Ruskin Art Club

founded 1888

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www.RuskinArtClub.org

Ruskin Art Club
(Founded 1888)

200 S. Ave. 66,
Los Angeles, CA 90042
info@ruskinartclub.org

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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

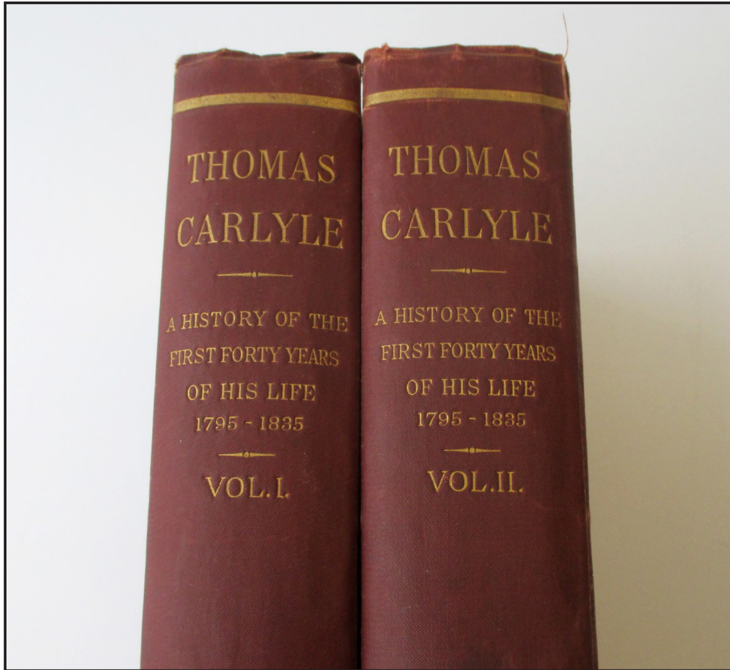
"Homecomings"

This is the story of a remarkable find – a discovery and a restoration that proved to be more interesting than we knew.

It starts with Jim Spates, a Ruskin scholar from Geneva, New York, who frequently figures in our programs and discussions, Ruskin blog-meister (whyruskin.wordpress.com) and the current co-director, with Sara Atwood of the Ruskin Society of North America. Jim told the part of the story he knew in our last Newsletter (#13).

I'll review the details: At the end of 2021, Beth Haswell, proprietor of the "Stomping Grounds," a shop specializing in regional memorabilia, picture framing, and antiquarian books in Geneva, New York, informed Jim that a local estate sale had yielded a pair of books with Ruskin's Brantwood bookplate -- a two-volume set of the first edition of J. Froude's 1882 biography of Thomas Carlyle. And, what's more, full of marginal annotations.

Upon perusal, Jim realized what a treasure these books were. The characteristic bookplate told him that they had been part of Ruskin's Brantwood library, dispersed in the early years of the 20th century. But the abundant marginal jottings, Jim recognized at once, were in Ruskin's unmistakable hand. These volumes had to be returned to the library from whence they had come and



Froude, Carlyle biography

to the service of Ruskin scholarship.

When the proprietor suggested a price that, while reasonable, was beyond a retired professor’s means, Jim called me and we were able to enlist the help of Stuart and Beverly Denenberg, board members of the Ruskin Art Club, to purchase them. We then offered the volumes to The Ruskin Library at Lancaster University in the United Kingdom, which, happily, agreed to purchase the volumes and take charge of them.

This seemed the happy end of the story. That is, until I brought the volumes with me last summer to personally oversee their return to the shelves of Ruskin’s study in Brantwood.

Over dinner in Coniston the night before the short trip to Brantwood, Stephen Wildman, who had directed and curated the world-class collections at the Ruskin Library at Lancaster University for nearly a decade, and had overseen the collections housed at Brantwood, puzzled over the Carlyle volumes. I say “puzzled” because the ever-knowledgeable Stephen informed me that Lancaster already boasted two volumes of Froude’s biography of Carlyle, same edition, in its collection. And, like the ones before him, these, too, were annotated in Ruskin’s hand.

Did Ruskin own two identical sets of the same biography and annotate both of them? It didn’t make sense.

It was then that we noticed that the set I had brought with me was subtitled *A History of the First Forty Years of His (Carlyle’s) Life, 1795-1835*. Mystery solved: Froude’s biography encompassed four volumes, not two: the first forty years and a second set, *Thomas Carlyle – A History of His Life in London, 1834-1881*.[1]

The set that Lancaster had in its collection were the two later volumes. I had, unknowingly, brought its companions, volumes 1 and 2, to complete them – and all four volumes annotated by Ruskin. A remarkable reunion, indeed!

[1] J. A. Froude, *Thomas Carlyle: A History of the First Forty Years of His Life – 1795-1835*, 2 volumes, Longmans, Green, and Co., London (1882); *Thomas Carlyle: A History of His Life in London – 1834-1881*, 2 volumes, Longmans, Green, and Co., London (1884).

