Ruskin and Morris

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On the first page of John Batchelor’s recent biography of Morris, he describes him as “one of the most complete and devoted of Ruskinians” and says that News from Nowhere displays “a Utopian society which represents Morris’s interpretation of Ruskin’s vision of England, expressed in Fors Clavigera and in Ruskin’s plans for the Guild of St George”.

By contrast, Tim Hilton writes as follows in the concluding volume of his monumental biography: “They shared a general interest in medievalism and in the preservation of ancient buildings. Yet, in personal terms, they were not close to each other. . . . During the twentieth century, Ruskin and Morris have often been described as similar people, comrades with shared beliefs. They were not. It is more reasonable to ally Ruskin with Carlyle.”

Let us now hear the words of Morris himself:

Before the uprising of modern Socialism almost all intelligent people either were, or professed themselves to be, quite contented with the civilization of this century . . .

But beside these contented ones were others who were not really content but were coerced into silence by the measureless power of Whiggery. Lastly, there were a few who were in open rebellion against the said Whiggery – a few, say two, Carlyle and Ruskin. The latter, before my days of practical Socialism, was my master towards the ideal aforesaid, and looking backward, I cannot help saying, by the way, how deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin! It was through him that I learned to give form to my discontent, which I must say was not by any means vague. Apart from my desire to make beautiful things, the leading passion of my life has been and is hatred of modern civilization.

In this well known passage from ‘How I Became a Socialist,’ contributed to Justice in July 1894, Morris made clear the significance to him of Ruskin as one of the most powerful critics of Victorian civilization.

In fact it was not twenty but forty years earlier that Morris had first encountered Ruskin’s writings, when he was a student at Oxford in the mid 1850s. The story of Morris’s self-education with his friends at Oxford is well known. Mackail records from the notes of R W Dixon:

It was when the Exeter men, Burne-Jones and he [Morris], got to Ruskin, that strong direction was given to a true vocation – ‘The Seven Lamps’, ‘Modern Painters,’ and ‘The Stones of Venice.’ It was some little time before I and others could enter into this: but we soon saw the greatness and importance of it. Morris would often read Ruskin aloud. He had a mighty singing voice, and
It is interesting that the particular passages of Ruskin Dixon recalls are from *Modern Painters*, but it is usually assumed that it was from the other books, and especially *The Stones of Venice*, that Morris derived his "strong direction". In the second volume, published in 1853, and in the chapter called 'The Nature of Gothic' Ruskin related the history of Venice to ideas about the workman that were to become central to Morris's thinking, emphasising above all the importance of pleasure in labour and its destruction in the experience of the factory worker: "You must either make a tool of the creature, or a man of him. You cannot make both."5

Morris's admiration for Ruskin and his Gothic enthusiasm may be seen reflected in his trip to Northern France in the summer of 1855, and in the article on the cathedral at Amiens contributed to the *Oxford and Cambridge Magazine* in 1856. But Morris was not at this stage going to follow the political implications of Ruskin's thought. As he wrote in a letter to his friend Cormwell Price in July 1856, Morris had decided to follow Rossetti's advice and attempt to become a painter while still working in Street's architectural office: "I can't enter into politico-social subjects with any interest, for on the whole I see that things are in a muddle, and I have no power or vocation to set them right in ever so little a degree. My work is the embodiment of dreams in one form or another ..."6 Yeats was later to write that "In dreams begin responsibilities". That was certainly to prove true in the case of Morris, in whom the development of Ruskin's ideas was to lie fallow for a while as he attempted to make painting and poetry his main activities in the manner of Rossetti.

