

Intermezzo

## Songlines: Ruskin and the Roads of Europe

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**Abstract** Ruskin's Europe can be understood as a network of roads, physical and imaginary, which interconnect in a single vital configuration. Ruskin saw this as a distinct terroir, a cultural and spatial ecosystem created over millennia. What he termed the 'Old Road' is an attempt to unify the topographical and historical discovery of physical journeying to a conceptual road of intellectual reflection and the imagination. Ruskin used, but lamented, the railways just as we use, but lament, the internet. These powerful tools come at a price, fore shortening encounter, memory and time. Ruskin fought to defend Europe's old road as one we are in danger of forgetting and which he called on us to reclaim.

**Keywords** Ruskin. Europe. Old Road. Roads. Travel. Tourism.

During the Cold War, 'Check Point Charlie' on Berlin's *Friedrichstraße* was symbolically the 'ground zero' of potential Armageddon. Across this rather makeshift set of barriers two ideologies with a willingness to risk global war confronted one another on an old road. I think it was the poet W.B. Yeats who pointed out that despite all the national borders and the military and political conflicts in the world, the roads themselves connect as if there were no borders. It is an instant source of comic delight when we see a photograph of bridge builders who, having commenced construction from two sides of a wide valley, find, as they approach the final meeting point, that their calculations are out! Roads, by their very nature, connect. The concept of the road, even the actual road itself, travels freely across boundaries. The road at Finisterre is continuous to Shanghai, even if we choose to put barriers across it.

We speak of roads in human terms. We talk of circulatory systems, of arteries, of by-passes, of networks, of nightmare roads and dream roads. We talk of one road 'feeding into' another and we even anthropomorphize roads with the feelings they induce in us. When we arrive in a city the well-planned highway on which we have been travelling

seems to experience something of a nervous breakdown as it disaggregates into a tangle of urban pathways. Either we brave the complexity that awaits us, or we circle the ring road until we find our way out, heading toward another city.

If we can, let us stop off in the city and find somewhere to park for a minute. Here we can explore another type of road on foot. City streets and alleyways have been shaped by centuries of human interactions. As Ruskin so eloquently teaches us, cities are like a history book and there is as much to read in the palimpsest of their roads and walkways as there is in their architecture. Less obvious, is that a large part of their history is written beyond the city limits. The city is a nodal point on a wider network, an international circulatory system of exchange, extraction and fulfillment. It is impossible to speak of the city in isolation. It gives visibility to something more fluid but omnipresent. Everywhere, the city is ultimately shaped by events arriving on the roads from somewhere else. The nature of place is in part determined by the nature of the networks that serve it. When we speak of Europe, are we speaking of its people, their possessions and places, or is Europe itself in some ways better described by the nature and character of its internal and external connections?

Our roads are teachers, structurers of behaviour, maps of the neural pathways of our culture. They are accumulated traces in the landscape of a people's self-portrait. Memorably quoted by Sir Kenneth Clark in the television series *Civilization*, Ruskin wrote

Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts, the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of three the only trustworthy one is the last.<sup>1</sup>

Such autobiographies are written across the surface of Europe, our roads are the desks for their manuscripts. Compare the roads of Europe to the roads of America. Europe's roads embrace the memory of many thousands of years of human culture. In America a single, soulless grid erased the tribal pathways of Native Americans, and continues to eviscerate the recent memories of a young nation.

Not that Europe is immune from the amnesia of modernity. In the Nineties Rem Koolhaas, the Dutch architect and theoretician gave this phenomenon the rather unprepossessing name of 'Hollow Core'. People in Antwerp, Brussels, Gent and the Ruhr lived and worked, he noted, in an urban landscape set between core cities and were responsible for a considerable proportion of the region's economic production and consumption. Within an hour, residents of Hollow Core could reach four international airports, eight intercity railway stations, sixteen universities, thirty-two international sport venues, and sixty-four shopping malls, while at the same time they lived in low-density neighbourhoods in a superficially green environment. Koolhaas was attempting to define the boundaries of his subject. If he was to design dwellings here where did his task start and finish?

Sitting in his study at Brantwood at half past seven in the morning on 25th February 1873, John Ruskin grappled with the same question. He was writing one of his serialized letters to the labourers of Great Britain. If he was to consider the labour - or life - of one man, what were the boundaries of his subject?