[2] Ruskin left his estate to the Arthur Severn family who had cared for him in his final decade (Ruskin died in 1900). Ruskin’s manuscripts, drawings, library, and other effects were sold at auction in July 1930 and, after Arthur Severn’s death in 1931, in May of that year. Ruskin disciple John Howard Whitehouse saved a large collection of Ruskin primary materials from dispersal as well as ensuring the purchase of the Brantwood estate itself for posterity. The Whitehouse collection today is housed at Lancaster University and constitutes the world’s largest single repository of Ruskin manuscripts, correspondence, and drawings. For those interested in detailed accounts of the 1930-31 auctions of Ruskin effects, I have provided links to auction catalog summaries: http://english.selu.edu/humanitiesonline/ruskin_dev/notes/provenance_sothebys_1930_note.php; https://erm.selu.edu/notes/provenance_sothebys_1931_note. You can also browse Lancaster’s University’s collection on the Ruskin Art Club website, www.ruskinartclub.org, under “Resources.”

The next day, I had the moving experience of returning the Froude volumes to Ruskin’s study in Brantwood, his estate on Lake Coniston, in the presence of Brantwood’s director, Howard Hull, and Joseph Rodrigues, my research assistant. They were placed in a large bookcase belonging to Ruskin’s father, John James Ruskin, from whence they had been exiled when the contents of the house were sold[2] more than ninety years ago.

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

Revisiting 2022...

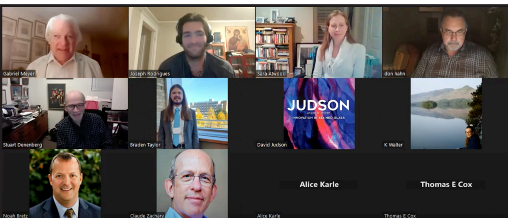
As 2022 winds down, let's appreciate a few of the highlights of the past year at the Ruskin Art Club:

The annual Ruskin Birthday Bash on February 10 with the Zelter Quartet and actor Jeff Sugarman.

We launched a new annual event in 2022 with the Louise Huxtable Lecture on Architecture in association with Architecture Collections at the Getty Research Institute. With Maristella Casciato, Meredith Clausen, and Edward Nilsson.

Prof. Amy Woodson-Boulton delivered one of 2022's most provocative and timely presentations in her April 28 lecture on "Ruskin and the Plastics Crisis."

Appropriately, our first in-person (hybrid) event of 2022 was the 22nd Annual Ruskin Lecture at USC's Doheny Library on Sept. 8. Prof. Eugene McCarraher delivered a remarkable lecture on "The Economy of Heaven: Ruskin, Capitalism, and the Post-Capitalist Future." The event included our traditional exhibition of historic materials from the Ruskin Art Club Special Collections at USC's Doheny Library.



Following the success of last year's multi-part study series analyzing Ruskin's *Unto this Last* (with Prof. Jim Spates), we featured a two-part study series in November introducing Ruskin's seminal work, *Modern Painters* with Prof. Sara Atwood.

These dynamic events as well as all our other lectures and field trips are available on our YouTube channel, Please subscribe!

Remembering Louise Coffey-Webb 1956 -2022

Note from the editor: Louise Coffey-Webb was a Life Member of the Ruskin Art Club. She had been preparing a lecture for the RAC, "The Eye of the Beholder: Peacocks in Art and Design," which was scheduled for Oct. 24, 2022. Sadly, Louise died unexpectedly in July. Her friend and colleague Dale Gluckman paid tribute to her memory in October with a lecture focused on historic Thai textiles and art. (Please visit our website www.ruskinartclub.org to view a video of this talk on our YouTube channel.) We wished to include Alex Webb's obituary notice in this newsletter, published in "Culver City Crossroads" last July.

Louise Coffey-Webb, generally known as Loulou, who died suddenly on July 3rd was born in Manchester, England and brought up in Berkhamsted, a town near London, the second of three children.

Very bright but not particularly academic in her early years, she started working for BBC radio after leaving school and quickly became an effective production assistant in radio drama and documentaries.

In 1978 she met a young American actor, script writer, and comedian who was working in London. They married in summer 1979 and Loulou came to live in Hollywood, the first of many homes in greater LA.

Here she caught up with her academic education, collecting a BA and MA from Antioch University and then put her fascination and love for costume, textiles, fashion history and the arts to use in a series of interesting roles.

Her career included working for the costume departments of Warner Bros. and Sony, being Collections Manager at LACMA, a Curator and Assistant Professor at Woodbury University, and a Project Manager for the James G. Galanos Foundation. For the last five years or so she was an inspired and committed Collections Manager for the Culver City Art in Public Places Program. During her career she also held down many more voluntary positions, board memberships and advisory roles too numerous to mention.

She is the author of *Managing Costume Collections and the famous little red book of Culver City's Art in Public Places*.

Loulou's passing is mourned by an enormous circle of friends, enthusiasts, colleagues and ex-colleagues both here and in the United Kingdom. She had no children and her marriage did not last, but she created an international family of those inspired by her expertise, her love of company, her empathy with others and her unconquerable sense of fun.

