Ruskin and Fairfax Murray

David Elliott

Of 60 or so copies of early Renaissance works that Charles Fairfax Murray made for John Ruskin between 1873 and 1883, around 40 were for the Guild of St George – the remainder, mostly lost, for the Arundel Society and the Oxford lectures. It was one of Ruskin’s longer sustained relationships – 17 years – and tells us a good deal about his attitude to his protégés. They were totally contrasting figures, John Ruskin – in the last two decades of his working life, an icon in an era seemingly peopled exclusively by Public Figures; Fairfax Murray, at the outset of his career, a deeply private man. Almost the only thing which catalogue notes are agreed upon today is that he was a colourful and elusive figure who had two families, one in Italy and one in England. He is routinely described as ‘a heaven-sent copyist’ because Ruskin said so. He is sometimes said to have turned to dealing in despair at painting in the shadows cast by Rossetti and Burne-Jones. The truth is, needless to say, a good deal more complex. First then, a word about Fairfax Murray.

Charles Fairfax Murray was born in 1849, in a Georgian terraced house in the High Street, Bow. Today the very address conjures up visions of the grinding poverty of tenement dwellings in London’s East End, of Pearly Kings and costers, Gin Lane and General William Booth. To the contrary, Bow in 1849 was a bustling country village on the outskirts of London. As the city spread, Bow prospered.

His father, James Dalton Murray, was the linen-draper in this flourishing community. Fairfax Murray came therefore from exactly that striving middle-class stock that was the backbone of Victorian England, the heart of Ernest Gambart’s market for prints and engravings, the core readership of Charles Dickens’s Household Words. The family were educated and conventionally well-read. His father had a talent for watercolour. Fairfax Murray’s mother died when he was four years old and the family moved away. He spent part at least of his short childhood in Sudbury in a household where Richard Gainsborough Dupont was a familiar. At 12 years of age he was living in London apart from his family in digs in the Grays Inn Road but he disappears from sight for another two years during which he gained employment in the drawing office of Peto & Betts, the great railway contractors. At 14 or 15 Fairfax Murray was commissioned by Sir Samuel Morton Peto to draw portraits of his sons. Fairfax Murray was already a powerful draughtsman of mature skill when he first came to the notice of John Ruskin.

Ruskin was senior to Fairfax Murray by thirty years. At 47 he was at the peak of his reputation. His Slade Professorship was three years in the future, Brantwood and the St George’s Fund five; he was now independently wealthy. There were still twelve good years, not perhaps great years, before instability would turn to madness. Behind the facade of his frenetic activity one may already glimpse the didact, his carelessness with fact and others’ opinions, the sexual
dilemma, the recurrent religious doubt; but the world in which he moved was at his feet. Charles Fairfax Murray was just 16, unknown, poor and ambitious. There is no fairy-tale ending to this story; it began on a high note but ended in recrimination – as did so many of Ruskin’s relationships – in 1883, the year that he briefly resumed the Slade professorship. In 1866 Ruskin had long enjoyed substantial resources and he had frequently indulged his possessive strain of philanthropy – the generosity with strings attached – which ensured that he was at once both welcomed and scorned. Ruskin expected both to be loved for his liberality and respected for his authority, displaying no awareness of a possible conflict. As one former pupil put it: ‘No one could be more charming and interesting than Ruskin so long as you were in the looking-up attitude.’

He had once promoted Dante Gabriel Rossetti until, finding the wayward poet and painter contemptuous and intractable, he had transferred his bounty to Lizzie Siddal. At the time of her death in 1862 he had turned to Ned Jones and Georgina, who were among the few close enough to share his disturbed confidences about Rose La Touche. By 1866, he was subsiding and promoting Ned Jones to the limit through Charles Augustus Howell, his ‘man of affairs’. Grateful though they unquestionably were, the Joneses were acutely aware, like Rossetti before them, of the hazard of becoming Ruskin’s creatures: “He wanted to own me, but I wouldn’t let him”, Ned told Thomas Rooke.²

