

Edited by Ruskin: Francesca Alexander's *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*

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Abstract In 1907 Cook and Wedderburn published the volume XXXII of the Library Edition, grouping together a series of texts “Edited and Arranged by John Ruskin”: *Studies of Peasant Life: The Story of Ida, Roadside Songs of Tuscany, Christ's Folk in the Apennine, Ulric the Farm Servant*. Since most of the works were authored by Francesca Alexander the volume is in effect a tribute to this American artist. In this paper I outline the history of the editing of Francesca Alexander's *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, from the manuscript “Francesca's Book” to the published edition issued in parts between 1884 and 1885. I argue that Ruskin's interest in the project bears a special relationship to the publication of the *Fioretti di San Francesco* in mid-nineteenth-century French and English versions, and to the ideological context that generated those publications. Ruskin's declared aim of conveying to the English mind “some sympathetic conception of the reality of the sweet soul of Catholic Italy” was generated within this context, and his idea of publishing Francesca's manuscript in a heavily edited and thoroughly new form justifies comparison with continental research into Medieval literature in the last decades of the Nineteenth century.

Keywords Francesca Alexander. Roadside Songs of Tuscany. The Story of Ida. Italian Folk poetry. Fioretti di San Francesco. Cardinal Manning. Frédéric Ozanam.

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1 On the Old Road

John Ruskin's editorial works are utterly neglected, in part because of their ancillary nature, but also because they belong to his last years, which are still little studied and somewhat undervalued. The guidebooks to Venice and Florence of the late 1870s and 1880s – *St Mark's Rest, The Guide to the Principal Pictures in the Academy Venice* and *Mornings in Florence* – and even *Fors Clavigera* (1871-1884) and the Oxford lectures of the same pe-

riod - are provocative in that they partially contradict the aesthetic and theological assumptions of his earlier works. Their complex, non-linear argumentation is challenging, and the abundance of rhetorical tropes carries a host of half-submerged references which hardly ever come to the surface. Ruskin's multilayered discourse does not aim at definitive answers, but at opening up a vital space for meditation. After the wreckage of the Franco-Prussian war, a conflict that affected him painfully and magnified his personal emotional wreckage, his lifelong concern for Europe, its culture and its heritage, takes on a sense of desperate urgency, and of mystical reliance. It was in this context that Ruskin conceived of his edition of *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, a work he considered highly and that contemporary reviewers defined as "unique" and "very sumptuous". In exploring its genesis I shall recall his penultimate European journey, and some readings that may well have played an important part in shaping the work as it eventually appeared.

On 5 August 1882, five months after suffering his third and most severe attack of mental illness to date, Ruskin set off, on his doctor's recommendation, on what was to be his last visit to Tuscany. He was accompanied by his valet and by the young artist who was to be his first biographer, W.G. Collingwood, who recorded aspects of the journey in three chapters of his *Ruskin's Relics*. The tour was meant to consolidate Ruskin's recovery and was equally divided, in terms of the time spent, between France (Champagne, Burgundy and the Jura) and Tuscany (Pisa, Lucca and Florence). The French itinerary took him "on the old road", as Ruskin called it,¹

along the beaten track of places he had visited with his parents and which would be recollected in his autobiography *Praeterita* (1885-1889).² The Continental old road was engraved in the story of his personal life, and (partly) coincided with the myths, legends, and histories of Europe's past. In his late work Ruskin considered this legacy from a new focus, one in which the old family routes are interlaced with the 'Road of Our Fathers'. As early as the 1860s - as Cook and Wedderburn suggest - Ruskin had begun planning a series comprising "Studies in Christian History and Architecture" to be entitled *Our Fathers Have Told Us*. "The work", announced Ruskin, "will consist of ten parts, each taking up some local division of Christian history, and gathering, towards their close, into united illustration of the power of the Church in the Thirteenth Century".³ *The Bible of Amiens*, published in 1880, is the first and only volume of the series to be completed. A study "descriptive of the early Frank power, and of its final skill", it is a close reading of a portion of the map of Europe that Ruskin had explored repeatedly in the course of his working life, a portion coinciding with a "highly restricted geographical area delimited by his personal experience", whose "imaginative and rhetorical geography" could however "vary considerably", as Denis Cosgrove has pointed out.⁴ After the *Bible of Amiens* Ruskin's researches were directed further back in time, towards a closer study of the earlier history of Christianity. The visit he made on 2 September 1882 to the Benedictine monastery of Cîteaux, the cradle of the Cistercian reformation, was to be a climactic experience with respect

¹ Collingwood 1903, 45.

² *Works*, 35.

³ *Works*, 22: lxiii-lxv.

⁴ Cosgrove 2010, 136; see also Cosgrove 1995.

to this.⁵ Ruskin never accomplished his ambitious project, and perhaps he did not intend to. In his strained mental condition, he could not aim at writing such a comprehensive work, but he needed to clarify the outlines of that history as a framework for his researches on art, religion, and modern life. This is testified to by the large quantities of notes he left, and which are

partly published in volume XXXIII of the Library Edition.⁶ Fragments of *Ara Coeli* and *Valle Crucis*, the books which were to deal respectively with “the foundations of the Papal power”, and with “the monastic architecture of England and Wales”, surface through the 1882-1884 letters of *Fors Clavigera*, and through his notes to *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*.