NEWSLETTER ESSAY:

The Storm Cloud of the Twenty-First Century:

John Ruskin, Pope Francis, and global warming

by Eugene McCarraher

The violence present in our hearts, wounded by sin, is also reflected in the symptoms of sickness evident in the soil, in the water, in the air and in all forms of life. —Pope Francis, Laudato si'[3]

A wildfire in Battleship Mountain, British Columbia, September 10, 2022 (CNS photo/BC Wildfire Service via Reuters)

When Pope Francis observed that the natural world had been infected with human wickedness, he echoed one of the more macabre and prescient prophecies of ecological ruin: *The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century* (1884), John Ruskin's account of the impact of industrial capitalism on the weather of England. In

[3] *Laudato si' (Praise Be to You)* is the second encyclical of Pope Francis. The encyclical has the subtitle "on care for our common home". In it, the pope critiques consumerism and irresponsible development, laments environmental degradation and global warming, and calls all people of the world to take "swift and unified global action." The encyclical is dated May 24, 2015.

Ruskin's eyes, the ailing earth had been contaminated by the putrescence of our wounded hearts. Polluting the skies with the effluvium of avarice, "iniquity" leavened the clouds; "bitterness and malice" befouled the winds; "poisonous smoke" composed of "dead men's souls" rose up from the ominous mills. "Blanched Sun,—blighted grass,—blinded man." This was "blasphemy," in Ruskin's view: a desecration of "the visible Heaven" and a sacrilege upon "all the good works and purposes of Nature." "Of states in such moral gloom every seer of old predicted the physical gloom," he warned. If the moral and material pestilence of industrialized avarice metastasized, our terrestrial paradise would become a ghastly inferno. The only antidotes to this metaphysical contagion were "Hope…Reverence…[and] Love"—a constellation of virtues that, by healing our desolate souls, would also mend or mitigate the desolation already inflicted on the planet.

The phantasmagorical quality of Ruskin's vision has caused even many of his admirers, then and now, to attribute it to early-stage dementia. (One contemporary scholar has opined that Storm-Cloud is "more nearly eschatology than meteorology" and that it represents its author's "climactic shadow-struggle projected as apocalyptic myth." Thus the "gloom" is none other than Ruskin's own encroaching madness inscribed into the firmament.) Yet far from indicating delirium, Storm-Cloud offers a lucid and penetrating account of our ongoing assault on the natural world, heralding a planet existentially imperiled by the plague of capitalist modernity. Indeed, with his Romantic sensibility that alerted him to the eerie signs of the times, Ruskin anticipated Pope Francis's 2015 encyclical, *Laudato si'*. Certainly, the reactions to Francis's letter mirror the derision directed at Ruskin. Like *Storm-Cloud, Laudato si'* was casually dismissed as the cri de coeur of a downer, "the work of a profoundly pessimistic man," as Matthew Schmitz lamented in *First Things*. Yet neither Francis's vision nor Ruskin's issue in melancholy. Precisely because they both exhibit a sacramental imagination that captures the direct and intimate connection of spiritual and ecological disorder, they rekindle and sustain a faith in Ruskin's hallowed trinity of virtues—the excellences of soul needed to confront the storm cloud of the twenty-first century.

Despite the obvious religious differences between the Victorian prophet and the pope—Ruskin was a heterodox Christian who had experienced an "unconversion" from Evangelicalism—a sacramental consciousness lies at the heart of their ecological imaginations. As one of the premiere Romantic intellectuals of the nineteenth century, Ruskin epitomized the Romantic inheritance of the medieval sacramental worldview, its modern restatement, in Wordsworth's lines, of

…a sense sublime

Of something far more deeply interfused,

Whose dwelling is the light of setting suns,

And the round ocean and the living air,

And the blue sky, and in the mind of man.

Throughout his work—from the art criticism of his early career to his later climatological oracles—Ruskin discerned the trademarks of divinity "deeply interfused" in nature. He argued in *Modern Painters* (1843–60) that artists portrayed the "faultless, ceaseless, inconceivable, inexhaustible loveliness, which God has stamped upon all things." The beauty of flowers, rocks, or human beings displayed, he wrote, "the Divine attributes." When we gaze upon "the material nearness of these heavens," he marveled, we "acknowledge His own immediate presence." In "The Work of Iron" (1858), Ruskin importuned readers to consider that a pebble possessed "a kind of soul," and that it would say to us, if we were inclined to listen, that "'I am not earth—I am earth and air in one; part of that blue heaven which you love, and long for, is already in me.'" When Ruskin reported on his ominous storm cloud, he was deciphering signs of sacrilege as well as recording ecological devastation.

