

# Ruskin and his Victorian readers

Dinah Birch

Throughout his long writing life, John Ruskin did not lack for readers. From the moment that he published the first volume of *Modern Painters* in 1843, as an ambitious and precociously confident 24-year-old, he was acknowledged as an author to be reckoned with. But the nature of his publications, and of his readership, had changed radically by the time the final part of his autobiographical memoir, *Praeterita*, appeared in 1889. His writing had always challenged the conventional parameters of literary genre. *Modern Painters* had its beginnings in Ruskin's wish to celebrate the paintings of J. M. W. Turner and his fellow landscape artists, demonstrating (as Ruskin explained in an earnest subtitle) 'Their Superiority on the Art of Landscape Painting to all the Ancient Masters, proved by example of the True, the Beautiful and the Intellectual, from the Works of Modern Artists, especially those of J. M. W. Turner, Esq., R.A.' *Modern Painters* soon outgrew its polemical origins, becoming a monumental five-volume study of landscape art, aesthetics, cultural politics, natural history, and much else besides, published over a period of 17 years. The third volume, published in 1856, was subtitled 'Of Many Things', as Ruskin wryly conceded the runaway expansion of the interests reflected in what had begun as a work in defence of a new generation of painters. His recurrent attempts to discipline the proliferation of his ideas, observations and admonitions into a structured framework were never wholly successful.

*Modern Painters*, a profoundly Romantic work, became a Victorian reflection of the impulse that had led to Wordsworth's *Prelude* (begun in 1798, and posthumously published in 1850), Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria* (1817) or even De Quincey's *Confessions of an English Opium-Eater* (1821). It was a version of what Wordsworth described as the 'The Growth of a Poet's Mind', shared with the reader as an exercise in spiritual and aesthetic autobiography. The epigraph to each volume, drawn from Wordsworth's *The Excursion* (1814), is a justification of what Ruskin understood to be the authority of his writing, rooted in the divinity of nature and truth, and distinct from solipsistic self-indulgence. The Wordsworthian reference assured his aspirational readers that they were not simply entertaining themselves with an opinionated book about painting, but acquiring a moral education. Ruskin had won the Newdigate Prize for Poetry as a twenty-year-old undergraduate at the University of Oxford in 1839, receiving the prize from Wordsworth's own hands. Four years later, in the year in which Ruskin began his career as a published author, Wordsworth became Poet Laureate. No longer the stubbornly radical poet he had been in his youth, he was a 73-year-old emblem of a decorous approach to literature. Ruskin's epigraph borrows Wordsworth's cultural weight:

Accuse me not  
Of arrogance,

If, having walked with Nature,  
 And offered, far as frailty would allow,  
 My heart a daily sacrifice to Truth,  
 I now affirm of Nature and of Truth,  
 Whom I have served, that their Divinity  
 Revolts, offended at the ways of men,  
 Philosophers, who, though the human soul  
 Be of a thousand faculties composed,  
 And twice ten thousand interests, do yet prize  
 This soul, and the transcendent universe,  
 No more than as a mirror that reflects  
 To proud Self-love her own intelligence.<sup>1</sup>

From the first, Ruskin's principles of composition were primarily associative, building argument and instruction from a fertile network of connections – 'twice ten thousand interests' – that crossed diverse fields of knowledge, and were often intensely personal. As a young man, his thought was formed by his boyhood experiences of evangelicalism, notably in the form of the numerous sermons he had heard in the chapels and churches of South London, and by the literature that his father had encouraged him to read – especially the poetry of Wordsworth and Byron, and the fiction of Walter Scott. These were the seminal influences that shaped his responses to an ever-expanding range of books, pictures and places, as he continued his rigorous programme of travel and self-improvement throughout his twenties and thirties. Architecture and history were absorbed into this growing range of reference. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, published in 1849 while *Modern Painters* was still under way, was an ardently Protestant celebration of a Gothic school of architecture. It was exceptional among Ruskin's works in the simplicity of its structure, considering the history and purpose of architectural practice from the perspective of what he saw as their underlying ethical and religious principles – beauty, truth, sacrifice, power, life, obedience, and memory. A chapter was devoted to each of these principles. *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* was followed by *The Stones of Venice*, the second major work of this phase of Ruskin's career, published in three volumes in 1851 and 1853. The product of months of patient study in Venice, a city he had first come to know in a series of visits with his family, *The Stones of Venice* provides its readers with a formidable body of information and interpretive comment on churches, palaces, and domestic buildings, alongside extended disquisitions on the political and religious context of their construction, and their wider significance in relation to European history. This is a work that makes unflinchingly heavy demands on its readers, calling for a level of commitment that few at the time, or perhaps since, were able to make.

