



# CHERRYBURN TIMES

*The Journal of The Bewick Society*

## RUSKIN'S ANNOTATIONS TO BEWICK'S *BIRDS*

*by Peter Osborne*

'The Bewick Society exists to promote interest in Thomas Bewick', but as what? A fine craftsman illustrator who revived wood engraving, or something more? Leading figures in the arts in the mid 19th century were clear about this: Thomas Bewick was an important artist and a superlative model for young people wanting to be artists. One of these admirers was of outstanding importance: John Ruskin wrote that Bewick was one of the world's great artists. And when Ruskin drew up a reading list for his students of art at Oxford, Bewick's *Memoir* was at the top of the list.

Ruskin is back in favour. Books which half a century ago went for pence now cost many pounds. If the Society is keen to promote Bewick we would do well to heed and exploit Ruskin's interest. References to Bewick are scattered through Ruskin's enormous collected works but his main evaluation was made in two books: *Ariadne Florentina* and later, in 1881, *Love's Meinie*. The latter is Ruskin's late book on birds – he had to have and publish a view on nearly everything – and in it he both praises and criticises Bewick, being especially critical of the Water Ouzel. But the longer and more measured evaluation of Bewick comes into *Ariadne Florentina*, a book on drawing and engraving which is in fact the published form of the lectures which Ruskin gave at Oxford in 1872. It is believed that he looked intensively at *British Birds* in preparing these lectures and that the annotated volumes in Sheffield Millennium Galleries, which are my subject, were those he used. I was particularly keen to see them because Ruskin, in his published works, could get carried away by his own theories and rhetoric. His more spontaneous reactions as he leafed through these books are valuable as being far more indicative of his direct personal response.

Ruskin's copy of *British Birds* is in Sheffield for a particular and relevant reason. It was part of his gift of art, books and other materials to the Guild of Saint George which he founded and based there just at this time in the early 1870s.

In this foundation Ruskin's ideals for both art and society were brought together. He was seeking a revival of craft-based manufacture in which people would find a joy in the personal, creative hand working which they had lost in becoming slaves to mass production in factories. Sheffield was chosen for the beginnings of this intended revolution because of its tradition of specialized steel craft. It would be the new Florence of the north, and the Guild of Saint George would be Ruskin's

Trojan Horse. You can see how well Bewick, the skilful, workshop-based engraver/artist, fits into this as an ideal model. And you would expect to see that his craftsmanship, the facture of the engravings, would be high in Ruskin's interests both in the donation of *British Birds* to the Guild and also in his appraisal of their contents.

Ruskin copiously annotated *British Birds*, writing directly on the first editions of *Land Birds*, 1797, and *Water Birds*, 1804. As was his habit he treated these volumes as tools to be used, not only writing freely beside the illustrations but cutting out chunks of pages, especially vignettes, for his own and others' use. Annotation is not even: in some parts his comments spill out freely, but then sometimes several pages are missed and, towards the end of the *Water Birds*, he runs out

entirely, the last c.100 pages being untouched. Interestingly, the annotations show Ruskin far more interested in the vignettes than the bird cuts. Annotation material on the former outweighs that on the birds by about 2 : 1 and more of the latter are exclamatory or repetitive: 'very fine', 'magnificent', etc. Not only are the bird comments sometimes disappointing in their brevity, but also there is, strangely, no comment at all on the Dipper cut that he went on to criticise strongly in *Love's Meinie*. The Sheffield Catalogue of the Ruskin and Tuscany exhibition says that the notes were written 'probably while preparing the lectures on engraving'. The didactic imperatives often used do suggest an educational purpose. The following comments represent a large selection of all that Ruskin wrote in his annotations.



John Ruskin in 1870, just before he wrote *Ariadne Florentina*

There are many acute observations on individual bird cuts which range from eager praise to perceptive criticisms. What excites Ruskin most is the brilliance of touch in the cutting of plumage. Exclamations of admiration are evoked by: Snipe: 'One of his finest bits'

Wryneck: 'one of the simplest and best for studying his plume treatment'

Woodcock: 'Superb'

Bittern: 'Typical of his highest style'

Yellow/White Owl: 'Throughout stupendous in feather cutting. This and the next (Tawny) are the two finest'

Divers: 'Plumage fine' as also the series following the Water Crane.

