

Ruskin Art Club

founded 1888

A tax exempt 501 c (3) non-profit corporation

www.RuskinArtClub.org

Ruskin Art Club (Founded 1888)

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“We seek in the arts, in Nature, and in the mysterious power of beauty, the instruments not only of personal transformation, but, in the spirit of John Ruskin, of the transformation of the physical, social, and cultural landscape of our world.”

- Ruskin Art Club

FROM THE EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR: GABRIEL MEYER

“Ruskin and the Sufficient Life”

Now that it’s officially summer, and we’re peeking out from our Covid foxholes, we can safely entertain once more that most seasonal of summery occupations – the books, serious and not-so-serious, which reveal their leisurely wisdom only on beach blankets in the shade of umbrellas, and, so they tell me, with something cool close at hand.

While I’ve yet to risk the short trek to Dockweiler Beach, I already have my marching orders when it comes to summer reading – something intriguing, vivid, delightful – and short. (Summer and that long-promised re-read of Milton’s *Paradise Lost* don’t seem to go together somehow.)

As many of you know, we have just concluded our spring season of programs with a little summer hiatus, and then back again with the fall calendar in mid-August (details below). In May, we presented a mini-conference highlighting Ruskin’s influence on the American Transcendentalists – Emerson, Thoreau, and Muir with fine reflections from Sara Atwood and Laura Dassow Walls (available on our YouTube channel). In preparation for my talk on John Muir, I did a lot of reading, not only in the works of the main characters, but also, more generally, on the topic of 19th-century environmental movements in the US and UK.



The Old Man of Coniston from The Bell - A Winter Study
W G Collingwood

Amid all the research, I found two studies particularly enriching, and in very different ways. One was Devin P. Zuber’s *A Language of Things: Emmanuel Swedenborg and the American Environmental Imagination* (University of Virginia Press, 2019), a book recommended to me by Ted Bosley, the Gamble House’s executive director, and a cogent analysis of the conceptual roots of American Transcendentalism’s “natural theology,” the belief that Nature is a form of Scripture, a sacred text. Zuber skillfully untangles the web of relationships between Emerson, Muir, and the San Francisco Swedenborgians who, under the leadership of Rev. Joseph Worcester, functioned as a nexus of early ecological thinking in the American West and inspired a community of painters (e.g., William Keith and George Innes) and craftsmen at the end of the 19th century. (For more on this, visit the RAC website YouTube channel where you will find Ted Bosley’s fine lecture on the San Francisco Swedenborgians.) Zuber’s book qualifies as “short” and, therefore, summer-worthy, because the main body of text is only 172 pages; the rest of it is comprised of generous academic attachments -- extensive notes, a 24-page bibliography (!), and indices.

The other study, Vicky Albritton and Fredrik Albritton Jonsson’s *Green Victorians: The Simple Life in Ruskin’s Lake District* (University of Chicago Press, 2016) was not exactly new to me – I had met one of its authors, Fredrik Jonsson, at the last academic conference I attended before Covid descended (February 2020) – but, frankly, had only lightly skimmed it (a few pages here and there) until I was in mild-panic-mode preparing my own presentation and read it properly. It, too, curiously, running at less than 200 pages, is a compact little study, but one impressively researched, its authors gifted with noteworthy talents for unpacking concepts (particularly the history of concepts) *and* telling stories.



John Ruskin: Brantwood, 1871

The stories it tells have to do with the lives of Ruskin associates and disciples in the Lake District, near Brantwood, Ruskin’s estate on Coniston Water – people such as Susan Beever, Ruskin’s local “muse,” Ruskin’s secretary W.G. Collingwood, rural activist Albert Fleming, founder of the Langdale Linen Industries, Canon Hardwicke Rawnsley, anti-railroad campaigner and, with Ruskin disciple Octavia Hill, one of the founders of the National Trust. While these figures merit a mention or two in the standard sources, it’s relatively rare to

find whole chapters outlining their highly individual and unique relationships with the Master (rarely simple, especially as Ruskin aged) and, most importantly, deft analyses of their various attempts to translate aspects of Ruskin’s “program,” especially its ecological dimensions, into practice, into the ways that they and their families lived and worked in the Lake District and in the arts, crafts, and literary and charitable enterprises they created. Far from a “boutique project,” their aims encompassed withdrawal from an industrialized, consumerist consciousness, the embrace of simplicity and investment in traditional rural economies along with the acquisition of practical skills and crafts which made their lives less dependent upon mass-produced goods and urban services.

