

AN ENTIRELY HONEST MERCHANT: THE STORY OF TWO

LIBRARY EDITIONS

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PROLOGUE

As the short essays which would soon be collected into *Unto This Last*—the only book among his dozens which Ruskin would ever describe as a “true book” (that is, a book he deemed *true* from first word to last)—printed serially in London’s *Cornhill Magazine* in 1860, the editor, the famous novelist, William Makepeace Thackeray, began to receive, first a few, then a welter of letters from the prestigious magazine’s readers vehemently protesting against the economic practices which the articles’ author was proposing. “Fantastic,” wrote some, “impossible,” said others, “lunacy,” said still others, “the preachings of a mad governess,” wrote one particularly incensed reviewer. The uproar was so great the editor was finally forced to tell Ruskin that the *Cornhill* would not welcome the author’s three remaining essays in the series, although he would permit one (furious, Ruskin negotiated for a double-length article). Responding in his “Preface” to *Unto This Last* the next year, Ruskin expressed his surprise that his recommendations had been “reprobated” in so “violent” a manner. For at the heart of all his counsels lay a very simple notion: that in all our economic dealings with each other we should be *honest*, that it was never our business to trick or cheat or harm one another, never our business to put our own personal interests above those of any of those with whom, whether it be over the course of a day, a week, a year, or a life, we traded. The truly great tragedy of the modern world, he went on, was that we had lost our “faith in common honesty and in the working power of it” for good. Without such faith, civilization starts to crumble and we come to regard each other as enemies rather than as the helpers along life’s path we are intended to be. Hence, he concluded, “it is quite our first business to recover and keep” this faith. It was the intent of *Unto This Last* to demonstrate this verity beyond reasonable doubt.

Three years later, Ruskin’s father, the very rich and successful sherry merchant, John James Ruskin died. He was buried in Shirley Churchyard, south of London. On his sarcophagus, his son engraved the words below, words of tribute which, we trust, any merchant would be proud to have carved on their own gravestone as an acknowledgement of how they approached their life’s work:

JOHN JAMES RUSKIN

Born in Edinburgh, May 18th, 1785.

He died in his home in London, March 3rd, 1864.

He was an entirely honest merchant,

And his memory is, to all who keep it, dear and helpful.

His son, whom he loved to the uttermost

and taught to speak truth, says this of him.

The First Library Edition

It was 1994; and, after paying my respects at some significant Ruskin sites, including Brantwood and the Ruskin Gallery in Sheffield, I had come to London for a day before flying back to the US. At the heart of those 24 hours would be a meeting with Clive Wilmer whom I had first met in 1989 in Cambridge after reading his excellent (still excellent; still in-print!) compilation of some of Ruskin's most important writings on society, *Unto This Last and Other Writings*. Our plan was to go to the National Gallery intent on studying its permanently hanging Turner oils using Ruskin's lengthy descriptions of these masterpieces as interpretive guide and food-for-talk. The descriptions, complete with marvelous reproductions and introductions, had been published not long before by Dinah Birch in *Ruskin on Turner* (this book, alas, is now out-of-print, but good copies can often be found on the web). It turned out to be, of course, a thrilling afternoon and, when our Ruskin-Turnering stroll was ended, Clive and I decided to celebrate with a pint (or two!) in a pub on the edge of Trafalgar Square. By now very much committed to Ruskin studies, it was not long before I lamented to Clive how frustrated I had become by my inability to find a full 39-volume set of Cook and Wedderburn's *Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin*. Since 1989 I had been the happy possessor of the three Library Edition volumes containing Ruskin's *Fors Clavigera* letters "to the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain", these having been found by my late wife, Tracy, in a Bloomsbury book shop and given to me as a Christmas present. Reading the *Fors* volumes closely had taught me how indispensable it was to have this remarkable compendium to hand when doing Ruskin scholarship. Unfortunately, such a set was not to be found either in Geneva, New York, the small city where I lived, or in the library of the small colleges located in Geneva where I teach. To make matters worse, searches on library list-serves and the then-fledgling internet had proved useless: at any given point there were either no Library Editions available or those that had made it to the market were well beyond the means of a university professor.