2 Fanny Alexander and the Peasants of the Abetone

The story of its editing begins on 5 October 1885, when Ruskin and Collingwood arrived in Florence and were introduced by the former's American friend and artist, H.R. Newman, to the Alexanders, a family of Massachusetts expatriates who had settled in Tuscany in 1853. Francis, a Boston portrait painter, and Lucia Gray Swett, a wealthy woman of aristocratic connections, were part of that large circle of Anglo-American artists living in Florence in the late nineteenth century, and with respect to whom their daughter Fanny must have been quite eccentric. Born in Boston in 1837, Esther Frances, known as “Fanny”, spoke Italian as her second mother tongue. She was particularly and unusually connected with the poorest among the local people, and cultivated her drawing skills in composing precious missal-like sheets of drawings of flowers and folk songs, with the care, the devotion and the restraint of an amanuensis [fig. 1].

The Alexanders habitually spent their summer holidays in the Apennines at Abetone, where Fanny established an extraordinarily close, sympathetic relationship with the peasant women of the village. A deeply pious Lutheran Evangelical, Fanny was fascinated by the religious beliefs, traditions, and legends that were transmitted mainly through singing among the *contadini*. In these mountains” as Van Brooks puts it “everyone sang, the farmers, the shepherds and the charcoal-burners, who, as they watched their fires at night, kept one another company by singing together and improvising verses”.⁷ Musically gifted herself, Fanny started recording the *contadini* songs and their tunes in her manuscript.⁸ This careful work was intended to be both documentary and artistic, and had philanthropic purposes, as Fanny aimed to sell the manuscript to some American patron and redistribute the money among her poor Abetone friends.⁹ Her method was similar to that of Lady Augusta Greg-

⁵ Collingwood 1903, 51; Evans, Whitehouse 1959, 3: 1020.

⁶ *Works*, 33.

⁷ Brooks 1958, 182.

⁸ *Works*, 32: xx.

⁹ Most of the manuscript is now lost, the leaves with Francesca's drawings were given by Ruskin to Girton College Cambridge, Oxford, and Sheffield (*Works*, 32: 44-5).

ory, who collected orally transmitted folk tales among the Irish peasantry.¹⁰ Fanny's interests were, however, more closely intertwined with a bond of solidarity, as local people saw her as a "miracle-worker", who "nursed the invalids [...], sent scrupulous children to the seaside, bought mattresses, dresses and shoes for them and paid their rent when it was overdue".¹¹

A well-known source of Fanny's knowledge of Tuscan oral culture was Beatrice Bernardi di Pian degli Ontani, an illiterate *improvisatrice* from whose *viva voce* Fanny transcribed and translated most of the Tuscan songs, *rispetti*, and *stornelli*. A woman in her sixties when Fanny met her, Beatrice was a celebrity in the Florence *salotti*, although she continued to live a peasant life of hardships to the end. In *Roadside Songs* Beatrice is given a leading place: her portrait opens the collection and about ten pages are devoted to first-hand details of her biography. Another major source was Edwige Gualtieri, Fanny's affectionate, pious, and musical housemaid, whose fame was to be wholly due to Ruskin's edition of *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*.

3 "Francesca's Book"

On 9 October 1882, in hyperbolic terms that recall his descriptions of some revelatory moments in his life – such as his encounter with Tintoretto in the Scuola di San Rocco in 1845 – Ruskin wrote to Mrs Alexander saying that their meeting had marked a turning point in his life:

Fanny's meant her collection to be an elegiac monument to a territory and its people, to peasant life, to universal feelings, to orally preserved old music. Her drawings and the poems she transcribed and translated were generated by an intense relationship with the place. Neither a true local nor a complete foreigner, but a combination of both, Fanny's transcultural stance enriches the image of her Tuscany with an insider's understanding, combined with the wonder of an outsider. Her work partakes of that literary interest in folk traditions and songs that had emerged in Italy in the 1840s, when Niccolò Tommaseo, Giuseppe Tigri, Antonio D'Ancona, Giambattista Giuliani and others had started gathering and publishing a substantial corpus of materials and establishing metrical forms and rhymes, variants, and theories as to their origins and paths of transmission.¹² In addition, the British expatriate Ouida had set her novel *A Village Commune* (1881) in the Abetone, giving in the appendix a documented account of the place and of Beatrice di Pian degli Ontani.¹³ All of these works are acknowledged in *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*.

I've taken a new pen – it is all I can! – I wish I could learn an entirely new writing from some pretty hem of an angel's robe, to tell you with what happy and reverent admiration I saw your daughter's drawings yesterday; – reverent, not only of a quite heavenly gift of genius in a kind I had never before seen, – but

¹⁰ George 2003, 227. This is the only published article on *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, it focuses on Alexander's translations into Italian, but refers to an unrecorded edition of 1888.

¹¹ Brooks 1958, 182.

¹² Tommaseo 1841; Tigri 1869; D'Ancona 1878; Giuliani 1879.