In February that year Fairfax Murray had sought Ruskin’s advice “on becoming, or how to become, an artist,” sending him a parcel of his drawings. Preoccupied though he was by thoughts of Rose La Touche, John Ruskin found his interest aroused by the young lad’s promise. He straight away sent the drawings to the 33 year-old Ned Jones, asking him to make arrangements with Charles Augustus Howell for Fairfax Murray’s further training and maintenance. In March 1866 Ruskin wrote again, this time to Howell: “Did Ned speak to you about an Irish boy I want to get boarded and lodged and put to some art schooling – and I don’t know how?”⁴ and once more later the same month: “All I want is a decent lodging – his is now a shopboy – I only want a bit of a garret in a decent house, and a means of getting him in to some school of art.”⁵ Howell enrolled him at Heatherly’s and Fairfax Murray divided his time during the summer of 1866 between classes there, copying at the National Gallery and Dulwich, and working on his painting The Children in the Wood that would hang in the Royal Academy Summer exhibition the following May. Ruskin returned to England at the end of the summer from four months spent in Italy and northern France, and wrote afresh to Howell: “The boy’s sketches are marvellous”.⁶ This was something more perceptive than merely the nonchalant patronage of the wealthy man. Ruskin had lighted upon a new talent that he could direct, instruct and fashion. Curiously, Ruskin and his new protégé came face to face only by chance, in the National Gallery in the autumn. Charles Augustus Howell however had proved a supportive mentor, introducing his young charge in to Dante Rossetti’s circle, who dubbed him “Little Murray”. In November 1866, Howell arranged with Ned Jones to take the lad in to his studio, where help was sorely needed, as his first assistant. Fairfax Murray turned 17 that September. (Plate 1)

There is little evidence that Ruskin played any further direct part in Fairfax Murray’s career in the next five years, though there was occasional contact and
one may suppose that the subsidies he provided to Ned Jones through Howell paid Fairfax Murray’s generous wage of twenty-five shillings a week, supplemented by payments for specific pieces of work. He received for example a further £60 for a copy of Theophilus and the Angel in 1867, thereby doubling his salary. A good cook earned about £30 a year at the time; Rossetti made £3000 that year.7

From the start Fairfax Murray was very much involved in Burne-Jones’s decorative work for Morris, Marshall, Faulkner & Co., and much of his early work for Burne-Jones was done at Queen Square. He spent a good deal of his spare time with Rossetti and Morris, neither of whom was on intimate terms with Ruskin by now, thought Rossetti was still close to Burne-Jones at this point. Early in 1869 Fairfax Murry turned freelance. There was now considerably more studio work for Burne-Jones than before, but he was free also to assist Rossetti, making replicas for eager buyers and acting as his amanuensis. For William Morris he drew cartoons, painted glas³ illustrated and illuminated his manuscripts, the first being Morris’s Book of Verse, his gift to Georgiana Burne-Jones. He assisted G F Watts, and worked in his own right as a portraitist and genre painter. For his 21st birthday William Morris took him to Bruges to see the Memlings.

In November 1870, Fairfax Murray set out on his first visit to Italy. This was not a Ruskin-sponsored expedition, but the fulfilment of a long-held ambition. He was there, mainly in Pisa and Florence, until the following March. For Ruskin this was the year of Brantwood, the Ruskin School at Oxford, his illness at Matlock and the death of his mother. In December 1871 he staged a startling reappearance in Fairfax Murray’s young life. Ruskin had returned from Venice at the end of July and proposed marriage to Rose La Touche. Rejected, he shut himself away in Brantwood; but by November, Ruskin and his fellow member of the Council of the Arundel Society, Sir Austen Henry Layard the discoverer of Nimrud, were seeking a copyist to work in Rome. Edward Burne-Jones was consulted and he cordially recommended Fairfax Murray. On 6th December Burne-Jones wrote “come here on Thursday to meet Mr Ruskin . . . – I have puffed you up tremendously.”8

Ned Jones’s alacrity in dealing with his patron’s request stemmed from Ruskin’s dismay at his continuing affair with Maria Zambaco; he had painted her again during the summer, this time as Temperance dousing the flames of passion, an unsuitable allegory at best. Charles Augustus Howell, whom Ned had commended to Ruskin, presented another difficulty; he had been dismissed, apparently for attempting to defraud George Howard. Burne-Jones, balancing the hazards of recommending anyone to undertake Ruskin’s bidding against an opportunity to restore himself in the Professor’s favour, wrote to Fairfax Murray: “I trust you think of me much when you are in Italy so as to redeem me from shame – you have it in your power to wipe that disgrace out of my life.”9