Consider, for instance, what I am doing at this very instant. It is a bitter black frost, the ground deep in snow, and more falling. I am writing comfortably in a perfectly warm room; some of my servants

<sup>1</sup> *Works*, 24: 203.

were up in the cold at half-past five to get it ready for me; others, a few days ago, were digging my coals near Durham, at the risk of their lives; an old woman brought me my watercresses through the snow for breakfast yesterday; another old woman is going two miles through it to-day to fetch me my letters at ten o'clock. [...] Somebody in the east end of London is making boots for me [...]; a washerwoman is in suds, somewhere, to get me a clean shirt for to-morrow; a fisherman is in dangerous weather somewhere, catching me some fish for Lent; and my cook will soon be making me pancakes, for it is Shrove Tuesday.<sup>2</sup>

The interconnectedness of things, the costs and consequences of actions, the displacements, gains and losses, the shifts of power and spreading of influence and energy, the interchangeable and the momentarily manifest: all these live in networks of relationships and contacts which we inhabit and which we are naturally gifted to exploit. Ruskin talks of our

innate love of mystery and unity [...] the joy that the human mind has in contemplating any kind of maze or entanglement, so long as it can discern, through its confusion, any guiding clue or connecting plan.<sup>3</sup>

Finding a language to express the nature of humanity's individual, social and cosmic inter-dependence was a European project long before Ruskin; long, indeed, before Homer. Our great megalithic structures are remnants of a sophisticated social network that was connected across huge distances, one which mapped into the cultural co-ordinates of its political economy the

science of its astronomy and the rituals of its beliefs, shared from Orkney to North Africa.

The sea, or the 'whale-road' was just as important, though its routes have left their physical remains only beneath the waves and in poetry from the *Seafarer* to the *Odyssey*.

Think of Lindisfarne, or Holy Island, a remote island set in cold and stormy seas on the North East Coast of Britain. It was here, in the seventh century that Christian monks produced the illuminated Lindisfarne Gospels.

*St Cuthbert's book*, as Ruskin called it, is a fusion of Celtic knot-work, Nordic mythology and Christian symbolism. It was made in the middle of a thousand-year period in which Britain and Ireland were hugely popular with invaders from continental Europe. The result was a pooling of many cultural forms which the indigenous Celtic culture proved ideally adapted to interweave. Even though our ancestors seem to have selected the remotest spots on earth, these archipelagoes of islands and coastal hinterlands were at the heart of a Europe wide network of communications and trade. In an age when populations were small, vital cultures had to be international cultures.

The resulting fusion of material and spiritual interests goes to the heart of Ruskin's reading of European civilization and it is why the roads of Europe play such a key role in his unfolding consciousness. The Celtic Christian carpet pages can be read, in some senses, as a sort of map, an illustration of a network of mytho topographical relationships, somewhat after the fashion of Australian Aboriginal Songlines. The Lindisfarne carpet pages, as they are known, read both literally and symbolically. In their labyrinthine intricacy they wrest order from chaos. Like Aboriginal paintings, they seem

<sup>2</sup> *Works*, 27: 514.

<sup>3</sup> *Works*, 10: 163.



**Figure 1** Double Brougham carriage built in Camberwell to Ruskin's design in 1875 for the journey between London and Brantwood. Frontal view. Whitehouse Collection, R72, Lancaster University. On display at Brantwood

to find a language for the intangible, the language of luminous encounters on a network.

Within three centuries the early abstractions of the monks' carpet pages leapt from their vellum into the three dimensional world of the Gothic. The bedrock of the roads now literally soared into space. We are reminded in Jean Gimpel's *The Cathedral Builders*, that between 1100 and 1250 more stone was quarried in France than in the entire pyramid-building epoch of ancient Egypt. In the aftermath of the disintegration of the Roman Empire, a new form of Christendom was giving shape to otherwise chaotic entanglements. The roads not only carried stone and clerics, they burst alive with trade and pilgrimage. The troubadours crafted songs of the road, celebrating place in lyrical imagery, *A Lunel lutz una luna luzens*, bringing the variety of regional language into the mainstream of Europe's literature.

We have talked of the profound cultural legacy which gives roads character, actual and mythic, and to which we are all, as Ruskin was, heir. It is time to talk of roads of physical geography and actual kilometers. Roads of travel. Ruskin was an inveterate traveler, forever on the road.

Born in the golden era of coach travel, his earliest encounters with the landscapes of Europe were shaped by his mode of discovering them on long family carriage journeys away from his home in London. From the age of three, when he paid his first visit to the Lake District, until train travel took over the coach in Ruskin's life in the 1860s, Ruskin undertook no fewer than 15 lengthy continental tours in addition to extensive travels every year within the United Kingdom. Even in the second half of his life, despite being a regular and frequent user of the railways, coaches continued to form a vital component of most of these journeys.

The years leading up to Ruskin's birth in 1819 had seen a boom in road building in northern Europe. Pioneering engineers such as Tresquet in France and

Macadam in Britain transformed the coaching experience. Better road surfaces allowed faster, more maneuverable coaches. The journey time of mail coaches was slashed, and carriage journeys became considerably safer and more comfortable for passengers.