It was at this point that Clive said: "Jim, I think I know where there's a Library Edition you might buy." Dumfounded, I asked: "Where?" "Cambridge," he said. "There's what we call a "minor" public school there—Americans would think of it as a "private" school—The Leys School. They have a set they are looking to sell. The set's been in their library for a long time and it's rarely used—in fact, it may never have been used. My friend, Charles Moseley, can tell you about it. Shall we ring him up?" And so it happened that, before five minutes had passed, with my nerves jangling as coins dropped into the public phone at our pub, I called Dr. Moseley.

“Yes,” he told me, it’s available, all 39 volumes, and it’s in fine shape. We’d have to have £1000 for it, however. Are you interested?” Was I *interested*? Not only was the Library Edition the Holy Grail I needed to do my Ruskin studies well, it was “in fine shape” and was being offered at a price at least three (and often five or six) times cheaper than what I had found on the web! But the immediate problem was that I had a four PM departure from Gatwick the following day and it was already late in this day’s afternoon! No matter, I thought. I’m going to find a way to do this! But how was I to *pay* for the treasure? I had nothing approaching £1000 with me and, in those days, bank machines dispensing large amounts of cash didn’t exist. Explaining this to Dr. Moseley on the phone, I felt that my chance, perhaps the only one I’d ever have to buy a Library Edition I could (if barely) afford, slipping away. “It’s no problem,” Dr. Moseley said, “If you are a friend of Clive’s, we’ll trust that you’ll wire us a certified check when you are back in America.” Pleased beyond words at his kindness, I told Dr. Moseley that my rental car and I would be at the Leys library door at 9 AM the next morning. Exhilarated, once I had hung up the phone, I thanked Clive profusely. He said he was more than happy to help. Then, as Clive returned to Cambridge by train, I spent the following two hours spreading maps of Southern England on tables around the pub asking anyone and everyone what would be the quickest traffic-dodging route to Cambridge, following this query with another attempting to determine what would be the fastest route from Cambridge to Gatwick.

It *was* beautiful, one of the maroon-covered sets, almost perfect in fact—the covers intact and tight, the pages—oh, my goodness!—at least in all the volumes I looked at (about a dozen) uncut! Clive had been right: the set had never been used! The only “blemish” (minor!) was that the spines of some volumes had been discoloured by afternoon sun-light as the set’s calm decades passed. The purchase and attending promise of payment were made. But now another problem arose in my mind: how was I to get all these books on the plane? Dr. Moseley, who, from the first, had been delighted with my delight, had the solution; he quickly left the room, returning minutes later with four large cardboard boxes, into which we fastly packed, neatly and carefully, my Three Very Important Misterys: Cook, Wedderburn—and Ruskin! But it was now close on ten-thirty. After thanking Dr. Moseley exuberantly (I really wanted to *hug* him, but refrained; we were, after all, in England, and I had just met him!), my car and I drove, at whatever reckless speed I was willing to chance, towards Gatwick, my sharp cornering ability much enhanced by the weighty contents in the rear seat and boot.

“You say that these boxes are filled with books?” the lady at the British Airways ticket counter asked her breathless customer? “Yes.” “Books by...?” “By John Ruskin.” “Who?” “John Ruskin. He was a very important British writer of the last century.” “Well, I never heard of him. Did he really have four boxes worth of things to say?” “Absolutely.” “Hmm... But then why is it, if he wrote that much, that I never heard of him!” “Well, actually, I could answer that question, but it would take some time and I’ve only got a half hour until my flight lifts off.” “Yes, I see that. All right, but I want you to know that this is highly irregular. I’ll let these go, but it will cost you £20 per box for extra baggage.” Credit card at once on counter. “But I’ll tell you this,” she called after me said as I raced for the gate, “I don’t think you’re going to have an easy time of it at American customs!”

