‘Utopian Topics’: Ruskin and Oxford

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2019 marks the bicentenary of John Ruskin’s birth. I want to take this opportunity to reconsider his dealings with Oxford – what the university did for him, what he did for the university, what the connection tells us about Oxford, about nineteenth-century education, and about education more generally. As it happens, Corpus Christi College, the college which generously hosts the F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture, is the perfect place for a talk on this subject. It was Corpus Christi that provided Ruskin with a home during his years as the university’s first Slade Professor of Fine Art. He was grateful, and he developed real affection for the college. But Corpus Christi was not where the story begins. Christ Church, Corpus Christi’s grand neighbour, was the college that admitted him as an eccentric eighteen-year-old undergraduate, in 1837 – the year in which Victoria, born like Ruskin in 1819, became Queen. He left Oxford for the last time in 1884, by then very much out of patience with the university. It was a long and often fractious relationship. Tensions between Ruskin’s aspirations, and the objectives of the university, ebbed and flowed through the decades, but they never disappeared. He was both insider and outsider. At times he seemed an irrelevance, even a joke. Now, however, his thinking about our shared responsibility for the environment, or the necessary connections between disciplines, or the need for students to take an active part in their education, or the importance of an outward-facing and ethically grounded approach to academic life, look less utopian, and more mainstream, than was once the case. So too does the way in which his work challenged the gendered identity of the university, and of its intellectual authority. Ruskin was among those who helped to build the Oxford that we know today, but he did so from a position of mingled allegiance and dissent.

Ruskin’s loyalty to Oxford, alongside his disaffection, was to a large extent personal. It had much to do with longstanding friendships, and the strength of associations that had been forged in early life. Such bonds were always a powerful motive in his work. But it was also defined by broader social and cultural issues, related to nationhood, religion, gender and educational practice. These were important to Ruskin’s relations with the university from their earliest beginnings. He was the only child of John James Ruskin, an Edinburgh-born Scot who, after a difficult start, had made a substantial fortune out of his business as a wine merchant. John James’s commercial achievements were built on the kind of unremitting toil that meant setting aside cultural pursuits. Born in 1785, he had been an eager reader of Romantic poetry and fiction in his youth, with a keen interest in painting, and the theatre. His wife Margaret shared his taste for books, but her imaginative life was dominated by her evangelical faith. The family was exceptionally close, and the Ruskins were to some extent hostile to the world outside the home, or at least suspicious of its distractions. John was not sent to public school, as might have been expected for the son of wealthy parents. He was chiefly taught at home, with lessons from his mother supplemented by visits from tutors. As a seventeen-year-old, he spent a brief period at the new King’s College in London, where he was a pupil of Thomas Dale, who was the very first professor of the brand-new academic discipline of English literature. Ruskin describes this pioneering course of study in a letter to his father: ‘Four lectures on this subject have spoken of four celebrated authors of old time – Sir John Mandeville, Sir John Gower, Chaucer, and Wickliffe. We are made acquainted with their birth, parentage, education, etc; the character of their writings is spoken of, and extracts are read as examples of their style.’[[1]](#footnote-1) Such teaching must have seemed rather less stirring than the immersion in Wordsworth, Scott, Byron and Shelley that represented the real substance of Ruskin’s literary education. The ideals of his Romantic and evangelical parents shaped his early life. So too did his father’s Scottishness, which was one of the reasons why Ruskin felt at some distance from Oxford as a very English university, and Christ Church as a very English college.[[2]](#footnote-2) As a boy Ruskin was encouraged to write, and especially to write Byronic poetry, and to take his lessons in drawing seriously. He developed an early inclination to study the natural world, particularly in relation to the science of geology, a discipline which was beginning to challenge traditional models of natural history in the early years of the nineteenth century. His first publication, as a ten-year-old, was a poem on the landscape of the Lake District, which appeared in *The Spiritual Times.[[3]](#footnote-3)* His earliest published prose was a group of articles on geology, published in Loudon’s *Magazine of Natural History* when he was fifteen.[[4]](#footnote-4) A combination of poetry and geology was characteristic of Ruskin’s boyhood interests. But Ruskin was also rigorously schooled in evangelical traditions of Biblical exegesis, and he firmly believed, as his mother had taught him, that the duties of a thoughtful religious life mattered more than the pursuit of worldly ambition.