Charles Fairfax Murray was to become Ruskin’s principal English copyist. On New Year’s Day 1873 he was at Brantwood, and on 7th January 1873, William Michael Rossetti wrote in his diary: “Murray is about to go to Italy, for a somewhat lengthened stay in Rome and elsewhere, at Ruskin’s expense. He is to make copies of the Botticelli frescoes in the Sistine Chapel . . . (he) also thinks of examining the Old Master drawings in the various galleries, and drawing up a catalogue of them correcting errors of attribution, tracing the connection between
drawings and pictures, etc, etc.” This brief diary entry goes directly to the heart of
the matter. Charles Fairfax Murray had already settled on his future career; the
commission in Rome was an undreamed of opportunity to launch it. Nevertheless,
copying for Ruskin was a matter of “bread and cheese,” the means to make a
living that enabled him to develop his skills as expert, connoisseur and collector.
Murray presented his letters of introduction at the Vatican in March, and was
back in Pisa on Good Friday 1873 when he received a letter from Edward
Burne-Jones to say that he was with William Morris at Spencer Stanhope’s studio
in Bellosguardo. He hurried over to Florence and he and Morris climbed Giotto’s
tower. They went to Santa Maria del Carmine to see the Masaccios on Easter
Sunday before breakfast. Fairfax Murray arranged to meet Burne-Jones later in
Siena; writing to Charles Eliot Norton from Bologna on his way back to London,
Burne-Jones reported that he had left him there “settling at work at the Pax in the
Palazzo Publico.”

Fairfax Murray took lodgings with the dealer Paolo Lombardi and awaited
further orders. In the first week of May, Ruskin forwarded a flurry of instruc-
tions: “Make what you can of the Peace and then make arrangements to go to
Venice straight, or to Assisi – the Poverty there is the most important thing you
could do outside Rome . . .” Later in the month came a characteristically
contradictory admonition “I care more for completeness of record than for
accurate copying” followed in the same paragraph by “do it as thoroughly as you
can and pleasantly to yourself. Do not spare fees to custodians,” Ruskin con-
tinued, “the money gift really opens his heart if he has one,” and, unable to resist
a little rebuke, “I wish you had told me the nature of your illness instead of what
sort of party disturbed the landlord at Sestri.” In the event, both the proposed
copy of Giotto’s St Francis embracing Poverty in Assisi and Fairfax Murray’s visit
to Venice were to wait while he resumed his work in Siena.

By 1873, the St George’s Fund was some eighteen months old. In his first
important public lecture, The Political Economy of Art, given in Manchester in
July 1857, Ruskin spoke of fostering the development of the artist within the
context of his radical social message. “Artists” he believed “must be discovered
and refined like pure gold,” they must be given “sufficient and unagitated
employment.” His lecture gave clear notice of his interventionist approach
to patronage, and he illustrated his discourse on the management of artistic
production with the four cardinal virtues – Fortitude, Temperance, Justice and
Prudence – depicted in Ambrogio Lorenzetti’s Allegory of Good Government in
Siena’s Palazzo Publico. His commission to Fairfax Murray to paint this copy of
that majestic fresco for the Guild of St George, fully 16 years later, is, surely, an
indication of his undiminished confidence in his design for the ideal society. The
Guild was to demonstrate, once and for all, the validity of his benevolent,
authoritarian model of social justice and the role of art and education. In the
middle of May, Fairfax Murray’s copy of the Lorenzetti was not yet completed
when he set off for Rome once again, to examine more closely the Botticelli
frescoes of the Trials of Moses that he was to copy during the winter. That
accomplished he returned to Siena by way of Assisi and stayed to finish the
Allegory of Good Government by the third week of June, before Ruskin wrote to
say “I want you to go to Pisa and make a sketch for me of the cornice of the

21
Baptistery outer door with its 13 half-length figures and tell me what you think of the date of the stone below and of its style – it puzzles me.”

