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Dickinson, Rachel (2019) Ruskin and a Generation Worth Remembering.
Journal of Victorian Culture. ISSN 1355-5502

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/622808/>

Version: Accepted Version

Publisher: Oxford University Press (OUP)

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jvcult/vcz018>

Please cite the published version

<https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk>

Round Table

Ruskin and a Generation Worth Remembering

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‘There are a few, a very few persons born in each generation, whose words are worth hearing, whose art is worth seeing’.¹ So declared Victorian cultural critic John Ruskin (1819-1900) in July 1876, speaking of what he elsewhere refers to as genius. As so often with Ruskin, the micro level is also played out on the macro; what he sets out here in relation to the individual person reflects a pattern he perceived within wider cultural movements over time. His writings are infused with a sense that, just as there are a few individuals of particular note in each generation, so there have been a few, select generations which – when their individuals of great note are considered as a group – are of special, collective worth.

This paper begins by outlining a Ruskinian definition of ‘generation’, then offers an example of how this is applied by Ruskin to the macro level of a specific historical generation, that of Venice c. 1500. While identifying genius or Ruskinian ‘worth’ is much easier to do with the hindsight of history, Ruskin recognized the potential for its existence in his own time: the coda briefly transports the principles laid out in relation to medieval Venice to Ruskin’s own generation by listing figures he wrote about who shared his birth year. As each individual listed maps onto a Ruskinian sense of genius or special ‘worth’, they form a concentrated generation stemming from a single year: they are Victoria’s Victorians, born in 1819. Mapped against Ruskin’s own criteria, they form a crystallized micro-generation of ‘worth’.

1. Ruskinian ‘Generation’

Ruskin was steeped in the Bible. Guided by his Calvinist mother, as a child he read two or three chapters a day out loud and memorised verses.² By the age of three, he knew the Lord’s Prayer and the Ten Commandments by heart.³ So for Ruskin the concept of ‘generation’ is inflected by scriptural uses of the term and typically relates to multiple generations over broad sweeps of time, rather than an individual generation. It also tends to entail an optimistic, Evangelical belief in the teleological improvement of humanity, albeit with the looming potential to be damned like the generation of Noah or the neighbours of Lot. For example, he draws *The Ethics of the Dust* (1865) to a close by having the semi-autobiographical Old Lecturer proclaim to the disciple-schoolgirls surrounding him that there is the potential for ‘a nobler life in us’, that ‘the time when the Dust of the generations of men

¹ *Fors Clavigera* Letter 67 (28.645). All references to Ruskin’s published work are to the Library Edition, *The Works of John Ruskin*, ed. by E. T. Cook and Alexander Wedderburn, 29 vols. (London: George Allen, 1903-12).

² Michael Wheeler, *Ruskin’s God* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), p. 6.

³ Tim Hilton, *John Ruskin: The Early Years* (London: Yale UP, 1985), p. 12.

shall be confirmed for foundations of the gates of the city of God' is approaching, and that this ideal state can be achieved through 'our labour'.⁴ The improvement of humanity requires 'labour' or good works. Thus for Ruskin, an ideal generation – or exemplary individual within it – can achieve their potential and be recognized for that worth through what they do. With first person plural pronouns, he stresses that the culminating greatness of generations is a collective effort over time, spanning from the individual to the wider culture.

Similarly, in *Sesame and Lilies* (1865) he considers what for him is one of the key markers of cultural and individual worth: art. Ruskin argues that 'the arts' 'differ from the sciences' in that they cannot be taught through facts and instead are 'founded' 'on dispositions which require to be created'.⁵ He elaborates that good art

is the instinctive and necessary result of power, which can only be developed through the mind of successive generations, and which finally burst into life under social conditions as slow of growth as the faculties they regulate. Whole æras of mighty history are summed, and the passions of dead myriads are concentrated, in the existence of a noble art.⁶

Not only is Ruskinian worth collective and cumulative, 'develop[ing] through the mind of successive generations', but this becomes 'concentrated' in extraordinary individual creations ('art') stemming from exceptional individual persons. As the final section of this paper notes, when an individual is unusually perceptive and able to communicate that instinctive knowledge, Ruskin refers to them as a 'genius'. He charmingly describes genius thus in an 1854 letter:

the great things, which require genius to do, are done easily if you have the genius. If you are to do anything that is really glorious, and for which men will for ever wonder at you, you will do it as a duck quacks – because it is your nature to quack – when it rains.⁷

For those who possess it, Ruskinian genius is natural and effortless and can be recognised by the lasting 'wonder' it induces in others; a coalescence of such genius at a moment in time marks an ideal generation.