Francis echoes Ruskin's Romantic apprehension of God's countenance in the material realm. Invoking the cultures of Indigenous peoples whose habitats are being stolen and contaminated, the pope lauds their belief that "land is not a commodity but rather a gift from God…a sacred space with which they need to interact." All of nature is "imbued with the radiant presence" of God; "to contemplate creation," he asserts elsewhere, "is to hear a message"; divinity conveys its power and love, he reminds us, even in "the last speck of dust of our planet." What Gerard Manley Hopkins called "the dearest freshness deep down things" envelops the entire universe, beckoning us into what Francis calls "universal communion" with all created things. Calling on us to relinquish the authoritarian desire for technological hegemony, he issues an invitation into an "openness to awe and wonder" that will reestablish "fraternity and beauty in our relationship with nature." Francis's ecological vision rests not on a moral and political claim about the primacy of the common good, but on an ontological claim about the nature of the universe: that its architecture is thoroughly leavened by what Dante called "the Love that moves the sun and the other stars."

Although they share a sacramental cosmology, Francis and Ruskin travel in somewhat different critical and political directions. Perhaps the most controversial section of *Laudato si'* is Francis's account and condemnation of "the technocratic paradigm" in the encyclical's third chapter, "The Human Roots of the Ecological Crisis"—a thinly veiled retort to Lynn White Jr.'s 1966 essay "The Historical Roots of Our Ecologic Crisis," in which the historian argued that mounting environmental damage could be traced to the Judeo-Christian conviction that God had bestowed "dominion" over the planet to human beings. Rejecting White's equation of that "dominion" with what he calls a "Promethean vision of mastery over the world," Francis locates the roots of our ecological predicament in "an undifferentiated and one-dimensional paradigm" for developing and using technology. This "technocratic paradigm," as he later dubs it, posits "a subject who, using logical and rational procedures, progressively approaches and gains control over an external object," which is conceived, he remarks, "as something formless, completely open to manipulation"—bereft, that is, of any sacramental quality. This imperious subject employs the scientific and experimental method, which is, in Francis's view, "already a technique of possession, mastery, and transformation." Anticipating the

obvious objection that human beings have always sought to exert some degree of control over the rest of nature, Francis differentiates this modern paradigm of mastery from previous forms of dominion. Before the ascendency of the technocratic paradigm, he contends, human efforts to shape and master nature were "in tune with and respected the possibilities offered by the things themselves"—things were not, that is, seen as "formless, completely open to manipulation"—and mastery was thus "a matter of receiving what nature itself allowed, as if from its own hand." The relationship between the instruments of dominion and nature is conceived here as a collaborative, even loving process in which human beings practice receptivity as well as mastery and acknowledge the real material limitations on their ability to control and produce.

Under the "technocratic paradigm," however, this respectful and reverent relationship gives way to relentless exploitation—a "confrontational" relationship, in Francis's words, a combative and often violent struggle in which human beings seek both to establish unrestricted supremacy over nature and to "extract everything possible" from it, believing that through technological expertise they can sustain an economy of "infinite or unlimited growth." Worse, the technocratic paradigm has become not just a model for human dominion over the rest of nature but also, and perhaps even more insidiously, "an epistemological paradigm which shapes the lives of individuals and the workings of society." Human beings turn the technocratic paradigm on themselves so as to extract everything they can in terms of efficiency and productivity. In this way, the pope warns, "technology tends to absorb everything into its ironclad logic." For Francis, the technocratic paradigm is another term for what Max Weber dubbed "the disenchantment of the world": the evacuation of spiritual forces from the world so as to unleash technological control for the purpose of human prosperity—the de-sacramentalization of the world, a denial of Ruskin's "Divine attributes." The disenchanted logic of the technocratic paradigm sanctions a host of inhumane developments, two of which Francis discusses: automation, in which labor—which should be a way for human beings to cultivate and express their talents—is supplanted by machines; and the emergence of biotechnologies that dislocate farmers, diminish biodiversity, destroy ecosystems, and concentrate control over agricultural production in the hands of global corporations.

Pope Francis accepts a gift given by members of the Laudato Si' movement (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

From this analysis Francis draws two important conclusions. First, he observes, "technological products are not neutral," an insight that runs contrary to the common wisdom that techniques, machines, and devices

constitute an amoral, apolitical, and non-ideological edifice of instrumentality that can be used for any purpose, good or evil. Francis argues that because technology is designed by human beings, it inevitably embodies human purposes. Second, the non-neutrality of technical means implies that "decisions which may seem purely instrumental are in reality decisions about the kind of society we want to build," a rebuke that reminds us that words such as "practical" or "efficient" are always empty and misleading unless they point to an objective in terms of which something is "practical" or "efficient." Since the triumph of the technocratic paradigm is responsible for looming ecological catastrophe, it must be repudiated, Francis maintains, in favor of a new—or old but renovated—paradigm through which humanity can "recover the values and the great goods swept away by our unrestricted delusions of grandeur." He sketches an "integral" or "social ecology" in which cultural, economic, and ecological issues are interrelated, represented by "cooperatives of small producers [who] adopt less polluting means of production, and opt for a non-consumerist model of life, recreation, and community."

