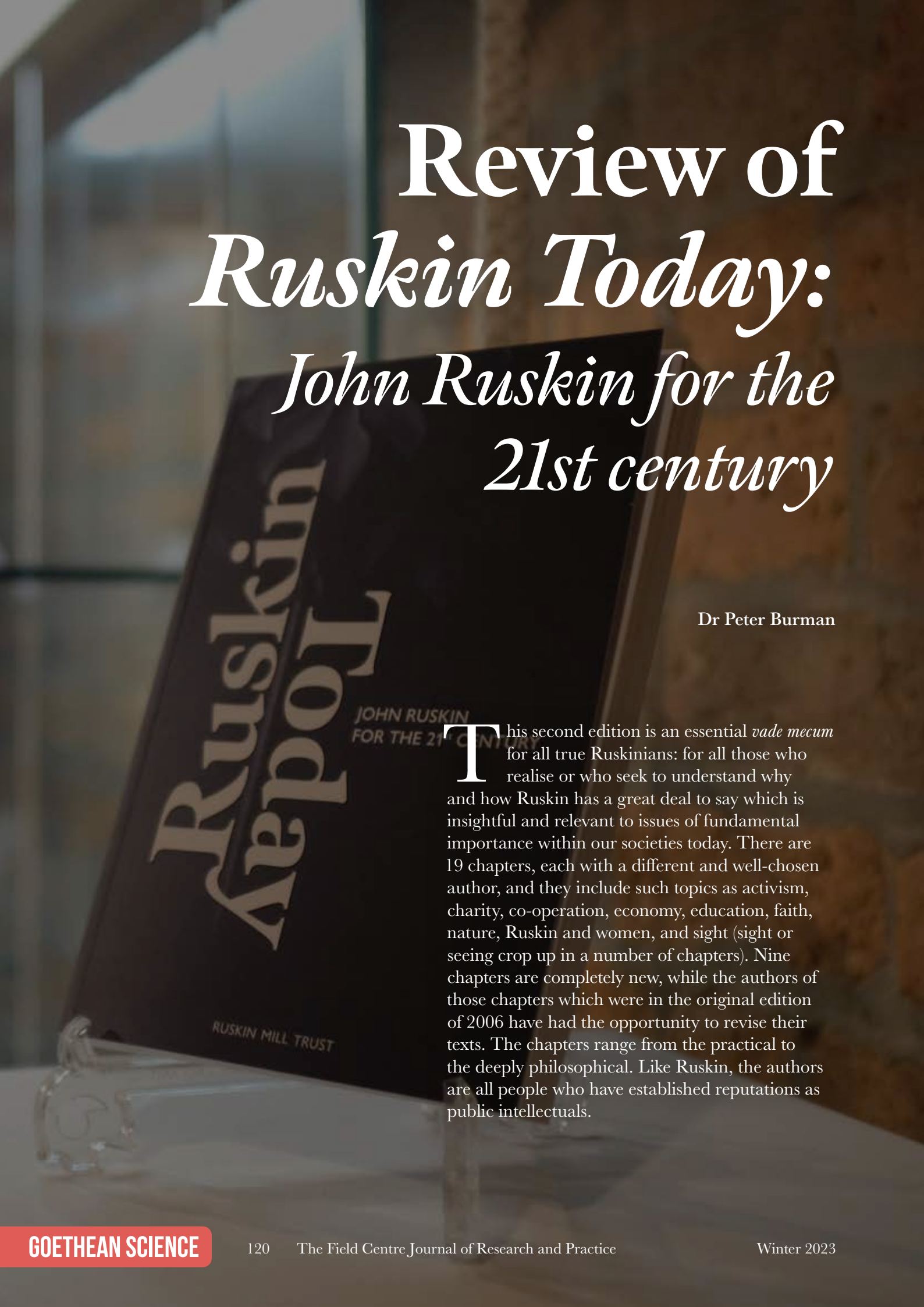
Review of *Ruskin Today: John Ruskin for the 21st century*



Dr Peter Burman

This second edition is an essential *vade mecum* for all true Ruskinians: for all those who realise or who seek to understand why and how Ruskin has a great deal to say which is insightful and relevant to issues of fundamental importance within our societies today. There are 19 chapters, each with a different and well-chosen author, and they include such topics as activism, charity, co-operation, economy, education, faith, nature, Ruskin and women, and sight (sight or seeing crop up in a number of chapters). Nine chapters are completely new, while the authors of those chapters which were in the original edition of 2006 have had the opportunity to revise their texts. The chapters range from the practical to the deeply philosophical. Like Ruskin, the authors are all people who have established reputations as public intellectuals.

