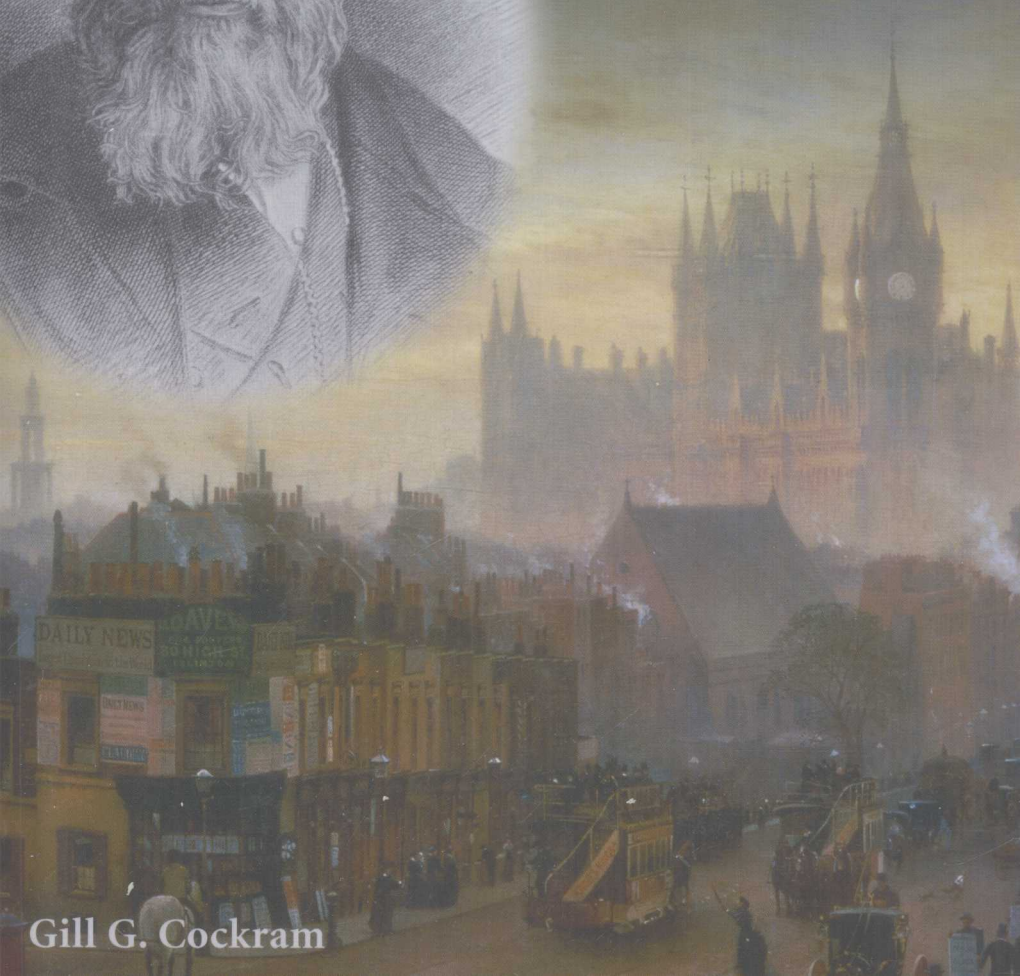
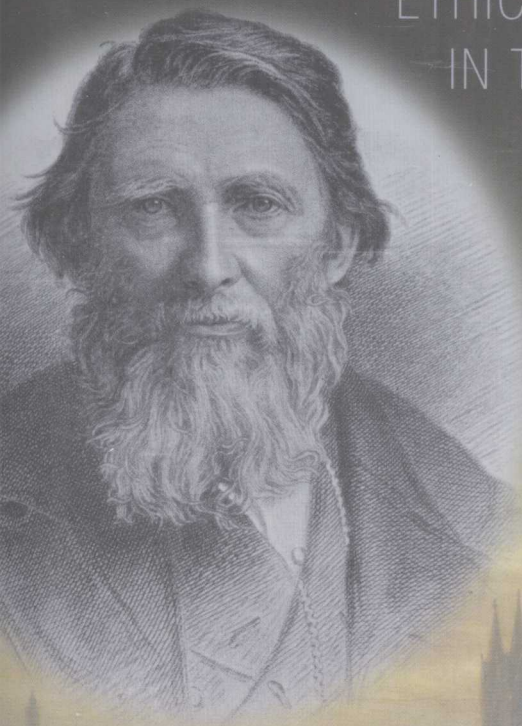


