

John Ruskin as a Reformer

By

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I. Period.

Birth and Early Life.

- (a) Time and place.
- (b) Parentage.
- (c) Surroundings or environments.
- (d) His Educational Advantages.
- (e) Beginning of his literary taste and love of art.

II. Period.

Art.

- (a) Turner's influence on his writings; their character and aim.
- (b) His success as a writer.
- (c) Art Critic.
- (d) His travels.
- (e) His establishment of the "Working Man's College" - its aim, etc.
- (f) His success as a teacher.

III. Period.

Changing from Art to Ethics.

- (a) His acquaintance with Carlyle and Carlyle's influence upon him.
- (b) His growing tendency toward trying to solve socialistic problems

IV. Period.

Ruskin the Reformer (or Social Science)

- (a) Change in his writings.
- (b) Some of his ideas and various experiments by which he tried
To solve these socialistic problems.
- (c) His Government Reform plan.

Conclusions:-

- (a) What effect did his character, influence, art, writings, teachings and
experiments have on society?.

Books and Articles on Ruskin.

Vol.1.The life of John Kuskin by Collingwood.

Vol.11." " " " " " " "

Along article in the Review of Review, March 1900.

Sketch of his life and work by Pancoast.

John Ruskin as a Reformer.

1. Period of his early child-hood.

John Ruskin, one of the greatest men, sitting forth the highest ideas of our century, was born in the city of London, Feb. 8, 1819. Though born in a large city, he was not city bred. His parents were Scotch people. His Father was an upright and successful wine merchant, with an intense love of pictures and a decidedly religious bias. His mother a very pious, though severe woman, dedicated her son, before his birth, to the Christian ministry, and always regarding him as a sacred trust, she made his training her life mission.

Every detail of his education and early influence was the result of deliberate plans. His mother's over carefulness of him, seems to have taken away his childhood. She allowed him no toys, because she thought the best teacher a boy could have was personal experience-leaving him to find his own amusement and compelling him to think out things for himself. Until he was fourteen years old, she was his only educational guide-watching him constantly, punishing him severely if he cried, disobeyed, or fell, and though her affection for him was great, she never gave him any outward expression of maternal love. On Sunday she restricted him to reading of the "Bible," "Robinson Crusoe" and "Pilgrims Progress" The other days, he read from choice Scott, Homer and Byron. After his fourteenth year, tutors of the very best were engaged for his training, and at the age of eighteen, he went to Oxford and entered Christ church as a gentleman commoner. While there, he paid diligent heed to his studies.

Though the son of a wine-merchant, he was a born poet. Before entering his teens, he was writing descriptions in prose and verse of every scene, also illustrating them. His first book, "The Story of Miss Edgeworth" was

produced in his seventh year. At Oxford, in 1839, he carried off the Newdigate prize for English poetry.

11. Art Period.

The whole of Ruskin's after life and work, hangs almost entirely on the influence of Turner's pictures upon his mind during his days at Oxford. Seeing these pictures and reading the strongly worded condemnation of the artist in Blackwoods Magazine, by one who was not a qualified art critic, he attempted to defend Turner's work. This attempt led to the writing of one of his greatest works called "Modern Painters", the first volume of which appeared in 1840, four others soon following. Next came "The Stones of Venice," "Seven Lamps of Architecture," "Morning in Florence," and "Proserpina" which are some of the very best specimens of English Prose and have all been called forth by his venomous attack on those who undervalued Turner's pictures. These writings naturally called forth a great deal of criticism from most people but he was upheld in them by some of the best judges of literature such as Rogers, Tennyson and Carlyle. Nothing daunted, he continued his writings with great zeal, and in 1842, became "art critic," which position he held with undisputed right until 1860. While holding this position, he made strong friends and bitter enemies.

As "art critic," it was necessary that he should possess a wide and and unprejudiced knowledge. This and his many illnesses, necessitated a great deal of traveling. So during his life, he made numerous trips to Italy, Switzerland, Paris, Venice, etc. where he gained much knowledge of art.