While Morris made this attempt, he and Burne-Jones lived in London at Red Lion Square from November 1856, and there became friendly with Ruskin. A letter from Burne-Jones records: "Just come back from being with our hero for four hours - so happy we've been he is so kind to us, calls us his dear boys and makes us feel like such old friends ... think of knowing Ruskin like an equal and being called his dear boys. Oh! he is so kind and good - better than his books, which are the best books in the world."7 Burne-Jones had found his vocation in painting, but this was not the case with Morris. His abundant energies sought other outlets. These included work decorating the debating chamber at the Oxford Union in the summer of 1857. Ruskin's comment in a letter to William Michael Rossetti was not flattering: "You know the fact is they're all the least bit crazy and it's very difficult to manage them." (WJR, XVI, xlvii) It would seem that Ruskin was more impressed by Morris as a poet at this stage. He wrote to the Brownings in March 1858 about *The Defence of Guenevere*: "his poems ... about old chivalry.. are most noble - very, very great indeed - in their own peculiar way". (WJR, XXXVI, 280)

However, it was not to poetry that Morris was to commit his energies after the failure of his volume with the public, but in an area even closer to Ruskin's central interest. In September 1857 Morris stayed with his friend Dixon in Manchester and visited the Art Treasures Exhibition; at this exhibition, Ruskin gave lectures
on 'The Political Economy of Art', published as A Joy for Ever, showing his increasing concern with the relation of art to society. In 1859 he published The Two Paths, Lectures on Art and its Application to Decoration and Manufacture in which he strongly criticised the idea of the artist as a specialist. In 'Modern Manufacture and Design' he told his Bradford audience to rid themselves of “any idea of Decorative art being a degraded or separate kind of art. Its nature or essence is simply its being fitted for a definite place; and, in that place, forming part of a great and harmonious whole, in companionship with other art”. (WJR, XVI, 320) Harvey and Press believe that “Ruskin's advocacy must have been particularly gratifying to William Morris as he took the decision to embark on a career as a designer”. I am not sure how to relate this to Mackail's observation in his biography that Morris thought the fifth volume of Modern Painters, published in 1860, to be “mostly gammon”, but since Mackail adds that this was “the caprice of a momentary impatience”, perhaps we can disregard it.

In these years we move towards the establishment of Morris, Marshall, Faulkner and Co. in 1861, which was, in Fiona MacCarthy’s words, “conceived as an opposition movement; anti-boredom, anti-pomposity, against the inane luxuries that Ruskin had decried”. Harvey and Press see the Firm as a “Ruskinian enterprise”, in its foundational commitment to decorative work of high quality and its acceptance of the responsibility of the manufacturer to educate public taste, though they argue that as a businessman Morris sometimes had to compromise his Ruskinian ideals. Their conclusion is that the necessity for these compromises eventually led Morris to see that “Ruskin alone did not have a complete answer to the problems of nineteenth-century society”, which Morris then went on to seek in Socialism. They go on: “But of all the really central tenets of the Ruskinian model, the only one which Morris fully discarded was the belief that the benevolence of individuals could combine to better the world.” It is difficult to dissent from this in general terms, but in relation to the crafts it is surely significant that Ruskin showed no interest in the products of the Firm, or indeed in the decoration of his own homes in anything but the most conventional of Victorian ways, as a visit to Brantwood rather gloomily shows. Nor is there much evidence that he showed any interest in the early days of the Arts and Crafts movement; his aesthetic preoccupations remained chiefly painting and architecture. The Guild of St George was to promote some craft concerns, but these were on its own, basically political, terms.

On another plane, Ruskin admired Morris's treatment of Greek myth in his poetry at the end of the 1860s, writing in The Queen of the Air in 1869 that it was more powerful than that of Keats in dealing with such themes. (WJR, XIX, 309) But this did not prevent his responding in a letter to Joan Agnew with some amusement to the dichotomy he observed between Morris's substantial bodily presence and the tone of his poetry in The Earthly Paradise: “I can't understand how a man who, on the whole, enjoys dinner—and breakfast—and supper—to that extent of fat—can write such lovely poems about Misery. There's such lovely, lovely misery in this Paradise.” (WJR, XXXVII, 3)

