

THE SOCIAL AND EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT OF JOHN RUSKIN

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A thesis submitted to
The University of New England
in fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

1983

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degree.

I certify that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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M. D. Lawson

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ABSTRACT

The thesis of this study is that the aesthetic, social and educational criticism of Ruskin forms an organic unity. Only two full length studies of Ruskin's views on education have been published - William Jolly's Ruskin on Education (1894) and Hilda Hagstotz's The Educational Thought of John Ruskin (1942) - and both these studies have a narrow focus, ignoring Ruskin as a social critic. Chapters 4 and 5 argue in detail that this social criticism runs right through his art criticism, and forms in turn the basis of his educational thought and practice. Chapters 6, 7 and 8 are concerned specifically with the interconnections of Ruskin's social and educational thought which converge in Fors Clavigera (1871 - 1884), a letter series to English working men. Chapter 8 argues that the neglected Fors Clavigera is central to an understanding of Ruskin's social and educational thought and that this work is one of his major achievements; its extreme length and intensely personal nature often being a barrier to proper appreciation. This personal nature of much of Ruskin's writings - he is possibly the most confessional of major English writers - has meant that the first three chapters of this study are not only concerned with placing Ruskin in his social milieu and historical context but also deal with the developments in Ruskin's inner life and the formative intellectual influences on his writings.

Despite his socialist reputation, Ruskin was faithful to his conservative mentors, particularly Plato and Carlyle. Ruskin's views on society and his solutions for the ills of society were pleas for a return to a rigidly hierarchical world, found, for example, in pre-Renaissance Venice. It must be faced, as the concluding chapter argues,

that Ruskin's views are reactionary and were no possible solution to the disintegration of the society he described so well.

The most tangible and lasting aspects of Ruskin's educational legacy are his influential views on the education of women (discussed in chapter 6) and his insistence on a close relationship between education and manual labour (Chapter 7 explores this influence on English education). Other aspects of his educational legacy become clearer, as Chapter 9 shows, if the very diverse writings of his last productive period are seen as texts for the Guild of St. George. Chapter 9, in the course of discussing the proposals for the St. George schools, places the Guild of St. George in the context of the utopian tradition of education and analyzes the activities of the Guild, particularly its Museum and parallel educational collections (still existing in truncated form today).

Despite his extreme authoritarianism, as shown in his plans for the Guild of St. George, Ruskin is to be honoured for the brilliance of his persistent attacks on Victorian complacency in the face of appalling misery: part of his abiding importance is that from the time of the collapse of the Chartist movement to the socialist revival of the eighteen eighties, Ruskin carried much of the burden of being the social conscience of Victorian society. His writings which contain social and educational criticism, such as The Crown of Wild Olive, Sesame and Lilies and Fors Clavigera, this study argues, contain much of his best work. This is not to deny the continued pleasure that can be derived from the descriptions of Venice, the "readings" of Turner's paintings and the set-piece descriptions of nature from Modern Painters which did so much to establish Ruskin's Victorian reputation.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It is a pleasure to record the help received while on the Ruskin trail. Much of the research was done at Oxford where the staffs of the Ashmolean Museum and the Bodleian Library were unfailingly helpful. Mr. James Dearden of Bembridge School, Isle of Wight, Secretary of the Ruskin Society and Curator of the Ruskin Galleries gave valued advice, as did Mrs. Andrea Carruthers of the Department of Fine Art, University of Reading, Curator of the Guild of St. George Museum, when the author visited their respective institutions. Meetings with Professor Kenneth Charlton at King's College, University of London and with Professor Brian Simon, Professor W.H.G. Amytage and Professor John Roach (on their visits to Australia) were much appreciated.

At The University of New England the wise counsel and forbearance of my supervisor, Associate Professor James Bowen, has been most important at all stages of the work and is greatly valued. Also at The University of New England discussions with Professor R. S. Neale (Economic History) and Mr. D. Beer (History) were thought provoking. At the University of Sydney, Dr. R. C. Petersen (Education) gave valued help.

It has become almost mandatory for Ruskin students - and the present author is no exception - to express indebtedness to the immense labours of Messrs. Cook and Wedderburn in preparing their thirty-nine volume edition of Ruskin's Works and also to ask forgiveness for quoting extensively from Ruskin, whose eloquence often defies paraphrase.

The Library of The University of New England not only provided for a long term loan of Ruskin's Works but gave an outstanding service in pursuing rare items.

Greatly appreciated has been the excellent typing and unfailing kindness of Mrs. Dianne Hill in the course of preparing this work.

I would also like to thank my wife, Rita, and children, Mark and Rachel, for not only being particularly supportive during our stay in England but also for allowing Mr. Ruskin (and all his accompanying luggage) as a house guest over the years.