These were the influences that formed Ruskin’s boyhood, as they were to shape his mature life as a critic and artist. In some ways, though not in all, they equipped him for distinction as a student. His fluency as a poet earned him the Newdigate Prize for Poetry in 1839, and the occasion of its award in the Sheldonian Theatre - from the hands of William Wordsworth, no less – was the high point of his undergraduate career. His skills as an amateur painter also attracted admiration, for they were exceptional for a young man of his social class. Young ladies were more likely to have been taught to draw proficiently than their brothers, as drawing was valued among their accomplishments. Boys, on the other hand, if they were brought up in families where art was valued, were commonly taught to judge paintings, not to make them. This reflects a broadly-based distinction between the education of well-to-do girls and boys. In general, girls were thought to respond best to an education based on *doing* – needlework, playing the harp or the piano, or the practice of domestic management. Boys were believed to be suited to a more abstract schooling, predominantly based on mathematics and the classics. Ruskin’s education as a child had spanned this division. His immersion in poetry, and in the evangelical Biblical exegesis he had learned from his mother, had given him an exceptional verbal facility, but his interest in rocks and glaciers, and in the practicalities of producing pictures, had encouraged a more material turn of mind. Ambivalence in Ruskin’s culturally gendered identity was a persistent feature of his presence in Oxford. It was a source of friction, but also of productive challenge. In his later years in the university, he became a patriarchal figure – the Professor, the Master – and throughout his life he was perfectly capable of condescending to women. But his deepest allegiances lay with the traditionally defined cultural values of femininity. These were co-operative and altruistic, rather than competitive and aggressive. Ruskin valued practical activity alongside abstract deliberation, in ways that questioned conventional intellectual hierarchies. Ambitious young women were often drawn to him as a sympathetic authority. This was a tension that complicated his relations with the masculine academic traditions that he encountered in Oxford.

Ruskin’s teenage accomplishment as an artist made him useful as a follower of Dr William Buckland, the geologist and mineralogist who was a notoriously unconventional professor in Christ Church. He prepared diagrams for Buckland, and through this connection he met the ‘leading scientific men of the day, from Herschel downwards’ – including Charles Darwin, whose later theories Ruskin was to reject.[[5]](#footnote-5) John James Ruskin, who was not without social ambitions for his son, had paid the extra required for him to become a ‘gentleman commoner’, which meant that he associated with his fellow gentleman commoners, who were predominantly the sons of aristocratic families. He was not a typical member of this set, who were for the most part more concerned with gambling and wine than with Romantic poetry and the art of the English watercolour. This did not worry Ruskin, for he had no wish, unlike most students, to remove himself from the influence of family life. His mother had moved to Oxford to be near him, and his father joined them at weekends. Ruskin was confident in his own identity, and less disconcerted by his encounter with an entirely different cultural world than might have been expected. Henry Liddell, a tutor in Christ Church who was later to become an important figure in Ruskin’s relations with Oxford, described him as ‘a very wonderful gentleman-commoner here who draws wonderfully. He is a very strange fellow … living quite in his own way among the odd set of hunting and sporting men that gentleman-commoners usually are … [He] tells them that they like their own way of living and he likes his; and so they go on, and I am glad to say they do not bully him, as I should have been afraid they would.’[[6]](#footnote-6)

Though Ruskin was in a position to make his own mark in Christ Church, the question of formal academic success was a different matter. His education had been unusually wide-ranging and creative, but it hadn’t included the intensive training in the classics that might have led to the first-class degree that his proud parents were expecting. Furthermore, his evangelical faith, at a time when the religious life of Christ Church was largely limited to a complacent high Anglicanism, didn’t incline him to revere the classical and therefore pagan texts that he was required to study. His Romantic evangelicalism rested on a conviction of the need for individual and inward commitment, of a kind that he found it hard to give to his studies. He was not, and never would be, intellectually deferential, and this made the drudgery that would have been needed if he were to shine in his final examinations difficult to sustain. And he had little respect for the syllabus. ‘Sophocles I found dismal, and in subject disgusting; Tacitus too hard, Terence dull and stupid beyond patience; - but I loved my Plato from the first line I read – know my Ethics for what they were worth (which is not much) and detested with all my heart and wit the accursed and rascally *Rhetoric*, - which my being compelled to work at gave me a mortal contempt for the whole University system.’[[7]](#footnote-7) Ruskin wrote that in his sixties, when he had come to feel that his undergraduate years, which had ended with a breakdown followed by an honorary fourth-class degree, had been a waste of time, and indeed shameful in its wrong-headed goals. This was a view coloured by later disappointments, and by the memory of his undergraduate unhappiness over his failed courtship of Adele Domecq, daughter of John James Ruskin’s business partner. But his views at the time were hardly less rancorous. He wrote to Thomas Dale in 1840:

