



JOHN RUSKIN'S POLITICS AND NATURAL LAW

AN INTELLECTUAL BIOGRAPHY

Graham A. MacDonald



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Front Piece. John Ruskin. Miniature on ivory, by J. C. Berry
Credit: Ruskin Foundation (Ruskin Library, Lancaster University)

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An Intellectual Biography

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Graham A. MacDonald
Parksville, BC, Canada

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In Memoriam

William H. McNeill
(1917–2016)

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PREFACE

As many readers of Ruskin know, coming to terms with his discursive style is an important task. His biographers and commentators have wrestled with this difficulty. Even such a warm admirer as young Arnold Toynbee complained to a friend about the abuses of ‘word painting’ and that ‘the worst are those interminable pages of mere word-daubing which even Ruskin is not guiltless of.’¹ One may assume, however, that such wordiness was less frowned upon in Victorian times when there were fewer daily means of appeal for the citizen’s undivided attention. For thousands of Victorians and Edwardians it was a forgivable trait and Ruskin was widely read. All later students of his work have come to appreciate that the magnificent edition of his collected works prepared by Edward T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, with its extended commentaries, references and biographical segments, represents one of the great sources for Victorian studies. Former Oxford students of Ruskin, they saw through what is by far the most detailed and useful edition of any of the major Victorians. When supplemented by the far-flung archive of a vast number of personal and professional letters, one has at hand a unique corpus as an aid to the understanding of a most unusual and creative life. In styling the present work as an ‘intellectual biography’ the ambitions are modest, for there are many good formal biographies of Ruskin. The format is used mainly as a support for an effort to trace the unfolding of a specific manner of thinking about things which, I argue, came to inform Ruskin’s general outlook. Aspects of his biography are also referenced to shed light on the several unresolved tensions in his thought and life. While I do not pursue at any length the on-going interest in the nature of his mental disorders, these

matters are mentioned where appropriate and are important to keep in mind with respect to the late work particularly.

The lines of his political thought I associate with the concept of natural law, an ancient concept but one which started to come under modification in early seventeenth-century Europe, as new fashions of scientific enquiry started to emerge. The word 'law' was much used by Ruskin and its connotation usually retained the classical sense of natural law, with moral implications or with that sense of 'fate' and 'fortuna' so popular in medieval thought and imagery. 'Fortuna' is implied in the title of that most extraordinary of his late works, *Fors Clavagira*. It may be said that the natural law tradition in western societies, in its social applications, has never died out but has rather shared the stage with modern empirical and national versions of law administration. Its effects are far from evident at the national and sub-national level in some countries where arbitrary and shifting rules marked by *Realpolitik* or by pragmatic decisions are all too evident. Its abstract appeal, like that of the word 'democracy', can be much greater than its success in practice. The concept of 'law' Ruskin usually endowed with a meaning in line with pre-Hobbesian versions of natural law, which is to say versions represented in ancient Greek or Roman texts, Biblical texts or medieval Christian works.

The emergence of natural law, as a more formal principle in Ruskin's thought, came about gradually through his shifting views on art, religion and history. It shows early, if reluctantly, in his youthful studies of science, particularly geology and chemistry, where he quickly came to concede that the Bible had great limitations as a source of reliable scientific earth and biological history. It was after his turn to economics and political reform in the 1850s that the pluralistic implications of natural law came to dominate his thinking in league with his revived interest in the works of the ancient Greeks and Romans, the *Apocrypha* and works of the early Church Fathers. This was accompanied by the adoption of a starker kind of non-denominational Christian belief, this resulting from a steady departure from his early upbringing in the ways of evangelical Protestantism.

In his insightful commentary on the history and theory of natural law, A.P. d'Entrèves cautioned students of the topic about adopting easy generalizations about the term or of drawing too rapid a parallel in its use by practitioners widely separated in time. The presumed reasons for the seventeenth-century separation of natural law into distinct scientific and humanistic channels have now become less convincing, the observable world confused once again in the age of Einstein. Previously measurable concepts such as motion, time and space have themselves become unstable. In the

humanities, the reign of ‘positivism’ has come under a cloud with even well-armed opponents of the role of natural law in legal studies coming around to the suggestion that there may be elements of the old classical aspects of ‘reasonableness’ which need to be acknowledged in modern practice.² In considering Ruskin as a practical proponent of natural law, somewhat in the style of Burke, we encounter a man who never entertained the possibility that the ‘moral’ could ever be usefully separated out from the ‘natural’ in any sphere of human endeavour, including the scientific.