At the heart of these efforts, some of which survived well into the 20th century, is the concept of “the sufficient life” – a life of artful simplicity, imagination, and ethically responsible consumption. Members of the Ruskin Art Club will be familiar with these ideas not only from Ruskin and Morris, and Thoreau, for that matter, but from contemporary thinkers such as Wendell Berry.

Ruskin, in *Modern Painters V*, linked these values to the concept of the good life:

“So the things to be desired for man in a healthy state, are that he should not see dreams, but realities; that he should not destroy life, but save it; and that he should not be rich, but content.”

(Modern Painters V; Library Edition Vol. 7:425-426)

“*Ruskin and the Sufficient Life*” by Gabriel Meyer — Continued

As the authors go on to elaborate:

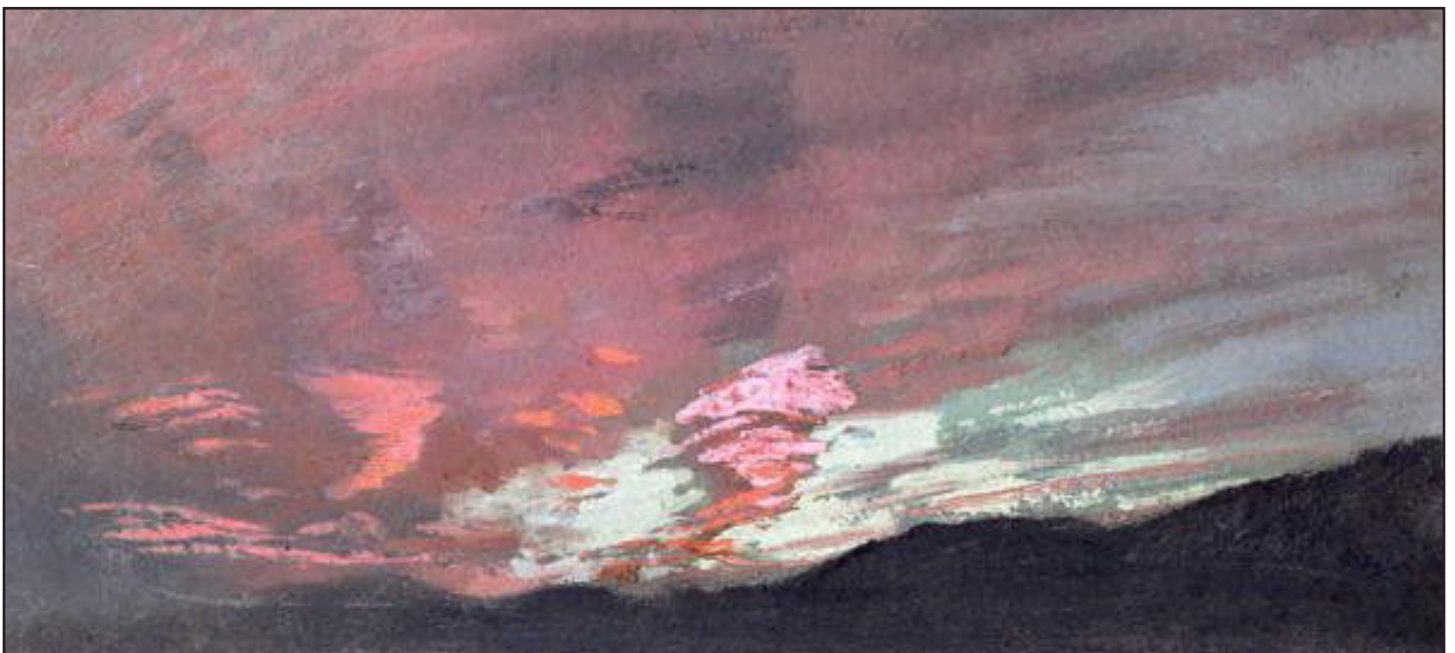
“For Ruskin, wise consumption combined ideals of social justice, humanist technology, and environmental stewardship. To consume well was to promote the dignity of skilled labor, to further the beauty of well-made designs, and preserve the natural world from waste and degradation. Crucially, Ruskin recognized that such limits to consumption were not only morally necessary but also a means of enriching life and making it more meaningful.”