“What’s in the boxes?” the customs agent in Newark, New Jersey, asked. “Books,” I said, and then, trying to anticipate the next question, added: “Books by John Ruskin, an important British writer of the last century; these are his collected works, very rare.” (Mistake the First!) “Never heard of him. *How* rare and *how* valuable a set is it? You may have to pay import duty on them.” “Ah...well, actually, they are really not all *that* valuable, I only paid £1000 for them.” “How much is that?” “Oh, sorry. It’s about \$1800 or slightly more these days.” “That’s way more than your allotment. You are only allowed, as you know, as I see on your passport that you’ve been to England often, \$400 in duty-free items.” “These are all for scholarly uses, sir. I’m not really a book collector and I’m certainly not a book seller.” “All right, if that’s the case—and I can see from your passport you are a professor—I guess I can let you go without paying duty. Where’s your receipt for the purchase?” Panic! “Ah...well, you see, I actually don’t have a receipt. I made an agreement with a man at the school where I bought them to send payment when I got home.” “Then, for all I know, you might have paid five times as much for them.” More panic; with this result: “Look, while I can’t prove how much I paid for the set, let’s open one of the boxes, even all of them if you like, and I can show you that they all have the bookplate of the school, a small school in Cambridge and not a very wealthy one.” (Mistake the Second!) “How do I know it’s a *poor* school?” he asked, immediately seeing the flaw in the professor’s rattled reasoning. “Wait here.” Then he’s gone; this followed by ten minutes of escalating nervousness and worry that I was going to be forced to leave my priceless edition in a customs warehouse in New Jersey, leave it until that time when, after posting payment to Mr. Moseley and getting back acknowledgement that the money had arrived, I could collect them following a six-hour drive back to Newark. Finally, the agent comes back: “I talked to my boss. Take your damn books and get out of here. But know that we’re cutting you a lot of slack on this, Mr. Professor! Know too that we’ve put a note in your file. So, if you ever try this sort of thing again, we’ll confiscate whatever you are bringing in!” Then, sardonically, as I wheeled my cart toward the exit: “Enjoy your *Ruskin*! Whoever he is!”

Home. Upstate New York. So relieved. So pleased. Tracy pleased for me. The certified check sent via Western Union to Leys next day; followed by, on the second day, a visit, all four boxes in tow, to the Archives at Hobart & William Smith Colleges, where I meet my good friend, the Colleges’ Archivist, Charlotte Hegyi, to present my treasure, she more than a little familiar, as are all the staff at our library, with my love of Ruskin. “But all the pages are uncut,” Charlotte says as she pulls first one volume and then another from the boxes. “How are you going to *use* the books?” A tiny point I had never thought of once during the frenetic days just passed! “Oh, I’ll do it,” she said. “I know how to do this properly and have the right tool.” “You are such a good soul,” I said, “but can’t you get your student workers to help?” “Not a chance,” she replies: “They are often careless and this needs to be done carefully.” And thus, Charlotte, already high in my personal pantheon for her sweet friendship, rises into my realm of heroes for bestowing a kindness neither expected nor imagined, a generosity honoured every time I reach behind me in my library carrel to take down one of a volume of Cook and Wedderburn to check some detail or peruse their wondrous contents.

After leaving the books with her, I head up to my carrel, that special space where all my Ruskin work is done. Then, as I turn the key in the door, for the first time, these thoughts occur:

“Wait a minute! Clive doesn’t have a Library Edition, and he loves Ruskin as much as I do! He lives in Cambridge and knew the set was available and, to boot, had Mr. Moseley’s phone number readily available! Why didn’t *he* buy the set?” Followed by another thought, in answer: “Oh, my goodness! He didn’t buy it because he didn’t have the money! *I* have what should have been *Clive’s* Library Edition! Unable to buy it himself, he ‘gave’ it to me out of kindness and friendship, never mentioning the disappointment he must have felt when he saw my excitement and gave me Mr. Moseley’s phone number.” And so I learned that that which I had been seeing solely as my *fors*-aided good fortune had been something far beyond and more laudable than that: it had been a great and selfless gift.

