

Carlyle and Ruskin: An Influential Friendship

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Charles H. Kegel

One of the most powerful, sustained, and influential relationships between major literary figures of nineteenth century England was that which existed between Thomas Carlyle and John Ruskin. And while the relationship has not escaped the notice of scholars, its impact upon John Ruskin, the younger of the two, has yet to be described and assessed.

To the casual reader of Ruskin and Carlyle there might seem to be differences great enough to exclude any possibility of a friendship between the two men. And it might appear incongruous that the delicate Ruskin—lover of art, measurer of gothic gargoyles, sponsor of May-queen festivals, collector of colorful rocks—should become the avowed disciple of the stern Carlyle—transcendental mystic, scoffer at art, popularizer of German metaphysics.

The differences, indeed, were great. Carlyle, eldest of nine children born to a poor Ecclefechan stone mason, struggled with adversity throughout his early life. The poverty of his rude environment imposed conditions which made extremely difficult his subsequent rise to fame. A bag of oatmeal under his arm, he walked ninety miles to Edinburgh and a university education. And after years of hardship as schoolmaster, tutor, translator, and hack writer, his imposing genius transported him, via America, from Craigenputtock obscurity to London fame. No such struggles had the genius of Ruskin. Born the only son of a comfortably situated London wine merchant, Ruskin spent his early life in a sheltered atmosphere of delicacy and refinement. His doting parents, certain of their son's precocity, nurtured him carefully; contact with the rude, the sordid, and the ugly they cautiously avoided, while yearly travels both in England and on the Continent maintained his steady acquaintance with the beauties of nature and of art. His earliest writings were taken by his eager father to publisher friends and found their way into print. His mother took rooms at Oxford, where Ruskin had been entered as a gentleman-commoner, in order to watch carefully her frail son. And in 1843, the year after he received his degree, *Modern Painters* catapulted "a graduate of Oxford" to fame.

One could, of course, continue to point out differences between the two men. If style is the man, then Carlyle and Ruskin were irreconcilably foreign to each other. The rude, irregular, masculine force of Carlyle's prose,

through which shines a kind of noble complexity, is the very antithesis of Ruskin's festooned and cadenced periods.¹ Also, their early intellectual interests seem widely divergent. While Carlyle's *Teufelsdröckh* waged fierce battle with *das ewige Nein*, Ruskin classified rocks and minerals, sketched flowers, and wrote sentimental Byronic poems. While Carlyle searched twelfth-century Bury St. Edmund for a social pattern to impose upon the sick society of the nineteenth century, Ruskin measured Turner's effectiveness at drawing meadows.

These differences, however, are largely on the surface, and they are somewhat unfair to Ruskin in that they take into consideration mainly his early work. The careful student, although cognizant of these superficial differences, is aware of an underlying sympathy even biographical—between the two men. Both were of Scottish parentage; both attained an intellectual supremacy over their fathers, whom, nevertheless, they continued to respect with a kind of awe;² both were subjected maternally to a rigid, Calvinistic interpretation of God and his book; both were first intended for the ministry,³ later abandoned those hopes, and finally lost contact completely with conventional Christianity.

Similar also were their intellectual inclinations; and though I shall deal later with specific similarities, it will serve a useful purpose to generalize here. Although they abandoned the Christian ministry, both became preachers-at-large to their generation, and the sermons they preached were strong denunciations of the existing state of society. Both sought as the solution for current social problems an ethical certitude such as had existed in the middle ages, and both thought that the way to regain that ethical certitude was through *individual* reformation and regeneration.

Setting aside for the moment similarities and differences between the two men, let us investigate the nature and extent of the relationship they did have. Just how early Ruskin met Carlyle, his senior by almost twenty-five years, is not known with certainty, though I have argued elsewhere that the first meeting probably took place during the period between September 1846 and June 1847.⁴

