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In 1911, the New York Times alerted its readers to the forthcoming 'authoritative' biography of Ruskin with the words 'out of a life's devotion to Ruskin and the Herculean task of editing the definitive Ruskin, Mr E.T. Cook is to give us a definitive Ruskin biography also. It will have the authority of a brilliant Oxford scholar, combined with the charm and lightness of a style which makes Mr Cook one of the first of English journalists.' Cook had been given complete access to Ruskin's diaries, notebooks and letters by his literary executors, and Ruskin's family and friends co-operated fully with him. His depth of knowledge of, and sympathy for, his subject make Cook's biography a vital tool for anyone wishing to understand Ruskin's extraordinary achievements in so many fields. Volume 1 covers the period to 1860, the year in which the final volume of *Modern Painters* was published.

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# The Life of John Ruskin

VOLUME 1: 1819–1860

EDWARD TYAS COOK



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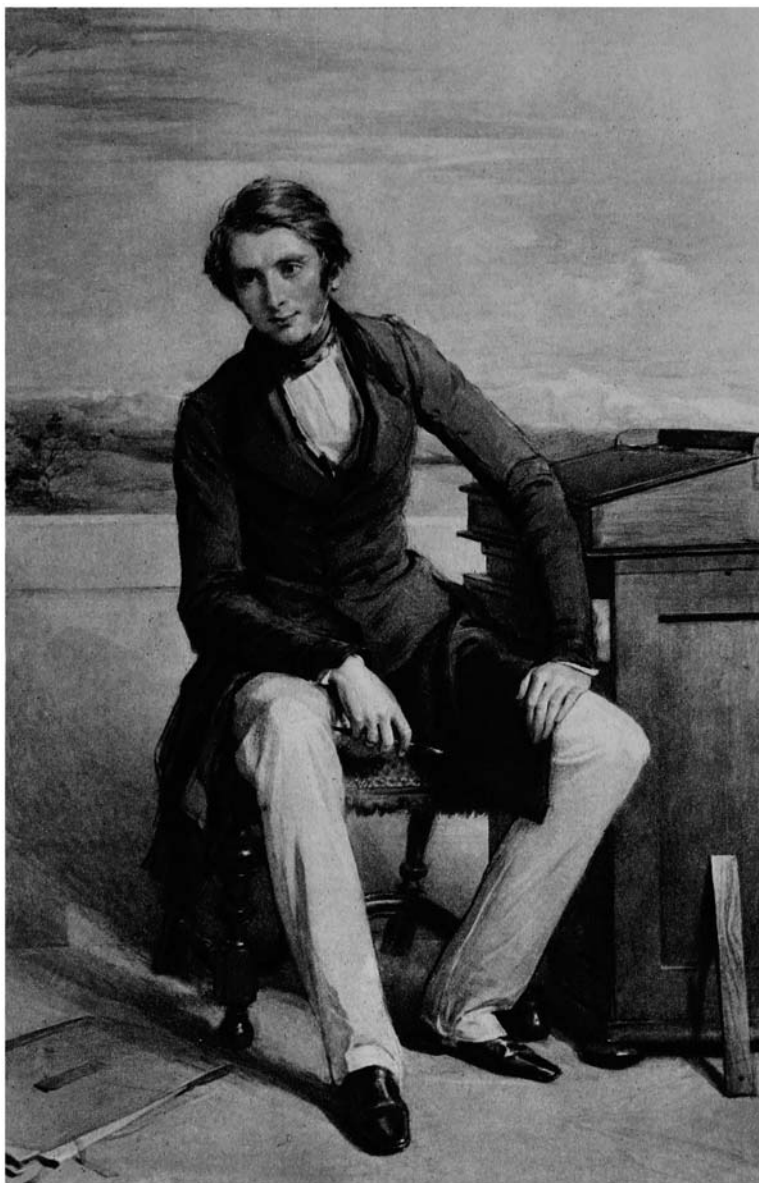
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G. Richmond

The Author of "Modern Painters"

1843

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BY

E. T. COOK

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## PREFATORY NOTE

THE principal material on which this Biography is founded consists of Ruskin's diaries, note-books, and letters which have been placed at my disposal by his executors. The diaries, though some years and events are not included, are a main authority for the Life. They are supplemented by a large collection of letters to his parents, which are preserved at Brantwood. During Ruskin's absences from home, he wrote almost daily, and sometimes more than once a day, to his father, or to his mother, or to both. The letters to his father (who died in 1864) are fuller than those to his mother. After her death in 1871, their place is partly taken by letters to Mrs. Arthur Severn, to whose friendly assistance I am much indebted. Letters to many other correspondents are also used in this Biography; and I am especially grateful to the family of the late Professor Norton, and to his publishers, Messrs. Houghton, Mifflin & Company, for their kind and gracious permission to make large use of his letters.

