

JOHN RUSKIN

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John Ruskin by Frederic Harrison

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FREDERIC HARRISON

JOHN RUSKIN

ENGLISH MEN OF LETTERS

JOHN RUSKIN

BY

FREDERIC HARRISON

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JOHN RUSKIN

1819-1900

CHAPTER I

BIRTH AND CHILDHOOD

ON the publication of the first volume of *Modern Painters*, Sydney Smith, the acknowledged oracle of the *Edinburgh Review* and of cultured society, is reported to have declared that "it was a work of transcendent talent, presented the most original views, and the most elegant and powerful language, and would work a complete revolution in the world of taste" (*Præterita*, ii. 165).

And so it was. The writer of the Victorian era who poured forth the greatest mass of literature upon the greatest variety of subjects, about whom most was written in his own lifetime in Europe and in America, who in the English-speaking world left the most direct and most visible imprint of his tastes and thoughts—was John Ruskin. For fifty years continuously he wrote, lectured, and talked about Mountains, Rivers, and Lakes; about Cathedrals and Landscapes; about Geology; about Minerals, Architecture, Painting, Sculpture, Music, Drawing, Political Economy, Education, Poetry, Literature, History, Mythology, Socialism, Theology, Morals.

The author of more than eighty distinct works upon so miscellaneous a field, of masses of poetry, lectures, letters as well as substantial treatises, was of necessity rather a stimulus than an authority—an influence rather than a master. As one of his foreign admirers has said—the readers of Ruskin are charmed, inspired, more than convinced. (He is a moralist, an evangelist—not a philosopher or a man of science.) But the union of marvellous literary power, with encyclopædic studies of Nature and of Art, both illumined with burning enthusiasm as to all things moral and social, combined to form one of the most fascinating personalities of the nineteenth century.

The man himself issued a mass of biographical matter, full of naïveté, candour, and charm. And as many biographies of him already exist, together with scores of studies of his work and influence both in English and in various European languages, it might be thought that no need remained for any fresh biography of any kind. But the extant materials for a biography are so voluminous, so dispersive, and often so much entangled with other matter, that it is believed there is still room for a plain volume such as this, which would condense the story in accessible form and denote his place in English literature. And the directors of this series could not venture to omit a Man of Letters who was one of the greatest masters of prose in English literature, and one of the dominant influences of the Victorian epoch.

I have been asked to undertake the task, which with real hesitation I accept. Though an ardent admirer of the moral, social, and artistic ideals of John Ruskin myself, I am sworn in as a disciple of a very different

school, and of a master whom he often denounced. As a humble lover of his magnificent power of language, I have studied it too closely not to feel all its vices, extravagances, and temptations. I am neither Socialist nor Platonist; and so I can feel deep sympathy for his onslaught on our modern life, whilst I am far from accepting his trenchant remedies. I had abundant means for judging his beautiful nature and his really saintly virtues, for my personal acquaintance with him extended over forty years. I remember him in 1860 at Denmark Hill, in the lifetime of both his parents, and in the heyday of his fame and his power. I saw him and heard him lecture from time to time, received letters from him, and engaged in some controversies with him, both public and private. I was his colleague as a teacher at the Working Men's College and as a member of the Metaphysical Society. And towards the close of his life I visited him at Brantwood, and watched, with love and pain, the latest flickering of his indomitable spirit. If admiration, affection, common ideals, aims, and sympathies, can qualify one who has been bred in other worlds of belief and hope to judge fairly the life-work of a brilliant and noble genius, then I may presume to tell all I knew and all I have felt of the "Oxford graduate" of 1842, who was laid to rest in Coniston Churchyard in 1900.

John Ruskin, born in London, was a Scot of the Scots, his father and his mother being grandchildren of one John Ruskin of Edinburgh. Both parents and he himself passed much of their early life in Scotland, where he had many Scotch cousins, and whence he