2. A Historical Generation of Ruskinian 'Worth': Carpaccio's Venice

⁴ *Ethics* (18.360).

⁵ *Sesame* (18.169).

⁶ *Sesame* (18.170).

⁷ John Ruskin to J. J. Laing 6 August 1854 (36.172).

When Ruskin declared that only a ‘very few persons [are] born in each generation, whose words are worth hearing, whose art is worth seeing’, he was writing about his vision for a better future for Britain, and the hope that a coming together of such genius with the individual good works it might inspire would lead to improvement on a grand scale. The 1876 letter of *Fors Clavigera* whence this comes, Letter 67, is entitled ‘Companionship’ and so directly links to the ideal actions of ‘Companions’ or members of his Guild of St George – the charitable organization he began to plan in the 1860s and established in the 1870s, and whose collective efforts he hoped would form an ideal generation. This letter’s working title had been ‘The Civilized Nation’, a term he there dissects with dripping ire, culminating in the declaration that ‘in modern Europe’, ‘the civilized nation consists broadly of mob, money-collecting machine, and capitalist’.⁸ This perceived corruption and decay belies his belief in a teleological improvement from generation to generation, noted in the indicative quotations from *Ethics* and *Sesame* just cited, and which runs through Ruskin’s oeuvre. As he looks at his own society, there is a tension in what he sees, pulling him between, on the one hand, an optimistic belief that, through a process of improvement on a grand temporal scale, an ideal generation may be at hand, and on the other hand a pessimistic despair when faced with the realities of the worst the Industrial Revolution had yielded. On balance, at least in his public writing, Ruskin maintains hope in the face of growing ‘Illth’. A term he coined, it is the concept of being ill rather than well in economic, social and aesthetic senses and the opposite of ‘wealth’ as in his famous declaration: ‘There is no wealth but life’.⁹ He offers an antidote to the unworthy, uncivilizing forces he sees threatening his own and future generations: he proposes working together to build a ‘National Store’ (a collection of useful wealth, or worth) through collective efforts such as he envisaged for his Guild, which he hoped would defend against ‘Illth’.¹⁰

Speaking specifically of the ‘British nation’ in *Fors* 67, he stresses his ‘conviction’ that the existing generations are in grave danger, that Britain ‘is at present unhealthy, poor, and likely to perish, as a power, from the face of the earth’.¹¹ This echoes the prophetic stance he took 25 years earlier – a generation earlier – in the opening of *The Stones of Venice* (1851), when he drew attention to ‘three thrones, of mark beyond all others [...] Tyre, Venice and England’.¹² These three sea-faring empires are of particular ‘mark’ or ‘worth’, and he

⁸ *Fors* (28.638n1 and 28.639-40).

⁹ See *Unto this Last* (17.89, 105), *Munera Pulveris* (17.168).

¹⁰ *Fors* (28.640).

¹¹ *Fors* 67 (28.638).

¹² *Stones* 1 (9.17).

links these locations to the specific moments – to the generations – when each reached its peak, and became ‘worth’ the most. From Ruskin’s perspective, England of 1851 was on the cusp either of producing the greatest and most ‘worth’-ful generation the world had seen, or ‘if it forget their example [of Tyre and Venice], may be led through prouder eminence to less pitied destruction.’¹³ The example he focuses on in *Stones* is Venice when she was ‘paradise on earth’, the generation when she was at her peak and when that excellence was channelled through an individual who Ruskin perceived as an exemplary, genius figure of an ideal generation: Carpaccio (1465-1520).