Other important material for a Life of Ruskin is to be found in his own books, and especially in *Præterita* and *Fors Clavigera*. Upon this material also I have been allowed by his executors to draw unreservedly. *Præterita* is only a fragment of autobiography. It deals hardly at all with Ruskin's later years; and, in the years with which it does deal, it leaves many gaps. It is fullest in the record of his childhood. My first two chapters might have been made much longer, but that *Præterita* covers the ground. Here and there, both in those chapters and elsewhere, I have quoted from it; but as far as possible I have drawn upon autobiographical passages scattered elsewhere in Ruskin's writings. The "Autobiographical Notes," which are occasionally quoted, are manuscript passages not included by

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## PREFATORY NOTE

Ruskin in the published text of *Præterita*, but intended by him for the projected continuation of it or for its subsidiary *Dilecta*.

Among hitherto published biographical studies of Ruskin, the books which have most authority are Mr. W. G. Collingwood's *Life and Work of Ruskin* and *Ruskin Relics*. Every student of Ruskin must feel himself to be under a deep debt of gratitude to the author of those excellent books. The literature of Ruskiniana is vast. My bibliography in the Library Edition of his Works enumerates more than 1200 items under that head. I cannot honestly say that I have read every one of those books, pamphlets, and articles; but I have probably read more of them than most other persons have. In every case where I have used information or other material thus derived, I have intended to express my obligation by reference. If I have anywhere failed to do so, it is by inadvertence for which I here offer apology.

The late Mr. George Allen gave me some personal reminiscences of his long connexion with Ruskin; and these have been supplemented, since Mr. Allen's death, by his diary, extracts from which were made for me by his daughter, Miss Grace Allen.

I have the pleasant duty of thanking my friend, Mr. Alexander Wedderburn, for reading the proofs of this book, for supplying me with several reminiscences of Ruskin, and for making many valuable suggestions.

E. T. C.

*September 1911.*

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## Introductory

THE life of Ruskin was, as he said of it, “persistently literary.”<sup>1</sup> The biography of him must be the account, mainly, of a character, a temperament, an influence; and seldom, of events on the stage of public action. He himself would have deemed this limitation not disadvantageous. “Lives in which the public are interested,” he wrote, “are scarcely ever worth writing. For the most part compulsorily artificial, often affectedly so,—on the whole, fortunate beyond ordinary rule,—and, so far as the men are really greater than others, unintelligible to the common reader,—the lives of statesmen, soldiers, authors, artists, or any one habitually set in the sight of many, tell us at last little more than what sort of people they dealt with, and of pens they wrote with; the personal life is inscrutably broken up,—often contemptibly, and the external aspect of it merely a husk, at the best.”<sup>2</sup> A biographer of Ruskin is free from some of these disabilities.

Ruskin’s life was not lived in the public eye, but he was frankly communicative. In letters and diaries, as well as in his fragment of autobiography and in many a page of his other books, he left behind him much intimate material. If there be anything unintelligible in his life, it is not for lack of self-revelation. The lives worth writing, he thought, are those about which truth can be told in the greatest of sciences, that of Humanity; and which reveal what is “beautiful or woful” in an individual soul.

There is little temptation, again, to dwell too much in any biography of Ruskin upon the people he dealt with or the pens he wrote with. There is indeed a certain interest

<sup>1</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 85.

<sup>2</sup> Preface to *The Story of Ida*, 1883.

in the case of a master in any of the arts in knowing something of his methods, and I shall devote a chapter or two to such topics. Yet among great writers Ruskin was one of the least dependent upon particular methods, apparatus, tricks, or surroundings. He wrote anywhere, anyhow, with anything, and on everything.