By invoking the name of Burke, we also invoke a view of history. Elizabeth Helsinger has commented insightfully on the way in which Ruskin, as an historian, has generally been regarded, which is to say, not very favourably.³ He was, to be sure, a man who made use of history as an argumentative tool and by which to make moral judgements. Natural law, or God’s law (or ‘*Fors*’ or ‘fate’ or ‘fortune’) is used in his writings like a moral sledge hammer, driving home veritable truths of old. The degree, however, to which Ruskin remained captive to a particularly evangelical version of moral and allegorical history, I believe to be another question entirely. To contend that Ruskin often read history with a view to making practical moral judgements about present circumstances is no doubt true. To see his reading of history as taking only the form of an account of the endless implications of the Biblical ‘fall’ leaves his other approaches to history to one side.⁴ His early mastery of Homer and Scott left lasting imprints, which fostered an appreciation for the grander cycles of history and for displays of cultural pluralism. Richard Titlebaum has appropriately pointed to the parallels between Ruskin and the approach to history of Giambattista Vico.⁵ From one of his most admired sources, Walter Scott’s novels, Ruskin learned to read history through the portrayal of the full-blooded experience of others, imaginatively conceived by one who made a disciplined use of historical documents.⁶ Ruskin’s appreciation of the role of ‘imagination’ in the writer’s craft approximates Vico’s term ‘*fantasia*’.⁷

An attempt to come to terms with the legitimacy of different moralities embedded in diverse cultures is a marked feature of the late works, accompanied by the articulation of political principles appropriate to such recognition. While works such as *The Stones of Venice* have usually been the focus for those commenting on his historical views, I have drawn much on his 1873 lectures, *Val D’Arno*, to illustrate his adoption of more rigorous enquiry, designed to answer some specific questions. Here, some of his main statements about natural law occur, along with an openness towards pluralistic cultural thinking, features which no doubt owe much to his contemporary friendship with the Oxford philologist, Fredrich Max

Müller. These lectures have not attracted a great deal of attention from Ruskin commentators. As lectures, they were unusual in being closely written out by hand before presentation. In his attempt to explain the emergence of a Christian style of art in Florence, at a particular time, the lectures drew much on Sismondi and Villani. If Ruskin ever attempted to become a more proper historian, it was probably in this series.

In stressing Ruskin's gathering appreciation for the role of 'cultural pluralism' in politics, it is important to note that he did not solve, nor try to solve, the many shades of difficulty which surround this question, or the more complex question of how such pluralism relates to cultural relativism, a question much in the air in modern scholarship.⁸ He did not see a conflict between the universal suggestions implied by natural law and the facts that human societies were, by degree, culture-bound by their times and circumstances. He would have understood the way in which Shirley Letwin outlined the importance of history as an emergent factor in the classical world, as he understood the same principle in the works of Richard Hooker.⁹ The stability of the world was something to be accepted in its mystery while the phenomena of the world exhibited on-going change within that larger unity.

The question of the character of Ruskin's political conservatism is also raised. It has been suggested by Robert Hewison that his toryism was of the 'ultra' kind.¹⁰ The argument is well made but I find reasons to qualify the claim on a number of fronts, developed within this volume. His radicalism in politics was of the Red Tory kind but it contained a certain socialist fragment which drew early supporters of the labour movement to him. It was a fragment with few modern welfare state implications, however, and, as such, it remained largely inspirational to his contemporaries. The practical route that Ruskin actually chose, along with his class strictures, was of little interest to them. What did interest Ruskin has since become of greater moment, not just with respect to the garden city movement but also through his back-to-the land approach. In his own mind, a return to the land was not meant to extoll the virtues of getting-away-from-it-all as much as altering the laws of the nation with respect to land management and offering a critique of seemingly endless economic growth. His method was often one of advancing cultural and natural history education. It is notable that the first property given over to the new National Trust in 1895, was a property in Wales, the Cliff of Light (*Dinas Oleu*), at Barmouth, originally given to the Guild of St. George in 1874 by Fanny Talbot. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, the most modern thing about Ruskin is arguably his environmentalism, given his interest in air and water quality and in reducing the 'human footprint' on the land.

