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# The Politics of the Golden River: Ruskin on Environment and the Stationary State

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## ABSTRACT

In 1938 Lewis Mumford stated that ‘Ruskin was the first economist to express the realities of energy income and living standards in relation to production’. Ruskin’s ideas on wise economic distribution and consumption were developed from within an older and broader view of technology, hostile to mass machine production. Mumford was not the first to draw attention to the relevance of Ruskin for developing environmental and urban planning theories. Despite Ruskin’s frequent castigation of John Stuart Mill’s ideas on political economy, and others of the eighteenth century ‘classical school’ of political economy, he shared a good deal with them. With Mill he displayed a preference for governments empowered to exercise legislative control in the imposition of limits to growth and in safeguarding worker interests. Notions of the ‘stationary state’ can be found in the mature writings of Malthus, Mill and Ruskin. In Ruskin’s case, however, his views were shaped by his reliance upon older ideas of political economy linked to a pre-Hobbesian tradition of Natural Law influenced by Biblical literature, by the Elizabethan, Richard Hooker, by various medieval writers and by the classics of ancient Greece and Rome, particularly the works of Plato and Xenophon. Intimations of his organic social views may be found in his early children’s tale, *The King of the Golden River* (1841), which found mature expression in the 1878 Constitution he wrote for The Guild of St. George, his late social experiment. After 1854, his ideas on political economy were steadily informed by works and commentaries dealing with practical environmental issues concerning architecture and common lands conservation, public health, transportation, science policy and pollution.

## KEYWORDS

Ruskin, pollution, land use, consumption, stationary state

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Ruskin was the first economist to express the realities of energy income and living standards in relation to production. His grasp of consummatory and creative functions neglected by the monetary economists, makes him - despite frequent solecisms - the fundamental economist of the biotechnic order.

Lewis Mumford. *The Culture of Cities* (1938)

## I

Lewis Mumford was not the first to discern a strong environmental aspect in the social thought of the great Victorian art critic John Ruskin (1819–1900). By the 1870s, some of Ruskin's immediate and younger contemporaries were starting to notice his views and their relevance for urban and countryside planning theory. Significant among these were proponents of garden city and greenbelt concepts such as Patrick Geddes and Ebenezer Howard in England and in America, Frederick Law Olmsted, William Price and Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>1</sup> Among historians and economists, one might include Arnold Toynbee, Frederick Harrison and the close student of imperialism, John A. Hobson.<sup>2</sup> This rather secular wing of commentary, following a period of relative neglect, resurfaced after 1960 in a series of articles and books which have looked more critically into various aspects of Ruskin's place in environmental thought, particularly with respect to the conservation movement and his views on railways and air pollution.<sup>3</sup>

This positive stream of commentary parallels a second and older tradition, one of a more aesthetic and literary character. Its original focus was on Ruskin's strong affinity with the Lake District poets, his attachment to the novels of Scott, his association with the transcendentalists in America, and his commanding knowledge of the Bible and classical sources.<sup>4</sup> Such studies have traditionally drawn strength from biographical enquiries into Ruskin's Protestant upbringing and the presumed persisting influence of Evangelical attitudes on his main works.<sup>5</sup> Ruskin's views on religion were, however, complex, quite distinguishable from his views on Church and State, and evolved towards a starkly personal

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1. See Olmsted and Kimball 1922, p. 70; Geddes 1900; Howard 1965. On Price, see Thomas 2000. On Wright, see Rosenberg 1961, pp. 71–76.; Lang 1999.
  2. Unless otherwise cited, references to works by John Ruskin will be to, Ruskin 1903–1912, cited hereafter as *Works*. On Ruskin and the Toynbees, see *Works*, 20, pp. xlv–xlvi and 38, pp. 344–45. See also Koot 1987, pp. 84–89; Meacham 1987, pp. 5–23; Harrison 1902, p. 138.
  3. An important synthesis in this tradition was provided in Sherburne 1972. Subsequent titles of interest include: Wheeler (ed.) 1995; Crook 2003; Ritvo 2009; Winter 1999.
  4. See Rosenberg 1961, Ch. 7. See also Bloom 1971, Ch. 12; Landow 1971, pp. 146–79; Beer 1998, Ch. 7; Stein 1967.
  5. This is a controversial aspect of Ruskin and cannot be pursued here. For references to the recent literature, see Wheeler 1999, pp. xiii–xv.

*Environment and History* 18.1

and bare bones version of Christian belief.<sup>6</sup> Following upon the chapter ‘Dives and Lazarus’ in Rosenberg’s excellent 1961 biography, a succession of focused books and papers have appeared, considering aspects of Ruskin’s views on land and life and their connection with his religious outlook.<sup>7</sup> Recent enquiries have acknowledged Ruskin’s broadening view of religion, giving special attention to his later enquiries into ancient mythological texts and the influence of these texts on his views on environment.<sup>8</sup>

Related to both of these traditions of commentary is a third, that of science, a field of enquiry that was problematic for Ruskin.<sup>9</sup> Science is, however, relevant to Ruskin’s views on environment. Suffice to say that while much has been made of his hostility towards aspects of nineteenth century scientific practice, Ruskin does not represent a strict break with Victorian science as much as a frequent denying of the implications of some of its presumed conclusions. To be sure, he longed to become a geologist in his youth and might have done so if he could have put to rest the demons raised by the Darwinian evidence that soon came to accompany Lyell’s new geological time scale.<sup>10</sup> Yet, he could not resist eating steadily of the forbidden fruit of nineteenth century science.<sup>11</sup> His effort to view the natural world according to the older notion of the ‘great chain of being’ resulted in his being identified as a scientific outsider but this did not prevent him from working up his own unique terminology and vision of science based on naturalist observation, augmented by his study of mythology.<sup>12</sup> For his critics, Ruskin’s morality of science was as distracting as his morality of art or economics, reinforcing an anti-urban bias; but for those many citizens who appreciated a well-served-up sermon, his social messages rang true enough.<sup>13</sup>

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6. Critical reviews of Ruskin’s religious beliefs commenced with Wilenski’s study of Ruskin in 1933. Ruskin’s theological position has remained topical with commentators and biographers. See Wilenski 1933, pp. 329–56; Rosenberg 1961, pp. 111–13; Hilton 2000, pp. 117–18, 124–5; Wheeler 1999; Craig 2006. On Ruskin’s stated position in 1886 see *Works*, 34, p. 594.
  7. See Rosenberg 1961, Ch. 7.
  8. See Fitch 1982; Wheeler 1995, 1999; Craig 2006. Of interest in this general broadening is Ruskin’s post-1869 relationship with the important philologist at Oxford, Frederick Max Müller, whose correspondence with Ruskin is retained in the Oxford University Archives.
  9. See Alexander 1969: 508–21; the papers in Wheeler (ed.) 1996; O’Gorman 1999; Weltman 1999.
  10. Ruskin was certainly not alone in his effort to balance new geological and biological evidence with more practical moral considerations. Tennyson was a parallel case. See Bush 1950, pp. 125–26.
  11. See Hewison 1996. If Ruskin had met many great artists and literary figures before 1840 he had also met Darwin and Lyell, and had a great respect for both. Ruskin to J.J. Ruskin, April 22, 1837, *Works*, 36, p. 14; and *Works*, 19, pp. xlv–xlv; 26, pp. 12–13, 117–20.
  12. See Wheeler 1995, Weltman 1999.
  13. A useful review of opinion on Ruskin’s writings, pro and con, is provided in Bradley (ed.) 1984. For a view of the difficulties associated with the late Ruskin and his audience with respect to science, see Fitch 1982, pp. 638–40.

