

## REVIEW

*John Ruskin's Politics of Natural Law: An Intellectual Biography*  
by Graham MacDonald

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The Middle Ages have long occupied a problematic place in modern self-consciousness. If to the Renaissance humanists the fault of the Middle Ages was that they were too barbarous, to the Protestant Reformers it was that they were too Catholic, and to the Enlightenment *philosophes* they were rather too Christian altogether. We might even say that the Middle Ages were to some degree “invented” as a foil against which these successive historical phases of modernity could define themselves with ever more radical repudiations. The very concept of a “middle age” arose in the Renaissance (with the Italian humanists like Petrarch) to describe an ostensible “Dark Age” between Classical Antiquity and the great movement of revival in classical Greek and Latin arts and letters they saw in their own time (Mommsen 1942). To this day, as if the foe could never be too securely banished, our vernacular employs the term “Medieval” as a pejorative to describe all that is religiously fanatical, cruel, backwards, and in general incompatible with our notions of “modern progress.” Even the mainstream conservatism of the English-speaking world is most typically a rather “Whiggish” affair. Our conservative optimists positively celebrate the post-Medieval rise of liberal individualism, free markets, and the commercial society as the great engine of wealth creation and unprecedented technological achievement.

There is however an important dissident strain of thought which defends an alternative narrative. This kind of romantic traditionalism looks upon the Middle Ages with a certain nostalgia as the very model of an integrated Christian culture. Here was the age of chivalry and knighthood, the Gothic Cathedrals and Gregorian chant, the guilds of artisans, and the *Summa* of St. Thomas Aquinas. In short, it was an age in which all cultural activities—art, architecture, literature, music, politics, economics, and intellectual life—were unified and consecrated by a great spiritual aim. Something very fundamental changed in Western civili-

zation when the organizing principle shifted from *religion* to *economics*. If Whig history saw in those mighty modern powers harnessed and unleashed by the industrial revolution a great upward march of human progress, the “High Tory”<sup>1</sup> saw in them the “dark satanic mills” of which William Blake wrote. Industrialization and mass urbanization were associated in the minds of traditionalists and romantics with the spread of a soulless and crass materialism, the disruption of ancient bonds of family and community, and the callous destruction of rural landscapes. If such traditionalism affirms the old forms of social hierarchy, it also insists on a *noblesse oblige* of the privileged classes toward the poor, and more generally on the virtues of social solidarity. Above all, it laments the replacement of religious faith with economic materialism, the exchange of rootedness for anomie, and the replacement of a culture of craft with mechanized mass production. To find in general culture an example of this sensibility we need look no further than J.R.R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* with its neo-Medieval romance of monarchy, nature, rural village life, and an enchanted world filled with the warring spiritual powers of good and evil.

To anyone who shares or merely wishes to understand this sensibility, that great Victorian *homo universalis*, John Ruskin is a crucial reference point. And now in Graham A. MacDonald’s intellectual biography *John Ruskin’s Politics of Natural Law* comes a work that articulately explains Ruskin’s fundamental ideas, the inter-connections between them, and the relation of the course of their development to his personal life. Ruskin has perhaps been thought of most of all for his work as an art critic (mentioned for instance in Sir Kenneth Clark’s famous *Civilization* series for the BBC). He was the figure who championed the work of William Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites and, inspired the Victorian era’s Gothic revival. Macdonald rounds out our picture of

Ruskin by treating all aspects of his thought as an integral whole, while giving special attention to its religious, political, and social dimensions.

In some ways, Ruskin's personal background made him an unlikely champion of *via media* Anglicanism and Medieval constitutionalism, and an equally unlikely opponent of the rising commercial-industrial society of Victorian Britain. Born in 1818 as the son of a successful wine merchant, Ruskin was raised in the devout Bible-centered atmosphere of evangelical Protestantism. It seems to have been in connection with his time at Oxford that his religious stance began to shift. Ruskin formed a close friendship with his tutor Osborne Gordon, who strongly encouraged Ruskin away from Evangelicalism (30-31). Oxford at this time was the center of the Tractarian movement (Edward Pusey, John Henry Newman, John Keble, et al.). After three centuries in which Protestant zeal sought to repudiate England's medieval Catholic inheritance, came this Victorian religious movement which sought to recover a sense of Anglicanism as a *via media* between Roman Catholicism and magisterial Protestantism. Tractarians in particular restored the sense of historical continuity between Anglicanism and patristic and Medieval traditions, and they had a deep affection for the majestic "High Church" styles of liturgy. In this, they turned to earlier precedents from the English Reformation itself. One of the first intellectual pillars of the case for continuity between Anglicanism and Medieval thought was the great Elizabethan theologian Richard Hooker.<sup>2</sup> In 1845 Gordon encouraged Ruskin to take up reading Hooker in the new edition produced by the Tractarian John Keble. Hooker turned out to be a transformative influence on Ruskin's own thought as something all-encompassing:

Richard Hooker's elaborate hierarchy of law, derived from St. Thomas Aquinas, was put to good use in the second volume of *Modern Painters* (1846.) Law informed all visible nature, art, science, religion, economics, history, and politics. Natural law is used in his work like a moral sledgehammer, driving home veritable truths (7).