It is not without considerable bitterness that I can look back on the three years I spent at the University – three years of such vigorous life as I may never know again, sacrificed to a childish vanity, and not only lost themselves, but breaking down my powers of enjoyment or exertion, for I know not how long. If I ever wished to see the towers of Oxford again, the wish is found only in conjunction with another – Rosalind’s – that I had ‘a thunderbolt in mine eye’.[[8]](#footnote-8)

This was not the end of the story. The friendships that he had made at Christ Church – with Osborne Gordon, his shrewd and kindly tutor, with Walter Brown, another tutor who became a steadfast friend, with Charles Newton, later a pioneering archaeologist at the British Museum, and above all with Henry Acland, reforming doctor and university politician, were of lasting importance to him. So too was his enforced and resented familiarity with classical literature, much of which was to re-emerge in more positive contexts in his later work – Aristophanes, Thucydides, Herodotus, Aristotle, Euripides, Homer, Pindar, and especially Plato. Despite his professed scorn, when Ruskin published the first volume of *Modern Painters* anonymously in 1843, he did not hesitate to add to its gravitas by identifying himself simply as ‘A Graduate of Oxford’. Ruskin’s feelings may have softened, but he continued to brood over his years in Oxford. What chiefly lingered in his mind was his experience of a great university failing, as he saw it, in its pedagogic duty.

In 1853, Ruskin laid out the grounds of his dissatisfaction in ‘Modern Education’, a polemical appendix to the third and final volume of *The Stones of Venice* – an architectural work with a title that recalls his devotion to geology. In recalling his undergraduate days, Ruskin denounced the limitations of the university’s traditional and largely classical course of study: ‘the instruction in the physical sciences given at Oxford consisted of a course of twelve or fourteen lectures on the Elements of Mechanics or Pneumatics, and permission to ride out to Shotover with the Professor of Geology.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Ruskin’s assault on the narrowness of an Oxford education was rooted in his faith, and in this he was in agreement with the nonconformists and evangelicals in whose schools and colleges a broader programmes of study were pursued. Ruskin wished to see something comparable happen in Oxford, the educational home of the Anglican church.

That English ministers of religion should ever come to desire rather to make a youth acquainted with the powers of Nature and of God, than with the powers of Greek particles; that they should ever think it more useful to show him how the great universe rolls upon its course in heaven, than how the syllables are fitted in a tragic metre; that they should hold it more advisable for him to be fixed in the principles of religion than in those of syntax; or, finally, that they should ever come to apprehend that a youth likely to go straight out of college into parliament, might not unadvisably know as much of the Peninsular as of the Peloponnesian War, and be as well acquainted with the state of modern Italy as of old Etruria; - all this, however unreasonably, I *do* hope, and mean to work for. For though I have not yet abandoned all expectation of a better world than this, I believe this in which we live is not so good as it might be.[[10]](#footnote-10)

This is the spirit of reforming zeal which inspired Ruskin to work with Henry Acland on the foundation of the Oxford Museum of Natural History, a project which combined his interest in science, in education, and in architecture, and which was to become the most publicly visible reflection of his continuing involvement with the university. Acland shared Ruskin’s belief in the need to introduce a serious study of science into the standard pass and honour courses, and he was a leading campaigner for the construction of a new home for the specimens that would be used to teach a range of scientific disciplines - astronomy, geometry, experimental physics, chemistry, mineralogy, geology, zoology, anatomy, physiology, and medicine. Each of these subjects would have its own teaching spaces and laboratories, grouped round a central court designed to display the teaching materials. After a hard-fought campaign, the Gothic plans of the Dubliner Benjamin Woodward, heavily influenced by the ideas of Ruskin’s *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* and *The Stones of Venice*, won the 1854 architectural competition for the design of the building, and the sum of £30,000 was voted for the construction of the museum. More was needed if the building was to represent the Gothic ideal at its finest. Ruskin was willing to help: ‘I will pay for a good deal myself, and I doubt not to find funds. *Such* capitals as we will have!’[[11]](#footnote-11)

