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Robert Hewison, *Ruskin and his Contemporaries*. London: Pallas Athene, 2018. 412 pp. + lx11 illus.

Kay J. Walter, University of Arkansas at Monticello, walter@uamont.edu

Robert Hewison is a reliable scholar, so it should come as no surprise that his new book about John Ruskin is a treasure. Readers familiar with Hewison's previous work on Ruskin will be prepared for the fluid tone and the vastness of the author's understanding of Ruskin and his context. It is a pleasure to find Pallas Athene offering such a timely contribution to the global celebrations of the bicentennial of Ruskin's birth, and as Hewison tells us in the Preface, his hope is that the current surge of interest in Ruskin outlives the year-long celebrations. Certainly, the success of this book will assist in keeping that interest alive. Ruskin is a writer not just for his own time but for all time; Hewison puts it this way, "Ruskin is still our contemporary" (xv). The profundity of Ruskin's foresight and the clarity of his vision of humanity ensure that he will remain the contemporary of many generations to follow our own.

The biggest shortcoming of the book is the intention of its organization. In the Introduction, Hewison describes Ruskin's gravitation throughout his career toward the lecture as a genre for his visionary pronouncements. Ruskin's early works, for example *Modern Painters*, were multi-volume tomes produced expansively over years of ongoing toil. His later writings, especially *Fors Clavigera*, are published as multi-volume works, but they were written as brief, weekly addresses to his audience. Eventually, Ruskin grew frantic in his efforts to explain. Simple things became profound and charged with symbolic meaning. In contrast to recent film portrayals, Ruskin was an eloquent, popular, and adored public speaker, famous for filling lecture halls into which audiences crowded well beyond capacity. Hewison uses Ruskin's penchant for the lecture as justification for the structure of his own book. He collects short-ish pieces he has written about Ruskin for a variety of purposes and venues and presents them here, edited into a book-length portrait of the Victorian genius. The result is an image created over time. This overlaying of word portraits of the sage in relationship to others clarifies the reader's vision of Ruskin in much the same way Victorian era composite photography attempted to produce a clearer image of physiological features among family relations.

The chapters of Hewison's book about Ruskin create the clarity of their overlay in the same way composite photography does but with much the same resultant blurriness. Arthur Batut's *Members of the Family of Arthur Batut* reveals features of the genetic relationship in his composite photograph, but the eerie placement of hands, heads, and garments results in an odd sense of vertigo for the viewer. When we look at the photo, we become unsure if we have seen any member of the Batut family at all rather than all of them at once. Similarly, reading Hewison's book as a book leaves a reader's head rather spinning. The collection is much more suited to a leisurely chapter-at-a-time ramble than the quick march one might allot to a book-length biography. Each chapter urges pause and reflection.

Chapter one begins with a story. Hewison has an engaging tone, and his descriptions absorb the reader at once. We peek into a room in Venice to find Ruskin working, motivated by an amalgamation of influences (4). The chapter introduces Ruskin's relationship to the great contemporaneous artist, Turner, who "would turn out to be his flawed hero" (6). Hewison sees Ruskin's education, and therefore his writing, as growing organically from his natural curiosity about his experiences. Hewison tells us that "The decision to study Venetian cultural history **led to** *The Stones of Venice*" (10, emphasis mine). Chapter two reveals the formation of Ruskin's taste. This part of the book is about childhood influences, but rather than focusing on Ruskin's mother, as is customary, Hewison describes the influence of John James Ruskin on his son's taste in art. Hewison explains the importance this way, "Before Ruskin was a critic, he was a connoisseur" (22). The father took pride in collecting the art of great living artists, and his hobby introduced the son to other art connoisseurs. Thus, even while Ruskin was writing *Modern Painters*, his taste in art was still forming. Hewison goes on to explore how Ruskin grew from a collector of art through being an art critic, to become a patron of artists, and then eventually an art educator. Chapter three considers his relationship with Turner in detail, and Hewison explains that Ruskin's understanding of Turner goes through phases, just as Turner's art does. Ruskin develops an "increasingly darker and more tragic vision of the painter" as time goes on (45-46). Hewison reads the contradictions throughout *Modern Painters* as signs of development. Hewison says, "One would [. . .] hope that a work that took five volumes and seventeen years to complete shows some change and maturation" (50). Clearly, it does.

