

John Ruskin: His Life and Works.

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6. Character and Influence of Author and Works.

John Ruskin, the world renowned critic of art, philosopher and reformer, was born in London, England, February 8, 1819. He was a Scotchman by birth, although his parents lived in England. His father was a successful and wealthy wine merchant, a lover of nature and art; His mother was a very strict and firm woman, possessing a loving and religious nature; although at times she was passionate and over-indulgent in the indulgence of her child, looking upon him as a "sacred trust, never a pleasure or fast time."

His surroundings were those of the city life, noted teachers, artists, reformers, and men of letters, all of whom accomplished and contributed something toward the development of English literature. His early training began in the home, with his mother's teaching, it being one of the marked features and influences in his learning and writing.

As a child he had a quiet disposition, and showed traces of fond love of study.

His father hoped to see his son first laureate. His mother's greatest desire was for him to enter into evangelistic

work; but this proposition was not heartily received by young Ruskin, and a copy of Rogers "Essay" quickly turned his attention toward art. Stoddard says of him,

"While yet a child, and long before his time,
Had he perceived the presence and the power
Of greatness."

He entered Christ College, Oxford, in 1836, as a gentleman commoner, taking his degree six years later. Here, through this excellent scholarship and a selection of English poetry, he won the Newdigate Prize in 1839. Up to this time, he had studied Latin, French and Greek, written some poetry, mastered several branches of science, and practiced art.

His friends and companions were found among the class of teachers and artists including Turner, Copley, Harding and Fielding. While at Oxford, he chose his vocation; and from that time we see him struggling forward as one of the world's greatest art heroes. At this time, Turner, the great artist, was exciting the world with his masterpieces, which proved to be

powerful influences in Ruskin's life and work, moulding lasting images in his memory. His first literary attempts were in the form of pamphlets and magazine articles.

His travels extended over the greater part of the continent, together with England and Scotland. It was while making various tours through Italy and Scotland that he gathered stores of information, by studying and sketching old cathedrals, abbeys, academies and natural scenery, to be used in later publications; making us realize and almost see the many pictures of life, and beauty, perceived by the trained mind and set forth by the talented artist. Mrs. Ritchie says "Ruskin should have been a novelist. When he chooses to describe a man or woman, there stands the figure before us; when he tells a story we live it."

His travels and education and the creative forces and impulses, furnishing material for his productions which, today, the world so highly prizes.

Ruskin's real life work began

when he wrote "Modern Painters," a work to vindicate the genius of Turner. It gives us the perfected and purified style of Ruskin, although designed to prove the superiority of modern landscape painters over the old ones. The last volume, published in 1861, contains principles of art and natural descriptions.

"The Stones of Venice," one of his greatest productions, treats of the life and history of Venice, her strength and downfall; the theme being the development of Gothic architecture over the domestic form. "The Seven Lamps of Architecture," contains seven novels, and teaches us that pure art is but religious and moral in its application. Besides these, his principal contributions to the nineteenth century, he has published works on "Political Economy," "Elements of Perspective" and "Sketching," "The House of Wild Olive," "Into the East," and "Sesame and Lilies."

Perhaps no man has been so much repaid and influenced by another as Ruskin by Carlyle. Both labored for the

same purpose, striving to reach the same end, but began from entirely different standpoints. Carlyle viewed men, the chaos and sins of city life, and urged people to be true, pure, and moral, while Ruskin glorified in nature in all her aspects, teaching them to follow nature as the only true principle in life.

We may characterize his works by saying they contained intellectual, moral, and spiritual teachings. All through his life he was active both in body and mind, and his writings have continued until within the last few years. His later life was spent at Brackenwood,

England, among the beautiful hills and dales surrounding Foxglove Lake, where he died January 20, 1900, and was laid to rest beneath a cluster of firs in a nearby churchyard.

Thus has passed from our midst one of the most worthy types of humanity, and a great art critic, of whom England can proudly boast of being his native land. As a reformer, he

will ever stand in the hearts of his countrymen as one who, reigns supreme. He is the greatest master of art England ever produced, causing its revival by bringing it before the public, and teaching its principles to down-trodden humanity, suffering and oppressed by inequalities and the cruel and harsh laws of the ruling class. By his far-reaching and influential works, he raised the standard of the common artist among the great artists of the world, thereby winning for himself a world-wide reputation as a reformer and critic. Were it not for Ruskin, art would now have been in the undeveloped condition of the eighteenth century; but with him, it is one of our most advanced sciences. He found art and artists despised by all mankind, and left them universally honored.

We should not only think of Ruskin as foremost of art critics, but also as an artist in words, applying this principle throughout his life in all undertakings.