The Ruskin Mill Trust is to be congratulated for bringing this collection of stimulating essays to the public in the form of an attractive and timely book. Moreover, the Ruskin Mill Trust is one of those organisations which practices what it preaches: through its commitment to education for life through learning advanced craft skills to the stewardship of former industrial buildings which, through imaginative re-purposing incorporating the contributions of artists and craftspeople, become 'living heritage'.

The volume has been edited by Laurence Cox, Aonghus Gordon and Robert Hewison, themselves all leading Ruskinians who have played a part in the "worldwide regrowth of interest in the works and ideas of John Ruskin". This deep interest in Ruskin and his writings and the history of his actions as a founder and initiator of worthwhile projects, from social housing to the protection of ancient monuments, has been especially strong in Europe, North America and Japan. Ruskin's own organisation, The Guild of St George, has members in a dozen countries, and there is still greater potential for international membership and the sharing of insights into Ruskin's relevance to today. It should not be forgotten that a number of other organisations were founded under his direct influence and encouragement such as The National Trust (there are now National Trusts in some 70 countries world-wide), the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the Art Workers' Guild, the Arts & Crafts Exhibition Society and the Society of Designer Craftsmen. It would be impossible to enumerate the numbers of individuals who have fallen under the spell of his writings but one of those was the Mahatma Gandhi who read *Unto This Last* on the long journey from Johannesburg to Durban and, as he put it, "determined to change my life in accordance with the ideals of the book".

The Guild of St George is the educational charity with the unique mixture of interests categorised as being the arts, crafts and the rural environment. So I propose to examine those chapters which are specially relevant to the work of the Guild of St George, beginning with the chapter on Agriculture which is by Berni Courts, a key participant in the community of practice at the Ruskin Mill Trust. Here he has researched and practised the therapeutic and educational benefits of the living organism known as biodynamic farming. In his chapter he has this to say about Ruskin's contribution to the idea of responsible agriculture: "In founding the Guild of St George, the concept of land usage as a direct reaction to the social 'illth' presented Ruskin's vision for a socially holistic use of land. He recognised and wanted to protect physical labour at the heart of farm productivity that resulted directly in the wellbeing of agricultural workers. He was reassured that the system of smallholding could yield adequately to provide for localised needs. He was sensitive to nature's ecology in a direct symbiosis with human activity." Ruskin's emphasis was always on creating and nurturing agricultural landscapes which would be 'fruitful', as well as beautiful and peaceful. He had no truck with the sort of agriculture that depended on vast quantities of energy being poured in to create the fruitfulness out of season, as had been the practice in aristocratic