The many fruitful suggestions of these diverse enquiries cannot be discussed in any detail. Suffice to say that what is being described here as Ruskin's environmentalism is of a piece with his approach to other subjects in that it is endowed with a moral content. While a number of previous studies tend to link Ruskin's moral of landscape, along with his wider approach to matters, with a presumed persisting evangelical outlook, the current paper goes far in the other direction and stresses the pre-Reformation cast of Ruskin's mind.<sup>14</sup> Ruskin's post-1850 politics, economics and environmental ideas drew increasing strength from older Biblical and classical ideas, mixed with the organic social vision of the late medieval scholastics as filtered through the massive work of the Elizabethan, Richard Hooker.<sup>15</sup> This contention contrasts somewhat with the direction set by James Sherburne in 1972, where the notion of material abundance is held up as a possibility in Ruskin's thought. Aware of all the sources, Sherburne was inclined to discuss Ruskin, on this point, largely in the context of the general Enlightenment and Romantic versions of progress.<sup>16</sup> He sees the ironic similarity between Ruskin and Mill on the matter of the Stationary State but the two men arrived from different directions.<sup>17</sup> 'Abundance' says Sherburne, 'plays the role in Ruskin's thought of the hero who is sabotaged by the villain competition.'<sup>18</sup> Competition was certainly the villain but the question of abundance for Ruskin was not really one of scarcity as opposed to plenty. It was one of assuring the right and just distribution of essential goods and services and that production of such goods and services became the sustained focus of public policy. All the rest could be curtailed or denied altogether as destructive and wasteful of the splendid God-given natural setting. It was Lewis Mumford, perhaps, who best understood this pre-Reformation side of Ruskin. As a consummate student of city history, he shared much of Ruskin's horror over modern urban and industrial trends. In describing Ruskin as the 'fundamental economist of the biotechnic order' he grasped the subtle distinctions he had made in considering the relationship of craft with technology, or 'technics' as Mumford preferred.<sup>19</sup> Ruskin's so-called utopianism had little to do with lost or ideal cities of the future but much to do with small scale rural reconstruction, and recovery, through Xenophon and

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14. See in particular the general argument in C. Stephen Finley, *Nature's Covenant: Figures of Landscape in Ruskin* (University Park: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).
  15. While at Oxford, two of Ruskin's tutors tried to wean Ruskin from the severe evangelical influence of his parents. Walter Brown put Isaac Taylor's *Natural History of Enthusiasm* (1829) in Ruskin's hands. *Works*, 35, pp. 291–2. Osborne Gordon encouraged Ruskin in a close reading of John Keble's new edition of Hooker's *Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity* (1843). *Works*, 3, p. 10 n.2. See also Ruskin, *Diary Notes on Hooker. c. 1845–50*. On the influence of Thomas Aquinas and scholastic thought on the Oxford of Hooker's day, see W.D.J. Cargill Thompson, in Hill (ed.) 1972, pp. 20–22. See also Wheeler 1999, Chs. 6 and 7.
  16. Sherburne 1972, Ch. 4.
  17. *Ibid.* p. 280.
  18. *Ibid.* p. 85.
  19. See Mumford 1966 in Manuel (ed.) 1966.

*Environment and History* 18.1

others, of the essential social virtues attending a life which demanded little from the market place. Such humility of the human species Terry Gifford has appropriately identified in Ruskin as ‘a prerequisite of the ecological perspective’.<sup>20</sup> His proposed methods of economic and environmental repair were, nevertheless, difficult to sell in the context of the Victorian England which Winter has described in its condition of high industrial advancement. On the other hand, they made instant sense to the young Gandhi as he started to consider the issues confronting primarily rural India.<sup>21</sup>

What, then, was the initial impulse behind Ruskin’s mid-life conversion to social advocacy? In the early 1850s, the art critic had become alarmed at the accelerating pace of social and economic change in England and Europe. It was sufficient to turn him from the study of art to that of architecture. *The Stones of Venice* (1851–53) was generated largely from a practical concern for the promotion of architectural conservation principles in the face of what he perceived to be mounting economic and social forces of corruption, augmented by the widespread military disruptions of 1848.<sup>22</sup> This question of the pace of nineteenth century change had registered elsewhere. Even in highly rural America, the close student of land use, George Perkins Marsh, addressing farmers of Vermont in 1847, stated that ‘Every middle-aged man who revisits his birth-place after a few years absence, looks upon another landscape than that which formed the theatre of his youthful toils and pleasures.’<sup>23</sup> Ruskin would have instinctively agreed with this observation.<sup>24</sup> After 1854 his quest became increasingly one in search of stability in social, economic and land use matters. At the national level, this quest took him towards a conception of the stationary state; and at the local level, towards rural communes as a curb on the industrial city.

## II

Ruskin first came to notice through his extended defence of that landscape-preoccupied artist, J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851). Commencing with the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843, his art criticism was soon supplemented by architectural studies, leading to publication of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* in 1849 and *The Stones of Venice*, completed in 1853. The famous chapter from the latter, ‘The Nature of Gothic’ indicated that the author’s attention was

20. Terry Gifford, ‘Conclusion’ in Wheeler (ed.) 1995, p. 189.

21. Winter 1999. Ch. 6; McLaughlin 1974, pp. 23–31.

22. On Ruskin’s motives in writing *The Stones of Venice*, see Cook 1911, 1, pp. 25–56. David Carroll has attempted to link the force of this alarm over the pace of change with Ruskin’s theological views. See Carroll, 1995. On the military threat to Venice after 1848, see Clegg 1981, pp. 72–77.