Francis's excoriation of the technocratic paradigm and his adumbration of a sacramental ecology make *Laudato si'* one of the most perspicacious moral and spiritual documents of our time—forthright in its condemnation of the desire for unbridled power, uncompromisingly bleak in its portrayal of the depredation that has immiserated so much of the world, and breathtakingly hopeful in its central conviction that, as Hopkins put it, "nature is never spent," precisely because of the "dearest freshness deep down things." It articulates clearly the inexorable consequences of the vision of an earlier Francis—Sir Francis Bacon, that is, who advanced the Promethean claims of the new science and technology at the advent of modernity. As the savants and technicians on the island of Bensalem declare in Bacon's *The New Atlantis* (1626)—an early prototype of the modern alliance between scientific endeavor and industrial enterprise—"the end of our foundation is the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible." The endless expansion of "human empire" required a thoroughly utilitarian conception of the natural world; the objective of the new scientific method, Bacon asserted in his *Novum Organum* (1620), was to "bind her to your service and make her your slave." Rooted in spiritual blight, this project of subjugating the natural world has culminated, Francis shows, not in universal affluence but rather in global derangement.

Bacon was writing at the birth of capitalism, and it's the capitalist character of scientific and technological modernity that Francis tends to ignore or obscure, and which Ruskin helps us better remember and confront. To be fair, Francis does sometimes signal an acute awareness of the capitalist roots of our ecological crisis. He observes that our ecological woes stem directly from "our current models of production and consumption," and he rues that "the economy accepts every advance in technology with a view to profit." He clearly names the champions of the technocratic paradigm: "economists, financiers, and experts in technology"—in other words, the business clerisy, the monetary wizards, and the Silicon Valley tech bros who constitute the intelligentsia of neoliberal capitalism. There are numerous other instances in which Francis appears to link ecological catastrophe to the everyday mechanisms of capital accumulation. And yet, Francis never once calls

the system by its name, relying instead on any number of euphemisms and circumlocutions.

Alas, Francis's reluctance to directly indict capitalism both banalizes his portrayal of the "technocratic paradigm" and limits his political imagination. His lack of historical specificity leads him—as it led earlier critics such as Friedrich Georg Jünger, Martin Heidegger, and Jacques Ellul—to write of an undifferentiated "technology" that appears to act as a historical agent in its own right, unfettered from the purposes and control of the human beings who create it. Recall how Francis asserts that "technology tends to absorb everything into *its* ironclad logic"—not the pecuniary logic of capital, shared by the professional and managerial classes who act as its faithful stewards. Here, Francis seems to forget his own admonition that "technology" is not neutral. Conservative critics would have lost their minds if the pope had cited the first volume of *Capital*, but there Marx demonstrates that mechanization in the capitalist factory—conducted today under the rubric of "automation"—was and always will be about gaining greater control over workers and the work process and about augmenting the surplus value that capital can extract from labor. Indeed, there's a long line of Marxist and non-Marxist historians—from Lewis Mumford to Harry Braverman to David F. Noble—who have documented the capitalist imperatives that have shaped technologies, from their selection to their design.

" Preaching jeremiads (religious or secular) has been of little discernible avail against the cultural strategies of accumulation. Talking about consumerism is often just a way of not talking about capitalism."

Francis's hesitancy about naming capitalism introduces an incoherence into the political implications of "integral" or "social ecology." "Business is a noble vocation," Francis writes somewhat defensively, "directed to producing wealth and improving our world"—"especially," he adds, when it "sees the creation of jobs as an essential part of its service to the common good." Although we don't hear much anymore of the Ayn-Randian bunkum about "job creators," it's essential to remember that the purpose of business under capitalism is to accumulate capital, not to create jobs or to serve the common good. Why are businesses for which job creation is supposed to be so essential a service automating production and services at an accelerating pace? Because automation cuts down or eliminates labor costs and increases profits. Work under capitalism is not arranged so as to allow workers to flourish; it's arranged (and increasingly surveilled) to exploit and discipline them. Those producer cooperatives in which Francis invests his hopes would have to conduct their work and employ their technology within a very different institutional ecology.

Ruskin, by contrast, insisted that *capitalism* lay at the root of our ecological crisis—that capitalism, not technology per se, was generating the ecological conditions for the storm clouds of the coming centuries. Well before *Storm-Cloud*, in *Unto This Last* (1862)—his controversial foray into "political economy," which

was even more harshly rebuked than Storm-Cloud—Ruskin had forthrightly asserted that capitalism and Christianity are antithetical and incompatible. "I know no previous instance in history," he observed, "of a nation's establishing a systematic disobedience to the first principles of its professed religion." "The writings which we (verbally) esteem as divine," he continued, "not only denounce the love of money as the source of all evil, and as an idolatry abhorred of the Deity, but declare mammon service to be the accurate and irreconcilable opposite of God's service." A decade later, in *Munera Pulveris* (1872), Ruskin contended that capitalism, far from fostering a "disenchantment" or de-sacramentalization of the world, had erected its own totemic structure of deity, sacrament, and devotions. "We have, indeed, a nominal religion, to which we pay tithes of property and sevenths of time. But we have also a practical and earnest religion, to which we devote nine-tenths of our property, and six-sevenths of our time." "Getting-on" was the name of this religion's divinity, or, rather, Mammon, "the great evil Spirit of false and fond desire, or 'Covetousness, which is Idolatry.'