RUSKIN AND SOCIAL REFORM

ETHICS AND ECONOMICS
IN THE VICTORIAN AGE



Gill G. Cockram

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AND
SOCIAL REFORM

Ethics and Economics in the Victorian Age

GILL G. COCKRAM

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CONVENTIONS

B.L.	British Library
L.L.	London Library, St. James's Square, London
L.S.E.	London School of Economics, University of London
M.M.L.	Marx Memorial Library, Clerkenwell, London
R.L.	Ruskin Library, Lancaster University

Fors J. Ruskin, *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84)

Notes:

Place of publication of all works cited is London, unless otherwise specified.

The standard Cook and Wedderburn publication of Ruskin's works has been consulted throughout this thesis, and the select works are listed in the bibliography. Original and variant editions have been used, however, as appropriate in a study of reception. These alternative citations are recorded in the relevant footnotes.

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INTRODUCTION

Ruskin was repudiated and attacked by every circle and school. The Bishop repudiated his theology; the political economist his social teaching. But one vital fact soon emerged above the sea of criticism. That was the reception of his teaching by the working classes of this country. The appeal to their hearts and imagination was undoubted. They soon realised that one with sympathy for the lives they led was speaking to them, and that he wished to create for them here and now a new and happier world.¹

J.H. Whitehouse (1920)

Ruskin directed public attention to this evil sixty years ago. The world would have been much happier would it only have listened to him.²

A.J. Penty (1917)

Everyone with any knowledge of nineteenth century history knows something about John Ruskin. Some think of him as the art critic who famously insulted Whistler, others remember that he had a penchant for Gothic architecture, and a small number indulge in anecdotal ribaldry concerning the circumstances of his divorce. Few, however, are aware of the extent and depth of his influence as a social and economic critic. Yet Ruskin's impact in this area was profound, a factor which has been largely overlooked by historians of the nineteenth century. Those writers who have studied his social thought are conscious of this gross anomaly and have acknowledged the requirement for a reassessment of his importance. It was with this aim in mind, that I undertook to examine Ruskin's reception and influence as a social critic in the second half of the nineteenth century.

My investigation begins around 1850, a time that marks the emergence of Ruskin's serious incursion into the field of economic criticism,

and ends in 1906, the year of the first Labour representation in the House of Commons. It was during this period that Ruskin became increasingly antagonistic to the instrumental values of industrial capitalism, a theme that resonates through most of his later writings. In *The Stones of Venice* (1853), he strongly criticised the division of labour, and in *Unto This Last* (1860–2), using a basic Christian ethic of cooperation, he scathingly attacked the whole *laissez-faire* philosophy which underscored the Liberal interpretation of classical economics. The central ideas of *Unto This Last* were then further developed in *Munera Pulveris* (1862–3), *The Crown of Wild Olive* (1866), *Time and Tide* (1867), and *Fors Clavigera* (1871–84).

The initial response to Ruskin's early social critique has been well documented. As can be seen in contemporary reviews and notices, it was a combination of fear and incredulity. What is less well known however, is that some twenty years later Ruskin was hailed as a major influence, especially among socialist sympathisers. This dramatic change in his reception in Britain demands a closer look at the social and intellectual background. During this transitional period much of Ruskin's original economic analysis, as it was assimilated and diffused by other major reformers, became increasingly plausible. In this context the reception of Ruskin's social critique takes on a new significance.