The friendship then started developed and strengthened with the passing years. In 1849 Ruskin seems to have spent considerable time making a serious study of Carlyle's published works.⁵ In 1851, just after the publication of the first volume of Ruskin's *Stones of Venice*, the first extant letter passed between them, in which Carlyle urged his young friend to continue his "very gratifying" work in the "quite new 'Renaissance' . . . we are getting into just now."⁶ In 1854, just one year after Ruskin had—in his famous "Nature of Gothic" chapter in the second volume of *Stones*—made manifest the social implications of his art theory, Ruskin made the first public admission of his discipleship to Carlyle.⁷ The following year he felt it necessary to

explain to Carlyle that many things in his own writings which “corresponded very closely to things that you had said much better” were not deliberate plagiarisms.⁸ And in 1856, while answering in an appendix to the third volume of *Modern Painters* the general charge of plagiarism, Ruskin admitted being “quite unable to say to what extent my thoughts have been guided by Wordsworth, Carlyle, and Helps; to whom (with Dante and George Herbert, in olden time) I owe more than to any other writers;—most of all, perhaps to Carlyle, whom I read so constantly, that, without wilfully setting myself to imitate him, I find myself perpetually falling into his modes of expression, and saying many things in a ‘quite other,’ and, I hope, stronger way than I should have adopted some years ago.” Ruskin added, “I find Carlyle’s stronger thinking colouring mine continually.”⁹

The friendship was not without misgivings for Ruskin’s parents, who were fearful that Carlyle would pervert their son.¹⁰ And they were right, if one considers perversion to mean (as they certainly did) a shift of emphasis from problems of art to problems of society. I think there can be little doubt that Carlyle’s influence played a large part in quickening the shift, which started in the late fifties and was completed in 1860 with the publication in *Cornhill Magazine* of a series of essays entitled “Unto this Last.”¹¹ Certainly some of the Carlyle “colouring” Ruskin had spoken of can be found in *A Joy for Ever*, a series of lectures on the political economy of art which he delivered in Manchester in 1857. The following quotation is characteristic:

I wish to plead for your several and future consideration of this one truth, that the notion of Discipline and Interference [by the government] lies at the very root of all human progress or power; that the ‘let-alone’ principle is, in all things which man has to do with, the principle of death; that it is the ruin to him, certain and total, if he lets his land alone—if he lets fellow-men alone—if he lets his own soul alone . . . I believe that the masses have a right to claim education from their government. . . . I believe they have a right to claim employment from their governors.¹²

Carlyle’s letters, once Ruskin had manifested his interest in social matters, offered constant encouragement and urged the younger man to continue in his assault against “those unfortunate dismal-science people.”¹³ After reading the first essay of *Unto this Last*, Carlyle wrote, “I have read your paper with exhilaration, exultation, often with laughter, with bravissimo! Such a thing flung suddenly into half a million dull British heads on the same day, will do a great deal of good. I marvel in parts at the lynx-eyed sharpness of your logic, at the pincer-grip (red-hot pincers) you take of certain bloated cheeks and blown-up bellies. . . . Stand to that kind of work for the next seven years, and work out then a result like what you have done in painting.”¹⁴ And when *Unto this Last* was discontinued by the publishers

of *Cornhill Magazine* in November 1860, it was Carlyle who encouraged his good friend and then editor of *Fraser's Magazine*, James Anthony Froude, to solicit from Ruskin something else in the political-economy line.¹⁵ The result was *Munera Pulveris*, which Ruskin significantly dedicated "to the friend and guide who has urged me to all chief labour, THOMAS CARLYLE."¹⁶

The friendship between master and disciple which had ripened in the fifties and early sixties did not diminish with time. If anything, it grew more solid, assuming, in fact, the aspects of a father-son relationship. Ruskin's father had died in 1864. Accustomed throughout his life to a strong parental tie, Ruskin cast Carlyle into the vacant position. As early as 1867, in a passage written for *Time and Tide* but removed from the book publication of that work, Ruskin had spoken of Carlyle "as a son might speak of his father."¹⁷ The first direct mention of the relationship to Carlyle occurred in a birthday letter to him in 1873. Ruskin signed it, "Ever your loving disciple—son, I have almost now a right to say."¹⁸ In the next year, when Ruskin toured the Continent, he accelerated his correspondence to Carlyle to the point of an almost daily letter, as was his habit with his own father.¹⁹ All of these letters after that of May 21, 1874, were addressed "Dearest Papa" or "My dearest Papa."²⁰ Apparently Carlyle did not mind the new relationship, for in answering a letter from Carlyle which is no longer extant, Ruskin wrote, "I have your lovely letter, so full of pleasantness for me; chiefly in telling that I give you pleasure by putting you in the place of the poor father who used to be so thankful for his letter."²¹ The habit of addressing Carlyle as Papa continued until his death in 1881, and in a manuscript intended for *Fors Clavigera*, but never so used, Ruskin wrote that his relationship with Carlyle had been "as a child with its father or mother, not as friend with friend."²²