Sea Eagle: 'Feather cutting stupendous. Note the whiskers over mouth and going down the back feathers to the tail'

As in these last two, Ruskin often notes the handling of other features such as bill, eye and claws:

Common Buzzard: 'Eyes magnificent. . . .light itself'

Red Grouse: 'Legs and feet glorious'

Raven: 'head, eye and claws superb and general colour'

Redshank: 'Bird and shanks fine'

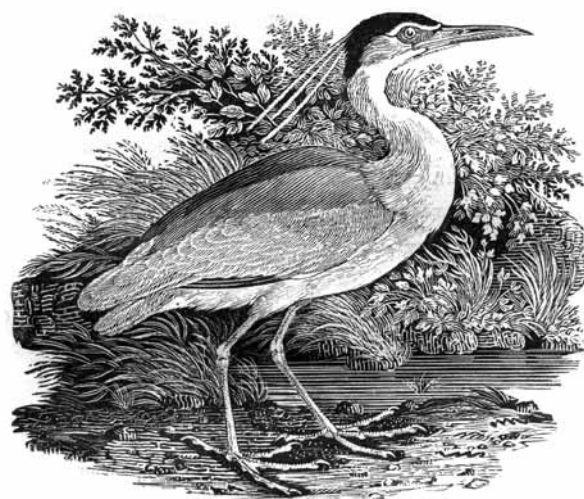
Razorbill: 'Great pains taken with bill'

Imperatives suggesting pedagogical purpose include the Night Heron: 'Look with lens at cutting of the white crest feather and the claws.' [1]

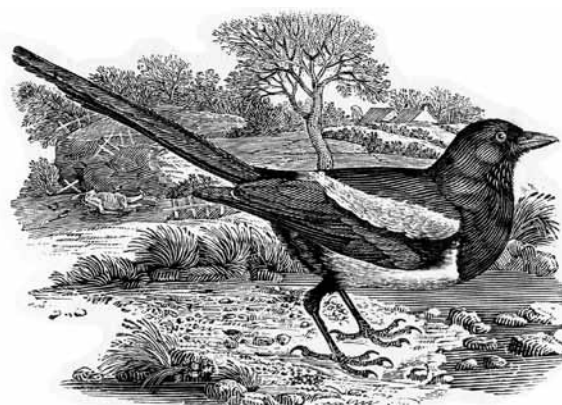
Many laudatory comments are general: the Turnstone is 'superb', the Dunlin 'Very fine', the Red Legged Sandpiper 'one of the choicest pieces of work in the book', the Avocet 'Exquisite in the lines of body and wings', and the Corncrake 'very fine, especially the action'. It is notable that these last two perceptions praise important qualities in Bewick's Birds: the gracefulness of line which he refers to in the introduction and the sense of movement so often used to indicate what Bewick and Beilby called 'instinct'. Ruskin also notes the effect of local colour. The Hobby has a 'fine head' for this, though he criticizes the Jay for lack of it, saying that it was 'curiously poor' and showing that he did not care for colour but only for *chiaroscuro*.

In fact Ruskin is sharply critical of some cuts, especially where Bewick tends to over-elaborate, and most of all where plumage seems to be cut laboriously and repetitively. In the Peacock 'The complexity of the distant raised plumage and leaves a most notable instance of a great man's mistake in showing his skills in the wrong place and losing intelligibility for display.' The Rook is 'intensely laboured and thought-out – but too elaborate for the material'. He notes that the Magpie [2], with its 'Distance wonderfully fine' is, in later editions relieved of its 'ugly sticks in the foreground,' an acknowledgement of Bewick's improvements through the editions. Of the Golden Eagle: 'Note in general the conscientious infinity of labour in the feather cutting (which) becomes servile for want of proper teaching of *chiaroscuro*.' This is just, but it also reflects Ruskin's theory and personal practice in relieving passages of detail with areas of appropriate generalisation.