<sup>1</sup> Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (eds), *The Works of John Ruskin*, London: George Allen / New York: Longman, Green, and Co, 1903–12, 39 vols; III, 9. See William Wordsworth, *The Poetical Works of William Wordsworth*, 5 vols, ed. Ernest de Selincourt and Helen Darbishire, Oxford: Clarendon, 1949–63; V, 140. Ruskin has slightly abbreviated the passage.

Much of *The Stones of Venice* is, like *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, organised according to an overarching plan. But its polemical drive, like that of *Modern Painters*, proved hard to contain within its structure. Still confident in the Protestant values that had inspired *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, Ruskin insists that his readers should recognise the moral imperatives arising from his architectural analysis, caught up as they were in what Ruskin had come to see as a calamitously mechanised version of rampant capitalism. The Gothic architecture that he praises as the glory of Venice was not simply a matter of a handsome architectural style, to be studied as a testament to the magnificence of the past, but an expression of what Ruskin understood to be a living model of the free and creative responsibility that his contemporaries had lost. 'The Nature of Gothic', published as a chapter in the second volume of the work, includes an impassioned attack on an industrialised approach to labour and design:

And now, reader, look round this English room of yours, about which you have been proud so often, because the work of it was so good and strong, and the ornaments of it so finished. Examine again all those accurate mouldings, and perfect polishings, and unerring adjustments of the seasoned wood and tempered steel. Many a time you have exulted over them, and thought how great England was, because her slightest work was done so thoroughly. Alas! if read rightly, these perfectnesses are signs of a slavery in our England a thousand times more bitter and more degrading than that of the scourged African, or helot Greek. Men may be beaten, chained, tormented, yoked like cattle, slaughtered like summer flies, and yet remain in one sense, and the best sense, free. But to smother their souls with them, to blight and hew into rotting pollards the suckling branches of their human intelligence, to make the flesh and skin which, after the worm's work on it, is to see God, into leathern thongs to yoke machinery with, – this is to be slave-masters indeed; and there might be more freedom in England, though her feudal lords' lightest words were worth men's lives, and though the blood of the vexed husbandman dropped in the furrows of her fields, than there is while the animation of her multitudes is sent like fuel to feed the factory smoke, and the strength of them is given daily to be wasted into the fineness of a web, or racked into the exactness of a line.<sup>2</sup>

If the achievement of Venetian Gothic was, as Ruskin proclaimed, the expression of a free Protestant aesthetic, then the mechanistic search for regulated perfection that he saw as the first characteristic of Victorian manufacture was an assault on the essential freedom of its subjugated workers. The challenge to the reader is direct, and the instruction specific. 'Look round' ... 'examine again' ... Here is a call based on the interpretation of text – the perfectnesses of the room must be read rightly, and Ruskin has the authority to guide his readers to do just that. The primary strategy is, as it is in much of Ruskin's work, that of the sermon.

<sup>2</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, X, 193.

Who were the readers that Ruskin hoped to reach with the exhortations of *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, or the polemical observations of *Modern Painters*? Their first qualification would have been some degree of affluence. These books were by no means cheap. Their costs of publication were high, and had been subsidised by Ruskin's wealthy wine merchant father. A hypothetical Ruskin enthusiast buying the five volumes of *Modern Painters* as they appeared would have spent £8 0s 6p; and *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* would have added a guinea to the bill. The three volumes of *The Stones of Venice* would have cost £5 15s 6p, plus an additional three guineas for the three parts of concurrently published *Examples of the Architecture of Venice*. The entire outlay would have amounted to £17 19s. That was a very substantial sum in the mid-nineteenth century, out of reach for all but the prosperous.<sup>3</sup> Ruskin assumes that he is writing for those who were doing well, financially speaking at least, in a deeply divided mid-Victorian society, at a time when the divisions between rich and poor were stark. His admonitions were aimed at the complacencies of the comfortable, not the ignorance of the needy. They assume that readers will share Ruskin's own commitment to self-education and social obligation, for Ruskin's characteristic voice was never that of an entertainer. His works were intensely serious, in the evangelical interpretation of that word, and his appeal is to the conscience of his readers. At the same time, his elaborately-worked prose and far-reaching range of cultural reference assumes a high level of education, together with an appetite for self-development. If Ruskin was a prophet, his intended audience was the increasingly wealthy and ambitious middle classes that had shaped his own identity.

