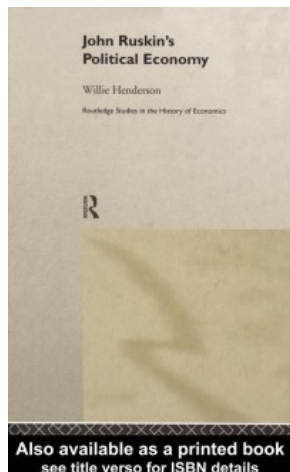


Cover



# JOHN RUSKIN'S POLITICAL ECONOMY

This volume offers an exciting new reading of John Ruskin's economic and social criticism, based on recent research into rhetoric in economics. Willie Henderson uses notions derived from literary criticism, the 'rhetorical turn in economics' and more conventional approaches to historical economic texts to re-evaluate Ruskin's economic and social criticism. By identifying Ruskin's rhetoric, and by reading his work through that of Plato, Xenophon and John Stuart Mill, Willie Henderson reveals how Ruskin manipulated a knowledge-base. Moreover, in his analysis of the writings of William Stuart, John Bates Clark and Alfred Marshall, the author shows that John Ruskin's influence on the cultural significance of economics and on notions of economic well-being has been considerable.

Far from being mad, Ruskin attempted a methodological/scientific critique of political economy. He fixed on ideas of 'natural laws', 'economic man' and the prevailing notion of 'value' to point out gaps and inconsistencies in the system of classical economics. Though he wrote vigorously against the idea of formal systems of thought, some of his work has implications for the future development of economic analysis. By linking the consumer directly with the product being valued, he hit upon ideas of value which have elements in common with Jevon's notion of marginal utility. He also took values into the heart of John Stuart Mill's scientific domain of 'production'. Harmony, for Ruskin, can only be achieved through the use of human reason guided by a sense of justice. Whilst he left no formal system of economic analysis, he had a huge impact on the ways in which economists, and wider society, began to move towards alternative policy and welfare contexts. Some of his ideas on individual economic responsibility, this book shows, speak to us directly today.

**Willie Henderson** is Deputy Head in the School of Continuing Studies, University of Birmingham. He is author of *Economics as Literature*, and co-editor of *Economics and Language*; both published by Routledge.

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Willie Henderson



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KITTY

*In memoriam*





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This book is dedicated, as I promised, to Kitty's memory.



## PREFACE

My motives for starting to write the book were mixed. Those for continuing with it had very little to do with anything that could be considered, in any direct sense at least, academic. The work focused my mind during a period of considerable distress and, no doubt, from time to time the confusion caused by this distress comes to the surface. I started the work with only a slight knowledge of Ruskin or, indeed, of the vast and impressive scholarly output devoted to evaluating his works. Ruskin is marginalized in the history of economic thought, so I can be excused.

As a newcomer to Ruskin criticism, I have been both encouraged and intimidated by the existing literature. Encouraged because it means that there is a readership interested in re-examining his ideas. Intimidated because of the high quality and extensive nature of the secondary field. I hope that in the pages which follow that I have adequately illustrated my indebtedness to the work of others. I am conscious that I have only scratched away at the surface of Ruskin's writing, overwhelmed by its sheer volume. I would have found this work difficult to research had it not been for the existence of *The Works of John Ruskin on CD-Rom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996). This has proven to be an excellent research tool. Profitable use had been made of the search function and dictionary. I am grateful to those who spent time in its compilation.

I came to Ruskin by a circuitous route. Whilst working on a series of essays on marginalized nineteenth-century economics texts, a chance conversation with the economic historian Peter Cain led to the suggestion that I add Ruskin to the list of writers. This I did, and the longer-term outcome has been this book-length work on Ruskin's Political Economy. My interest developed from a consideration of the rhetoric of economics. This is a field which was opened for theoretical discussion by Deirdre McCloskey. Within this field I have been concerned with the role of metaphor and language development and use in economics. Latterly this led to applying rhetorical and other textual analyses to marginalized texts in the history of economic

thought where I have attempted to integrate economic and rhetorical understanding.