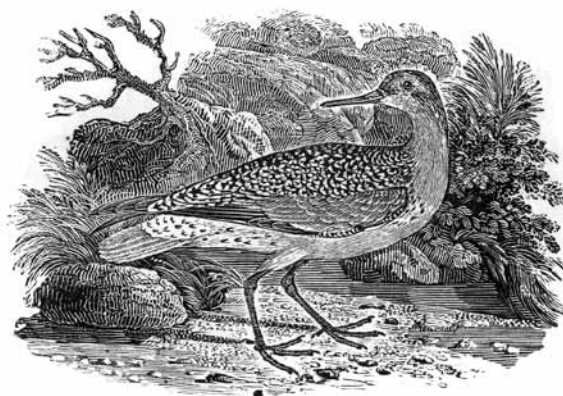
The Knot [3] is 'horrible all !!!' 'Tail curiously spoiled by the background; and the water by the Redshank is 'wofully (sic) conventional.' Though the plumage of the Woodcock is 'fine,' 'he has lost the rounding kept so wonderfully in 293.' The Partridge is 'most curiously mistaken, losing the whole breast' to the extent that Ruskin awards it 6 ex-



[1] The Night Heron



[2] The Magpie



[3] The Knot



[4] The White Grouse

clamation marks upside down. The Dotterel feather is good but ‘I can do better myself.’ In some of these criticisms Ruskin is looking at the relationship between bird and background. Fuller analysis shows that this is subtly organized by Bewick so that indeed not all of the bird outline is equally contrasted. He lightens or darkens areas for this. Ruskin is right that the Partridge is over-lightened on the breast, losing its grey bib, but the Knot is typically, and perhaps rightly, under-contrasted on the tail. He is right, too, about the conventional water in the Redshank, and conventional schematised depiction is common in many background details.

The White Grouse [4], however, is ‘Bewick’s uttermost with !!!! !!!!’ notes of admiration. And indeed the balance of comments on the bird cuts is weighted toward enthusiastic praise, but with occasional criticisms that do seem to stick regarding over-elaboration, tonal exaggerations for the sake of contrast, and some conventionalised background.

In the notes on the vignettes Ruskin is again concerned with the cutting, but is far more interested in the meaning, titling and validity of subject and content. (The distinction is maintained in this present paper of distinguishing subject, as what is depicted, from content, which is about the underlying meaning of the whole image.) Cutting is much praised in the dog and protective mother hen [5], which he calls ‘Maternity’; ‘a study for woodcutting the hen’; and the fighting cocks are ‘splendid’. The image of father and son trapping a blackbird in the snow is ‘exquisite’ and the Dipper vignette is ‘well done for the little bird on the right, – water ousel?’ The peacock on The Rich Man’s Gate [6] is ‘finer than the professed cut of it.’ The ‘flight of (What birds)’ in the Farmyard [7] is ‘very notable for the careful variety of touch’. (Ruskin’s uncertainty about bird identification in these two cases throws some doubt on the level of his detailed ornithological awareness.) The Linen Line [8] is ‘highly comic; the old sow beautiful’ and the ploughman landscape ‘exquisite’; the Saving the Toll [9] ‘landscape superb’, the ‘Northumberland rain, entirely magnificent’ in the Traveller [10], and the Skaters on the Tyne [11] ‘very fine’. The snow snare scene with three figures has ‘Landscape perfect’ and clearly elucidates ‘the meaning of the 3 figures’, while the Rock at Sea is ‘wonderfully fine in [the] unaffected wildness and sadness of the sea’, an echo of Brontëesque feeling. The little dog in The Haystack is ‘thoroughly fine’, the Cows and Magpies [29] are ‘Superb’ and ‘the distance one of his finest bits of tree work’. ‘The astonished horse in the distance’ of the Snowman [12] is ‘nice’, and the Runaway Horse and Cart [13] ‘very fine’. The Blind Fiddler is ‘one of his carefulest bits.’