In 1860, when its author was forty-one years old, *Modern Painters* at last reached its conclusion. This was not because Ruskin considered that the work was complete, nor could it ever have been complete. But he was conscious that his unfailingly devoted father, whose resources had made his work possible, was approaching the end of his life, and deserved to see the work in as finished a state as might be managed. This was a turning point in Ruskin's life, as he began to break free from the enduring influence of his parents. He had become restless with the publication model that had shaped his writing throughout his twenties and thirties, with its assumptions of a well-to-do and leisured readership investing in expensive and richly illustrated volumes designed to provide aesthetic and moral enlightenment. He wanted to reach a different audience, in a change of direction that required a new mode of writing. After the fifth and final volume of *Modern Painters* appeared in 1860, Ruskin began to publish a series of four essays on political economy, to be collected in volume form in 1862 as *Unto This Last*. His

<sup>3</sup> Income comparisons are notoriously complex and difficult, but as a point of general reference it is worth noting that Isabella Beeton's widely-read *Beeton's Book of Household Management*, London: S. O. Beeton, 1861, suggests that a housekeeper might earn £20-44 per annum, while a butler might earn £25-50 per annum (8). According to the Board of Trade, a male agricultural labourer would have earned, on average, approximately £28 10s for his year's work in 1860 (*British Labour Statistics: Historical Abstract 1886-1968*; Department of Employment and Productivity, 1971).

chosen venue was the monthly *Cornhill Magazine*, founded in 1859 by Smith, Elder & Co, his own publishers, and edited by W. M. Thackeray.

The *Cornhill* had been established in part as a rival to Dickens's journal *All the Year Round*, also launched in 1859 as a successor to his popular *Household Words*. These illustrated journals were intended for the expanding middle classes, combining lively articles on a range of edifying subjects with serialised fiction. But their readers didn't need the level of disposable income required to buy Ruskin's earlier work. In 1860, an issue of the *Cornhill* cost a shilling – still a significant sum, given that some of its rivals sold for sixpence, but manageable for a family with a little extra money to spend on the expansion of their cultural horizons. Thackeray was a shrewd commissioning editor with an excellent eye for literary quality, and in its first year the *Cornhill* published work by Anthony Trollope, Thackeray himself, Thomas Hood, Alfred Tennyson, Emily and Charlotte Brontë (posthumously), Matthew Arnold, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning, alongside Ruskin's essays. Encouraged by the dynamic and enterprising George Smith, Thackeray drafted a pitch to prospective contributors that emphasised the intended diversity of the journal's audience. The readership of the *Cornhill*, he explained, would not be defined by 'rank, age, and sex', but would welcome 'a professor ever so learned, a curate in his country retirement, an artisan after work-hours, a school-master or mistress when the children have gone home ... a Geologist, Engineer, Manufacturer ... [,] Lawyer, Chemist – what you please'.<sup>4</sup> Thackeray's formula was spectacularly successful, and in its early years the monthly issues of the *Cornhill* were selling 110,000 copies – a prodigious number, representing a readership on quite a different scale to anything Ruskin had previously been able to reach.<sup>5</sup> In practice, most of its readers were city-dwellers rather than country curates, and many were buying the journal in railway station bookstalls, as they travelled to their businesses. This was not the audience of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*.