So I did not come to a study of Ruskin via the secondary literature on him but via the rhetoric of economics. This concern has marked the essays in this book although not quite in the manner that I had originally intended. My original intention was to attempt a series of essays which supplied alternative frames to the same material in Ruskin. This intention turned out to be too ambitious. The idea of different frames still holds in what follows: each of the main chapters provides a different way of looking at Ruskin. However, the cumulative purpose of a more conventional book wins out. I have attempted to move Ruskin closer to his audience but also closer to established economics or quasi-economics writing. It was only towards the end of the writing that I realized, after reading Judith Still's work on *Feminine Economies*, that, in moving Ruskin's texts closer to other economics texts, I was dealing not simply with economic knowledge claims but, more especially, with the representation of economic knowledge. Ruskin appears to me now to be struggling with representational issues as well as methodological and policy issues. This, no doubt, ought to have been obvious to me from the outset for it is the stuff of rhetoric. But it was not. I am happy that there is enough both of the idea of various frames and the idea of economic knowledge, including its rhetorical and cultural significance, to feel that something that is different from what others have achieved is presented. The intertextual analyses adds to the existing literature and the inclusion of some mainstream economists provides a new frame for reading forwards from and backward to Ruskin's works.

Although Ruskin has not been approached in what follows through the established critical literature, that literature has been extensively consulted. I have been impressed, in particular, by those scholars who have had the courage to look beyond conventional judgements on Ruskin's political economy and who have been prepared to undertake archaeological work to reveal a potential knowledge base. Critical and non-prejudicial reading which looks to Ruskin's sense rather than his madness, is essential. Without being too kind to Ruskin, I feel that I have discovered in Ruskin methodological issues and analytical insights relevant to the longer-term development of economic understanding. This is so for his discussion of economic science, ethics and poverty. I hope that I have also demonstrated, to historians of economic thought, for it does not need to be demonstrated to literary historians, that nineteenth-century economics texts can be interrogated successfully by methods of rhetorical analysis and literary criticism as well as by more conventional methods. Ruskin saw the cultural significance of economic thinking and attempted a broad-based critique of it. Ruskin's political economy is interesting not because he developed

significant tools of economic analysis but because he worked on ideas that were suggestive of the possibility of such tools. The exploration, however flawed, of Ruskin's economics rhetoric set out in what follows, presents, I hope, some surprises. The connections explored in the final two chapters are, in this sense, interesting.





# 1

## REASON, RHETORIC AND JOHN RUSKIN

### Ruskin's popularity and readership

Kenneth Clark, who re-established Ruskin's reputation in the 1960s, argues that, in the whole second half of the nineteenth century 'he was accepted by all thoughtful people as one of the impregnable figures in English literature' (Clark 1964: xi). This is a very comforting notion of Ruskin's reputation though it does not correspond to Ruskin's own view of his standing. In the middle of the period to which Clark is referring, Ruskin reacted to the evaluation of his many critics whom, he felt, complained of the 'effeminate sentimentality of Ruskin' (*Fors Clavigera*, C&W, 28: 21). Even if 'all thoughtful people' were to be narrowly defined, Ruskin was subjected also to recurrent criticism and satirical abuse.

Ruskin's first commercial success was *Sesame and Lilies*, an elegant, persuasive and gendered approach to cultural and social values, which proved to be popular with female readers. Other writings from the 1860s were either only just successful, such as *The Crown of Wild Olives* which received critical reviews, or complete failures at the time, such as *Ethics of the Dust* (seen by Quentin Bell as his 'worst book') and *Unto This Last*, his first major work of economic criticism. *Munera Pulveris*, an attempt at a systematic, socially-oriented, political economy based upon Ruskinian definitions of key economic notions, can be described as an enduring flop. *Fors Clavigera*, a major work of social comment, started in 1871 to 'quiet' his conscience and to 'rightly help others', was seen, and has been seen frequently and inappropriately since, as rambling evidence of mental instability (*Fors*, C&W, 28: 485). The *Spectator* of October 7, 1871 complained of its 'watery and rambling verbiage' and 'silly and violent language' (Intro., *Fors*, C&W, 27: xxii). The influential critic, Leslie Stephens, an admirer of J. S. Mill, came out very strongly against the early letters. This is a judgement that he maintained, writing of Ruskin's 'incapacity', in *Fors Clavigera*, 'for consecutive writing' (quoted in Bell 1978: 112).