While there are references to almost all of Carlyle's works scattered throughout Ruskin's writings and diary, it was *Past and Present*, Carlyle's one great contribution to the nineteenth century's habit of contrasting the medieval with the modern, that had the most powerful impact upon him. It was one of the first of Carlyle's works with which Ruskin came in contact.²³ It continued to be the work which he prized most highly. In 1887, just a short time before ten years of mental darkness descended upon Ruskin, he sent his marked and worn copy of *Past and Present* to a friend, Alfred Macfee, with the following note: "I have sent you a book which I read no more because it has become a part of myself, and my old marks in it are now useless, because in my heart I mark it all."²⁴

Ruskin's comment that *Past and Present* had "become a part" of him can be documented throughout his assault upon the existing economic system. Carlyle had told him in *Past and Present* that the theory of supply and demand was atheistic, that it neglected ethical considerations, that, in short, there were far more important things for England to consider than

that it should undersell other nations in cotton.²⁵ And in contrast to this nineteenth century atheism Carlyle had pointed to a medieval period in which an ethical absolute governed not only religious, but economic life as well. So, "Carlyle having led the way as he does in all noble insight in this generation"²⁶ Ruskin trained his verbal guns upon the "Science of Political Economy, . . . the most cretinous, speechless, paralysing plague that has yet touched the brains of mankind."²⁷

Ruskin's first major volley in this attack was *Unto this Last*, in which the influence of Carlyle is ever present. Ruskin attempted to demonstrate that there is more to political economy and to the relationship between worker and employer than the cash nexus. Human affections, human responsibilities also play a part. He pleads with the merchants and industrialists to accept their rightful place in the social pattern: "In his office as governor of the men employed by him, the merchant or manufacturer is invested with a distinctly paternal authority and responsibility."²⁸ This argument, of course, is almost identical with Carlyle's exhortation to industrial "captains of industry" to accept the responsibilities of the feudal lord.

The influence of *Past and Present* appears again in Ruskin's next important economic work, *Munera Pulveris*. Here he aimed at more than mere criticism of the present system. He intended it to be "an exhaustive treatise on Political Economy," one which would substitute his economic theories for the accepted economy of the day; however, Ruskin accomplished only what he called "the preface of the intended work,"²⁹ a series of definitions which were to furnish the point of departure for the unrealized *magnum opus*. I have mentioned earlier that *Munera Pulveris* was inscribed to "the friend and guide who has urged me to all chief labour, THOMAS CARLYLE." And in an appendix to the work Ruskin disclaimed originality for the economic theories implicit in *Munera Pulveris*, Carlyle having said on the subject "all . . . that needs to be said, and far better than I shall ever say it again." Significantly, he mentions *Past and Present*.³⁰ In addition, Ruskin twice recommends that work to his readers. Carlyle's chapter upon "Permanence,"³¹ in which he had pleaded for a resumption in nineteenth century England of the sort of permanent contract which bound Cedric to Gurth, Ruskin cites in connection with his definition of "slavery."³² Again *Past and Present* is recommended and quoted in Ruskin's definition of "mastership,"³³ a definition permeated by Carlyle's demand that the modern, industrial master should assume the responsibilities of the feudal lord.