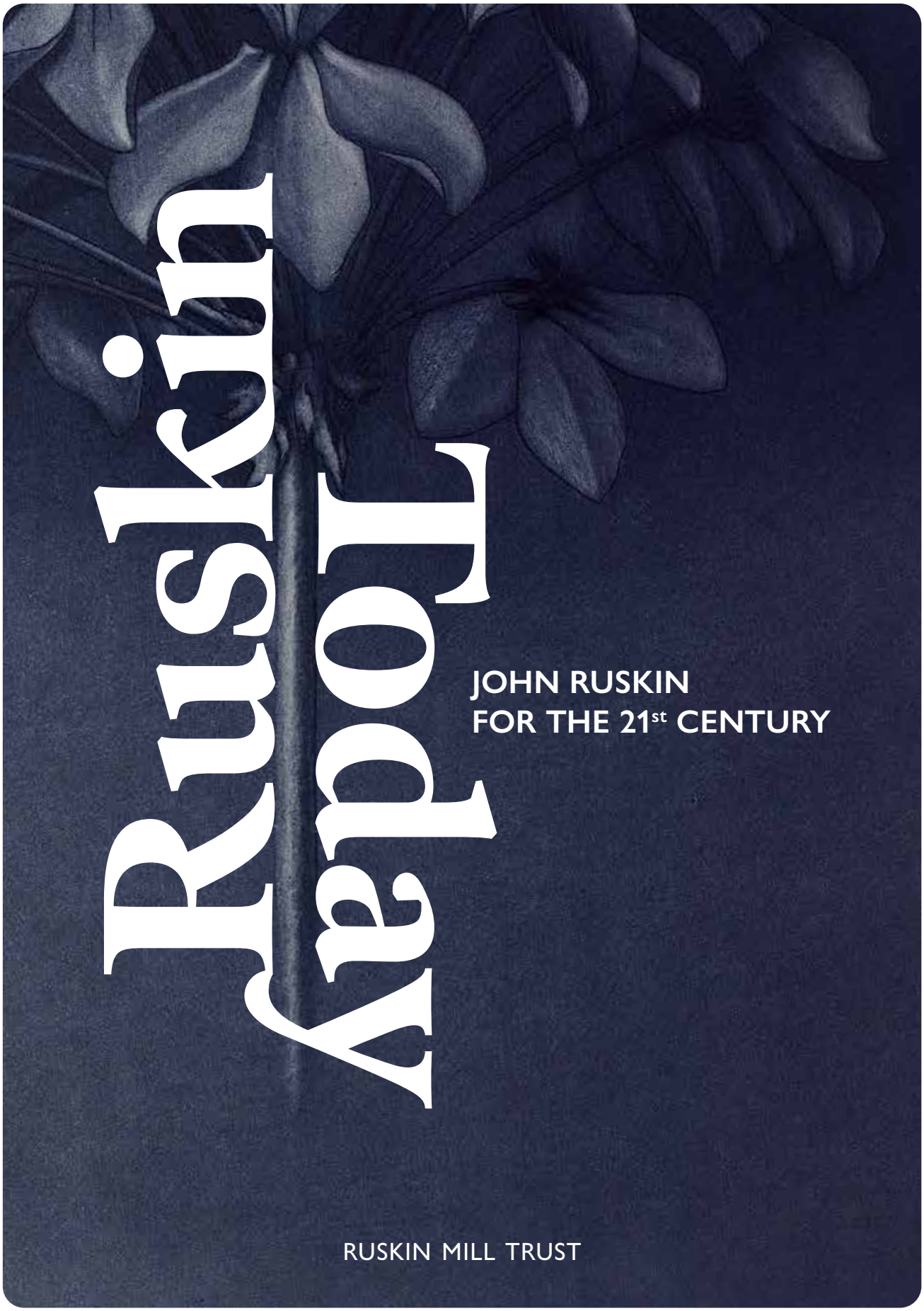
heated walled gardens: "Nor any fuel wasted in making plants blossom in winter". Berni Courts also has a beautiful quotation from Gandhi, who stated: "To forget how to dig the earth and tend the soil is to forget ourselves." It was at the Ruskin-inspired Phoenix Farm, established in 1904 near Durban, that Gandhi brought into the world the concept of *satyagraha*: non-violent protest and resistance created by a critical mass of people.

From Berni Court's chapter we learn more about the Ruskin Mill Trust and its espousal of biodynamic ecology. "Each of Ruskin Mill Trust's provisions orientates towards the revitalisation of once prosperous signature crafts, which since industrialisation have fallen deeply into recession alongside the skills of the community that worked in the industry". Those of us who attended the inspirational AGM of the Guild of St George at Stourbridge, in November 2022, have seen this in action; likewise, the manufacture of cutlery in Sheffield; and the practice of agriculture being learned at Nailsworth, in Gloucestershire. Berni Courts states thus in his summing up: "These beacons of change represent diverse human areas in the fields of political sovereignty, educational and personal development while crafting new agro-ecological systems of economy and social improvement."

The chapter on Art is by Anna Somers Cocks, a charismatic figure in the art world and in her striking championship of Venice and the contemporary challenges to the survival of Venice. She starts with a quotation which has become a favourite starting point of mine in Ruskinian contexts: "Unless you are minded to bring yourselves, and all whom you can help, out of this curse of darkness that has fallen on our hearts and thoughts, you need not try to do any art-work – it is the vainest of shadows, whilst all the real things that cast them are left in deformity and pain." (21.104, from Ruskin's *Notes on Educational Services*).

Amongst places we could take Ruskin to "where he would find reasons for hope" would be Dulwich Picture Gallery: "Dulwich devised a programme that went beyond educating people about art; it went out into the highways and byways, or, in modern terms, to reform schools for dangerous young criminals, to the unemployed and to old people's clubs, and it coaxed them into making art to add to their often limited powers of expression, to show them something to enjoy in their loneliness and confusion. *It offered the experience of doing, not just surviving passively.*" (Reviewer's italics).