Recent scholarship sees *Fors Clavigera* as a 'masterpiece' and as answering

the social incoherence promoted by libertarianism by developing alternative views of order, regulation and self-restraint (Hilton 1985: x; Stoddart 1992–3). The first letters of *Fors Clavigera* added to the off-beat reputation that he had earned in the 1860s upon publication of his works of social and economic criticism. Ruskin's popularity is a phenomenon of the late 1870s and after, when reappraisals of his work began to appear, even within formal economics discussion.

Perhaps a distinction is to be made between his general standing in terms of art criticism and literature and his standing with respect to the development of his political economy and social criticism. However, his *Modern Painters* (1843 and 1846), *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) and *The Stones of Venice* (1851, 1853), i.e. the works of the earlier part of his literary life, concerned with art and architectural criticism, were known, according to Maidment, only to a small and critical group of professionals. The first of his books to be noticed in *The Times* was the second volume of *The Stones of Venice* (Conner 1979: 106). These were his only 'true' books in the sense that they were 'written deliberately in volume form' (Maidment 1982: 31). Both price and topic placed them out of the reach of a general readership, whilst his first public lecture to a 'general audience' did not take place until 1853. Lecturing slowly grew in significance from then on, becoming the focus for the development of essays later pulled into book form such as *The Two Paths* and *A Joy for Ever* (first referred to as *The Political Economy of Art*) which were the product of lectures from 1856 to 1859 (Spear 1984: 129; Maidment 1982: 32). *Unto This Last*, his greatest work on economic criticism, sold only 800 copies between 1862 and 1873. His social thinking did gain followers in the late 1870s and 1880s with appreciations appearing in popular publications (Stoddart 1990: 5–6). But this was just as frequently abused on grounds of utopianism and impracticality, *Fors Clavigera* being a special target. And this is so even after the reappraisal of the late 1870s and early 1880s which saw not only the increased sale of many of his books but also the start of Ruskin Societies devoted to debating his reformist ideas.

His writings on political economy had caused him great pain in preparation and production. He had spent, at times, 'sleepless nights' trying to puzzle his way through problems of wealth and poverty. He eventually complained about his lack of support, especially from the Church (Collingwood 1900: 354). Ruskin's aim in these works had been to subvert the existing, and very well defended, social and economic morality which he saw as based upon a false and degrading image of human motivation. He hoped to replace it with a notion of economics and economics agency founded upon justice and a 'true' understanding of wealth. He wanted a wide audience, willing to act upon his views, not an audience of systematic experts. It may be thought that Ruskin, the amateur, found a professional basis for accessing such an audience when he became, in middle age, Slade

Professor of Fine Art at Oxford. He held this post twice (1870–8 and 1882–5) and claims to have left it, for the first time, not for reasons of health but because he was 'looked upon as a lively musical-box instead of a man who knew his science and his business' (*Arrows*, C&W, 34: 547). But if he were to gain acceptance for his version of social economics he needed, in the meantime to make dramatic use of this position.

What he wished for was nothing short of a radical transformation of economic behaviour and expectations, including that of policy-makers, and of political economy as a subject. Its practitioners, he held, were short of lexical and etymological understanding for they did not know '... the alphabet even of the science they profess' (letter to C. E. Norton, 18 August 1869). By January 1876 he begins 'to question very strictly with myself', asking how it is that St George's 'work does not prosper better in my hands' (*Fors*, C&W, 28: 485). (The iconography of St George will be considered below, p. 19.) This phrase captures Ruskin's sense of failure with respect to the development of a persuasive ethical economics capable of overcoming the miserable lot of the poor. His feeling of failure was such that, in his depression, it prevented him, during the writing of parts of *Fors Clavigera*, seeking escape in reading, drawing and geological pursuits. Ruskin societies, and the birthday greetings that they sent to Brantwood,<sup>1</sup> have been some consolation but, given his madness, especially after 1889, it is difficult to know what these could have meant to him.