Ruskin's dealings with persons were of comparatively little moment. He had, indeed, many distinguished friends, especially among artists and men of letters, and the story of his friendships will be found, I hope, to be among the more interesting threads in this biography; but the interest centres largely around Ruskin himself. He met also, and had some personal acquaintance with, men of fame outside his own immediate circle. We shall catch glimpses in this book of Marshal Radetsky; of Archdukes and Grand Duchesses and British Royal Highnesses; of Rubini and Taglioni and Jenny Lind; of Forbes and Buckland and Darwin; of Manning, of Gladstone, and of Disraeli. And, more summarily, it may here be recorded that Ruskin "formed one of a worshipful concourse invited by the Bunsen family to hear them talk Bunsenese"; that he saw the Bishop of Oxford (Wilberforce) "taught by Sir Robert Inglis to drink sherry cobbler through a straw"; that he "heard Macaulay spout the first chapter of Isaiah without understanding a syllable of it";<sup>1</sup> and that he was invited to go down to Broadlands with Lord Palmerston, who received him much as Lord Oldborough receives Mr. Temple in Miss Edgeworth's *Patronage*, and, at dinner, cross-examined him playfully upon the wildest of his political theories. But all such encounters were incidental and significant of little. The success of *Modern Painters* gave the author entrance to the polite circles of London; but "at that time," he said, "even more than now (1888) it was a mere torment and horror to me to talk to big people whom I didn't care about." And in the later period of his life he mixed very little even in literary or artistic circles. "It seldom chances," he said, "my work lying chiefly among stones, clouds, and flowers, that I am brought into any freedom of

<sup>1</sup> *Præterita*, vol. iii. §§ 28, 29.

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intercourse with my fellow-creatures.”<sup>1</sup> Still less did he mix at any period in public affairs. He made a glory in what I fear that some of my readers may consider his shame; namely, that he had never given, and never meant to give, a parliamentary vote in his life.<sup>2</sup> He “knew so little,” he said, “of public life and saw so little of the men who are engaged in it,” that he was “guilty of a misunderstanding of Mr. Gladstone’s character”<sup>3</sup> as “total” as—well, as that of some who had not a like excuse. Ruskin’s life, then, was private and secluded. A biography of him must be the story of a soul, or be of nothing worth.

The development of Ruskin’s character and mind, the nature of his temperament, and their encounter with the world will, then, be one main theme of this biography. The theme is ample; for Ruskin’s life, though in an external sense empty of events, was in another sense as full as any of which we have record. His life, like his style, is distinguished above all things by abounding vitality; for his closing years are not rightly to be accounted part of his “life,” they were but a long-drawn-out stage of death. In no author who has written so much as Ruskin can so few words be found which are otiose, so few passages which are spiritless; and, similarly, in his life, I doubt whether from his first articulate years to his last there was an empty or an idle moment in them. He was, indeed, a creature of moods; the same eager sensibility that gave him exaltation brought in reaction an equal despondency. But he liked and disliked, he hoped and despaired, ever with the same consuming intensity. He could find occupation anywhere, and beauty everywhere; in the simplest and commonest effects of nature, no less than in the most brilliant. Mrs. Severn remembers walking with Ruskin, when she was a young girl, and seeing him stoop low down and glance sidewise at the sky. “Do you put your head down here,” he said, “and you will see what I see.” So she bent down also, and saw what he had seen—“the wondrous loveliness

<sup>1</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 7 (1871).<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter 29.<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, Letter 57.

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of a tree's buds against the sky." "I cannot explain to you," he said in one of his later Oxford lectures, "what a deep element of life, for me, is in the sight merely of pure sunshine on a bank of living grass. More than any pathetic music,—yet I love music,—more than any artful colour—and yet I love colour,—more than any other merely material thing visible to these old eyes, in earth or sky."<sup>1</sup> When he wrote of the world that "God had placed its real happiness in the keeping of the little mosses of the wayside and of the clouds of the firmament,"<sup>2</sup> he was recording a fact of his own experience of life. Every cause which he took up, every interest which successively engaged him—painting, architecture, sculpture or missals, rocks, shells, flowers or birds, mythology, music or economics—aroused the same enthusiasm, whether in admiration or in rebuke. He lived, as he wrote, at white-heat. If, as Mr. Pater says, "to burn always with this hard gem-like flame, to maintain this ecstasy," be "success in life," then was Ruskin's life successful above common measure.

But Ruskin lived not only for art's sake; and our theme is full of the tragi-comedy of human life; abounding in conflicts of duties, in tragic disappointments, in an almost comic disproportion, sometimes, between means and ends. We shall see Ruskin, endowed with exquisite sensibility, and possessed by a love of beauty so passionate that he burnt to make all the world participate in his vision. With him this love of beauty was inextricably mixed with the beauty of holiness. Two sides of his nature were at first at strife. He found for himself a reconciliation; and believed, in the first rush of his enthusiasm, that he had only to write, in order to convert the world. The enthusiast for beauty was cast into the midst of a material age. He did not convert the world, and he turned to rail at it. Instincts of compassion, at first dormant in his nature, were awakened, and the same sensibility that opened the

<sup>1</sup> *Art of England*, § 11.