Ruskin’s oft-quoted praise of Fairfax Murray’s skill – “a heaven-sent copyist . . . beyond comparison the most skilful of the artists thus employed” – was contained in his Master’s Report to the Guild of St George in 1884, a generous tribute in the year after they had finally fallen out. In fact, Ruskin’s early public recognition of Fairfax Murray’s skills was not in praise of his copies but of his knowledge of Italian art; he described “a young painter, Charles F Murray, working with me, who already knows the secrets of Italian art better than I . . .”. Copyists he could employ without difficulty; Fairfax Murray’s exceptional ability, Ruskin recognised, lay in his expertise “. . . I counted more on your scholarship than on your drawing from the first.”

“Murray,” Ruskin wrote in Fors, “whose help is given much in the form of antagonism – informs me of various critical discoveries lately made, both by himself and industrious Germans, of points respecting the authenticity of this and that which will require notice from me . . . the picture in the Uffizi that I had accepted the ordinary attribution to Giotto is in fact by Lorenzo Monaco.” Philip Webb was vastly amused by this “antagonism” and it remained a running joke between them for the next ten years. Fairfax Murray was a robust advocate of his opinions; he was also a rigorous and dedicated critic.

Ruskin’s disdain for “industrious Germans” embraced the ranks of other contemporary art historians; he was equally dismissive of Crowe & Cavalcaselle’s New History of Painting in Italy: “You can no more write the history of Italian painting than you can write the history of the south wind in Italy.” Fundamentally, he considered the new historiography of art to be in conflict with his belief, expressed most cogently in The Stones of Venice, that art in all its forms is an expression of the moral and ethical well-being of the times in which it is created, with significant lessons for later generations. The new art criticism was simply an irritant, the detailed re-attribution of Vasarian certainties a diversion from Ruskin’s vision of the interdependence of art and the social fabric. There is no doubt that this standpoint would always be a source of potential conflict between Ruskin and Fairfax Murray. On New Year’s Day 1874 Ruskin resumed his barrage of instructions: “Form the most careful opinion you can of the Luca Signorelli with the Death of Moses at the end – it seems so much more beautiful than anything he could have done.” Another, undoubtedly welcome, letter arrived: “I neglect you horribly and cannot think how you get on without money . . .” enclosing £50. In Rome, Fairfax Murray rented a studio in the via di St Nicola Tolentino close to the Piazza Barberina and he started work in the Vatican in mid-February.

Fairfax Murray spent Easter 1874 in Pisa with Angelica Colivicchi, the girl he was to marry, and was back in Rome at work when Ruskin joined him on 16th of April. They worked amicably together side by side in the Sistine Chapel. “A delightful day yesterday at Sistine and pleasant evening with Murray” Ruskin recorded in his diary on the 23rd, and almost immediately travelled south to Sicily for a few days. Once there he wrote on the 29th: “I shall come to you in the Sistine on Monday. Then, if you bequeath me your scaffolding, you may take your holiday as soon as my group of Midianites is done. I merely send you this line to
warn you that I have not fallen in to Etna.” On 5th May Ruskin noted in his diary “Yesterday began sheep in Sistine Chapel”; he despatched a note to Fairfax Murray to request him “can you come down yourself any time today and clear away your colours and slops which I’m always dropping my pencils in . . . you might tell me a thing or two about my sheep” (beside the figure of Zipporah in Botticelli’s Life of Moses). During the week, Fairfax Murray broached the subject of his return to London. Ruskin had other views: “Mr Ruskin finds me useful here so I have consented to remain, not very unwillingly I must admit, as I find much pleasure in going about with him to see things” he wrote. This was one of only two periods in 17 years when they worked side by side together, and the contrast with the tenor of their relationship when they were at a distance was striking.

Half way through the month “Ruskin came and took possession of the scaffolding.” Then, almost as suddenly as he had appeared, he was about to leave; “I send you a generous present of six sheets of paper I can’t use myself.” One week later he wrote once more, from Assisi. “I shall want you here for a day or two to hear what you have to say about Giotto, it’s not my field at all,” a surprising indication of his willingness to defer to the young assistant in matters of style and attribution. Two weeks later, he wrote again to Fairfax Murray, this time from Lucca. “Please send an a/c note of the expense you have been at for me and funds you have had to meet them as I must stop for this year,” and then he was gone.

