*This talk was delivered on 19th April 2024 in the Guild’s Ruskin Land, part of the Wyre Forest. The event was organised by Professor John Holmes of the University of Birmingham.*

**John Ruskin**

The focus of my paper is the interdisciplinarity of Ruskin’s work, and how the underlying principles of his social engagement align with contemporary thought. Of course, ‘interdisciplinarity’ is not a word that Ruskin ever heard. But it’s a concept that he was very familiar with, and in fact it is one that he championed throughout his long career. The roots of his refusal to compartmentalise knowledge, creativity, ethical values or practical reforming initiatives lie deep in his early years, and they define the originality of his cultural presence.

In reflecting on where that originality comes from, it is worth noting how unusual his intellectual formation was for a boy of his class and generation. He was largely home-schooled, and though he came from an ambitious and well-to-do family he was not exposed to the customary emphasis on the classics that was the educational mark of a gentleman in the first half of the nineteenth century. Instead, he had a rigorous training in Biblical exegesis, delivered by his devoutly Evangelical mother, who hoped and expected that he would become a clergyman. One of the ways in which the teaching that Ruskin received as a small boy was exceptional was that it was delivered by a woman. But his education was by no means exclusively religious. A succession of seriously accomplished professional artists – Charles Runciman, Copley Fielding and notably James Duffield Harding – were employed as Ruskin’s drawing masters, and they developed his skill in drawing and painting. Alongside his copious output as a writer Ruskin never stopped producing a stream of fine pictures of buildings, skies and landscapes. I have often thought that if Ruskin had not become celebrated for different reasons he would be more fully acknowledged as a brilliantly innovative artist.

 I’ve said that Ruskin was home-schooled, but not all of his education took place at home. Because his Scottish father, John James Ruskin, took his son with him on his travels through Britain, he saw much more of the country as a child than would have been usual at the time. Later, the Ruskin family travelled extensively in France, Switzerland and Italy. These experiences inspired his lifelong engagement with architecture, for Ruskin saw many churches, cathedrals, great houses and castles on these journeys. But it also kindled his interest in the natural world – and particularly with geology, which was in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the scientific discipline that was beginning to overturn centuries-old assumptions about the formation, structure and history of the earth. Geology lay at the cutting edge of new thinking, and Ruskin never lost his sense of its fundamental importance.

Ruskin, like his parents, especially his father, was also an eager reader, with the giants of British Romanticism as the central figures on his literary enthusiasms – Scott, Byron, Wordsworth, Shelley. Ruskin began to write poetry himself as a child, and his work as a poet continued to be important to him until his early twenties. Winning the Newdigate Prize for poetry at Oxford was a high point in his career as a student. And yet art, literature, architecture, landscape and science were not the weightiest influences on his developing mind as a young man. Underlying all his interests, and all his diverse forms of creativity, lay his committed Evangelical faith. Like many of his contemporaries, Ruskin lost that faith as he approached middle age, and left his fervent Evangelicalism behind. But he never lost the values that his early religious training had imprinted so deeply on his mind – the legacy of his mother, as his immersion in art and literature was the legacy of his father. He never lost his belief that moral responsibilities mattered more than worldly ambition, and that the welfare of humankind lay in a commitment to shared care for each other, and the natural world.

None of the influences that made up the rich texture of Ruskin’s mind were in themselves unique. His Romanticism, his Evangelicalism, and his growing interest in the natural sciences were all shared by many of his contemporaries. But the combination of those influences, and his steady refusal to allow divisions between his intellectual, moral, historical and scientific ideas, was, I would argue, what made his thinking so exceptional. The distinctive strands of Ruskin’s thought were in themselves remarkable, but it was the distinctive fusion of those interests into a body of argument and action made him a powerful force in nineteenth-century cultural and political life.

And I should underline the point that action mattered to Ruskin as much, if not more, as any kind of theoretical thought. Formed by Evangelicalism and Romanticism, he had unshakable faith in the power of the individual, but he knew he could not change the world alone. Though he was hardly a natural team player, he worked with others in a range of institutional contexts throughout his life – teaching at the Working Men’s College in London, helping to establish the Museum of Natural History in Oxford, founding a new School of Drawing at the University of Oxford when he became a Professor of Fine Art there in 1869, creating the Guild of St George to promote a new approach to arts, crafts and agriculture, supporting new institutions of higher education for women like Somerville College, or Whitelands College in London. These proliferating activities are a reflection of his wish to translate understanding into practical responsibility, so that his lectures, essays and books could move beyond the sphere of the single reader, or specific audience. He was not only a writer, he was also an activist, who wanted his work to make a difference.

