

ORDERS OF RELEASE:
JOHN EVERETT MILLAIS' 1853 ROYAL ACADEMY PICTURE
AND THE RUSKIN DIVORCE CASE

In 1854, after six years of marriage, John Ruskin was divorced. Within the year his wife, Effie, married the young and comparatively successful painter John Everett Millais. Since divorce is an order of release, one would have expected commentators¹ to have sought a connection to Millais' 1853 Royal Academy submission, his Order of Release - 1746; this did not happen. That is surprising, for it was well known that Effie Ruskin was the model for the central character in the painting. The explanation presumably lies in the desire to date the romance from a slightly later period, the time when Ruskin wished to have his portrait painted and insisted that Millais accompany him and his wife to Glenfinlas.² Since the Royal Academy Exhibition opened on 30th April and the holiday did not begin until 21st June 1853 these commentators ignore or discount William Bell Scott's assertion that Millais "had won the heart of the unhappy Mrs. Ruskin" before they had reached Lady Trevelyan's home in Northumberland on their way to Scotland.³ They ignore the unusual relationship between the title and the subsequent marital breakdown, allowing it to seem coincidental.

Before developing my ideas, it is desirable to briefly state the major events which led to the separation of John and Effie Ruskin. In 1848, John Ruskin married Euphemia "Effie" Gray. For five years the marriage seemed tranquil but in 1854 the wife left the husband, returned to her family, successfully sued for divorce on the grounds of non-consummation of the marriage, and after some time married Millais. Millais, although young, was quite well known at this time. He had been a child prodigy who had become a probationary student at the Royal Academy when he was only eleven years old. In 1848, along with the painters Dante Gabriel Rossetti and William Holman Hunt, he had formed the Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood. His early submissions to the annual Royal Academy Exhibition had attracted a great deal of attention, and one in particular, a painting variously called Christ In the Home of His Parents or The Carpenter's Shop, had been subject to savage criticism. In 1853, therefore, when he showed two pictures, The Proscribed Royalist and Order of Release - 1746, he was well enough known for his pictures to attract considerable attention. The second painting, the subject of this article, was so popular that it needed a guard to stop the crowds getting too close.⁴

The painting seems to depict an imaginary scene; a moment in 1746 when a young Scottish woman comes to a bare prison waiting room