23. Cited by Lowenthal, ‘Introduction’ 1964, p. xvii.

24. J. Mordant Crook has reviewed this particular point with respect to Ruskin’s reaction to railway enterprise in England. See Crook 2003.

shifting from aesthetics towards social questions. The new direction was made coherent in *The Political Economy of Art* (1857) and more famously in 1860 when four essays on political economy appeared in the *Cornhill Magazine*. The latter were republished as *Unto This Last* in 1862, but were on neither occasion well received by the critical public or by economists. Other works followed, none of them as concise or focused, but all moving Ruskin closer towards his utopian experiment known as The Guild of St. George which finally took legal form in 1878.<sup>25</sup> ‘Utopian’ is perhaps, something of a misidentification in political terms, since Ruskin had no interest in uprooting revolutionary proposals aimed at sweeping existing governments away. The late life experiment was designed to affect changes in public law through osmosis via pilot projects functioning properly under the British Constitution.<sup>26</sup>

The guild experiment was not a practical success by most accounts but the aims and constitution of the Guild reveal particularly well the direction of Ruskin’s thought on environmental matters and the connection of political economy with environment.<sup>27</sup> These ideas had long been in gestation and intimations of them are noticeable in some of his earliest writings, including the journal of his tour of the Lake District, which he kept in 1830.<sup>28</sup> Despite romantic overtones, another early work, *The Poetry of Architecture*, demonstrated his awareness of Swiss alpine landscapes as primarily working landscapes.<sup>29</sup>

His youthful knowledge of the Alps undoubtedly played an inspirational role for his charming children’s story, *The King of the Golden River* (1841). Ruskin probably never again wrote anything quite so to the point as this tale, originally a gift to his future bride, Effie Gray.<sup>30</sup> Arguably his most successful book, it appeals, as do all good tales, not just to children but also to adults.<sup>31</sup> Characteristically, it holds out the prospect of the main protagonists living happily ever after. These were the inhabitants of ‘a secluded and mountainous part of Stiria’ whose valley lay in sight of a river that fell out of the local mountains before it ran away to the west. (Figure 1) Well after the sun had set in the valley below, its rays continued to fall upon the upper reaches of this river. This brilliant evening effect had led the local inhabitants to call it the Golden River. The valley, while not nourished by this river, was favoured by regular rainfall, so that the crops and cattle prospered and it became known as the Treasure Valley. Soon we learn that the economy of this valley was dominated by three brothers, Schwartz, Hans

25. The main works in political economy and political thought following *Unto This Last* include *Munera Pulveris* (1863–1872), *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), *Time and Tide* (1867) and *Fors Clavigera* (1871–1884).

26. Ruskin to Cowper, 4 Aug. 1871, in Bradley (ed.) 1964, p. 314.

27. On the Guild of St. George, see Armytage 1961, pp. 289–304, Hoare 2006, Ch. 8 and pp. 423–29. See also *Works*, 30; Harris 1985; Barnes 1985.

28. See Burd and Dearden (eds.) 1990.

29. The work appeared under the name of Kata Phusin. *Works*, 1: pp. 1–188.

30. Lutyens 1972, pp. 17–18.

31. *Works*, 35, p.304.

## THE POLITICS OF THE GOLDEN RIVER

and Gluck, but that Gluck, the youngest, was a drudge and servant to the elder two. The older brothers worked hard but were tight-fisted, driving hard bargains with the locals. Slowly they became the practical owners of the valley, gaining all to themselves.

Shortly, a stranger arrives at the farm house, one South West Wind, Esquire, seeking food and shelter. Gluck's ready hospitality is cut short by the return of his brothers. The stranger responds to this show of selfishness by withdrawing the favourable south winds from the Treasure Valley, thus bringing on extended drought and general financial ruin. The brothers decide to seek their fortune in the city where they enter into false dealing in what little gold plate still remains to them, Gluck being set to the task of smelting. While melting down an heirloom, suddenly appears none other than the King of the Golden River, grateful for his liberation. The King tells Gluck that whoever throws holy water into the river above Treasure Valley will turn it into genuine gold. Any who fail in this, however, will be turned into stone. When first told of this, the elder brothers are incredulous and give Gluck a good beating. Soon, however, their natural instincts take over and each decides to try his luck with the challenge. Each fails and each is turned into stone in the effort.

Not surprisingly, ethical tests have been set along the way. When Gluck finally makes his attempt, he passes them without difficulty. The King then rewards him by altering the course of the Golden River, which now bursts a new course into the Treasure Valley. Thereafter the crops are restored, followed by general rejoicing. The valley 'became a garden again, and the inheritance, which had been lost by cruelty, was regained by love' for at Gluck's farm 'the poor were never driven from the door' and 'his barns became full of corn, and his house of treasure.'<sup>32</sup>

Throughout this satisfying little tale, with its moral imperatives, Ruskin touches on many future themes, such as description of Alpine landscapes and geological formations. He also considers the economic value of rivers and good land use, captured well in the chapter title – 'How the Agricultural System

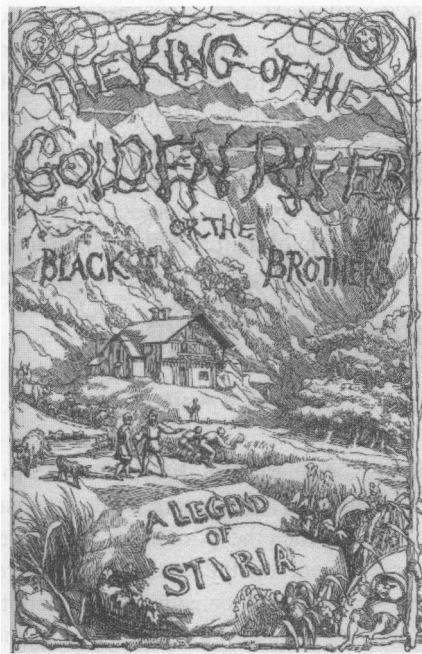


FIGURE 1. Title Page, Original edition of *The King of the Golden River*. (1851). Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. 1.

32. *Works*, 1, p. 347



of the Black Brothers was Interfered with by South-West Wind, Esquire'. A Dickensian image of degraded city living and corrupt commerce is illustrated by the impulse to deal in gold for 'ill-gotten' profit. Ruskin's use of Holy Water as a prop projects a central point of his economics: the notion that commodities should be assessed primarily according to their 'value in use'. We know 'Holy Water' to be 'Holy' by the way the brothers use it and not by its literal designation. Other prominent themes concern child labour, the protection of animals and the question of the proper distribution of goods. It is a parable of an integrated spiritual and physical world, although the word 'environment' nowhere appears in any of Ruskin's works.

### III

John Rosenberg has drawn attention to Carlyle's innovative use of the word 'environment' in its more modern sense. The distinction is between an older usage in which the word had a largely verbal connotation, that of the 'action of encirclement' or 'the state of being surrounded', and a more concrete sense of the word. Carlyle considered it to denote 'the region surrounding something'. The *Oxford Dictionary* editors, citing the Scottish sage, render it as: 'The conditions under which any person or thing lives or is developed; the sum total of influences which modify and determine the development of life and character.'<sup>33</sup> The word had taken on a sense of the holistic and organic, the influence of the German authors Carlyle was so preoccupied with in the 1820s.<sup>34</sup> This 'organic' sense came easily enough to Ruskin as well, although his uses of 'cooperation' or 'nature' were the characteristic terms in his works.

