

LANDSCAPE PAINTERS, PRE-RAPHAELITES
AND THE LIVERPOOL ACADEMY*

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the great period of English landscape painting had passed, Bonington having died in 1828, Constable in 1837, and Turner in 1851. The disfavor that landscape art had fallen into is reflected by the attacks Turner, a financially successful and respected member of the Royal Academy, began to suffer in the 1840s. Ruskin's defense of Turner was also his defense of landscape, "the ruling passion of my life."¹ A feeling for landscape, Ruskin said, "will be found to bring with it such a sense of the presence and power of a Great Spirit as no mere reasoning can either induce or controvert."² In his 1851 pamphlet, Pre-Raphaelitism, Ruskin lamented the current fare: "look around at our exhibitions, and behold the 'cattle-pieces,' and 'sea pieces,' and 'fruit pieces,' and 'family pieces': the eternal brown cows in ditches, and white sails in squalls, and sliced lemons in saucers, and foolish faces in simpers; -- and try to feel what we are, and what we might have been."³ Ruskin thus felt that Turner and the Pre-Raphaelites alike represented human potential as they threw off the artificial attire of the popular paintings of the day to stand nakedly before the glory and truth of nature and the imagination. In his 1854 Lectures on Architecture and Painting, Ruskin calls Turner "the first and greatest of the Pre-Raphaelites," and the Pre-Raphaelites, "landscape painters."⁴

Ruskin saw only what he wanted to see. The Pre-Raphaelites were no more landscape painters as such than Turner was a Pre-Raphaelite. Rossetti had no skill at painting natural scenery, would rather bring his flower into the studio than his easel into nature, and was happier in the miasmatic air of Chelsea than in the calm breezes of Kelmscott. Burne-Jones was similarly no landscapist, and he came to frustrate Ruskin by his preference for the folds of drapery to those of water and clouds. Nevertheless, Brown, Millais, and Holman Hunt (particularly in Our English Coasts) did show a real interest in nature, and the P.R.B. had a significant impact on landscape art in the 1850s. In fact, Allen Staley makes a convincing case throughout The Pre-Raphaelite Landscape that Ruskin's attraction to the group was almost wholly dependent on their concern with landscape -- the botanical detail of Millais' Ferdinand and Ariel, for example, or the expanded distant view of his Woodman's Daughter, or the closely studied foliage which surrounds his Ophelia. Ruskin's real interest in Millais' portrait of him at Glenfinlas was in the setting, for he wrote Furnivall that the

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