Finally, this study considers Ruskin's politics from the standpoint of the ways in which his thought conforms or deviates from that English tradition of politics informed by 'the politics of imperfection'.¹¹ The origins of that tradition Quinton located in the events of the Tudor period. Ruskin's reading of the formidable Elizabethan theologian, Richard Hooker, played an important role in grounding him in the natural law, one he found useful in thinking about the proper civic route to the fostering of good lives. As a point of view, it contrasted strongly with the dominant philosophical positivism of his day.¹²

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NOTES

1. Cited in F.C. Montague, *Arnold Toynbee* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1889), 27.
2. See the appendices in A.P. d'Entrèves, *Natural Law: An Introduction to Legal Philosophy*. Rev. ed. Introduction by Cary J. Neederman. (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1994).
3. Elizabeth K. Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982), Ch. 5.
4. See Judith Stoddart, 'Conjuring the Necromantic Evidence of History' in her *Ruskin's Culture Wars* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 108–12.
5. Richard Titlebaum, *Three Victorian Views of the Italian Renaissance*, (New York: Garland Publishing, 1987), 20–21.
6. See Stephen Bann, *Romanticism and the Rise of History* (New York: Twayne, 1995), 23–25, 37; Isaiah Berlin, *The Crooked Timber of Humanity* (London: Fontana Press, 1991), 49–69.
7. See Isaiah Berlin, *Against the Current: Essays in the History of Ideas* (London: Pimlico, 1997), 98–9, 104–5.
8. For a lucid exploration of these questions, see Steven Lukes, *Liberals and Cannibals: The Implications of Diversity* (London: Verso, 2017).
9. Shirley Letwin, 'Nature, History and Morality', in R.S. Peters, ed., *Nature and Conduct*. (London: Macmillan, 1975), 229–50.
10. Robert Hewison, 'Notes on the Construction of The Stones of Venice', in Robert Rhodes, and Del Ivan Janik, eds. *Studies in Ruskin: Essays in Honour of Van Akin Burd* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 1982) 131–52.
11. Anthony Quinton, *The Politics of Imperfection* (London: Faber and Faber, 1978).
12. Noel Annan, *The Curious Strength of Positivism in English Political Thought* (London: Oxford University Press, 1959).

‘Let us all share the same lot: if any miss let all bear it.’
—Motto of the Frith Guilds in the time of King Athelstan, c. 930 A.D.

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

I

In Isobel Colgate's splendid *fin de siècle* novel, *The Shooting Party*, the pastimes of aristocrats in the Oxfordshire countryside of 1913 are portrayed amidst their crumbling conventions and illusions. During the day's hunting episodes, Olivia Lilburn finds herself walking next to Lionel Stephens who is carrying a pocket edition of Ruskin. 'I love Ruskin,' exclaims Olivia, 'Even when I think he is talking nonsense. I love the sound of it.'¹

The episode well encapsulates Ruskin's great difficulty as a writer in his own time and ours. It is a commonplace of Ruskin commentary that he was a brilliant word painter but that the interspersed 'nonsense' caused critics and readers alike to qualify their admiration. This was true concerning his main writings on art and architecture and also his later social tracts. Writing came easily to Ruskin, too easily perhaps. With parental encouragement, he started to write when very young and it became as habitual as his sketching. A child of privilege, he was soon published through connections with such as the Rev. George Croly and William H. Harrison, but without the benefit of much editorial guidance.² The main exception arose from the close-watching eye of his father whose criticisms the son took seriously. As he matured, he usually bent to the occasional censorial wishes of the father out of respect or even agreement. The larger lack of editorial discipline, however, complicated the reception of his writings and often became the source of negative comment. Ruskin himself was often the

source of such criticism when he brought out new editions of past work. It is only in a few cases, such as the youthful children's tale, *The King of the Golden River*, or his most effective piece of social criticism, *Unto This Last*, that he managed to stick to the point with rigour. After 1870, the writing often took on a stream-of-consciousness aspect which, for many readers, robbed them of coherence, seriousness of purpose or else merely left them confused.³