His art works are very precise and impressive, some of the harsher spheres of nature standing out in bold relief, while to others he pays a most decided degree of attention and minute description, criticising artists for insufficient details.

No artist has ever presented us with such melodious, pathetic, and inspiring word-pictures as Ruskin. One of his great faults is that the images set forth are often too rich and typical for the average mind to appreciate, and he often becomes extravagant in the use of language, thereby directing more attention to the flow of language than to the teachings.

Up to the age of forty years, he was a reformer of art, but at that age there came an abrupt change; his future development being within the boundaries of social science. He did more than any other author to awaken in the public an interest in architecture, but did not possess a firm grasp of his attempted subject. He was the great reformer of the working class and his

motto was "sincerity." He stood to enable
 toil, and in beautiful language asks us to
 remember these injunctions, - that wisdom
 is a trust for the sake of ignorance,
 wealth for the sake of poverty, strength for
 the sake of weakness; that we are to bear
 our fellow's burdens, and open up the
 springs of happiness in the desert, because
 we are all followers of Christ Jesus.

He did everything within his power
 to elevate the sufferings of laborers, to lift
 toilers from their degradation, and
 spent the greater part of his fortune and
 income in reformations for the poor,
 working to put down wrongs without social
 up heavals, founding philanthropic societies
 and charities, exhibiting extreme adoration
 for the development in industrial
 communities, and reaping his rewards,
 through his accomplished purpose.

As an economic reformer and
 political economist he ranks foremost
 among our English authors. He was
 a firm believer in abolition of competition,
 public ownership and interest free money.

Ruskin's doctrine was that many of the class relations which arise between the rich and poor, were due to the misunderstanding of such terms as wealth and value, and gladly gave of his energy and thought to amend such problems by truth; his aim being ever toward the highest ideals, many of which he failed to accomplish. Strictly speaking, he may be more truly classed an individualist rather than a socialist. Many people do not know what the term rich implies; the wealth of a nation must be determined by the general welfare of the community, and not by individuals, who are the chief elements in bringing cruelty and desolation in lower classes.

He would have political and social schools established, at the cost of government, free to every citizen; manufactures providing for the production and sale of all the necessities of life; the government should train a person for his desired vocation, and provide work for him if he were out of employment; and furthermore he would

have comfortable houses provided for the aged and destitute.

We may criticise his socialistic movements on the ground that he took too much interest in, and provided too elaborately for the working class, thereby causing the degrading of them, his idea being to improve the condition of the workman was to better manhood.

His religious views were of the socialistic order, believing the only constant forms of religion was in useful work, faithful love, and charity, and always felt an earnest trust in the power of God. Truth and righteousness he laid down as the fundamental principles of all manhood and womanhood.

Beauty was indeed his doctrine, but he could see no beauty unless the things were true, good, and moral. We may style him the lover and interpreter of nature, advising artists to seek nature for all information, "selecting nothing, rejecting nothing, and scorning nothing." Although many of his productions

contain falsities. His diction is especially pure, rich and flowing and may be characterized by its beauty, simplicity, and directness. It is so perfect that we will acknowledge him as the master of English prose. As an art critic, we criticise him because he followed more the scientific method than the artistic, but in his writings he wholly subordinates facts to the artistic effect.

The world which the genius of Ruskin first flashed upon was far different from our world of today; the Renaissance completely overturned the religious world, and was hostile to Ruskin's belief. Wordsworth saw the same moral life in nature as Ruskin saw in art; Ruskin justified Wordsworth's views, and gave them to us in literature; he taught us to see, and opened our eyes to discern the beauty before us.

No writer of the nineteenth century has given us such important and lofty truths, or set a higher ideal of life for man kind, ascending through and elevating the standard of living among the poor and outcast.

No one who is a true lover of literature and art will deny that by the death of Ruskin, the nineteenth century lost one of her most remarkable personalities. When we reflect on the extent of his writings, subjects, deep convictions, originality, and picturesqueness, we can but think of him as a prose prophet, who founded his great literary contributions on the fundamental principles of life, nature, and art.

The life which he had was not an easy one, nor even were his surroundings very luxurious, yet, Ruskin never feared, and in his noble works we detect the beauty that otherwise would have remained unnoticed. He lived his faith as fully as did ever a human being; he was true to his aspirations, though they were high and sometimes were neither wise or consistent.

It is much to identify him with his native land and endear him forever in the hearts of her future generations.

Let us ever cherish the name and
 memory of our highest and noblest ideal,
 John Ruskin, and say with Longfellow,
 "O thou sculptor, fairer, fock!"

Take this lesson to thy heart, -
 What is best which which hath nearest;
 Shape from this thy work of art."