In Ruskin’s eyes, Carpaccio’s *The Legend of St Ursula* and *St George* cycles are the distillation of a prophetic lesson offered more broadly through Venice as a whole:

[Carpaccio’s] message is written in the Venetian manner, by painting the myths of the saints, in his own way. This prophecy of Carpaccio’s may be thought of by you as the sweetest, *because* the truest, of all that Venice was born to utter: the painted syllabing of it is nearly the last work and word of hers in true life. She speaks it, and virtually, thereafter, dies, or begins to die.¹⁴

Part of what Ruskin prizes in Carpaccio’s work is the way it captured the truth and essential message of Venice at her peak and distilled this into art, preserving the lessons of an ideal generation for later generations to learn from. Anyone who knows their medieval history knows that the Venice Ruskin evokes never really existed: the compelling vision of Venice he offers in ‘The Nature of Gothic’ (the central chapter of the central volume of the *Stones*, and the chapter that so inspired figures like William Morris) or sees played out in Carpaccio’s *St Ursula* cycle¹⁵ is not a factual description of medieval life and working practices; but from Ruskin’s perspective, that doesn’t matter. Medieval Venice – especially the exemplary generation portrayed in Carpaccio’s depictions of saints – offers ideal lessons in how to be a person of worth in a Ruskinian sense. There are many instances where Ruskin elaborates on this, but one which draws attention to his own time is when he contrasts ‘our’ St George, that is, the nineteenth-century British St George as depicted on coins, with Carpaccio’s painting *St George and the Dragon*. Ruskin urges his readers to look at any ‘real “pound” in your own pocket’ then begins to teach his lesson.¹⁶ [fig.1] Aside from the fact that the English image

¹³ *Stones* 1 (9.17).

¹⁴ *Fors* 71 (28.773).

¹⁵ See *Fors* 71 through 77, of November 1876 through May 1877. When a despairing older Ruskin returned to *Stones* in 1881 and added an Epilogue, he points specifically to letters 71 to 76 as a revelation ‘of my true personality’, and thus revealing something of what he would consider to be his genius (11.235).

¹⁶ While he allows for any pound, in his note he elaborates: ‘The best is on George III.’s pound, 1820; the most finished in work on George IV.’s crown-piece, 1821’ (27.474).

he discusses is intrinsically linked to money, Ruskin notes much that is wrong with it as an object:

how brightly comic it is! The horse looking abstractedly into the air, instead of where precisely it *would* have looked, at the beast between its legs: St. George, with nothing but his helmet on (being the last piece of armour he is likely to want), putting his naked feet, at least his feet showing their toes through the buskins, well forward, that the dragon may with the greatest convenience get a bite at them; and about to deliver a mortal blow at him with a sword which cannot reach him by a couple of yards, – or, I think, in George III.’s piece, with a field-marshal’s truncheon.¹⁷

This is exemplary Ruskin: perceptive, educational and entertaining. He wittily points out the flaws in the modern English version, showing it has much to learn from Medieval Venice about practicality, perspective and human (and equine) nature.

In contrast,

Victor Carpaccio’s [...] St. George exactly reverses the practice of ours. He rides armed, from shoulder to heel, in proof – but *without* his helmet. For the real difficulty in dragon-fights [...] is not so much to kill your dragon, as to *see* him; at least to see him in time [...]. Carpaccio’s St. George will have his eyes about him, and his head free to turn this way or that. He meets his dragon at the gallop – catches him in the mouth with his lance – carries him backwards off his fore feet, with the spear point out at the back of his neck.¹⁸

Ruskin sees Carpaccio’s version as much more truthful and realistic: St George is active and perceptive, able ‘to *see*’ the dragon in time to fight it. This image of George and dragon came to symbolize his own fight against the evils of modernity. He could see this being played out in the skies visibly darkened by pollution, in the reports of workers’ bodies bent, twisted and torn by industrial production, in encountering impoverished people like a little girl wearing ‘a large and dilapidated pair of women’s shoes’.¹⁹ Inspired by the Carpaccio St George and his fight, Ruskin named his charitable Guild of St George after it, conceiving of its members (‘Companions’) as individuals fighting against the evils of his time. While Ruskin’s sepia copy of Carpaccio’s painting [fig. 2] is focused on George, horse and dragon, with the princess an unfinished figure to the right, one of the ways he visualised the battle

¹⁷ *Fors* 26, February 1873 (27.475), Ruskin’s emphasis.