The defects of the late writings were not entirely absent in the earlier ones on art and architecture, but in the early works, the language colour, his worship of nature, the impressive visuals, all served to attract readers such as Olivia Lilburn. His asides and preoccupations with the morality of art were more forgivable than in the later works where his didactic tone and social preaching often gave offence. A man of wealth attacking the conventional wisdom of the prevailing economic order was bound to generate a good deal of heat or accusations of hypocrisy. Even so measured a man as Anthony Trollope became impatient with Ruskin's outbursts in print.⁴

Ruskin's political and economic thought emerged hesitantly and in a fragmentary way, rising out of the more firmly established writings. In their final form, his social proposals were stark but perhaps not as unfinished as has sometimes been suggested. To those contemporaries who paid attention at all, his ideas were usually considered well intended but eccentric or tangential to the main currents of late Victorian political reform. In politics, religion and ethics, he was aware that he was fighting rear-guard actions against certain popular and learned accounts of the tale of progress associated with nineteenth-century thought and the more distant roots of its underlying rationalism which he thought he found first-nourished in the Italian Renaissance. His resistance was not waged against the resultant new sciences, as such, for he was not hostile to science; nor was it waged against the cause of 'enlightenment' as such. His objection concerned what he took to be inappropriate intrusions of one dominant account of science, that associated with late eighteenth-century 'utilitarianism', into other distinct modes of understanding.

There had been earlier manifestations of this recognition of inappropriate category intrusion, associated with his great love of geology, a study he took up early in life. Fully aware of the revolution in that field accomplished by Charles Lyell and his forerunners, and reinforced by conversation with the young Darwin, he did not reject their findings outright. He made use of their conclusions to refine his understanding of the Bible, concluding that, with respect to geological earth history, it was not a

credible source. It remained, however, a valuable ethical source, if not the only source, of social wisdom. Before the age of 20, he understood that it was important not to confuse the proper study of geology with the proper study of ethics and religion.

The results were not so clear cut in terms of his general religious outlook. As with many of his contemporaries, such as James A. Froude, Mark Rutherford or Alfred Tennyson, Ruskin became a doubter and underwent many alterations in belief. Unlike the rebellious Froude, who was drummed out of Oxford over his anti-Christian views unveiled in his novel, *The Nemesis of Faith*, Ruskin always wore his scepticism more discretely and found a way to deal with the Christian tradition in more traditional or pragmatic ways. As a social critic, he adopted a comprehensive but less certain view of history than that offered by many of the leading eighteenth- and nineteenth-century lights. He is more easily associated with representatives of what Geoffrey Clive called ‘the Romantic Enlightenment’, people who made room for the shifting currents of history, for doubt, poetry, art and traditions as important factors in human experience.⁵ As an outlook, Clive characterized it as one marked by a tension between two grand sources of anxiety: the possibility of the ‘inexistence of God’ and that of the possibility of the ‘dehumanization’ of the autonomous individual.⁶ As an antidote to this tension, the romantic looked to the comfort of the arts, poetry, the heroic, the chivalric and the sentimental aspects of history. It was these which provided vectors of social stability. Even if those traditions were partly, or even mainly, illusional, the proof was found in the experience of the tried and true. Such durable illusions provided a flexible retreat for the workings of natural law over the cooler and harder scientific rationalism which informed the minds of many in the eighteenth century who, by degree, furthered their own illusional myths of progress. Similarly, the doubting romantic of the nineteenth century found ways to resist the mounting ‘positivism’ of his times.

Ruskin’s political thought is not easily separated from his views on economics and in this respect it is not exceptional to much literature of the period. Many theorists tended to write in terms of ‘political economy’. The incompleteness of his work in this direction is owing partly to the timing of his attempt to take up social criticism in the mid-1850s. Despite some coherent first efforts, after 1863 his emotional and mental difficulties started to complicate his life on a more regular basis and his ability to take large literary projects to completion declined sharply. Despite much creativity in the later years, the contemplated treatise on political economy

never appeared, nor did many other promised projects. Since his death, many commentators have pondered the nature of his personal conflicts and their effects upon his work and private life.⁷