*Unto this Last*, four angry essays on the iniquities of mid-Victorian capitalism, was not altogether in tune with the expectations of the new *Cornhill* and its readers. It has often been claimed, not least by Ruskin himself, that Thackeray and Smith curtailed its publication on the grounds of the unfavourable reaction to its radical economics. Ruskin later recalled that the outcry became 'too strong for any editor to endure.'<sup>6</sup> In fact the reception of the essays was far from universally hostile,<sup>7</sup> particularly among the widely-read provincial press. In 1864, the circulation of the London weeklies stood at 2,263,000 per week, while the provincial weeklies

<sup>4</sup> W. M. Thackeray, 'A Letter from the Editor to a Friend and Contributor', Prospectus announcing the publication of *The Cornhill*, 1 November 1859. Cited in G. N. Ray ed., *The Letters and Private Papers of W. M. Thackeray*, 4 vols, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1943, 4, 160-162.

<sup>5</sup> Jenifer Glynn, *The Prince of Publishers: A Biography of the Great Victorian Publisher, George Smith*, London and New York: Allison & Busby, 1986, 126.

<sup>6</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XVII, 43.

<sup>7</sup> See Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Later Years*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000, 15.

were selling 3,907,000 copies per week.<sup>8</sup> In the later stages of his career, after the completion of *Modern Painters*, Ruskin's influence was often at its strongest beyond the cultural circles of the capital. In his comprehensive study of contemporary critical responses to *Unto this Last*, Daryl Lim concludes that 'Ruskin was not reprobated, scorned and crucified, even if his admirers – and Ruskin himself – saw what happened in that light.'<sup>9</sup> The *Westmorland Gazette*, to give one example among many, applauded Ruskin's 'strong, eloquent, iconoclastic essays', and his 'vigorous blows against the sordid idol of the political economists'.<sup>10</sup> It may be that Thackeray's editorial decision was motivated by the suspicion that Ruskin's unremittingly high-minded tone might be off-putting to his readers, rather than by any alarm generated by a hostile reception. The *Cornhill* was in part intended to educate and inform its readers, but the first purpose of the journal was to divert them, and to make money. Ruskin's writing was never designed to please, nor to make money – whatever his readership, at any point in his career. *Unto this Last* was not at home in Thackeray's *Cornhill*.

Ruskin was stung by the peremptory treatment of his papers in the *Cornhill*, and was later to speak bitterly of its readers – 'railroad born and bred'.<sup>11</sup> However, he continued his attempts to reach the burgeoning readership of mid-century literary magazines, and published six articles on the terminology of political economy and its relations with European literature in *Fraser's Magazine* in 1862–63. These were brilliant but difficult, opaque essays, and they made no concessions to any need to entertain *Fraser's* readers. Unsurprisingly, J. A. Froude, the magazine's editor, cut the series short. The essays did not appear in volume form, with the somewhat rebarbative title of *Munera Pulveris* ('Gifts of the Dust'), until 1872.<sup>12</sup> A series of papers published in *The Art Journal* in 1865, entitled *The Cestus of Aglaia*, also turned out to be an uncomfortable fit with the journal's style, and were never completed. These experiences did not amount to an encouraging start to Ruskin's attempts to find a new audience through the popularity of literary magazines. Simply put, the problem was that Ruskin was unwilling to adapt the purposes of his work to the demands of contemporary journalism. Nevertheless, he was not prepared to return to his former habits of writing. Instead, as the 1860s wore on he began to develop new means of communicating with his readers.

One of the most significant of these developments was his growing interest in the potential of the public lecture. He had made a cautious beginning in 1853,

<sup>8</sup> John Russell Vincent, *The Formation of the British Liberal Party, 1957-1868*, Brighton: Harvester Press, 1976, 59.

<sup>9</sup> Daryl Lim 'The Reception of John Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, 1860-2, Cambridge, unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, 2013. Cited with the permission of the author.

<sup>10</sup> *Westmorland Gazette*, 1 and 8 September, 1860.

<sup>11</sup> Ruskin made the remark in *Ariadne Florentina* (1876); see *Works of John Ruskin*, XXII, 469.