¹⁸ *Fors* 26, February 1873 (27.475), Ruskin’s emphasis.

¹⁹ *Fors* 37, January 1874 (28.14).

against destructive aspects of the nineteenth century was through this image of St George on the side of true 'Wealth' fighting against the dragon of 'Illth' to save the princess.

The resonant image of a princess recurs in Ruskin's account of Carpaccio's *St Ursula* sequence, particularly 'a picture [...] representing the dream of a young princess. Carpaccio has taken much pains to explain to us, as far as he can, the kind of life she leads'.²⁰ Although she is asleep in this painting, Ruskin notes evidence of the princess's active good works and reads this across the other paintings in the cycle to offer her as an exemplary figure with layers of resonance. Here and elsewhere, he draws attention to the clothing worn by her and other figures in the cycle, using dress to prove his point that Venetian society at that moment in time offered an ideal model.²¹ For Ruskin, art, architecture and clothing are forms of expression which capture a sense of the individual creative genius, who distils ideals into colourful artefacts from which future generations might learn. He makes this point in the conclusion to the final volume of *Stones*, where he traces the decline in clothing from the Venetian medieval ideal of dress he perceives in the work of artists like Carpaccio through to 'now, in its morbid magnificence' when it has 'degraded' 'like architecture': 'Precisely analogous to this destruction of beauty in dress has been that of beauty in architecture'.²² But having traced an aesthetic and ethical decline in art, clothing, architecture and literature, the final sentence of *Stones* is one of hope, that through a new English Gothic with all its social, economic and aesthetic potential, 'London of the nineteenth century may yet become as Venice without her despotism, and as Florence without her dispeace.'²³

3. Individuals of Ruskinian 'worth' born in 1819

Ruskin perceived his own time as being at a crossroads. While he saw decline due to Illth, this was tempered by the hope that, if his contemporaries could learn from mistakes of past nations and from ideal models of past individuals, then there might be improvement on a grand scale. Such amelioration of culture might come if, guided by the vision of those who possess genius, a wider network of individuals works to promote ethically and aesthetically sound Wealth. In an 1852 letter to his father, he explains that:

I don't think myself a great genius, but I believe I have genius; something different from mere cleverness [...]. There is a strong instinct in me, which I cannot analyse, to

²⁰ *Fors* 20, August 1872 (27.342-33).

²¹ See esp. JR to Susan Scott, Verona, 14 May 1869. Ruskin Foundation, Ruskin Library, 1996L00220. MS B5 L 49 and Dickinson, 'To Teach Them How to Dress', p. 62.

²² *Stones III* (11.224-25)

²³ *Stones III* (11.230).

draw and describe the things which I love – not for reputation, nor for the good of others, nor for my own advantage, but a sort of instinct like that of eating and drinking.²⁴

While he outlines this as an ‘instinct’, and not done ‘for the good of others’, he nevertheless perceives of himself as being exemplary and thereby able to affect others through an inspired language of art: whether visual (‘draw’) or verbal (‘describe’), his creations flow instinctively from him, capturing truth and thereby the potential to influence others for good. Because, for Ruskin, ideal generations are characterised by their individuals of genius, a belief in his own status as a genius opens the possibility that his own time – despite its negative aspects – might yield a generation of note akin to Carpaccio’s.

Three years later, in a letter of 1855, he describes the headstrong, difficult-to-control nature of genius and adds: ‘These geniuses are all alike, little and big. I have known five of them – Turner, Watts, Millais, Rossetti, and this girl [Elizabeth Siddall]’.²⁵ In this list, the geniuses are all visual artists and, with the exception of Turner, all born within a decade of himself; this continues the pattern established in relation to historical creative figures such as Carpaccio – that geniuses are ideally perceptive artists who instinctively tap into and express truth at a particular moment in time.