He made a mark with *Unto This Last* in 1862, based on four previously published essays in *The Cornhill Magazine*. This work set out the substance of his main critique of those he called the ‘orthodox political economists’, all of whose works were imbued with what he considered to be the false premises of ‘utilitarianism’. Subsequent essays of 1863, later published as *Munera Pulveris*, further refined his economic premises. These were followed by a series of letters of 1866, first exchanged with Thomas Dixon, and published as *Time and Tide*. This work advanced things along political lines, both romantic and conservative. In unveiling his plans for his social experiment, the Guild of St. George, in the public letters known as *Fors Clavigera*, he drew back considerably from *Time and Tide*’s essentially statist model of comprehensive reform in favour of the small-scale and the local, what today would be considered ‘green’ models of enterprise. His agricultural commune and associated institutions were theorized within the context of what was allowable under the British Constitution. In the *Charter* and *Oath*, there was nothing very radical or revolutionary. Its adherents were asked to subscribe to principles sanctioned by an older form of natural law, one with roots in ancient classical, patristic and medieval ethical premises with their attendant visions of the good life.⁸

In the present study, it is argued that an account of natural law informed Ruskin’s social and political thought, endorsing a distinctive version of human rights and obligations which contrasted strongly with post-Hobbsian, utilitarian and secular liberal counterparts in which an individual’s ‘subjective rights’ are understood to precede the claims of the general good.⁹ This posited modern separation, in Sandel’s words came about as follows: ‘Only in a universe empty of *telos*, such as seventeenth century philosophy affirmed, is it possible to conceive a subject apart from and prior to its purposes and ends.’ Such a world view ‘ungoverned by a purposive order’ left principles of justice ‘open to human construction’ and ‘conceptions of the human good to individual choice’.¹⁰ The emergence of such views was subsequently resisted by many but it gradually came to exercise a wide influence during the Enlightenment and after. For Ruskin, ‘the right and the good’ remained closely fused and he denied the validity of attempts to establish the precedence of one over the other by those who resorted to complex metaphysical debate, especially ‘German’ metaphysical debate.¹¹ He seldom spoke of ‘liberty’ or ‘rights’ without also couching

the discussion in terms of parallel obligations, stressing a view of humans as culturally situated personalities in the first instance. Thus in *Val D'Arno* he discussed 'libertas' in its older classical and Christian sense (as opposed to Mill's sense), as 'deliverance from the slavery of passion'. Once having learned 'how to rule our passions' and when 'certain that our conduct is right', it remains only to 'persist in that conduct against all resistance'.¹² Regardless of time and place, then, the first consideration for maintenance of any proper civil association is the fostering of acceptable public conduct in a secure setting, a contention which assumes acceptable norms.¹³ Just how well Ruskin managed to balance a conception of society grounded in natural law with his wish to make greater room for social pluralism will be a question of interest in the later stages of this work.¹⁴

Natural law has a long and dignified history as a term, dating back to ancient Greece. The idea that there was a built-in form of 'reason' animating humankind, guiding all matters and conditions, achieved considerable precision during the middle Roman Empire through the writings of Cicero, among others. Its essence was well captured by Emperor Justinian in his important codification of Roman law undertaken in the sixth century. His approach, says d'Entrèves, was to make 'an appeal to the intrinsic dignity of the law rather than to its power of compulsion'.¹⁵ 'Of all subjects,' says Justinian, 'none is more worthy of study than the authority of Laws, which happily disposes things divine and human, and puts an end to iniquity.'¹⁶

Natural law went through many iterations in Christian writings of the Middle Ages, reaching an apex in the works of Thomas Aquinas.¹⁷ The universal qualities of natural law were both dignified and sufficiently abstract to provide a suitable mechanism to explain the workings of both the spiritual and tangible worlds of human experience.

This had become problematical in seventeenth-century Europe, many argue, as the term started to split into two streams, one scientific and one social, a gradual response to the important advances made in astronomy since the time of Copernicus. The scientific aspect of natural law purportedly dealt with the underlying determinants of observable things of the world in their inanimate or living developmental sense. The social aspect of natural law continued to be concerned with understanding the rules of human conduct; but now it might be supplemented by a more radical view of human nature, one that thought it more profitably studied through the lens of a scientific-sounding knowledge of behaviourism. Throughout the seventeenth century, the uses of 'reason' were explored but often in

the context of a debate between ‘ancients and moderns’ depending on how much of the ‘new learning’ was embraced by a given practitioner. Thomas Hobbes increasingly embraced the new scientific position after 1651.¹⁸

Natural law remained a useful organizing idea throughout the eighteenth century but it had many different connotations. Jeremy Bentham became the strong advocate for the view that natural law had lost its usefulness as a covering term in matters social. The Roman Catholic Church remained the main defender of natural law in all its applications. Bentham’s position, however, influenced many in the nineteenth century who favoured the dominant value of empirical or ‘positive’ law in court proceedings. Positivists recognized tangible laws of a statute kind only, originated by a human hand, and not those sanctioned by traditions rooted in the mists of time or by Biblical sanction. The Benthamite position, then, was far removed from early seventeenth-century reformers, such as Grotius, who tried to advance, in more secular terms, the older external basis of natural law.

