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The Cambridge Companion to John Ruskin, edited by Francis O’Gorman.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015. xxiv + 289 pp.
\$29.99/£18.99 pb, \$94.99/£54.99 hb, \$24/£18.04 eb.

THE WORKS OF JOHN RUSKIN COLLECTED IN THE *LIBRARY Edition* at the beginning of the last century span 39 substantial volumes. Every year dozens of new academic articles and books emerge that deal at least in part with Ruskin; the 2015 installment of the “Ruskin Bibliography” compiled by Stephen Wildman lists 7 new editions of his work in 5 languages, and 68 new books and articles.¹ He has been featured in films, television shows, plays, and at least one opera. Ruskin societies and reading groups flourished at the end of the nineteenth century, and still exist. Gandhi, Proust, Tolstoy, and early British Labor politicians cited him as an influence. Many towns in Britain have a road or a school bearing his name, or both. There is a Ruskin, Florida, and a Ruskin Library, Tokyo. Ruskin is big and has had a significant presence in the cultural landscape for a century and a half. It is high time that he received the marker of cultural importance and authority that comes with being the subject of a “*Cambridge Companion to . . .*” In late 2015, he did.

Edited by Francis O’Gorman, *The Cambridge Companion to Ruskin* joins the substantial list of volumes in the series, which has been growing for over a quarter of a century.² The aims of the Cambridge Companions series shed light on the present volume: “Cambridge Companions are lively, accessible introductions to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics and periods. All are collections of specially commissioned

¹ The Ruskin Review and Bulletin 51–58. Of the 68 new items for 2015, The Cambridge Companion accounts for 18.

² <http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/companions/about.jsf>.

essays, shaped and introduced to appeal to student readers.”³ The series’ target audience is undergraduate students. In this market, it has become a beacon resource; fighting against the all-too-common undergraduate urge to run non-scholarly internet searches for academic information, many institutions now subscribe to the full electronic Companions series and recommend it to students as a first port-of-call for appropriately rigorous yet introductory information. Previous titles include many authors, some, such as Jane Austen (1997 and 2010) now in their second edition, as well as volumes dedicated to specific books—for Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (2013) and *Emma* (2015)—or to specific periods (*Victorian Culture* 2010), genres (*Fantasy* 2012), regions (*Literature of New York* 2010), or themes (*Slavery in American Literature* 2016). As their number has grown, the Cambridge Companions series has come to represent a type of new canon; exclusion from it suggests that the topic is not considered obvious or important for undergraduate study. Ruskin’s “disciples” *Wilde* (1997), *Proust* (2001), *Tolstoy* (2002), and *Gandhi* (2011) were all the subjects of dedicated volumes before he was. Ruskin is volume 591. His relatively late arrival into this authorizing and authoritative series in itself says something about the position of Ruskin in current culture and the academy. As several of the contributions to this volume note, he has been difficult to classify. This elusiveness has tended to keep him out of the undergraduate curriculum.

The *Ruskin* volume achieves its aim of being “shaped and introduced to appeal to student readers.” It curates the potentially overwhelming breadth of John Ruskin into 300 pages, 18 chapters (each about 13 pages in length), 4 sections, a basic “Chronology,” and a selected “Guide to Further Reading.” Some of the chapters work well as introductions to Ruskin by synthesizing earlier scholarship, for example, Martin Dubois’s chapter on Ruskin’s “Private Voice.” Stuart Eagles’s chapter on “Political Legacies” distills his own previous publications into 12 pages and adds recent findings. O’Gorman’s “Introduction” beautifully captures the essence of Ruskin with statements such

³ http://universitypublishingonline.org/cambridge/companions/browse_by_collection.jsf?collectionTitle=The+Complete+Companions&subProductGroupCode=ALL&tSort=title+closed&aSort=author+default_list&ySort=year+default_list.

as “Ruskin’s primary business is celebration, not criticism” and “Ruskin is a writer of hope” (10, 11). In some ways, those two statements are all undergraduates really need to know before launching into their own, self-directed study of Ruskin. This despite the fact that Ruskin can be difficult for the modern eye to read; his sentences are long with convoluted punctuation, his tone is often didactic, and his writings cross disciplinary boundaries.