<sup>12</sup> The title is an allusion to the Latin poet Horace (*Odes*, 1, 28): 'Te maris et terrae numerique carentis arenae mensorem cohibent, Archyta / pulveris exigui prope litus parva matinium munera'. The lines are a lament for the dead Archytas, Greek philosopher and mathematician: 'Once you measured the sea and earth and the countless sand; now, Archytas, you are contained in the small gifts of a little dust by the Matin shore'. Ruskin's meaning is not wholly clear, but may be summarised as a warning against mistaking the deathful 'gifts of dust' for the genuine richness of the life he wants his readers to value.

when he delivered a course of four lectures in Edinburgh, on architectural construction and decoration, Turner and his works, and Pre-Raphaelitism – having first reassured his anxious father about the loss of social status that the work of a lecturer might imply: ‘I do not mean at any time to take up the trade of a lecturer ... all that I intend to do is merely, as if in conversation, to say to these people, who are ready to listen to me, some of the simple truths about architecture and painting which may perhaps be better put in conversational than literary form ... I shall assuredly have plenty to say, and shall say it in a gentlemanly way, if not fluently’.<sup>13</sup> The lectures proved to be hugely popular, and were published as *Lectures on Architecture and Painting* later that year. He practised the form, in a more informal context, in talks that he gave to his pupils at the Working Men’s College, where he taught from 1854 until 1862. Here he found an appreciative audience for the fluent movement of ideas and thought that often characterised his approach to lecturing. One of his pupils commented on these talks: ‘Formless and planless as they were, the effect on the hearers was immense. It was a wonderful bubbling up of all manner of glowing thoughts; for mere eloquence I never heard aught like it’.<sup>14</sup>

Lecturing was a new enterprise for Ruskin, but it was also a return to one of the most deeply-embedded of his cultural experiences – that of the sermon. His lectures, elucidating the significance of a text for his audience, persistently follow the conventions of the Protestant homily, though the chosen texts ranged far beyond the Bible, and were not always confined to words, as they had not been in *The Stones of Venice*. His lecture on ‘The Work of Iron’, delivered in Tunbridge Wells in 1857 and later published in *The Two Paths* (1859), which takes the ‘saffron stain’<sup>15</sup> deposited by iron in the basin of the Tunbridge Wells spring as its initial text, proved to be a seminal work in Ruskin’s changing relations with his readers.<sup>16</sup> His insistence on the responsibility of his readers to act in the face of social injustice remains at the core of his writing, but his call to arms is now communicated through a boldly developed metaphor, rather than descriptive analysis. Apathy, Ruskin asserts, is a kind of murder: ‘the choice given to every man born into this world is, simply, whether he will be a labourer or an assassin ... whosoever has not his hand on the Stilt of the plough, has it on the Hilt of the dagger.’<sup>17</sup> Demanding and provocative, ‘The Work of Iron’, and the lectures that followed, were designed to jolt his readers into questioning the grounds of their own social and economic success. Journalists need to please their editors and their readers; preachers have no such obligation.

After the mixed experience of his encounters with the *Cornhill* and *Fraser’s*, Ruskin established a new rhythm of work – delivering public lectures that were

<sup>13</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XII, 26-7.

<sup>14</sup> J. P. Emslie, ‘Recollections of Ruskin’, *Working Men’s College Journal*, Vol. 7, p.180; cited in Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years*, New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985, p. 205.

<sup>15</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XIII, 369.

<sup>16</sup> Nicholas Shrimpton notes that the lecture begins ‘a new era’ in Ruskin’s work in ‘Rust and Dust: Ruskin’s Pivotal Work’, *New Approaches to Ruskin: Thirteen Essays*, ed. Robert Hewison, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981, 60.

<sup>17</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, 406. A plough’s stilt is the shaft used to control the direction and depth of the furrow.

then grouped according to broad thematic topics, and published, by Smith Elder & Co., in volume form. This was the origin of his widely-read collections of the 1860s, including *Sesame and Lilies* (1865), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), and *The Queen of the Air* (1869). These were not cheap books, but they were affordable, and they sold well. *Sesame and Lilies* cost 3s 6d; *The Crown of Wild Olive* cost 5s; *The Queen of the Air* cost 6s. Ruskin was still writing for the middle classes, but no longer exclusively for its most affluent members.

Ruskin's published lectures were not, like those talks for the Working Men's College, formless and planless. But they did move from information to challenge in a distinctively self-assured style, engaging both audiences and readers with a directness and vigour that exercised a powerful appeal. The lengthy and heavily worked sentences of his earlier books gave way to a more straightforward syntax, digestible to a wider range of readers, and often with the texture and rhythms of the spoken word, as the personal connection of lecturer and audience echoed through the written text. His lecturing schedule gave him the opportunity to travel, and though he did not manage to 'give lectures in all the manufacturing towns'<sup>18</sup>, as in 1858 he declared that he would, he did see parts of Britain that he would never otherwise have encountered. His sense of the readers he hoped to move and persuade steadily enlarged, along with new ambitions for the practical actions that might flow from his writing.