The publication of the critical essays, which formed *Unto This Last* in 1862, had a dramatic effect on Ruskin's reputation. Opposition to this work was violent, multifaceted, and came from a variety of political persuasions, as indeed did his later support. Written at the high tide of individualist idealism, it was, commented Ernest Barker, published when '*laissez-faire* was as much a political dogma as it was an economic doctrine', and Ruskin's writing had 'undermined the doctrine in both of its applications'.³ It was therefore seen as much as an attack on liberalism as a concession to socialism. In the reforms that Ruskin advocated, he transgressed all the rules of the non-interventionist economic system, and, in so doing, reinforced an important principle of socio-economic interaction which initially gained him many enemies. He never lost faith in the right-thinking of *Unto This Last*, however, and republished it independently in 1877 when sales were already beginning to escalate. By that time, many intellectuals were reconsidering the nature of orthodox political economy and Ruskin must be given strong credit for assisting this process.

The reaction to Ruskin's thinking, which often matched the passion of his own critique, is important on two counts: not only as an indicator

of his competence as a social critic, but also as a benchmark in the dynamics of the movement toward collectivism. Those who were initially antagonistic to his social criticism tended to fall into two groups: the businessmen who would almost certainly suffer financial loss if they followed his humanitarian economics, and those who genuinely believed that his proposals for reform were unworkable. As will become apparent, his reception changed, but then so to a large extent, did his audience: from mid-nineteenth century middle-class liberal entrepreneurs to a preponderance of labourers and trade-unionists, who ultimately became the greatest purchasers of Ruskin's books. Yet despite this later left-wing reverence for his writings, it has proved difficult to place Ruskin accurately within the tradition of working-class radicalism. His insistence on state intervention and social stratification makes him a 'destroyer of liberalism', as Raymond Williams suggests,⁴ but this does not make him a socialist. And Ruskin is equally removed by his radicalism from the 'enlightened Tories' of the first wave of Christian Socialism, led by F.D. Maurice in the middle of the nineteenth century. Much of this confusion resides in the erratic development of socialism itself. When Ruskin wrote *Unto This Last* in 1860, socialism was, as Royden Harrison notes, dependent on the support 'of a few scattered individuals'.⁵ Ruskin's true position therefore has remained ambiguous not only because of his own complexity, but also because of the timing of his most effective social critique. This has led to confusion over his role. A recent primer by H.S. Jones, *Victorian Political Thought* (Basingstoke, 2000), for example, makes no mention of Ruskin, whose name does not even appear in the index. Whatever the answer to Ruskin's political persuasion may be, it is to be found in the pages of *Unto This Last*, which contains the essence of his social thought, and yet has been too readily dismissed as economic fantasy.

This small book was not a utopian socialist manifesto, although many perceived it as such at the time of its first publication.⁶ Instead, it was an attempt to redefine the whole language of political economy, at a time when opposition to *laissez-faire* was mounting from all quarters. Yet although *Unto This Last* ultimately received an endorsement by many Labour MPs, Ruskin's social criticism has been frequently misunderstood. Despite the availability of excellent secondary sources, there are problems in trying to assess the influence of a man who was by nature full of contradictions, and who professed so adamantly to be anti-partisan

throughout his life.⁷ While William Morris continues to be applauded for his active political radicalism, Ruskin's stance remains equivocal, and it is difficult to assign him to any specific political ideology other than through the orientation of his disciples. Those influenced by Ruskin, moreover, were not in any sense organised into a cult or anything as clear-cut as a Ruskinian 'school'.