Charles Fairfax Murray married in Pisa in the following April of 1875. It was an unsettled time in his relationship with Ruskin who had returned to England the previous September to see Rose La Touche for the last time, and his uncertain mental balance was seriously disturbed. He rounded on William Stillman: “. . . I am encumbered with affection which I cannot answer or use . . . there are many . . . who say pleasant things to me and when I am gone, pity me for a madman.”15 “Better not say nothing to nobody about Mr R, William, if you are a man of the world; no man living I think has so many enemies” Fairfax Murray told his friend William Spanton. For the moment he had work on hand; there were six furniture panels for Morris & Co., and illustrations in prospect for William Morris’s Aeneids of Virgil which was now taking shape. “I am up to my neck in turning out designs for paper chintzes and carpets and trying to get the manufacturers to do them . . .”16 Morris said. Fairfax Murray was also deeply involved in negotiating the purchase of an Ambrogio Lorenzetti fragment of A Group of Poor Clares for the National Gallery; and there were still three major undertakings for Ruskin in hand, a Madonna and Child by Filippo Lippi which Ruskin criticised – “he has been quite unable to do justice to the exquisite fineness of the Lippi” (Plate 2) – and two Botticellis, The Adoration of the Magi now in the Uffizi and a little known Nativity, later the property of Sir William Abdy, the Duke of Wellington’s son-in-law.

Fairfax Murray did not resent the periodic criticisms of his copies when he thought them valid. He was, however, dismayed by Ruskin’s dogmatic pronouncements on art, and critical of his increasingly wild attributions: “I bought the first two numbers of ‘Mornings in Florence’ on the spot and didn’t care much for them” he wrote to Spanton. “Everything he says is true or nearly true in principle but what he sees is not there. The frescoes [in the Choistro Verde at
Santa Maria Novella are nearly worthless – originally in no way remarkable for the time in which they were painted, they have been almost completely overpainted... I believe that the attribution of them to Giotto rests on no authority but his own and the custode's17... with the same perversion he persists against clear proof to the contrary in asserting the Spanish Chapel in S. Maria Novella to be by Simone Martini whose pictures bear no resemblance to the ones in question and whose identity is clearly established.18 Isn't it extraordinary? Mr Ruskin always lays it down so peremptorily that people ought not to have 'opinions' about things they know nothing of... but it is useless talking, you know him.”19

Ruskin spent the summer of 1876 in Italy, meeting Fairfax Murray in Florence and commissioning “any memoranda you can make of the Botticellis in the Accademia.” Ruskin reached Venice on the 9 September in an increasingly irrational state of mind, seeing a manifestation of Rose La Touche’s presence beside him in Carpaccio’s Dream of St Ursula. In December, Fairfax Murray was urgently summoned to copy from the cycle.

Ruskin struggled back from the abyss, and by February 1877 he again called on Murray’s help. John Wharleton Bunney and Angelo Alessandri were already copying for the Guild. “I wish you could come here and make some drawings for me – any time between now and the 1st May but the sooner the better. I have presented your drawing to the Sheffield museum and want more such, probably as many as you care to do... there are things at the Schiavoni I greatly need...” Ruskin wrote to Murray. Four days later he wrote again “I am greatly pleased that you are coming – your drawing is producing great and good effect at Sheffield and if we can get more good records of the Pope picture it will enlighten their Protestant minds greatly.” Bunney was rather less enthusiastic at the prospect of a rival for Ruskin’s attention, “I refer everybody to you now as my agent for Venetian affairs”, the Professor declared soothingly.

Fairfax Murray spent March, April and May 1877 in Venice with Ruskin, accompanied by Angelica, his wife. He rented an apartment on the Fondamenta Bollani and was soon at work on the Carpaccios. “I wanted to ask if you think you could do another St Ursula and her Maids for Oxford, working again from the original to the same point of finish” Ruskin wrote at the beginning of April. Together they enjoyed a lovely sunset from the Madonna dell'Orto, and a visit to St Alvise; Ruskin was enchanted by Angelica. There was work to be done: “Can you meet me on St Mark's Place tomorrow at half past nine. I am going up in to the gallery to study a mosaic... of extreme beauty and importance. A sketch of it such as you have done of St Simeon's robe details will be the most important work you or I have done in Venice.” Ruskin returned to England at the end of May 1877. Two weeks later he sent payment for Fairfax Murray's work in Venice, unprecedented promptitude which was not to be repeated: “I send guineas because it looks prettier – do you ever condescend to a bit of Paul Veronese?” Once again, the tensions between them had been dispelled in a few weeks together; but they were destined never to work side by side again.