In the 1870s Morris became increasingly involved in political issues, firstly through the Eastern Question Association (EQA) and the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB). Ruskin is listed by Norman Kelvin as one
of the thirteen ‘conveners’ of the EQA meeting of 8 December 1876 (CL, I, 338, Note 2). He wrote to Burne-Jones on the subject from Italy, expressing surprise that his support had been solicited, as he conceived of himself at the time as “a mere outlaw in public opinion”. He continued encouragingly:

I hope neither Morris nor you will retire wholly again out of such spheres of effort. It seems to me especially a time when the quietest of mankind should be disquieted, and the meekest self-assertive.14

This was advice that only Morris was to take. Earlier in the year, Morris had mentioned Ruskin in a letter to Charles Fairfax Murray about time spent in Oxford: “we [Morris, Burne-Jones and Faulkner] were very merry together: we saw Ruskin there: he was amusing, but refused to enter into our enthusiasm for the country and green meadows: said there were too many buttercups & it was like poached eggs”. (CL, I, 254)

It was with the foundation of the SPAB that we can see a direct link between Morris and Ruskin. The Society’s came into existence as a result of Morris’s letter to The Athenaeum of 5th March 1877, protesting against the plans put forward by Sir Gilbert Scott to ‘restore’ Tewkesbury Minster, and was formally constituted at a meeting on March 22nd, with Morris as Honorary Secretary. On 10th July Morris wrote to Ruskin for permission to reprint some remarks from The Seven Lamps of Architecture on the subject of restoration, of which Morris declared: “They are so so good, and so completely settle the matter, that I feel ashamed at having to say anything else about it, as if the idea was an original one of mine, or any body’s else but yours: but I suppose it is of service, or may be, for different people to say the same thing”. (CL, I, 383) The passage quoted runs:

Take care of your monuments, and you will not need to restore them; watch an old building with anxious care; count its stones as you would the jewels of a crown; bind it together with iron when it loosens, stay it with timber where it declines. Do not care about the unsightliness of the aid; better a crutch than a lost limb; and do this tenderly, reverently, continually, and many a generation will still be born to pass away beneath its shadow. (CL, I, 368, Note 2)15

We can presume that Ruskin gave his permission, as the passage was incorporated into the SPAB’s statement of its aims. It is in this context, and that of the trial which resulted from Ruskin’s intemperate criticism of Whistler, that we find Ruskin writing to Morris on 3rd December 1878. Having thanked Morris for his support, and asserted that only Morris had gone “straight to the accurate point of the Crafts question, recognising the justice of the word ‘Imposture’ which nobody else understood”, Ruskin went on:

How much good might be done by the establishment of an exhibition, anywhere, in which the Right doing, instead of the Clever doing, of all that men know how to do, should be the test of acceptance. (WJR, XXXVIII, 335)
May Morris relates this, appropriately, to the development a few years later, of the Arts & Crafts movement. (CW, XVI, xviii) Meanwhile, the SPAB remained a significant point of contact between the two men. On 3rd November 1879 Morris wrote to Ruskin about his concern over St Mark’s in Venice and suggested that he might write to The Times on the subject. Ruskin did not do so, but organised an exhibition of photographs of St Mark’s, for which he supplied notes. (CL, I, 530-4, including a reproduction of the letter) Ruskin also sent a message of support to the meeting held at the Sheldonian Theatre in Oxford on November 15th. Morris was still wanting to “stir the St Marks’ matter” in May 1880, when he wrote to Ruskin to ask him to take the chair at the AGM of the SPAB on June 23rd and if possible to “say some words, which no one can say as well as you, for a cause which you yourself made a cause”. (CL, I, 569) Morris’s letter is one of his most eloquent, and includes a statement of principle, or faith:

But even if we do nothing in this case, & in many others, yet I do think we may save here & there some fragment of art, and to my mind it would be worth the trouble, and years of our little Society’s life, if we could save but one little grey building in England.