Modern critics are not unaware of this dilemma. In his book, *John Ruskin's Labour* (1983), P.D. Anthony admits to a great admiration for Ruskin, but nevertheless gives a thorough and intellectually detached examination of his merit as a social critic, with a particular emphasis on his significance *vis à vis* Marx. Anthony draws interesting parallels between Ruskin and William Morris, whose 'canonisation coincides with the argument that he is a Marxist'.⁸ Indeed, Morris was not taken seriously until he acquired this political label. No one, however, could label Ruskin a Marxist⁹ and, since 'seriousness and significance have come to be acquainted with Marxism, Ruskin's social theory has remained a subject of considerable condescension'.¹⁰ Yet, writes Anthony, 'Morris followed a trail laid by Ruskin. Morris's famous denunciations are remarkably similar to Ruskin's, except that Ruskin's are more savage, sometimes coarser, and were made first'.¹¹ Yet this link is a factor which seems subsequently to have been either forgotten, or else relegated to the status of polite academic deference. Anthony attributes this deficit largely to Ruskin's opposition to Marxist political activism and comments, 'It is the utopian moralist in Morris, not the political activist, that provides the decisive link between Ruskin and the practical possibility of a revolutionary change in the world's values'.¹² In fact, Anthony considers, it has proved to be the moral appeal of Morris which has endured rather than his political activism and this moral stance undoubtedly came largely from Ruskin.

Anthony's respect for Ruskin is further endorsed by J.C. Sherburne, who, in *John Ruskin or the Ambiguities of Abundance* (1972), concentrates also on Ruskin's social critique, giving an extremely erudite analysis of his plausibility as an economic critic. Sherburne, however, comments in his epilogue:

The degree of Ruskin's influence . . . remains to be determined. So does the question of whether the wholeness and aesthetic quality of his perception survived the secular, sociological, and scientific sea change which the language of social criticism underwent

around the turn of the century. Hobson's work would be an excellent test case, but this lies in the future.¹³

It is hoped that this book, which places great emphasis on Hobson's role, will go some way to addressing this requirement.

To give historical perspective to Ruskin's attack on classical political economy, it is useful to look briefly at criticism of *laissez-faire* prior to 1860. When Ruskin began his critique in the late 1850s, Adam Smith's teaching, as amended by Ricardo, still provided the inspiration for British economic policy. *An Enquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations* (1776) was at the heart of the system which dominated the long process of industrialisation in England from the late eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, when *laissez-faire* began to face mounting opposition from reformers.¹⁴ This antipathy to *laissez-faire* was tempered by the fact that some intellectuals still persisted in regarding the problems of indigence as the fault of the individual. Many reformers, while not endorsing Malthus' depressing conclusions on the inevitability of an economic underclass, felt that the causes of social distress lay more with immorality than with classical economic policy. Benthamite utilitarianism, allied with a revival of evangelicalism, had dictated that the individual was responsible for his or her own fate. This view endured despite a strong undercurrent of discontent among the labouring classes and their sympathisers over the relationship between labour and capital, and the role of the state in addressing social issues.

The apparent synthesis between *laissez-faire* economics and the doctrine of personal salvation, preached by an evangelical clergy, was not lost on those capitalists who had everything to gain under the existing system,¹⁵ but it increased the anger of reformers as disparate in their views as Southey and Marx, and of course, later, Ruskin as well. Indeed, the continuing dominance of *laissez-faire* economics caused an undercurrent of opposition from people of often widely divergent political persuasions. As Raymond Williams has commented on 'the complexity of this difficult period':

Where Cobbett sneered at Owen's 'parallelograms of paupers', Southey, with very many of the new generation of English industrial workers, approved. In a movement like Christian Socialism, the influence of both Southey and Owen can be clearly discerned.

Yet Owen, in his main bearings led to socialism and the cooperatives; Southey, with Burke and Coleridge, to the new conservatism.¹⁶

Opposition to the principle of *laissez-faire* also entered the national consciousness through much of the literature gradually becoming available to a wider reading public. Dickens, in *Hard Times* (1854), posed the individual against 'the system', a covert attack on utilitarian 'gradgrindery' and Millite individualism; and there were many tracts of a radical nature which predated Ruskin's critique. In *Ambiguities of Abundance*, J.C. Sherburne acknowledges that Ruskin's eclecticism rendered the extent of his debt to previous critics of classical economy unclear. Nonetheless, Sherburne indicates some of the most likely influences upon Ruskin.