Ruskin's early exposures to travel, art, the Bible, the classics of Homer, Elizabethan writers, Walter Scott and the Lake District poets all imprinted heavily upon his imagination.<sup>35</sup> His examination of much eighteenth century artistic opinion helped him formulate a 'moral' interpretation of art in relation to nature, indicating that his future views of economics and social relations would be little informed by French and Scottish Enlightenment views, but more by older accounts of natural law.<sup>36</sup> Hoary views associated with 'the great chain of being' reinforced the theological outlook inherited from his parents but they also posed a conflict in the young Ruskin, who was keenly interested in modern science, particularly geology and botany.<sup>37</sup> He understood early both

33. Rosenberg 1985, pp. 35–6, 177–8.

34. Harrold 1934, Ch. 1, and Sherburne 1972, pp. 28–9.

35. See the late autobiography, *Praeterita. Works*, 35, pp. 219–20.

36. Ruskin's reading in the 1840s of the Elizabethan philosopher and theologian, Richard Hooker, was particularly significant. *Works*, 35, p. 414. See also 'Of the Theoretic Faculty' in *Modern Painters*, 2: Sec. I. *Works*, 4, pp. 25–27, and 50. On Ruskin's reading of art theory, see Ladd 1932, and Landow 1971.

37. Lovejoy 1964, Ch. 6.

*Environment and History* 18.1

the temporal implications of Charles Lyell's revolutionary works in geology and the direction of Darwin's thought, yet tried to shut out the sound of 'those dreadful hammers' by reading Saussure and by attending the lectures of the entertaining, but religiously orthodox Oxford geologist, William Buckland.<sup>38</sup> Gradually becoming a doubter in religion in the 1840s, Ruskin nevertheless sought to maintain his understanding of science in a pre-evolutionary mode. Evidence of much forbidden scientific knowledge is scattered throughout his works and there is no doubt that Ruskin's knowledge was up to date. For what must be considered practical social reasons, he refused to draw the conclusions of his reading.<sup>39</sup> Fond of Darwin personally, he still maintained late in life that, 'It is mischievous, not only in looking to the past germ instead of the present creature – but looking also in the creature itself – to the Growth of the Flesh instead of the Growth of the Spirit.'<sup>40</sup> Ruskin's resignation from Oxford in 1884 over the vivisection issue was consistent with this view, for the methods of the 'doing' of science had moral implications.

Remaining attached to the time-worn 'great chain of being' with its fixed orders and greater social comfort zone, Ruskin nervously held that even if we did live in a more dynamic world than previously suspected, the older view of a stable world was quite sufficient for practical purposes.<sup>41</sup> Such ambiguities in outlook need be kept in mind when considering Ruskin's antiquarian sounding politics and his proposals for environmental management.<sup>42</sup> An excellent field naturalist, it was his copy of Linnaeus that he kept close at hand, not Darwin.<sup>43</sup>

#### IV

In the 1883 revision to his beautifully illustrated geological reverie, *Deucalion*, Ruskin reminded his readers that all his earlier investigations in the Alps 'were connected in my own mind with the practical hope of arousing the Swiss and Italian mountain peasantry to an intelligent administration of the national treasures of their mountains and streams'.<sup>44</sup> This was, perhaps, something of an exaggeration of old age but there was a basis for the claim, for *Modern Painters*

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38. Ruskin had received, as a present from his father, the new abridged edition of Saussure in 1834. See Evans and Whitehouse (eds.) 1956, 1, p. 9; on Ruskin and Buckland, see *Works*, 35, pp. 198–200, 204–5; and Burd (ed.) 1973, 2, pp. 429, 448, 462, 655–6.
39. *Works*, 1, p. 478; 26, pp. 12–13, 117–20; Ruskin to his father, Jan. 10, 1837, *Works*, 36, pp. 9–10; Ruskin to his father, April 22, 1837, *Works*, 36, p. 14; Ruskin to Acland, 24 May, 1851, *Works*, 36, pp. 114–15. See also Wilson 1996; Alexander 1969, pp. 508–10; Hewison 1996, pp. 42–5.
40. *Works*, 34, p. 586.
41. Alexander, pp. 508–21, and Lovejoy, Ch. 8.
42. Hewison 1996, pp. 37–8.
43. *Works*, 4, pp. 4–5; 25: 200.
44. *Works*, 26, p. 339.

is far from restricted to purely aesthetic issues. We have noticed also that six years before *Modern Painters*, he had published *The Poetry of Architecture*.<sup>45</sup> The sub-title given, *The Architecture of the Nations of Europe considered in its Association with Natural Scenery and National Character*, boldly announces his later ambitions.<sup>46</sup> Here, the title was grandiose but the execution limited, consisting largely of a comparison of vernacular cottage and villa styles in Europe with those of England. This pioneering essay would be forgotten in the light of his more marked influence on the new 'sport' of mountaineering and other works on architecture.<sup>47</sup>

Not unsurprisingly, an anti-urban bias developed early in Ruskin's writings. In the 'The Nature of Gothic' he vilified the supposedly progressive tendencies of the modern urban-industrial world.<sup>48</sup> Later, contending it was the 'degradation of the operative into a machine' that explains the 'vain incoherent destructive struggling' characteristic of modern Europe, he saw workers involved in a struggle 'for a freedom of which they cannot explain the nature to themselves'.<sup>49</sup> In 1854 he published a pamphlet on the Crystal Palace (an architectural outgrowth of the great London Exhibition of 1851) in which he pointed to the ambiguity it symbolised with respect to England's wealth and industrial culture.<sup>50</sup>

A few years working part time as a teacher at F.D. Maurice's Working Men's College in East London inspired *The Political Economy of Art* (1857) followed by the essays in the *Cornhill Magazine*, the basis of *Unto This Last*. In the latter, Ruskin outlined his views on 'intrinsic value', arguing that an important aspect of sound political economy concerned choices about what things were worth making, what activities were worth undertaking and what things should be recognised as part of the public domain, understood as forms of 'commons'. Policy should lead us 'to desire and labour for the things that lead to life' and to 'scorn and destroy the things that lead to destruction'.<sup>51</sup> The thesis was actually advanced as early as 1852 when he had attacked import and export duties as forms of taxation, urging their replacement by taxes on 'the sale or possession of all articles which tend to enervate the moral strength of the people, or to minister to its indolent pleasure'.<sup>52</sup> By 1864 he was asking 'whether a demand for intrinsically good things and a corresponding knowledge of their use be not conditions on the whole to tend towards national wealth ... ?'<sup>53</sup> By such

45. Collingwood 1892, 1, p. 72. The selection of the name 'Kata Phusin' was a reference to his recent reading of Aristotle and the Greek term he rendered for 'according to nature'. It was the first of Ruskin's many obscure word plays associated with the titles of his works.

46. *Works*: 1, pp. 1–187.

47. Clark 1953, pp. 37–40.

48. See *The Stones of Venice*, 2, Ch. 6. *Works*, 10, pp. 180–269.

49. *Works*, 10, p. 95.

50. 'The Opening of the Crystal Palace'. *Works*, 12, pp. 417–32.

51. *Works*, 17, pp. 84–5. See also *Munera Pulveris*, *Works*, 17, p. 184.