His reputation has always been variable. He has tended to be seen as an isolated and eccentric amateur, a dilettante, whose emotionalism departed, 'from the norms of male discourse' and who suffered marginalization as a result (Birch 1988: 312). Only recently Ruskin's work has begun to shake off the notion of having merely an amateurish knowledge-base. Wilenski, writing in the 1930s, talks of his life as a life of 'play' and of 'self-indulgence' whilst also acknowledging his genius and social conscience (Wilenski 1933: x). Hilton writes of his work being subjected, then and since, to the 'dismissive prejudices of a period' (Hilton 1985: x). Amongst his most severe critics were those who felt that, in writing on social economics, Ruskin had blundered into a subject for which he had neither the temperament, experience nor patience. Economics, then and now, had a reputation for cold logic and systematic thinking, based, at least in the field now known as micro-economics, upon a set of axioms derived from a simple set of premises. To the economically informed, Ruskin's prose seemed chaotic and 'feminine' when compared to the clarity and 'masculinity' of Mill's (Birch 1988).

Ruskin's reputation for sound ideas are somehow influenced by the economic conditions and assumptions of the particular period: 'in' when the market has clearly failed, as in the financial crash of the early 1870s or in the 1930s when Wilenski was writing, and otherwise 'out'. In trying to understand Ruskin's text today, the contexts and expectations which

readers bring are key. In terms of the environment and the development of towns, there is currently a growing awareness that Ruskin's work is informed by a solid knowledge basis (Wheeler 1995: 6). Furthermore, *The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century*, for example, can now be understood, given global warming, as a work of major significance. How his texts are framed changes their meaning. If his social criticism is read in the context of the impoverishment of Central America or sub-Saharan Africa, his treatment of poverty and wealth become very relevant. It is time, given that Thatcherite, market-led solutions are being re-examined in a period of Hegelian synthesis inaugurated by New Labour, for his contribution to the development of economic ideas to be reconsidered.

The essays here will concentrate upon a few texts which will be detached from his whole output and moved closer to economically informed writing by other authors. As Ruskin's economics will therefore be separated from his whole corpus, this chapter will provide, as a point of departure, an overview of the integrated nature of his concerns.

Ruskin's life and works are not well known to those interested in the development of economic thinking and there is some merit, and some danger, in considering his biography and its relationship with his economic criticism. And, since his aesthetics and rhetorical development together inform his economic criticism, it is worthwhile tracing out the links and moves that enable Ruskin to turn confidently from art to social criticism.

## **Ruskin according to Ruskin, and some others**

There are several sources for Ruskin according to Ruskin: his diaries, his letters, his fluid and loosely structured works, particularly *Fors Clavigera*, and his autobiography, *Praeterita*. The first two illustrate Ruskin in the ordinary business of life. They chart his journeys, his experiences, his reading, 'drawing, observing, geologising' and the development of his social conscience (Norton, quoted in Intro, C&W, 7: xxiii). Though self-regarding, he did not always keep a diary. However, when he was away from home it was his habit to write daily to his father. His journeys gave him the chance to observe (he had trained his eye since childhood) and to reflect on the economic circumstances of Alpine villagers or city-dwellers in places where industrialization had not yet touched, and so contrast conditions in urban England with those elsewhere.

The miserable conditions that he saw during his tour of 1848 aided his turn towards social criticism, initiated earlier during a visit to Lucca (see p. 15). In his letters, such as those to Charles Norton, Ruskin is often in full pursuit of the issues that dominated his thinking at the time. The few letters on the subject of political economy are full of forceful attacks and vehement argument and give an accurate sense of his radicalism. *Fors Clavigera*, a development of the letter-form that he had experimented with

in *Time and Tide*, is, according to Hilton, a better source for thinking about Ruskin's self-understanding than the carefully filtered autobiography *Praeterita*, for it shows Ruskin struggling with political, economic and cultural issues central to his maturity (Hilton 1985: x).

