

Conversations with Van Akin Burd

*As readers of "The Companion" are aware, **Van Akin Burd**, Distinguished Professor Emeritus at The State University of New York at Cortland, has written dozens of scholarly articles on the great Victorian who is the subject of these pages and is the author or editor of no fewer than four acclaimed Ruskin "classics"—The Winnington Letters of John Ruskin (Harvard University Press, 1969), The Ruskin Family Letters (Cornell University Press, 1973; two vols.), John Ruskin and Rose La Touch (Oxford University Press, 1979), and Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876-77 (University of Delaware Press, 1990). Just turned 98, Professor Burd continues his Ruskin work, having published four articles in the last three years. For all these reasons, there is little doubt that he is the living "dean" of Ruskin studies.*

*At the request of the Master of the Guild and the editor of The Companion, during the past year, **Professor Jim Spates** of Hobart and William Smith Colleges (Geneva, New York) conducted a series of informal interviews with Professor Burd during his regular visits to Burd's home in Cortland, New York. What follows are some highlights of those talks, reflections by Professor Burd on a "life with Ruskin" which is now well into its seventh decade.*

JS: Van, you completed your PhD on Ruskin and Turner at the University of Michigan in 1951. It was a time when Ruskin was all but ignored in scholarly circles. How did it happen that you chose him as the subject of your life's work?

VAB: Well, it's a fairly complicated, but I think interesting story. I began my appreciation of Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites while I was an undergraduate at the University of Chicago in the 1930s. I learned about them in one of my courses. I also found out that the Art Institute of Chicago had some of their paintings and so, whenever I had "free days," I would go to see them. I was especially taken with the Turners and Rossetti's beautiful "Beata Beatrice." I still have my undergraduate anthology of Victorian writers but my marginal notations fail to show any special interest in Ruskin. It would take a World War, assignment to Naval Intelligence duties in Charleston, South Carolina, and a careful reading of Proust to make that happen.

I am ahead of my story. Leaving Chicago in 1936, I did some public school teaching. I had long been a reader of Melville's novels and, in the summer of 1938, decided I wanted adventure in the area of the south seas he so often wrote about. I took the summer off and shipped to the Fiji Islands where I spent considerable time getting to know not only the islands but the local people. There are some interesting stories about this, but they will have to wait for another time.

I enrolled in the Master's Program at Stanford University in 1941. My wife, Julia, and I married in 1943. Not long after, I enlisted in the Navy, being assigned, as I mentioned, to Charleston.

While we were there we read the classics. One was Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past*. I started to wonder: How did Proust learn to write like this? What was the source of his interest in art, architecture and, especially, Venice? Visits to the Charleston Library told me that he had been a dedicated reader of Ruskin and had even translated some of his works into French. My posting in Charleston ended near the end of 1945 when I was sent to Okinawa to help with the resettlement of the local people after the American invasion of the island. I was certainly *not* a hero.

JS: Perhaps not in the military sense but, in due course, you would become a hero to not a few others for another reason!

VAB: Well, at the time, I had no clear idea of what the future would hold. After the war, I was intent on getting my PhD in literature, and Julia, Joyce (our young daughter), and I returned to Chicago. We had no money, so I hoped to use the G.I. Bill to pay for housing. But the university had set no housing aside for veterans. Then I learned that the University of Michigan had such places. That decided it. We moved to Ann Arbor and for the first year and a half lived in one of their apartments reserved for veterans. It was no great shakes—our only heat was a coal stove! Later, with the aid of the GI Bill, we moved into a better apartment in Ann Arbor.

Eventually, I had to decide on a subject for my dissertation. I discussed the matter with my advisor, Professor Clarence Thorpe. I told him I wanted to write on the connection between Proust and Ruskin. "Impossible!" he said. "The subject is immense! You'd have to do *two* dissertations, one on each man to do justice to it!" Professor Thorpe made it clear that, if I chose Proust, I would have to become fluent in French. That seemed like an immense task at my "advanced" time of life, especially in light of the fact that I had a family, and could not expect to live on government largesse indefinitely. "Besides," Thorpe added, "*everybody's* doing Proust these days. He's *au courant*. But *nobody's* doing Ruskin!" By that time, I had read a lot of Ruskin and was in increasing admiration of his genius. Of course, as I read, I found out that he had written an immense amount on my early love, Turner. And so, all these things came together and Ruskin became my choice. My dissertation was on Ruskin and Turner.