In 1869, Ruskin acquired a formal role as a lecturer. He accepted what was to be his first and last paid job, as the inaugural Slade Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. This was not, as Ruskin saw it, a move towards becoming a professional academic, though the Oxford lectures he delivered and published through the 1870s were more formal in tone and composition than his texts of the 1860s, and more closely focused on art. He was, at least in the early days of his appointment, conscious of the duties of his post. But he also hoped that he could challenge the political and pedagogic orthodoxies of Oxford in ways that could influence the views of a generation of idealistic undergraduates, young men who might go on to change the values of the ruling classes. To some extent, he was successful. His lectures, together with the school of drawing he established in Oxford and high-profile activities like his road-building project in Ferry Hinksey, created a group of followers who carried versions of his thinking into their work as progressive social reformers. Ruskin was moving towards a model of communication in which a programme of action, alongside the spoken and written word, would be central. From his earliest beginnings as a writer, he had urged his readers to look beyond verbal text, turning instead to the meaning of clouds, leaves, mountains, oceans, pictures, buildings. One of Ruskin's innovations as a lecturer was his use of large and often dramatic illustrations to reinforce his rhetorical expertise, a technique that was perceived as startling in the conservatively-minded lecture halls of Oxford. His skills as a writer were exceptional, but for Ruskin eloquence had never been the real point of his work.

Letters were still more direct than published lectures as a means of connecting with readers. Ruskin was a copious letter-writer all his life long, and in the late 1860s this too became a channel for public communication. Among his

<sup>18</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XVI, xx.

correspondents was the pugnacious Thomas Dixon, a cork-cutter from Sunderland with a consuming interest in the relations between social classes. Ruskin wrote at length to Dixon, and asked that his letters, largely focussed on the need for self-determination and co-operation among working people, be sent for publication to newspapers. Dixon complied, and they appeared in publications such as the *Leeds Mercury* and the *Manchester Daily Examiner and Times* – characteristic of the provincial publications where Ruskin's polemic had previously found a sympathetic reception. Ruskin was writing in the midst of the 1867 controversy over the extension of the suffrage, and described the letters as an attempt, in the 'plainest terms I could use, the substance of what I then desired to say to our English workmen, which was briefly this: – "The reform you desire may give you more influence in Parliament; but your influence there will of course be useless to you, – perhaps worse than useless, until you have wisely made up your minds what you wish Parliament to do for you; and when you *have* made up your minds about that, you will find, not only that you can do it for yourselves, without the intervention of Parliament; but that eventually nobody *but* yourselves can do it." '19 In 1867, twenty-five of Ruskin's letters to Dixon were collected and published as *Time and Tide, by Weare and Tyne*. They were among the precursors of Ruskin's most sustained attempt to create a new kind of readership, when in 1871 he began to publish correspondence of a pioneering nature – *Fors Clavigera: Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain*.

The monthly letters of *Fors Clavigera* reflected Ruskin's wish to attract readers who would respond to his call for practical action. He began the series at around the time that he was finding his feet as an Oxford professor, and these two beginnings were not unconnected. His activities in the university were important to him, but he was often frustrated by the professional constraints of the role, and from the first he felt that it could not amount to the whole of his work. *Fors* begins with an account of the injustice and distress that Ruskin saw all around him:

For my own part, I will put up with this state of things, passively, not an hour longer. I am not an unselfish person, nor an Evangelical one; I have no particular pleasure in doing good; neither do I dislike doing it so much as to expect to be rewarded for it in another world. But I simply cannot paint, nor read, nor look at minerals, nor do anything else that I like, and the very light of the morning sky, when there is any – which is seldom, now-a-days, near London – has become hateful to me, because of the misery that I know of, and see signs of, where I know it not, which no imagination can interpret too bitterly.<sup>20</sup>

Like the Oxford lectures, *Fors Clavigera* was written alongside plans for practical action. Ruskin used the letters to announce the foundation of what he first called St George's Fund, and then St George's Company, the organisation that later became the Guild of St George, as part of his ambition to establish a 'National Store instead of a National Debt'. The company focussed its work on art education; craft work;

<sup>19</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XVII, 313.