His autobiography is a problematic work for those wishing to reconstruct the Ruskin biography. He started writing it in 1885, when his reputation as 'the Prophet of Brantwood' had been established, and continued to do so, on and off, until 1889 when he was overwhelmed by the instability which had caused him problems intermittently from 1878. It has deeply marked the pursuit of the Ruskin biography as in the works of early biographers such as T. E. Cook. It is only with later scholarship, starting with Wilenski, then Viljoen, and pursued by Hilton and others, that its influence as a source for biographical reconstruction has been reduced. *Praeterita*, for all its directness, is, like any autobiography of worth, a work of literature as well as of personal history. It is a selective and controlled reflection upon past pleasures. In its efforts 'to present a humane and attractive personality' in the face of his mental condition, it is no less constructed than any of his other writings (Sawyer 1979–80: 28).

Ruskin, an only, and isolated, child, was born into a comfortable, pious, demanding and, occasionally, adventurous household on the 8 February 1819. He remained under its direct and indulgent influence for a period which stretched well beyond conventional adolescence. He honoured his father and mother. He reveals in *Fors Clavigera*, written late in life, that he never 'disobeyed his mother' (*Fors*, C&W, 28: 81). In the margins of his copy of Plato's *Laws*, which he translated in his maturity, he adds at the relevant sections, 'The law of duty to parents. Sublime' and 'The great passage on duty to parents' (Plato, *Nomoi*, pp. 116, 588). Such passages, public and private, show that his sense of family and of duty was profound.

Ruskin's mental health was delicate from the age of twenty-one (1840) when he suffered depression and symptoms of what was feared to be consumption, following a romantic infatuation for which his lonely childhood had not prepared him. The recovery process took nearly eighteen months. Norton's sense of Ruskin's life-long 'boyish gaiety of spirit', Cook's sense of 'Ruskin's cheerful talk and happy ways', and Furnivall's delight in his sympathetic nature, 'boyish fun' and his 'partly feminine' charm, should not be crowded out by the fact that he was often depressed (Cook 1911a: 231; Cook 1911b: 293). Ruskin could be good company.

Depression recurred in the years 1847, 1862–4, and during 1867, the year in which Ruskin first began to fear the possibility of insanity. Spells of intense work alternated with lethargic periods when he could not focus his energies. However, creativity and depression are often associated, and though Ruskin suffered, those engaged in challenging the cultural values of a generation often do. Think of philosophers such as Hume, Rousseau or Wittgenstein. Depression is sometimes a concomitant of creativity. But the

first devastating bout of insanity, the result of mental stress and, perhaps, genetic pre-disposition, did not occur until early in 1878 (Wilenski 1933: 22; Spear 1984: 81). The disturbances continued at intervals during the 1880s just as he was achieving a popularity that had eluded him in the earlier part of his life. After a very troubled and inactive decade, Ruskin died early in 1900.

*Praeterita* was started in January 1885 and published in parts during the years 1885–9. The last chapter was written, with great difficulty, in the summer of 1889 before a fifth attack of madness in the autumn of that year (Wilenski 1933: 24). Ruskin writes the autobiography to mull over life's pleasures and as a way of counterbalancing his instability. Painful events are excised from the writing, but not, of course, necessarily from his own mind or from those of, at least, some of his readers (Cockshut 1994: xxix). His marriage to Euphemia Chalmers Gray, which was annulled in 1854 on the grounds of lack of consummation, is not mentioned. Whatever the details of the marriage, which lasted nearly five years, it seems to have brought Ruskin some stability even if it did not bring fulfilment. Its dissolution had implications for his future: knowledge of his marital failure spoiled any chance of marrying Rose la Touch.

