

from *The Roots of Honor*

JOHN RUSKIN

John Ruskin (1819–1900) was born in London, the only child of a wine importer. He was educated at home and studied at King's College, London, and at Oxford. A precocious young man, he started writing articles at age fifteen and became a highly influential art critic, publishing his first great work, *Modern Painters*, in five volumes between 1843 and 1860. He later turned to social and political concerns, writing such works as the three-volume *The Stones of Venice* (1851–1853), *Unto This Last* (1860), and *Sesame and Lilies* (1865). *Unto This Last* addresses social reform and economics; it includes "The Roots of Honor," excerpted here. Ruskin held an Oxford professorship from 1870 to 1880, when he resigned for health reasons. He had bouts of madness until 1883, when he was reelected to his professorship. Astoundingly prolific, Ruskin wrote over 250 works on art, ornithology, politics, history, economics, geology, literature, mythology, and what we would now call environmental science. He also wrote a fantasy novel, *The King of the Golden River* (1841), and worked on his autobiography, *Praeterita*, from 1885 to 1889. Ruskin's thought on art and political economy has been highly influential. *Unto This Last* had a profound influence on Mahatma Gandhi, and Ruskin continues to influence such contemporary writers as Wendell Berry, whose work is included in this chapter (p. 484).

Now there can be no question but that the tact, foresight, decision, and other mental powers required for the successful management of a large mercantile concern, if not such as could be compared with those of a great lawyer, general, or divine, would at least match the general conditions of mind required in the subordinate officers of a ship, or of a regiment, or in the curate of a country parish. If, therefore, all the efficient members of the so-called liberal professions are still, somehow, in public estimate of honor, preferred before the head of a commercial firm, the reason must lie deeper than in the measurement of their several powers of mind.

And the essential reason for such preference will be found to lie in the fact that the merchant is presumed to act always selfishly. His work may be very necessary to the community; but the motive of it is understood to be wholly personal. The merchant's first object in all his dealings must be (the public believe) to get as much for himself, and leave as little to his neighbor (or customer) as possible. Enforcing this upon him, by political statute, as the necessary principle of his action; recommending it to him on all occasions, and themselves reciprocally adopting it; proclaiming vociferously, for law of the universe, that a buyer's function is to cheapen, and a seller's to cheat — the public, nevertheless, involuntarily condemn the man of commerce for his compliance with their own statement, and stamp him forever as belonging to an inferior grade of human personality.

This they will find, eventually, they must give up doing. They must not cease to condemn selfishness; but they will have to discover a kind of commerce which is not exclusively selfish. Or, rather, they will have to discover that there never was, or can be, any other kind of commerce; that this which they have called commerce was not commerce at all, but cozening; and that a true merchant differs as much from a merchant according to laws of modern political economy, as the hero of the “Excursion” from Autolycus.¹ They will find that commerce is an occupation which gentlemen will every day see more need to engage in, rather than in the businesses of talking to men or slaying them; that, in true commerce, as in true preaching, or true fighting, it is necessary to admit the idea of occasional voluntary loss; that sixpences have to be lost, as well as lives, under a sense of duty; that the market may have its martyrdoms as well as the pulpit; and trade its heroisms, as well as war.

May have—in the final issue, must have—and only has not had yet, because men of heroic temper have always been misguided in their youth into other fields, not recognizing what is in our days, perhaps, the most important of all fields; so that, while many a zealous person loses his life in trying to teach the form of a gospel, very few will lose a hundred pounds in showing the practice of one.

The fact is, that people never have had clearly explained to them the true functions of a merchant with respect to other people. I should like the reader to be very clear about this. 5

Five great intellectual professions, relating to daily necessities of life, have hitherto existed—three exist necessarily in every civilized nation:

The Soldier’s profession is to *defend* it.

The Pastor’s, to *teach* it.

The Physician’s, to *keep it in health*.

The Lawyer’s, to *enforce justice* in it.

The Merchant’s, to *provide* for it.

And the duty of all these men is, on due occasion, to *die* for it.

“On due occasion,” namely:

The Soldier, rather than leave his post in battle.

The Physician, rather than leave his post in plague.

The Pastor, rather than teach Falsehood.

The Lawyer, rather than countenance Injustice.

The Merchant—What is *his* “due occasion” of death?

It is the main question for the merchant, as for all of us. For, truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live.

¹By the “Excursion,” Ruskin is playfully referring to the *Odyssey* and its hero, Odysseus. In contrast, Odysseus’s grandfather, Autolycus, was a child of Hermes, and thus a thief. It was said he could never be caught. —Eds.