52. These were not published until the 1880s. *Works*, 12, pp. 593–603.

53. *Works*, 17, pp. 499–500.

environmentally-shaped arguments, Ruskin continued to attack 'orthodox' political economy but his efforts to gain credence as an economist were not a success in his day.<sup>54</sup> In response to much criticism, his essays in *The Cornhill* were suspended, as was a second series in *Fraser's*, in 1863.<sup>55</sup>

In 1864 Ruskin settled upon a different approach – that of the public letter and lecture. This included the popular *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), the addresses published as *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866) and 'Twenty-Five Letters to a Working Man of Sunderland' published as *Time and Tide* (1867).<sup>56</sup> In addition to cautioning working men on the limitations of merely obtaining the vote, *Time and Tide* had a more tangible purpose, the setting out of a programme favourable to the revival of various 'commons' principles, not just in the areas of land, water and air quality, but also in education, the arts, labour rights and citizen welfare. The active role proposed for the state, in a bureaucratic sense, was minimal, although not absent. *Time and Tide* followed up on *Unto This Last* where a four-point scheme for state initiatives was advanced.<sup>57</sup> As early as *The Stones of Venice*, Ruskin had urged that 'the first duty of a state is to see that every child born therein shall be housed, clothed, fed and educated till it attain years of discretion'.<sup>58</sup> *Time and Tide* sought to give these various ideas administrative substance.

Ruskin's political outlook was ambiguous. One may easily detect in him elements of socialism, but his advocacy is that of the radical Tory rather than the egalitarian radical.<sup>59</sup> Several strains of conservative thought emerged in Britain after the Reformation, embracing, by degree, aspects of traditionalism, the virtues of a National Church, an appreciation for the 'organic' society and scepticism about the possibilities of politics as such.<sup>60</sup> Radical toryism represented a variant on these themes by which an enhanced role for the state became the remedy for current economic and educational woes. It is in Robert Southey, more than in Edmund Burke, that radical English toryism takes form, particularly in his *Sir Thomas More, or Colloquies on the Progress and Prospects of Society* (1829). Southey's appreciation for phases of economic history was more sophisticated than Burke's, although both demonstrated a strong appreciation for that 'organic' aspect, which Jonathan Mandilow has usefully described as 'the communal value of politics'.<sup>61</sup>

54. See Fain 1955, Chs. 2 and 3; Henderson 2000, Ch. 6.

55. *Works*, 17, pp. 119–293. The Fraser's pieces were eventually published in 1872 as *Munera Pulveris*.

56. *Works*, 17, pp. 295–482.

57. *Works*, 17, pp. 17–23.

58. *Works*, 11, p. 263.

59. See the Addenda Notes to *The Political Economy of Art* for some of Ruskin's earliest attempts to organise his thoughts on the role of the state. *Works*, 16, pp. 105–39.

60. See Quinton, 1978, pp. 16–17.

61. Mandilow 1986, Ch. 2.

Ruskin had read Southey's *Colloquies* approvingly in his youth.<sup>62</sup> Ultimately, Ruskin was less concerned with detailing the historical phases which had fostered what he took to be the contemporary state of English industrial slavery than in proposing practical solutions. He agreed with Southey that the state should play a creative role in restoring equitable balance between the classes by means of legislation, taxation, education and other practical measures. Ruskin's support of free trade and repeal of the Corn Laws, along with his sceptical view of party politics, renders it doubtful if he can be considered a very representative figure of that other fragment of toryism identified as the 'Ultra-Tories'.<sup>63</sup>

State ownership and administration of resources played a fairly minor role in his programme. State supported educational institutions linked to unemployment relief were of greater interest, as well as the fostering of new corporate forms of organisation that could function within the established constitutional framework of England. Independently wealthy in 1864, Ruskin soon started considering small-scale alternative models of voluntary organisation, structured around his principles of political economy and informed by a bare-bones Christian ethic much influenced by his reading of Dante and Plato.<sup>64</sup> Thus, the seeds of his utopian experiment had already been sown before he was appointed as the first Slade Professor of Art at Oxford in 1870.

## V

At Oxford his interest in social reform become more pronounced, reinforced by environmental considerations. Passages in his main treatise on science, *The Eagle's Nest* (1872), have a distinctly modern ring:

... the misuse we made of our discoveries will be remembered against us in eternal history; our ingenuity in the vindication or denial of species will be disregarded in the face of the fact that we destroyed, in civilized Europe, every rare bird and secluded flower; our chemistry of agriculture will be haunted with the memories of irremediable famine; and our mechanical contrivance will only make the age of the *mitrailleuse* more abhorred than that of the *guillotine*.<sup>65</sup>

A theme of stewardship had come into focus, paralleled in new economic writings by considerations of the proper nature of human consumption and distribution.<sup>66</sup> Europeans were, in his view, expending far too much energy in the

62. *Works*, 3, p. 653 n. 2

63. Robert Hewison has argued for a connection between the Ruskin family and the 'Ultra-Tories'. See Hewison 1982.

64. Ruskin to Susan Scott, 14 May, 1869. In Whitehouse (ed.) 1929, pp. 113–15; and see Smart 1883.

65. *Works*, 22, p. 147.

66. See Craig 2006.

pursuit of what he considered non-economic objectives, particularly in the form of war industries.<sup>67</sup> Desirable environmental values, as objects of policy, could be stated simply: 'Pure Air, Water and Earth' are three of the six 'chiefly useful things to be got by political economy'. Translated into terms of governmental responsibilities it meant simply that 'the first thing the king of any country has to do is to manage the streams of it'.<sup>68</sup> With much classical reference, he informed his fellow citizens that they had transformed 'the Mother Earth, *Demeter* into the Avenger Earth, *Tisiphone*', by turning 'every river of England into a common sewer, so that you cannot so much as baptize an English baby but with filth'.<sup>69</sup>

As a remedy for abuse of the commons he called for strengthening of the laws applied to landholding and for a limited policy of nationalisation of certain lands.<sup>70</sup> Such policies would facilitate needed public works projects, particularly on those coastlands that had to be 'made accessible and gradually reclaimed' but less so, for developmental purposes, on mountains or moorlands, for our lives depend on them 'more than on the best arable we have'.<sup>71</sup> Here, Ruskin distinguished the suitability of private or public actions associated with a necessary domination of nature from those in which an ethic of preservation and benign neglect were more appropriate. Enhanced productivity was a valid goal, but protection of park and wild lands should also be assured.<sup>72</sup> A society needs 'vast spaces of land for culture, exercise and gardens round the cities, full of flowers which being everybody's property, nobody would gather; and of birds which being everybody's property, nobody would shoot'.<sup>73</sup> Proponents of garden cities such as Patrick Geddes and Ebenezer Howard, approved these assertions of proper land inventory and classification.<sup>74</sup> Ruskin considered his proposals neither utopian nor particularly fanciful, calling only for an educational rediscovery of ancient traditions of moral leadership and economy espoused by Solomon, Plato and Xenophon, among others.<sup>75</sup>

His environmentalism also called for preventative measures, officially sanctioned, as well as privately adopted. Concerning the 1871 floods in Italy, he argued that 'half the money lost by this inundation of Tiber spent rightly on hill sides last summer would have changed every wave of it into so much forest and foliage'. Against criticisms that such 'would not pay' the proper response

67. *Works*, 27, pp. 21, 125–27. As were many others of his time, Ruskin was ambiguous in his views on war. See *Works*, 5, pp. 410; 18, pp. 459–93, 515, 547; See also Hobson 1898, pp. 321–28.

