
BOOKS & WRITERS

A Camberwell Beauty

By Naomi Lewis

GENIUS, as all of these books¹ remind us here and there, lodges itself in some curious human houses. To think though that it attaches itself only to the "good" or likeable human qualities is to step aside from the facts. Take Kipling. Or Goethe. Or Lawrence. The screams, the rage, the frightful views, the vanities or prolixities—can they really be cut away from the whole? Ruskin, re-presented to us in two of these books, is a particular case of the kind. It is even possible to demonstrate that the traits which make him dislikeable as a man were an integral part of his writing and critical gift. Sir Kenneth Clark, in *Ruskin Today*, performs such a demonstration.

Ruskin, as reputation goes, has had no luck at all in our time. His works are almost wholly unread; but books on his unfortunate private life (his marriage to Effie Gray, his other few strange unavailing loves) abound. Well, since this is so, let us welcome *Effie in Venice*, a large collection of letters, all but a few of them new to the press, giving an almost daily first-hand account of the only time in the marriage (two long sojourns in Venice between 1849 and 1852) when husband and wife were out of parental sight. Effie and John, we may recall, were married in 1848. She was 19; he was 29. Six years later the marriage came to an end; it was, as every library reader knows, never consummated. This was, perhaps, the one thing not spoken of or advised upon in the letters that busily flew to and fro between daughter or son and parents Ruskin and Gray. But there is more than private news to engage us in Effie's vivacious lines. Unlike so many professional writers, she could lightly carry her life at the tip of her racing quill. Moreover, in her words, we can see the daily marriage relationship set down for once without selection or *parti-pris*. There were oddities (which enraged her later, in retrospect); but, as the letters show, there were matters to please her too.

IN SPITE OF ALL the attacks and "vindications," no one can say how Ruskin envisaged the longed-for marriage to Effie. He had known her first when she was a girl of twelve; a year later, when she stayed in Herne Hill again between school and home, he wrote her *The King of the Golden River*. She was several years older (about seventeen) when Ruskin fell seriously in love; significantly, though, he thought her somewhat younger than she then was. One need only look at her face, however, in all those portraits, to know that fairy tales were never really her diet. For Effie, indeed, so gay and pretty and capable, so quick to learn, so *sensible*, day-dreams had always a way of turning into practical reality. It was her suggestion to move to Venice in the autumn of 1849. And in that Austrian-occupied town, full of high-born military gentlemen with time on their hands, Effie shone. Unlike the Brownings living not so far away, she was not plagued with romantic scruples about political loyalties.

As a family, the Grays themselves deserve a note. Of the first nine offspring, only Effie, the oldest (born 1829), and her brother, George, survived. Thereafter, Mrs. Gray gave birth to six more children, mostly around the time of her daughter's marriage to Ruskin. The youngest, little Everett, was born in 1855, not long after the annulment. He was named for Millais. If they lived at all, however, the Grays lived long. George, who never married, was 95 when he died. Melville (born in the year of Effie's marriage) survived the Second World War, married for the first time at 91, and lived to be 98.

By Victorian standards, Effie herself could hardly be called conventional. She could design and make her own clothes, dress, if she had to, without a maid (the Austrians thought this charmingly whimsical), row her own gondola through the Grand Canal. About this practice Mr. Ruskin senior testily wrote that, though it may have been health-giving, "the Exertion" seemed to him neither feminine nor beautiful. "I only do shrink a little, & ventured to say others would, from seeing the Loveliest part of Creation ever unsex itself." At the same time,

¹ *Effie in Venice*. Edited by MARY LUTYENS. John Murray, 40s. *Ruskin Today*. Chosen and Annotated by KENNETH CLARK. John Murray, 35s. *A Sultry Month*. By ALETHEA HAYTER. Faber, 30s.

however much she enjoyed her power to turn the hearts of susceptible Counts and lieutenants, her Scottish caution lay very near to the surface. Thus we find her complacently trouncing "the present Continental infidelity and the perfect want of consideration of anything like an after-state."

I am a strange person and Charlotte thinks I have a perfect heart of ice, for she sees him [Lieut. Paulizza] speaking to me until the tears come into his eyes and I looking and answering without the slightest discomposure, but I really feel none. I never could love anybody else in the world but John and the way these Italian women go on is so perfectly disgusting to me that it even removes from me any desire to coquetry which John declares I possess very highly, but he thinks it charming, so do not I...

Unlike the Catholic Austrians, she was a punctilious Sabbatarian. She would go to the German church—"her knowledge of that very disagreeable dialect," Ruskin commented sourly, "enabling her to get a Protestant service from which I am debarred." He himself conducted household prayers every morning at ten.