This is the spirit we have been working in, & therefore we are in a way pledged not to be discouraged by anything, as long as there is anything genuine, however humble, to save.

I know you will help us if you can . . . (CL I, 569-70)

Ruskin replied in a sad letter on May 27th, regretting that he did not feel able to attend, and concluding: “Please recollect – or hereafter know – by these presents – that I am old, ill, and liable any day to be struck crazy if I get into a passion. And therefore, while I can still lecture – if I choose – on rattlesnakes’ tails, I can’t on anything I care about. Nor do I care to say on this matter more than I have done, especially since I know that the modern mob will trample to-morrow what it spares to-day. You younger men must found a new dynasty – the old things are passed away.” (WJR, XXXVII, 315)

On a less exalted level, Morris was to refer to Ruskin in a letter to J H Middleton in November 1882 about the Priory Church of Christchurch, in which he described the architect involved [either Edward Benjamin Ferry or his father] as an “unmitigated ruffian”, and added: “You may be sure that Ruskin was right when he said to me the only way of stopping these villains was to bribe them: it would be worth paying Ferry £500 a year to keep Ch: Ch: as it is –” (CL, II, 139)

Morris’s involvement with public affairs through the SPAB may be associated with his taking on the role of lecturer in the same years. When May Morris came to write about her father’s lectures on art, she was delighted to note the happy coincidence by which Morris received an affectionate letter from Ruskin on the morning of the day of his first lecture, in December 1877. She further remarked: “Following in the steps of his friend and master, whose ‘Unto this Last’ and ‘The Political Economy of Art’ were books deeply admired by him as direct and eloquent statements of the condition of Art & Labour in this century, he was speaking in 1877-8 almost alone from his point of view on the questions that occupied his mind” – contrasting this with the situation ten years later when the
Arts & Crafts movement was getting under way. (Introduction to CW, XVI, xvii-iii) As Morris came to engage increasingly with issues of culture and politics, and began his career as a public lecturer, the example of Ruskin must have been in his mind. Frederick Kirchhoff, discussing Morris’s ‘conversion to socialism’, writes that he underwent “a period of dalliance with Ruskinian socialism in the late 1870s, during which he delivered lectures to what was intended to be a working-men’s association (the Trades Guild of Learning)”.

It is certainly true that Morris’s early lectures, including the five published as Hopes and Fears for Art, provide evidence of the importance to Morris of Ruskin at this stage to. In ‘The Lesser Arts’ (delivered to the Guild in 1877), Morris refers to “my friend Professor Ruskin” as “a great man now living”, and goes on “If you read the chapter in the 2nd vol. of his ‘Stones of Venice’ entitled, ‘On the Nature of Gothic and the Office of the Workman therein,’ you will read at once the truest and the most eloquent words that can possibly be said on the subject. What I have to say upon it can scarcely be more than an echo of his words . . .” (CW, XXII, 5) In ‘The Beauty of Life’ in 1880 Morris places Ruskin in the context of the Romantic Movement, and states: “It would be ungracious indeed for me who have been so much taught by him that I cannot help feeling continually as I speak that I am echoing his words, to leave out the name of John Ruskin from an account of what has happened since the tide, as we hope, began to turn in the direction of art”. (CW, XXII, 59-60)

In ‘The Prospects of Architecture in Civilization’ in 1881 Morris asserts that Ruskin’s chapter ‘On the Nature of Gothic’ “should have been posted up in every school of art throughout the country – nay, in every association of English-speaking people which professes in any way to further the culture of mankind”, adding that he had to echo Ruskin’s words because so little notice had been taken of them, probably because people feared that if they looked at them carefully they would find that the truth they contained “would either compel them to act on it or to confess themselves slothful and cowardly”. (CW, XXII, 140) And when Hopes and Fears was published in 1882 he wrote vigorously to an unknown correspondent:

I do not like however to be praised at the expense of Ruskin, who you must remember is the first comer, the inventor; and I believe we all of us owe a hope that still clings to us, and a chance of expressing that hope, to his insight: of course to say one does not always agree with him is to say that he and I are of mankind. (CL, II, 126)

The few reviewers of Morris’s book also recognised the relevance of Ruskin. But Edith Simcox in the Fortnightly Review distinguished interestingly between “the despairing tone of Mr. Ruskin, and the qualified but unextinguished hopefulness of Mr. Morris . . .” 17 From the North American perspective of the Century Magazine, however, they seemed equally to exhibit “the glorious British privilege of grumbling”. Rossetti and Ruskin between them have had an ‘unhealthy’ influence on Morris, whose acknowledged achievement means that he really has “very little to complain of”: “they have encouraged in him the national malady of discontent”. The anonymous reviewer goes on to ask: “Why these contemptuous letters, vilifications, outpourings of scorn from Mr. Ruskin? . . .
And why all these whimperings from Mr. Morris, whom . . . the publics have encouraged, supported, and enriched?" The answer is confidently given; it lies in "the unhealthy and anomalous state of affairs in the Mother Country" by which the "dull and often immoral" upper class has too much influence, at the expense of "the strongest, healthiest, and cleverest portions of the population". In a curious way, the reviewer's point of view here may be seen to resemble Morris's, though he or she remains confidently unaware of it. Thus the evidence for Ruskin's significance for Morris in this area is undeniable, but we must agree with the view of Harvey and Press referred to earlier, that by around 1880 Morris was discovering that Ruskin's ideas were insufficient by themselves to form the basis of the kind of political philosophy he was seeking. That, as we know, was to come with his reading of Marx, undertaken soon after his joining the Democratic Federation in January 1883. E P Thompson remarks that when Morris was reading Capital, especially Vol.1 Ch.14 on 'Division of Labour and Manufacture', "Repeatedly, when reading this chapter, Morris must have felt the hand of Ruskin on his shoulder". Morris evidently invited Ruskin to join the Federation, and Ruskin couched his refusal metaphorically in a letter of 24th April: "It is better that you should be in a cleft stick, than make one out of me - especially as my timbers are enough shivered already. In old British battles the ships that had no shots in their rigging didn't ask the disabled ones to help them. Ever your affect J R". (quoted in CL, II, 188)

It is worth remarking that the liveliest exchange of correspondence between Ruskin and Morris at this time concerned not politics but stained glass. Georgiana Burne-Jones records that Ruskin had written to Burne-Jones on 2nd February 1883 to ask him to design windows for the chapel of Whitelands Training College for Women, and asking for the glass not to be dull. Burne-Jones accordingly asked Morris to experiment with ways of obtaining the greatest brilliance of effect. (Memorials, II, 129) Kelvin, noting this, remarks simply: "But Morris had been uncooperative." (CL, II, 187, Note 1) One wonders what his response would have been had the enquiry come from a less respected source. At all events, Ruskin wrote directly to Morris in a teasing tone:

You bad boy, why haven't I any bit of glass yet? –
– Send me anything, I don't care what – for I want to make some experiments which the colour doesn't matter in.
and just please answer that one question - how far you paint on glass, and how far you diffuse in it - a given bit of colour.

Ever your loving
J R

(Quoted in CL, II, 187, Note 1)

Morris replied in considerable detail, describing the methods used by the Company, and both Ruskin's letter and the reply show that Ruskin had no technical knowledge of the making of stained glass. Morris remarked towards the end of his letter that they aimed to get "a jewel-like quality which is the chief charm of painted glass" – perhaps a diplomatic response to the suggestion that the glass might have been dull – and concluded by inviting Ruskin to visit the Company's premises at Merton Abbey. (CL, II, 186) In reply, Ruskin said that he
would like to do so - though he never did - and concluded by saying that he had not been aware that Morris was producing such jewel-like glass:

I thought you were going to give subdued greens and greys with browns - and to depend on Ned’s sentiment for power. If you are really going in for glow and glitter - I'll come and see everything that’s turned out - if I’ve only life and time.