68. *Works*, 27, pp. 90–1; 17, p. 547.

69. *Works*, 27, pp. 92–3.

70. *Works*, 29, pp. 494–5.

71. *Works*, 17, p. 545.

72. *Works*, 17, pp. 154–5; 27, p. 496.

73. *Works*, 27, p. 121

74. Geddes 1900, pp. 307–20 and Howard 1965.

75. For Ruskin's edition of Xenophon's *Economist*, see *Works*, 31, pp. 1–95. On Solomon, see *Works*, 17, pp. 57, 62; 29, pp. 227–9.

was: 'will you pay your money in advance for what is actually new land added to the Kingdom of Italy? Or will you pay it under call from the Tiber every ten or twenty years as the price of the work done by the river for your destruction?'<sup>76</sup> Here are intimations of the utility of flood plain mapping and the recognition of flood cycles.<sup>77</sup> In his comprehensive review of environmental history in England, James Winter has suggested that there was a certain inconsistency in Ruskin's attitude to flood control and water supply issues, pointing to his opposition to the Thirlmere Reservoir in the Lake District but support for such measures in parts of Europe.<sup>78</sup> No doubt the Thirlmere project, (conceived to supply water to far away Manchester by aqueduct), did represent an early version of 'not in my backyard' to the members of the Thirlmere Defence Association.<sup>79</sup> In Ruskin's case, if his antagonism towards Manchester was characteristic, Thirlmere itself represented a somewhat atypical case compared with his comments on Alpine and Italian flood situations. The Thirlmere Valley was not subject to regular flooding, whereas the continental cases he mentions generally concern chronically overgrazed landscapes and narrow settled valleys which required local measures for flood prevention.<sup>80</sup>

There was, then, a certain range of essential works that should be considered necessarily 'public' owing to their scope or localised importance. This attitude informed his view of roads and harbour construction. He was certainly not a proponent of railway development, objecting in one case to the destruction of a scenic English valley between Buxton and Bakewell.<sup>81</sup> To the extent railroads were necessary, however, he favoured public ownership in order to reduce duplication of lines and to control fare rates.<sup>82</sup>

Concerning the broader scope of industrial enterprise, Ruskin recommended preconditions for manufacturing, noting that the 'invention of new wants' could be mischievous, urging that any particular 'demand' for a 'supply' was not just a matter for private commercial decision but also for public deliberation in terms of consequences.<sup>83</sup> Similarly, he saw a need for improved administration in natural resource exploitation. On the state of the herring industry in Loch Fyne in 1873, for example, he complained of 'the cupidity of careless fishers, unchecked by beneficial law'. Ruskin placed the blame for current mismanagement on recommendations rendered by the 1863 Royal Commission on Fisheries

76. *Works*, 17, pp. 547–50.

77. Ruskin was interested in maps, collected extensively, and urged their increased use in schools. See *Works*, 27, pp. lxxxi–ii and 39, p. 335. See also Cosgrove 1995, pp. 76–101.

78. Winter 1999, p. 25

79. The history of the Thirlmere Reservoir project has been reviewed in Ritvo 2003 and 2009. See also Winter 1999, pp. 176–88.

80. *Works*, 29, pp. 323–4, 346–9.

81. *Works*, 27, p. 86.

82. *Works*, 17, pp. 530–32; Crook 2003.

83. *Works*, 16, pp. 123–25; 17, pp. 102–3.



FIGURE 2. Early Morning on the Don, Sheffield. Postcard Painting by 'Jotter' [Walter Hayward-Young (1868–1920)].

Policy.<sup>84</sup> Elsewhere, he made cryptic comments about people encroaching upon traditional 'commons' lands for their own gain.<sup>85</sup>

Long a close observer of cloud conditions, Ruskin contended that fresh air itself was being destroyed by prevalent industrial practices.<sup>86</sup> He stated in 1875 that 'you might easily vitiate it so as to bring such a pestilence on the globe as would end all of you'. Reduction of air quality was occurring not just by the actions of contemporary wars but by means of 'foul chemical exhalations' and by means of 'the horrible nests, which you call towns' being 'little more than laboratories for the distillation into heaven of venomous smokes and smells mixed with effluvia from decaying animal matter and infectious miasmata from purulent disease'.<sup>87</sup> (Figure 2) Ruskin would revisit this theme of air quality in two public lectures in 1884 entitled 'The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century'.<sup>88</sup> These were extraordinary performances in which he took up 'the traditions of air from the year before Scott's death' (1832), contending that 'plague clouds' had appeared over England during his own lifetime 'as a result of the industrial

84. *Works*, 28, pp. 32–3.

85. *Works*, 28, pp. 302–3; 421.

86. Volume 4 of *Modern Painters*, in particular, contains much of Ruskin's early observations about cloud conditions and Turner as a master of their representation.

87. *Works*, 27, p. 91.

88. *Works*, 34, pp. 4–80; and see MacDonald 1990: 44–49; Wheeler 1995, pp. 181–86.



vices of Englishmen'.<sup>89</sup> He gained the agreement of at least one other artist in this matter, D.G. Leslie, and, in 1907, John W. Graham reinforced the main lines of Ruskin's conclusions.<sup>90</sup> His cumulative observations did not add up to an attractive picture of the age of progress. Government, he argued, should have the 'power of purifying the air by dealing properly and swiftly with all substances in corruption; by absolutely forbidding noxious manufactures; and by planting in all soils the trees which cleanse and invigorate the earth and atmosphere'.<sup>91</sup>

Ruskin's conservation advocacy also extended to cultural property.<sup>92</sup> His interest in official interventions on behalf of buildings came to the fore in the late 1840s, during his extensive studies of Venetian architecture.<sup>93</sup> In his Crystal Palace pamphlet, he first suggested a society for the protection of buildings, one based on voluntary funding but with methods consistent with the office of a public overseer.<sup>94</sup> In such a system of reporting, the society could then furnish funds 'to buy freehold such buildings or other works of intransferable art as at any time might be offered for sale'. In addition, such a society could assist public and private proprietors and exert influence on them 'to prevent unwise restoration and unnecessary destruction'.<sup>95</sup> This proposal for cooperative action was clearly couched in terms of the 'anti-scrape' philosophy of architectural conservation promoted later by William Morris. The 'anti-scrape' attitude was opposed to radical restoration of older structure.<sup>96</sup>

Such conservation initiatives played a role in the founding of the Commons Heritage Trust in 1865, the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings in 1877 and the National Trust in 1895. Ruskin's influence on Octavia Hill, Morris and H.D. Rawnsley was considerable in this respect.<sup>97</sup> No Marxist, Ruskin favoured only limited cases of land and property nationalisation.<sup>98</sup> At the same time, possession of property by private or corporate owners bestowed no natural or absolute rights in use, all ownership being conditional, framed by legal obligations or prescriptions. Such a view was central to his embrace of the larger view that the true aim of political economy is 'the multiplication of human life at the highest standard'.<sup>99</sup> Sociologically, Ruskin was sounding here a somewhat

89. *Works*, 34, p. 10.