One strand came from the work of Simonde de Sismondi (1773–1842), who, in his *Nouveaux principes d'économie politique* (1819), 'warns against the economists' tendency to simplify and generalise'.¹⁷ As with Ruskin, notes Sherburne, Sismondi's 'attack on method is a way of injecting ethics into economic analysis'; but, unlike Ruskin, Sismondi 'retains a strong interest in making economics more accurate as a science'.¹⁸ Ruskin's true antecedents, however, were to be found less in the field of economic history than in more Romantic sources. Also important was Robert Southey,¹⁹ who along with Wordsworth and Coleridge condemned political economy for defining man as a purely rational and mechanistic being, devoid of all sentiment. To this list of influences upon Ruskin must be added Carlyle, Hazlitt, and, of course, Dickens. Above all, no one who reads Ruskin extensively can doubt his affinity with Carlyle.²⁰

Carlyle's vociferous social criticism had a considerable impact in the middle years of the nineteenth century. That stemmed especially from his series of historical writings and works of social criticism, in which he attacked the 'mechanical' nature of industrialised society, which precluded any reference to spiritual causes. In *Signs of the Times* (1829), Carlyle complained explicitly:

It is no longer the moral, religious, spiritual condition of the people that is our concern, but their physical, practical, economical condition as regulated by public laws.²¹

As Michael Levin points out, Carlyle was not against 'industrial transformation' but was opposed to 'the way society had downgraded

spontaneity and community'.²² In this, too, he influenced Ruskin, who shared with him an abomination of vulgar materialism such as they both considered to be celebrated by the Great Exhibition. But when Ruskin was beginning in the 1850s to establish himself as a social critic, Carlyle's influence was diminishing.

One of the reasons for this was the fact that the economic optimism of the mid- nineteenth century did nothing to endorse Carlyle's earlier expressions of gloomy foreboding. But as A.L. Le Quesne comments, 'The divergence between Carlyle and his leading disciples can be traced back before 1848.'²³ Carlyle's growing emphasis on the role of the 'hero' proved unacceptable to his followers; despotism was not considered a plausible solution to social ills.

Ruskin may have been influenced by Carlyle's anti-democratic stance, but ultimately Ruskin was far more radical and far more analytical and accessible to the working-man in his critique of *laissez-faire* economics. Carlyle had exposed social evils, but he had not offered any workable alternatives. This was reflected in what A.L. Le Quesne terms 'a progressive coarsening in the fibre of Carlyle's thinking and writing from the early 1840s onward'²⁴ which indicated a 'change in attitude to the mass of mankind'.²⁵

Ruskin gained much from Carlyle in terms of opposition to individualistic rationalism; both feared that a breakdown of natural relationships would be the outcome of an increasingly industrialised society. Ruskin, however, showed a much greater humanitarian concern for the plight of the working man, and, especially in *Unto This Last*, tried to offer an alternative to economic exploitation.

There is another possible source of influence, however, which it is helpful to analyse both in order to evaluate Ruskin's originality and to understand the parallel strands that certainly augmented Ruskin's popularity in the socialist revival at the end of the nineteenth century. Ruskin's eclecticism, claims Sherburne, meant that he could 'incorporate into his criticism of economic man elements from a very different tradition, that of Robert Owen and the "Ricardian socialists"'.²⁶ Ruskin gave no credit to Owen, but agreed with him on many social issues which were certainly picked up by the emergent labour movement at the end of the nineteenth century. As with Ruskin, Owen's paternalistic, anti-democratic stance makes him a dubious sort of socialist, but his emphasis on community and his refutation of *laissez-faire* economics

secured 'his influence on a working-class audience. Indeed, themes from early socialism, inspired by Owen's ideas, were translated into later forms, notably in the field of cooperative economics.²⁷

One of the men who expanded Owen's ideas was William Thompson, who foreshadowed Ruskin's view of man as a complex organism – a factor which both Thompson and Ruskin considered should be recognised and acted on by economists in the interests of promoting general well-being. Thompson advocated 'the utmost possible, nearly approaching to a perfect, equality of distribution of wealth, and thus to the greatest happiness desirable from it'.²⁸ He set out three rules of action²⁹:

First. All labour ought to be free and *voluntary*, as to its direction and continuance.