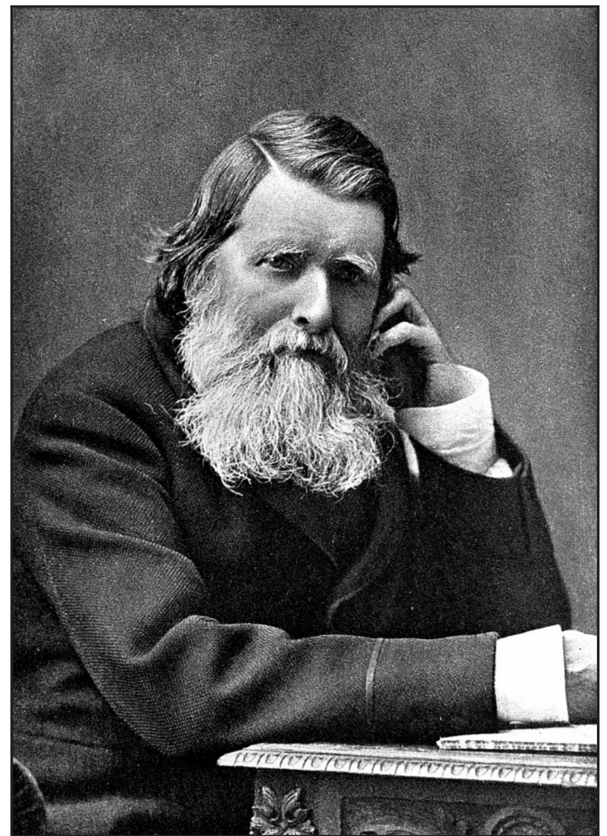
Ruskin's acute perception of the grotesque sacramentality of capitalism was inseparable from his courageous advocacy of what is sometimes called "small-c communism." Although he referred to himself as "a violent Tory of the old school," Ruskin inspired William Morris, R. H. Tawney, G.D.H. Cole, and many others in the rank-and-file of British socialism before World War I. In the series of open letters to industrial workers in the 1870s that became *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin dubbed himself "a Communist of the old school…reddest of the red."

What was this "old-school" and "reddest of the red" communism? Ruskin never provided any coherent, systematic answer to this question, but in *Fors Clavigera* he hinted that his ideal community of workers was a body of artisans and farmers, devoted to the production of useful, beautiful objects and to the conviction that "public, or common, wealth shall be more and statelier in all its substance than private or singular wealth"; indeed, "the common treasure of the whole nation should be of superb and precious things." Moreover, "the fortunes of private persons should be small" and their dwellings should be equally modest; but public buildings—schools, libraries, and fountains, for instance—should be "magnificent" and "noble."

The principle of communist property in this producer's republic of virtue would be that, in Ruskin's words, "our property belongs to everybody, and everybody's property to us." This reflects what anthropologists have called "usufruct": a regime of property rights (common among tribal and archaic communities) as inhering in use and need rather than in mere legal ownership. Usufruct elides the distinction between "private" and "common"; even if I "own" an object, it becomes someone else's—or the whole community's—if it's needed, and the community has a claim on whatever I produce on "my" land, shop, office, or factory. It's a far more fluid, democratic, and egalitarian conception of property rights than that enforced in capitalist societies, in which ownership entails almost absolute rights of use and exclusion. (Although we do see traces of usufruct in the laws of eminent domain, whereby private property can be seized on behalf of the common good.) Usufruct also makes sense of the early Christians as depicted in the book of Acts—one of the most disconcerting

passages in the New Testament, and one that has given rise to many risible feats of exegetical and homiletical duplicity. "No one claimed that any of their possessions was their own, but they shared everything they had," Luke tells us; the first Christians in Jerusalem (and, it seems, throughout the Roman Empire) erased the line between private and common. (David Bentley Hart is only reporting the good news when he suggests that the political economy of Christianity is anarcho-communism.) The communist imperative of the Gospel was so clear that even after the Constantinian compromise with the principalities of property and politics, Christians continued to affirm the revolutionary implications of the evangelion. Following, for example, St. Basil—"the bread that you keep belongs to the hungry, the cloak in your closet to the naked"—and St. Thomas Aquinas—the "universal destination of goods"—Francis writes in *Laudato si'* of a "social mortgage on private property." It's the closest he comes to a straightforward declaration of the communist Gospel.