¹³ Ouida 1881.

also of the entirely sweet and loving spirit which animated and sanctified the work, and the serenity which it expressed in the surest faiths and best purposes of life.¹⁴

He proposed buying the manuscript, which had proved to be closely related “to [his] work in England”, he would pay the sum that the family had asked for it (600 guineas) and place it in St George’s Museum.¹⁵ His idea was to exhibit the manuscript at Sheffield for the benefit of the Companions of the Guild of St George and of local peasants. To this purpose, he wished Fanny to write “by way of introduction to it – such brief sketches as she may find easy of arrangement of the real people whose portraits are given”. The main object of the sketches would be “the conveying to the mind of our English paesantry (not to say princes) some sympathetic conception of the reality of the sweet soul of Catholic Italy”.¹⁶

The meeting marked a turning point for Fanny too. The news of Ruskin’s visit and of his interest in her manuscript spread rapidly throughout Florence, and she became a celebrity overnight. In December she wrote to a friend that she felt “temporarily on the list of *distinguished people*”, that her house had been invaded by “the strangest variety of people [...] of every possible nationality”, asking to see her work in a frenzy of Ruskin emulation.¹⁷

When Ruskin returned to England in mid November 1882 he was in a state of high enthusiasm over his new treasure, and quickly began disseminating references to Fanny’s work in his lectures. On 1 March 1883, in the first of his Oxford lectures devoted to “Realistic schools of painting”, he presented Francesca Alexander, along with three other young artists – Giacomo Boni, Angelo Alessandri, and Lilius Trotter – claiming that Francesca’s drawings “carry with them certain evidences of the force of the religious feelings on the imagination”.¹⁸ It must have been at this time that he began referring to Fanny in his public writings as “Francesca”.¹⁹

Ruskin introduced Francesca’s work on several occasions, arousing considerable interest in his new friend and her work. On 6 June, at Prince of Wales Terrace, Kensington he delivered a private lecture on “Francesca’s Book” before two hundred attendees which included Matthew Arnold, Henry Lowell, Lord Leighton, the Burne-Joneses; Cardinal Manning had also received an invitation.²⁰ Several newspapers reported the event, all claiming to disclose the identity of the mysterious Francesca. All of them variously noticed that the lecturer was “in capital health and spirits”, that the second part was all devoted to “Francesca’s Book”, a work “written and illustrated by a Miss Alexander”, whose original pen-and-ink drawings were shown.²¹ *The Tablet*, a Lon-

¹⁴ Swett 1931, 23.

¹⁵ Swett 1931, 23.

¹⁶ Swett 1931, 23.

¹⁷ Swett 1931, 381, 379; emphasis in the original text.

¹⁸ *Works*, 33: 279.

¹⁹ This is testified to by the letters which have been published. On Christmas evening Ruskin wrote to Mrs Alexander still referring to “Fanny” (Swett 1931, 26-8). From then on the letters reflect a growing degree of familiarity, as the two addressed one another as *Fratello* and *Sorella* and refer to Mrs Alexander as *Mamma*.

²⁰ Hilton 2000, 467; Viljoen 1971, 321, 568.

²¹ *St James’s Gazette*, 7 June 1883.

don Catholic newspaper, specified that the venue was the home of Mrs Bishop, a Catholic lady,²² and the *Western Daily Press*, reporting the news the following week, announced that the forthcoming publication of the “series of drawings [...] with some descriptive verses”,²³ had been anticipated by Francesca Alexander’s *The Story of Ida: Epitaph on an Etrurian Tomb*. Finally, a lengthier review in the *Spectator* of 19 June reported the lecture in greater detail, saying that Ruskin had mentioned some correctable flaws in Francesca’s rendering of the human figure, but expressed his unconditional praise of the strength and delicacy of her flower drawings, which compared only to those of Leonardo da Vinci’s. The association with flowers then had led him to see the folk legends that Francesca had learnt from Beatrice degli Ontani as “the sparks which have kindled her imagination

and given life to her skill”, sparks that must have reminded Francesca “in her innocent freshness, of the *Fioretti* which, six centuries ago, gathered round the memory of St. Francis”.²⁴

This often-quoted reference to the *Fioretti* is interesting and deserves some attention. When the first two issues of *Roadside Songs* were published in August 1884, Ruskin wrote to Francesca again comparing the work to the *Fioretti of St. Francis*, and this time made closer reference to the book’s purpose and to some additional notes he had inserted. “I am very, very happy” he said, “about the form the book is taking—the little supplementary bits, enable me to fit it all together into what will be the loveliest thing ever seen, and to more good than the *fioretti di San Francesco*”.²⁵

4 The Little Flowers of Francesca

The association with the *Fioretti* might imply more than a general evocative allusion. The connection had been first made at the beginning of June 1883 by Cardinal Henry E. Manning, in his letter of thanks for his copy of *The Story of Ida*. Concluding her introduction to Francesca Alexander’s *The Hidden Servants*, Anna Fuller reports the Cardinal’s words:

It is simply beautiful, like the *Fioretti di San Francesco*. Such flowers can grow in one soil alone. They can be found only in the garden of Faith, over which the world of light hangs visibly, and is more intensely seen by the poor and the pure in heart than by the rich, or the learned, or the men of culture.²⁶

²² *Tablet*, 9 June 1883, 886.

²³ Ruskin’s own report of the lecture is given in a letter to Francesca dated 10 June, “I lectured on your book last Tuesday to all my best London friends and made them ever so happy [...] I simply said to the London people that I was not worthy to have such a book to show them. [this is not reported by any reviewer]. But it is nice that you like so much what I’ve said about the two religions” (Swett 1931, 32-3).

²⁴ *Works*, 32: 535-8.

²⁵ *Works*, 32: 77; Swett 1923, 77.