The Second Library Edition

It was a year later, the fall of 1995. I am leading a semester-long program for my students in Galway, Ireland. Naturally, it is, of course, only a matter of days before I am on the hunt for the best bookstores in town. I quickly discover that Kenny’s Bookshop in the High Street is not only the best in the city but is, in many estimates, the best in Ireland. Always on the lookout for Ruskin or Ruskin-relevant titles (even with a Library Edition there is much else one needs!), I immediately find Des Kenny, one of the store owners. “Any Ruskin, Des?” “Well, Jim,” that eminent replies, “to tell the truth, we don’t get much call for Ruskin these days, but you can try upstairs and see if there’s anything under art or architecture.” There is as it turns out, but not much (a couple of “George Allen Greens,” a very tattered copy of Kenneth Clark’s marvelous compendium, *Ruskin Today*, which I already own in considerably better condition). I report this back to Des. “I’ll keep a lookout for you, Jim. Give me your number and if anything comes in, I’ll call.” And, then, as I turn and start to leave, this, from Des, behind: “I don’t know if you know, but we have a huge collection of used books in our store out back, just across the street. I don’t know if there’s any Ruskin, but you are welcome to poke around.”

Minutes later, I am poking. There is nothing of Ruskin’s under art, nothing under architecture, nothing under society; nothing any place; a dead end. But wait! Over there, on a wall of mixed books near the cash register, I see a familiarly-sized volume in blue cover—about two and a half inches wide and ten inches high. Could it be a volume of the Library Edition? Yes it is, amazingly enough! Volume 13, which records a huge swath of Ruskin’s writings on Turner—in *very* good condition. “May I take this to show Des?” I ask the clerk. “Sure.” “Des, look at what I found,” I say, thinking already of Clive and my wish, if possible, to redress the “wrong” of the year before: “It’s a volume of *the* great set of Ruskin’s works. Are there any more?” “I don’t know, Jim, if you didn’t find any others out there, it’s probably a stray.” My heart sinks. “Wait a minute,” Des continues, “we have a warehouse with thousands of boxes of books not far away. Maybe we can find a few more if we search there. I’ll get my staff on it right away. Check back tomorrow.”

Tomorrow: “Jim,” Des says as I walk into Kenny’s. “Guess what? We found a dozen more volumes in various boxes, scattered all around the warehouse. How many volumes are there in the set?” “39.” “OK, let me keep hunting. There may be even more. Why don’t you go to the store out back and look at those we have? They’re lined-up on the floor near the register.” I go;

Des comes too. I start checking: the volumes, now 13, are in, if not perfect, then fine condition—most of the spines are tight, the plates are pristine (some marginalia in a few volumes). I am delighted. “Come back tomorrow,” Des says.

Tomorrow: “Come with me,” Des says excitedly as I enter. “Look!” He smiles as we come to the top of the stairs by the cash register. My heart leaps! For there, lining the floor, has to be a complete set of the Library Edition, all the volumes which have been added since the day prior seemingly as unspoiled as the others. “I told you we had lots of books in the warehouse,” Des says. “My staff found these in other boxes. I don’t know why they were separated, but here they are! Remind me how many volumes there are?” “39.” “Ah, well, there’s a bit of a problem then,” Des says. “I thought 39 was the number. But we have only 38 and, even doing a double-search, we couldn’t find the last one. Somehow, it’s gone missing.” “Which one is missing?” I ask. The volumes on the floor being unordered we rectify the situation and discover that Number 35 is missing. Number 35? *Praeterita*! Ruskin’s autobiography, one of the most important volumes in the collection! But still! Here, in front of me, stand 38 volumes in superb shape. “Des,” I say, “OK, so we have an incomplete set. It’s not for me. It’s for a dear friend in England who very much wants this set and, in truth, needs it for his Ruskin research. How much do you want for what’s here?” Des thinks about it for a few moments. “How does £325 sound?” “Amazingly good, amazingly fair,” I reply. “Let me get to my friend and see if the price is OK with him. Can you hold them for a few days? I’m not quite sure how long it will take to work this out.” “Sure,” says Des. “They’ll stay right here until I hear from you.”