The description of the volume printed on the back cover and repeated on the front endpaper declares, “This is the first multi-authored expert collection to assess the totality of Ruskin’s achievement and to open up the deep coherence of a troubled but dazzling mind.” It is a good resource, and it does shed light on Ruskin, but in order “to assess the totality of Ruskin’s achievement,” it would have had to be much longer than the format allowed by the Cambridge Companions series. Much like Ruskin’s own writing, there is a tension in this volume between offering an “accessible,” solid introduction and offering “a totality” complete with new research and approaches. Intriguingly, while the general series website stresses that these commissioned volumes are designed to be “accessible” and aimed at students, the British-specific version expands the scope, stating that this is “a series of authoritative guides, written by leading experts, offering lively, accessible surveys to major writers, artists, philosophers, topics, and periods. With over 500 Companions available in a variety of print, digital, and online formats covering 12 subject areas, they are perfectly suited for the student, researcher and general reader.”⁴ While noting that these are “accessible surveys,” this statement positions the series as a definitive resource aimed at a more knowledgeable reader than the average undergraduate approaching a topic for the first time. The “student” remains but is joined by the “researcher” and the “general [implicitly educated] reader.” This expansive register adds to the cultural stakes, reinforcing the notion that inclusion into the series marks the topic in question as important, authoritative, and of wide interest.

In commissioning the volume, O’Gorman has attempted to bridge competing identities and reinforce Ruskin’s place in

⁴ <http://www.cambridge.org/gb/academic/cambridge-companions>.

the academy and culture. The volume pulls together a range of scholars. The majority, 11, are based in the UK, with 4 in the USA and 1 in Italy. They represent expertise at a variety of career stages, from those who have written extensively on Ruskin over decades to more junior academics who had not previously published on Ruskin. Some are in academic posts, while others are based outside of universities. All but 4 of the contributors have English Literature as their disciplinary home. As the volume is part of the Literature and Classics catalog of the Cambridge Companions series, it is fitting that literature scholars dominate. But, given the breadth of Ruskin's work, it is surprising that none of the contributors are, strictly speaking, historians of art or science, for example. This lack suggests that even as he has been undergoing a kind of resurgence, Ruskin is studied primarily "in departments of literature" where, Marcus Waithe notes, Ruskin studies held on after disappearing from most other disciplines (263). On a similar note, only 6 chapters are by women while 12 are by men. Ruskin was a vocal (if not always consistent) supporter of women; Dinah Birch's chapter opens with George Eliot's praise for Ruskin, while Sharon Aronofsky Weltman's stresses the "crucially progressive elements" and empowering influence of Ruskin on women in his own time (162). In light of this inclusive quality, it would have been good to see a more equal gender balance.

What initially may seem a major omission—the lack of Stephen Wildman as a contributor—is explained by the dedication: "For Stephen Wildman / Director and Curator Ruskin Library and Research Centre / University of Lancaster UK / With gratitude." Wildman and his predecessor as keeper of the Whitehouse collection, James S. Dearden, have supported much of the scholarship in the volume. Without their custodianship of the collection now housed at Lancaster University and the generous sharing of their knowledge, there would have been gaps in almost all the contributions, and it is touching to see that debt acknowledged.

The four sections of the volume are "Places," "Topics," "Authorship," and "Legacies." The first, "Places," is primarily biographical, with an emphasis on Ruskin's journeys. It highlights key locations for Ruskin, while coloring them with the tint of the particular critical perspective of each chapter's

author. Keith Hanley's "Edinburgh–London–Oxford–Coniston" takes Ruskin full-circle through his life in Britain. Starting with his Scottish ancestry and Romantic child-self rooted in Walter Scott, it moves through Ruskin's actual homes: in London, where he spent his childhood and kept a house for much of his life, periods in Oxford as a student in the 1830s and later as a Professor in the 1860s and 1870s, and finally at Coniston in the Lake District. The narrative Hanley weaves into this is one of identity formation and "his construction of 'Great Britain'" (30). Through Hanley's gaze, Ruskin's very personal routes and homes expand to national significance. Developing the sense of place and identity, in "The Alps," Emma Sdegno widens the circle beyond Britain to consider his encounters with these Continental mountains, which both form and blur national boundaries. She notes how they represented "vicarious homes" for Ruskin, offering a multitude of "cultural, religious and aesthetic meanings" that he attempted to preserve (33, 47). She stresses how he engaged with and encouraged active rather than a purely contemplative approach to the mountains. Nicholas Shrimpton's "Italy" opens—not as one might expect, with a declaration that Ruskin loved Venice—but instead by offering a nuanced introduction to Ruskin and politics through the lens of "the Italian Question" and responses to it by Ruskin and other literary celebrities (49). Tracing Ruskin's many journeys to Italy, he points out that his was "a very partial version of the peninsula," rooted in his particular "geographical, as well as artistic, interest in Italy" (63, 61). Despite his limited route, it was nevertheless "the setting for a series of transformative personal experiences" (64). This pattern of tracing Ruskin's journeys is repeated in the final element of "Places": Cynthia Gamble's "France and Belgium." Like Hanley's chapter, there is a sense of coming full circle—Ruskin first traveled to the Continent by visiting France and Belgium in 1825; in 1888, he had to be collected from Paris as a broken old man and did not return to the Continent in his final 12 years. The lifetime of experience linked to these countries is captured by Gamble as she traces ways in which they "are interwoven into his writings on art, architecture, landscape, history, culture and politics" (79).