The ecological crises of our age, as Ruskin and his disciples foresaw, call not simply for scientific “fixes” but, crucially, for cultural change, for a re-imagining of human life that is not based on avarice and “affluenza” – the psychological and sociological condition “when too much is never enough.”

The Albritton’s have given us a well-researched and evocative portrait of 19th century idealists who attempted, not without hardships and missteps, to live “sufficient lives” – lives of restraint, industry, community and mindfulness against a world of burgeoning industry and mass consumption. These portraits, however, possess much more than strictly historical or antiquarian interest: They pose penetrating questions about our own 21st-century responses to Ruskin’s vision of the good life – the practical choices we are or are not making in the shadow of today’s even greater and more consequential ecological demands.

NB: Fredrik Albritton Jonsson (University of Chicago) will deliver this year’s Ruskin Lecture, applying Ruskin’s insights to the issues of our day, on Thursday, Sept. 14, 2021, 5pm. The title: “The Sufficient Life: John Ruskin’s Subversive Idea.” Details on our website: www.ruskinrtclub.org.

Gabriel Meyer is the Executive Director of the Ruskin Art Club in Los Angeles



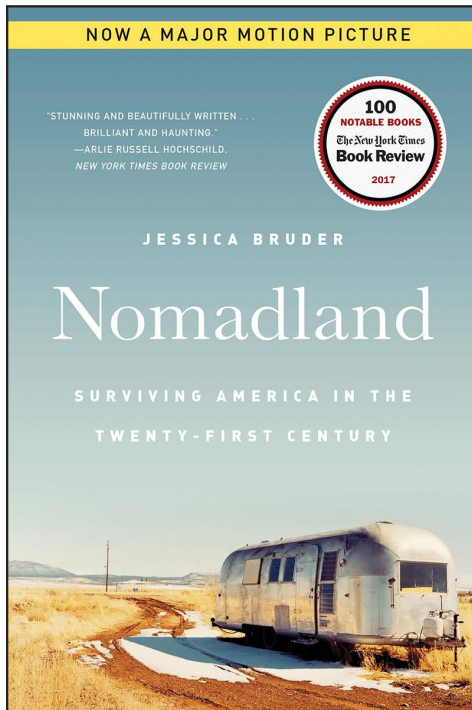
John Ruskin: Stormy Sunset from Brantwood

NEWSLETTER ESSAY:

“What Would Ruskin Think of *Nomadland*?”

By Tyson Gaskill

“There is no wealth but life.” - John Ruskin, *Unto This Last*



Anyone who follows the annual Hollywood awards shows knows that *Nomadland*, directed by Chloé Zhao and based on the nonfiction book by Jessica Bruder, earned an armload of plaudits this year, including Oscars for Best Picture and Director (full disclosure: it also won this year’s USC Libraries Scriptor Award that honors the year’s best Adapted Screenplay—an event which I produce).

The book and film focus on a rarely discussed subset of Americans—people of retirement age living in modified vans or campers, either by choice or need, who travel across the land working short-term, subsistence-level itinerant jobs to pay for auto repairs, food, gas, and other necessities. This kind of rootless existence, like modern tinkers, certainly seems anathema to the comfortable, if not sedentary lifestyle most of us seem to expect in our later years. In researching her book, Bruder embedded herself in this burgeoning group of people for whom the middle-class American Dream is rapidly receding into the rearview mirror (almost literally in this case).