At the beginning of *Modern Painters I*, Ruskin refers to art as a language.²⁶ As Elizabeth Helsinger points out, according to Ruskin’s conception of things, ‘[o]nly for a small and privileged group of active seers does art function as a language to express mental processes’.²⁷ For Ruskin, such active seeing – and ability to communicate truth through creative endeavours and thereby shape others – is the mark of genius. It is not limited to visual artists. As George Hersey notes, when Ruskin wrote *Fiction Fair and Foul* (1880), he similarly ‘claim[ed] that only four other men in recent history had had the sense of material beauty, i.e. of aesthetic sight, that he possessed’.²⁸ The list of these men of genius reads: ‘Rousseau, Shelley, Byron, Turner, and myself’.²⁹ The others are his seniors and can all roughly be grouped as from the long Romantic generation. Collectively, they cross the

²⁴ Ruskin cited in Kenneth Clark, *Ruskin Today* (New York: Holt, Reinart and Winston, 1964), p. xvii.

²⁵ Letter to Mrs Acland of 10th July 1855 (36.217). The figures listed are all visual artists: J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851), G. F. Watts (1817-1904), J. E. Millais (1829-1896), D. G. Rossetti (1828-1882) and E. E. Siddall (1829-1862).

²⁶ *Modern Painters I* (3.87).

²⁷ Elizabeth Helsinger, *Ruskin and the Art of the Beholder* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard, UP, 1982), p. 203.

²⁸ George L. Hersey, ‘Ruskin as an Optical Thinker’, in *Ruskin Polygon*, pp. 44-64 (p. 47 with reference to 34.343).

²⁹ *Fiction Fair and Foul* (34.343). The figures listed are J.-J. Rousseau (1712-1778), P. B. Shelley (1792-1822), G. G. Byron (1788-1824), J. M. W. Turner (1775-1851) and Ruskin (1819-1900).

disciplinary and generic boundaries of visual art, poetry and prose – all fields in which Ruskin achieved recognition.

Ruskin is not alone in linking cohorts of individuals possessed of genius with generations of particular importance, and with his own generation. While noting that ‘it is notoriously difficult to grasp a situation which is unfolding at our very feet’, Edmund Gosse looked from the vantage point of 1897 at the preceding decade stretching back to 1887. He identified it as marking a significant change in the history of literary studies as an old generation of particular ‘genius’ passed away. He argued that, while ‘[t]here have always been bursts of genius’, an exceptional number of significant, culture-changing writers had been born in ‘the second decade’ of the nineteenth century and had in the space of a decade largely disappeared. Stating that ‘[o]nly two’ of this living ‘galaxy of genius’ remained as he wrote his retrospective – Herbert Spencer and John Ruskin – he bemoaned the fact that ‘Mr Ruskin, quite unseen at Coniston, has practically, alas ! joined the chorus of those invisible singers whose births made the second decade of this century so incomparably splendid.’³⁰

What if we tighten the beam from Gosse’s focus on those born in the second decade of the nineteenth century, to those born in the final year of that decade and look through the lens of one of their number, Ruskin’s lens? A search for references to Victoria’s Victorians – those who shared the birth year of 1819 – in the *Library Edition* reveals that Ruskin wrote about at least the following: Queen Victoria (d.1901), whose reign encompassed an ‘age’ spanning two to three temporal generations; Arthur Hugh Clough (d. 1861), a poet and educationalist; Herbert Benjamin Edwardes (d. 1868), a Major-General who was a career officer and administrator in India; George Eliot [Mary Anne Evans] (d. 1880), a novelist; W.P. Frith (d. 1909), a genre painter and Royal Academician; Charles Hallé (d. 1895), a conductor and pianist; Ernest Charles Jones (d. 1869), a Chartist poet and novelist; Charles Kingsley (d. 1875), a priest, professor and novelist; and, Bernard Quaritch (d. 1899), Ruskin’s favourite bookseller.