Grotius and other Dutch thinkers reflected the economic and social changes current in western Europe and they expanded upon the work of sixteenth-century Spanish Catholic theologians who had argued for versions of international law fortified by the older traditions. The New World encounters had stimulated radical thinking among the Canon school of theology at Salamanca about the legal requirements and human status of the indigenous populations of the Caribbean and South America.¹⁹ The thrust of the revived concepts of natural law was that there could be detected in nature overarching principles of a law for all, regardless of the apparent relativism of specified historical social structures, including seemingly primitive ones. These new schools came to employ the idea of reason in the direction of more secularly understood universal natural rights, which were eventually consciously proclaimed during the course of the American and French revolutions, and again in the twentieth century with the United Nations Charter and International Declaration on Human Rights. Such principles were, of course, difficult to implement and the natural law aspects remained fuzzy in practice, as the Nuremberg trials revealed.²⁰ It may be said, however, that the natural law tradition has never died out but has rather shared the legal stage to a degree with modern empirical national versions of law administration. Its effects are far from evident at the national and sub-national level in many modern countries where arbitrary and shifting rules, justified by *Realpolitik* or by more pragmatic decisions, are all too evident. Its abstract appeal has been much greater than its success in practice.

The concept of ‘law’ was much with Ruskin and he endowed it with an indistinguishable natural and divine source. Richard Hooker’s elaborate hierarchy of law, derived from St. Thomas Aquinas, was put to good use in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846). Law informed all visible nature, art, science, religion, economics, history and politics. Natural law is used in his work like a moral sledge hammer, driving home veritable truths. The emergence of natural law as a more formal principle in his thought came about initially through his understandings of science, aesthetics and religion, the three closely associated in his mind. First it came through his early study of science, particularly geology and chemistry, whereby he came to see that the Bible had only limited value as science. Secondly, his reading of Hooker in the mid-1840s, followed by the culmination of the so-called ‘Papal aggression’ in 1850, involved a review of the separatist issues confronting the Church of England. Finally, well after his turn to economics and political reform in the later 1850s, he gradually came to further appreciate the pluralistic implications of the classics and the work of modern students of religion and mythology such as Frederic Max Müller. This last phase was marked by, in personal terms, the adoption of a much starker kind of non-denominational Christian belief.

In his commentary on the history and theory of natural law, A.P. d’Entrèves cautioned readers about adopting easy generalizations about the term or of drawing too rapid a parallel in its use by practitioners widely separated in time. The presumed reasons for the seventeenth-century separation of natural law into distinct scientific and humanistic channels have now become unreliable, the observable world confused once again in the age of Einstein. Seemingly measurable concepts such as motion, time and space have become unstable. In the humanities, as well, the reign of ‘positivism’ has come under a cloud with even well-armed opponents of natural law in legal studies coming around to the suggestion that there may be elements of the old classical aspects of ‘reasonableness’ which need to be acknowledged in modern practice.²¹

In considering Ruskin as a practical proponent of natural law, somewhat in the style of Burke, we shall encounter a man who never entertained the possibility that the ‘moral’ could ever be usefully separated from the ‘natural’ in any sphere of human endeavour, including scientific study.²² While there is much ‘God talk’ in Ruskin, from start to finish, the quality of such talk rather early takes on a certain character. Most distinctly, it separates itself from the Protestant evangelical certitude embraced by his mother, and generally accommodated (for her sake) by his father.

