

“*Ob! Woolner, if one could only find the
‘supreme’ Carlylean Ignoramus*”:

John Ruskin, as Recounted in
Thomas Woolner, R. A., His Life in Letters

IN ANNOTATING *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, some of the most salient facts as well as the juiciest bits of gossip have been gleaned from published letters and reminiscences of Carlyle contemporaries, among them Caroline Fox’s *Memories of Old Friends* (1881), David Masson’s several anecdotal histories, in particular *Carlyle Personally, and in His Writings* (1885), Francis Espinasse’s *Literary Recollections* (1893), Charles and Frances Brookfield’s *Mrs. Brookfield and her Circle* (1905), and *Thomas Woolner, R. A., His Life in Letters* (1917). Various quotes from the *Woolner Letters*—most particularly the salty nuggets found in a series of letters to Emily Tennyson—illuminate Ruskin and how he was regarded by some of his contemporaries. Social circles surrounding the Carlyles were contiguous and often overlapping, and the circles surrounding Ruskin, the Tennysons, and the principals of the PreRaphaelite Brotherhood intersected in similar ways. For example, Woolner, Ruskin, William Holman Hunt, and the Tennyson family all sat for the Oxford mathematician Charles Dodgson, and their portraits are among 407 images in the Dodgson photograph albums, now at Princeton University Library.

Thomas Carlyle wrote to Woolner on 21 May 1851: “If you will come to us, to tea, on Monday night (the old hour) I have good hopes of producing Mr. Ruskin for you. Unluckily, however, it is not quite positive. Mr. R. is out of town and not absolutely certain to be back before Monday” (*Woolner Letters* 12 and *CLO*). To date no scholar has been able to establish the date of the first meeting of Ruskin and Carlyle, but this letter must have followed that occurrence by a few months or less, placing the meeting early in 1851.

The fun really begins with a telling bit in a letter from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Woolner, 16 April 1853:

Said M'C afterward sent said white daub to Ruskin,¹ to whom he had wanted me to submit it as a preliminary to the purchase which I had sternly refused. Ruskin's opinion (I suppose) has induced him to give me a commission for £150, and I have chosen a subject of the "Virgin in the house of St. John" which I am now about. . . . M'C. sent me a passage from a letter of Ruskin's about my Dantesque sketches exhibited this year at the Winter Gallery of which I spoke to you in my last. R. goes into raptures about the color and grouping which he says are superior to anything in modern art—which I believe is almost as absurd as certain absurd objections which he makes to them. However, as he is only half informed about Art anything he says in favor of one's work is of course sure to prove invaluable in a professional way, and I only hope, for the sake of my rubbish, that he may have the honesty to say publicly in his new book what he has said privately, but I doubt this, Oh! Woolner, if one could only find the "supreme" Carlylean Ignoramus, him who knows positively the least about Art of any living creature—and get *him* to write a pamphlet about one—what a fortune one might make. It now seems that Ruskin had never seen any work of mine before, though he never thought it necessary to say this in writing about the P.R.B. (52-53)



Rossetti wrote to Woolner, 5 and 7 February 1854: "You will hear how the pinions of the great Millais have grown, till now he takes even the great Ruskin under them, as a poor well-meaning fellow, who must not be quite bullied down" (71). The irony of this observation lies in the date of the letter. On 25 April 1854, after having put his wife Effie on a train, Ruskin was served with papers of marriage annulment on grounds of

¹ "M'C" refers to Francis McCracken, an art collector and shipping agent in Belfast who corresponded frequently with Ruskin. The "white daub" is Rossetti's *The Annunciation* or *Ecce Ancilla Domini!*, for which his sister, Christina, was one of the models; see <<http://www.rossettiarchive.org/docs/s44.rap.html>>).

non-consummation. And, on 3 July 1855, Euphemia Ruskin, née Gray, married John Millais.

Several entries from Woolner's journal reveal an earnest enthusiasm while reading Ruskin on board *The Queen of the South*, bound from Australia to England, 1854:

Tuesday, August 1. / Last evening I had a read at Ruskin's first vol. of *Modern Painters* and derived much pleasure from the wisdom of the principles enunciated and the forcible grace of the language they are expressed in. I am convinced the work must do an incalculable amount of good, for it states truths hitherto but dimly understood by many fine artists and totally disregarded by the bulk—I see no evidence of unjust bias in the author, not more than his propositions justify, and I apprehend no man can be too fond of nature and truth. Artists and critics object to this book the same way that unhealthy people object to the physician's injunctions to take exercise and face the pure air of heaven, but if they wish to enjoy long life they must do as they are recommended (86).

