

U DX2**John Ruskin letter****c.1860****Biographical Background:**

John Ruskin was born in 1819 and was educated by his mother, Margaret Ruskin (nee Cox) (b.1781), and then at Oxford, where his mother lived for the duration of his undergraduate days. His father, John James Ruskin (b.1785), was a wine merchant with an intense interest in art and literature, one that passed to his son. Ruskin had an upbringing that was as restrictive as it was broadening; his mother was deeply religious and puritanical, yet his parents loved travel and he spent each summer travelling around England and Europe. As a consequence he spent the rest of his life both working prodigiously and seeking romance in the physical environment. He continued to live with his parents through his adulthood and there is a sense in which he never grew up. His attitudes towards women were immature and his marriage to Euphemia ('Effie') Chalmers Gray in 1848 ended in disaster; it was annulled in 1855 on the grounds of non-consummation and she married their mutual friend, John Millais, in a small cloud of scandal. Ruskin's later biographers, W G Collingwood and Edward Cook, played down the question of sexual inadequacy on Ruskin's part, but in 1947 Effie's grandson, William James, published a series of letters designed to defend the reputation of his grandmother and place the blame for the marriage breakdown on Ruskin: 'The Order of Release: the story of John Ruskin, Effie Gray and John Everitt Millais told for the first time in their unpublished letters'. Mary Lutyens also published a number of letters relating to the affair in 'Effie in Venice' (1965) and 'Millais and the Ruskins' (1967).

Ruskin was an enormously influential cultural critic; his importance lies in the way he defined rather than reflected the Victorian moment. He shot to success with his book *Modern Painters* published in 1843; although the motivation for this book was a defence of Turner, he went on to write several volumes which fully laid out his aesthetic philosophy of art. Ruskin went through several stages of literary interest. His final volume of *Modern Painters* was published in 1860, but in the late 1840s he turned his attention to architecture and 'The Seven Lamps of Architecture' came out in 1848 encouraging and establishing the Victorian passion for the Gothic. In the late 1850s he shifted direction again, becoming very interested in political economy and eventually falling out with J S Mill as a result. His work emphasised duty and the moral economy and he later tried to put some of his practical plans into action by supporting model schools and setting up the St George's Guild, a moral cooperative guild of companions in labour.

Ruskin spent the years 1855 to 1870 lecturing in all parts of the country and in all kinds of institutions. Two of his best known series of lectures from this period are *Sesame and lilies* (1865) and *The ethics of the dust* (1866) (both in *Works*, vol. 18). The latter came out of a series of lectures given at Winnington Hall Girls' School in Cheshire and Ruskin's friendships with these girls is well documented in published correspondence. On 10 December 1867 Agatha Tyndale wrote about a play they had staged in which '...we had a scene in a garden, and all the flowers represented by little girls, in wreaths of the flower they personified...' It is clear from this that after Ruskin's visit to the school the teacher continued to put Ruskin's ideas into the educational activity of her pupils. In *Sesame and lilies* Ruskin had represented women as flowers in a garden. Ruskin's reply to this letter is in *The Winnington letters: John Ruskin's correspondence with Margaret Alexis Bell and the children at Winnington Hall* (1969). Agatha was Ruskin's favourite pupil: on 8 May 1868 he wrote to his mother 'It is highly satisfactory to my general notions of propriety that for once the prettiest girl in the school is also the most amiable' (*The Winnington letters*, p.617).

In 'The Ethics of the Dust' Ruskin constructed his lessons around crystals. Agatha's letter thanks him for the agates he has sent. Mineralogy was Ruskin's abiding interest from

childhood and he spent a lot of time in the natural history section of the British Museum. He presented to the Museum the 'Colenso Diamond' and the 'Edwardes Ruby'. Between 1882 and about 1884 Ruskin and his friend, Lazarus Fletcher, mineralogist at the museum, were corresponding frequently about a catalogue of specimens they were jointly writing and by the end of 1886 Ruskin was talking about publishing a book summing up his lifetime's hobby called 'Recreations in mineralogy'.

These letters were written in the final years of Ruskin's life and one of them records that 'this last illness has been a heavy warning to me; and I suppose my British Museum days are over'. In 1884 he had resigned his professorship in fine arts at Oxford (endowed by Felix Slade) after holding this post since 1870. During that fourteen years he had worked ceaselessly, producing publications of his lectures and and monthly editions of *Fors Clavigera*, an organ for social reform aimed at working class men. His father had died in 1864 leaving a considerable fortune which he spent on supporting hundreds of pensioners and in 1885 he left his last house, Brantwood at Coniston in the Lake District, and its valuable contents, to his cousins, Arthur and Joan Severn on the condition that they make it open to the public. His mother had also died in 1871 and he had quickly become very dependent on the Severns as living companions. One of their descendants, Joseph Arthur Palliser Severn, went on to write a memoir of 'the professor', as Ruskin was always known to his students, followers and many friends (*The professor: memoir of John Ruskin*, 1967).

During this last decade of his life, Ruskin was often ill and irascible. He fell out with friends, like Lazarus Fletcher, and with institutions like the National Gallery. However, throughout his long career he had acted as 'patron' in every sense of that word to schoolchildren, art students, aspiring artists and whole art movements. This side of Ruskin was as much in evidence in the 1880s as his ill humour. It was during this period that he met Esther Francis Alexander (1837-1917). Alexander was an American woman leading a closeted life with her parents (much like Ruskin's own) in Florence and attending the evangelical Christian church there. She used the nom de plume 'Sorella' when writing to him and her mother wrote to him as 'Mamma'. Alexander was an artist and Ruskin lectured on her drawings and introduced and edited her *Roadside songs of Tuscany*. The intimacy of these letters says much about Ruskin's ambiguous relationships with women. John Ruskin died on 20 January 1900 and is buried in the churchyard at Coniston, surrounded by his loved hills of the Lake District.

Custodial history:

Donated by Miss Severn, Coniston, Cumbria, 1928

Description:

Letter from John Ruskin to Mrs Baines relating to the education of girls.

Extent: 1 item

Related material:

Letters to John Ruskin [Ref U DP7-15]

Other repositories:

Ruskin Galleries, Isle of Wight; John Rylands Library, Manchester; Huntington Library, California; Pierpont Morgan Library, New York

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U DX/2/1

Letter from John Ruskin, Denmark Hill, London, to Mrs Baines, 26 Portland Place

c.1865

This handwritten letter was sent from Ruskin's parents' house in Denmark Hill so must have been written between 1843 when they bought the house and 1871 when it was sold subsequent to their deaths. Ruskin lived intermittently with them throughout the period but as the letter concerns the education of girls it may date from about 1865 when *Sesame and Lilies* was first published. Includes photocopy of letter.

Ruskin advises her to find a few other ladies with whom she can agree on 'two or three essential points', and then to carry them out 'if it be but in the education of one girl'. 'By the end of the year you will be able to judge better how you can help me'.

1 item