

Q&A with Howard Hull, Director of Brantwood, John Ruskin's home in the Lake District

How did Ruskin see our relationship with nature?

First of all, that nature 'treats well, those who treat her well'. In contrast he warned that nature would become malevolent if treated badly. He recognised that we are never in a passive relationship with nature, so we have to make decisions about our treatment of the environment all the time, because everything we do has consequences, good or bad. Secondly, that nature is the great teacher, which we should approach with humility and respect. Unless we know nature, how can we enter into a positive and fulfilling relationship with it? Ruskin put a primacy on 'seeing clearly'.



What endangers this relationship?

Ruskin elaborated what he called 'the law of help' in which he describes how competition is in all things the law of death and collaboration the law of life. We are familiar with competition between people and within nature, but Ruskin also targets competition between people and nature, showing how our bid to dominate nature and bend it to our will leads ultimately to barrenness and the depletion of vital forces. Ultimately, on a global scale, this disfunction in the relationship is catastrophic. Ruskin observed that nurturing forms of cultivation and husbandry of the land where nature is supported are not only healthy for both man and nature, but have a positive effect on the human spirit.

Why does Ruskin matter today?

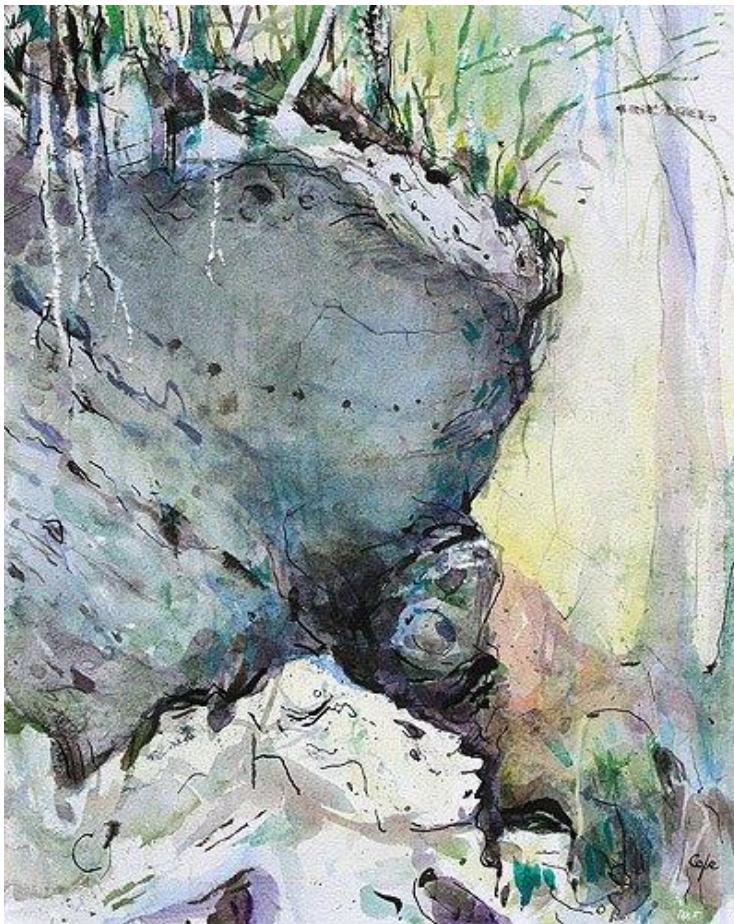
Ruskin recognised the special nature of the Lake District. He wouldn't look kindly on all the development that has taken place here but he would certainly treasure its remaining beauty and bio-diversity. He would also value the continuing association of the area with the values of Romanticism and the birth of the conservation movement. In a world that is under such environmental threat, he saw the Lake District even in his time, as standing for a different way of relating to nature. He wanted people to come here to walk and travel slowly and take time to see the detail of this landscape – even down to the tiniest of moorland plants.

Is this not an elitist view?

Ruskin's life work was dedicated to social justice and helping ordinary working people. His ideas have spread around the world and into all manner of different cultures. Tolstoy said of him "Ruskin was one of the most remarkable men, not only of England and our time, but of all countries and all times. He was one of those rare men who think with their hearts, and so he thought and said not only what he himself had seen and felt, but what everyone will think and say in the future'.

How would he have reacted to motor vehicles on fell tracks?

Well he could express himself pretty powerfully! Underneath a colourful rebuke would be his concern for the ways in which they damaged and degraded the tracks and surrounding environment for purely personal satisfaction, and how their presence would spoil the ability of others to slow down and enter into a more meditative engagement with nature.



What role did Ruskin's vision for the Lake District play in the World Heritage nomination?

Ruskin played a vital part in the transition from Romantic-era thinking into the early conservation movement. He opened people's eyes in detail to nature, especially mountain scenery, in a way which embraced both scientific and aesthetic perspectives. He studied our impact on everything from climate to soil and landscape integrity, helping to define the positive social values inherent in Lakeland communities and agriculture and enumerate the threats. He was one of the key figures in the World Heritage definition of the Lakes as a Cultural Landscape of global importance.