

JAMES S. DEARDEN

## John James Ruskin: Artist and Patron

When John James Ruskin died aged 78 on 3 March 1864, his son wrote in his epitaph, "He was an entirely honest merchant and his memory is, to all who keep it, dear and helpful. His son, whom he loved to the utmost and taught to speak truth, says this of him." John James Ruskin, the two hundredth anniversary of whose birth passed by almost unnoticed in 1985, is of course much overshadowed by his internationally famous son. But his honesty and integrity was inherited by his son and is reflected in almost everything John Ruskin wrote or sketched.

J. J. R. was born in Edinburgh. His father, John Thomas Ruskin, a grocer, wine and general merchant, had left London as a young man to seek his fortune in Scotland. But his business acumen was not equal to his lifestyle, which was ultimately to lead to disaster. He became bankrupt, with debts in excess of £3,000. By this time, John James, had moved to London to seek *his* fortune in a mercantile career. He worked long hours for relatively little return, but it was entirely in character that he promised to pay his father's debts, and he finally did so by 1822.

By the time that John Thomas's debts were paid, John James had become a partner in the sherry importing firm of Ruskin, Telford & Domecq. He was a hard-working and astute businessman and had the added advantage of importing perhaps Spain's finest sherry into Victorian England. When he died—working almost to the end—he had amassed a considerable fortune.

The fortune which John James Ruskin made enabled him to provide all the material things that his son wanted and to relieve him of the daily toil of working for a living. He was

able to send Ruskin to Oxford as a gentleman commoner, to buy Turner watercolours for him, to commission the best engravers to illustrate his books, and to finance the continental tours whence sprang many of them. John James delighted in helping to further his son's career as a writer on art and social and political economy, and—particularly in the early years—he actively helped with the polishing and placing of the manuscripts. From the profit from the sale of Domecq sherry sprang one of the greatest influences on art and social thinking of the nineteenth century.

John James was interested in all of his son's projects, and when Ruskin discovered the Pre-Raphaelites and did all he could to further their careers, he had the enthusiastic support of his father, who also eagerly welcomed these young artists into his home. Millais dined several times at Denmark Hill; so did Holman Hunt, G. F. Watts, Morris, Burne-Jones. On one evening in 1855 Rossetti, Woolner and William Bell Scott dined with the Ruskins; two months later Dante Gabriel and William Rossetti were joined by Woodward, the architect of the Oxford Museum. An evening in May 1859 saw Wornum from the National Gallery, joined by Rossetti, Clarkson Stanfield, Munro and Street, while on John's birthday in the next year, the two Rossettis dined there. The dining room was large enough for a dinner party of twelve and the guests would have been able to admire watercolours by Hunt (still-life Hunt, that is), Roberts, Prout, Cox, Cattermole, the family's two Turner oils—*The Slave Ship* and *The Grand Canal*—on the walls of the room. The latter John James had bought for eight hun-