The Museum, as originally conceived, was to be an expression of art, science and religion, working in harmony to support a new kind of education for undergraduates. John Phillips, who had succeeded Buckland as Professor of Geology, was the first Keeper of the Museum, and it was his idea that the columns around the central court should be made from British geological samples, while the capitals and bases would be carved with instructive and beautiful examples of plants and animals, arranged according to their orders. Phillips, like Ruskin and Acland, saw the museum as a tangible expression of the natural theology that was still, in the 1850s, a dominant force in Oxford – though not for much longer. In 1860, just as the museum was approaching completion, the famous debate between T. H. Huxley, Darwin’s bulldog, and Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, signalled the end of an intellectual era in Oxford, as religion and science began to pull apart.[[12]](#footnote-12) The planned decorative scheme turned out to be too costly, and was never completed. But that incompletion is part of what the building has come to represent, in the history of the university as it relates to the imperfect legacies of Ruskin’s work. Ruskin had written to congratulate Henry Acland, on hearing that Woodward’s design for the Museum was to go ahead, predicting that it would be ‘the root of as much good to others as I suppose it is rational for any single living soul to hope to do in its earth-time’.[[13]](#footnote-13) Ruskin didn’t direct the conception and construction of the museum, and he couldn’t command its future. But it would not have been built as it was without his influence, and it stands as testament to a moment of high idealism in Oxford’s history.

Ruskin’s relations with Oxford were genial, if distant, as his reputation grew throughout his thirties. Henry Liddell, another Christ Church reformer, had become Dean of the college in 1855, and in 1858 Ruskin was elected as an Honorary Student. He appreciated the gesture, and returned it in full when in 1861 he gave 45 Turner drawings to Oxford’s University Galleries. It was the university’s first major acquisition in contemporary art, and it signalled Ruskin’s wish that, as *Modern Painters* had urged, the value of Turner’s art should be fully recognised by the nation. Again, his contribution was that of a moderniser, the author of *Modern Painters*, just as it had been in his work for the Oxford Museum. The scientific study of the natural world was to be part of Oxford’s changing identity; so too would be the contemporary art represented by Turner, the greatest of the modern painters. Not only was Turner’s landscape painting a magnificent asset in its own right, its interpretation of the natural world meant that it was also – like the decorative scheme of the Oxford Museum – precious as a point of cultural reference. Ruskin had lost his evangelical faith in the late 1850s, but he had not lost his conviction that the world in which we live is not so good as it might be. His work had been motivated by his sense that it was his duty to change lives, by guiding others to share his vision. This was not, as he understood the processes of instruction, a matter of the communication of theoretical schemes of analysis. In his notes on ‘Modern Education’, he had claimed that ‘For one man who is fitted for the study of words, fifty are fitted for the study of things’.[[14]](#footnote-14) Ruskin’s approach to education was consistently grounded in the material substance of the world – stones, flowers, birds, trees, animals, leaves, sculpture. Few had studied words to more telling effect than Ruskin, but what could be *seen* meant more to him than any turn of phrase. Much of his writing takes the form of secular sermons, a literary form that he understood from his many years of religious observance in evangelical churches and chapels. A clergyman’s sermon would take its text from the Bible; Ruskin’s texts were drawn from nature, and from the human art that derived its power from nature. It was this model that accounts for the peculiar quality of forceful authority, sometimes of arrogance, in Ruskin’s work. Like a clergyman, he did not see himself as expressing his own views. He was communicating unchanging truths that, as he perceived them, stood outside personal opinion.

It was in those terms that Ruskin devoted himself to education throughout his vigorous middle years. He taught in the Working Men’s College in London’s Red Lion Square; he taught aspiring artists, often by correspondence; he gave public lectures throughout Britain. And he developed a particular interest in the education of women. He supported a number of girls’ schools, and later contributed to new establishments for women in Oxford, Cambridge and London – Somerville College, Lady Margaret Hall, Newnham College, Girton College, Whitelands Training College. But it was the University of Oxford that claimed his most serious and sustained commitment. The energised institution that Oxford might become, as Ruskin saw its future, had to do with its unique place in national life. Alongside Cambridge, it was the university with primary responsibility for educating the future leaders of Britain, in religious and practical terms. Oxford could become the means of translating Ruskin’s hopes for new models for education, including women’s education, into reality. These hopes were partly due to the efforts of Ruskin’s old friend Henry Acland, who was unwavering in his wish to tempt Ruskin to take on a formal role in Oxford – perhaps as Professor of Poetry, or as a curator of the University Galleries, but ideally as a Professor of Art. The opportunity to make this happen arose in 1868, when a bequest from the art collector Felix Slade endowed Chairs of Fine Art at Oxford, Cambridge and University College London. Ruskin was the best qualified candidate for the Oxford post, and in 1869 he was elected, for an initial term of three years.