Saturday, August 5.—Last night I had a good long read at Ruskin, and enjoyed it as much as was possible in such a confusion of voices; it delights me the downright hearty way he cuts up and exposes the ignorant conceits and tameness of the over-lauded old masters as much as it pleases me the keen, magnificent exposition of Turner's greatness and the delicate beauties of minor landscape artists. I should like to hear some of this criticism on the works of Anthony, who is now a man of note in the world. I suppose taking into account every kind of scenery and style of treating them, Ruskin understands landscape better than any other man (87).

Tuesday, August 8. / At 2 p.m. we had to go off our course on another tack. I read a little of Ruskin and finished the first vol. of *Modern Painters*. He must have worked hard during his life to accumulate such an extraordinary amount of truth as is shown in this vol. alone: the character of water is wonderfully rendered, he seems while writing to be a sea-god he understands its nature so perfectly; I have no doubt the rocks and mountains are equally faithful, but I do not know this so well. The trees are truth itself.



The following epistolary quotations concerning Ruskin are taken entirely from a series of letters from Woolner to Emily Sarah Tennyson, née Sellwood (1813–96; *ODNB*), written between May 1856 and December 1860. In the first of these, Ruskin's criticism of Holman Hunt's *The Scapegoat* (1854–56) elicits a comment from Woolner about Ruskin's lifestyle and his independent means:

28 May [1856]

Ruskin has been cutting it up and praised some of the worst pictures in the place; he has made such an obvious mess of it this year that his enemies are dancing for delight. Hunt says as he has no wife and youngsters he cares very little for it. . . . I should like Ruskin to know what he never knew—the want of money for a year or two; then he might come to doubt his infallibility and give an artist working on the right road the benefit of any little doubt that might arise. The little despot imagines himself the Pope of Art and would wear 3 crowns as a right, only they would make him look funny in London! (114)



In the next example, Ruskin's praise for Woolner's bust of Alfred Tennyson is compared to the enthusiasm already displayed by Millais for the same work.

8 March 1857

Ruskin came yesterday and was more pleased than any one, since Millais saw it, has been: he said that he was "very glad to know that such a thing could be done" and he shook my hand violently several times congratulating me on my "great success" as he called it, and when he was going away said, "I consider that bust to be a triumph of Art." Now if he would say this in print it would make my fortune, but unhappily it quite hurts his feelings to have to praise anything without colour. (130–31)



Emily Sarah Tennyson (*circa* 1857), artist unknown,
from *Wikipedia* via a collection in the Beinecke Library,
Yale University



In Woolner's letter of 18 August 1857, the postscript reads: "Carlyle spoke [Sunday night, 16 August 1857] with profound contempt of Ruskin because the little Art Deity called 'Aurora Leigh' the finest poem by far of the present age, and gave him a copy to read" (136). Did a copy of "Aurora Leigh" come from Ruskin or from TC's brother John Aitken Carlyle, or from both? TC's marginalia in his copy, from whatever source, is a delight to consider. A key, prepared by Brent Kinser and David Sorensen, collates TC's candid remarks to the text of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's poem, and it comprises appendix II of *The Collected Letters of Thomas and Jane Welsh Carlyle*, volume 32 (CLO).

In late summer 1857, Ruskin stayed with Sir Walter (1797–1879; *ODNB*) and Lady Paulina Trevelyan (1816–66; *ODNB*) at their Northumberland estate, Wallington, before joining his parents for a protracted tour of the Scottish Highlands. On 13 October 1857 Woolner wrote:

I will in some other letter give you my meaning in the sketch for Trevelyans: I hope they will like it for I feel sure of being able to make an attractive and interesting group of it. I hope that Ruskin who has been staying with them, has not set their minds against having a piece of sculpture at all, for he is quite capable of such a thing, and he openly avows that he "hates sculpture." (138)



In the following, dated 22 February 1858, the William Morris poems that Woolner mentions are likely the volume *The Defence of Guinevere, and Other Poems*, published in that year to indifferent critical notice:

Have you seen and do you like W. Morris' poems? I have not seen them to read yet, but long ago he read me some which I thought contained some original ideas and an extraordinary power of entering the far-back old knightly way of looking at things. He is one of the men who worked at the mural Arthur pictures at Oxford, but is not experienced as an artist. I am afraid from all I gather that those pictures are not the marvels of art persons might be led to suppose who only listened to the rhapsodies of Ruskin from himself or diluted through his disciples. (143-44).