Ruskin's problematic emotional development is a fitting subject for a biographical project, for his emotional capacities informed his writing. This statement must be accepted, however, only with caution. Ruskin's texts are not of uniform style: *Praeterita* is, for example, substantially different in the characteristic way in which ideas are shaped when compared to the methods used in *Unto This Last* and both are different in their structural detail from the writing in the open-textured *Fors Clavigera*. Ruskin's style and ideas developed over his long productive life as time and taste altered. The self-aware Ruskin made significant rhetorical choices sometimes to meet earlier criticisms (Kacher 1974: 30). He attempted to match audience and mood, an ability enhanced in those works which grew out of public lectures, and is capable of sustaining an argument as well as of losing the thread.

Conner suggests that Ruskin invested paintings and buildings with human emotions almost as a substitute for his own lack of emotional success with real personalities (Conner 1979: xii). This identification is seen at its most morbid and most literal after the death, in May 1875, of Rose la Touch (also mentally ill) whose textual presence in *Praeterita* is 'carefully edited' (Cockshut 1994: xxix). He had met Rose when she was eleven and waited until she was eighteen before proposing marriage. He did so in February 1862. He had to wait until 1872 to be refused. Such was his distress upon her death, that he identified Rose with St Ursula as presented in the painting by Carpaccio. Shut away in his room, he made a detailed copy of *St Ursula's Dream*. He later imagined, in his grief, that he was receiving messages from Rose through the intermediation of the saint

(Wilenski 1933: 21; Spear 1984: 80). For Ruskin, art operated at more than one level. The art object, such as a landscape or a portrait, was a thing in itself but also a metaphor for nature or for human nature. This interchange of painting and persons or images or objects and persons had already become part of Ruskin's method of social analysis, especially with respect to the image of economic man.

Knowledge of his psychological problems, which some thought they had perceived from his emotive writing long before knowledge of his problems were made public, has supported much unjust and lazy criticism of his work. Difficult or obscure or associative or unpalatable writing is dismissed too quickly as evidence of instability (Spear 1985: 13; Sawyer 1979–80: 26). His mental problems should not be ignored as they were by the earlier biographers, partly following Ruskin's own practice in *Praeterita* and partly at the insistence of Joan Severn, whom Hilton constructs as Ruskin's controlling guardian at Brantwood (Hilton 1985: xi). Spear is very clear on this for he is intent on reaching a 'sympathetic understanding' of Ruskin by concentrating, in the context of historical circumstances, 'upon Ruskin's sanity' (Spear 1984: xii). Ruskin's mental problems should not be allowed to become the prejudicial framework for evaluating Ruskin's writing. His texts are 'rich' and can sustain critical readings without reference to the assumed state of his mental health. The 'death of the author', a tenet of post-modernist textual criticism, ought to be kept in mind when any search for 'meaning' turns too easily to Ruskin's health rather than his writing. There is, however, an interplay between Ruskin's life and his writings, as Hilton points out (Hilton 1985: ix). Awareness of this form of intertextuality, provided it is not prejudicial, can help make sense of his books (Hilton 1985: ix; Conner 1979: xi; Sawyer 1979–80: 26).

Political economy, a subject and social process which gave him so much anguish, is also absent from the account developed in *Praeterita*. Yet his critique of economic man, of so-called natural laws, of value and economic motivation, which only comes into its own from the late 1850s, is central to the developing projects of his middle years. Ruskin had measured, for example, from the publication in 1860 of material which formed the basis of 'the central work' of his life, i.e. *Unto This Last*, 'the beginning of the days of reprobation' (Cook 1911b: 2). It was not that there were no voices raised in support, for there were some positive reviews of the *Cornhill* essays in minor newspapers, and there was always Carlyle. Rather, in the words of Ruskin's father, that 'opinions so opposed to Malthus, *The Times* and the City of Manchester' could not be readily defended (21 July 1860, quoted in Cook 1911b: 5).

That there was more at risk in attacking the notions of the Manchester School than there was in the promotion of a particular school of painting, was something that Ruskin's father, John James, knew by instinct. He had suppressed the radical letters which Ruskin had written in 1852 for



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