²⁶ Alexander 1903, ix; *Works*, 32: xxiii. Anna Fuller’s extract too is given in the Library Edition with no further details. Cook and Wedderburn play down the relationship between Ruskin and Cardinal Manning, whose friendship with Ruskin helped fuel suspicions that he was about to con-

Writing to Mrs Alexander on 22 June, Ruskin referred to a letter by Manning he had forwarded to Francesca.²⁷ Cook and Wedderburn laconically inform us that Ruskin “saw something of Cardinal Manning in his later years” and that “some of the Cardinal’s letters were accompanied by gifts of books such as the *Fioretti of St Francis*”,²⁸ but no reference to the gift occurs in the Library edition,²⁹ nor are we informed that it was Cardinal Manning who first translated and published the *Fioretti* into English in 1864 under the title of *Little Flowers of St Francis*. Manning’s reference to the *Fioretti* in connection with *The Story of Ida* echoes his own preface to the translation, where he defined the stories of the poor saints collected in the anonymous florilegium, as “admirable poems in prose” which

may justly be compared to flowers which give evidence of the season which has brought them forth, but do not reveal the name of the gardener who planted them. Every page of this little book breathes of the faith and the simplicity of the Middle Ages. [...] Indeed, no one author could have composed this book. Compiled from a variety of sources, it is as if it were the work of a whole century.³⁰

In his preface Manning also pointed out that the *Fioretti*

were not to be considered as “superficial trivial sketches, only intended to familiarise the public mind with the austere virtues of the cloister”; rather, the stories, in “their great simplicity”, were “full of strong doctrine, and fitted for men deeply versed in theology”, and provided a typological reading of episodes in the lives of St Louis, of St Clare, and of St Francis, acknowledging the distinguished French scholar, Professor Ozanam as his source. Manning’s edition was, in fact, greatly indebted to Frédéric Ozanam (1813-1853), a distinguished Catholic scholar who had translated a selection of the *Fioretti* into French. This constituted a part of his wide literary-historical source study, *Poètes Franciscains en Italie au treizième siècle* (1852), corresponding to Chapter VII, entitled “Les Petits fleurs de saint François”. Historical and literary studies merged with social engagement in Ozanam, who was also the founder of the Society of St Vincent de Paul. This twofold commitment emerges in his studies of early Franciscan poetry, where the poetical and religious value of poverty are foregrounded. Poverty is also seen as a stylistic cypher by Ozanam, who praises the *Fioretti* as true poetry and sees prose as the fittest form for telling the epic of the poor.³¹ It is no surprise then to discover that, among the altarpieces encountered in his rides through the Umbrian villag-

vert to Catholicism, something he had to officially deny in 1887.

²⁷ Swett 1931, 339.

²⁸ *Works*, 36: xxxvi.

²⁹ We are informed that the *Fioretti* was a late discovery of Ruskin’s, and that in *Praeterita* (*Work*, 35: 523) Ruskin acknowledged that his American friend Charles Eliot Norton had introduced him to the *Fioretti*, and two letters to Norton of 1874 and 1879 where the work is mentioned, are reported with no details of the edition (*Works*, 37: 279). In *Mornings in Florence* (1875-1877) Ruskin had quoted and translated a lengthy passage from an edition that Cook and Wedderburn (*Works*, 23: 356), overlooking a date discrepancy, wrongly identify with Leopoldo Amoni’s (Roma: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana 1889).

³⁰ Manning 1884, v.

³¹ “Mais le livre des Petits fleurs de saint François est écrit en prose, et il a ce point commun avec tant de poèmes du moyen âge écrits d’abord en vers pour le grand plaisir des grands, mais qui ont fini par trouver en prose une forme plus populaire et durable. [...] et on peut ajouter que les pompes de la poésie eussent mal convenu à l’épopée des pauvres” (Ozanam 1852, 203-4).

es, he sought the one in honour of St Zita.³² To this maid servant and patron saint of Lucca, Ruskin gives a leading role in *Roadside Songs*, placing Francesca's drawings and the "Ballad of Saint Zita" in the first two issues followed by a lengthy note on her hagiography. Such correspondences encourage us to believe that Ruskin had some knowledge of Ozanam's work and thought. As a Medievalist scholar, endowed with a particularly keen sensitivity to the language of art, and actively engaged in charitable works, he certainly had the traits that would have attracted Ruskin's interest.

Frédéric Ozanam's work had been introduced into England by Kathleen O'Meara in her biography of 1876.³³ Two years later a second edition of the book appeared with a fifteen-page preface by Cardinal Manning,³⁴ in which Manning made an outright political statement that was in effect a call to European Christians and to the clergy to carry out their duties. The Cardinal presented Ozanam as "one of the most brilliant of the brilliant band" of nineteenth-century French Catholic writers who had left "an indelible mark upon the country".³⁵ His key contribution lay in his proposal for a future republic Commonwealth of Europe, an idea that originated in a 'fascination' with medieval culture combined with modern socio-polit-

ical theories. Ozanam's major source of inspiration was Alexis De Tocqueville's *Democracy in America*, Manning argues, quoting extensively from the English 1865 edition of that work,³⁶ which proposes an egalitarian model that responds to the urgent social issues thrown up by the "violent shock of opulence and poverty which is making the ground tremble under our feet".³⁷ The questions that Cardinal Manning raised in his Preface were of momentous importance to Ruskin, and we can imagine their emerging in the substantially unrecorded exchanges between the two friends in the early 1880s.

