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978-1-107-66195-0 - Ruskin as Literary Critic Selections

Edited by A. H. R. Ball

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as
LITERARY CRITIC
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Edited by
A. H. R. BALL, M.A.

*Senior English Master
Liverpool Collegiate
School*



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P R E F A C E

MOST previous editions of extracts from Ruskin have been intended to illustrate his work as a prose artist, a project which Ruskin himself regarded with particular dislike. The aim of this volume is to collect in continuous and readable form the thoughts of Ruskin on two topics of special interest to-day—literature and aesthetics. The attention which has been given to Ruskin's other subjects makes the neglect of this branch of his work more striking, for there is here much of permanent value. Interesting themes, original treatment, suggestive ideas which warm and stimulate the mind, are set out in a more easily readable form than is usual in Ruskin's works; and always there is the incomparable beauty of his prose style. These provide a general background of culture not accessible elsewhere in so small a compass.

The arrangement of the extracts requires little explanation; it is intended to indicate both the character and range of Ruskin's literary criticism. The well-known passages on the value and study of books, from *Sesame and Lilies*, are placed first. The most representative sections on the broad general principles which underlie all his criticism, both of literature and of art,—the “moralistic theory,” the treatises on aesthetics, and the study of the grotesque—are next grouped together. The survey of landscape in literature, including the chapter on the “Pathetic Fallacy,” and the extracts on style, are among Ruskin's most useful criticisms, and deserve careful study. It is regretted that it is impossible to make any suitable short extract from the *Elements of English Prosody*. The criticisms of individual authors are chiefly on Dante, Shakespeare, Scott, Byron, and Wordsworth, but a few others are included

where the expression is particularly happy. Exigencies of space require somewhat ruthless excision in a few cases, but the selection includes representative and valuable essays. Lastly there are grouped together a few of Ruskin's definitions and aphorisms.

The Introduction indicates the early influences on Ruskin's critical faculty, attempts a brief estimate of the merits and demerits of his work, and gives a summary of the most important topics in this book, bridging over the inevitable gaps in the selections by reference to passages not quoted in the text. The life of Ruskin is not pursued in detail, as this is fully treated in the Introduction to A. C. Benson's *Selections from Ruskin*. For convenience a list of proper names, giving the allocation of characters to the books in which they occur, and brief notes where necessary, is appended. Textual references are indicated by footnotes.

Few readers have easy access to the Library Edition, and the references in this volume are to the numbered sections, which are alike in all editions.

I am indebted to my friends Dr H. A. Needham, of the University of Bristol, and Mr W. Holdgate, of Liverpool, for their valuable advice and criticism during the preparation of this volume, and my thanks are due to Messrs George Allen and Unwin, Limited, and to the Ruskin Trustees, for permission to include extracts from books which are still in copyright.

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