends the scheme was carried out ; pupils were secured, and applications for wheels came from all sides. Says Mr. Albert Fleming : " We got an old weaver, and one bright Easter morning saw our first piece of linen woven—the first purely hand-spun and hand-woven linen produced in all broad England in our generation." When the present writer visited the school some fifteen years ago, the industry was still flourishing.

Since the death of Ruskin in 1900, his influence in art and literature and social politics has been slowly but surely spreading in the life of the nation. His art criticism is still highly valued ; he has taught people to look and admire, and that is much ; his literary

style, though pronounced by critics as sometimes rhetorical, is full of beauty and restfulness ; perhaps the autobiographic sketch of his early years in his *Praeterita* is as near the perfection of literary work as it well can be. And what shall be said of his social theories ? Though it may be conceded some of them are crude, they are based on principles which reveal the livableness of life.

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