That Manning might have been the vehicle by which Ruskin came to know Ozanam by way of O'Meara's biography seems therefore to be quite plausible, and further echoes in *Roadside Songs* seem to support this hypothesis. In introducing the *Fioretti*, O'Meara reports a veiled reference by Ozanam to his wife Adèle - whom he calls his "Beatrice" - and her "delicate hand" in translating the "little flowers". Interestingly, in reporting these words, O'Meara expands the flower metaphor implied in the *Fioretti* and defines them as the "fragrant little flowers that grew in the lowly spots along the road".³⁸ It is tempting to imagine that *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* might have been inspired by O'Meara's image. This is a reference which

³² Ozanam 1852, 10.

³³ An Irish Catholic expatriate to Paris, Kathleen O'Meara (1839-1888) wrote novels under the pseudonym Grace Ramsay, and in her own name wrote some biographies and lives of saints; she was the Paris correspondent of *The Tablet*.

³⁴ O'Meara 1878. The book went through seven editions by Catholic and Christian publishers in the United States between 1878 and 1915.

³⁵ O'Meara 1878, vi, viii.

³⁶ O'Meara 1878, xi-xvi.

³⁷ O'Meara 1878, xv.

³⁸ "They are anonymous 'it being the effort of mysticism to be forgotten of men before God', remarks the gleaner who presents them to us; and he adds, 'Here I pass the pen to a had more delicate than mine'. Whilst he was plunged in the arid researches of the archives, this hand 'more delicate than his' was culling *the fragrant little flowers that grew in the lowly spots along the road, and forming them into a bouquet whose perfume refreshed him in many an hour of weariness and pain*. Perhaps the fact of their being translated by her whom he styled his Beatrice may have added another charm to those exquisite idylls in Ozanam's eyes, and account in a measure for the fascination which they possessed for him to the least" (O'Meara 1878, 289; emphasis added).

LA MADONNA ED IL RICCONO

The Madonna and the rich man

Andante

Il piange la Madonna non ha né pan né vin, né
pan né la Madonna. O Dio pietoso. Ne op. nel Vesuvio. O Madonna di grazia. O Madonna di grazia.



Mary you are a bird that has flown, and on the mountains of St. Michael's, you are seen to this day. The man called an old girl, the woman a woman (the things of the world) that I do not know the name, but I have seen one like it in the hand of an angel, and I do not know the name. **H**eatrice of Paris that Orleans learned from there that they called her, and afterwards taught it to me. It took such a hold of her that for long time she could not say it without the tears running down her face. The man of Paris writes that he's come out after all that a very pretty one of the time it existed in the world, and afterwards the man of Paris, looking with smiles as she sang. The meaning of the story is not so clear as might be, but if I understand it, it relates to any supposed event in the life of the Madonna. The woman (the thing of the world) is a bird that the Madonna, compassionating the lost state of the rich man, appeared to him in the form of a poor woman, and what was the result.

Figure 1 Esther Frances “Francesca” Alexander, *La Madonna e il Riccone*, title page to *The Madonna and the Rich Man*. Collection of the Guild of St George, Museums Sheffield

The meaning of the story is not so clear as might be; but, if I understand it, it relates, not to any supposed event in the life of the Madonna, but to an apparition (one of those of which we hear so often) in which the Madonna, compassionating the lost state of the rich man, appeared to him in the form of a poor woman; with what result the song tells. From Francesca Alexander's MS. book (*Works*, 32: 108)

would have been particularly appropriate to Francesca, whose “delicate hand” had not only transcribed and translated the poems, but had also illustrated them with her extraordinary flower drawings. The chain of connections and correspondences may be read as constituting a multi-layered flower-and-song association that determined Ruskin's choice of the final title of the book. As we know the titles of Ruskin's late works are outcomes of half-obscure, densely personal, highly evocative processes.

5 A “Unique” and “Very Sumptuous” Book

Sometime around 10 May, Ruskin received “Francesca's Book” from Florence.⁴⁰ On the 13th he shared with her his ‘bewilderment’ at its beauty and preciousness, trusting that she would “soon know how precious it [would] become to uncountable multitudes”. He hinted at the need to change the form of the manuscript and, announcing the imminent publication of *The Story of Ida*, he said that once *Ida* began to become known he would make “this book” known at Oxford.⁴¹

The Story of Ida is the first of the works by Francesca that Ruskin published and the one least heavily edited. When Ruskin first saw the manuscript, he was struck by the association between the fragile young Italian girl and Rose La Touche, the young woman he passionately and devastatingly loved, who had died in 1875. But what also struck him was the ecumenical potential of the story, as Francesca reported:

The excitement and inadequacy that Ruskin expresses in his letters on *Roadside Songs* after the summer 1883, when he had conceived the full sense of the project, can be thus related to the complexity of the endeavour and the ‘holiness’ of the *Fioretti* model. On 1 October from Kenniwe Castle, Galloway, he wrote to Mrs Alexander: “I’ve got type settled, and my own notions a little – but I’m a profane creature to have a charge of such a thing”.³⁹

He said a good deal about my little story of *Ida*, which he had just read, and quite took my breath away by proposing to take it away and have it printed. He said it would be a very useful religious book [...] especially from the absence of all sectarian feeling in it, and he seemed much pleased at the strong friendship and religious sympathy between *Ida* and myself, belonging as we did to two different and usually opposing churches. And in connection with this, he spoke with much sadness of the enmity between different Christian sects, saying that he had known good Christians, in all of them (which is my own experience).⁴²

The need to bridge the fracture between Protestant and Catholic Churches and overcome what he saw as one of the greatest cultural barriers dividing Europe from England (and dividing England itself), was a strong concern of late Ruskin, and the potential he found in the work of

³⁹ Swett 1931, 40.