Let me tell you another amusing story. In due course, it was time for me to defend my dissertation, and, as usual, a committee of scholarly eminents was formed to put me through my paces. Not long before that was to happen, my advisor, Professor Thorpe, died. He was replaced by the very intimidating Professor Warner Rice, a Milton scholar, who, as far as I knew, didn't know much about Ruskin. So, on the day of my oral examination, I was more than a little nervous. After we had been discussing Ruskin for some time, out of the blue Professor Rice asked me about a Browning poem I should have known. I *did* know it but, in the stress of the moment, I couldn't recall anything and had to say so! Not long after, I was asked to leave the room while the eminents decided my fate. I did so in some trepidation. After what seemed a

long time, another professor emerged, approached me, and reaching into his pocket, pulled out a Ruskin cigar and handed it to me. That was how I knew I had passed, even though I would not learn this was “officially” the case until I went back into the room! [*For some time “Ruskin cigars” were sold in America, their boxes emblazoned by one of his later portraits. All his life Ruskin was a vocal—indeed, strident—critic of smoking of any sort!—JS*]

JS: How did it happen that you came to spend your entire career at State University of New York (SUNY) at Cortland?

VAB: Well, that too is an interesting story. After I got my degree, I started looking for positions. SUNY Cortland had an opening in their Department of English at a salary of \$5,600, which, in those days (it was 1951), was a considerable amount, especially if you had a family. However, it hardly escaped my notice that Cornell, a considerably more prestigious place, was nearby. One day during my first Cortland year, I went to Cornell to see if a position might be available. One wasn't. I told the chair that I would like to be notified if one did come available. “It that happened,” I asked as I left, “what would the salary be?” “\$3200,” he said! And so I stayed on at Cortland. Over the years, I had three opportunities to leave but we were happy there, so there was no reason to go.

JS: Your first book was *The Winnington Letters of John Ruskin*. How did you come to write that?

VAB: An unexpected chance. After the war, some officers chose to remain in the reserves for a number of years. I was one. Once a year we had to go for refresher courses in our specialty which, in my case, was intelligence collection. As it turned out, one year my course was in New York City. For some time, I had known that the Pierpont Morgan Library there had a great deal of original Ruskin material—letters and manuscripts. Given my continuing interest in Ruskin and Turner—the first article I published after my dissertation (in *PMLA*) was on their relationship—I decided to go to the Morgan to look at the manuscript of Ruskin's *Modern Painters V* which, as you know, has wonderful chapters on Turner. I had also become aware that, not long before, the Morgan had purchased, from the Millais family in England, a major collection of unpublished material pertaining to Ruskin's life. While at the Morgan I asked to look at “The Bowerswell Trunk” as that collection was called. (It had come across the Atlantic in a small green trunk and was kept in it for some time.) As soon as I began reading, I knew it contained “blockbuster” material about Ruskin's life that no previous biographer had had access to, including much about his disastrous marriage to Effie Gray. I asked the Morgan's curator, F. B. Adams, if the trunk's contents might be reserved for me to edit and publish. He said no because the Morgan had already promised “first access” to Mary Lutyens [*Lutyens eventually published three books largely based on the collection: Effie in Venice, Millais and the Ruskins, and The Ruskins and the Grays—JS*]. So I asked him to let me know if the Morgan ever bought anything else of significance regarding Ruskin. Not long after, I received a letter from Mr. Adams telling

me that a considerable collection of letters which Ruskin had exchanged with Miss Margaret Bell of Winnington Hall in the 1860s had been purchased. Would I be interested in editing these?

The Winnington Letters was very intense work. It demanded much scholarly sleuthing to ferret out many of the details of Miss Bell's life. I spent a lot of time in the nearby Manchester Public Library doing that. One thing I discovered was that, early on in their relationship, Miss Bell figured out how to manage Ruskin. When the book came out, one reviewer said that it had opened a "new era of Ruskin scholarship," had set a "standard" which other scholars should use as a model. I was—and still am—proud of that assessment.

JS: I recall that *The Winnington Letters* contained material which was not in the Morgan's collection. What can you tell us about your search for this additional material?

VAB: The Winnington project was responsible for my first use of the Ruskin collection then housed at Bembridge on the Isle of Wight. It was during Jim Dearden's early years of caring for J. Howard Whitehouse's invaluable Ruskin materials. I was the second American scholar to work at Bembridge, I think, only Helen Viljoen having preceded me. My wife, Julia, came too. Jim was very helpful in finding the letters which were important to my project and making them available to us to copy. There being no photocopy machine then—it was the mid-1960s—transcribing had to be done by hand. It was very tiring and exacting work. We stayed in the Master's House and, every day, went to chapel with Jim and the boys. (We always sat in the back!) We returned the next summer. By this time, Jim had gotten an early copy machine. My daughter, Joyce, and a friend of hers who had come with us worked the machine. Another memory is that one night—we rented a house in Bembridge town this time—we had Jim and his wife, Jill, to dinner. We fixed hamburgers, which they had never had. Jim and Jill have been good friends of ours ever since, despite the distance which separates us. I should mention two other things. First, I was among the most fortunate of scholars to have had a wife like Julia. She never resented my Ruskin work and often helped—transcribing, proof-reading, and so on. She was always ready to go on our many trips to England and the Continent. Second, people who are interested in Ruskin owe an immense debt to Jim Dearden. Not only did he open up the Whitehouse collection to scholars, he invented a remarkably useful way of cataloguing it. This system is still the primary way the collection is catalogued at The Ruskin Library in Lancaster.