A journey of 187 miles from London to Manchester, which had taken more than four days in 1754, was, by 1830, advertised as taking 18 hours. By the 1820's the revolution in road construction meant that there were growing numbers of financially comfortable families that could contemplate recreational journeys. The Grand Tour had offered a wealthy aristocratic elite an experience of self-improving and educative cultural travel; now, popular guides to areas of outstanding natural beauty or cultural significance allowed others a version of this experience.

As sole representative of London's largest importer and retailer of sheries, with a roster of over 1,000 customers in Britain, Ruskin's father was obliged to travel extensively for business. In Great Britain and on extended trips across continental Europe, the Ruskin family travelled together, mixing business and pleasure.

As tourists, the Ruskin family's first debt was to the popular printed guides, portfolios of engravings and the poetry and reports of other travelers. However, a more exclusive opportunity was provided to the Ruskins by virtue of John James' visits to the grand houses of his customers, where they were exposed to artistic collections assembled on the Grand Tour.

The Ruskins also travelled on the coat tails of the public appetite for the Picturesque which gripped early tourism in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. John James and Margaret were familiar with the views or 'stations' described by authors such as Wordsworth, Linton or Thomas West, and illustrated by artists such as John 'Warwick' Smith.

Primed by his visits to the Lake District, on his thirteenth birthday Ruskin had a life-changing encoun-



ter in the form of the gift of Samuel Roger's travel poem, *Italy*. Illustrated by J.M.W. Turner, *Italy* became the planning document for a succession of family continental tours which were to shape Ruskin's entire life. Many of Turner's views were visited, the Ruskins subsequently acquiring Turner's original watercolour study of *Monks on the Road to Florence from Fiesole*, a picture engraved in *Italy*, the site of which they visited. It was to hang in the bedroom at Brantwood until the very end of Ruskin's life.

Ruskin was keen to note his visit and compared real life to the original, stating

The little bend of wall within which they are placed is not really a part of the Franciscans' garden, but one of the turns of the road in the ascent to Fiesole.

Direct experience of the artist's subject was to be a hallmark of Ruskin's career as an art critic.

At this time Ruskin was under the influence of various drawing masters, most notably Samuel Prout and Copley Fielding from whom, in turn, he learnt topographical and atmospheric rendition and the ability to record buildings quickly and accurately. With these skills and a passionate interest in geology and architecture, Ruskin quickly fashioned his own distinctive agenda for travel and his method of work. Proud parents were happy to stop the coach for their precocious son while he got out, often drawing at some length the roadside features or views. Ruskin even records walking alongside the coach while they remained inside keeping pace with him. His famous eye for detail was thus grounded in wayside encounters taken slowly. Ruskin was able to undertake analytical and aesthetic observations concurrently. The tempo of such travel provided him with the ability to immerse himself intensely in the moment, absorbing a strong sense of place.

The slow pace of the coach on long journeys through dramatic scenery also provided an evolving succession

of imagery through the window, much as the playing of a film. Descriptions in notebooks at the Beinecke, written whilst moving, as well as more famous published passages written from memory, record and exploit for dramatic effect the cumulative experience of this gradual unveiling or revelation. The influence of this style of travel also carries over into his approach as a teacher for he lays out his lessons in the shape of a journey, planning a series of experiential encounters in a carefully measured sequence. Ruskin and his teaching were also shaped by the heightened sense of anticipation such adventures provided, the sense that each discovery leads to another and that there are unimagined treasures yet to be encountered.

Being on the road thus offered Ruskin a high degree of excitement and pleasure, but it also offered something of deeper significance. When Ruskin suffered mental and physical health issues following his rejection by *Adèle Domecq*, and subsequently while he was a student at Oxford, the family remedy was to take him travelling. Travel linked opportunities for intellectual and sensory enlightenment with well-being and emotional healing. In his later years, following the mental breakdowns at Brantwood, Joan Severn employed the same strategy. It was a childhood experience of the healing effects of a visit to the Lake District that prompted Ruskin in 1871, while in Matlock to declare that if he could lie down in Coniston Water he would be well. The following year he bought Brantwood.

With the exception of a brief crossing of the English Channel, Ruskin's early European journeys were undertaken by horse and carriage. Although not over fond of horses and never a rider, Ruskin nonetheless loved travel by carriage. One of the more amusing and less well known pieces of Ruskin's writing is a short play or dramatic sketch which he wrote in 1836, entitled *The Ascent of the St. Bernard*, in which the crush of the inn in Martigny and his father's negotiations with the ostler



**Figure 2** Double Brougham carriage built in Camberwell to Ruskin's design in 1875 for the journey between London and Brantwood. Lateral view. Whitehouse Collection, R72, Lancaster University. On display at Brantwood

feature vividly. By the time that he was writing *Prae-terita* Ruskin was looking back on the joys of coach travel with a nostalgia widely shared by his readers. Hugely popular in 1888 was the release of *Coaching Days and Coaching Ways* by W. Outram Tristram, a lively and wistful look at a past era, the illustrations of which also sold in large numbers on Ridgeways pottery.