⁴⁰ He had received Francesca's manuscript from a “Quaker woman” who visited Francesca in Florence in Spring 1883 (Swett 1931, 384). Ruskin's letter is dated “Herne Hill. Sunday 13 May 1883” (Swett 1931, 28-9).

⁴¹ Swett 1931, 28-9.

⁴² Swett 1931, 376.

Francesca, a pious American Evangelical woman who collected the religious poems of Catholic *contadini*, became gradually clearer. At this stage, the idea of keeping the manuscript at St George's Museum had given way to the prospect of a - possibly imminent - publication of the work. In the meantime, he had received from Francesca the "short biographical sketches", which were to accompany the drawings.

Although not completely defined as yet, the idea of a serial publication was also taking shape. On 24 October 1883 Fanny wrote to her friend Lucy Woodbridge: "As nearly as I understand, some part of the book of the *Roadside Songs* is to be printed in numbers, but I do not know how much, nor when it is to appear".⁴³

The ten issues of *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* appeared between April 1884 and August 1885. Ruskin worked intensely on one issue at a time, gaining the attention of the public step by step. Each of the thin issues was composite, consisting of 25-30 pages of heterogeneous materials: a number of folk songs, two drawings and the prose sketches of the peasants by Francesca, and some Editor's notes. By December 1884, four issues had come out, meeting with puzzled reviews in the newspapers, which experienced difficulty in framing it. A lengthy piece in *The Evening News and Star* of that November foresaw that "when completed" the work would be "probably unique in the world of art and letters".⁴⁴ When the whole book appeared, in September 1885, in the shape of a 340-page folio hardback volume, it was greeted as a "very sumptuous book" whose socio-historical interest to the British public was, according to the reviewer, jeopardized by the hardly accessible format [fig. 4].⁴⁵

In the course of editing Ruskin had completely rearranged Francesca's manuscript, selecting from among the drawings and folk songs and changing their order, so as to place first the *Ballad of Santa Zita*, instead of the two religious hymns that opened the manuscript, and close the book with a version of the legend of St Christopher he had expressly asked Francesca to transpose into prose to make the story clearer. The central section included two long religious songs - *The Madonna and the Rich Man* [fig. 2] and *The Madonna and the Gipsy* - and Francesca's drawing of *Christ and the Woman of Samaria* accompanied by a translator's note. These texts formed the backbone of the collection, what we might call its Christian framework, and were built around Francesca's drawings. Ruskin assigned great importance to the people who had sat for the drawings, the "originals" - as Francesca called them - of the *Madonna*, the *Samaritan*, *St Christopher* and the *Gipsy*. He saw a resonance in their lives with the episodes and legends from the Gospel of which the songs speak. He thought of their stories as new *Fioretti*, stories of poor, everyday saints, survivals of that monastic European spirit he had been on the track of for some years. This is suggested by the Editor's preface to the first issue, where he informs the reader that Francesca had chosen her models because they shared some "circumstances and habitual tone of mind" with the figures of the saints they represented.⁴⁶

Originally intended just to complement the drawings, the sketches of the peasants' lives in fact constitute the larger part of the complete work: 136 of 340 pages, about two thirds of the whole book. Their prominence is ensured by an index of twenty-one names that opens the

⁴³ Swett 1931, 385-6.

⁴⁴ *The Evening News and Star*, December 1884.

⁴⁵ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 September 1885.

⁴⁶ *Works*, 32: 54.

Figure 2 Esther Frances “Francesca” Alexander, *Non ho né pan né vin cosa ti posso dar?* 381×277 mm. In *The Madonna and the Rich Man* (*Works*, 32: 104). Collection of the Guild of St George, Museums Sheffield

“The pretty young girl who sits for the Madonna is named Emilia; but I must not tell the name of her family, nor where she lives, for fear that it might be heard of [...]. I have not much to tell about Emilia (or, as we usually call her, La Madonnina); she is very beautiful, and has sat for all the Madonnas in the book. [...] but the girl sitting in the wooden chair, whose face does not appear, deserves that I should tell a little about her. [...] Afterwards her face appears several times in the course of the book, [...] poor Paolina [...] I must tell the story”.