The enthusiasm is partly offset by a few criticisms: some vignette cuts, like birds, are ‘overelaborate in vain’. The Stilt vignette is one such. Again he criticises some aspects of Bewick’s depiction of nature. For example ‘he never seems to have seen reflections in water’, (which is an exaggeration), and depiction of rock in the sea stack pictures is ‘bad’ and ‘very poor’, as again is the vignette of boys collecting eggs on cliffs, which is ‘poor, especially the odd cutting of the distant mountains’. Ruskin has indeed here seized upon a depictive limitation which Bewick developed early in his career in employing certain stereotyped schemata insufficiently varied by observation. Rocks, water, and especially tree bark are examples, the last probably derived from his beloved Croxall.



[5] The Dog and the protective Mother Hen (Maternity)



[6] The Beggar’s Meal (The Peacock at the Rich Mans Gate)



[7] The Farmyard



[8] The Linen Line



[9] Saving the Toll

Ruskin also grumbles that only the ladder throws a shadow in the Farmyard [7], an example of Ruskin expecting academic propriety where Bewick was much freer, bending the rules to his use for effect.

Similarly he attacks the Crow and Pitcher [14], noting ‘the total want of evaluation shown by his barbarous error in perspective of vase.’ There is ‘inconceivably bad chiaroscuro (in) Military Glory’ and ‘execrable light and shade in the Birds-nesting Boy’ [16]. Now, however, after a century when significant artists have more frequently broken academic rules than kept them, we may question Ruskin’s highlighting of faux pas which he was even willing to praise elsewhere, as Holbein’s ‘Death and the Ploughman’ in *Ariadne Florentina*.

In any case his criticisms are far outweighed by his praise. In several cases this again takes the form of imperatives, which suggest a pedagogical purpose. ‘Thin Ice is superb.. see the dog trying to get across the stream,’ and in the Greenshank vignette, where the man is ‘very fine,’ ‘look at the face with a lens.’ In *The Crow and Pitcher* [14] ‘examine the bird’s eye and beak’. ‘Look at duck’s heads in pannier and the old horse’s eye and nostril’ in the *Stubborn Horse* [17], and ‘note engraving of hand on boy’s shoulder in the *Illiterate Leading the Blind*’ [18]. In the *Cruel Tanner and Boys* ‘Look at the dog’s eye with a powerful lens and the man’s face!!!’ [19] and in *Rest* ‘very marvelous, see brace of birds and dog’s head.’

Ruskin does note some qualities in Bewick’s work which are extraordinary for the time such as the depiction of movement. In the *Runaway Horse and Cart* [13] ‘note him try to give swiftness to the wheels by many cuts for spokes’ and the unusual quality of dark tone in his depiction of background ice floes. His very high estimate of Bewick is reflected in enthusiastic praise. *Mutual Assistance* is compared to Turner’s *Crossing the Brook*. Ruskin’s all-great artist is again invoked in ‘the Arctic Sea! Glorious, like a piece of Turner.’ ‘Rippled Sea under Moonlight has more in it than many an Academy picture (light).’ And, of *The Dog and the Tramp!!!* [20], ‘No Greek work is finer than this angry dog.’ There is a complex annotation of *Ultra Loyalty*: [21] ‘Laziness? Or drunkenness – but I think not. The head one of the finest pieces of woodcutting he ever did and all magnificent – Richness of landscape got out of horizontal line.’

This last note reflects on Ruskin’s own strengths and weaknesses: his highly perceptive comment on the brilliant working of distance balanced by a typical failure. With half a decision made in favour of laziness as a subject, he omits to notice the inappropriateness of this when the miller, typically for Bewick’s interest in movement, is actually in the act of falling. The besom inn sign confirms the drunkenness. Something of the same weakness is found sometimes in his comment on vignette subjects and content. He proclaims his interest in this at the very beginning of the book, writing against the title, *Land Birds*, ‘and something more, this prophecy (i.e. The Newcastle Arms) [15] for one little thing’ ‘The gravestone of aristocracy’, he adds, ‘*Vita Nuova*, (referring ironically to Dante), The new life of commerce and manufacture.’ This perhaps reflects more Ruskin’s social concerns than Bewick’s, though he too may have considered it. Sometimes his interpretation is reflected in a title-like phrase. *The Illiterate Leading the Blind* is ‘Poverty and Misery’ [18]. *Grata Sum*, [24] where he seems strangely uncertain of the