In the *Woolner Letters* the following letter is conjecturally dated "autumn of 1859" by the exhibition at Apsley House, Rotten Row, of a Winged Victory by the sculptor Baron Marochetti (1805-67; *ODNB*). Marochetti enjoyed not only the enthusiasm of Ruskin but also the patronage of the royal couple and the Ashburtons, and his profile in relief of Louisa, Lady Ashburton is shown with her *ODNB* entry by Virginia Surtees. In the passage, Woolner also chides Ruskin for his appreciation of the Reverend Charles Haddon Spurgeon (1834-92; *ODNB*), a fundamentalist, unordained, evangelical Baptist who drew massive audiences to revivals held at the Crystal Palace and at London's Metropolitan Tabernacle:

I went and spent a long evening with Carlyle on Monday last: he was not in good spirits; in fact he has not been at all well since that laborious continental journey last year. . . . Ruskin came in while I was there and commenced a buzz of inflated rapture upon a piece of charlatanry called "Victory," by Marochetti, now being shown at Apsley House; . . . Ruskin's inflation was met in a manner that I think one so utterly good and kind as you could not with your utmost efforts imagine; but we certainly gave that conceited creature something to

reflect upon. When he was gone we both agreed that a man who took Marochetti as his ideal sculptor, Louis Napoleon as his favourite king and politician, and Spurgeon for his best beloved theologian,² was certainly an unsafe guide for women and the youths of England; for beside these, his trusting admirers are few. (183)



In his letter of 9 December 1860, Woolner suggests his pleasure concerning the improved health and spirits of Jane Welsh Carlyle, before taking another jibe at Ruskin:

I forget if I told you in my last note how remarkably well Mrs. Carlyle is this year, and generally she is laid up an invalid the whole winter. I was there the other evening and they told me a good joke of Ruskin. She sat next him at dinner at Ld. Ashburton's, and Ruskin was full of glee at the thought of having been chosen to decide as one of the judges on the Melbourne Shakespeare statue affair, and she told him that he and Carlyle would never agree, but asked, who he would appoint, supposing he were sole judge, to make Shakespeare's statue; he said that undoubtedly he should appoint *Richmond*, the portrait draughtsman and that he considered Richmond could do it better than any other man in England.³ This is quite serious and not the least in joke on his part. I merely give it to you as an instance of the flimsiness and folly to which a man's mind may arrive, when he lives fattening upon the adulation of ladies and weak young men, chiefly landscape painters" (203).

² In his diary, Ruskin entered for Sunday, 8 February 1857: "Hear Mr. Spurgeon on 'Cleanse thou me from secret faults'—very wonderful" (Joan Evans and J. H. Whitehouse, eds., *Diaries of John Ruskin*, vol. 2 [1956], 526).

³ George Richmond (1809–96; *ODNB*) was a portrait painter and occasional sculptor who shared similar subjects, style, and popularity with the artist Samuel Laurence (who is invoked in the first of the Harriet, Lady Ashburton, letters in this issue). Richmond's 1857 portrait in chalk of Ruskin has been much reproduced, and other sitters included many from the Carlyles' circle—Edward "Bear" Ellice, Thomas Erskine of Linlathen, Arthur Helps, Harriet Martineau, Richard Monckton Milnes, and William Stirling-Maxwell.



These anecdotal quotations from the *Woolner Letters* in tandem with the Ruskin letters to John Hullah and to Harry Quilter give a small example of far-flung sources, archival and published, that can be tapped to annotate and to verify the chronological sequence of Ruskin's unpublished diaries and correspondence. The core texts and manuscripts, published and unpublished, of Ruskin studies are strikingly similar to those of Carlyle studies: a multi-volume collected works, an immense body of curated letters from which selections (though not *collections*, as per the Carlyles) have been published, and, in Ruskin's particular case, copious diaries and ephemeral writings. To date, Ruskin's published diaries consist of the three-volume selection edited by Joan Evans and John Howard Whitehouse (1959) and *The Brantwood Diary of John Ruskin* edited by Helen Gill Viljoen (1971). Several Ruskin scholars—among them John Lewis Bradley (1955, 1964, and, with Ian Ousby, 1987), Van Akin Burd (1969, 1973), Harold I. Shapiro (1972), and John Hayman (1982)—have compiled tightly focused selections of Ruskin's correspondence, but there is no complete collection comparable to that of the Carlyles' letters. A number of Ruskin titles have appeared in new editions, most recently Ruskin's unfinished autobiography *Praeterita*, edited by Francis O'Gorman and published by Oxford World's Classics (2012). The 39-volume *Works of John Ruskin* was brought into print between 1903 and 1912 by Edward Tyas Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, and a century later it remains the definitive edition for many of the constituent titles.

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