As a writer, his style was so beautiful and his work-manship so perfect, that it has to be acknowledged that he is the greatest master of English Prose.

About this time, he made a brave attempt to redress some of the

social inequalities by founding a "Working Man's College." This was a step toward putting into practice, some of his doctrines-the improvement of the intellectual life of the working man. His object being, not to make artists, but to make working men better men, to develop their powers and feelings-in short, to educate them.

Mr. Ruskin took entire charge of the drawing classes of the Institution, giving his first lecture on Oct. 30, 1854. By January, the work had grown so that it was necessary for him to employ two assistants. If one will stop and think a moment, he will realize that this philanthropic labor was no easy task. Many of the pupils were very ignorant, others not over ambitious, and still others had to be coaxed to work and humored into perseverance. Such work has many difficulties and discouragements with but very little reward. How can those who say that Ruskin is sentimental and egotistical reconcile these statements with his intense devotion, week after week, year after year, to such labor.

As a teacher, he had unbounded success. Possessing "Personal magnetism", which is the attraction of a powerful intellect and intensely sympathetic nature, he exercised it to the highest degree over all with whom he came in contact. He was enthusiastic and devoted to his work, always ready to go to any trouble to help any man, woman or child. This made him simply adored by his pupils and insured him greater success. As a result of this experiment, Ruskin learned that the working men could be interested in art. The experience led him forward to broaden views of nature, art, the duties of philanthropic effort and social economy.

Turner's influence now gave way to the stronger influence of Carlyle
III. Change from Art to Ethics.

The political, social and economic writings of Carlyle were worshipped by

Ruskin. Thus his views early fell under the influence of the author of "Sartor Resartus," so that, at the age of forty, he wished that he could begin life anew on entirely different lines. Before this time, he was a writer of art- after this, art was secondary to ethics. Up to this age, he had been a believer in English Protestantism but now, he could not reconcile these beliefs with the facts of life, and so he constructed his own creed from its very foundation. He was too earnest to allow such a conversion to operate in faith alone, even though he did have to begin with himself. It annoyed him to know that people praised his books for their beautiful and picturesque writings, instead of obeying the teachings which he set forth in them. This caused him to withdraw "Modern Painters" and published some economic writings in which his motives could not be mistaken for in them he spoke nothing but the utmost practical truths.

Until forty years of age, he was a philanthropist, working heartily with others in a definite cause, hoping to amend the wrongs without a social upheaval, but while he was ever ready to make any personal sacrifice in the way of social and philanthropic experiment, and his interest in these questions was increasing, he became less sanguine about the value of such efforts as the "Working Men's College," and less ready to cooperate with others. He saw that a much more extensive work was necessary so he set himself to form a sketch for these repairs.

IV. Reform Period.

His writings became entirely of a socialistic, political and economic nature. In them he set forth the growing needs of the people, shows what have been and still are the causes of so much human suffering and want- why there is such a lack of morality. Then he sets forth various methods by which these problems may be solved. For fifteen years he had

pondered the cause of this poverty, crime and degradation and the conviction had grown upon him, that modern commercialism was at the root of it all. In other lands, other men were being led to the same conclusions by different paths, such as by the French communism, German socialism and Russian anarchy.

In his attack on commercialism and his analysis of its bad influence on all sections of society, he was very vigorous. His first encouragement in this came from the highest quarters such as Carlyle and Sir Arthur Helps; but it brought on again the old struggle with the newspapers. They united in saying the whole business was insane, though they could not doubt his sincerity when he laid down a tenth of his income as he had recommended his adherents to do. By the end of the year, he had set aside 7000 toward establishing a company to be called of "St. George" as representing at once England and agriculture. Sir Thomas D. Acland and Right Hon. W. Cowper Temple undertook the trusteeship of the fund. Subscriptions began coming in, so that at the end of three years 236 and 135 had been collected to add to Mr. Ruskin's 7000. A few acres of land was now given, and a start was made. Meanwhile, Mr. Ruskin practised what he preached. He did not preach renunciation; he was not pessimist, neither was he an optimist.