A key company in this drama is Amazon, which hires thousands of short-term employees to help with the annual Christmas rush of orders at their fulfillment warehouses sprinkled throughout the country. While many of the “nomads” seem appreciative of the work, Bruder is unflinching in her description of the low pay, drudgery, and hazardous conditions involved for these itinerant workers. She mentions a 2011 exposé by a Pennsylvania newspaper that documented summer temperatures exceeding 100 degrees in a local Amazon warehouse, and how the company’s response was to hire paramedics to wait outside in ambulances when employees inevitably collapsed from heat exhaustion.

Nomadland: Book Cover & Movie Poster



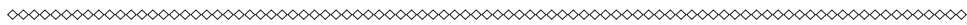
Movie Still from Nomadland (2021)

It’s generally trickier to adapt nonfiction to the screen since, well, a *story* often needs to be developed from material that is rarely written with a cinematic vision. And that’s the case here, as Frances McDormand’s character “Fern”—the central one in the film—is nowhere to be found in the book. Instead, the book focuses on a few different people who are the eponymous nomads and who appear *as themselves* (but as peripheral characters) in the movie; Fern operates as a kind of summation of their thoughts and experiences. Much has been made in the press over the past year about how Zhao’s film soft-pedals the way Amazon treats these “workampers”—who generally suffer an astonishing amount of repetitive stress injuries. But the reality is a bit more nuanced; many are grateful for the pay, which, while low, is still better than a lot of other available jobs of similar difficulty. Bruder at times wonders if the nomads suffer from a kind of Stockholm Syndrome, which becomes clear when one of the workers injured *on the job* at a warehouse expresses her deep gratitude that Amazon had a doctor on the premises for such situations. One worker on the night shift, Silvianna, “had been watching [the prison drama] *Orange is the New Black* and found herself comparing the inmates’ lives with her own.”

“Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions. If you will have that precision out of them, and make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them. . . And the great cry that rises from all our manufacturing cities is louder than their furnace blast, is all in very deed for this - that we manufacture everything there except men . . . to brighten, to strengthen, to refine, or to form a single living spirit never enters into our estimate of advantages.”

- John Ruskin, *The Nature of Gothic*, 1:12,16

Amazon is obviously not the only company in history (let alone in Bruder’s book!) to take liberties with the welfare of its employees. But what would our formidable Victorian think of this way of life (once he got over his revulsion of the techno-Utopia Amazon seems to promise with its same-day delivery of any good produced under the sun)? Ruskin’s most pointed commentary on the subject of labor comes in a series of essays published under the title *Unto This Last*, and which are readily available in a Penguin Classics edition edited by Clive Wilmer. In it he rails against prevailing notions by political economists that workers were composed of “steam, magnetism, gravitation, or any other agent of calculable force,” declaring that they were “an engine whose motive power is a Soul.” He argues that “masters” (in this instance, companies who hire seasonal workers) gamble in a kind of lottery to find the lowest common denominator—workers who will accept low wages for the promise of consistent employment. Almost preciously by today’s standards, he declares that “the manufacturer, in any commercial crisis or distress, is bound to take the suffering of it with his men, and even to take more of it for himself than he allows his men to feel.” It’s almost painful to think of the eyerolls of millions of Americans unceremoniously dumped out of work the past few decades, either during the Great Recession or nearly anytime private equity firms take over a company and methodically strip it of its resources. The workers are always the ones left holding the empty shopping bag.



Tyson Gaskill is the executive director of communications and events at the USC Libraries, where he has overseen the libraries’ cultural programs since 2001. In addition, he oversees the conception, curation, and presentation of exhibitions at the Doheny Memorial Library. He is also responsible for producing the Libraries’ annual Scriptor Award fundraiser and the public programs at the annual Los Angeles Archives Bazaar. He is a board member of the Ruskin Art Club.