[10] The Traveller in Northumberland Rain



[11] The Skaters on the Tyne



[12] The Snowman



[13] Runaway Horse and Cart



[14] The Crow and Pitcher



[15] The Newcastle Arms (Title-page Vignette, vol 1)



inscription, is ‘Thirsty’. These seem to be off the more obvious focus on ignorance in the former and the sheer goodness of pure water in the latter, but many of his pseudo titles are more pertinent, such as ‘The Two Old Soldiers’, ‘The Blind and the Lame’ for Mutual Assistance, ‘at the Rich Man’s Gate’ for the Beggars Meal [6], ‘Grace before Meat’ for The Overlong Grace [38], and ‘The Devil’s Pipe’ for the Devil Spying the Gallows [23]. ‘Stopping at the Inn’ blames the Runaway Horse on the carter rather than the children, which seems fair [13], and ‘The Modern Icarus’ for Flight to the Moon [33] is more an ironic comment, to which he adds, ‘See Daedelus on Giotto’s Tower.’ The owl vignette is ‘The classic Athena’ and Ruskin adds ‘The dark oak foliage one of his finest bits’.

While Ruskin’s interpretation of vignettes may sometimes appear to us to emphasise less obvious meanings, and particularly those which conform to his own ideals for society, they remain of interest as the spontaneous thoughts of a highly perceptive, if opinionated, critic, who quite probably grew up with Bewick’s books in the 1820s. In several cases he does not know the meaning. Against ‘The Dog at the Oven,’ as he calls it, he writes ‘M?’ and explains that this is ‘an old mark of mine for meaning?’ Of the Little White Heron vignette he writes ‘Can’t make this out.’ The Millstone Lifters are for him ‘obscure,’ though he does observe ‘misapplied and well-applied force,’ which is indeed a reasonable interpretation. In Rest by a Monument ‘there is something in his head that I don’t understand.’ In the Overlong Grace [39] he questions ‘the meaning of the boy on a goat in the picture,’ which raises the same question of the vignette of the same subject (and Death on a Sledge Drawn by Goats). Perhaps the implication of the context in Overlong Grace implies that it represents superstition for Bewick. The Man Hanging a Cat [35] is ‘vildest bad taste, unless there is some meaning I can’t get at.’ The important implication of all these cases is Ruskin’s assumption that there is a meaning to be understood.

Some examples of his own attribution of meaning are now discussed. There is a long comment on the frontispiece vignette of boys sailing toy boats [41]: ‘I am not sure of the meaning of this vignette but I think it means a waste of time – the work of earth and heaven calling us in the distance. (Or cf. p.56 perhaps the results of Church and factory on British youth).’ The fact of this vignette being used as a frontispiece suggests that it may have had a specific purpose for Bewick. Since the book is addressed to youth perhaps Ruskin is suggesting that they could be better employed, though, for Bewick this could as well be in enjoying nature rather than in labouring.

He correctly identifies the man praying on a rock at sea as ‘Shipwrecked. See masthead above water,’ [36] but is unsure about the vignette of wrack on the seashore. He calls it ‘The Rudder’ [37] and says it is ‘very fine, but tiller wrong way on or a loose spar.’ In fact it does appear to be the tiller but separated, thereby enhancing the pathos.