See the passage cited in Vol. II. chap. xxxii.



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beauty of the world to him impressed upon him with intolerable force its load of misery. Ill equipped, and giving only half his energies to the work, he sought to redeem the misery, and his life seemed to him to end in failure.

The story of Ruskin's private fortunes, and of the development of his character, have also their elements of tragic circumstance. The earlier period of his life was tied in a relation with his parents closer than falls to the lot of most men. They had for him unbounded affection, and he for them ungrudging deference; but it was "an exquisite piece of tragedy altogether," said Ruskin, of his father's death—"the loss of a father who would have sacrificed his life for his son, and yet forced his son to sacrifice his life to him, and sacrifice it in vain."<sup>1</sup> "The men capable," he said, "of the highest imaginative passion are always tossed on fiery waves by it"<sup>2</sup>; his own experience in love shows every element of the comic or tragic irony of life—a grand passion in boyhood which left a scar not the less wounding because it was partly ludicrous; a marriage in early manhood which was brief and unhappy; an abiding love in middle age which was denied its fruition by the most cruel irony. Tragedy more exquisite, as we shall see, than the other! If life be the school of character, Ruskin was well lessoned. We shall hear his own account of the influences which moulded his character favourably and unfavourably in early years; and afterwards the course of our story will show the many gifts, graces, and virtues which illuminated his life. Yet Ruskin's character was not one of those which seem raised above the level of humanity, and from their very perfection leave us a little cold. In something that I once wrote and showed to Ruskin, I had chanced to cite these lines from "Mimnermus in Church":—

"You promise heavens free from strife,  
Pure truth and perfect change of will;

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<sup>1</sup> Letter to Dr. Acland, March 9, 1864: see Vol. II. p. 68.

<sup>2</sup> *Præterita*, vol. i. § 255.

But sweet, sweet is this human life,  
 So sweet I fain would breathe it still.  
 Your chilly stars I can forgo :  
 This warm, kind world is all I know.”

The lines were new to him, and he asked particulars about the author of *Ionica*. “I like this one verse,” he said, adding characteristically, “though I have never thought of stars as chilly.” He liked the verse, and it was in harmony with his own feelings. With a mind of singular richness and fulness, he combined a childlike character; fresh, winning, playful, wistful; but he had also something of the impatience and the petulance of a child. These developed under conditions of his education and circumstances into an intellectual pride, which was Ruskin’s most tragic fault. It is no discovery of his critics. He knew it and confessed. He did, indeed, rebut the charge of “arrogance,” in so far as it referred to the bold utterance of long considered and carefully formed opinions. But he knew that one of his calamities was “a dangerous and lonely pride.”<sup>1</sup> And one cannot doubt that he was right in ascribing to this sense of isolation a principal cause of the failing of his mind. His successive mental illnesses were, as we shall find, attended in some respects with every circumstance of exquisite pain. His was no case of an abrupt failure of all mental power and total eclipse. The earlier brain storms passed, and in the intervals between them his mental powers were hardly impaired. But as they increased in frequency, he was for ever haunted with the dread of recurrence. Under the ordeal, Ruskin’s character was perhaps perfected by suffering. It is certain that *Præterita*, which some account the most perfect in style of his books, and which was written in intervals of illness, is distinguished also by an unusual serenity of temper; and *Fors Clavigera* similarly closes upon a note of repentant softness:—

“I thought myself speaking to a crowd which could only be influenced by visible utility; nor was I the least aware how many

<sup>1</sup> *Fors Clavigera*, Letter 88 (March 1880).

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entirely good and holy persons were living in the faith and love of God as vividly and practically now as ever in the early enthusiasm of Christendom, until, chiefly in consequence of the great illnesses which, for some time after 1878, forbade my accustomed literary labour, I was brought into closer personal relations with the friends in America, Scotland, Ireland, and Italy, to whom, if I am spared to write any record of my life, it will be seen that I owe the best hopes and highest thoughts which have supported and guided the force of my matured mind. These have shown me, with lovely initiation, in how many secret places the prayer was made which I had foolishly listened for at the corners of the streets; and on how many hills which I had thought left desolate, the hosts of heaven still moved in chariots of fire. . . . The story of Rosy Vale is not ended;—surely out of its silence the mountains and the hills shall break forth into singing, and round it the desert rejoice, and blossom as the rose.”

