Notes about the author of this booklet

Few people, apart from personal family, were better acquainted with John Ruskin than **William Gershom Collingwood.** Ruskin's biographer and personal secretary knew the man and his works intimately and was exceedingly well qualified for these tasks; and yet, in a busy life of service to the Professor, Collingwood found time for numerous scholarly pursuits. His wide and detailed research into the history and archeology of Northern Britain, together with undoubted literary skills, enabled him to publish a considerable variety of books and learned papers, many of which are still in demand.

Collingwood was a fine artist. His paintings are still sought after by collectors; some examples of his work, including portraits of Ruskin, can be seen in the Ruskin Museum at Coniston. For many years he served as president of the Lake Artists' Society whose annual exhibition continues to be appreciated by art lovers visiting Ambleside in the summer.

The people of Coniston are greatly indebted to W.G.Collingwood and his family for their part in the creation of the Ruskin Museum and Institute in Yewdale Road. The building and its exhibits (apart from loaned items) belong to the village and can justly be regarded as "Coniston's History File".

In Coniston you can visit

The Ruskin Museum

&

John Ruskin's home at *Brantwood*

The Ruskin Cross, from the **East.** Photo: Miss Hargreaves.

The Ruskin Cross at Coniston

"If you would see my monument, look around you", wrote a great architect upon a stone of his greatest building. "I have raised myself a record more lasting than bronze", the Roman poet said, meaning the books he had written. Ruskin's ideal was a step higher:- "That we also, careless of monument by the grave, may build in the world—monument by which men may be taught to remember, not where we died, but where we lived".

For a man like him the true memorial is not any statue or shrine or house of pilgrimage, nor even the long rows of volumes with his name lettered on their backs. These things are a mockery, if he is not remembered for the fact of his influence, and the effect of his thought upon the world.

Standing by his grave one cannot but think what we owe him. He was not a mere successful man, but a great pioneer of thought. He led the way to many new fields, which he left for others to cultivate. It is from him chiefly that we, or our teachers, have learnt the feelings with which we look nowadays at pictures or architecture or scenery, entering more intelligently into their beauty and significance, and providing more consciously for their safe keeping. Nobody for many generations understood so clearly and taught so fearlessly the laws of social justice and brotherly kindness; no one preached councils of perfection so eloquently and so effectively. There are few of us whose lives are not the better, one way or another, for his work; many who

The Ruskin Cross - Interlaced panel on the North side.
(Photo: Miss Hargreaves, Coniston)

and fought; and his cry was always, —"St George for Merry England!"

That he succeeded in all he attempted, neither he nor his best friends would claim; but it was a fine answer he gave to one who reproached him with the old taunt of Reuben, —"Unstable as water, thou shalt not excel". He might not excel, he said, but he had rather irrigate.

The last side of the shaft, looking northwards, bears only an interlaced pattern, -- the mystery again, to close the story, as his own life closed in long years of weakness and weariness. This panel is shown here in the photograph by evening sunshine, as worth more attention than it claims at first sight. The interlaced work on most modern imitations of ancient crosses is treated with little life and vigour. It is often dully cylindrical, and raised from a laboriously flattened ground as if cut out and laid on a plate. This is full of subtle variety in curve and surface, as is the ancient work, making the simple pattern into an interesting piece of artistic craftsmanship.

The sculptor of the cross is Mr. H. T. Miles of Ulverston, who in years gone by worked for a while under Mr. Ruskin. The designs were made by W. G. Collingwood, Mr. Ruskin's biographer, and for many years his assistant and secretary. The cross was set up for Mr. and Mrs. Arthur Severn, of Brantwood, on Ascension Day, 1901. And so:

"The grey stone stands over him,
And his rest should be sweet,
With the green earth to cover him
And our flowers at his feet."