Clive finally reached at home in Cambridge. All explained: the set, its fine condition, *Praeterita* missing, my great delight at finding a set for him. “Let me make a few calls and I’ll get back to you, Jim. It might take me a couple of days.” “Fine,” I say, “Des said he’d hold them until I hear from you.” A day passes. Another. Finally, on the third day, Clive calls and says happily: “Let’s do it! I’ll work out the details of payment and shipping with your bookstore man.”

Ten minutes later, I’m at Kenny’s. Des not at his desk. “Where?” “Out back, in the other shop.” Mounting those out back stairs I immediately notice that the Library Edition is no longer on the floor. My heart sinks. Seeing him near the register, I ask: “Des, what’s happened to the set? My friend in Cambridge has said yes. He very much wants it.” “Funniest thing happened after you left the other day, Jim,” Des begins: “Less than an hour later, a fellow from Dublin came in, saw the books on the floor, came to find me, and asked about them. I told him that they were on hold for another customer. He asked me what price I had asked for the set. I told him £325. He said that he had been looking for a set of this edition for twenty and more years and that he was willing to pay me £1500 in cash right now if I would sell them to him. (My heart nearly sunk into my shoes by now.) I told him one volume was missing. He said it didn’t matter. He’d buy the set as is. It was, as you might imagine, Jim, a *very* tempting offer, almost five times as much money, capital we very much need right now in the business. It’s not every day we make £1500 sales here, you know. But,” he goes on, catching my consternation, “I told him that I couldn’t do it. I had made a promise to another customer and until that customer told me he wasn’t interested I couldn’t in fairness sell the set to another at any price. An agreement is an agreement. He wasn’t pleased!” Immediately, my heart immediately restores to its rightful

position, as I grasp that not only was the Galway Library Edition going to be Clive's, but that Des Kenny, who didn't read Ruskin, who hardly knew who he was in fact, by refusing the much larger offer and brooking the ire of an obviously well-heeled collector, had acted exactly as Ruskin argued all merchants should act, had done in practice exactly what an entirely honest merchant should do.

"But, Des," I asked, "if this is all true, as I am sure it is, where's the set? When I didn't see it on the floor as you began your story, I thought you must've sold it to that fellow." "Oh, it's out in the back, Jim! I *had* to put it there. This whole thing has been so nerve-wracking! I just couldn't take the chance that someone else would come in and want to buy the set for even more!! Now, give me your English friend's phone number and we'll get this sorted! After which," he added with obvious distaste, "I'll have to call that guy in Dublin and tell him the set has sold!" As it turned out, Clive phoned Des first, hearing these words when the honest merchant picked up the phone: "I'm so glad you have rung, sir! Your books have nearly been the death of me!" Ten days later, a blue-bound, 38 volume version of *The Library Edition of the Works of John Ruskin* arrived in Cambridge. A perfect Ruskin ending to a Ruskin story.

Epilogue

It is 1999; I am in New Orleans at a sociology conference. As per usual, in my spare time, I seek out the antiquarian book shops. "Any Ruskin?" I ask in store after store. "No" always the answer. Finally, there is one store left according to the phone book, way down Decatur Street: very old shop, very old man in charge. The question posed. "No, never get any Ruskin. Haven't for years. No one reads him now. But wait a moment, I think I have *one* Ruskin book. Check back there in English Literature." And there, *incredibly*, it is! One volume of the Library Edition: Volume 35: *Praeterita*! It's a maroon-binding, like mine, so it won't match Clive's set, but it will *complete* his collection. And by facilitating such completing, my "debt" will finally be paid: My friend, who had so generously put me in the way of a set of the Library Edition which rightfully should have been his, *would* have been his under different financial circumstances, will have his Cook and Wedderburn entire. I buy the book. I can't remember how much I paid. The cost was immaterial. Home, I carefully pack the book and ship it airmail to England, never even thinking of calling Clive to alert him to what's winging its way over the waters to Norwich Street, delighting in imagining him opening the package on coming home one evening after teaching.