Francesca Alexander (*Works*, 32, 110)





Figure 3 Esther Frances “Francesca” Alexander, *The Jessamine Window*. 389 × 284 mm. *Works*, 32: 142. Collection of the Guild of St George, Museums Sheffield

“Paolina’s portrait is given [...] as the girl setting a jessamine at her window [...] And though I think all these faces are pretty, not one of them gives even a faint idea of her beauty, which I found it entirely beyond my power to represent”. Francesca Alexander (*Works*, 32: 115)

“The Jessamine Window, with its pretty lesson in window-gardening, is given to Sheffield”. John Ruskin (*Works*, 32: 158 fn)

volume, in which are listed the “Persons whose characters are sketched, or some account given of passages in their lives, in illustration of the songs of Tuscany”.⁴⁷ The sketches are given “in Francesca’s own colloquial, or frankly epistolary, terms, as the best interpretation of the legends revived for us by her, in these breathing images of existent human souls”.⁴⁸

In *Roadside Songs* the association between a saint and her/his “original” turns out to be far from systematic; sometimes it is only hinted at, a mere suggestion, and sometimes it is abandoned in favour of another character who in the picture appears dimly and at a distance [fig. 2]. Francesca tells us in a confident and assertive narrative voice about Gigia, Lucia Santi, Geminiano Amidei, Emilia, Paolina, their brothers, mothers, sisters-in-law, neighbours, donkeys: in effect recreating a whole community. “However”, she writes at one point, “I am not writing a history of Cutigliano, but of Assunta, who lived in one of its steep narrow streets, just flights of low steps, but with beautiful gardens between the old houses, and roses and jessamines hanging over their walls”.⁴⁹ Ruskin the teacher and mentor who educates Francesca’s drawing skills, gives her also the status of narrator, encouraging her to write a wealth of stories which was to overflow into the subsequent collection of stories published serially as *Christ’s Folk in the Apennine* (1887-1889).

Such prose sketches occur in issue after issue of *Roadside Songs*. This creates the effect of a community of people with whom British readers become familiar gradually, as with characters in Victorian serial novels. They

also interlace with the group of texts of *rispetti* – shorter songs composed of hendecasyllabic lines, with an *abababcc* or *ababccdd* rhyme scheme – and *stornelli*, short, proverbial, three-line songs each focusing on a flower (e.g. “Flower of the Pea”, “Flower of the Maize”). Francesca’s drawing – “sincere and true as the sunshine; industrious, [...]; modest and unselfish, as ever was good servant’s work for a beloved Master” – seize and render those correspondences with “candour and lack of ostentation” [fig. 3].⁵⁰ Interestingly, the ballads and songs that are reported and translated all treat of encounters between strangers: the Madonna and the rich man, the Madonna and the gipsy, as well as the drawing of Christ and the woman of Samaria. Moreover, all the figures involved in these encounters are women, as models of benevolence and acceptance, and to womanhood, in the collection, Ruskin attributes a “guiding power”.⁵¹

The editorial intervention is massive. Ruskin organizes the work in such a way as to give prominence to the Christian frame and to the peasants’ portraits and lives, adding substantial notes to orient the texts and make the discourse relevant to contemporary Britain within the European context. The tone and approach are those of *Fors Clavigera*, the monumental epistolary work he addressed to the workmen and labourers of Britain. After an almost continuous run of more than fifteen years, Ruskin ended the *Fors Clavigera* series in December 1884, a date midway through the serial publication of *Roadside Songs*, which addresses a similar audience, and casts a similar critical, unsettling glance on Euro-

⁴⁷ *Works*, 32: 50. The emphasis on the peasants’ lives stands out in the 1885 volume edition, while the Library Edition prints the sketches in smaller fonts.

⁴⁸ *Works*, 32: 88.

⁴⁹ *Works*, 32: 147.

⁵⁰ *Works*, 32: 52. Her drawing reflected a discipline of the hand responding to criteria of “rightness” that Ruskin had advocated from the 1860s, see Levi, Tucker 2011.

⁵¹ *Works*, 32: 224.

pean events and British insularity, particularly in the Editor's "Notes on Santa Zita", "On the Priest's Office", "On the Gipsy Character", "On St Christopher". In the Preface Ruskin associates Tuscan folksongs with ancient Greek epic verse, in consonance with Tommaseo, Tigri, and Ouida, but referring to Émile Boutmy's *Philosophie de l'Architecture en Grèce* and his stylistic description of the homeric sentence as "explicit and undisturbed narrative or statement of emotion".⁵² In the "Note on the Life of Santa Zita" he reconstructs the story of the patron saint of Lucca through a close comparison between the 1615 version of the poem in *ottava rima* by Guaspari di Bartolomeo Casentino's *Vita e morte della beata Sita*, which Francesca had translated, and the account given in Alfonso Villegas's monumental work, *Il Sagro Legendario della vita di Gesù Cristo, di Maria Vergine, e de' Santi* (1757). Ruskin's enquiries had revealed that the thirteenth-century maiden servant was recognized in the time of Dante as "a very notable creature and one of practical power throughout Europe".⁵³ The long "Note on the Gipsy Character" is a tough attack against British intolerance, where Ruskin points at the "much happier wisdom" of the Italian peasantry to show "how deeply and cruelly the scorn of the Gipsy race had infixd itself in the minds of the prosperous middle classes of our own island, at the beginning of the century", referring to the 1797 entry in the *Encyclopædia Britannica*.⁵⁴

Published in September 1884, few months before he bid farewell to the readers of *Fors Clavigera*, the "Notes on the Priest's Office" have a pivotal role within the collection: "I leave the reader", says Ruskin, "for a while to his own reflections on the people he will make acquaint-



Figure 4 Francesca Alexander, *Roadside Songs of Tuscany*, London, George Allen, 1885. E.T. Cook and A. Wedderburn, *The Works of John Ruskin*, Library Edition, vol. 32, *Studies of Peasant Life*

ance with in Francesca's stories, and on the circumstances which have made them what they are".⁵⁵ These "Notes" constitute a dense theological digression on political and religious institutions in Europe, which seems at odds with the context of Tuscan peasantry, and only can be understood if related to his research into Monasticism and Early Christianity. The focus is on the clergy, whose irrelevance in contemporary life, says Ruskin, is confirmed by

⁵² *Works*, 32: 56.

