

# The Caretaker

## John Dawson (1928-2011): A Tribute<sup>1</sup>

Jim Spates

Professor of Sociology

Hobart & William Smith Colleges, Geneva, New York

In Book II of Plato's *Republic*, Socrates and his friends, trying to discover what a truly good society would be like, decide that, however it is structured, it will have to have "Guardians," a small group of highly qualified citizens whose task it will be to ensure that all the essential elements of society are preserved against the slings and arrows of either outrageous fortune or outrageous others. Like Mr. Ruskin, for decades I have been an admirer of this book, one of the greatest in that pantheon of the world's literature that great Victorian calls "the Kings' Treasuries." Along with Ruskin's *Unto this Last*, I regularly have students in my courses read *The Republic* either in whole or in part. Sometimes I teach a course on Plato with Eugen Baer, a colleague in our Philosophy Department who knows Greek. The first time we co-taught, Eugen said that to call one of those special people who look after society's welfare (its "faring-well") a "Guardian" is a poor translation, that word carrying the implication that this all-important person might be authoritarian and distant. What Socrates really meant to convey, he said, was that this leader would be a "Caretaker," someone who not only knew what was right to do and preserve in social life, but someone who *loved*, with all his mind *and* heart, the ideas which and the people whom he served. John Dawson was a Caretaker.

I first met John and Margaret Dawson in the fall of 1995. At Michael Wheeler's invitation (Michael was then in charge of the Ruskin Programme at Lancaster University), I had just given a talk on Ruskin's social thought at the university's Ruskin Seminar. It being my initial trip on what would become my (by now relatively lengthy) "Ruskin Road," I desperately wanted to visit Brantwood, to see where this man, whom I now believed to be a genius beyond any I had ever encountered, had lived. "Well, if you are going to do that," Michael said, "you need to be in touch with John and Margaret. They live in Coniston and they know more about Ruskin than almost anyone living." After which (most accurate I was to find) praising, he rang these good souls up, explaining that a strange fellow from the Western side of the Pond was hopeful of visiting Coniston and seeing Brantwood. "Of course," they immediately replied in the first manifestation of what I would come to know as their singular generosity and kindness. "Come

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to our house,” John said after Michael passed me the phone: “We’ll have some tea and then visit Brantwood; and Ruskin’s grave—you wouldn’t want to miss that. If you stay another day, we’ll find you a B & B and show you other important Ruskin sites.” And so, the next day, warmly settled in that fine company (after an hour or so of visiting as we drank that promised tea), with John explaining everything as we went—the meaning of all the symbols on W. G. Collingwood’s grave memorial, for example—I had my first, awestruck, visits to these sites which mean so much to those who love Ruskin.

Along the way, John asked me to explain why I was so interested in Ruskin’s social thought: “It’s among the most important things he ever wrote, though few read it now,” he said, not without some asperity. “Almost *everything* about it is important—although he *did* say some foolish things! He was most impractical, for instance, in his attempts to actually change society. The Guild of St. George, which he created in the 1870s, was a well-intentioned idea but just too utopian. Almost no one joined it and, worse, almost no one supported it financially. They thought they’d be throwing their money away—and they were right! But his social criticism as a whole is magnificent because, until we learn to live together wisely—and Ruskin told us clearly, brilliantly, and simply how to do that—all the greed and suffering will go on.” In response, I told my new friends that my feelings about Ruskin’s social writings were the same: that I had in Ruskin found at last the sociologist I’d always been looking for—someone who was willing to say that this sort of social life was good for people and for life generally while that other sort of social arrangement should be shunned like the plague. The reason this was such “good news” to me, I went on, was that my field, much as I loved parts of it, still used an analytical model adapted from the physical sciences, with the consequence that the vast majority of its practitioners, wanting to be seen as “objective scientists,” were unwilling to make any sort of value judgments regarding what they had studied, even if pain and suffering were the dominant characteristics of their analyzed landscape. Intrigued by my response, John asked, since I had decided on that extra day, whether, next evening, I might present a brief summary of my Lancaster talk after dinner—to which repast I was invited, of course!—present it to themselves and a few Ruskin friends as audience? Thinking it over for at least a half second, I said: “Absolutely!” And so it happened that, after the sherry and Margaret’s wonderful meal (no one in this world makes a better roast lamb!), during which I learned much I hadn’t known about Ruskin from those the Dawsons had assembled, I gave my presentation. Seven hours later (brief summaries of my talks being one of my oratorical specialties), just before I left for my B & B, John said: “That was very nice, Jim. We were most interested to see how you would do.”