It may be that those who elected him, including the ever-loyal Acland, did not wholly anticipate the spirit in which Ruskin would approach his new role. Henry Liddell, whose character did not mellow over the years, had a clear sense of what a new kind of professoriate, influenced by the German model of higher education, might amount to. ‘What we want is something at once permanent and intelligent. The Heads of Houses are permanent, but not intelligent. Tutors may be intelligent, but are certainly not permanent … Real professors would be permanent and intelligent … a true aristocracy.’[[15]](#footnote-15) Liddell had misgivings about Ruskin from the first. He had written to Acland: ‘he will *never* make a Professor. He may be a great Drawing Master, or a great artistic Poet, - as he is and has been, - never anything more.’[[16]](#footnote-16) Acland thought differently, and talked Liddell round. The truth of the matter was that Ruskin and Liddell had very different concepts of what should constitute the work of a Professor of Fine Art. Ruskin believed that, as he put it in 1876, ‘the teaching of Art, as I understand it, is the teaching of all things’.[[17]](#footnote-17) He would not confine his work to lectures and classes elucidating the history of painting or sculpture or architecture. He was not a professional academic, and though he cared about university reform, it was by no means the only thing he cared about. Nevertheless, he was grateful to Acland and Liddell, and promised to behave decorously. ‘I believe you will both be greatly surprised for one thing at the caution with which I shall avoid saying anything with the University authority which may be either questionable by, or offensive to, even persons who know little of my subject, and at the generally quiet tone to which I shall reduce myself in all public duty.’[[18]](#footnote-18) Caution and quietness were qualities alien to Ruskin’s nature. Though his inaugural lectures were restrained, it soon became clear that he would be an unruly Professor. University authority was not, for Ruskin, the highest form of authority. The real problem, for Liddell and for many of his colleagues in Oxford, is that Ruskin didn’t consider art to be his real subject as a Professor, despite the formally-defined nature of his role. He wanted to teach, and aspired to teach a nation, as far as he could. But he did not believe that he could achieve what mattered most to him by talking about art. Before his election to his Chair, when the possibility of his becoming curator of the University Galleries was mooted, he had told Acland that ‘all art whatsoever rises spontaneously out of the heart and hands of any nation honestly occupied with graven human and divine interests. It cannot be taught from without’.[[19]](#footnote-19) In *The Cestus of Aglaia* (1865), the point is made with simple force. ‘Good pictures do not teach a nation; they are the signs of its having been taught.’[[20]](#footnote-20) What, then, would teach a nation? We don’t know exactly what Ruskin said in his lectures, as the published texts were often substantially different from what Ruskin’s audiences heard. Writing to E. A. Freeman, a fellow historian, J. R. Green gives something of a clue in recalling Ruskin’s opening course of lectures: ‘he electrified the Dons by telling them that a chalk-stream did more for the education of the people than “their prim national school with its well-taught doctrine of Baptism and gabbled Catechism”’.[[21]](#footnote-21) If that is indeed what he said, Liddell would not have been pleased. Just a year after Ruskin’s election, Liddell remarked coldly to Acland that ‘I begin greatly to repent of having furthered his election’.[[22]](#footnote-22) In *Fors Clavigera*, the series of ‘Letters to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain’ that Ruskin was publishing alongside the texts of his Oxford lectures, he told his readers that after his first polemical lectures in Oxford ‘my University friends came to me, with grave faces, to remonstrate against irrelevant and Utopian topics of that nature being introduced in lectures on art’.[[23]](#footnote-23) This, of course, did nothing to discourage him.

Controversial or not, Ruskin’s lectures were extremely popular, and this may have been one of the reasons for the resentment of senior members of the university. He was a celebrity among dons, and his extensive experience of public lectures had enabled him to communicate with his audiences, which were always large, with energy, and often with dramatic panache. His large lecture diagrams were striking, and his visual aids often included photographs, casts, and once a plough share. Alexander Wedderburn, later one of Ruskin’s editors, was among those who attended, and he remembered that ‘at the end there would be a rush to the front, and the Professor would hold an informal “class”’.[[24]](#footnote-24) Sometimes the crowd would be so great that Ruskin would repeat the lecture - in part to allow ‘the bonnets’ to attend, for his audiences were not confined to undergraduates, and women had won the right to attend university lectures in 1866. Women became prominent among his most enthusiastic followers in Oxford.