Second. All products of labour ought to be secured to the producers of them.

Third. All exchanges of these products ought to be free and *voluntary*.

Thompson thus opposed the principle of individual competition with one of mutual cooperation. He recognised that there were some benefits in competition with regard to endeavour but these were outweighed by the evils. Competition, in his view 'retains the principle of selfishness as the leading motive to action in all the ordinary affairs of life'.³⁰

Thompson's Owenite views were endorsed a year later by John Gray, who in his *Lecture on Human Happiness* (1825) attacked the current system for inadequately treating the effects, rather than the causes, of human misery. Gray's concern, like Ruskin, was that 'the greater proportion are led to seek for happiness in the pursuit of wealth' but, if they are not educated to make good use of it, 'it commonly happens that they convert it to the destruction of their own peace'.³¹ Years later, Ruskin was to emulate these sentiments in many of his works.

There are thus many sound economic and social reasons why it is important not to neglect Owen's influence in any consideration of Ruskin's thinking. And this is reinforced by Ruskin's association with the early Christian Socialists at the Working Men's College.³² However much Ruskin may have wished to distance himself, in his flirtation with the first wave of Christian Socialism in the middle of the century, he was

exposed to those who in principle upheld the Owenite philosophy of economic cooperation, even though their acceptance of this concept was gradual.

The Christian Socialist movement also serves to 'situate' Ruskin, both in his context and in his originality. In the early nineteenth century, Christian political economy was, as A.M.C. Waterman points out, strongly favourable to: private property rights, free and competitive markets, the institutions of marriage and wage-labour, and a high degree of social and economic inequality.³³ Under the leadership of F.D. Maurice, the first Christian Socialists opposed this orthodoxy in principle, but remained largely anti-democratic. Their promotion of cooperative enterprise was, as E.R. Norman comments, 'ethical' and 'educative' rather than political, and 'distinctly lacked a socialist economic base'.³⁴ But the Christian Socialists were not completely homogeneous, and where Kingsley echoed Ruskin's plea for practical reform, Ludlow foreshadowed his economic concerns.

In his work, *The Victorian Christian Socialists* (1987), Norman refers to the economist J.M. Ludlow as 'arguably the most important of the Christian Socialist leaders of the whole century'.³⁵ Ludlow, writes Norman, produced a collection of papers and reports on social issues which became 'a major resource for Church and cooperative reformers'.³⁶ Certainly, Ludlow was very outspoken in his denigration of the inactivity of both church and state in addressing the problems of poverty. He also attacked the political economists directly, finding their 'let-alone' system devoid of humanitarian concerns. He deplored the existing state whereby 'every partner [seeks] his own gain at the cost of every other's loss by what is termed competition'.³⁷ The remedy, claimed Ludlow, lay in opposing competition with 'combination' or cooperative enterprise.³⁸

In reaching this conclusion the influence of the French visionary, Fourier, was paramount.³⁹ Ludlow had spent his formative years in France and was impressed with the methods and ideology of the Fourierists. Although he was not initially sympathetic to socialist thinking, seeing it as a challenge to the church, he later realised the possibility of a Christian form of socialism which incorporated the cooperative ideals of Fourier. Indeed, it was Ludlow, writes Norman, who introduced the 'French cooperative method' to Maurice and others of his circle, thus adding a new dimension to the radical socialist tradition, which in England had largely begun with Owen.⁴⁰ Ludlow was rather suspicious

of Owen's communitarian experiments and disliked his unorthodox religious stance, but nevertheless Owen's emphasis on cooperation and his example of the exchange of equivalents of labour seemed to have its effect on the newly-formed Christian Socialists in the 1850s, even though their individual interpretation was different. As Norman points out: 'The Christian Socialists did much to encourage cooperative economic enterprise, and in the process forged an enduring link with at least one aspect of the emergent labour movement.'⁴¹