The next year—after considerably more reading had moved me from an interest in to an abiding passion for Ruskin—I was back again, having contacted John about the possibility of talking at Brantwood itself. “Well,” said the man in charge of organizing talks for that august

assembly known as “The Friends of Ruskin’s Brantwood,” “we would be very glad to hear you talk again, Jim. But I think you should speak at the Coniston Institute, a big room in town.” Though somewhat disappointed, I gladly accepted. “This time though,” John said, “we hope you can stay with us at Park Side.” I was *honoured*.

Before my talk, during the afternoon, John took me on a tour, my first, of the Ruskin Museum which he oversaw. It was the old Museum where most of the collection was housed and displayed in one large room. Patiently, he walked me about, explaining to his (still awestruck) visitor how important, among the Museum’s treasures, were Ruskin’s adolescent sermon book and the castings he had sent back to England from Italian cities as examples of how architecture should be done. “By the way,” he said in a seemingly off-handed way as I studied a glass covered case chockfull of artifacts from Ruskin’s various homes, “Do you see the two Ruskin portraits over there on the wall?” “Yes.” “I was wondering whether you liked one or the other better.” Both had been painted at Brantwood during the 1890s, Ruskin’s final decade, one by Arthur Severn, Joan Severn’s artist husband, the other by W. G. Collingwood (“Collie”), first Ruskin’s student, later his amanuensis, always his friend. I had seen neither image before, but, within a minute, I chose the Collingwood. “Why?” John wondered. “Well,” I replied, “it was easy. The Severn picture shows us an anguished, worried Ruskin, a miserable, worried man trapped inside himself. But Collingwood’s picture is a portrait of a great man, a man nearing the end of life to be sure, but a person of astonishing stature who, despite all that has happened to him (you can see the hurt in his eyes), looks directly at the viewer looking at *him* with immense compassion.” John said: “Good.” And then, at last, I understood: “That was a test! He wanted to see how I really felt about Ruskin, to see whether I saw what was most important about him. And last year’s talk in the living room was a test! And tonight’s talk at the Institute is another test! He’s protecting Ruskin. John is not going to let me speak at Brantwood until he’s sure that I understand Ruskin.” The Caretaker. Happily, two years later, during my next visit to the Lake District, John asked if I would like to give my coming talk at Brantwood. It was one of the great thrills and privileges of my life.

How does one share the glories of a friendship of the heart? Of the joy of staying at Park Side with John and Margaret whenever I gave my Ruskin talks. Of their considerable tolerance as, late into the night before a talk (my usual style), I would strew their guest bedroom with discarded notes while pacing up and down until the wee hours figuring out what I would say, arriving at breakfast bleary-eyed and barely coherent. Of the wonderful meals together (many shared with Pamela and Howard Hull) and all the good and profound chat, and my abiding, heartwarming sense that, when I was with them, I was very much a member of the family. Of the delights of hiking with them (often with another cherished Coniston friend, Mike Salts, sometimes with my late wife, Tracy, once, with my daughter, Lauren) through woods, over cascading streams (“We call them ‘becks’ up here, Jim,” John corrected, his eye flashing that