His disapproval of the relations existing between poverty and wealth is shown by his contemplation of the luxury possible to him after his father's death. In this revery, he enumerates the numerous luxuries he enjoys while hundreds around him are starving for bread. This wealth does not make him happy - the problem of the poor is continually on his mind. Thinking thus, he determines to distribute all this wealth, left to him by his father, among his relatives, poor people and public institutions. By doing this, he was simply carrying out one of his doctrines that, a man should not enjoy what he did not earn. By thus attempting to live out his creed, he made it

impossible to live without teaching, writing, or otherwise working.

He determined that the sons of aristocracy coming within range of his influence should know what work was. It would help them to dispose of the prevalent thought that manual labor was an easy thing and required no skill. It would also be healthy for them. So when he was Professor at Oxford, his road making expeditions were quiet as popular as his drawing classes. He learned of the navy and scavenger the arts of gutter-sweeping; then he organized, among his aristocratic pupils gutter sweeping gangs for St. Giles, London. These scavengers had to work eight hours a day so as to keep the gutters clean between the British Museum and Seven Dials. In these experiments, he was usually successful, because he ascertained and surmounted their difficulties before setting the task for others.

The public generally ridiculed these experiments as silly and ridicule but public opinion had little effect on him. The degradation and sufferings of the poor had sunk deep into his soul, and he was determined to see what could be done. He perceived that rent kept working men poor, so he set up as lodging house keeper in a London slum and tried to provide decent homes at a moderate rate.

After carrying on "Fors" for some time, his attention was called to the question of "usury". At first, he saw no great sin in "interest". He held that the "rights of capital" were visionary, and that the capital should belong to him who could handle it, in a perfect state of society. He thought the existing system no worse in this respect than in others, and his expectation of reform in the plan of investment went hand in hand with all the other good times to which he was looking forward. So he quietly accepted his rents, thinking it his business to be a good landlord and spend his

money generously. To carry out another plan, he and Miss Octoria Hill, one of his art pupils, who was a believer in his ideals of philanthropy, undertook to reclaim a small part of the lower class dwellings of London. At first, they were ridiculed, but by the noblest endeavor they succeeded, and set an example which has been followed in many of our towns with great results. They showed what a wise and kind landlord could do by caring for his tenants, giving them inhabitable dwellings, recreation grounds, a fixed tenure and requiring in turn only a moderate rent. Mr. Ruskin thus received five per cent in return for his capital, while other property holders received twelve per cent more.

When he began to write against rent and interests, there were plenty of critics to cite this and other investments as very inconsistent with his preaching. As it was no defence to say that he took less than other landlords, he was glad to part with the whole of it to Miss Hill.

During the time he had been performing these local reformatations, he was studying the professed leaders of political economy and was on the lookout for facts and thoughts. He now abandons writing and devotes himself to advocating the establishment of government, trade and society on a sounder and more righteous line. The cause of most evils, he thought, were to be traced to misconceptions of the meaning of such terms as wealth, value and political economy. He believed that if the truth of these things were known, a great difference would arise between the rich and the poor. Therefore he did his very best to teach the truth on these subjects. With this end in view, he wrote, in 1860, "Unto This Last" and published it in the Cornhill Magazines. The first two chapters were so violently criticized by its readers that the editor begged him to stop writing in that strain. The book, which is an attack upon political economy, declares that the so

called science is not political economy, but merchantile economy. Political economy should mean, the good of the whole community but the science called by that name makes the merchant rich regardless of others. Its chief doctrine seems to be, "buy in the cheapest market and sell in the dearest".

Ruskin says of the doctrine, "not in history is there anything so disgraceful as this modern idea of a commercial text, representing an available principle of national economy. Buy in the cheapest market? Yes, but what made your market cheap? Charcoal may be cheap among your roof timbers when your house and home has been made a ruin by fire. Bricks may be made cheap in your streets after an earthquake. But would you therefore say that fire and earthquake are national benefits because you can buy things cheap after this reign of havoc and destruction? And you can rest assured that behind it, if you could tear away the veil of commercialism, there would be seen some destructive fire of human joy or some earthquake of human happiness".