have never read a line of Ruskin think his thoughts, passed on to them from others; many enjoy advantages which they owe, perhaps indirectly, but none the less truly, to his teaching. The results of such work, however little recognized as his, are his real memorial; and our respect and love for the dead are shown, he said, "not by great monuments to them which we build with our hands, but by letting the monuments stand which they built with *their own.*"

Still, though we might be quite content to think that his grave should be undistinguished, he would surely have given leave to mark the spot where his body lies. He left no word about it, but we know that he would have been very hard to please with anything ambitious or pretentious. He was tolerant of homely provincial art, so long as it was designed with significance and worked with care. In his later years he liked the ancient crosses of our early Northern English School, of the age before the Norman Conquest; and though these came under his notice at a time when he was no longer writing books, he gave much private encouragement to several who were engaged in the study of such remains of ancient art. The last bit of drawing in which he showed much interest was a sketch from the detail of the cross at Bewcastle in North Cumberland, a relic of those Anglo-Saxon converts to Christianity whose praise he spoke in his latest lectures, called "*The Pleasures of England*", and of their Italian teachers of 1200 years ago, - for then as often in later ages, Italy was the art-mistress of England. He was fond of the symbolism and mythological allusions of these primitive sculptures, and of their unacademic but picturesque

ornament. Now we could not build him a tomb like his favourite Castelbarco shrine at Verona, nor carve him such an effigy as that of his marble lady-love, Ilaria di Caretto, at Lucca; but **it seemed right that the head-stone to his grave should suggest something of his affection for decorative craftsmanship, and that here in the North it should take the ancient traditional form of a North-country cross, cut from the stone of the dale where he made his home, and carved by a local sculptor, once a pupil of his, with allusions to his life's work and the signs of the faith in which he died.**

The shaft and head together are of one stone from the Mossrigg quarries in Tilberthwaite, the hard greenstone or volcanic ash of the Coniston Fells, which in its cleaved varieties makes the famous green slate of the Lake District. The lower block of the base comes from Elterwater, practically the same material. It need hardly be said that this stone is most difficult to carve, but it was chosen for its durability and for its colour, and no trouble was spared to get a sound block, as flawless as possible.

The pedestal is cut into the three "Calvary Steps" which are usual in the old crosses, though the surfaces of the steps are sloped to prevent damage by settlement of leaves or earth. The base measures 38½ by 28½ inches at the ground, and the cross stands 7½ feet above the top of the pedestal, a little over 9 feet altogether from the turf.

The east side, overlooking the grave, bears the name and the years of his birth and death. The two dates are separated by the ancient *filfol* or *swastika*, the revolving cross, supposed to have been at first a rude

Key-bearer, means the strength of Ulysses, or of Patience. Fors, the Nail-bearer, means the strength of Lycurgus, or of Law". It was of these aspects of human life that he wrote his seven-years-long series of Letters to the Working Men of England, developing his latest and maturest teaching. "*Fors*", though not the most popular of his works, must be regarded as his chief effort on the economic and didactic side; and so takes a central place in the design, surrounded by the four little cherubs. They are familiar faces on gravestones, but few who see them remember that they are descendants by ancient pedigree from the winged sun-symbol of early Assyria, another form of the primitive emblem of life and immortality.

In "*Fors*" he unfolded his scheme for the Guild of St. George, from which he hoped so much and got so little. But the failure of his efforts in carrying out his plans — a partial failure only, since the Working Man's Bodelian, his Museum at Sheffield, shows that it did not fail in every direction, — is no reason why an idea which dominated him so long and so powerfully should be omitted from the record. It meant that his aims were intensely patriotic and national. It was for no advancement of his own that he worked and spent

Greeks have a sweetmeat, "halva", compounded of sesame flour and honey. Sometimes in old crosses, there are little roundels or pellets supposed by certain antiquaries to represent the holy water of the Communion, which might give a precedent for such figures here: but they would hardly be understanded of the people. Not that the grain which is carved for Sesame is much more comprehensible; but the lilies help it out, so that he who runs may read the well-known phrase.