But Ruskin’s own days were not destined to close in the calm of work done in happier temper. The clouds descended on his mind again, and did not break. *Præterita* was left a fragment; and just when he seemed to be coming out of school and expecting to enter upon more serious business he was dismissed by the Master he hoped to serve with a—“That’s all I want of you, Sir.”<sup>1</sup> If it be the function of biography to reveal what is beautiful and woful in individual souls, a life of Ruskin should not lack material.

These volumes have, however, a further scope. They must attempt to describe not only a life, but an influence. His writings exercised an influence upon the thought of his time, the very extent of which sometimes causes it to be forgotten. He was a pioneer in many fields, and it is the fate of successful pioneers, first to be scorned because their words seem paradoxes, and then to be ignored because their paradoxes have become commonplaces. To give any adequate account of a great writer’s work in the world, it is necessary to recall the conditions, the thoughts, the prejudices which existed when he wrote. Again, though Ruskin’s life

<sup>1</sup> *St. Mark’s Rest*, § 208.

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was persistently literary, and though he mixed but little in public affairs, yet his writings, his lectures, his schemes were ever addressed to practical issues. And here, too, his influence made itself felt through many channels and in many different directions. It will be an object of these volumes, then, while avoiding such disquisitions as would be out of place in a biography, to give some historical account of the fortunes of his books and of their influence in the world of thought and of action.

The course of Ruskin's life and influence lends itself with unusual appropriateness to the division of the biography into volumes. The two volumes, covering respectively the periods from birth to 1860 and from 1860 to the end, correspond to two Books in his history. The year 1860 makes a dividing line; before it, he was a writer upon art, after it, a writer also upon economics. Of course men's lives and thoughts are not built in absolutely water-tight compartments; and I have taken care to trace in the earlier period the growth of the ideas and instincts which coloured the later one. There was no dichotomy in Ruskin's mind between them, but only a development from one to the other. He had thought much and written something about social and political conditions before 1860, and after 1860 he continued to be artist, art-teacher, art-critic. Still there is a real line of demarcation which may be drawn in that year. Before 1860, he was in his principal activities the interpreter of a Beautiful World; after 1860, he was principally absorbed in a mission to reform the world. And the nature of his reputation in the world corresponded with this division of his interests. The first volume will show Ruskin winning his way, against some prejudice at first, but with steady advance in favour, to general acceptance. In the second, we shall see him derided; and if in the end by some the more admired and respected, yet also the object of a more doubtful and perplexed regard. The first Book is the record of splendid and unbroken success; the second, of apparent failure. Failure, as some think, splendid also, and destined to become success; but still, so far as immediate

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effect was concerned, failure. In another respect the two Books of Ruskin's life are contrasted. The interest of the first Book is largely that of an orderly and, as it may seem, inevitable development. The interest of the second is different. In some autobiographical notes, left among Ruskin's papers and not used in *Præterita*, I find this remark: "My old age is really youth."<sup>1</sup> He made the note in connexion with his keener appreciation of certain aspects of architecture; but it is true in a wider sense. It was in the later period of his life that Ruskin broke most away from the conventions and restraints of thought which old age deems sage and prudent, and turned to the fields of more obstinate defiance and more daring experiment which are sometimes supposed to belong only to youth. Yet, throughout, as I hope to show in the course of these volumes, there was a unity of increasing purpose in Ruskin's life and work. "The multiplicity of subject," he said, "and opposite directions of investigation, which have so often been alleged against me, as if sources of weakness, are in reality, as the multiplied buttresses of the apse of Amiens, as secure in allied result as they are opposed in direction."<sup>2</sup> Ruskin's writings on art are the more worthy of regard because he connected art with life. His writings on social economy are the more broadly based because they take account of the ministry of art. And throughout, beneath all diversity of doctrines, enthusiasms, and works, he pursued the same ideal, and inculcated the same devotion. "There is no Wealth but Life—life, including all its powers of Love, of Joy, and of Admiration."<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> This aspect of Ruskin's life had suggested itself to one of the French critics who, in recent years, have written with so much charm and insight upon him. See "La Jeunesse de Ruskin" in M. André

Chevillon's *Nouvelles Études Anglaises*, 1910.

<sup>2</sup> Epilogue to *Arrows of the Chase*, written at Amiens in 1880.

<sup>3</sup> *Unto this Last*, § 77. See the quotation of the passage in Vol. II p. 134.