The second section, "Topics," is perhaps where the hand of a commissioning editor is most apparent. Gamble's list of

themes linked to France and Belgium offers a very small set that could be further developed in this section. "Topics" includes only seven key concepts while the next section, arguably a sub-section focused on "Authorship," offers just four. There are many more possibilities.

"Topics" opens with the three areas that, anecdotally, are most apt to be linked to Ruskin in our current culture: "Art," "Architecture," and "Politics and economics." The section also includes "Sexuality and gender," the specter that haunts Ruskin in popular culture. Less obviously, at least when picturing a typical student looking for information on Ruskin, there are also chapters on "Nation and class," "Religion," and "Technology." Noticeable in its absence is science; Ruskin was a keen botanist, geologist, and hydrologist, yet science and natural history are dealt with only in passing. Similarly, Ruskin and Arts and Crafts, while touched on in many chapters (notably those by Geoffrey Tyack and Marcus Waithe), might also have warranted a dedicated mention.

In "Art," Lucy Hartley offers a synopsis ranging from *Modern Painters*, which first propelled Ruskin into the public's gaze, through the movement of his keen focus from one painter to another over time; ultimately, "he resolved the contradiction produced by championing Turner as well as Angelico and Tintoretto by separating symbolic from imitative art," essentially "redefining greatness" (93, 91). The final sentence of this chapter is an excellent, clear declaration of why Ruskin was and continues to be an influential figure in art. While exploring "Architecture," Geoffrey Tyack moves through key themes—particularly Venice and modern interpretations of the Gothic that proliferated in Ruskin's lifetime. The chapter notes some of Ruskin's great hopes, for example "better homes for the working classes" and "enlightened . . . design of cities," tempered by his great disappointment and disaffection with what he saw as poor choices and bad taste in modern architecture and implicitly modern society (113). Tyack highlights the inter-woven, "repetitive, fragmentary, and often self-contradictory" nature of Ruskin's writing on the topic (100). In so doing, he sheds light on these trends across Ruskin's writing; such intertwined, cyclical yet in-tension-with-itself thinking lies at the heart of the next chapter, by Nicholas Shrimpton. Having focused on

Italy through the lens of politics in his first contribution to the collection, Shrimpton further develops that theme in his second, "Politics and economics." His main task is to reconcile Ruskin the Tory with Ruskin the Communist, and in doing so Shrimpton reveals the repetitive, contradictory Ruskin at his most irritating and most inspired as he tries to "constitute the good society" (128).

While perhaps less obvious than the first three "Topics," the fourth, Judith Stoddart's contribution on "Nation and class," flows naturally from them. It also takes a turn to the more overtly theoretical as she draws attention to Ruskin's unexpected position in Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, then contextualizes him in relation to nineteenth-century debates. It may surprise some readers to find that much of this chapter deals with the establishment of the Guild of St. George. Founded by Ruskin in the 1870s, it is now a registered charity for arts, crafts, and the rural economy with an international membership. She also helpfully touches on one aspect of Ruskin's voice that might puzzle readers coming to him for the first time, the fact that he sometimes "indulges in self-citation" (132). Francis O'Gorman's chapter, "Religion," echoes other contributions by tracing internal contradictions and tensions within Ruskin—here at their most personal: at the level of hope and belief. He argues that Ruskin was a man of deep faith, but who grappled with a sense that he had not lived up to his God-given potential and was troubled by "the pains of living" and questions of theodicy (154). In so doing, O'Gorman sheds light on the "silence" of Ruskin's autobiography, *Praeterita*.