Ruskin's next major work of social import was *Time and Tide*, a series of twenty-five letters which appeared in various newspapers early in 1867. Like Carlyle, who in the same year protested the extension of the franchise with *Shooting Niagara*, Ruskin inveighed against the liberty and equality of man.³⁴ In the utopia he presents in *Time and Tide*, Ruskin will allow no

clamoring by the lower classes for a voice in government. "Your voices are not worth a rat's squeak, either in Parliament or out of it," he told his laboring readers.³⁵ Even education—and state education for all is provided in his utopia—cannot erase the "divinely-appointed differences, eternal as the ranks of the everlasting hills,"³⁶ between ranks of society. It is good, it is moral to do one's work without grumbling; and in a passage worthy of Carlyle, Ruskin wrote: "Yonder poor horse, calm slave in daily chains at the railroad siding, who drags the detached rear of the train to the front again, and slips aside so deftly as the buffers meet; and, within eighteen inches of death all day long, content, for eternal reward, with his night's rest, and his champed mouthful of hay;—anything more earnestly moral and beautiful one cannot image—I never see the creature without a kind of worship."³⁷ The entire series of *Time and Tide* letters, in fact, simply presents an attempt to implement Carlylean social doctrine.³⁸

The greatest tribute to *Past and Present*, however, is to be found in the *Fors Clavigera* letters and the closely associated Guild of St. George. It requires no acute literary sensitivity to agree with Cook's generalization that *Fors Clavigera* "from its first page to the last is deeply coloured by the influence of Carlyle."³⁹

Carlyle's original attitude toward the *Fors Clavigera* letters was somewhat critical. Sending an advance copy of the first letter to his brother John in December 1870, Carlyle wrote, "I think you never read a madder looking thing. I still hope (though with little confidence) that he will bethink him and drop the matter in time . . . though, alas, I fear he will plunge into it all the same."⁴⁰ However, four months later—five *Fors* letters having then been published—Carlyle spoke of them as "words winged with Empyrean wisdom, piercing as lightning."⁴¹ And a year later, in a letter to Emerson, Carlyle wrote his most eloquent tribute to the *Fors* letters: "There is nothing going on among us as notable to me as those fierce lightning-bolts Ruskin is copiously and desperately pouring into the black world of Anarchy all around him."⁴² Among those lightning-bolts is Ruskin's exhortation to his readers to "Read your Carlyle . . . with all your heart, and with the best of brain you can give."⁴³ Especially *Past and Present*. In the tenth *Fors* letter, published for October 1871, Ruskin pronounced:

A good law is one that holds, whether you recognize and pronounce it or not; a bad law is one that cannot hold, however much you ordain and pronounce it. That is the mighty truth which Carlyle has been telling you for a quarter of a century—once for all he told it you, and the landowners, and all whom it concerns, in the third book of *Past and Present* (1845 [sic] buy Chapman and Hall's second edition if you can, it is good print, and read it till you know it by heart) . . . I tell you once for all, Carlyle is the only living writer who has spoken the absolute and perpetual truth about yourselves and your business; and exactly in proportion to the inherent weakness of brain in your lying guides, will be their animosity against Carlyle.⁴⁴

In addition to the strong general coloring of Carlyle in the work, in addition to Ruskin's plea that his followers read their *Past and Present* until they know it by heart—in addition to these things the very frequency with which Ruskin employs a medieval-modern contrast in *Fors* demonstrates the particular impact of Carlyle's *Past and Present* upon the work. In this respect Cook has said, "*Fors Clavigera* may be described, under one aspect of it, as a resumption, at the latter part of the century, of the contrast between *Past and Present* which Carlyle had drawn three decades before."⁴⁵

Likewise, Carlyle's influence is immediately obvious in Ruskin's Guild of St George. There can be no doubt that the Guild was to be a practical application of Carlyle's social doctrine as Ruskin understood it. In 1874, when the idea of a St. George Society was beginning to take shape in his mind, Ruskin wrote, "That it should be left to me to begin such a work, with only one man in England—Thomas Carlyle—to whom I can look for steady guidance, is alike wonderful and sorrowful to me."⁴⁶ And in 1885—the Guild had then become a feeble reality—Ruskin wrote in a "Master's Report," "The object principally and finally in my mind in founding the Guild, was the restoration, to such extent as might be possible to those who understood me, of this feeling of loyalty to the Land-possessor in the peasantry with whose lives and education he was entrusted. . . . Carlyle's grander exhortation to the English landholders in *Past and Present*, I put . . . with reiterated and varied emphasis forward in connection with a definite scheme of action."⁴⁷

Carlyle's influence upon Ruskin was powerful and sustained.⁴⁸ In large part Ruskin's shift of emphasis from artistic to social problems was prompted and encouraged by his older friend, and all of his social pronouncements, which occupied the greater part of his literary life, were strongly colored, both in substance and style, with Carlylean pigments. This indebtedness Ruskin freely admitted many times in his works and in his letters. And where he went beyond Carlyle, as he often did, he viewed himself as a disciple attempting to find the means by which his acknowledged master's doctrine could be put to practice. It is perhaps fruitless to ponder literary *if's*, but one can hardly escape the speculation that without Carlyle's inspiration, encouragement, and friendship Ruskin would have been a much different—and to my mind, a less significant—writer.