90. Regarding G.D. Leslie's *Letters to Marco* (1893) see *Works*, 34, p. xxiv; and see Graham 1907, p. 35. See also Mosley 2008.

91. *Works*, 27, pp. 91–2.

92. *Works*, 9, p. 74; 12, p. 431; 22, p. 283.

93. *Works*, 8, pp. 225–32; 11, pp. 234–5.

94. *Works*, 12, pp. 415–32.

95. *Works*, 12, p. 431. See also Harris 1963.

96. Morris 1877, pp. 81–2.

97. See Harris, 1963, pp. 165–67; *Works*, 6, pp. 456–59; 16, pp. 73–75; Sherburne 1972, pp. 72, 242; Hill 1956, Chs. 10, 13, 15; Cook 1911, 2, pp. 574–6; Rawnsley 1902, Ch. 9; Dearden 1999, p. 195; Chitty 1996; Walton 1996.

98. *Works*, 17, pp. 141, 168, 239, 438–9; 27, pp. 191, 379–81; 29, pp. 19, 404, 494.

99. *Works*, 17, p. 150.

'utilitarian' note. He favoured regulatory law to curb practices that ran the risk of destroying commodities of intrinsic value or interest or which threatened public health. In the late 1850s Ruskin had strongly supported Sir John Simon's efforts to implement a public health act.<sup>100</sup> In a 'practical and large sense, nobody has a right even to make experiments, but only to act in a way which they certainly know will be productive of good'.<sup>101</sup> Corporate, as well as individual, actions should all be subject to certain monitoring requirements under law. On behalf of future generations, echoing Burke, he stated, that 'we have no right, by anything that we do or neglect, to involve them in unnecessary penalties, or deprive them of benefits which was in our power to bequeath'.<sup>102</sup>

This way of thinking he extended to the normal market place, where he did not view kindly government laxity in the safeguarding of quality standards in items for public consumption. He supported Lord Cecil's proposal that 'it is expedient that her majesty's government should give their earliest attention to the widespread and most reprehensible practice of using false weights and measures and of adulterating food, drink and drugs'.<sup>103</sup> John Bright, as President of the Board of Trade, had stated in the House of Commons, that he regarded 'these subjects as about the most difficult and ... about the least advantageous, to which any party can devote itself'. Ruskin countered that he could 'assure Mr. Bright that people who know what life means, can sustain the calamity of the inspection of their weights and measures with fortitude'.<sup>104</sup> With the British economy shifting away from primary industry and towards diversification through lighter manufacturing, retail distribution and professional services, such issues of quality control were becoming relevant to expanding urban populations.<sup>105</sup>

## VI.

People in society do not, of course, live happily ever after as they do in children's tales. A desire to experience general conditions of stability however, is an ongoing preference in well-functioning communities. Ruskin's concerns about environment and economics were, ironically, taking him somewhat in the direction of J.S. Mill, his long-time utilitarian adversary.<sup>106</sup> Both men embraced a preference for what Mill termed 'the stationary state'.<sup>107</sup> If they disagreed about the meaning of 'liberty' and 'individualism' and 'democracy' as political indices

100. Lambert 1963, pp. 174–5.

101. *Works*, 27, p. 195. See also Hewison 1996, pp. 42–5.

102. *Works*, 8, p. 233.

103. *Works*, 28, p. 651; 27, p. 16.

104. *Works*, 28, pp. 16–18.

105. See Young 1953, p. 159; Wilson 1969, pp.178–200; Robson 1976.

106. See Henderson 2000, pp. 107–24; Robson 1976, pp. 83–5.

107. Mill 1965 Bk. IV, Ch. 6; *Works*, 17, p. 110. See also, Ryan 1974, Ch. 6.

of the good life, they agreed that the means of seeking out talent for authoritative leadership was an important political consideration in fostering healthy populations. Mill's 'stationary state' and Ruskin's social blueprint set out in *Time and Tide*, suggest that the prudent society will entertain ideas of sustainability, simplicity and worker protection and place limits on economic growth. In the interests of such stability and more equitable distribution of benefits, neither Ruskin or Mill were reluctant to embrace modest eugenic-sounding proposals, Mill retaining an appreciation for the darker vision of Malthus on the question of the mechanics of population growth and decline. J.A. Hobson felt that this 'static' quality in Ruskin's political economy was overstated in favour of a too uniform vision of an ideal rural society.<sup>108</sup>

Under current arrangements, Ruskin felt that political and community leadership was too markedly disposed in favour of vested industrial interests. This disposition would not be altered by fixing attention on extension of the democratic vote. Ruskin and Carlyle held up the 'captain of industry' as a better ideal type of authority, even if both strongly decried the quality of contemporary performances owing to the current rules of political economy. British experience indicated to them that the typical British capitalist was little more than a buccaneer, having been educated according to faulty moral principles and a false understanding of science. The modern capitalist was, as a rule, the last type to be recommended.<sup>109</sup>

This reluctant ideal of the 'captain of industry' notwithstanding, by the 1870s Ruskin had concluded that the current procedures of capitalism were based on 'occult theft'. The scope of this criminality was not merely local in incidence, but extended into international relations, particularly through warfare.<sup>110</sup> Despite this dark view, he did not call for rejection of the free enterprise model, only the modification of its scope through law and regulations imposing greater conditionality. Aristocrats in his new order, for example, would be put on fixed wages, for their 'income must in no wise be derived from the rents of land'. To improve marketplace operations, Ruskin urged two types of reform: (1) legislation concerning monetary matters, land tenure and standards relating to production of consumable items; and (2) legislation to enhance the bargaining power of various groups in society by granting enhanced rights of association. In the first group, there are intimations of centralised monetary governance along with notions of formal quality control in industrial production.<sup>111</sup>

108. In addition to *Time and Tide*, see Ruskin's 1882 address to the Metaphysical Society: 'Social Policy Based on Natural Selection', *Works*, 16, pp. 164\_6. On Mill, see Ryan 1974, pp. 166–69; on the limiting nature of Ruskin's social model, see Hobson 1898, p.105. On the eugenics question, see Morton 1984, Ch. 5.

109. *Works*, 18, p. 389; 27, p. 127; Carlyle 1965, pp. 147–55.

110. *Works*, 27, p. 127; 17, pp. 103–4, 142; 18, p. 368.

111. *Works*, 18, pp. 378, 439; 17, p. 33; 16, pp. 97–8, 179, 472.

## THE POLITICS OF THE GOLDEN RIVER



FIGURE 3. St. George's Museum. Walkley. c. 1890. Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. 30.