trademark twinkle), up mountains (“We call them ‘fells,’ up here, Jim”—twinkling again); once to the top of Brantwood’s moor; once a bit more than halfway up the Old Man; once—with John leading and myself a happy member of “The First Working Garden Party at Brantwood of the New Millennium”—to the site of Mr. Ruskin’s ice shed high above the main house. (“Going on walks led by John was like going with Ruskin himself,” Christine Parker once told me.) And, always, of my growing love and admiration for these *two* Caretakers of the spirit of the Great Master, who, so strangely, but appropriately—Ruskin having deserved better during his own life but not reaping that improvement until this later one—bore the same Christian names as his sires! *All* treasured moments. What Dickens in *Our Mutual Friend* called “the *true* gold.”

And, lastly, there was their palpable, unabashed love, whatever Ruskin’s warts (and these are fewer and much less unsettling than many misinformed think these days) of the magnificent Victorian’s brilliance and significance. Between visits, we exchanged letters. Replying to one of mine, Margaret, using words which moved me then and move me now, wrote: “To read Ruskin is like looking up at the sky on a starry night, and then, suddenly, a brighter, flaming planet appears which causes one to gasp in wonder.” John, setting his thoughts down on another sheet, said: “As a thinker and progenitor of great ideas, Ruskin stands alone and will outlive the praise or detraction given by any of the tribe of mere mortals!” Asked to give “the appreciation” after one of my Brantwood talks, John said: “When all the others have come and gone, there will still be Ruskin. He ranks with Jeremiah as one of the greatest minds who has ever lived among us.” Later, at Park Side, my knowledge of the Old Testament as rudimentary as my older friend’s was studied, I asked: “John, why Jeremiah?” To which the subject of this testimonial replied: “Because Jeremiah was by far the greatest of the Hebrew prophets. Ruskin deserves to be ranked with him.” The Caretaker.

The *true* gold. In 1866, Ruskin brought together three of his most brilliant lectures under the title, *The Crown of Wild Olive*. In his “Introduction,” he explained his metaphor. He began (characteristically) by chastising his fellows for favoring self and pelf over community, and for willfully ignoring the express charge given by the founder of their professed religion to love their neighbors. “What you really want,” he said (I paraphrase), “is to walk around sporting tiaras of gold, so you can be the *envy* of your neighbors. Even the antique Greeks, those whom, in foolish condescension, you think of as “pagans,” knew better! Knew that the symbol of a life well-lived is not a band of glittering metal, but the chance to wear a diadem *grown* from this living earth, a crown of wild olive—a crown prickly and cool, a crown which, *intentionally* simple and common but honestly and helpfully won, would garner not the envy, but the *love* and *respect* of one’s fellows. And should you decide to seek such a simple circlet before you finish your allotment of always disappearing days, he concluded, here will be the rewards of such striving: “Free-heartedness, and graciousness, and undisturbed trust, and requited love, and the sight of the peace of others, and the ministry to their pain; these—and the blue sky above

you, and the sweet waters and flowers of the earth beneath; and mysteries and presences, innumerable, of living things—these may yet be here your riches, untormenting and divine; serviceable for the life that now is, nor, it may be, without promise for that which is to come.”

John, of course, great soul that he was, never sought any crown (great souls never do). But if anyone ever spent a life trying to bring about as a lived reality in the lives of all those whom his own days touched those noble rewards celebrated in Ruskin’s lovely lines, it was this remarkable man. Consider it slightly differently: Reflecting on the course of our own days, thinking back on all our once and present Friends and friends, is it not the case that, if anyone has ever earned the right to wear, perpetually in our memories, hearts, and honourings, that crown of special olive which symbolizes both the earth’s goodnesses and those who give their precious moments to enhance the lives of others, wouldn’t John Dawson be at the summit of our astonishingly short list of candidates?

He was a *giant* of the Ruskin world. We loved him. He loved *us*. We shall miss him much. We already do. For the *gift* of his good, thoughtful, helpful, and loving presence among us through his (too few) years—for his unceasing Caretaking—we cannot be more grateful.