What Effie's letters catch, outside these personal matters, is the chit-chat of the scene: the menus (the modern eye halts for a moment at those roasted blackbirds and larks): the mournful political undertones (a desperate Italian, his life's work gone, stabs an Austrian official); the enchantment of one or another Military Ball. As for the clothes she wore or saw, a museum could be constructed from her descriptions. Here, for instance, is the Baroness Gras du Barry, in a dress of

rose silk with frills to the waist of shaded Lace from white to red, put in waves all round the skirt at intervals, and berthe to correspond with two frills of the same, hanging loose in a point behind and before, no ornaments but a pearl necklace and a white Feather on each side of her head, a mode which is very fashionable just now and extremely becoming. Two or three Ladies had them last night of colours to suit their dresses and all looked well; the ends of the feathers are placed in the plait behind and hang down gracefully on each side of the face.

AND HOW DOES Ruskin himself appear in these lively pages, that handsome, indulgent, mysterious husband, working away (if we didn't know it was *Stones of Venice*) on some vaguely aesthetic or scholarly ploy out of sight? Perhaps in as cheerful a guise as we are ever likely to find him. Effie's praise for his qualities is constant if sometimes odd. He is, she writes, "like all men of genius, very peculiar, but he is very good and considerate in little things." "I

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never saw any person so free from petty faults and narrow-mindedness although peculiar in many ways. His gallantry of behaviour is most charming, and he is so considerate and thoughtful for me." "I never saw anybody like him, so perfectly devoid of jealousy."

This want of jealousy must strike the reader too. Pleasure at her success, amusement at the thought of how shocked opinion would be in England—these would seem his main response when attention is paid to his wife. There was that curious episode when, for the task of applying leeches "just inside the waist" (a remedy for her recurring sore throat) some competition arose between Lieutenant Paulizza, "our handsome friend with his long curling moustaches and striking dress" and the Dominican Friar with "meek deportment and sparkling eyes." "John and I could hardly help smiling..." "John only laughed and seemed highly delighted with the novelty of the thing." Effie's John was, it is clear, no Mr. Casaubon. He would take her to the Opera whenever she wished to go—even if, like the Webbs, he might use the time for writing a chapter on "chamfered edges." Then, there was a reckless Carnival night when the two went out with masks "to have some fun," and had it too. (Ruskin said nothing of this, though, in his next letter home.) He even let himself be persuaded to pay a duty visit to see his cousin Mary's recent child. "He likes it a little," Effie reports, "because he says it is not like a baby at all and has eyes like rat's fur and a black face like a mouldy walnut, which is a great deal for him."

Indeed, so long as they stayed in the heightened Continental atmosphere, the marriage, such as it was, bounced along. The return to a dull suburban house in Herne Hill, bought and even furnished by the Ruskin parents, must inevitably have brought disaster.

As for poor Effie [wrote John] . . . her London society will be out of her reach—and though we have worthy people in our neighbourhood—there is a wide difference between the society of the gentry in Camberwell and the kind of companions she has had . . . who—however frivolous they might be—yet could hardly say anything even in its frivolity—which was not interesting owing to its large bearings. Last Sunday we had for instance—two generals and a commandant of a city—side by side on our sofa. . . . After being made a pet of by Marmont—and able to run in whenever she likes in the evening to the drawing-rooms of women of the highest rank in Austria, I don't wonder at her beginning to look a little melancholy. . . .

EFFIE IN VENICE does lighten the picture of a marriage best known through the frightful acrimonies of its legal dissolution. But to see

this episode in perspective, to read, without dusty labour, what Ruskin actually wrote on art and politics and himself, to recall and understand the vast extent of his influence, what better, easier guide is to hand than Sir Kenneth Clark's persuasive *Ruskin Today*? In design this is a selection of extracts on the main Ruskinian themes, cunningly pointed, one might think, to make the idle reader search out *Fors Clavigera* or *Unto this Last*; it is prefaced by a lucid analysis of Ruskin's achievement, and includes, appropriately, some of Ruskin's own drawings and paintings. If anyone doubts that a water-colour called "Oak Spray in Winter" can represent just that and yet be disturbing, he should glance at this careful yet passionate little sketch.

Why do we not read Ruskin? Because, Sir Kenneth suggests, he was a moralist and preacher. He thought of too many things at once. He was self-indulgent and arrogant in his studies. We should read him, says Sir Kenneth, "for the very quality of his mind which, when abused, makes him unreadable: his refusal to consider any human faculty in isolation." Not that Ruskin did not know and deplore his own indisciplines. Look at the striking letter (p. 60) written to his father just before the old man's death. Consider, too, as a brilliant, mordant comment on the Ruskin story, the letter he wrote just after that death to his life-long friend Acland, then Regius Professor of Medicine in Oxford (and owner of the controversial painting of Ruskin—neat and black, on the edge of a stream—by Millais).

You have never had—nor with all your medical experience have you ever, probably, seen—the loss of a father who would have sacrificed his life for his son, and yet forced his son to sacrifice his life to him and to sacrifice it in vain. It is an exquisite piece of tragedy altogether—very much like *Lear*, in a ludicrous commercial way—Cordelia remaining unchanged and her friends writing to her afterwards—wasn't she sorry for the pain she had given her father by not speaking when she should?