UPCOMING EVENTS [VIRTUAL]

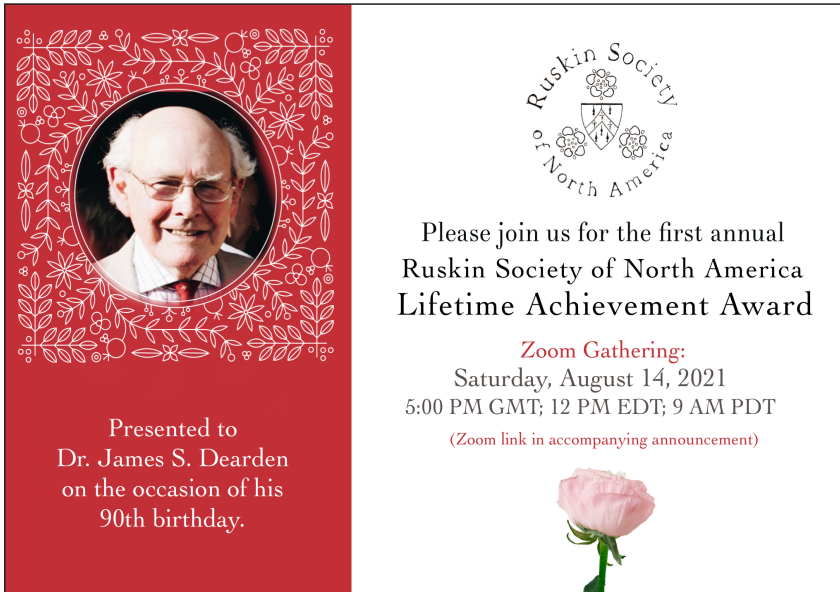
The Ruskin Art Club is adjusting, as are all organizations these days, to the ongoing challenges of Covid-19 restrictions. Most of our events will continue to appear under the “virtual” banner; but we hope, LA County protocols permitting, to host a number of hybrid events in the coming months, which will have in-person and well as virtual dimensions. Our website will keep you informed of our upcoming events and the formats in which they will be presented. Please continue to register for all of these events at info@ruskinartclub.org.

AUGUST 2021

James Dearden Receives the Ruskin Lifetime Achievement Award

by Professor Jim Spates

Saturday, August 14th, 9am PDT



One of the signal events on the worldwide Ruskin calendar this year will occur on **August 14, 2021**, via Zoom, 9 AM Pacific Daylight Time, 12 noon Eastern daylight Time, 5PM BST.

The newly- formed **Ruskin Society of North America** will award its first *Lifetime Achievement Award* to the beloved Ruskin scholar, **Dr. James S. Dearden of the Isle of Wight**, on the occasion of his ninetieth birthday.

For more than a half century, Dr. Dearden has been the preserver of one of the most important collections of Ruskin letters and diaries in the world – first, at the Bembridge school on the Isle of Wight, now at The Ruskin at Lancaster University in the UK. In addition, he has long been one of the most significant and influential scholars in the field of Ruskin studies. Over the course of these decades, Jim has written dozens of articles about Ruskin and his life and a significant number of books to accompany them--most importantly, two that have already achieved “classic” status: *Ruskin: A Life in Pictures*, and the more recent and monumental, the *Library of John Ruskin*, destined to be a key reference for scholars and those interested in Ruskin for decades to come.

The Award event will be co-hosted by the Co-Directors of the Ruskin Society of North America, **Sara Atwood** and **Jim Spates**, and will feature a filmed interview with Dr. Dearden, conducted by Howard Hull, curator of Brantwood, Ruskin’s home in the Lake District, along with a series of brief tributes from Clive Wilmer, former Master of the Guild of St. George; Rachel Dickinson, current Master of the Guild of St. George; Stuart Eagles, former Editor of the Guild’s annual publication, *The Companion*; Paul Dawson, editor of *The Friends of Ruskin’s Brantwood Newsletter* and Chair of The Friends of Ruskin’s Brantwood, and, not least, remarks by two major Ruskin scholars, Drs. Dinah Birch (currently at the University of Liverpool) and Robert Hewison (former Slade Professor of Fine Arts at Oxford).