Matching this oval in the upper part of the shaft is the *Crown of Wild Olive*, the trifling but priceless reward, as the book so named sets forth, for the best work done in this world, — though "it should have been of gold, had not Jupiter been so poor". In the design the ribbon which binds the wreath twines into an interlaced pattern, recalling once more the mystery of life which so often is Ruskin's theme, and especially in these lectures of Work, Traffic and War.

The central figure is *Fors Clavigera,* the angel of Destiny, winged, robed and crowned, and holding, as Ruskin interpreted it, the Club, the Key and Nail. "Fors, the Club-bearer, means the strength of Hercules, or of Deed. Fors, the

hieroglyph of the sun in its course, and thence a symbol of the rise of human life, - to the Christian church, which adopted the sign in the early ages, meaning also the sunrise of another day, resurrection to another life.

The inscription is surrounded with the interlacing work of the kind often described as Celtic, though it is found on very early Egyptian seals, and in some Greek decoration and in Roman mosaics, and thence was adopted by the Greek-Italian craftsman of the earlier Christian ages. The earliest Anglo-Saxon crosses and missals were ornamented with the elaborate interlacing, and the style was carried into Ireland and Scotland and Scandinavia, growing more and more complicated as time went on and forming the basis of the semi-barbaric patterns of the northern nations, though it was by no means their invention or exclusive possession. What significance they attached to it we can hardly guess; to us it may mean the mystery of life, the many woven strands that form character, and the crossing and re-crossing paths of a man's career.

The shaft in these old monuments is often carved with allusions to human life; the head with divine symbols. So here the patterns of the shaft form a kind of short pictorial biography, beginning at the bottom of the east, and going round with the sun.

The young Ruskin began as a poet, and attained some distinction as a verse-writer in magazines before ever he found his vocation as a writer of prose. Here under the arch of the foot of the stone, is a young singer with his lyre and laurels, somewhat classical and not very passionately inspired. We rise through a tangle of

interlacing before we come to his name, beneath his first great work, just as he had to live through some painful and perplexing years before he wrote himself large in *Modern Painters.*

The rising sun was his own device on the cover of the book, in its early editions; and sunrise, which he rarely missed, for he was an early riser, was a favourite "effect" in landscape, more beautiful to him than sunset. Here it may stand for the rise of modern painting, the painting of Light in all its varieties. Sunbeams and level clouds, Turner's often repeated sky, are hardly a legitimate subject for sculpture, but this is not academic bas-relief; it is the kind of sketching in stone which the early carvers used, with complete disregard for what many take to be the canons of art.

It will be noticed that the surfaces are flat or nearly so; there is no modelling of the figures, and there is none of the usual flat ground out of which figures rise in true bas-relief. Incised outline and deep hollows for emphasis are alone used to tell the story; the intention being to preserve the simple decorative character of the work, considering the cross as a standing–stone fretted over

The Ruskin Cross, from the **West** Photo: Miss Hargreaves.

which was, to him, the sunniest side of his life, and one which he showed very early, along with his studies in art, and kept in evidence to the end, throughout all his endeavours after philanthropy and social reform. The scroll breaks into flower with his favourite wild rose, bud and blossom and fruit; there are three of his pet creatures, the squirrel, the kingfisher and the robin, about which he wrote in *Loves Meinie* and other books.

The western side gives the story of his later work, after 1860, when he began his campaign against the modern commercial spirit with the book called "*Unto This Last*". The title was taken, as every reader knows, from the parable of the labourers in the vineyard. "*When they came that were hired about the eleventh hour, they received every man a penny. But when the first came they supposed that they should have received more; and they murmured against the good-man of the house. But he answered one of them and said, Friend, I do thee no wrong: didst not thou agree with me for a penny? Take that thine is, and go thy way; I will give unto this last even as unto thee.*" *(Matthew 20:1-16)*