These ideas he put to the test by promoting a new type of group land ownership associated with what today might be called 'green' enterprise. The aims of the Guild of St. George had been regularly rehearsed in the 1870s in *Fors Clavigera*, his periodical letter 'To the Working Men of England'. While establishing the Guild, he found the legalities cumbersome, leading him to remark in 1879 that it is 'at present a peculiarity of British Law that while, for any selfish purpose, a company may acquire without difficulty, or dispute, any land they desire, the acquisition of land for any benevolent purpose is discouraged and encumbered with legal forms ...'<sup>112</sup> With the Guild being finally put on a legal foundation came efforts to implement some of the programme. This included the 'trade warrant' by which guild members would themselves become the guardians of quality standards and honest trade practices. Education was a necessary element. The libraries proposed for Guild adherents would stress the classics and items appropriate to education for education's sake and not merely 'for getting on'.<sup>113</sup> (Figure 3) When Carlyle first heard of the Guild he thought it 'utterly absurd' and refused to contribute to it. Ruskin carried on, telling a more sympathetic friend that, 'It is not to be *Communism*: quite the contrary. The old Feudal system applied to do good instead of evil – to save life instead of destroy ... as the system gets power, I hope to see it alter *laws* all over England.'<sup>114</sup>

112. *Works*, 30, p. 18.

113. *Works*, 17, pp. 384–6; 31, pp. xiii–xv.

114. Carlyle, in William Allingham's *Diary* (1907), cited in Cate 1982, p. 39, 228n; Ruskin to Cowper, 4 Aug. 1871, in Bradley 1964, p. 314.

The establishing documents for the Guild, along with the Vow that was to be signed by members, reflected his preoccupation with advancing simple rural industries, craft skills and recreations within the matrix of his reduced view of formal religion and embrace of natural law principles.<sup>115</sup> Clause V of the Creed, for example, recalls the sentimentality of *The King of the Golden River* and is in line with Ruskin's developing opposition to the practice of vivisection at Oxford.

I will not kill nor hurt any living creature needlessly, nor destroy any beautiful thing, but will strive to save and comfort all gentle life, and guard and perfect all natural beauty, upon the earth.<sup>116</sup>

Such were some of the ideas that Ruskin sought to impose upon his new Chivalric order of the well-intended, each member prepared to 'tithe' ten per cent of his or her wealth to the enterprise. Ruskin designated St. Francis of Assisi, who he greatly admired, as the Patron Saint of St. George's Bank.<sup>117</sup>

The Guild's failure to attract supporters from all classes was almost total. In 1884 the entire membership counted only 57 persons.<sup>118</sup> The organisation did gain lands and resources, however, and the details of these are outlined in the Master's Reports tabled between 1879 and 1885. Its achievements on the ground were modest, centred mainly in areas around Liverpool, Sheffield and the Isle of Man. (Figure 4) Yet, there was also acknowledgment that something radiated out from the institution in more than merely symbolic form. The pursuit of precision for the description of the Guild had ultimately produced a legal document in 1878, executed under the Companies Act (1867), issued by the Board of Trade.<sup>119</sup> This document was somewhat path-breaking with respect to future private or group efforts to conserve parklands, heritage districts and other special landscapes, by means of the attachment of conservation caveats or easements to specific parcels of land. Such documents have since become the stock in trade of such bodies as the National Trust, the Nature Conservancy and a host of other conservation-minded organisations around the world. Hobson noticed also that the main emphasis in Ruskin's guild proposal was on the enabling aspects, on facilitating the doing of something 'practical' by a limited group of citizens.<sup>120</sup>

Ruskin's Guild was clearly oriented towards the countryside more than urban areas. In the 1870s he urged, against the grain, that 'you must not have

115. *Works*, 28, pp. 419–20; 30, pp. 3–12; 45–59, 62.

116. *Works*, 28, p. 419; Cook 1911, 2, p. 478; Wilenski, p. 155.

117. *Works*, 27, p. 282 n.

118. *Works*, 30, p. 86. The dramatic side of the story has been well told in Hoare 2006, Chs. 8 and 13.

119. *Works*, 30, pp. 8–12. *The Master's Report for the Year 1885* was the last from the hand of Ruskin. *Works*, 30, pp. 93–99; For reviews of the history of Guild activities since Ruskin's death see Wardle and Quayle 1989, p. 198; Harris 1985; Barnes 1985.

120. See Hoose 1981; Lang 1999, pp. 27–9; Hobson, pp. 180–82.

## THE POLITICS OF THE GOLDEN RIVER

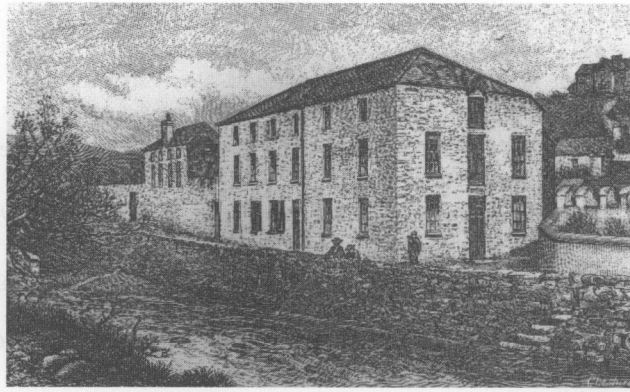


FIGURE 4. St. George's Mill, Laxey, Isle of Man. c. 1890. Ruskin, *Works*, Vol. 30.

large cities'.<sup>121</sup> Masterman was surely correct to note that the frontier of reform in the late nineteenth century was, in fact, the city and this was the main reason for the Guild's lack of success as a model. The failure was compounded, said Masterman, by Ruskin's 'extraordinary over-estimate of the possibilities of agriculture in this dismal, wind-swept northern isle of ours'.<sup>122</sup> Morris, Geddes, Howard, Walter Gropius and Frank Lloyd Wright all saw that much of Ruskin's economic critique had possibilities but none of them were interested in the severe retreat from modern technology that Ruskin's vision for the Guild embraced. The surviving papers and Master's Reports from the Guild are filled with discussion on what was and was not appropriate practice for members. For example, Ruskin was opposed to the use of modern sewing machines by associates of the Guild, for in his view they worked to erode knowledge of the traditions of sewing.<sup>123</sup>

Despite the limited performance of the Guild on the ground, its larger principles were in line with those of many welfare state proposals: universal education, pensions, limits on working hours, limits on the privileges of wealth, sanitation measures, institutions concerned with the condition of children and the poor, public cultural institutions and special conservation lands. Safeguarding the intricacies of the Victorian environment, in Carlyle's sense, was certainly one of those principles. His understanding of 'sustainability' did not have the implication it often has in more recent discussions, where theoretical modelling of resource consumption is dominant.<sup>124</sup> For Ruskin, reducing the impact of the 'human footprint' was as much a desirable state of mind as it was an object of public policy.

121. *Works*, 27, pp. 174–75.

122. Masterman 1920, pp. 52–3.

123. *Works*, 30, p. 306

124. Rogers 1994, pp. 1–3.

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## THE POLITICS OF THE GOLDEN RIVER

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