⁵³ *Works*, 32: 61-2.

⁵⁴ *Works*, 32: 164.

⁵⁵ *Works*, 32: 125.

their absence from the *dramatis personae* in “higher imaginative” literature, as well as by their appearing as a desacralized body. He then provocatively maintains the bishops to be “responsible for all evils in Europe”, and quotes from Pope Gregory I’s letter to Emperor Maurice in Milman’s *History of Latin Christianity*. The issue alluded to actually constituted an iceberg in the history of Christian controversies: it dates back to 587-88 AD when John IV of Constantinople, supported by Emperor Maurice, attributed to himself the title of ecumenical patriarch, and Gregory the Great responded by introducing the title of *Servus Servorum Dei*, declaring the pope’s humility before God. The reference is left implicit, with no footnotes to clarify it, a flash in the theological background of a discourse that revolves around the theme of religious consecration, ruling power, and wealth. While stating that the evil of Europe is in having lost the vow of poverty, Ruskin maintains that the beneficial effects of religious men are still at work “in secret channels”, and that their “modest and constant virtues” are “at the root of what yet remains vital and happy among European races, as Francesca’s book will display”.⁵⁶ He reminds us that in the Bible and in Homer political and religious bodies were “consecrated offices”, while among the Romans the figure of the Pontifex maximus was “simply one of the functions to which any citizen was eligible, as to that of consul or dictator”.⁵⁷ Here Ruskin refers the reader to forthcoming, but in fact nev-

er published, chapters in *Ara Coeli* on the life of St Gregory, and in *Valle Crucis* on St Benedict, works that “may be both read in connection with the Tuscan songs”.⁵⁸ Finally he considers the significance of anointment and of the vows of poverty taken by monks and priests, saying that while in monks the vow is part of their desire to worship God in seclusion,⁵⁹ in Priesthood “magnificence” was “entirely needful” – as Tintoretto’s *Circumcision of Christ* in the Scuola di San Rocco (“the most beautiful existing symbol of all priesthood”) showed.⁶⁰ He recalls here that Gregory I “civilized the Saxons and Lombards” by “the use made of music, metal work and painting” and blames the attacks of “typically modern protestants” against the “use of splendour” by the Church, and concludes that all ancient cultures were “born in equal simplicity”, citing Gibbon’s portrait of Caliph Omar as a model of frugality and munificence: “Wherever he halted, the company without distinction was invited to partake of his homely fare, and the repast was consecrated by the prayer and exhortation of the Commander of the Faithful”.⁶¹

As in *Fors Clavigera*, Ruskin’s discourse here follows a path that is not linear, but one which moves “disjointedly through constantly shifting, idiosyncratic viewpoints”.⁶² Read in the context of the spiritual search on which he was engaged at this time, however, we may grasp a sense of the theological questions and social concerns it raises.

⁵⁶ *Works*, 32: 118.

⁵⁷ *Works*, 32: 119. Italics in the original.

⁵⁸ *Works*, 32: 119. Italics in the original.

⁵⁹ *Works*, 32: 120.

⁶⁰ *Works*, 32: 121.

⁶¹ *Works*, 33: 121-3.

⁶² Stoddart 1998, 47.

6 “The Main Lessons”

Coinciding with the birth of the interest in peasantry from the 1870s,⁶³ *Roadside Songs of Tuscany* was perceived as a composite work whose ethnographic interest was soon acknowledged.⁶⁴ In assembling its texts and images, Ruskin performed a complex act of cultural mediation by means of multiple processes of translation.

Roadside Songs was intended to intersect with British culture and be relevant to it within the European context. Ruskin conducted his reader through his historical and philological searches, connecting the Tuscan peasantry to the sources of Western civilization. His method is analogical and associative, his statements aiming not to be normative but suggestive and reformatory. Initially Ruskin had meant to provide teaching through Francesca's stories of the *contadini*, but later gave up this attempt for reasons of which he wrote in a final “Note on the Vision of St Christopher”:

I had partly hoped, in closing this series of pictures of the hearts of the Italian peasantry, to indicate the main lessons they seemed to bear for us all. But I am abashed before their strength and innocence, and able to draw only this one conclusion of deep practical import, – that the only service we can rightly render them is to love them.⁶⁵

The teacher and scholarly editor thus withdraws from the work, letting the book close with two sections of letters from Francesca that compose a mosaic of stories told by her maid Edwige, about women and children, on family life and mutual help, poverty and charity. The volume ends with the evening prayer that, Francesca assures in a note, all peasants sing to their children. It is an appropriate ending for a book which was not intended to be a monument of an idealised view of rural life, but a memorial of living Tuscan peasants that aimed to rekindle, in modern Britain, that mysticism of everyday life which, in his old age, Ruskin saw as the core of Europe's legacy.

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⁶³ Blum 1982, 123.

⁶⁴ *Pall Mall Gazette*, 21 September 1885.

⁶⁵ *Works*, 32: 223.

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