Natural law has, of course, a venerable history of course in Western thought going back at least to Aristotle, the Stoics, and Cicero but reaching an apogee in the great Medieval synthesis of faith and reason achieved by St. Thomas Aquinas. The account of natural law Hooker inherits from Medieval scholasticism presupposes a teleological conception of

nature, in which natural human inclinations point to purposes which are also goods. As Aquinas framed the matter:

Since, however, good has the nature of an end, and evil, the nature of a contrary, hence it is that those things to which man has a natural inclination, are naturally apprehended by reason as being good, and consequently as objects of pursuit, and their contraries as evil, and objects of avoidance. Wherefore according to the order of natural inclinations, is the order of the precepts of the natural law.<sup>3</sup>

Thus advertence to human nature and the hierarchy of ends to which its inclinations are ordered (when properly and rationally directed), thus affords insight into the fundamental nature of the good across all times, polities, and cultures. Hooker's work was to adapt this Medieval Thomism to the particular circumstances of Elizabethan England. Hooker argued for a mixed or constitutional monarchy based both on the limitations on the king imposed by natural law, and from the inherited institutions of England's particular customs such as parliament and common law. Ruskin's interest in Hooker's natural law theory, views on church/state polity, and constitutionalism would long continue into his tenure as Slade Professor of art at Oxford in the 1870s. Traditional natural law faced, however, a number of challengers from Hooker's time to Ruskin's. The nascent Puritans of England with which Hooker contended drew upon the Calvinist conviction that what remains in man after the fall is "so corrupted, that anything which remains is fearful deformity."<sup>4</sup> The Puritans doubting the broad competence and benignity of human rational powers traditional natural law theory attributed to them, argued for a radical reliance on grace and scripture. However traditional classical and Christian natural law would face a far more enduring and expansive threat than the radical Reformation. The philosophical progenitors of the scientific revolution like Sir. Francis Bacon and Rene Descartes tried to supplant the ancient and Medieval view of nature as teleological, in favor of a mechanistic nature upon which *human* purposes might be imposed. If nature traditionally was understood as a source of *moral knowledge* of the good, the nature of the new science of Bacon and Descartes was an inert and aimless mechanism for man to understand in order to conquer. Increasingly as the modern scientific-technological society advanced, nature became understood above all as *resources* for human exploitation. The impact of the new view of nature on philosophical ethics came quite quickly.<sup>5</sup> Moral phi-

losophy and natural philosophy (now called science) began to take separate paths in Western thought. Thomas Hobbes for instance, dismisses teleology and reduces “natural law” to the brute urge for survival and what follows from it. By the Victorian era, the search for non-natural law foundation for ethics culminated in the utilitarianism of Jeremy Bentham and John Stuart Mill who saw this foundation in a kind of hedonistic calculus.

This whole trend in modern moral philosophy was utterly anathema for Ruskin. Ruskin was by no means hostile to modern science. Indeed, he was something of a naturalist himself pursuing geology and botany among his many interests. What he could not accept is the fashionable tendency to radically separate the moral and natural realms:

In considering Ruskin as a practical proponent of natural law, somewhat in the style of Burke, we shall encounter a man who never entertained the possibility that the ‘moral’ could ever be usefully separated from ‘the natural’ in any sphere of human endeavour, including scientific study (7).

Ruskin’s pivotal role as art critic then cannot in Macdonald’s account be divorced from his general reappraisal of the Middle Ages. Enriched by his trips to Italy, in *The Stones of Venice* (1851-53) Ruskin virtually inverts the inherited exaltation of Renaissance art and depreciation of Medieval art. In a well-known chapter “The Nature of the Gothic”, Ruskin exalts the sacred architecture of the Middle Ages. Ruskin is thus a key figure in the Gothic revival with its idealized Middle Ages. At the same time and quite astonishingly, the long-lauded Renaissance masters come under Ruskin’s critique as forerunners of modern decadence:

The painter Raphael, with his interest in perspective, was identified by Ruskin as the great harbinger of a decline in European painting in as much he allegedly foreshadowed the rise of scientific rationalism, and its concomitant, atheism. Michelangelo was a grand fellow but the ruin of art (68).