She also draws attention to the Big Draw, formerly called the Campaign for Drawing, of which the Guild has been a committed supporter, and indeed it was the idea of Julian Spalding, a former Master of the Guild of St George. She tells the story of the 'Damascus moment' which Ruskin had one day in 1842, while walking to Norwood, when he noticed a bit of ivy growing round a stem and "proceeded to make a light and shade pencil study of it in my grey paper pocket-book, carefully as if it had been a bit of sculpture … When it was done, I saw that I had virtually lost all my time since I was twelve years old,



The cover of *Ruskin Today*

because no-one had ever told me to draw what was really there!" (35.311) The experience – and this is the key thing – opened his eyes to the world around him. He sought to share his experience through writing his *The Elements of Drawing*, in 1857, which "is still a very good guide to seeing, and therefore drawing, better".

Anna Somers Cocks compares what has happened to the art world with what has happened to the world of sport: "In the 20th century, money took over and spoilt it all". There is much justice in what says. Towards the end of her chapter, she quotes some apt words of Sir Roger Penrose, a patron of the Big Draw, who came at art from the quite different discipline of mathematical physics: "Drawings are an invaluable aid to my thinking and an essential ingredient of most of my mathematical expositions." Finally: "Just as the doctors' warnings about the effects of increasing obesity rates have woken up government to the importance of sport in schools, so we need to prove that the practice of art really does increase our skills, our concentration, and, above all, our engagement with life." Precisely so!

Matt Briggs's chapter on Craft begins by asking the question: "What did Ruskin see in craft". He answers by saying that Ruskin was a 'seer' in the highest sense and that he "had the capacity to see beyond crafted and artistic works to the inner core of the people that made them and even further back to the formative moral, ethical, cultural and aesthetic archetypes and ideas that the makers accessed and embodied through such works". Matt Briggs then follows a train of thought through *The Seven Lamps of Architecture*, *The Stones of Venice* and *Unto This Last* pursuing Ruskin's ideas about meaningful and fulfilling work, i.e. through creative labour, drawing upon the intellect, moral strength and physical powers. Later, in *Praeterita*, he explains how he worked with carpenters, stone masons, road builders, pavers and bricklayers, recalling: "I have to say that half my power of ascertaining facts of any kind… is in my stern habit of doing the thing with my own hands till I know its difficulty." (35.427-8). Moreover, in *Time and Tide*, Ruskin advocated that every youth should learn through doing, using their hands, and via craftsmanship, in order to learn "a multitude of matters which no lips of man could ever teach him… with much furtherance of their general health and peace of mind." (17.426).

There are many references to Ruskin's writings in this chapter, which I have been duly following up. Reference is also made to archaeology. I live in a village, Falkland in Fife, where our recent archaeological programmes on the East Lomond Hill has shown that craftspeople have been working on our patch for at least 4,000 years and in crafts which are still relevant today: ceramics, textiles, masonry, carpentry, metalwork. In these fields the human interaction with the materials, and often with the tools, can be traced from pre-history to the present day.

I will end comment on this chapter with a quotation from the Crafts Council Education Manifesto from 2014:

> Craft generates £3.4bn for the UK… For this reason alone, investment in craft education is essential. But hands-on craft education has wider value, socially and economically. It develops new ways of thinking, can engage disengaged learners, and embeds experience of working with materials. It fosters persistence, creative thinking, problem-solving and agency. And craft is culturally important: it is part of our history and a driver of our future.

No member of the Guild should omit to read the chapters written by the Master, Rachel Dickinson, on 'Ruskin and Women', and by Nichola Johnson, on 'Sight'. Nichola Johnson's chapter is full of shrewd insights, for example how digital cameras and mobile phones have led to a superficiality of looking which is more focused on the act of recording than on the act of reflection leading to understanding. She draws attention to the role that drawing lessons have played, historically as well as today: "The observation required by the act of drawing, surely, cannot help but lead to a degree of understanding of the observed world, in Ruskinian terms, even if it does not necessarily lead to a particularly accomplished work of art." Another valuable observation is that "sight, for us, has become omnivorous and largely undiscriminating and concentrated on depth of looking, not speed of assimilation".

In Rachel Dickinson's chapter, the fruit of many years pondering Ruskin's stance towards women, she re-tells a very moving story about a moment when Ruskin was on his way to deliver a lecture, in Oxford in 1874, on Fine Arts in Florence. His eye was caught by a poor girl whose movements were constricted by her wearing "a large and dilapidated pair of women's shoes, which projected the full length of her own little foot behind it and before; and being securely fastened to her ankles in the manner of moccasins." (28.14). All the time he was giving his lecture he knew that "nothing spoken about art, either by myself or other people, could be of the least use to anybody there." Instead, he realised that what would be of use would be to solve the problem of "Why have our little girls large shoes?" (28.14). It is a truly humbling perception, now as then.

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This review is republished from the Guild of St George's website and newsletter, with many thanks.