Observe, the merchant's function (or manufacturer's, for in the broad sense in which it is here used the word must be understood to include both) is to provide for the nation. It is no more his function to get profit for himself out of that provision than it is a clergyman's function to get his stipend. The stipend is a due and necessary adjunct, but not the object, of his life, if he be a true clergyman, any more than his fee (or *honorarium*) is the object of life to a true physician. Neither is his fee the object of life to a true merchant. All three, if true men, have a work to be done irrespective of fee—to be done even at any cost, or for quite the contrary of fee; the pastor's function being to teach, the physician's to heal, and the merchant's, as I have said, to provide. That is to say, he has to understand to their very root the qualities of the things he deals in, and the means of obtaining or producing it; and he has to apply all his sagacity and energy to the producing or obtaining it in perfect state, and distributing it at the cheapest possible price where it is most needed.

And because the production or obtaining of any commodity involves necessarily the agency of many lives and hands, the merchant becomes in the course of his business the master and governor of large masses of men in a more direct, though less confessed way, than a military officer or pastor; so that on him falls, in great part, the responsibility for the kind of life they lead; and it becomes his duty, not only to be always considering how to produce what he sells in the purest and cheapest forms, but how to make the various employments involved in the production, or transference of it, most beneficial to the men employed.

10

And as into these two functions, requiring for their right exercise the highest intelligence, as well as patience, kindness, and tact, the merchant is bound to put all his energy, so for their just discharge he is bound, as soldier or physician is bound, to give up, if need be, his Life, in such way as it may be demanded of him. Two main points he has in his Providing function to maintain: first, his engagements (faithfulness to engagements being the real root of all possibilities in commerce); and secondly, the perfectness and purity of the thing provided; so that, rather than fail in any engagement, or consent to any deterioration, adulteration, or unjust and exorbitant price of that which he provides, he is bound to meet fearlessly any form of distress, poverty, or labor, which may, through maintenance of these points, come upon him.

Again: in his office as governor of the men employed by him, the merchant or manufacturer is invested with a distinctly paternal authority and responsibility. In most cases, a youth entering a commercial establishment is withdrawn altogether from home influence; his master must become his father, else he has, for practical and constant help, no father at hand: in all cases the master's authority, together with the general tone and atmosphere of his business, and the character of the men with whom the youth is compelled in the course of it to associate, have more immediate and pressing weight than the home influence, and will usually neutralize it either for good or evil; so that the only means which the master has of doing justice to the men employed by him is to ask himself sternly whether he

is dealing with such subordinate as he would with his own son, if compelled by circumstances to take such a position.

Supposing the captain of a frigate saw it right, or were by any chance obliged, to place his own son in the position of a common sailor; as he would then treat his son, he is bound always to treat every one of the men under him. So, also, supposing the master of a manufactory saw it right, or were by any chance obliged, to place his own son in the position of an ordinary workman; as he would then treat his son, he is bound always to treat every one of his men. This is the only effective, true, or practicable RULE which can be given on this point of political economy.

And as the captain of a ship is bound to be the last man to leave his ship in case of wreck, and to share his last crust with the sailors in case of famine, so the manufacturer, in any commercial crisis or distress, is bound to take the suffering of it with his men, and even to take more of it for himself than he allows his men to feel; as a father would in a famine, shipwreck, or battle, sacrifice himself for his son.

All which sounds very strange: the only real strangeness in the matter being, nevertheless, that it should so sound. For all this is true, and that not partially nor theoretically, but everlastingly and practically: all other doctrine than this respecting matters political being false in premises, absurd in deduction, and impossible in practice, consistently with any progressive state of national life; all the life which we now possess as a nation showing itself in the resolute denial and scorn, by a few strong minds and faithful hearts, of the economic principles taught to our multitudes, which principles, so far as accepted, lead straight to national destruction. Respecting the modes and forms of destruction to which they lead, and, on the other hand, respecting the farther practical working of true polity, I hope to reason further in a following paper.

Exploring the Text

1. What is the “preference” John Ruskin refers to at the beginning of the second paragraph? According to Ruskin, who is responsible for it? The merchant himself? The public? Explain.
2. How does Ruskin characterize commerce in paragraphs 3 and 4? What has changed since 1862? What has not?
3. How reasonable are Ruskin’s statements about the five great professions (para. 6)? Do you agree that the merchant’s profession is not, as many would say, to make money, but to provide for the country?
4. Ruskin writes, “For, truly, the man who does not know when to die, does not know how to live” (para. 8). What does Ruskin mean to suggest with this epigrammatic statement? How might it apply to your life?
5. Explain the nature of the comparison Ruskin makes between the merchant and the clergyman (para. 9).

6. In paragraph 9, Ruskin writes of the pastor, the physician, and the merchant, “All three, if true men. . . .” What are the purpose and effect of the qualifier “if true men”?
7. What, according to Ruskin, is the duty of the merchant as described in paragraphs 10 and 11?
8. What is the nature of the analogy developed in paragraphs 12–14? Do you find it reasonable and persuasive? Explain.
9. Ruskin concludes, “All which sounds very strange: the only real strangeness in the matter being, nevertheless, that it should so sound” (para. 15). Does it “sound strange” to you? Do you agree that the *sounding strange* is the only strange thing about it? Why does he conclude this way?