Ruskin’s view of the Renaissance as an early movement of secularization is still perhaps common enough. However, later Renaissance scholarship has increasingly corrected this view and emphasized many of its piously Catholic aspirations—which in any event should be obvious enough in the cases of Michelangelo and Raphael.<sup>6</sup> What he seemed to loathe in the Renaissance was what Jacob Burkhardt argued was its distinctive contribution—individualism. Ruskin’s aversion to radical individualism perhaps can be best un-

derstood in light of his own traditionalist aversions toward the industrialization processes of his own age.

The privatizing of the commons, the uprooting of the old rural communities, the mass migration of rural workers into the gritty factory towns, all seemed to herald a new type of mobile worker. This modern type was “individualized” in the morbid sense of being cut off from roots, and isolated from any familiar network of human connections. The new political economy was justified by a *doctrine* - economic liberalism - which treated the idea of human community as chimerical or at best a mere aggregation of such atomic individuals. We may think of Margaret Thatcher’s famous comment “...who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women...”<sup>7</sup> To be sure it is debatable whether the urban poverty of the Victorian era was actually in any quantifiable sense worse than the rural poverty of pre-Industrial times. Nonetheless, the paupers who inhabited the urban slums, the ugly stacks of smoke, and working-class social problems like prostitution and child labor became enduring symbols to their critics of the evils brought on by the industrial and urban revolutions (we might think of the image of the Victorian era drawn by Charles Dickens.) Some sought to redress the perceived ills of industrial capitalism either through expanding state regulations or outright revolution (most famously or infamously Karl Marx). Ruskin’s approach characteristically was mostly to *look back* to the Middle Ages in hopes of finding practical solutions for them. This approach involved at least two major prongs. As MacDonald outlines in chapter 5, Ruskin became intensely interested in the social problem. In his work *Time and Tide* (1866-1867) he does argue for a number of measures the state could take including job training schools and poor houses. But as MacDonald discusses he seemed to be most interested in the non-statist approach of Medieval poor laws he learned about through the study of Gratian’s 12<sup>th</sup> century compendium of canon *Decretum*. This emphasized the role of the local parochial church in the alleviation of poverty through things like tithing (134).

The other prong was his deepening interest in the Medieval guild system which suggested an entirely different form of political economy. The assumption of the new economics of British liberalism was that the *competitive* mechanisms of the free market would ultimately redound to the benefit of all producing better or cheaper goods. For Ruskin, the liberal-industrial political economy represented a complete overturning of the virtues he found in the Medieval guild system whose economic mechanisms were *cooperative* rather

er than competitive. Unlike for instance the sense of a zero-sum competitive game between workers and against factory owners over wages, or the competition of industrialists against each other, the old guilds united everyone within a craft from the apprentice to the master in a common, albeit hierarchical enterprise. Importantly, the guilds produced the humanizing beauty and art of handcrafts, rather than standardized machine productions. Ruskin made it part of his life's work to try to reanimate both a lively sense of social responsibility toward the poor and the whole idea of the Medieval guild. As Macdonald discusses in chapter 8, This latter idea bore fruit in one of Ruskin's most important legacies, the Guild of St. George—a proposal outlined in his *Fors Clavigera* which survives to this day. The Guild of St. George is dedicated to the culture of craft, the defense of rural values, works of charity, and education in the arts.

What are we to make of Ruskin's broad neo-Medieval critique of the impacts of the industrial revolution and the ideologies which legitimized it? Classical liberals will no doubt point out—and with considerable justice—that Ruskin dramatically undersells the positive gains produced by the rise of industrial capitalism. Ludwig von Mises argued that the industrial revolution was actually the instrumentality that ultimately raised the broad masses of Western humanity out of poverty.<sup>8</sup> The liberal capitalist order has on this analysis proved demonstrably proved better at creating and distributing more wealth to more people than either its predecessor—the agrarian and guild system—or proposed successors like communism which produced little more than the very worst kind of abject horrors of the 20th century which have scarcely if ever been equaled by any previous age. At the same time, Ruskin's critique of industrial capitalism and modern individualism is only partially about economics and the problems of material poverty. What Ruskin seemed to lament in this in the coal and iron economy was also the loss of inherited place and human solidarity. What Ruskin most valued in the Middle Ages was the presence of *non-economic* values—religion, community, sense of place, beauty, connection to nature, the culture of craft. While the form capitalism takes in the contemporary consumer society has furnished a wealthy middle-class life for vastly more people than either the medieval economy or the nascent capitalism of Ruskin's day were able to produce, one may question whether the spiritual and cultural problems he raised have been comparably resolved. To take one example, Christian piety has arguably withered more amid the comforts, pleasures, and entertainments offered by contemporary consumerism than in many times and places of

want, hardship and persecution. Ruskin taps into some of the deep motivations of the conservative tradition which without necessarily dismissing the positive role of markets in certain spheres is focused on defending non-market values. As perhaps the greatest traditional conservative of our age Roger Scruton (no enemy of the free market) put it:

Conservative thinkers have on the whole praised the free market, but they do not think that market values are the only values there are. Their primary concern is with the aspects of society in which markets have little or no part to play: education, culture, religion, marriage and the family.<sup>9</sup>

Another critique that may be launched against "Ruskinism" is its hyper-romanticism. Even granting validity to his critiques of modernity, are not the Middle Ages well and truly gone forever? Is it not fruitless to pine for them, rather than making the best of the live possibilities which are still available to us? To some degree there is a palpable absurdity to the idea of somehow "overturning" the great industrial and technological transformations of the last three centuries. But it is fruitless to deny as well that there were losses as well as gains involved in these transformations. It is here where nostalgia may have some value. As Mark Henrie (2004) has argued the sense of nostalgia *illuminates* and makes it possible to recognize evanescent goods. The question for Ruskin would surely not be something absurd like "how can we turn back the clock to the Middle Ages?" Rather it is about how positive elements in the Medieval inheritance—religiosity, a sense of beauty in art and architecture, rural culture and the life of the countryside, community life, and artisanship—be conserved in a modern era that accents acquisitive materialism. Such threatened values are what Edmund Burke called in his *Reflections*, "the unbought grace of life" upon which no price can be set. While the key answers to this question are surely cultural, we should not ignore the ironic possibility that further developments in capitalist economics and technology may help pave the way to reversing some of the negatives of the industrial era. In our time, is not the digital revolution rapidly *de-industrializing* the whole Western world? As Arthur C. Clarke noted<sup>10</sup> in the 1970s computers would eventually make it possible for people to decide where they wished to live and work by de-localizing the workspace. In principle then the new technologies produced by free market capitalism have made possible not only a post-industrial era, but the possibility of de-urbanization if people so choose.

Could the future not portend some great movement of return to the land?

There are other reasons for which Macdonald's work is topical. Ruskin seemed prophetic in that the green movement and environmentalism and consequent misgivings about the urban and industrial turns have obvious panache in today's culture. Moreover, even specifically *conservative* critiques of motifs like individualism, consumerism, and in general economic liberalism are enjoying something of a renaissance. We might think of the discussions of works like Patrick Deneen's *Why Liberalism Failed*, the "Benedict Option" of Rod Dreher, or at the level of populist politics the pro-protectionist, anti-globalization nationalist conservatives who seem ascendant in much of the Western world in our historical moment. Classical liberal defenders of modern free market economics stand to benefit then from familiarizing themselves with thoughtful critics like Ruskin who in many ways prefigured these contemporary concerns. Whether interest in Ruskin is sparked by sympathy for his traditionalist sensibilities, a desire to better understand an opposing perspective, or simply to round out understanding of a crucial if eccentric figure in the intellectual history of the Victorian age, Graham Macdonald's work should serve as a rich resource.

## NOTES

- 1 The old Tory-Whig Debate has gotten some more recent traction. See for example Graham McAleer's introduction to Kolnai 2008. It begins with the question "Tory or Whig?"
- 2 For more on Richard Hooker you can see my own Rosenthal 2008 which is included in Macdonald's bibliography.
- 3 St. Thomas Aquinas. *Summa Theologica*-I-II.94, Dominican Fathers translation. <https://dhspriority.org/thomas/summa/FS/FS094.html#FSQ94A2THEP1> (Accessed 6/6/2019).
- 4 John Calvin. *Institutes of the Christian Religion*. I.15 . Beveridge Translation. <http://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/institutes> (Accessed 6/6/2019).
- 5 One of the key thinkers to explore this connection between the modern anti-teleological science and the collapse of traditional natural law would be Leo Strauss.
- 6 To take just one example we can look at Dawson's (2009) remarks in chapter III.
- 7 Margaret Thatcher. Interview in *Woman's Own*. Quoted in <https://uk.reuters.com/article/uk-britain-thatcher-quotes/margaret-thatcher-in-her-own-words-idUKBRE9370LG20130408> (Accessed 11/12/2018).

- 8 Ludwig von Mises. "Popular and Wrong Interpretation of 'The Industrial Revolution'" <https://mises.org/library/popular-and-wrong-interpretation-industrial-revolution> (Accessed 6/13/2019).
- 9 Roger Scruton. "What Trump Doesn't Get about Conservatism." <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/04/opinion/what-trump-doesnt-get-about-conservatism.html> (Accessed 2/13/2019).
- 10 A Clip from his 1974 with ABC interview explains his futurology on this point: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OIRZebE8O84> (Assessed 6/13/2019).

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