Ever gratefully and affectionately yrs. (CL, II, 187 Note 1)

The terms of the relationship here are certainly affectionate, although the letter shows that Ruskin had not been taking any interest in the Company’s recent stained glass. Perhaps it was as a result of this exchange, Kelvin suggests, that Morris was prompted to ask Ruskin to join the Democratic Federation (CL, II, 187) – unsuccessfully, as we have seen, and Morris must have foreseen.

But it was in the context of Morris’s membership of the Democratic Federation that their next significant conjunction was to occur, in November of the same year. Morris had been invited to lecture to the Russell Club, a society of undergraduates with some radical sympathies. He chose as his topic ‘Art under Plutocracy’, and the urgent appeal in the last part of the lecture to his audience to throw in their lot with the Socialists offended members of the Establishment present. Kelvin tells us that Jowett, the Master of Balliol, said he would never have agreed to act as chair if he had known what Morris was going to say. (II, 235, Note 3) Ruskin, however, who was in his second term as Slade Professor of Art at the time, was in the audience, and supported Morris in general terms. The Pall Mall Gazette reported the dramatic events thus:

Mr. Ruskin, whose appearance was the signal for immense enthusiasm, speaking of the lecturer as ‘the great conceiver and doer, the man at once a poet, an artist, and a workman, and his old and dear friend,’ said that he agreed with him in 'imploring the young men who were being educated there to seek in true unity and love for another the best direction for the great forces which, like an evil aurora, were lighting the world, and thus to bring about the peace which passeth all understanding.

(WJR, XXXIII, 390, Note 1)

In one of his own lectures later in the term, published in 1884 as The Art of England, Ruskin alluded to Morris’s lecture with respect, and even suggested that it had not gone far enough:

The significant change which Mr. Morris made in the title of his recent lecture, from Art and Democracy, to Art and Plutocracy, strikes at the root of the whole matter; and with wider sweep of blow than he permitted himself to give his words. The changes which he so deeply deplored, and so grandly resented, in this once loveliest city, are due wholly to the deadly fact that her power is now dependent on the Plutocracy of Knowledge instead of its Divinity.

(WJR, XXXIII, 390 and Note)
In their feeling for the historical and cultural significance of architecture Morris and Ruskin were always at their closest.

But not, any longer, in their politics. Although Morris retained his respect for his old friend and inspirer, he was well aware that his commitment to Marxism was taking him in a different direction from what we may see as the neo-feudalism of the Guild of St George. This is made clear in two of Morris’s best expository letters. In July 1884 he wrote at length to Robert Thompson on his political outlook, beginning with a response to Ruskin:

You must understand 1st that though I have a great respect for Ruskin and his works (besides personal friendship) he is not a socialist, that is not a practical one he does not expect to see any general scheme even begun: he mingles with certain sound ideas which he seems to have acquired instinctively, a great deal of mere whims, deduced probably from that early training of which he gives an amusing account [in Fors, 1878]: anyhow his idea of national workshops [in Unto this Last] is one which could only be realised in a state (that is a society) already socialised nor could it ever take effect in the way he thinks it could.

(CL, II, 305)

In October 1885 Morris wrote to Fred Pickles, a member of the Bradford branch of the Socialist League, in explicitly Marxist terms:

Ruskin is quite sound in his condemnation of rent and usury, but he does not understand this matter of classes. The class struggle is really the only lever for bringing about the change.