<sup>20</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, 13.

and the rural economy. The letters of *Fors* became, among other things, the house journal for the Guild, and it evolved into something of an interactive publication, to use a word that would have been alien to Ruskin. In the second year of the series, the letters were published together with notes and correspondence from the Companions of the Guild, as they came to be known – and indeed are still known, for the Guild of St George is still an active organization, continuing the work that Ruskin began. He also experimented with innovatory visual dimensions to this work, as he had in his work as a lecturer in Oxford. In 1875, he began to offer a series of four ‘Lesson Photographs’, small albumen prints of ancient and Old Master works of art, available for his readers to buy at a manageable though not insignificant cost from his former Working Men’s College pupil William Ward. Commentaries were provided in the letters of *Fors Clavigera*.<sup>21</sup> Stephen Wildman argues that this enterprise might be seen as a pioneering form of ‘distance learning’, or an early equivalent of a lecturer talking to a series of slides.<sup>22</sup> Here too, Ruskin acknowledges that words alone could not carry the full force of his meaning.

At this point in his career, Ruskin severed connections with Smith, Elder & Co, his longstanding publishers. With the help of George Allen, a supporter who had once been Ruskin’s pupil at the Working Men’s College, he began to self-publish, selling his work directly to order. He told his readers that ‘I adopt this method of sale because I think authors ought not to be too proud to sell their own books, any more than painters to sell their own pictures.’ He decided that no advertisement was needed, as ‘no intelligent workman should pass a day without acquainting himself with the entirely original views contained in these pages.’<sup>23</sup> This business model, which was adopted for a number of Ruskin’s late works, was a long way from the crafted pages of *Modern Painters* and *The Stones of Venice*. It was never efficient, and it created a good deal of confusion and practical difficulty for his readers. Each *Fors* letter initially cost seven pence, and in 1874 Ruskin increased the price to ten pence. These were not trivial amounts for relatively slight pamphlets. The cost, together with the deeply personal and often challenging content of the letters, meant that sales were limited – 600 copies per issue, in the first twelve months. In the second year, there was a gradual increase, with monthly sales nearing one thousand copies. But George Allen and his competent daughter Grace, who did much of the work, were continually frustrated in their understandable wish to increase Ruskin’s readership. For Ruskin, efficiency and profit were not the point. The process of publishing was not a matter of business. He wanted his writing and his readers, to exemplify a different approach to publication and production. Words were empty if they did not change the thinking, and the lives, of those who absorbed them.

<sup>21</sup> William Ward, who had become Ruskin’s agent, lists the photographs as follows: Madonna, Filippo Lippi, 2s 6d; Madonna, Titian, 3s 6d; The Etruscan Leucothea, 1s 6d; Infanta Margaret, 3s 6d. *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, cviii.

<sup>22</sup> Stephen Wildman, ‘“Our Household Catalogue of Reference”: Ruskin’s Lesson Photographs of 1875-76’, in *John Ruskin and Nineteenth-Century Education*, ed. Valerie Purton, London: Anthem Press, 2018, 101-14, 101.

<sup>23</sup> *Works of John Ruskin*, XXVII, lxxxiii.