Ruskin’s activities at Oxford were not confined to the lecture theatre. It was also part of his plans that he would ‘establish both a practical and critical school of fine art for English gentlemen’.[[25]](#footnote-25) This would entail creating a collection of examples of art, grouped, according to their function, in the Standard Series, ‘especially for the use of the Professor’s class’, then the Educational Series, and finally the Reference Series. A Rudimentary Series was designed for the use of the ‘Town Class’. These remarkable teaching collections are now available to all, having been skilfully digitised, with the support of the Ashmolean Museum, the Ruskin School of Drawing, the University of Oxford, and the Arts and Humanities Research Council, as the Elements of Drawing website, complete with Ruskin’s accompanying notes and instructions.[[26]](#footnote-26) In practice, the series were never entirely distinct, either in their purposes or their content. The Professor’s class failed to thrive, partly because Ruskin had many other projects on his hands in the early 1870s, and was often absent. Nor was the purpose of the class, in part founded to create an alternative to the government-funded Oxford Art School already in existence in the University Galleries, entirely clear. Unsurprisingly, a good deal of confusion and ill feeling resulted. Eventually the government class was absorbed, into Ruskin’s plans, though never in an entirely satisfactory way.[[27]](#footnote-27) The fact that few of his students were consistently committed to the study of art was unsurprising, for their work was not part of a formal syllabus, and could make no contribution to their degrees. Ruskin’s lectures, intermittent and intensely personal, never amounted to a coherent course of study, and were not repeated as new generations of undergraduates arrived. He was a Professor in the University, but he was not part of its central business.

Ruskin’s relations with his peers in Oxford were often distant. George Kitchin – a Christ Church man who later became Dean of Winchester, and then of Durham – wrote about Ruskin’s presence in Oxford.

He tried strange things. I remember that he tried to make University society pause in its race for show and display of luxury. He bade us cease from competing dinner-parties, and to take to simple symposia. A few tried it, but their *mouton aux navets* did not attract the Oxford Don more than once; it might begin with simple eating and good talk; champagne and truffles were always lurking behind the door, ready to rush in on a hint.[[28]](#footnote-28)

It didn’t help that Ruskin at first had no domestic base in Oxford, instead staying in the Crown and Thistle in Abingdon, an old-fashioned inn where he felt at home. Matters improved when he was offered rooms in Corpus Christi, a college he found more congenial than Christ Church. His rooms in Corpus soon became a centre for hospitality, full of the drawings, geological specimens, manuscripts, precious stones, and books. Many came to see these treasures, and to learn from Ruskin.

Most of these visitors were undergraduates. As Ruskin established himself in Oxford, he found that students, rather than his fellow dons, understood him best. And it was with the practical help of students that he made his most defiant gesture in his years in Oxford – the construction of the Hinksey Road. Despite the various tribulations of his first three years as a Professor, Ruskin accepted a second term of office. He was ready to try new experiments. One of the many developments he disliked in the student life he saw around him was the growing cult of athleticism. The veneration of rowing, rugby and cricket seemed to him an indefensible misuse of time. Ruskin wrote to Acland, always his chief ally: ‘I want to show my Oxford drawing-class my notion of what a country road should be. I am always growling and howling about rails, and I want them to see what I would have instead, beginning with a quiet by-road through villages … This is my first, not my chief object. My chief object is to let my pupils feel the pleasures of *useful* muscular work.’[[29]](#footnote-29) Ruskin’s aims were not simply aesthetic. Ferry Hinksey was a badly drained village, and it was vulnerable to cholera and other water-borne sicknesses. The Hinksey Road project had as much to do with sewerage as with beauty. In Ruskin’s mind, these two objectives were not separate. Why should the sturdy young men of Oxford waste their strength on useless competitive sports, while neglected labourers and their families lived in squalor, and died of entirely preventable disease? High-minded and socially committed undergraduates agreed. Many of them came from Balliol College, where disaffection from the Anglican and classical traditions of the university was strong. At its peak, the project attracted around fifty students, working with shovels and picks and wheelbarrows. The road was not competently built, and it was the subject of much hilarity. But those who took it seriously did not forget it, and they formed a core group among Ruskin’s committed followers – Alexander Wedderburn, Arnold Toynbee, Alfred Milner, Leonard Montefiore. They did not become Ruskinians in any overt sense, but they were marked by their contact with his practical idealism. Among them was Oscar Wilde, who recalled the project with affection: ‘We learned how to lay levels, and dig, and break stones, and to wheel a barrow along a plank – a very difficult thing to do.’[[30]](#footnote-30) That kind of work doesn’t sound much like Wilde. But he was there, and like the Balliol diggers, he did not forget.