One is seldom persuaded by Ruskin that he is marked by some innate unworthiness or, on the other hand, embraces any firm belief in some ‘futuraity’ as the outcome of life. Any genuine hope in ‘futuraity’ has been reluctantly abandoned by those who take ‘Pascal’s Wager’ as he had done in 1848. His Christian attachment became social, political and pragmatic. ‘My faith is a dark one’ he told F.D. Maurice in 1851.²³ Anything so self-assuring about future prospects as ‘Justification by faith’ had become quite out of the question. His way of Christianity was closer to that elusive kind exemplified by his much admired seventeenth-century poet George Herbert. Herbert’s language spoke to the practical demonstration of Christian living and attitude. Ruskin saw the realization of such Christian virtues at work in the life of Louis XIV’s renegade Bishop of Cambray, Francois Fénelon.²⁴ The tangibility of Ruskin’s Christianity might be seen as bearing a relationship with the Christian Existentialism of the twentieth-century French philosopher, Gabriel Marcel or the thought of Proust. The latter observed: ‘All that can be said is that everything in our life happens as though we entered upon it with a load of obligations contracted in a previous life.’²⁵

He remained foremost, if not exclusively, a moralist in the Christian tradition. Unexpectedly perhaps, it was through Gandhi’s reading of *Unto This Last* in 1904 and his rapid embrace of the creed embedded in that short book – ‘there is no wealth but life’ – that a person outside of the immediate English cultural tradition grasped that simplified expression of natural law and transformed it, through his concept of *satyagraha*, into the basis of his reform program for India. That program shared, implicitly at least, much that was in keeping with the ideals of Ruskin’s Guild of St. George.²⁶ When Gandhi was in England in 1931 he remembered his debt to Ruskin and wrote to the Guild’s historian, Edith Hope Scott, seeking copies of *Fors Clavigera*.²⁷

II

Only a few words need be said by way of summary about Ruskin’s well-explored biography. He was born in London of parents of mainly Scottish background in 1819. His father, John James Ruskin (1781–1864), had become well established in the wine trade, following years of apprenticeship in Scotland. In 1818, J. J. Ruskin married Margaret Tweeddale Cock, his cousin, after a lengthy courtship, the marriage delayed so that Ruskin could cancel the debts of his deceased father. There were no other children

after John's birth, although a niece, Mary Richardson, was raised in the household after 1829.²⁸ The Presbyterian and evangelical views of the parents were strong and church-going was a regular and increasingly depressing routine according to Ruskin's autobiography, although this did not work against a life-long attention to the Bible and church matters.²⁹ Ever ambitious to rise socially, the parents gradually eased their way out of Presbyterianism and into the evangelical wing of the Anglican Church.³⁰

Ruskin's domestic education, if not as severely constricted in terms of content as that of John Stuart Mill, was just as disciplined, enforced with a minimum of toys, as Ruskin put it (with considerable exaggeration) and with no regular playmates.³¹ While Mill had Greek drilled into him from age three, Ruskin was set to memorizing passages from the Bible and was exposed to good literature. The great advantage for Ruskin was the presence of his father's well-stocked library and art collecting proclivities along with a stream of prominent and stimulating visitors into the home. There were also opportunities for domestic and foreign travel in keeping with the business needs of his wine-merchant father. The great disadvantage, as with Mill, were the high expectations for his future instilled by the parents.³² Assumptions and proposals were regularly advanced by the parents concerning their hopes for his education and path in life. Margaret Ruskin was particularly anxious that he become a man of the cloth of high standing while J.J. Ruskin saw greater possibilities in literature and poetry.

None of the parental ambitions were particularly appealing to Ruskin for he was drawn early to natural history and geology and then to artistic studies. His abilities as a writer, however, did blossom steadily and the parents had the good sense not to force their preferences too strongly. The father was more flexible than the mother and he took pleasure in his son's achievements, although he was never hesitant to reign in projects which he considered premature, such as the budding 1836 defence of the great English painter, J.M.W. Turner (1775–1851).

The long series of extant family letters covering the years between 1821 and 1871 is one of the great records of Victorian family life. The close student of Ruskin's biography, Helen Viljoen, came to the untenable conclusion that Ruskin ended up hating his parents. This was most unlikely, whatever evidence of occasional parental friction may be detected on occasion or in periodic episodes of Ruskin's angst.³³ Periods of friction are facts of life in most families. Contrary to what, over the years, many commentators often identified as a tendency towards 'suppression' of personal feelings in Victorian life, it is the frankness expressed in personal exchanges

that is such a notable trait of correspondence and novels of the period, a directness which suggests strong personal confidence, usually couched in terms of mutual respect. It is presumably an important trait of language in an imperial culture. The tendency for Victorians to avoid vulgarity in personal exchanges and discourse should not be confused with an inherent prudery or lack of perception.³⁴