The Old Soldiers Meeting on a Building Site [38] he calls ‘Old Comrades’ and comments ‘British War (Prophet and Glory).’ He seems to mean that Bewick is a prophet in the Old Testament sense of making acute critical comment on society. ‘Glory’ then is ironic if this is all reward old soldiers get. This reflects Bewick’s comments on John Cowie in the *Memoir*. He adds the perceptive observation ‘Note dovecote in the



[16] The Birdnesting Boy



[17] The Stubborn Horse



[18] Illiterate Boy leading the Blind Man



[19] The Cruel Tanner and Boys



[20] The Dog and the Tramp

distance, ironical? Irony is implied again about The Tanner and the Cruel Boys [19], where, in his anti-ecclesiastical vein, he adds ‘The use of cathedrals and bishops.’ But the mood he detects in The Old Stonebreaker [27] is different: ‘Note his comfort – his dog and his bottle. The signpost for the use of his work to all mankind.’ This is interesting because, knowing mid-century representations of stonebreaking as unremitting toil, Ruskin contrasts this vignette as implying a certain contentment of worthwhile labour.

The Two Horses in the Rain [22] are of ‘Highest possible quality, an amazing achievement in engraving and for feeling of melancholy in rain.’ He adds irony again for English weather: ‘Compare French: vous êtes amusant comme la pluie.’ He continues to see relevance in background features, so ‘the distant alehouse [is] unintelligible’ in The Devil and Condemned at the Gallows, but ‘what has the windmill to do with it?’ Similarly in the Drowned Dog [28], ‘I don’t understand the footsteps on mud.’ Jane explained the latter as the footprints of a passer-by avoiding the stink. Bewick’s frequent use of windmills in dramatic circumstances does suggest implied meaning, possibly imminence as in Hogarth’s ‘Idle ’prentice ... sent to sea’.

The Cows and Magpies [29] is ‘superb. But one wants this piece of jackdaw business explained.’ Later readers of his notes tried to do this: ‘means that the birds are mobbing a sparrow hawk’, writes J. Runciman. A similar airborne disturbance in the Fly-ridden Cow may suggest that these two cows are, like her, errant and therefore so troubled. What Ruskin strangely calls ‘Yorkshire Church and Religion (Vanitas) [is] noble in satire and prophecy.’ He seems to notice the juxtaposition of feckless youth with age and death, a theme which may well have been borrowed from Bewick by Turner. Sometimes a word or brief phrase implies comment. The Ploughman [40] is a beneficent ‘Justissima Tellus’ and the Old Washerwoman ignoring the dog peeing on her work [25] is ‘Tobacco,’ which is presumably implied to be the cause of her insouciance.

Ruskin’s fixed opinion was that Bewick was a ‘Northumberland Clod’ who ‘preferred to draw pigs rather than Venus.’ This tendency comes through frequently and sometimes unjustly. Of the Man in Deep Water he writes ‘Bewick has a curious love of drawing animals uncomfortable’, when the point is that in these cases the animal is showing greater wisdom than the human. Strangely the Traveller, Man and Donkey evokes: ‘it is surprising how little he enjoys donkeys.’ The Old Woman and the Dog [34] are ‘English Vulgarities – bad enough’; the Howdie [30] is ‘In bad taste, partly feverish and diseased’, the Thumb Print [31] in ‘Vilest bad taste’ and the Resting Sportsman ‘Useless. Observe how the idea of stick or gun seems almost insanely necessary to him.’ Oddly again, given Bewick’s expressed enjoyment of nature while fishing, ‘This perpetual fishing with no joy in the beauty of stream & shore – a most woful (sic) condition in Bewick’s mind’. Finally, two pieces of irony: Old Woman and Geese at the Fountain [26] is referred to as ‘The Nymph at the Fountain’; and Old Woman and the Gander [32] is ‘Bewick’s idea of refined character and features in advanced life!’ ‘Such age how beautiful’ to be compared with Wordsworth’s sonnet – “mild indignation!” [But] if any modern woodcutter can do more with o than that much of his block, I should like to see it’



[21] Ultra Loyalty (Drunk on the King’s Birthday)



[22] Two Horses in the Rain



[23] The Devil spying the Gallows (The Devil’s Pipe)



[24] Grata Sum (Thirsty)



[25] Old Washerwoman, the Dog peeing on her Work (Tobacco)



[26] Old Woman and Geese (The Nymph at the Fountain)



[27] The Old Stonebreaker



[33] Flight to the Moon (The Modern Icarus)



[28] The Drowned Dog



[34] The Old Woman and the Dog



[29] The Cows and Magpies



[35] Man hanging a Cat



[30] The Howdie [Midwife]



[36] Shipwrecked



[31] The Thumb Print [What is it hiding?]