Women were not, of course, to be seen among the Hinksey road-builders. But they too were inspired by Ruskin’s work in Oxford. Dons in Oxford were marrying in larger numbers, and their wives and daughters – often intelligent, spirited and ambitious young women like Mary Ward, Georgiana Max Muller, Charlotte Green, Lavinia Talbot, Bertha Johnson, Alice Kitchin - were actively seeking the means to participate in Oxford’s intellectual life. In 1873, Louise Creighton, a leading figure in the ‘Lectures for Women’ Committee, organised a series of lectures and classes inspired by Ruskin’s teaching on art. These were attended by many of those most closely involved with the movement for the foundation of women’s halls in Oxford. Lady Margaret Hall and Somerville Hall, later to become colleges in the university, were established in 1879. Ruskin became an active supporter, donating books, minerals and pictures. Ruskin wrote to Sir John Simon, eminent surgeon and public health reformer, about his continuing commitment to practical action:

I do entirely extend that belief of mine to women: who I think are on the whole, morally superior to men just because they almost always *can do* something. I look with great veneration upon the act of sewing on buttons for instance. The power of putting the button in a spot mathematically correspondent to the button hole – of getting a needle somehow through it or round it without pricking ones fingers on the other side – of putting a maximum number of strong stitches into a minimum compass at root of button – of finishing off without leaving any end of the thread – and securing all so firmly that it shall bear more pulling than the coat itself – this seems to me a great thing to do – quite enough to make any human being who had once achieved it understand the main laws of the Universe concerning work, and the meaning of Well and Ill doing. I do not speak of trimming bonnets, -- altering cuts of collars, and such other more imaginative & poetic exertions of mind & of practical knowledge: but taking into consideration merely plainwork and cookery, how few men there are who can do half as much as women! To calculate – or speculate, or receive and execute business orders, or make speeches in Parliament – is not *Doing* anything. Sewing & cooking is. If you could once teach Gladstone to sew on a button – you would make a man of him for ever, instead of a mere leaden spout of language.[[31]](#footnote-31)

After his years as a Professor ended in 1884, Ruskin continued to support the cause of women’s education in Oxford. In 1887, he wrote to Madeleine Shaw Lefevre, the first Principal of Somerville, in response to her thanks for a case of sapphires that he had given to the College: ‘Whatever I can do for you all is only my duty – all the more as I cannot do anything I meant for the Oxford men – gone all into cricket and chemistry, incapable of art or true thought.’[[32]](#footnote-32) As so often, Ruskin’s deepest allegiances lay with the values of femininity, and not with the masculine character of the university.

Ruskin’s life in Oxford did not close happily. His final tenure as Professor began in 1883, and lasted little more than a year. The primary reason for his resignation was the university’s vote to allow the practice of vivisection in its laboratories, a thought that he could not endure. The natural science that he had once loved and championed had developed in ways that he could neither understand nor approve. But in fact he had entirely lost heart, and his last, angry lectures were rambling and under-powered. ‘Not a single pupil has learned the things I primarily endeavoured to teach’, he remarked, shortly before he left for good.[[33]](#footnote-33) That was not true, but he must have seemed a benighted figure from the past in the changing and increasingly professional Oxford of the 1880s. He had no time for what he called the ‘torture and shame’[[34]](#footnote-34) of competitive examinations, and he disliked the move to academic specialisation that characterised the modern university. But in some respects, though not in all, his work, and his ideals, now seem closer to our concerns than his contemporaries could have predicted. His outspoken sympathy with colonialism is alien to liberal principles, but he also supported national claims for independence – he was an advocate of Irish home rule, for instance: “I am with Ireland altogether in these present matters, as I am with Scotland, with India, with Afghanistan, and with Natal.”[[35]](#footnote-35) He believed that our relations with the natural world do not end with finding new means for exploiting its resources; he argued that the arts and humanities cannot be separate from the study of science; he insisted that the privileges of academic life must entail taking responsibility for those who were excluded from its benefits; he believed that women should take a full role in the university, as students and teachers. Words like interdisciplinarity, or impact, did not figure in his vocabulary. But Ruskin was committed to what such ideas might mean, long before universities had begun to think about their implications. He was in many ways a misfit, persistently at odds with a powerful institution that did not share his values. Nevertheless, he should be seen among Oxford’s prophets. The university is right to celebrate his memory.