As the years passed, Ruskin's religion went through many phases, marked by scepticism and non-denominationalism. Commentators have remarked a good deal on the importance of his moment of 'unconversion' in 1858 at a Turin Chapel. This moment marked more of a self-dramatized culmination of a long process which had commenced in the later 1830s as he came to understand the disturbing theological implications of the new geology. While Ruskin made much reference to Biblical text throughout his life, his usage was not indicative of any strong or lasting commitment to evangelical principles as some have argued.³⁵ The parental views were resisted by one means or another from an early age. Particularly offensive to him, with the passage of time, was the notion of 'justification by faith', a principle so Protestant in its origins.³⁶ In his late years, a minor battle for Ruskin's soul was waged between Protestants and Catholics but this battle ended in a stalemate as Ruskin had long ago abandoned denominational religion in favour of a more barebones version of Christian human conduct.³⁷ He remained friendly with Cardinal Manning after his defection to Rome, but the latter's appeals to him to come to the mother church fell upon deaf ears. His death in 1900 came after a decade-long silence. He benefited from the close care of his cousin, who understood the fragility of his mind and who kept his personal contacts minimal.

III

Ruskin's contributions to political thought did not generate wide comment before his death or in the half century after, considerably less even than did his writings on economics.³⁸ General commentators have understandably attempted to place him within the context of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century developments, often noticing that he had rather little interest in French, Scottish or German Enlightenment philosophy although much in Romantic letters. In this respect, he differed considerably from Thomas Carlyle, (1795–1881) with whom he is so regularly linked. To Carlyle's regret, the enlightenment had little appeal for Ruskin.³⁹ A few of the Fabians were interested in him and took him up in the Society

Tracts.⁴⁰ In 1919, George Bernard Shaw, contended that ‘Ruskin was more misunderstood as a politician than in any other department of his activity.’⁴¹ For Shaw he was a communist of the Bolshevik variety, one who put little stock in democracy: ‘thus Ruskin, like Dickens, understood that the reconstruction of society must be the work of an energetic and conscientious minority’.⁴² Further, ‘If you like to call Bolshevism a combination of the Tory oligarchism of Ruskin and Mr. W. Churchill, with the Tory Communism of Ruskin alone, you may.’ Thus ‘when we look for a party which could logically claim Ruskin today as one of its prophets we find it in the Bolshevik party’.⁴³

The Shaw view did not recommend itself to most other chroniclers of socialist history. Ruskin received no mention in G.D.H. Cole’s monumental *History of Socialist Thought*.⁴⁴ Cole was certainly not unaware of Ruskin’s work: he merely thought it was of a different order.⁴⁵ The maintenance of social-class ideals in Ruskin’s thought led away from the kinds of parliamentary reform schemes advocated by most post-1880 liberals and socialists who saw increased social and political mobility as important aspects of the solution to the ills of the labouring men and women of Great Britain.⁴⁶ Cole’s contemporary, James Fuchs, for example, noticed the conservative aspects in Ruskin’s political outlook, leading Fuchs to distinguish between ‘revolutionary radicals’ and ‘reactionary radicals’, a distinction which has certainly been noted by various chroniclers of political thought.⁴⁷ Fuchs understood a radical to be one who saw the key to reform in some uprooting process. The French Revolutionary radical democrat, François-Noël Babeuf, may be taken as an example of the first type, being one who felt that the slate of the past must be wiped clean in any attempt to usher in a new order. Others, believing that social arrangements had merely gone astray, sought to re-establish ancient structures in modified form through radical measures. Fuchs saw strong signs of this second type in Ruskin.⁴⁸

A variation on this theme was provided by writers who identified Ruskin with that ‘Tory Radicalism’ linked to Southey and the later Wordsworth. The conservative writers of the Lake District, once recovered from earlier infatuations with the French Revolution, promoted much by way of social reform.⁴⁹ Previously, in one of the first critical studies of Ruskin’s thought, F.W. Roe described the context of such Tory radicalism as one rooted in the aftermath of the Industrial Revolution and the inadequate poor law and factory reform responses.⁵⁰ If rather laudatory, Roe’s was an insightful study which reinforced the view that Carlyle was a significant influence on Ruskin.