Two weeks later, a large package arrives from the UK. Opening it, I am shocked to discover that it's the same Volume 35 I had sent him. A letter is inside the book. In it, Clive tells me that he couldn't be more grateful for my thoughtfulness and generosity, and then goes on to say that, not long before, another strange and wonderful thing had happened: his best friend, Michael Vince, knowing Clive was missing Volume 35 found a copy in an antique books sale. Even more remarkably it had once been part of a blue cover edition! Clive thought I would want the maroon copy of Volume 35 back just in case I wanted to give it to someone else sometime.

It is 2006. I am in Switzerland traversing Ruskin's "Old Road," ferreting out the many places he wrote about so elegantly and drew so beautifully. One place I want very much to find

is the house in Mornex, not far from Geneva, where he lived in 1862, during the months when *Munera Pulveris*, his sequel essays to *Unto This Last*, was appearing in *Fraser's Magazine*. (Before long, *Fraser's*, like the *Cornhill Magazine* had before, would also censor Ruskin's essays on political economy because of the incendiary effect they had on readers.) At last, after some hours trying to find the house employing my seriously bad French, I am directed to it. There, I meet the house's owner, Suzanne Varady. During the coming years, more visits to Mornex ensue and Suzanne and I became fine friends. Better still, it turns out that Suzanne is more than a little interested in Ruskin. To fuel that interest, I regularly send her articles and books about him. She is always pleased. And then ("once again," I suppose I should say!), the obvious occurs: given the fact that Suzanne is sincerely interested in Ruskin and the attending fact that she has been so kind to me and other Ruskin folk who have visited her Mornex house, it seems to me that, if anyone should deserve and would enjoy it, she should have that second copy of Volume 35—for who can understand Ruskin who has not read his autobiography, *Praeterita*? I post the book. Suzanne is very, very delighted when it arrives. And, in this way, the last volume of the two Library Editions finds its home.

It strikes me, as I end these sentences, that this story does not merely demonstrate the truth of what Ruskin contends are the always salutary effects which accompany being an honest merchant, it illustrates the always salutary effects which follow in the wake of kind and selfless behavior generally, other lessons Ruskin tries to impart in *Unto This Last* (indeed, these moral teachings lie at the heart of all his writings). Such fine effects can be seen throughout the tale: in Clive's generosity in giving me a chance to buy the Library Edition which should have been his; in Charles Moseley's decision to give me not only a very fair price for the set (Clive later told me that he had been offered, as friend and scholar, the same price--£1000—even though Moseley knew he could have gotten more); in Charlotte Hegyi's choice, for friendship's sake, to hand-cut the very nearly twenty thousand pages of my Library Edition; in Michael Vince's finding and buying the missing Volume 35 for his friend; in Suzanne Varady's willingness to share her Mornex house with myself and other "Ruskin people"; even in the cranky help proffered by the lady at the British Airways counter and the customs agent in Newark; in, finally and most importantly, the decision to stand on the principle of how to conduct business rightly and honestly made by Des Kenny in Galway, even when that stance meant losing needed capital for his shop. With the exception of the Dublin collector who tried to tempt Des into placing pelf above principle, *everyone* in this story was helped, served, or made happier or stronger in some manner, was able to feel, whatever role they played, that they had acted honourably. Not bad "pay" at any time, in any place.

"Treat the servant [or customer, or acquaintance, or anyone...] kindly," wrote Ruskin in the first essay of *Unto This Last*, "The Roots of Honour," "with the idea of turning his gratitude to account, and you will get, as you deserve, no gratitude, nor any value for your kindness. But treat him kindly without any economical purpose, and all economical purposes will be answered." "All of which sounds very strange," he wrote near the end of the same essay, "the only real strangeness in the matter being that it should so sound."