Because the capitalist mortgage on private property has to be paid in profits and dividends, one of its uses, as Ruskin noted in *The Stones of Venice* (1853), is the mechanization of production for the purposes of lowering costs and controlling workers—"proletarianization," in Marxist terms, or workers' displacement from artisanal modes of labor and their relocation in urban factories. For Marx, this was a step forward in history, as the industrial regime of technology outstripped the precision and productivity of its artisanal predecessor. To Ruskin, this "degradation of the operative into a machine" marked a regression and a desecration. "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him," Ruskin mused. "You cannot make both. Men were not intended to work with the accuracy of tools, to be precise and perfect in all their actions." Workers who labored like machines inevitably lost any joy in the act of creation. "It is not that men are ill fed," Ruskin wrote, "but that they have no pleasure in the work by which they make their bread."



John Ruskin (Wikimedia Commons)

Ruskin's "old-school" communism is not that of the Marxist tradition. For Marxists, communism is the conclusion of a dialectical historical process in which capitalism creates the social and technological conditions for abundance. Thus, in the Marxist scenario, what Ruskin described as the consequences of "mammon-service"—the concentration of industry, the complete mechanization and dehumanization of technology, the dispossession of workers from control over the means of production—are necessary, albeit painful, stages in the path to communism. The "technocratic paradigm" represents, in this view, the arduous but inescapable de-sacramentalization of matter and its subordination to the Promethean will of a humanity increasingly

liberated from all constraints on productive power. Despite recent attempts to greenwash Marx, Marxists have inherited from their capitalist antagonists a commitment to economic growth as the foundation of freedom—a warrant to exploit the earth which, as Theodor W. Adorno once remarked, underwrote Marx's apparent determination to turn the planet into a giant factory. As an "old-school" communist outraged by the "blasphemy" spewed into the heavens, Ruskin stood against this mythology of "progress," and the ecological ruin it entailed.

" Despite recent attempts to greenwash Marx, Marxists have inherited from their capitalist antagonists a commitment to economic growth as the foundation of freedom."

Because it repudiates the capitalist insistence on expanded productivity, Ruskin's communism also valorizes a qualitative evaluation of goods. Conventional capitalist economics assesses the health of any economy in the sheerly quantitative terms of a growing "gross domestic product" (GDP): the annual sum of goods and services, irrespective of how evil, dangerous, or stupid those goods and services are. Cigarettes, processed meats, and Cocoa Krispies are numbered along with cabernet, spinach, and bananas. People are similarly tabulated: GDP does not distinguish between the healthy enjoyment and the abuse of cabernet, for instance, nor can it account for the difference between the working conditions of tenured academia and those of Walmart or Amazon workers. It does not measure the chasm between the unbridled and callous rapacity of a Jeff Bezos and the philanthropy of Patagonia's Yvon Chouinard. Such distinctions could be conveyed only through the sort of moral economy enunciated in *Unto This Last*, where Ruskin distinguishes between "wealth"—"the possession of the valuable by the valiant"—and "illth"—"that which causes destruction and devastation in all directions." Wealth, in this view, depends on both the nature of the object and the condition or character of the person who uses or produces it: both must be good for something to be considered genuine wealth. As Ruskin declared in his most renowned passage:

There is no wealth but life. Life, including all its powers of love, of joy, and of admiration. That country is the richest which nourishes the greatest numbers of noble and happy human beings; that man is richest, who, having perfected the functions of his own life to the utmost, has also the widest helpful influence, both personal, and by means of his possessions, over the lives of others.

By this subtle, expansive, and exacting standard, much that passes for wealth in our diseased economy is really illth.

Though usually applied to the realm of use or consumption, the criteria that differentiate wealth and illth could also be adapted—with potentially revolutionary consequences—to the realm of property as well. If wealth involves the valiance of those who *use* objects or services, why should it not involve that of those who *make* goods or *provide* services as well? Property is surely a "possession of the valuable"—the means of production or care. What would constitute valiance in production or care? Not just useful and beautiful things or thoughtful, sensitive care, but also attention to the virtues of craft (in the provision of nursing or education, as well as in the making of objects), commitment to comfortable living standards, and regard to the ecological impact of technology. Valiance, then, entails the reclamation of technical prowess, organizational skill, and political acumen by workers themselves. Enterprises would have to be governed by the producers themselves, not by a special class of technocratic managers. To be sure, Ruskin himself was a Tory paternalist. The owner of a business, he insisted in *Unto This Last*, is the "governor of the men employed by him." We need new models of valiant communism, imbued with the sacramental consciousness displayed in the charity of the early Christians.

Political economy is inseparable from ecology, and, as Pope Francis himself acknowledges, the property and production relations of society are intimately intertwined with its relationships to the rest of nature. Only some kind of radically democratic economics, leavened by a sacramental sensibility, offers a compelling alternative to capitalism's instrumentalist desecration of people, other animals, and the rest of creation. Tethered now to an enfeebled neoliberal consensus, that paradigm is already dying; the creeping senescence of capitalism will be, I think, one of the major storylines of our era. The ecological consequence of that doomed paradigm, global warming, is already upon us; some degree of devastation, perhaps considerable, is already our unavoidable fate. The storm cloud of the twenty-first century is drought and desertification, wildfires and rising sea levels. But as Hopkins would remind us, the dearest freshness deep down things are still available, even now. If we can learn to practice the trinity of Hope, Reverence, and Love, we might still be able to rescue what's left of the real wealth that is life.