Dr. Kegel is professor of English and dean of the College of Liberal Arts at Idaho State University.

1. This is particularly true of Ruskin's early prose style. In his later works Ruskin's style becomes harder, the purple passages fewer.

2. Thomas Carlyle, *Reminiscences*, ed. James Anthony Froude (New York, 1881), pp. 3–33; John Ruskin, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn (London, 1903–12), XXXV, 44—hereafter cited as *Works*.

3. Characteristically, Ruskin's parents had hopes that he would become a bishop (*Works*, XXXV, 25).

4. Charles H. Kegel, "An Uncertain Biographical Fact," *The Victorian Newsletter*, No. 10 (Autumn 1956), p. 19. Sanders, however, suggests a later date: "The best guess which I can make is that they met at a Rogers breakfast or one of John Forster's dinners in April or May of 1850." (Charles Richard Sanders, "Carlyle's Letters to Ruskin: A Finding List with Some Unpublished Letters and Comments," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, XLI [September], 208n)

5. *Works*, IX, p. xxiii.

6. *Works*, IX, p. xlvi.

7. *Works*, XII, 507.

8. *Works*, XXXVI, 184.

9. *Works*, V, 427, 428.

10. *Works*, XXXVI, 396, 460. It should be noted, however, that Ruskin's father did make some overtures of friendship in 1861. Sanders has recently published (pp. 217–220) five letters from Carlyle to the elder Ruskin thanking him for gifts of books, flowers, wine, and cigars.

11. Albers cautions, "Man darf auf keinen Fall Carlyle allein verantwortlich machen für Ruskins Hinwendung zu sozialökonomischen Themen," (Helma Albers, *Studien zu Ruskin's Sozialismus* [Hamburg, 1938], p. 26) She is, of course, right; for Ruskin's theory of morality in art carried the embryo of his later social criticism. However, without Carlyle's strong influence it seems likely that Ruskin would not have made the shift so early.

12. *Works*, XVI, 26–27. That Ruskin had Carlyle in mind when he wrote this passage becomes even more apparent as one continues reading. A few lines later Ruskin alludes to Carlyle's comparison of a modern worker and an English horse in *Past and Present* (Thomas Carlyle, *The Works of Thomas Carlyle*, Centenary Edition, ed. H. D. Traill [London, 1896–99], X, 157—hereafter cited as Carlyle, *Works*).

13. *Works*, XVII, p. xxxii. I am not suggesting that there had not been occasional encouragement earlier. In January 1856, for example, after receiving a copy of the third volume of *Modern Painters*, Carlyle wrote enthusiastically: "I wish you long life; and more and more power and opportunity of uttering forth, in tones of sphere-harmony mixed with thunder, these salutary messages to your poor fellow creatures,—whom (including us) may God pity." (Sanders, p. 214.)

14. *Works*, XVII, pp. xxxii–xxxiii.

15. *Works*, XXXVI, 382.

16. *Works*, XVII, 145. This work was also ill-starred. After four parts of the work had appeared, the publishers of the magazine forced Froude to put an end to the series in April 1863.

17. *Works*, XVII, 476. It should be noted, however, that the one serious quarrel between the two men occurred during May and June of 1867 (see Sanders, pp. 225–230).

18. *Works*, XXXVII, 75. It may be significant that this first direct mention of Carlyle as father comes in a birthday letter. It was Ruskin's habit, while his own father lived, to commemorate his birthday always with a long letter, a poem, or a rhymed letter (*Works*, II, p. xxxv).

19. *Works*, XXXVI, p. xcvi.

20. *Works*, XXXVII, 99, 115, 118, 120, 123, 124, 126, 130, 132, 148, etc.

21. *Works*, XXXVII, 123–124.