With the expansion of the railways the old infrastructure of coaching had rapidly declined. One survivor, however, was the Coaching Inn, a predilection for stays at which Ruskin retained throughout his life. Whilst inveighing against the changes that the railways brought about, Ruskin was nonetheless a heavy user of them from the start. Not untypically, Ruskin had conflicting views: the train itself was, he wrote, an

infinitely complex anatomy of active steel, compared with which the skeleton of a living creature would seem, to the careless observer, clumsy and vile.<sup>4</sup>

But train travel reduced its passengers to “pieces of white putty that could feel pain”. Instead of admiring the view

They pulled down the blinds the moment they entered the carriage, and then sprawled, and writhed, and tossed among the cushions of it, in vain contest, during the whole fifty miles, with every miserable sensation of bodily affliction that could make time intolerable.<sup>5</sup>

Just as Ruskin’s enthusiasm for the technology of photography waned even as he made use of it, so the mar-

vel that is the train nonetheless becomes one of his symbols of ‘illth’ in direct proportion to the degree to which its journey-denying ambition of speed robs its passengers of the wealth of nature through which they travel.

Ruskin’s road is the old road to which he is constantly drawn back, because it is a record of both civilization and evolution. Beyond that, its many strands ultimately comprise a spiritual journey or labyrinth. The road itself is medium, metaphor and teacher, embodying the interconnectedness of his reading of European civilization, his eye for the natural world and his own inner state of being.

In 2003, Clive Wilmer and I took a Ruskin Journey by the old roads from Venice to Turin and Pamela and I, the following year, travelled on, from Turin to Paris. One late afternoon in Verona Clive and I hiked out of the city reading a long passage of Ruskin, which I have considerably shortened:

If you chance to be at Verona on a clear, warm summer’s day, and to be weary – as may well happen – at the end of it, take a light carriage, and drive out at the eastern gate [...]. You will see, [...] a good road turning to the left – and [...] another turning to the left again, which, by a gradual slope, begins to ascend the hill on which the eastern walls of Verona are built. You will then presently find yourself, if it is towards evening, in the shade of those walls, [...] ascending, by a winding road, a hill [...] into the rocks of which, between you and the city walls, a steep ditch has been cut, – some thirty feet deep by sixty or eighty wide, – the defence of the city on that side being trusted to this one magnificent trench cut out of the solid rock, and to the precipice-like wall,

<sup>4</sup> *Works*, 19: 61.

<sup>5</sup> *Works*, 27: 346.



above, with towers, crested with forked battlements, set along it at due intervals. It was possible to cut that rock-trench [...] without gunpowder, because the rock is a soft and crumbling limestone, on which, when you see the dusty banks of it emerge under the hedges by the roadside, you, if a member of the Royal Institution, must look with great reverence. For in that white rock there are fossil-creatures, still so like the living creatures they were once, that there it first occurred to the human brain to imagine that the buried shapes were not mockeries of life, but had indeed once lived and died. Under those white banks by the roadside was born, like a poor Italian gipsy, the Modern Science of Geology.<sup>6</sup>

With a masterly control of rhythm, Ruskin's prose ambles uphill at the pace of the carriage, the revelation of the view unfolding and its significance in history. In this one very particular place Ruskin locates us in the continuum of time and space: wherever the traveler is on this road they are part of an entity which, like Ruskin's 'veins of wealth', is the circulatory system of a single heritage in which we share.

Pamela and I spent the night in snow at the monastery at the top of the St Bernard Pass where Ruskin's

dramatic sketch had placed him 180 years earlier. Not much had changed – at that point both the dogs and the monks were still there. We descended towards Chamoinix and two days later to Geneva and to the strange circular underground 'city' of CERN, which houses a giant particle collider in tunnels that cut through three countries. It is where the world wide web was started.

In concert with the rest of the world, the Europe of tomorrow begins to look ever-more like this, knowable only as an abstraction, its physical necessities and cultural consciousness rendered into a great web of forces of virtual mass, looping in and out of real people, real places, real mass, powering hundreds of cities on invisible roads in a web of 'dispersed moments of concentration'. The consequences have yet to be mapped, but we know them to threaten the environment and our well-being. Ruskin warns us that the danger will be as much spiritual as it is physical. These are roads we don't yet understand, that have no obvious means of accumulating the wisdom embodied in that 'golden stain of time'. We need Europe's old road to run alongside our super-highways. Europe's Old Road is also, as William Morris described it, 'a new road on which the world should travel', because it is a self-renewing road; as Tolstoy said of Ruskin himself, it is a road 'of all times and all places'.

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<sup>6</sup> *Works*, 19: 429.

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