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John Ruskin and Wakefield

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Earlier this year Melvyn Bragg announced on the radio that February 5th 2019 was the bicentenary of Ruskin's birth. This was a reminder that during the Society's Waterfront Project we had discovered that this great art critic, artist and social thinker seems to have spent time in Wakefield, and soon after published a correspondence about the town.

On 27th Jan 1875 in an edition of *Fors Clavigera*¹, Ruskin's pamphlets designed for 'the Workmen and Labourers of Great Britain', he wrote that the scene from Wakefield Bridge, by the Chapel, was one of the 'two most frightful things I have ever yet seen in my life.'² He may have been looking upstream across the polluted waters of the Calder to the maltings and mills, coal wharves and railway arches, or downstream to engineering works between the river and Kirkgate station in Calder Vale.

On the same visit it seems that Ruskin discovered that the medieval chapel he was studying was not the original: 'Here is the chapel on Wakefield bridge pulled down, a model of it built in its place, and the entire front of the historical building carried away to decorate a private boathouse; and I, quite as knowing in architecture as most people, am cheated into some very careful and quite useless work, and even into many false conclusions, by the sculpture of the sham front, decayed and broken enough in thirty years to look older than sculpture of 500 years as it would, or does, in pure air.' Clearly he had invested some time in studying, and perhaps sketching, features of the chapel until he realised its recent reconstruction.³ These reflections illustrate his great interest in the beauty of architecture, indeed beauty in all its manifestations, and his horror at the polluting effects of the new industries which destroyed that beauty.

¹ The phrase "Fors Clavigera" was intended to designate three great powers which form human destiny: *Force*, *Fortitude*, and *Fortune*. These three powers (the "fors") together represent the human talent and ability to choose the right moment and then to strike with energy. Ruskin believed that the letters were inspired by the Third Fors: that he was striking out at the right moment to influence social change: Wikipedia. Ruskin stated in his introduction to these pamphlets: 'I neither wish to please, nor displease you; but to provoke you to think'

² The other was in Bradford

³ Vol 3 Published 1884

Later in the same year Ruskin printed several letters from Wakefield sent in response to his observations on the chapel and bridge. One lengthy letter appeared in two editions of *Fors Clavigera*. The aging correspondent was known as E. L., later revealed as a woman in one of Ruskin's footnotes. After many years abroad, E.L. had returned to her native town, and she recalled her earliest memories of the views from each side of Wakefield Bridge:

'On the chapel side there was the soft green English landscape, with woods and spires and halls, and the brown sails of boats silently moving among the flowery banks; on the town side there were picturesque traffic and life; the thundering weir, the wide still water beyond, the big dark-red granaries, with balconies and archways to the water, and the lofty white mills grinding out their cheering music.' These reminiscences continued with a series of pastoral scenes described near the river and beyond, and in the town a cheerful hustle and bustle, familiar tradespeople, 'simple merry making and neighbourly ways': 'We were proud then of 'the cleanness, sweet air, and gentility of Wakefield'.

During E.L.'s long years abroad she had kept in touch with Wakefield friends, learning of the changes there: the decline of the old traditions in the town, the abandonment of the big houses, the loss of custom at the inns and shops. By the time she returned in the second half of the century the town she found seemed to her a complete contrast to the one she had known. She described its 'filthy beslavered pavements', and a general breakdown of the once close social cohesion: richer people looked further afield for shopping, for employing servants, or for entertainment; local tradesmen were not known personally by their customers. The natural beauty too had been lost around the town 'the great railways began to enclose the wide meadows ... with their ugly ramparts and arches, where the trains keep up with a continual scream.'

The greatest change E. L. perceived was in the coming of the large mills and factories, with industrial workers everywhere in the town, and the rise of the new men, the 'iron kings'. She focused on the remarkable growth of a firm established by a family she had known as a child, the Greens, one amongst a number of firms established on Calder Vale Road and Stennard Island in the 1860s,⁴ The head of the business, Edward Green, known to her in earlier years as 'young Ned', now lived in the fine Old Hall at Heath: he had stood for Parliament in 1874. The writer could not 'help wish the squires back' when she saw how such men 'are doing their worst to foul the air and blacken the fields' and yet are the leaders of society. She described vividly 'a desert of dross and ashes and twenty black throats vomiting fire and fumes into the summer sky; and under the big

⁴ Kate Taylor *The Making of Wakefield 1801-1900*. P. 92

sheds you see hundreds of the liberated Britons of these improved days, toiling, half-naked, in sweltering heat and din.' The familiar church chimes much missed by the nostalgic writer, were now drowned out by the screeching steam-whistle from the foundries. Could the many new Institutions in the town, charities supported by some of these modern industrialists 'compensate one little child for robbing it of its God-given birthright of earth and sky?'

Following this letter Ruskin stated that he felt bound to publish any complaints from persons who might regard themselves injured, so that parties concerned may present their own views to establish the truth. Thus he next published a letter from the wife of Ned Green, the factory owner, but not without inveighing against the destruction of nature by engineers and stating that 'all fortunes whatever, rapidly acquired, are, necessarily, ill acquired.' With an introduction of this sort it is clear where Ruskin's sympathies lay.