With similar insights, Hewison continues building his image of Ruskin, revealing, for instance, a definition of Ruskin's idea of idleness as "not simply [. . .] sinful sloth or unavoidable unemployment, but the absence [. . .] of engagement with a fulfilling occupation" (78). Seventeen chapters in total, Hewison's book includes consideration of Ruskin in connection with his father, J.M.W Turner, William Holman Hunt, Victor Hugo, Henry Cole, Oscar Wilde, Octavia Hill, and Charles Darwin as well as views of Ruskin in connection to politics, Venice, the London Working Men's College, teaching, the Guild of St George, spiritualism, the paradise myth, and cultural value. None of these images of Ruskin is extraneous, so each chapter is more fascinating and revealing than the last. Indeed, one might say of this book that Hewison reveals Ruskin as he claims Ruskin reveals life: "He worked less by a process of analysis, in which ideas are separated from each other and broken down, than by synthesis, gradually drawing ideas together into a whole" (16). The outcome is a book written to be savored bit by bit.

My copy of the book is the soft cover, though it is available in hardback as well. It is an attractive volume, well-illustrated and printed neatly on substantial paper stock.

Its four hundred-odd pages invite thoughtful perusal, and the numerous illustrations provide welcome visual representations of the people and places significant in Ruskin's life. Page 161, for instance, gives readers a peek into the Art Room of the Working Men's College, Great Ormond Street, where Ruskin met men such as George Allen who would become his assistant, publisher, and lifelong friend. The color plates bound in the middle on glossy paper are sharp images of artwork by Ruskin himself, Hunt, Turner, and the Italian artists Ruskin was considering when writing his masterworks. There is no initial listing of the illustrations in the forematter. This information is reserved for the aftermatter of the text, tucked in between the notes and the index.

The way Geoffrey Winston designed the oversized covers of the book to fold into a pseudo-jacket adds flair to its delicately tinted illustrations. On the front, the portrait of the prophetic master of Victorianism by Charles Fairfax Murray, with Ruskin's piercing gaze, invites and challenges the reader to see the writer as Hewison does. On the back cover, Ruskin's own lifelike watercolor of a seashell suggests the precision of the master's vision and the circular spiraling of sight into subject. In much the same way, the reader who takes up Hewison's book meets Ruskin face-on and then spirals through his life and influences. The book is not quite as chronological as Hewison suggests in his Introduction (xiv). Many ideas (such as Venice, Rose, and Turner) are taken up and considered briefly long before they are explored and explained in detail. By the book's end, we have circled back many times to approach the depth of an understanding. Clearly, Hewison's view of Ruskin's writing as performance art creates for him a three-dimensional perspective of a writer worth knowing intimately. Hewison sees the polymath in ways that enlighten less-informed readers of Ruskin, and the accomplishments of this book create opportunities for readers to understand Ruskin in twenty-first century perspectives.

I spotted fewer than a handful of errors in the text, which were superficial and unobtrusive mistakes such as the inversion of two words in a thought. The meanings are all so obvious that such momentary stumbles require no further comment. From the ideas to their presentation, there is much to admire in Hewison's book and nothing to disapprove. Ruskin scholars and Victorian fans alike will want to read it. When you do, don't be surprised to find yourself wanting to dawdle through the chapters. Take your time, not because the prose is difficult but rather because it is sensible, clear, and lovely. The epigraph of Hewison's Preface, a quote from Ruskin (of course), sets the tone for the entire volume: "I neither wish to please, nor displease you; but to provoke you to think" (ix). Throughout his life, Ruskin accomplished this goal, and throughout his biography, Hewison provides his readers with the engaging story of the master's success. You'll relish the moments you spend with the book and come away with a surer acquaintance with John Ruskin.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.