Not all are now internationally recognisable names, and Ruskin’s opinions of them ebbed and flowed. To offer just one example, typically contrary and contradictory Ruskin criticises George Eliot in *Fiction Fair and Fowl*. In an 1881 letter defending that negative reading, later published in *Arrows of the Chase*, he wrote:

No critic is good for anything who cannot judge of a painter by a line, and an author by a sentence. I read enough of George Eliot ten years ago to know her qualities; but,

³⁰ Edmund Gosse, ‘Ten Years of English Literature’ *The North American Review* 165.489 (1897), 139-48 (139, 141-42)

having some personal regard for her, said nothing about her, till the time when other people think the fitting occasion come for their praise. I have always praised the living, and judged – the dead.³¹

While harsh here in relation to Eliot, it usefully restates the close links between genius/perception and art/writing when Ruskin reads the life and work of others. Most of the direct contemporaries discussed by Ruskin produced what he would consider art,³² whether that be as a painter, either professional (Frith) or amateur (Victoria); poet (Clough, Jones); novelist (Eliot, Kingsley); memoir-writer (Edwardes)³³ or musician (Hallé).³⁴ All in some way actively worked to fight against Ruskinian Illth such as poverty, inadequate education, lack of beauty. Each was exemplary and influential and thereby potentially fits Ruskin's criteria for genius and worth, in that each made a demonstrable and lasting individual impact on British culture.³⁵ Through their endeavours they collectively helped to build what Ruskin describes as a 'National Store' of 'Wealth'.

They would not have considered themselves to be a generation. Then as now, the term normally denotes 'the average time [...] for children to grow up [...] and have children of their own', coupled with collective consideration of those of a 'similar age [...] involved in a particular activity or profession at a given time'.³⁶ A 'similar age', but not normally of a single year. Yet, as sociologist Philip Abrams succinctly puts it, '[a]ge-groups are ephemeral and leave a culture fundamentally untouched; generations endure and transform culture'.³⁷ This group of 1819ers – those exact contemporaries of whom Ruskin wrote – are the essence of an age-group, distilled into a specific year, yet they nevertheless fit the criteria for a 'generation' as defined by Abrams and Ruskin: their collective influence transformed culture. Arguably, one of the things which further defines them as a generation is their web-like interconnectedness. Ruskin knew all of them.

In *Ruskinland: How John Ruskin Shapes our World*, Andrew Hill describes Ruskin as 'a one-man worldwide web' who 'saw – if not always clearly – how art, science, nature,

³¹ *Arrows of the Chase* (34.559, Oct. 1881)

³² I had hoped to find Ruskin writing on scientists from 1819, but Tyndall is the closest, born a year too late.

³³ While largely unknown now, Ruskin was so impressed by Edwardes' autobiographical memoir *A Year on the Punjab Frontier* (1851) that he produced an edition of extracts from it, published as *A Knight's Faith* (1885).

³⁴ As Paul Jackson has noted, for Ruskin music is the equivalent of visual art.

³⁵ Not all were born British. Quaritch and Hallé were immigrants who chose to make England their home and there established cultural organizations; the Hallé Orchestra and Bernard Quaritch Ltd Rare Books remain influential more than a century later. See www.halle.co.uk and www.quaritch.com.

³⁶ 'generation, n.' *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, December 2018, www.oed.com/view/Entry/77521. Accessed 2 March 2019.

³⁷ Philip Abrams, 'Rites of Passage: The Conflict of Generations in Industrial Society' *Journal of Contemporary History* 5.1 (1970), 175-90, p.183.

history, the environment, politics, economics and industry sprang from and relied on each other.’ He was, Hill notes, ‘a genius at what modish strategists now sometimes call “joining the dots”.’³⁸ Although in Ruskin’s definition of genius ‘[t]here are a few, a very few persons born in each generation, whose words are worth hearing, whose art is worth seeing’, his own exact contemporaries offer an impressive list or constellation of such ‘persons’ of ‘worth’ interconnected and crossing a range of disciplines and spheres to build a web of lasting influence. Taken collectively, and with the benefit of hindsight, ‘Victoria’s Victorians’ form a micro-generation worth remembering. Crystallized from a single birth year, they offer a composite exemplary model akin to those Ruskin saw when he looked back to Venice at its peak and found inspiration in that generation from which to improve his present and our future.

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³⁸ Andrew Hill, *Ruskinland: How John Ruskin Shapes our World* (London: Pallas Athene, 2019), p. 33.

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