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1. Letter (John Ruskin to John James Ruskin), 25 March 1836, *The Ruskin Family Letters*. *The Correspondence of John James Ruskin, his Wife, and their Son, 1801-1843,* ed. Van Akin Burd (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press), p. 350. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Helen Viljoen describes the enduring influence of Ruskin’s Scottish origins in *Ruskin’s Scottish Heritage* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1956). See also Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. John Ruskin, ‘Lines Written at the Lakes in Cumberland. Derwentwater’, *The Spiritual Times: A Monthly Magazine,* 1.4 (1 August 1829), 150. See James S. Dearden, “John Ruskinʼs First Published Work”, *Book Collector* 42 (Summer 1994) 299–300. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. John Ruskin, ‘Enquiries of the Colour of the Water of the Rhine’; ‘Note’; ‘Facts And Considerations On The Strata Of Mont Blanc, And On Some Instances Of Twisted Strata Observable In Switzerland’; *Loudon’s Magazine of Natural History* (London: Longmans & Co.), 7 (September 1834), 438–439; 7 (November 1834), 592; 7 (December 1834), 644–645. See *The Works of John Ruskin*, eds. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 39 vols (London: George Allen), 1903-12; I, pp. 191-6. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. *Works*, XXXV, 34. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. H. L. Thompson, *Henry George Liddell: A Memoir* (London: John Murray, 1899,) p. 215n. Quoted in Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years*, p. 48. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. *Works*, XXXV, 610. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. *Works*, I, 383. In fact this is Celia’s phrase: ‘If I had a thunderbolt in mine eye, I can tell who should down’ (*As You Like It*, I.ii.202). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. *Works*, XI, 258-9. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Ibid. 261. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. J. B. Atlay, *Sir Henry Wentworth Acland* (London: Smith Elder, 1903), p. 241. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. See Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and Oxford: The Art of Education* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 12-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. John Ruskin, letter to Henry Acland (12th Dec 1854), *Works*, XVI, xliii. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. *Works*, XI, 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. Unpubl. letter (Henry Liddell to Henry Acland), 23 Feb 1854, Bodl. MS Acland d. 69, fo 32. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. Unpubl. letter (Henry Liddell to Henry Acland), 10 Oct 1864, Bodl. MS Acland d. 69, fo. 56. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. *Works*, XXIX, 86. [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. *Works*, XX, xix-xx. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. Ibid., XXVI, 542-3. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Ibid. XIX, 57. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Letter from J. R. Green to E. A. Freeman, 5 March 1870, *Letters of John Richard Green*, ed. Leslie Stephen (London: Macmillan, 1901), p. 246. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Unpubl. letter, Henry Liddell to Henry Acland, 15 Jan 1871, Bodl. MS Acland d.69, fo.94. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. *Works*, XXVIII, 92. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. *Works,* XX, xxvi. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. *Works*, XX, 27. [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. See http://ruskin.ashmolean.org/collection [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. See Hewison, Ruskin and Oxford, pp. 19-24. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. George Kitchin, *Ruskin in Oxford and other Studies* (London: John Murray, 1904), p. 43. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. *Works*, XX, xli. [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. Quoted in Robert Hewison, ‘ “From You I Learned Nothing But What Was Good”: Ruskin and Oscar Wilde’, *Ruskin and His Contemporaries* (London: Pallas Athena: 2019), p. 245. [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. Extract from unpubl. etter from John Ruskin to Sir John Simon, sold by Bonhams (March 2015), quoted by permission of the purchaser. [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Unpubl. letter from John Ruskin to Madeleine Shaw Lefevre (Somerville College), 9 May 1887. See Dinah Birch, ‘What Teachers Do You Give Your Girls?’ Ruskin and Women’s Education’, in *Ruskin and Gender* (Houndmills: Palgrave, 2002), p. 130. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. *Works*, XXXIII. 532. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. *Works*, XXXIII, 363. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. John Ruskin, letter to editor of *Pall Mall Gazette*, Jan 16 1887; *Works*, 34, 602. [↑](#footnote-ref-35)