David Judson, President of Judson Studios

David Judson is the 5th generation president of Judson Studios, and head of the Stained Glass Association of America. Under his direction, the studio has expanded its capacity to include contemporary practices in fused glass, working with outside artists to create works for galleries and public art installations.

Jane Brucker, Artist

Jane Brucker uses installation and performance to engage the viewer through contemplation, movement, and ritual activity. In large installations and intimate, small-scale sculpture, she touches on the poetry of existence by examining memory, fragility, and death. In addition to her studio practice, she is a professor and head of the drawing program in the Department of Art and Art History at Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles.



James Fishburne, Museum Director

James Fishburne is the curator at Forest Lawn museum. He has an MA and PhD from UCLA focused in the Italian Renaissance. Fishburne then worked at the American Museum of Ceramic Art, at the Getty, and taught art history courses at local colleges. In 2018, he was hired as the Director of Forest Lawn Museum, which is the art museum located within Forest Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale.

SEPTEMBER 2021

**21st Annual Ruskin Lecture:
“The Sufficient Life: Ruskin’s Subversive Idea”**

by Fredrik Albritton Jonsson

Tuesday, September 14th, 5pm



*The Old Man of Coniston from The Bell - A Winter Study
W G Collingwood*

We live in a moment of planetary crisis. The global expansion of consumer society has produced worldwide ecological strains, including climate change, the threat of mass extinction, and a greater frequency of epidemics from land-use change. Put differently – we are beginning to see the limits of the prevailing growth model. American standards of affluence cannot be universalized without dangerous environmental effects. It is easy to lose hope in the face of these challenges. A long-term remedy to planetary crisis will

require profound cultural transformation. How do we overcome the cornucopian idea of insatiability that permeates our culture? This talk will explore the alternative ethics and aesthetics of sufficiency: John Ruskin’s efforts to reorient the imagination away from the marketplace, toward the world of art and nature and the virtues of simple living.

Fredrik Albritton Jonsson is an historian of energy, environment and intellectual history at the University of Chicago. Originally from Stockholm, Sweden, he now lives on the edge of the Indiana Dunes national park outside Chicago. Most of his books and essays focus on two closely related questions: how did fossil fuel come to dominate modern society and what might the past teach us about finding a different way of flourishing in the world?

He is currently finishing a book with Carl Wennerlind entitled *Scarcity: Economy and Nature in the Age of Capitalism* (Harvard University Press, 2022).



Fredrik Albritton Jonsson

Pay a visit to the improved and updated **Ruskin Art Club** website!

Please note that the web address has changed:

We are now www.ruskinartclub.org.

The domain name is not all that's new. We've added new features to almost every tab including new background articles and Board of Directors' bios. We've reorganized the Resources pages with more useful information and references to many more Ruskin-oriented organizations and collections, along with an expanded library of recommended videos (art exhibitions, Ruskin-themed videos, and lectures), and we've added a unique page devoted to Ruskin's music. Our new and enlarged YouTube channel is perhaps the most notable addition to our website with its archive of recent lectures as well as videos of annual "Ruskin" lectures and other noteworthy events we've hosted in the past. By the way, when you catch up on a lecture you've missed or browse the channel, **be sure to subscribe!**


We've made it easier than ever to become a **Member** of the Ruskin Art Club, to **renew your membership online**, or to **donate** to the club.

You can also register to attend an event on the Calendar page.

Please tell us what you think of the changes and feel free to suggest improvements or additional features you'd like to see.

Contact us at our new email address: info@ruskinartclub.org.

(Email to our old address will be redirected.)



For news of Ruskin Art Club events, especially our new season of **in-person & virtual programs, lectures, and field trips**, visit us at:

www.RuskinArtClub.org
Ruskin Art Club on YouTube