JS: After *The Winnington Letters* came an even larger project, *The Ruskin Family Letters*.

VAB: Yes, a *much* larger project. So large, in fact, that when I published my two volumes I had only brought the letters into the early 1840s! I think this is my most important book because it is as complete a record as we are likely to have of Ruskin's formative years. To make the book as complete as possible, for a number of summers, I worked at Yale's Beinecke Library which

houses many hundreds of the family's letters. When the book finally came out, it was also very well reviewed.

JS: But I also remember that, some time ago, you told me that the project disappointed you.

VAB: Yes, and for an obvious reason: I didn't finish the letters. The family letters go on until 1871, the year Ruskin's mother died. I thought long and hard about continuing and recall that Jim Dearden, in particular, urged me to go on. But I *knew* how much *effort* it had required to take the story as far as I did and thought I probably didn't have enough years left to finish the rest. (I may have been wrong about that!) But, also, I was teaching full time and to continue would have meant devoting almost every moment of every summer to the work for a very long time. Someone else will have to finish it someday. It really needs to be done.

JS: And this decision not to go on with the Ruskin family letters led to two other major projects, *John Ruskin and Rose La Touche* and *Christmas Story*?

VAB: Yes. Neither was a project I had planned but, just about the time I was finishing *The Ruskin Family Letters*, Helen Viljoen, who had long been my "friend in Ruskin," died and left me her complete Ruskin legacy, including all the chapters of her unfinished Ruskin biography, dozens of boxes full of notes and transcripts, and much more. She hoped, I think, that I would finish the biography. But when I read her chapters, I saw that this would be an immense task and decided against it. Eventually, I gave all her materials to the Morgan where they can now be accessed by any interested scholar.

Like myself, Helen was much indebted to the Morgan and so, when she died, she left the Library two important unpublished items that had come her way over the course of her own long Ruskin road: Rose La Touche's small diary—which gave me the idea for *John Ruskin and Rose La Touche*—and the remarkable set of letters Ruskin had written Joan Severn when he was in Venice during the last months of 1876 and January of 1877, a time when he was desperately searching for some sort of contact with Rose's spirit. [*Rose's death in 1875 left Ruskin bereft.* — JS] That became the framing material for *Christmas Story*. For that project too, I had to do a lot of research—going to Venice, for instance, so I could visit the places where he had stayed and recreate the walks he had taken during his disturbed days there. I also traveled to Broadlands, the Mount-Temple's home in the south of England—what an impressive house!—to find out what I could about their interest in spiritualism, an interest which had brought the bereaved Ruskin to their séances before he went to Venice. Given full access to Broadlands' archives, I had another piece of luck. I discovered Lord Mount-Temple's handwritten notebook on the séances, detailing when they were held, who had attended them, which "spirits" had been "contacted," and the like. I consider both pieces of research—the story of Ruskin's days in

Venice and of the Mount-Temples and their séances—among the best I have done. They were both stories which, to be told properly, necessitated a great deal of detective work.

JS: Do you have a favorite among Ruskin's books?

VAB: *Modern Painters I.*

JS: Among so many great works of genius, why that one?

VAB: It's the Ruskin-Turner connection. It's where I began.

JS: What still perplexes you about Ruskin's life? Is there anything about him which you'd like to know which you don't yet know?

VAB: I'd like to understand the mystery of his sex life—or, rather, lack of it. It's a puzzle still despite the attempts of many to figure it out. Let me give you an example. I'm working on a small article now, explaining how a virtually unknown small book of Viljoen's, *The Ruskin-Froude Correspondence*, came to be. She inherited the letters from that obscure collector of Ruskiniana, F. J. Sharp, of Barrow-in-Furness. Not long before she died, she published the correspondence with a "vanity press," which, despite promises to the contrary, did nothing to promote it. To save space for other inventory, the press destroyed all unsold copies. As a result, only a few exist. I plan to call this article, "The Book that Almost Disappeared." But now to the intriguing issue: after Carlyle's death, the historian and biographer, J. A. Froude, published the letters of Carlyle's wife, Jane Welsh Carlyle. The letters made it clear that Carlyle was impotent. There was a huge controversy about it at the time, about whether Froude had overstepped the bounds of scholarly decorum by making such a personal detail public. But the interesting thing is that from the letters contained in Viljoen's volume, we learn that Ruskin, whose marriage to Effie Gray was annulled on the grounds of non-consummation—a fact which, given that the judgment had been much discussed in public, had caused Ruskin considerable embarrassment—*supported* Froude's right to make the expose. You might think he'd have taken the other side, since such information about Carlyle, with whom Ruskin had been close friends for decades, might have brought his own sexual problems into public view again. It's fascinating to think through.

JS: Van, you've been working on Ruskin for seventy years! Do you have any regrets?

VAB: Well, there are things I'd like to have done and there are things I'd still like to do, but, to tell the truth, I've no regrets. I've lived a magic life.