

## EMILY M.B. WARREN'S "ESSAY ON RUSKIN"

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Emily Mary Bibbens Warren (1869-1956), the English/Canadian artist, was the last art student of John Ruskin. Her father, Matthew Henry Warren, served in the British Navy and also as a fisheries manager in Newfoundland where he met Mary Gifford, then visiting from England her Anglican priest brother. Mary and Henry were married in St. Stephen's Chapel, Westminster, London, in 1856 and then returned to Newfoundland. Several of their five daughters were born in Canada, but after the family had returned to England, Emily – their youngest – was born in Exeter, Devon. Her mother had artistic interests and encouraged these in her daughters. As the youngest, Emily developed an independent streak early in response to what she took to be domineering behaviour by members of the family. It was a blow to her when her father died in 1879, for she felt that he had understood her best. She had already drafted a letter to Queen Victoria to complain about her own abused position in the family when she wrote to John Ruskin in 1883 to ask for his advice about the quality of her artwork (McRae 20-24). It showed a remarkable confidence for one so young.

Ruskin replied (Letter, 15 October 1883), as he was inclined to do to any intelligent letter from a young person, especially young girls. He was genuinely impressed by the drawings she had enclosed and so began a tutorial relationship which continued until the onset of his long-lasting depressions in 1889. On 30 December 1885 he wrote with praise for her skills – “you have a perfect, unsurpassed eye for colour” – and later reexpressed his envy: “I only wish I could do myself what you can do now” (qtd in McCrae 25, 34).

With such important credentials in hand and the support of the respected critic as a patron paying her regularly for her work, Emily Warren was asked to begin teaching, at age fifteen, junior pupils at the Grey Coat School, the prestigious Royal establishment from which explorer and fur trader David Thompson had graduated (Day 123-25). At the same time she was pursuing