[32] The Old Woman and the Gander



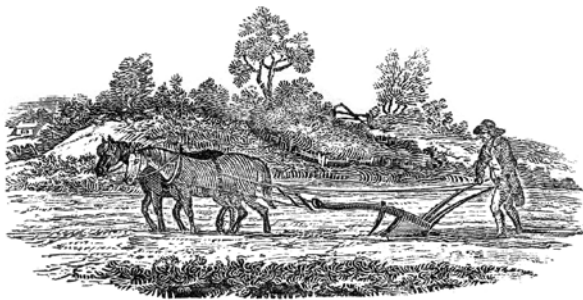
[37] The Rudder



[38] Two Old Soldiers on a Building Site (Old Comrades)



[39] The Overlong Grace (Grace before Meat)



[40] The Ploughman



[41] Boys sailing Toy Boats (Title-page Vignette, vol.2)

Even given that Ruskin was in the process of comparing Bewick and Hogarth, in their ‘love of the ugly,’ with Botticelli, we are still struck by his unpreparedness for the sheer realism of Bewick even though he was writing at a time when Courbet’s Realist movement was well underway.

By way of a summing-up, we may say that Ruskin’s annotations on his copy of *British Birds*, spontaneous and uneven as they are, throw light on his published views on Bewick. These views have sometimes been misrepresented in Bewick literature in a rather partisan way because Ruskin’s very high praise of Bewick is in fact balanced by critical comment. Some key themes emerge. The first is Ruskin’s enormous admiration for Bewick’s facture. Truly deep and profoundly noted, this is not however boundless, because he criticises some cuts for their over-elaboration or depictive effect. In this latter, Ruskin himself is sometimes over-bound by academic assumptions about perspective and chiaroscuro, when Bewick with his freer exploitation is often more modern. After all, not only was Bewick positively distrustful of the academic and its rules but he would happily manipulate tone and perspective for his own expressive ends.

It is notable that some key criticisms expressed later in *Love’s Meinie* are not prefigured at all in the notes. An interesting aspect of Ruskin’s comment is his frequent recommendation to look at detail through a lens since we know from other early 19th century sources that this was not uncommon practice. Ruskin’s notes about ‘colour’ in what are black and white images reflects Bewick’s stated intention as recorded in chapter 23 of the *Memoir*.

Ruskin does refer, in occasional notes, to qualities in Bewick which have not been sufficiently stressed such as his pioneering interest in movement, the aesthetic improvements per edition, and the gracefulness of bird form which Bewick loved. Ruskin also hints at insufficiently noted deficiencies such as repetitive schemata, and we have noted his application of academic criteria.

His reaction to the vignettes also mixes tremendous enthusiasm with occasional criticisms. Two things in particular raise questions. His criticism of poor taste often shows an unpreparedness for a socio-political realism which at least connects with what he elsewhere calls ‘prophetic’, and his endless search for ‘meaning’ raises the unanswered question of how much meaning there is to be found. His reference to Dante at the very beginning, on the Boys and Sailing Boats may have been meant to raise this question. There was the obvious *vita nuova* of the industrial revolution, and doubtless he was referring to that. Ruskin, who was turning increasingly to symbolic interpretation of art, found support for that in Dante’s *Vita Nuova*. It may be that in referring *Vita Nuova* to his ‘prophet’ Bewick, he was testing the vignettes against that touchstone. This is a sign of the tendency to symbolic interpretation at the time, even though, from what we know of Bewick, most of his imagery, if symbolic at all, would have been intuitive rather than planned.

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*Cherryburn Times* is normally published twice a year. Contributions are invited particularly (but not only) from members of the Bewick Society. The preferred digital format is ‘Rich Text Format’ (.rtf) or Microsoft Word (.doc) and images in Jpeg or Tiff: print resolution 300 d.p.i. (8 cm wide or larger).

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