Again Ruskin maintains, we do not know what it means to be "rich" - we only know one side of the question. "Rich", being a relative word implies "poor". Under the existing conditions, everybody cannot be rich. If everybody had enough - and there is enough for all - there would be no reason for any poor or rich. "The art of making yourself rich, in the ordinary, merchantile, economic sense, is, therefore, equally and necessarily the art of keeping your neighbor poor". The true wealth of a nation is in the general well being of the mass of the people. It can in no way be a benefit to a nation to increase the riches of a few at the sacrifice of the common health, comfort or happiness. The work of the government of a nation is therefore to determine the noblest type of man possible, and to continually aim at maintaining the largest number of persons of that class.

Such were some of the conclusions contained in "Unto This Last" and

"Munera Pulveris"; The principles involved were so sweeping that commercial men and politicians were amazed, and wondered what he meant. So he summarized his practical suggestions in the perface of "Unto This Last".

1st- He would have training schools all over the country, established and maintained by the government, and under government discipline. To be free to every child born in this country and in them each should be taught (1) laws of health, (2) gentleness and justice, (3) the future vocation of the individual. 2nd- He would have government manufactures and workshops for the production and sale of every necessary of life and for the exercise of every useful art. Good material always used and proper wages always given. 3rd- Any person out of employment should be received at the nearest government school, where personal examinations should be held; then such work given as the person was fitted for. If ignorance be the cause of his lack of employment, he should be taught; if laziness, then give him the work which most men try to shirk, painful and degrading, but necessary- mining and other dangerous work. Allow due wages- deducting the cost of compulsion- these wages to be at the workman's command as soon as he comes to a sounder mind respecting the laws of employment. When sickness is the cause, the sick should be tended to. (4) For the aged destitute, comfortable homes should be provided; this provision carrying with it no disgrace to the receiver when the misfortune has not come through guilt.

These suggestions in 1900 appear quiet rational, but to the readers of 1860 they were a great shock.

Conclusions-

Ruskin has enjoyed renown, and felt the breath of high reputation in every possible form, in the highest possible perfection, and with the highest desert. "While young, he was famous. He has been one of the most abused and yet one of the most praised men of England, and that in all forms,-

critically, passionately, wisely and frantically- for his merits and his frailties.

Among all the leaders of literature, he has been the acknowledged leader. He has won the genuine admiration and affection of a large circle of friends who only partly understood him. He has devoted more than fifty of the best years of his life to the uplifting of the poor and the working class. His name and work will always be revised at Oxford. He has suffered from his own power as all men of his genius do. His life was a battle with adversities from beginning to end. He was often accused of egotism, because of the intensities of his own preceptions being so great, that it was difficult for him to receive any knowledge from others. His life has been spoilt by his continual attempts to substitute a Christianity of his own for the Church of England.

"Though he did not die till Jan. 20, 1900, his voice has been silent for some years. His real influence is greater now than ever- due to what he wrote and accomplished in his earlier years. They are better understood now than they were then. As is the nature of most men of genius, he had his full share of extravagances; but today they are being taken for what they are worth and the underlying truths of his teachings are being accepted. Orthodox art, literature, economy and religion have each been shaken in his powerful grasp and their respective professors dare not say what their departments are since Ruskin spoke. Government schools, public libraries, state workshops and polytechnics are common institutions today of which no one would deny the use; but John Ruskin was considerably laughed at in 1861 when he advocated them.

Though he repudiated socialism, his political economy was built upon such principles that much of the socialistic tendency of today is based

upon his economic teachings.

No writer of our generation has written more important truths or set a higher ideal of life for his fellow men than John Ruskin.

He has done his best to establish a kingdom of God- a kingdom to be seen in just government, honest commerce, noble labor, adherence to truth and righteous living.