In the final phase of his career, Ruskin had become a controversial figure, removed from the cultural mainstream and often hostile to it. Who, at this point, were his readers? It must be acknowledged that no precise answer to this question can be provided. In her thoughtful analysis of the cultural and political context of Ruskin's writing in the 1870s, Judith Stoddart ruefully concedes the impossibility of identifying the exact nature of the readership of his political pamphlets, and particularly of those who read *Fors Clavigera*: 'The readers' letters included in the "Notes and Correspondence" appended to each fascicle – from clergy, middle-class women, industrial labourers, newspaper editors, economists – provide a ... selective picture of his audience. There is, in fact, no way of reconstructing at this distance who read Ruskin's letters.'<sup>24</sup> However, it is clear that his readership became increasingly mixed as it expanded through the later decades of his life. Many of his followers were women, who found his concepts of social justice and responsibility appealing, and warmed to his celebration of landscape painting, and of the natural world.<sup>25</sup> As Rachel Dickinson notes, 'in imposing twentieth- and twenty-first-century perspectives onto Ruskin, it is easy to overlook the empowering potential Ruskin offered to his female contemporaries.'<sup>26</sup> For different reasons, Ruskin became increasingly central to formal and informal programmes of working-class education. The work of Lawrence Goldman confirms that 'the analysis of reading lists, syllabuses and memoirs written by both students and tutors demonstrates that Ruskin was both taught and read enthusiastically in very many working-class communities and by thousands of working-class students' from the 1880s until the First World War.<sup>27</sup> In another social context, the membership of the Ruskin Societies that had sprung up in large provincial cities, drawn primarily from the prosperous middle classes, steadily grew from the 1870s through to the end of the Victorian period, and often beyond. Here too Ruskin's influence was at its strongest outside London. Stuart Eagles was the first to describe the extensive influence of these societies: 'It was in the middle-class districts abutting the cotton mills of Manchester, the shipbuilding dockyards of Glasgow, the busy trading ports of Liverpool and Birkenhead, the steel forges of Sheffield, and the factories and engineering works of Birmingham, that enthusiasm for Ruskin first flourished.'<sup>28</sup> Some of Ruskin's new followers were reading fresh work as it appeared, while others returned to the work of his youth and middle age, increasingly available in reasonably priced editions, thanks to the persistence and acumen of George and Grace Allen. In addition, Ruskin had growing numbers of disciples overseas,

<sup>24</sup> Judith Stoddart, *Ruskin's Culture Wars: Fors Clavigera and the Crisis of Victorian Liberalism*, Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998, 14.

<sup>25</sup> For an analysis of Ruskin's popularity among women readers, see Dinah Birch, 'Ruskin's Womanly Mind', *Essays in Criticism*, 38:4, 1988, 308-324.

<sup>26</sup> Rachel Dickinson, 'Ruskin, Women and Power', *Persistent Ruskin*, eds. Keith Hanley and Brian Maidment, London and New York: Routledge, 2016, 53-65; 54.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Goldman, 'John Ruskin and the Working Classes in Mid-Victorian Britain', *Persistent Ruskin*, 15-31, 15; see also Goldman's 'John Ruskin, Oxford and the British Labour Movement', in Dinah Birch ed., *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 57-86.

<sup>28</sup> Stuart Eagles, *After Ruskin*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, 154.

particularly in America, who were often reading the pirated editions that were a source of vexation to him for decades.<sup>29</sup>

The number of these diverse readers continued to increase as age and mental illness gradually overtook Ruskin towards the end of his life, and the volume of his writing diminished. They were reading for widely different reasons – a wish for self-improvement or a desire for political and social change, an appetite to know more about art or architecture or history, or perhaps simple curiosity. What they read amounted to something more complex than a varied series of demanding texts. They were encountering a life; shifting, exasperating, often baffling; but always engaging, always generous, always enriching. Those who read Ruskin with determination and care, and think about what they have read, find themselves changed by the experience. That was true for his Victorian readers, and it remains true for us.

**Dinah Birch** CBE, BA, MA, DPhil, FRSA, FEA is Pro-Vice-Chancellor for Cultural Engagement and Professor of English Literature at the University of Liverpool. Her books include *Ruskin's Myths* (1988), *Ruskin on Turner* (1990), and *Our Victorian Education* (2008), and she has edited *Ruskin and the Dawn of the Modern* (1999), *Fors Clavigera* (2000), *Ruskin and Gender* (2002), *John Ruskin: Selected Writings* (2004) and the *Oxford Companion to English Literature* (7<sup>th</sup> edn, 2009). She has also published editions of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Cranford* (2011), Anthony Trollope's *Can You Forgive Her?* (2012) and *The Small House at Allington* (2015), and was a Man Booker prize judge in 2012. She is a regular broadcaster and contributor to the *Times Literary Supplement* and *London Review of Books*, and is President of the British Association for Victorian Studies.

dlbirch@liverpool.ac.uk



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

<sup>29</sup> Ruskin's 'missionary' (183) influence is charted in Keith Hanley, 'The Ruskin Diaspora', *Persistent Ruskin*, 179-196.