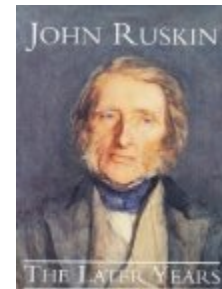


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Tim Hilton. *John Ruskin: The Later Years*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000. xxiii + 656 pp. \$35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-08311-8.

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The publication of Tim Hilton's *John Ruskin: The Later Years* has been a long anticipated event. Understanding Ruskin had always been complicated by the need to make sense of his life. As most readers of this List recognize, biographers of Ruskin have been challenged not only by the complexity of his ideas, but also by the life which made them possible. *Praeterita*, Ruskin's autobiography published between 1884 and 1889, left a vivid, but sentimental picture: scholars would eventually show that this famous work—often held up as one of the great autobiographies of the 19th century—was at once too incomplete and inaccurate to be relied upon. Nonetheless, the highlights of the life of Victorian Britain's most widely ranging cultural critic proved to be both arresting and well known: he had been shaped by his attentive parents, their evangelical Christianity, and family travels on the continent; he had begun to establish his reputation with the publication of *Modern Painters*; his failed marriage to Effie Gray (later annulled on the grounds of nonconsummation) had caused public dismay; he would maintain a very close friendship with Carlyle (whom he reverently spoke of as 'Papa'); he developed an unfortunate fascination and soon infatuation with Rose La Touche (who was some 29 years younger than Ruskin); he returned to Oxford as the university's first Slade Professor; he would have his judgments publicly repudiated with the Whistler libel suit; finally, he suffered from mental instability which culminated in madness—leaving him in need of constant care during the last 11 years of his life.

A number of biographers have tackled such a demanding life. R. G. Collingwood (*The Life and Works of John Ruskin*, 1893) and E. T. Cook (*The Life of Ruskin*, 1911) knew Ruskin and praised him. Yet, in the first decades of the 20th century Ruskin's reputation (and many things that could be connected to the Victorian

era) went into eclipse. Derrick Leon's biography (*Ruskin the Great Victorian*, 1949) reflected the optimistic outlook associated with both the end of the Second World War and the postwar Labour government; with "Victorianism" now safely in the rearview mirror his biography proved to be one of the earliest efforts to rehabilitate Ruskin. Nonetheless, Joan Evans, who was famously unaware of the "transcripts"—typed notebooks which the editors of *The Works of John Ruskin* (often referred to as "the Library Edition") compiled, but omitted from the 39 volumes—produced 3 volumes of Ruskin's diaries and a biography (*John Ruskin*, 1954) which portrayed him in an unfavorable light. However, by challenging both the utility of *Praeterita* and the reliability of the Library Edition, Helen Viljoen's *Ruskin's Scottish Heritage* (1956) set a new critical standard for biographical writing about Ruskin. John Dixon Hunt's *A Wider Sea* (1982), which in the early 1990s would prove to be something of an icon on remainder tables at bookstores in a number of university towns, provided the best known single volume biography since Leon. However, the publication of the *The Early Years* in 1985 immediately represented an advance: Hilton's first volume demonstrated both superior learning about and greater sensitivity toward Ruskin.

In the *The Early Years* Hilton had placed emphasis upon Ruskin's family, religious outlook and health. This volume also represented a departure because Hilton argued that despite the fact that *Modern Painters*, *The Seven Lamps and Architecture*, and *The Stones of Venice* were written before 1860 (when the final volume of *Modern Painters* was published) Ruskin's best writing came during the second half of his life. To be specific, Hilton claimed that *Fors Clavigera* which ran between 1871-1884 was Ruskin's masterpiece. Since the *The Early Years* ends in 1859-1860 the *The Later Years* carries the burden of ad-

dressing Ruskin's most significant production.

Not surprisingly, in *The Later Years* Hilton returns to the themes of Ruskin's family (which would come to include Joan Severn), his changing religious outlook and health. However, in the second volume these themes play out around Ruskin's love for Rose La Touche, his descent into madness (schizo-affective psychosis or manic depressive illness) and his eventual dependence upon Joan Severn.