If this volume is aimed at a non-specialist reader, then Sharon Aronofsky Weltman's chapter, "Sexuality and Gender" is the most important. She tackles some of the dirt that tends to stick to Ruskin—assumptions about his sexuality, false claims that he burned Turner's pornographic drawings, assertions that he was the embodiment of misogynistic Victorian patriarchy—and offers a concise, clear defence on each point. She also outlines Ruskin's views and influence on women's education and on expanding their power. If Weltman's chapter is arguably the most important in that it grapples with a major problem in Ruskin studies, or at least in the public perception of him, the next chapter, "Technology," by Alan Davis, is

potentially the most unexpected. Just as Weltman overturns common assumptions about Ruskin, sex and gender, Davis counters the not uncommon “picture of a cranky, reactionary, anti-technological Ruskin” (170). He proves the point by examining a range of then-cutting-edge technology and innovation: microscopes, photography, railroads, telegraphs and—in greatest depth—printmaking in many forms. Davis, like many of the contributors, concludes by drawing the strands of Ruskin together, here noting that, for Ruskin, engravers offer a model for perfect humanity working in an ideal society.

The penultimate section, on “Authorship,” starts with what may seem an anomalous chapter: “Ruskin and Carlyle” by David R. Sorensen. This is the only chapter title to include another person’s name and the only chapter in which Ruskin does not utterly dominate. Yet it flows logically from the previous two chapters, for it too aims to counter common assumptions about Ruskin, arguing that the “association” between Ruskin and Carlyle “was never as harmonious as appearances suggested” (189). Among the tensions and debates Sorensen notes are their differing opinions on aesthetics and the “Fine Arts,” on religion, and on the Governor Eyre controversy; but he also traces their similarities as they became obsessively involved in projects to bring about positive cultural changes simultaneously with feeling the weight of being unheeded prophets. Throughout, Sorensen deals with two key strands of “authorship.” One is the way Carlyle repeatedly read and authored his interaction with Ruskin in light of Frederick the Great; the other was the way in which he influenced Ruskin and so implicitly authored some of the younger man’s ideas and actions. For both, a drive to bring about positive social change was a source of private pain. Dinah Birch’s “Lecturing and public voice” expands on this point, noting how “[p]rivate preoccupations and public responsibility merge in Ruskin’s work as a lecturer” as that public “role became central to his identity” (202). She outlines his often unconventional approach and traces many of the strategies he employed as a public figure, contextualizing the public voice within the private relationships that shaped it, notably his parents and Carlyle. In doing so, she addresses the authoritative tone of much of Ruskin’s public voice, noting that the “certainty” of his preacherly, didactic approach divided audiences: “inspiring”

and “reassuring” some, while antagonizing and irritating others (203). He still divides audiences on the same lines today. The blurring of personal and public is a theme Martin Dubois further develops in “Diary journals, correspondence, autobiography, and private voice.” Here, he offers an overview of Ruskin’s life-writing (diaries, letters, autobiography) and his private idiolects and allusions. Like O’Gorman’s chapter on “Religion,” it sheds light on puzzling aspects of *Praeterita* by stressing cyclical patterns and the creative ordering of memory into “private eloquence” (228). Clive Wilmer picks up this thread in his chapter on “Creativity,” which grounds the “quite exceptional beauty of his prose” in his early development as a poet and his skill at drawing (231). Regular practice at these two disciplines—often perceived in culture as more creative than prose—helped build his distinctive vision and voice. Wilmer reinforces a recurring theme in the volume: “the moral emphasis” in much of Ruskin’s work (239). Here, with notable emphasis on his fairy tale, *The King of the Golden River*, but also in relation to wide-ranging works by Ruskin including his artwork. He concludes that Ruskin’s unique and powerful prose voice stems from his skill at other disciplines: “the critic was an artist” (244).

The final section, “Legacies,” identifies two realms where Ruskin most obviously has had and continues to exert and influence: politics and culture. While the other chapters are mostly firmly rooted in the past and concerned with contextualizing Ruskin, these push forward in time. Stuart Eagles’s “Political legacies” acknowledges that the “genealogies of ideas are difficult to trace” and so focuses on “individuals who understood themselves to be motivated by Ruskin” (250). He found an impressive number of influential individuals for whom that was the case. While this chapter effectively ends in the middle of the last century—almost all the figures Eagles mentions had died by 1950—it implicitly carries forward to the present time. Whether through charitable, educational, or political initiatives, Ruskin’s inspirational ideas as taken up by others helped to shape modern Britain and—through figures like Gandhi—our modern world. Marcus Waithe’s “Cultural legacies” picks up where Eagles’s chapter ends, in the 1950s. There are echoes here, too, of Wilmer’s chapter on “Creativity,” for the main focus of Waithe’s chapter is on contemporary craft