22. *Works*, XXIX, 539. There are interesting Freudian implications in this desire of Ruskin's for a father. Immediately after Carlyle's death in February 1881—ten day's later, in fact—Ruskin transferred the father role to another friend, F. S. Ellis (*Works*, XXXVII, 342). From that time forward, every letter addressed to Ellis called him papa except two (*Works*, XXXVII, 346, 362), and in both those letters Carlyle is mentioned. Conversely, in none of the letters which addressed Ellis as papa is Carlyle's name mentioned.

23. In a letter which Ruskin wrote to George Richmond in February 1881, the month of Carlyle's death, he wrote, "Do you know that you were the first person who ever put a book of Carlyle's into my hand?" (*Works*, XXXVII, 341.) Another letter suggests that *Past and Present* was the book referred to (*Works*, XXXVII, 361). Yet Ruskin had read *Heroes and Hero-Worship* in 1842, the year before the publication of *Past and Present* (Sanders, p. 208).

24. *Works*, XXVII, 179n.

25. In *Munera Pulveris* Ruskin borrows just this argument from *Past and Present* (*Works*, XVII, 280–281).

26. *Works*, XVII, p. xxiv.

27. *Works*, XVIII, p. lxxxii.

28. *Works*, XVII, 41.

29. *Works*, XVII, 143.

30. *Works*, XVII, 287.

31. Carlyle, *Works*, X, 277–282.

32. *Works*, XVII, 261.

33. *Works*, XVII, 280–281.

34. This idea was not new with *Time and Tide*. As early as 1849 Ruskin had written (*Works*, VIII, 248) of that "treacherous phantom which men call Liberty." In 1860 he wrote: "If there be any one point insisted on throughout my works more frequently than another, that one point is the impossibility of Equality. My continual aim has been to show the eternal superiority of some men to others, sometimes even of one man to all others; and to show also the advisability of appointing such persons or person to guide, to lead, or on occasion even to compel and subdue, their inferiors according to their own better knowledge and wiser will." (*Works*, XVII, 74.) One might consult also, in this respect, the entire sixth chapter of *The Cestus of Aglaia*, which is a vigorous denunciation of liberty in general and Mill's *On Liberty* in particular (*Works*, XIX, 120–134).

35. *Works*, XVII, 326.

36. *Works*, XVII, 457.

37. *Works*, XVII, 335.

38. Though he was a social prophet *par excellence* of nineteenth century England, Carlyle never attempted to translate his prophecies into practice. He was content to storm and rail about the course society must take, but seldom, and then with extreme reluctance, did he ever condescend to chart that course in concrete terms. The same could not be said of Ruskin, who, like Morris after him, had a passion for practice, and that passion manifested itself in many practical experiments.

39. E. T. Cook, *The Life of John Ruskin* (New York, 1911), II, 320.

40. Sanders, p. 232.

41. W. G. Collingwood, *The Life and Work of John Ruskin* (New York, 1894), II, 411.

42. *The Correspondence of Thomas Carlyle and Ralph Waldo Emerson*, ed. Charles Eliot Norton (London, 1883), II, 352.

43. *Works*, XXVII, 180.

44. *Works*, XXVII, 179. Carlyle also enforces the same truth in the first book of *Past and Present* (Carlyle, *Works*, X, 10–11).

45. *The Life of John Ruskin*, II, 321.

46. *Works*, XXVII, 22.

47. *Works*, XXX, 94–95. Though Ruskin considered St. George's Guild a practical application of Carlylean theory, Carlyle himself was apparently indifferent to the idea. He wrote in 1878 to William Allingham, "The St. George's Comapany is utterly absurd. I thought it a joke at first." (*William Allingham: A Diary* [London, 1907], p. 263.

48. Viewed from the other side, however, the friendship was not influential. I can find no evidence whatever that Ruskin ever formed or even modified any of Carlyle's thinking on an important subject. Carlyle was an independent and dogmatic thinker who had formed most of his major ideas before he met Ruskin, and those ideas he never fundamentally changed. Too, the extremely close father-son relationship which Ruskin forced upon the friendship possessed none of the belief that the child might be father to the man. Ruskin sought only guidance, love, encouragement. These Carlyle gave.