

JOHN RUSKIN AND THOUGHTS ON DEMOCRACY

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John Ruskin and thoughts on democracy by F. York Powell

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BY
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JOHN RUSKIN

AT sunset, on the 20th January 1900, died a man who has done much for his countrymen and would fain have done more. For years and years he prophesied to us of faith and hope and charity, and of judgment to come. He kept high ideals before us; he was charitable, kind, and unselfish in his own life. Like Carlyle, his master, he hated shams: "appearances" or "custom," or "what is expected" or "what must be profitable," were excuses of no avail in his eyes. "Is the thing true?" was his test, and it

seems to me that though in applying this touchstone we shall often go wrong, such is human ignorance, we shall not be so likely to go wrong in the long run as if we took another. Like Carlyle, too, he was a great preacher, preaching to a nation that has known and required many great preachers from the days of King Alfred and of Langland until to-day. Moreover, he was a popular preacher, but he was no hireling loving to prophesy smooth things, flattering under the simulation of rebuke or craftily apologising for and cunningly glossing over mean and petty but well-cherished national sins. He was a statesman sometimes, but never a politician. It was emphatically not his humour

to worship the ugly idol of expediency, nor could he stoop to cajole fools in order to gain place or popularity. He was an intensely religious man, but he never put on the garb of a sect or pretended for a moment to share the dogmatic beliefs that are the delight of the churches, though such acquiescence would have secured him powerful sympathies for his life's work. Priding himself to be the son of an honourable merchant, his morality would never have allowed him to inform the House of Commons that "adulteration was a mere form of competition." He was not willing to tell working-men that they are wise in matters of which they are ignorant, honest when he knew that they are too

often lazy and stupid, fine fellows when they are obviously, too many of them, more drunken, brutal, and dirty than they need be: though to no man in England was the cause of the poor ever nearer, and few public men, whom we have known, have thought and worked more earnestly and usefully on behalf of those who labour with their hands or have held good handiwork in more complete respect. Like Carlyle, too, he was one of the first English thinkers to discover and expose the hopeless but most delusive fallacies of the old school of political economy, though all he got for many years in this national service was shallow mockery. But the political economy of to-day is the political economy

of John Ruskin, and not the political economy of John Bright or even of John Stuart Mill. There was a time when, as he said himself, Carlyle and he stood almost alone against a world that listened greedily to the babble of party politicians and the chatter of popular journalists, to all the meaningless, deceptive buzzing of the ephemerals, in fact. But how does it stand now? What was essential in the creed of these two teachers is now largely a matter of faith (though unhappily not always of practice) among thinking men and women wherever English is spoken. I am not claiming for John Ruskin the infallibility that belongs to no man, were he even Isaiah or Dante or Shakespeare,