Mrs Green argued that the 'Fuel Economiser' for which the firm was then world famous was the result of her step-father's mechanical genius, and the works were 'costly, airy, convenient and erected to ensure the comfort of the workpeople'. It was not smokier than elsewhere in the town and the workers were treated well. She conceded that the family had risen above the station into which they were born but saw that as an impetus for others. Ned was not a 'vulgar parvenu' but a cultured man, and the old Hall in which they lived had been deteriorating before their arrival. 'No squire had lived here for a century and a quarter'.

Her request that Ruskin should retract the aspersions in the first letter was ignored by him - indeed he printed a further letter from E. L. At first the latter appeared disturbed that Ruskin had included the whole of her first letter, apologising for some errors, such as that the 'American Devil' whistle she had described did not sound from the Greens' firm, and the forges near the bridge were not theirs. But her view remained that, as Mr Green made machines, he was a machine-maker and therefore could be described as 'an iron lord'. As such he 'was the most prominent type of the modern successful men who are to inaugurate a new era in the town's history', and in Wakefield 'he is the hero and the model'. She felt that the acquisition of fortunes through rapid industrial development had altered the balance of the society she had known 'the prospect and possibility of such gains are disorganizing middle-class life... Ignorant pride on the one hand, envy on the other, breed hate between those who should be a mutual stay. As classes are estranged, so are families.'

E. L. also sent newspaper reports, some of which Ruskin published with the letter, of the evidence of bribery presented in the Wakefield election petition hearing against the return of Mr Green as the

Conservative Member for Wakefield. This resulted in the ‘unseating of Mr Green on the ground of bribery by persons for whom he was legally responsible’. Ruskin recognised that this was ‘only the compliance on Mr Green’s part with the ordinary custom of English electioneering’.

The final letter in this revealing series was from another correspondent, a working man who reported a fellow worker’s experiences at Greens. His account says that Greens had their own frightful siren which went off early in the morning and after mealtimes. The working week was fifty-four hours and pay was twenty-two shillings a week whilst in London similar work averaged thirty-eight shillings a week and in Glasgow thirty shillings for fewer hours. A system of piece work amongst the apprentices encouraged speed and greed rather than the proper learning of their trade. He pointed out that Greens had several forges supplying the works, and pig iron moulding took place on the site. His wry conclusion was that Mr Green at Heath Hall was cultivating ‘an ideal refinement in art’ whilst over three hundred men and boys in Wakefield were employed to ‘cultivate there the fine art of music in the shriek and roar of machines all day, to cultivate a trader’s eagerness for bargaining, instead of a wish to do good work, and to cultivate an acquaintance with the sort of work ... which is the most effective in this country for qualifying themselves and others for admission to the Ophthalmic, Orthopaedic, and other Institutions mentioned by your correspondent.’

Ruskin’s conclusions were that E.L.’s impressions were justified; ‘but of course I shall be most happy if Mr. Green will furnish me with more accurate indication of the persons who have made Wakefield the horrible spectacle that it is.’ He also dealt with the accusation of his friends who charged him with naming individuals. He was sure that ‘only by justly personal direction of blame can any abuse be vigorously dealt with. And, as I will answer for the sincerity and impartiality of attack, so I trust to make it always finally accurate in aim and in limitation.’⁵

These letters were published in 1875 and 1876, but it was not until 1880 that Ruskin also found opportunity to publish a report of 1866 which he had been sent some years earlier by its author, Mr. James Fowler, a surgeon from the Wakefield Hospital and Dispensary. This provided evidence of the appalling state of the Calder and other waterways in the town for a Royal Commission enquiring into public health and river pollution. Sharing a similar perspective to E.L., Fowler recalled a river full of fish in earlier years. Pollution from the new soap works at Thornes had killed the fish immediately and none returned. Now the river was black, with noxious smells, full of

⁵ Lectures on Art, Lecture IV., § 123 (Vol. XX. p. 113).

rubbish, sewage, and factory and workshop discharges. Fowler's detailed descriptions of the river and local streams and their surroundings are truly nauseous. He then discussed the effects on the overall health of the population and the increase in the death rate due to diarrhea, cholera and typhoid. His final thought was that such 'material filthiness' contributed to mental despair causing moral as well as physical deterioration.

These letters demonstrate the sharing of ideas promoted by Ruskin. His correspondents were mainly like-minded people, those who saw the destructiveness to quality of life in much industrial change. They regretted the loss of independence and skills in the workplace and the polluting of the natural environment, 'things which in the ordinary course of nature, are pleasing and refreshing to the mind'. Wakefield had been an elegant, self-contained town well into the nineteenth century, and widespread industrialisation and its accompanying population explosion came late. Ruskin's correspondents could remember clearly this previous era and describe the transformation which had occurred.

Through them Ruskin was pin-pointing issues arising from this industrialisation: pollution damaging the environment, the loss of skills and pride in work, and poor conditions for labour as a result of changes in the nature of businesses. Some of these concerns have found a fresh urgency today, making this an appropriate time to remember Ruskin, not only for the bicentenary of his birth, but also for recognising challenges which continue to beset the modern world.

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