
Francis O’Gorman’s book appears in an interesting series of volumes published by Ashgate on the nineteenth century cultural milieu under the general editorship of Vincent Newey and Joanne Shattock.

John Ruskin has always been a difficult man to understand. His writings are littered with moments of sublime brilliance, yet punctuated by some of the most incredible nonsense it is possible to imagine. Nobody has really engaged with this strange madman, who, in a spell of absolute brilliance, produced influential books such as Modern Painters, The Seven Lamps of Architecture and Unto this Last, then fell into the self-indulgence of Fors Clavigera and Praeterita, before abandoning the world completely for the last eleven years of his life.

For this reason I read Francis O’Gorman’s Late Ruskin: New Contexts with a certain amount of trepidation. O’Gorman sets out to try and reinterpret Ruskin’s later writings from 1860 to his enforced retirement from literary work in the late 1880s. I thought that I would be going down the familiar path flattened by the feet of numerous critics from early in the last century. Instead, I found myself scrambling up hill-sides and falling into lake-side ponds.

The problem with the book lies in its title Late Ruskin: New Contexts. The dust-jacket states that the book claims ‘new and distinctive importance for this period of Ruskin’s work, both in terms of Ruskin’s development as a writer and his place in Victorian culture as it moved towards modernity’. However, in the Acknowledgements O’Gorman admits to having had problems with the book. I am afraid that these are only too obvious when you read the text. The blurb suggests that the book has a unity of purpose, when in fact it is a series of essays on various aspects of Ruskin’s later writings. These essays have clearly been written over a number of years – and despite occasional cross-referencing – there are many anomalies and repeated quotations.

I also felt that O’Gorman had no clear idea about the theme of his book. If you read the first two chapters you get the impression that it is about the significance of autobiography in Ruskin’s later work. However, later on the emphasis shifts to Ruskin’s views on femininity and masculinity. The two themes are never really reconciled.

Morris, as usual with books on Ruskin, is conspicuous by his absence. There is no reference to him in the Index, although he is quoted – unattributed – and appears a couple of times in the Notes. It never ceases to amaze me that Ruskinian scholars appear to be completely unaware of the existence of Ruskin’s most important disciple.

Another statement made on the dust-jacket of the book is that it ‘draws on much unpublished material’. This is a claim made about virtually every new book written on Ruskin. Much the same – largely inaccurate – statement was made about the two volumes of Tim Hilton’s biography of Ruskin. I am pleased to report that on this occasion there is a genuine justification for this claim. This is most apparent in Chapter 1. Having spent the last five years researching a book on Ruskin I imagined that I had unearthed most of his family’s correspondence. I was wrong. It turns out that in this chapter O’Gorman has found some letters
from John James Ruskin to the *Cornhill Magazine* of which I was completely unaware. These prove that Ruskin’s father supervised his son’s articles on political economy through the press and was far less antagonistic to their publication than had previously been thought. Indeed, O’Gorman makes a convincing case that the articles that eventually formed *Unto this Last* were – in part – a celebration of John James Ruskin’s life as a wine merchant. This is research of the first order.

However, I was less convinced with O’Gorman’s attempt in Chapter 2 to interpret *Sesame and Lilies* as an autobiographical text. Nor, although O’Gorman shies off saying this, can the book be regarded as offering a radical reinterpretation of Victorian femininity. Ruskin, like Morris, could never free himself from bourgeois conceptions of the correct role for women. Having said this, Ruskin’s role models were hardly ideal: his mother was a bigot, his wife a flirt, and Rose La Touche was a religious fanatic. None of these women can be blamed for their attitudes. However, when Ruskin attempts to define male and female roles there is a reek of hypocrisy that smells far worse than the pyres of dead cattle and sheep recently burning in the British countryside. I am afraid that *Sesame and Lilies* can never be resuscitated.

In Chapter 3 O’Gorman discusses the background to Ruskin’s first ‘Lecture on Art’ which the latter gave at Oxford University in 1870. O’Gorman challenges the established view, as expressed in Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, that Ruskin’s inaugural lecture indicates that he was an imperialist. Instead, O’Gorman argues that ‘nowhere else, throughout his whole career, did Ruskin issue another statement so boldly colonialist’. This is not true. I can only assume that O’Gorman is unaware of the very dubious comments Ruskin made during his bizarre support for Governor Eyre’s Defence Fund in the mid-1860s. But Ruskin made so many contradictory comments about politics that, by selective quotation, you could made him out to be a liberal, socialist or fascist. O’Gorman’s account is well-balanced and accessible but can hardly be said to offer the reader a ‘New Context’. I might add there are far too many Notes to this chapter many of which should have appeared in the text.

Chapter 4 fails because of its lack of context. Entitled “‘Do Good Work Whether You Live or Die”: Fors Clavigera, Usefulness, and the Crisis of the Commune’, it consists mainly of a long, and largely unilluminating, discussion of Letter 6 of *Fors Clavigera*. While most Morrisians are aware that Morris made few contemporary references to the Paris Commune, the same cannot be said of Ruskin. His correspondence shows that he followed the events closely and was only too ready to make his opinions known. In this respect O’Gorman’s detailed concentration on a single document rather defeats its object.

The long titles continue in Chapter 5: “‘Decent, Trim, as Human Dwellings Should be”: Ruskin and the Pre-Raphaelite Imagination of the 1870s’, Chapter 6: “‘Just the Thing for Girls – Sketching, Fine Art and So On”: Ruskin and Manliness (1870–1920)” and Chapter 7: “‘Oh Fast Whirling Reader”: The *Bible of Amiens* (1880–85), Tolerance and Autobiography’. All of these plod over familiar territory and can hardly be said to offer ‘New Contexts’. I found it extraordinary that Morris – with his associations with the second wave of the Pre-Raphaelites, his views on ‘manliness’ and his interest in Gothic Churches and early Christian manuscripts – should have fallen through the net rather like a
rather small sand-eel. I suspect that a number of Morrisians might also question O’Gorman’s statement in Chapter 7 that ‘Ruskin was pre-eminent among Victorian Medievalists’.

As I said at the beginning, this is really a book of essays rather than a bold attempt to reinterpret Ruskin’s later writings. All the essays are well-written, well-researched and entertaining. However, as there is no Conclusion to the book, one is left wondering what O’Gorman was trying to prove.

*Nicholas Salmon*