One of the many virtues of *The Later Years* is that it conveys Ruskin's struggles in unprecedented detail. Ruskin's love for the unfortunate Rose La Touche (who Hilton suggests may have suffered from some variant of anorexia nervosa) is the central story of *The Later Years* because it was the dominant reality for much of Ruskin's mature life. Hilton traces the course of this bizarre relationship in the detail that the surviving sources warrant, showing that Ruskin was slowly, but decisively overcome by his attraction to the young girl. Hilton's account vividly demonstrates that this relationship was affected by Ruskin and Rose's religious passions. Interestingly, the picture that emerges from *The Later Years* is a painfully ironic one: Ruskin trying desperately at times (after Rose's parents had forbidden contact with him) to see and contact Rose and, yet, in Hilton's view, he did not need to actually spend much time with her. Hilton understands that Ruskin's love for Rose "was not in the nature of an active relationship with another person. It was rather, a part of Ruskin's personality. This love, which would survive long separations and would not cease with Rose's death, was never dependent on their occasional meetings." (p. 29). Instead, Ruskin was happiest when he thought that he had had a "sign" or "message" from Rose. Nonetheless, one of the things which stands out in *The Later Years* is the way in which both Ruskin's writings (*Sesame and Lilies* is an obvious example) and personal relationships could easily become subordinated to his need to have contact with Rose.

Hilton's treatment of Ruskin's last active years is also deft: he does an excellent job of demonstrating that the obsession with Rose (and the need to have a message or sign from her) continued after her death; he provides impressive treatment of the mental instability which proved to be a defining feature of Ruskin's last decades; finally, he explores the dimensions of Ruskin's dependence on Joan Severn. While earlier biographers have addressed all of these themes, Hilton analyzes them in unprecedented detail. For example, *The Later Years* reveals that Ruskin increasingly and habitually affected baby talk in

his correspondence with Joan Severn; it is clear, furthermore, that she and her husband Arthur (who with Charles Eliot Norton comes off badly in the book) faced a difficult task in caring for the author of *Modern Painters*. Hilton, then, is unflinching in painting an unflattering portrait of his subject: the Ruskin who emerges is one that is obsessive, unstable, and eventually utterly dependent.

Additionally, one of the things which makes *The Later Years* a rich read is that Hilton went to great pains (again, unparalleled for Ruskin biographers) to connect his subject to the lives of many of the figures who seem to dot the landscape of Ruskin's writings. To cite a few instances, Hilton traces Ruskin's actual relationship with Thomas Dixon—the cork cutter with whom Ruskin corresponded in *Time and Tide*—to exhibit how odd their correspondence actually was (and how much of the discussion was at least partly motivated by the need to communicate surreptitiously with Rose). Arthur Helps (a figure Hunt did not deem worthy of mention) was a well placed friend and writer from whom Ruskin admitted drawing inspiration for both ideas and style. Helps was a significant figure in his own right—an early Apostle, historian, literary figure and, ultimately, Clerk of the Privy Council—and Hilton brings him into *The Later Years* to illustrate the extent of Ruskin's contacts with London intellectuals. Finally, Hilton's examination of the key figures of the Guild of St. George will be of use to those who read Ruskin and wonder who figures such as Charles Fairfax Murray, Arthur Burgess and Raffaele Caroloforti are and why they are important.

Hilton's grasp of previous scholarship helps to make his treatment of the subject incisive. He presents not only Ruskin, but the interesting stories associated with both the survival and destruction of his many papers. In the hands of another writer these episodes might appear arcane or trivial, but Hilton capitalizes on these sideshows (such as Charles Eliot Norton's desire to protect Ruskin by destroying documents) to throw additional light on his subject. These items have a significant transparency: they let us see not only difficulties associated with the very task of biography, but also they give compelling evidence about the ways in which Ruskin was understood by the people who had known him intimately. Last, Hilton's use of this material ensures that *The Later Years* reaches a standard that is seldom met by biographers.

Having called attention to some of the strengths of *The Later Years*, it is worth noting that like all treatments of Ruskin, the book has its limitations. First, Hilton

overstates Carlyle's impact (a trap which Ruskin himself helped to set) on *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53). While Ruskin later sought to connect his writings to Carlyle, he remained during the 1840s and early 1850s many years away from calling him "Papa." At midcentury, Ruskin's notebooks, diaries and letters to his father, John James Ruskin, do not yet reflect a heavy Carlylean presence. Despite the fact that Ruskin's friendship with Carlyle remains one of the enduring images of the 19th century, scholars have yet to treat this relationship with the precision that it surely deserves. Second, while *The Later Years* is nicely developed there are unnecessary points of repetition and places where the price paid for condensing the volume (Hilton tells us in the Introduction that it had been much longer than its final incarnation of 656

pages) shows. Third, it is largely the selfish lament of this reviewer that Hilton did not explore *Fors Clavigera* in greater depth. Hilton's learning on Ruskin is unsurpassed and it is something of a shame that he did not more fully share the reasons for his belief in the significance of this highly unorthodox work.

Nevertheless, *The Later Years* remains a major achievement, which was worth the fifteen year wait. In fact, Hilton's scholarship should be seen as nothing less than a significant advance. Taken together with *The Early Years*, Ruskin scholars can now approach their subject with a sensitive and thoughtful biography. While these volumes will set the standard for future Ruskin scholarship, they reveal many facets of a life for which there will never be a final word.

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