Over this there is a panel for "*Sesame and Lilies*", his most widely read book. The Sesame, to be accurate, should have been shown as cakes of some shape: the

with patterns like lace, not encrusted with sculptor's relief-carving. In this hard material and for this purpose and position the incised sketchy style has a use and legitimacy of its own, to which Mr Ruskin has referred in a paragraph o*f Aratra Pentelici*: - "You have in the very outset and earliest stages of sculpture, your flat stone surface given you as a sheet of white paper, on which you are required to produce the utmost effect you can with the simplest means, cutting away as little of the stone as may be, to save both time and trouble; and, above all, leaving the block itself, when shaped, as solid as you can, that its surface may better resist weather, and the carved parts be as much protected as possible by the masses left around them."

The line of mountains from which the sun rises may recall the range of Mont Blanc from Geneva, and every reader of Ruskin knows how he has illustrated those aiguilles with pencil and pen, and how Geneva was the place where his book was first conceived, - "his true mother-town of Geneva". The pines he described so enthusiastically and the foreground detail he loved are suggested, as far as such carving can give them; and

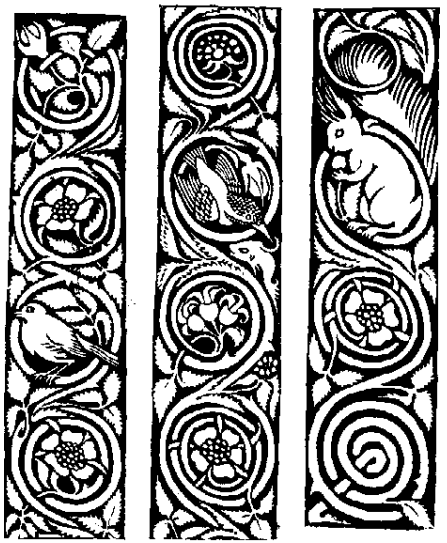
the young sketcher, in the romantic artist's costume of the earlier part of the nineteenth century—already ancient history—represents the Modern Painter in person.

Higher up the shaft, the emblem of Venice, the winged Lion of St. Mark, a highly conventionalized animal standing upon his scroll of Gospel, and the seven-branched candlestick of the Tabernacle, from the well known figure in the Arch of Titus, hardly need interpretation as referring to "*The Stones of Venice*" and "*The Seven Lamps of Architecture*". These, with "*Modern Painters*", were Ruskin's great books of the time in which he was chiefly occupied with art, down to the year 1860, when other matters became his principal care; **so that this side of the stone sets forth the first part of his biography.**

The three-pointed interlaced figures in the intervals are the pattern known as the *triquetra* and often seen in early sculpture, symbolizing the Trinity. The same device appears in the arms of the cross-head, and the globe in the centre is the usual emblem of divinity, the Sun of Righteousness. In later high crosses of the Celtic type there is a circle round the head, as if to suggest the nimbus or glory, as seen in sacred pictures round the head of Christ: but this wheel-head was not

usual in early Anglian crosses, which have the arms free. The fine example of Irton near Seascale, and those of the so-called Giant's Grave at Penrith, the Ruthwell cross (restored, but no doubt with correctness in its general outline), some heads at Carlisle and elsewhere have free arms with no wheel, and are Anglian: the Gosforth cross and others with wheel-heads are of a later type and show Irish influence in design.

Going round to **the south side**, the sunny side, we find a tall narrow panel filled with one floral scroll having animals among the branches of the conventionalized tree. This is a frequent device in Anglian work, though the tree in the old crosses is always some decorative attempt at a vine signifying the Christian tree of life, the church; "I am the true vine, and ye are the branches". The ancient artists delighted to insert birds and beasts, often drawn with pretty and dainty realism, — squirrels and the "Little foxes that spoil the vines". Here the motive is to suggest Ruskin's interest in natural history *



*****S*urely it is not accidental that this design faces the adjoining grave of Ruskin's delightful friend, Susie Beever of The Thwaite, whose love of such wild creatures is recorded in "Hortus Inclusus"? (MJS)*