FIRST-HAND evidence (letters, records, diaries), are the basis of *A Sultry Month*—a narrative reconstruction, brilliantly done, of the interlinking lives of a group of literary and political figures in the burning summer of 1846: the Brownings' marriage year; the year of Benjamin Haydon's death. That June there were fires, sewerage problems, wherry-men dying of sunstroke. Browning and Miss Barrett had reached a point of crisis in their engagement; the Carlyles one of many such in their domestic life. Peel was putting an end to the Corn Laws and facing his own defeat. Old Wordsworth was deploring Peel—Miss Hayter's analysis of

Wordsworth's position provides one of the most striking passages in the book.

But Haydon, in anguished contact with each, is the undisputed central figure of the piece, a furious, hopeful, urgent, preposterous man, forever painting his huge unsaleable historical-allegorical canvases while the bailiffs took their familiar place at the door. Portraits (which he did not do at all badly) would have earned his family—the many children, the beautiful enigmatic wife—a surer living. But “What work! Miserable, namby stuff!—small—spiritless.” He could write, to be sure; his Journals today get the praise, not his pictures. (He would not have cared for that.) Even his practice of making nude studies of figures in his painting and draping them afterwards strikes oddly on the mind when we realise who some of these figures were. There is in the British Museum, for example, a drawing of a “bald, thickset, slightly paunchy” male nude (Miss Hayter's words) entitled *Study for Wordsworth in Jerusalem*. But this June was to be his last month in the human world. Miss Hayter traces the careful steps to his suicide; tells us what happened thereafter. Those journals, for instance, lodged at Miss Barrett's home; the Will. . . .

Haydon at sixty was almost the only *active* survivor from the legendary days of Keats. Keats had drawn his face (the sketches, noble, eagle-like, visionary, are reproduced in this book); had called him “great spirit” in a sonnet. The urgency of these early days had never been tamed. Haydon's lifelong pursuit of genius may seem to us very much like the chase of the Hound of Heaven, in reverse. Sometimes he seemed to catch up with whatever he was seeking: it would not be Haydon that suffered exhaustion first. Certainly, next to him, most other characters pale; their pace seems slow, their aspirations lacking in drive. Then, the familiar focus returns. Absurd! And so the tragic figure of Haydon seems cast in a comedy.

Miss Barrett, in her curiously appropriate style, justly summed up the matter.

Poor Haydon! Think what an agony life was to him, so constituted!—his own genius a clinging curse! the fire and the clay in him seething and quenching one another!—the man seeing maniacally in all men the assassins of his fame! . . . struggling, stifling in the conflict for which there was no victory though he could not choose but fight for it.

But we also read in Miss Hayter's text that three weeks after Haydon's death, Browning dreamt that he was in a gallery of Haydon's pictures, and that Haydon was alive and working still. Browning's mother, who slept next door, heard him crying out in his sleep “Bravo! Bravo!” over and over again, with bursts of laughter.

Wasp & Liberal

The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America. By E. DIGBY BALTZELL, New York. *Random House*, \$5.95, 53s. 6d.

Oswald Garrison Villard, Pacifist at War. By MICHAEL WRESZIN. *Indiana University Press*, \$6.95.

THESE BOOKS, superficially dissimilar, are yet linked, for the second is a kind of case history of the first. The life of Oswald Garrison Villard can be taken as an example of the creation and limitations of the “Protestant Establishment”—or as an example of what was open a generation ago and is not so open to-day. Professor Baltzell's thesis is now deservedly famous in America. He was not the first American scholar (or American) to notice the closing of American society, the withdrawal within themselves of the “Wasps,” the “White, Anglo-Saxon Protestants,” with consequent impoverishment of their lives and of the national life. But no one has combined sociological knowledge, and what may be called non-academic *nous*, on this theme, which has been either dealt with by what I think rather mechanical means, more tables than insight, or by highly impressionistic studies of which Mr. Cleveland Amory's *Proper Bostonians* is probably the best. And, of course, themes studied with acuteness and systematic learning by Professor Baltzell have been the subject of much fiction; the “WASP” world has found its most persuasive chronicler in Mr. Louis Auchincloss and its most aggressive defender in Mr. James Gould Cozzens.

Professor Baltzell takes his thesis from Tocqueville. The English ruling class remained an aristocracy; the French descended into being a mere *noblesse*, conscious of its privileges and tenacious of them, losing what political talents it ever had, more and more isolated from the real growing forces in France and bringing itself (and much more important) that “great work of time,” the French monarchy, to ruin. And as Professor Baltzell's thesis is that things in America are getting worse not better, he might have strengthened his case by recalling the disastrous results of the “aristocratic reaction” whose nefarious influence has been emphasised by Georges Lefebvre and Robert Palmer.

Professor Baltzell's methods are both historical and sociological. His main frame of reference is Philadelphia and for a complete statement of the thesis, one should perhaps read his *Philadelphia Gentleman* (1958), as well as this more general sequel. There are some drawbacks to using Philadelphia as a model. It is not—one may risk the meiosis—a normative society for the rest of the United States. People remote from Philadelphia know about “the Main