and the creative, ranging though metalwork, stonework, pottery, and poetry. The secondary focus is on “Seeing” as “a point of absolute integration between powers of language, of foretelling, and divinity” (272). Here again is Ruskin the thinker, the prophet and seer who transformed the teaching of art and—as Eagles demonstrates—changed the way many perceived and engaged with the world. For Ruskin, “the process rather than the product” matters (276). Such mindfulness resonates with movements in our present and perhaps helps explain some of Ruskin’s current appeal. As O’Gorman notes in the Introduction, we “value him for being a little like us” (1).

When viewing this book on its own terms, as an “accessible” reflection on “Ruskin’s achievement,” which opens Ruskin to a non-specialist reader, the “Introduction” is arguably the most important chapter. In it, O’Gorman weaves together the sometimes seemingly disparate threads into a unified whole, offering solutions to barriers that those new to Ruskin might encounter as they attempt to read his works as well as scholarship related to him. Statements such as these will be helpful and reassuring to new students of Ruskin:

Ruskin, for almost everyone, is too capacious to read entirely; a historian of the remaining fragments of the past, he is mostly read in pieces. He is difficult to see steadily and to see whole. And his own capacity for saying things that are, or at least appear to be, contradictory complicates further the business of trying to understand him. (2)

We need to consider, as well as historicise and comprehend, exactly what Ruskin is saying, what he really meant. He deserves to be understood, though there is no requirement to agree with him. . . . Reading Ruskin in his own words, contemplating the dazzling management of his prose, we can perceive how language at its highest reach can shift the view. Such language alters the mind, though the reader does not cease to scrutinise it carefully. In the flow of his prose, we can, nevertheless, perceive the world a little through Ruskin’s eyes. (13)

They are also a useful reminder to those who are steeped in his writing, and those who attempt to teach him to undergraduates—most of whom have eyes and ears that have never before been tuned to such prose.

O’Gorman contextualizes some of the seemingly more problematic aspects of Ruskin, such as his often denigrated vision of “the ideal woman” in “Of Queens Gardens,” or the question “Is Ruskin a thinker or a writer?” (3, 7). While acknowledging that “[i]t is tough to judge Ruskin through what he actually, measurably, achieved,” he nevertheless offers a succinct overview of Ruskin’s achievements and influence (5). These notions are addressed throughout the volume. The introduction also helpfully outlines “two distinctive strands of Ruskin criticism . . . and an emerging third” (8). First, the empirical, with an emphasis on bibliography, biography, and editing; Second, his “contexts—the intellectual, or aesthetic, historical, gendered, or political environments in which his work makes fresh and better sense”; Third, “a reconsideration of . . . [his] influence” (8). This last comes closest to what O’Gorman identifies as a potential problem in twenty-first century approaches to Ruskin: “Ruskin trips the switch on a journalistic habit of requiring historical thinkers and authors to speak directly to the present in order to be worth reading. Ruskin, in these terms, is easy to describe as valuable in the twenty-first century because he is . . . ‘relatable’” (1). Parts of his current, “relatable” appeal, arguably, stems from the very reasons his reputation once dipped. After World War I, his idealism and message of hope were hard to accept against the loss of innocence and atrocities of that war; Eagles poignantly makes that point at the end of his chapter (261). He fell fairly fully out of favor after World War II as the Victorians in general seemed old fashioned, out-dated, and foolish in the face of true modernity and emergent postmodernity, reaching what Waithe refers to as “a low ebb [of reputation] in the 1950s and 1960s” (263). Now, the pendulum has swung; what seemed naive a century ago and old-fashioned half a century ago has the weight of authority again. Today, “He lends cultural capital, some long-bearded gravity, to present anxieties about, say, the money markets or the wrecking of the natural world. His words somehow make those worries more legitimate or worth taking seriously because they can claim his posthumous approval” (2). It has taken a long time for Ruskin to secure a place in the Cambridge Companions series—a quarter of a century and a list of almost 600 Companions precede this one—but

its arrival 15 years after the centenary of his death and 4 years before the bicentenary of his birth mark a resurgence in his authority and cultural cachet.

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