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UPCOMING EVENTS

Most of our Ruskin Art Club events will continue to appear under the "virtual" banner; but we hope to host a number of hybrid events in the coming months, which will have in-person as 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.

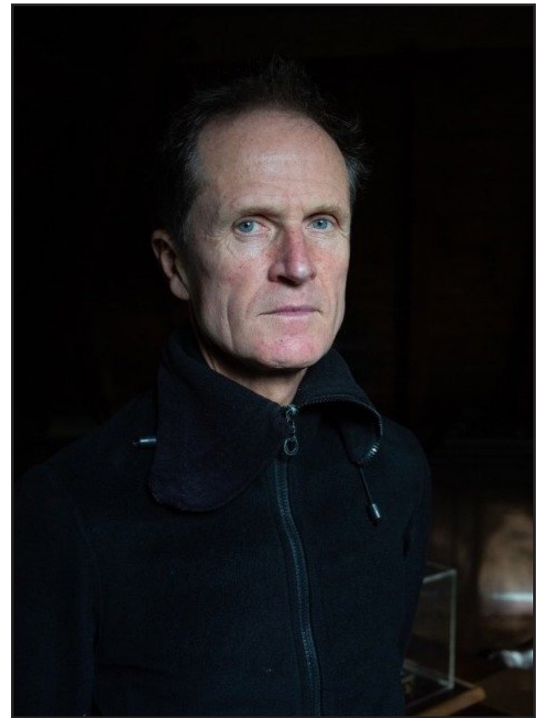
JANUARY 2023

Loosing The Eternal Horses From The Dens of Night

with Philip Hoare

Thursday, June 14th, 9am PST.

Like all great artists and visionaries, John Ruskin was a time-traveller. His aesthetic reached far into our present, his future, and deep into the past we have yet to uncover, from the deep time of the minerals and rocks he collected, like talismans or instruments, to the urgency of his *Fors Clavigera* newsletters, which prefigure our own social media and podcasts. He looks back too, through the visionary eyes of Albert Dürer, as he called him, in whose astonishingly prescient images of the natural world were mapped his own. At the same time Ruskin inspired a floppy-haired young man, who was doing his own impersonation of Dürer's dandy style: Oscar Wilde.



Philip Hoare

Taking these three vivid figures, Philip Hoare will explore the nature of their aesthetic, and the aesthetic of their natural world. With an eclectic supporting cast, ranging from Thomas Mann to Andy Warhol, William Blake and Marianne Moore to Patti Smith, Hoare will draw on his recent book, *Albert & the Whale* - a work which prompted the *New York Times* to call Hoare 'a forceful weather system of his own' - the author, curator and broadcaster will take us on a whirlwind tour of images and ideas, in a possibly forlorn attempt to pin these geniuses down.

Philip Hoare is the author of nine works of non-fiction, including biographies of Stephen Tennant and Noël Coward, and the studies, *Wilde's Last Stand* and *England's Lost Eden: Adventures in a Victorian Utopia*. *Spike Island* was chosen by W.G. Sebald as his book of the year for 2001. In 2009, Hoare's *Leviathan* or, *The Whale* won the 2009 BBC Samuel Johnson Prize for non-fiction. It was followed in 2013 by *The Sea Inside*, and in 2017 by RISINGTIDEFALLINGSTAR. His latest book, *Albert & the Whale*, led the *New York Times* to call the author a 'forceful weather system' of his own.

Philip is also co-curator, with Angela Cockayne, of the digital projects www.mobydickbigread.com and www.ancientmarinerbigread.com; and he swims every day in the sea.

A new Ruskin studies center opens in Venice

On December 15, Ca' Foscari University of Venice launched FORS, a Center for Ruskin Studies in Venice under its director, the eminent Italian Ruskin scholar Emma Sdegno. (Southern California audiences will have heard Emma lecture at the 2019 Ruskin Bicentennial Conference at the Huntington Library.) Ruskin readers will note that the new center's title, FORS, recalls Ruskin's letters to the workingmen of England (1870s), *Fors Clavigera*, and the importance of the concept of "*fors*" in Ruskin's mature thought. For Ruskin, fors symbolized the three powers which shape human destiny: force, fortitude, and fortune – this last, the faculty of waiting on the right moment to act. We welcome this new and exciting resource in the world of Ruskin studies and its celebration of Ruskin's lifelong engagement with Venice.

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

Pay a visit to the **Ruskin Art Club** website!

www.ruskinartclub.org.

There you will find information and articles on the history of the Ruskin Art Club, biographical information and reading recommendations on John Ruskin, and background articles and Board of Directors' bios. Our resources page provides links to other 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 an ever-expanding 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 email address: info@ruskinartclub.org.