 For many years after his death in 1900, Ruskin’s multiplicity made him seem an outlier – a moralistic polymath with little to contribute to an increasingly specialised world. In the twenty-first century, that picture began to change, as the causes that Ruskin had championed were increasingly recognised as crucial to collective well-being, and the vital connection between those causes became more and more apparent. Humanity’s relationship with the natural world is not separate from our ethical identity. An informed understanding of cultural history must inform our approach to scientific understanding. Our responsibility to each other must underpin economic policy. Nothing is separate. To give just one example, we might think of Ruskin’s passionate opposition to the formal endorsement of the practice of vivisection into the laboratories of the University of Oxford as among the ways in which his example now seems prescient. This was the issue that brought about Ruskin’s resignation from the university in 1884. Vivisection is now very carefully managed in modern laboratories, with due consideration of ethical issues around the status of animals as sentient beings. This was not the case in the mid-1880s, and Ruskin’s objections to the kind of unregulated vivisection that the university had decided to permit now looks like something other than the self-indulgent sentimentality than it was thought to be at the time. What had seemed a weakness, or eccentricity, in Ruskin’s thought now looks like a distinctive central strength.

 This strength is one that suggests numerous opportunities for turning to Ruskin as a template, or perhaps a platform, for building new initiatives. His complex body of work can point the way to making connections of the kind that can open new models of investigation and thought, as it did in his lifetime. And at this point perhaps I should add that I don’t want to suggest that this need necessarily involve years of study to familiarise yourself with the whole of his oeuvre – a daunting prospect, rewarding though such a course of study would be. Finding time to work through all that he thought and did, and all the consequences of his action in initiatives like his work on the foundation of the Museum of Natural History in Oxford, or the establishment of the Guild of St George, would form many people simply not be feasible. But that doesn’t mean that Ruskin’s work, or the legacies of his work, can’t continue to serve as a useful paradigm, either as a direct reference point or a more distanced model.

Anyone wishing to avail themselves of this model can do so in any way that works. Ruskin himself was no purist, when it came to what his work might achieve for those who came after him. And it is worth noting that Ruskin never claimed to be the authoritative origin of a specific method or system of thought. He was not a systematic thinker. He noted in *St Mark’s Rest,* a late work*,*  that ‘the only doctrine or system peculiar to me is the abhorrence of all that is doctrinal instead of demonstrable, and of all that is systematic instead of useful: so that *no true* disciple of mine will ever be a “Ruskinian”! – he will follow, not me, but the instincts of his own soul, and the guidance of its Creator.’

One of the many ways in which Ruskin’s work can contribute to the development of new projects lies in his polemical view of human responsibilities towards the natural world. It was during Ruskin’s lifetime that environmental questions were formulated that have still not found adequate answers – questions around conservation, pollution, climate, the economic exploitation of natural resources, our food system, transport, education. How can a sense of moral responsibility, to the environment and to the needs of others, translate themselves into practical action? How should we manage the land? In 1843, Thomas Carlyle reminded his readers, including Ruskin, that ‘Land is not the property of any generation … but that of all the past generations that have worked on it, and of all future ones that shall work on it.’ Ruskin agreed, and said as much in 1849, in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*: ‘God has lent us the earth for our life: it is a great entail.’ And he had much to say about the ways in which people might look after the loan – with, for instance, ‘such help of force as they may find in wind and wave’, and with the work of their own hands – weaving, planting, harvesting. Ruskin could be described as ‘Green’, in political terms, though he would not have signed up to every clause in the Green Party’s agenda.

What he does encourage is a clear-eyed scrutiny of orthodox models for economic growth. What are we growing? Is it worth growing? In *Fors Clavigera*, we find an account of public benches at Kirkby Lonsdale, decorated with metalwork in the form of stylised serpents. ‘Observe the method and circumstance of their manufacture. You dig a pit for ironstone, and heap a mass of refuse on fruitful land; you blacken your God-given sky, and consume your God-given fuel, to melt the iron; you bind your labourer to the Egyptian toil of its castings and forgings; then, to refine his mind you send him to study Raphael at Kensington; and with all this cost, filth, time, and misery, you at last produce—the devil’s tail for your sustenance, instead of an honest three-legged stool.’ We might not worry about the embellishment of public benches now, but the point stands – what are we doing with the world’s irreplaceable resources? Ruskin remains a powerful voice among those who insist that we think seriously about these questions, and continue to seek creative and responsible answers for ourselves and those who will come after us.

Dinah Birch

May 2024