There were, then, many precursors to Ruskin's social critique, but no critic in the mid-nineteenth century managed to generate the same antipathy and controversy as did Ruskin in the 1860s. It is indeed, a measure of his effect that he was very rapidly suppressed in the most effective way possible – by the curtailment of publication. It is also significant that by the 1870s, it was much easier for others to follow his lead.

The nineteenth-century interpretation of classical economics was becoming a very contentious issue. Certainly, by the 1870s the whole concept of non-intervention and its plausibility in the context of nineteenth-century industrialism was being closely questioned. J.S. Mill fiercely defended the liberty of the individual; but this was at odds with many of the assumptions of utilitarianism and his detractors were quick to point this out. Robert Williams commented in 1870:

It is a misfortune, that that portion of the community which makes its living by the poverty, the misery, and often by the sin of its fellow-creatures, should be able to quote the utterances of our great political philosophers in its favour. It is easily to be understood that there are certain persons and certain classes who will always deprecate the least interference on the part of the Government, and will raise the cry that commerce is paralysed, and that the liberties of the subject are in peril. These gentlemen owe their best thanks to the *laissez-faire* philosophy.⁴²

By the 1870s, *laissez-faire* was being denied scientific respectability by some; and furthermore, its all-pervasive principal claims were increasingly viewed by reformers as being responsible for most of the social ills of the day. It will be seen that the avenues of attack used by these later critics mimicked those for which Ruskin was ridiculed in

1860. This was interpreted by many emergent Labour members as a vindication of Ruskin's argument, which endorsed his moral and economic credibility. Almost a century after Owen had established his factory system in New Lanark, socialists were again linking his name with Ruskin. Moreover, with the obvious proviso that Owen was a secularist, there were further plausible reasons for this conjunction.

The most obvious correlation is that Ruskin mimicked Owen's communitarian experiments in his Guild of St George, established in 1871. But this is less important than the fact that Owen and Ruskin were united in their opposition to *laissez-faire* competition on both moral and economic grounds. Theirs was a morality free from the dogma of evangelicalism, and its central message of cooperation was further endorsed by the humanitarian ethos of the English positivists, many of whom were very pro-Ruskin.⁴³ Royden Harrison writes:

By the Religion of Humanity [the English positivists] expected to resolve the conflicts of capital and labour; order and progress; religion and science. Through Saint Simon and Robert Owen, John Francis Bray, Colin and Comte; the tradition of secular religiosity is joined to the formative stages of Labour and Socialist evolution.⁴⁴

While English positivism largely lost its influence after 1880⁴⁵ however, Ruskin's quasi-religious economic critique endured. It endorsed Owen's plea for cooperation and added that extra spiritual dimension, which was so appealing to many reformers in what they felt to be the moral vacuum of capitalist society.

By the end of the nineteenth century, *Unto This Last* was certainly selling at the rate of two thousand copies per annum, and it has subsequently been translated into many languages. Ruskin had made a seminal contribution toward the moralisation of political economy, his onslaught on capitalist exploitation rivalling that of Marx. He has been an inspiration to men as culturally diverse as Proust and Gandhi. Closer to home, Ruskin also influenced William Morris, who publicly acknowledged his tremendous debt, the positivist writer Frederic Harrison, the economist J.A. Hobson, both of whom wrote books about Ruskin, and many more. In 1906, despite Ruskin's denial of any political affiliation, it will be seen that his particular form of Christian Socialism was quoted as being the main source of inspiration for many newly