(CL, II, 462)

Meanwhile, in September 1885, he had written to an unknown recipient, who had evidently suggested a plan, perhaps on some kind of Ruskinian lines, by which the “evil of sordid ugliness” of the contemporary scene might be alleviated. Morris wrote: “I am sure you will find that Ruskin would be at one with me in asserting that it is the degrading and degraded life of all classes that gives birth to it, and no surface palliation could cure it”. (CL, II, 451) It is the “Commercial system” that is the root of the problems of society. Morris enclosed a pamphlet – possibly ‘Art and Socialism’, which had recently been published by the Socialist League – with the comment that “you will find plenty of Ruskinism in it”. (CL, II, 452) All this is clear evidence that Morris continued to respect Ruskin’s ideas even when he had come to believe that they were inadequate to solve the huge problems of his society, and felt that they did not have to be repudiated in the course of his becoming a Marxist. Thompson considers this matter carefully in his 1976 ‘Postscript’, referring to Morris’s address to the SPAB in 1884 in which he “paused to acknowledge both Ruskin and the Marx of Capital”.

There were few contacts between the two men after this. Morris included Ruskin in the list of his Hundred Best Books for the Pall Mall Gazette in February 1886, adding “especially the ethical and politico-economical parts of them”. (CL, II, 517-8) Ruskin did not reciprocate, but he did pay a striking tribute to Morris soon afterwards, according to Sydney Cockerell. In 1887 Cockerell visited Brantwood and, to his delight, had an intimate conversation with Ruskin.
Cockerell recorded: “Morris is ‘beaten gold’, ‘a great rock, with a little moss on it perhaps’. His ‘love of Turner, primroses and little girls’ had prevented his ever being Morris’s fast friend, but he had a great reverence for him and his views.”

In the same year Morris rounded off *A Dream of John Ball* with an allusion to John Ruskin’s idea of ‘work’, and he alluded positively to him again in 1888 in ‘The Revival of Handicraft’. In August 1891 Morris took his daughter Jenny to Northern France, on a tour that followed in the steps of both Ruskin and his own younger self. He recorded in a letter to Webb from Beauvais that “I really had no time to look carefully over the details though Jenny and I had a spell at the west front. So I bought those photos of the medallions that J.R. had done in the lump; they are beyond everything good and interesting, & can be photographed.” (CL, III, 335) These medallions, photographed on Ruskin’s instructions, can be found in *The Bible of Amiens* (WJR, XXXIII, 148-74)

By this time Morris was involved with the Kelmscott Press, and Ruskin had sunk into the sad silence of his final years. Morris, according to Fiona MacCarthy, “was still capable of wild outbursts of excitement”, and one of these was brought on in April 1892 when he was told that Ruskin had called him “the ablest man of his time”. He responded by ordering up a bottle of his favourite Imperial Tokay from the cellar at Kelmscott House to celebrate. The occasion of Ruskin’s tribute was a very appropriate one, as recalled by Sydney Cockerell. Cockerell had visited Ruskin at Brantwood earlier in the month, and had noticed on a table there a copy of Morris’s recent Kelmscott Press edition of the chapter on ‘The Nature of Gothic’ from *The Stones of Venice* that he had admired since his Oxford days, and alluded to and quoted so often. Cockerell noticed that it was inscribed ‘John Ruskin from William Morris with affectionate regards, April 11th 1892’. He recorded that “He [Ruskin] was pleased with it and interested in my telling him about the new black letter fount. He said that Morris was the ablest man of his time.” The book had appeared in March 1892, printed in the Golden type, and for it Morris wrote the brief but eloquent Preface in which he refers to the chapter as “one of the very few necessary and inevitable utterances of the century”. The Preface ends with a fine and fitting tribute:

John Ruskin the critic of art has not only given the keenest pleasure to thousands of readers by his life-like descriptions, and the ingenuity and delicacy of his analysis of works of art, but he has let a flood of daylight into the cloud of sham-technical twaddle which was once the whole substance of ‘art-criticism’, and is still its staple, and that is much. But it is far more that John Ruskin, the teacher of morals and politics (I do not use this word in the newspaper sense), has done serious and solid work towards that new-birth of Society, without which genuine art, the expression of man’s pleasure in his handiwork, must inevitably cease altogether, and with it the hopes of the happiness of Mankind.

