

## RUSKIN'S CHRISTMAS WALK IN VENICE

Van Akin Burd

In Number 75 of *Fors Clavigera*, those semi-public letters John Ruskin was writing in the 1870s, he declares that some of his “most intelligent readers” could not believe his account in the preceding issue of the message St. Ursula had sent him on Christmas Eve, 1876 (*Works* 29:54). Not that I could consider myself among his most intelligent readers, but I must confess that I might have been among those doubters. My Dutch background on my mother’s side, farmers who came up the Hudson River in the 17th century, a family that stayed in farming until this last century, does not leave me inclined to mysticism. And, of course, I don’t have friends, as Ruskin did, like Lord and Lady Mount-Temple who were deep into spiritualism. I’ll never forget the day in the library at Winchester when I first put my hands on Lord Mount-Temple’s diary in which he describes the séances he was attending. In one of his entries he lists Ruskin among his guests for a séance in 1864. The Mount-Temples later were convinced that the ghost of Rose La Touche, Ruskin’s recently lost love, had been seen standing beside him during the Christmas season of 1875 in the Mount-Temple home. Ruskin indeed had attended occasional séances since early 1864. Although he had told Lady Mount-Temple that he believed in the possibility of miracles, he considered himself generally as a “Fatal Non-Conductor” for the spirits in these séances in which a table might dance a jig through the help of the spirits. Nor do I have other friends, as Ruskin did, like Elizabeth Barrett Browning, who also dabbled in spiritualism. During her long stay in Florence, according to some letters found only a decade ago (Gaja 16-17), she had come under the spell of the neo-Platonist sculptor Hiram Powers, whose statue of the *Greek Slave* (depicting a slave girl naked on the auction block, her hands in shackles) is the subject

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