In September 1892 Cockerell recorded in his diary that after the meeting of the SPAB he had had supper with Morris and Webb, and that there was “talk about Munera Pulveris [Ruskin’s treatise on political economy], etc.” (CL, III, 444, Note 8) In November of the same year Cockerell attended an autobiographical talk that
Morris gave at Kelmscott House, in which he spoke of the influences on his 'clique' at Oxford: “I went up to College in 1852. Ruskin’s Stones of Venice (vols. 2 and 3) came out in the following year, and made a deep impression.” (quoted by May Morris in her Introduction to CW, XXII, 677) And, as my opening quotation from Morris showed, he was still acknowledging Ruskin’s invigorating influence in 1894: “how deadly dull the world would have been twenty years ago but for Ruskin!”

The humanity of this is retrospectively impressive, as the last recorded comment of either man about the other. Ruskin’s influence on Morris can be seen – should be seen – as crucial. It did not have the personal flavour of some of Ruskin’s other relationships; I suspect that Burne-Jones was always more of a “dear boy” to Ruskin than was William Morris. Nor did it extend to every area of thought. On such topics as democracy and religion they were poles apart. Nor do we not find the chivalric flavour of ‘Of Queen’s Gardens’ in Morris’s attitude to women; he was too down-to-earth, and later too much of a Socialist, to take Ruskin’s approach, even if he was not as radical in his ideas on sexual politics as some would like him to be. On the subject of the British Empire the contrast is even more marked. The Ruskin who ended his Inaugural Lecture in 1870 with an eloquent appeal to his youthful audience to take up the responsibilities of Empire – even though those responsibilities were given an emphasis very different from that of most contemporary enthusiasts for imperial expansion – was distant indeed from the Morris of chapter 15 of News from Nowhere, with its “ignorant adventurer” creating a market “by breaking up whatever traditional society there might be in the doomed country, and by destroying whatever leisure or pleasure he found there”. But whenever the central idea is human labour, and the crucial distinction between useful work and useless toil, we can not doubt, and must indeed celebrate, the encouragement and inspiration that the younger man found in the work and example of the older.

NOTES

4 J.W. Mackail, The Life of William Morris, Longmans 1922, I, 48-9, subsequently referred to as Mackail.
6 Norman Kelvin, editor, The Collected Letters of William Morris, 4 vols.,
Princeton University Press, 1984-96; I, 28. Subsequent references given in brackets as CL.

7 Georgiana Burne-Jones, 
Memorials of Edward Burne-Jones, 
Macmillan 1904, 2 vols., I, 147; subsequently referred to as Memorials.


9 Mackail, I, 226.

10 Fiona MacCarthy, William Morris. A Life for Our Time, Faber 1994, p. 169; subsequently referred to as MacCarthy.

11 Harvey and Press quote (p.199) from Unto this Last, (1860), in Ruskin XVII, 344, on the business of manufacturers as “to form the market, as much as to supply it”; see also their ‘The Making of an Earthly Paradise’ in ibid. pp. 218-34.

12 Harvey and Press, p. 222.

13 See Stephen Wildman’s recent article in the Ruskin Centenary issue of Crafts, in which he remarks that though Ruskin was highly significant as a catalyst for the Arts and Crafts movement, he “had little knowledge of the practice of any craft or applied art, collected minerals rather than ceramics, and strangely lacked interest even in the improvement of his own surroundings”; Crafts, No.166, September/October 2000, p. 26.

14 Memorials, II, 73.

15 The passage in WJR, VIII, 244-5 differs in some details, though not in overall meaning.


18 In ibid. pp. 281-2.


20 ibid. p. 784.


22 MacCarthy, p. 649.

23 Wilfred Blunt, Cockerell, p. 44.