In Venice, Fairfax Murray had told Ruskin of the opportunity to buy a frescoe of Andrea del Verrocchio, the Madonna and Child now in the National Gallery of Scotland. In Fors that July, Ruskin publicly commended both Fairfax Murray’s expertise and his honesty:
If you look at No VI of my ‘Morning in Florence’ you will see that I speak with somewhat mortified respect of my friend Charles F Murray as knowing more in many ways of Italian painting than I do myself. You may give him any sum you like to spend in Italian pictures, you will find that none of it sticks to his fingers; that every picture he buys for you is a good one, and that he will charge you simply for his time . . . I have secured with his assistance a picture of extreme value . . . a Madonna by Verrocchio, the master of Leonardo da Vinci, of Lorenzo de Credi and of Perugino . . .

Buying for Ruskin was not however without hazard. They had discussed other purchases, among them a Botticelli Madonna and Child of which Fairfax Murray sent Ruskin photographs. At the end of the month Ruskin instructed him to acquire it, adding that “I have been lecturing on your drawings for the last fortnight, 3 times a day.” The Botticelli reached Oxford in the third week of December. A confused and despairing letter arrived in Siena from Ruskin within days: “I have been ill and unable for all things. But alas what a strange fellow you are . . . the Botticelli . . . is so ugly that I’ve not dared show it to a human soul . . . I must stop spending in this way for it entirely puts me off with anxiety and vexation . . .” he wrote. Fairfax Murray wrote for advice to Sir Frederick Burton: “Mr Ruskin is dissatisfied with the Botticelli I bought for him . . . I am very much put out by this as I thought he had sufficient eye-sight to see through a little dirt and roughness whether a thing is good or not. The Madonna is full of sentiment and the Child is no uglier than usual . . . I shall not now let him have a Vivarini I have here.” This went in the end to Frederick Leighton and Fairfax Murray bought it back at his studio sale.

Ruskin spent the lonely Christmas of 1877 at Oxford in an uncertain frame of mind. In response to a coaxing letter from Murray he replied at the end of January: “Thank you for you nice letter . . . I am sure you will do well for me in the long run . . . it’s just my usual ill luck about the Botticelli – I do hope you will get the Verrocchio over safe for me – it’s worth a million.” Less than a month later Ruskin suffered a serious physical and mental collapse and although he recovered by April 1878 this was to prove only the first of the periods of madness that would eventually silence him. Ruskin’s letters to Fairfax Murray, which provide us with continuous soundings on their fluctuating relations, also chart the uncertain state of his mind and emotions. In a revealing presiment of his insanity, Ruskin had written to Fairfax Murray almost three years earlier: “I have delayed writing in a fit of languor and other illness very new to me.”

Fairfax Murray was busy during the second half of 1878 with copies for Ruskin. He had contributed to a fund to purchase J W M Turner’s Splügen which Ruskin had been prevented by his collapse from buying for himself; now he received two sad letters within days of each other, part apology, part encouragement, part the pedagogue: “My love to your wife – I hope she loves me a little” and the next day “You must allow for illness in my impressions of things. All mental diseases shows itself in seeing faults and ugliness and in languor of enjoyment and beauty . . . better times will come to both of us yet, I trust.”

Almost a year passed before Ruskin, still shaken by illness, wrote again, from Brantwood; he had received the Botticelli St Michael from the Madonna of the S.
Barnaba altarpiece, with which he was in the main delighted: “I can’t criticise . . . and I fear you would not care if I did,”23 he wrote, a succinct summary of their uneasy relationship. Fairfax Murray had, nevertheless, continued faithfully to work for him. His sympathetic enquiry elicited an outburst and an apology in the same letter. “You need not be anxious about me”24 Ruskin replied “. . . nor attend to gossip or newspaper passages. I am quite about still to do my own work, but not my own and other people’s too, which – having been at their beck and call – astonishes them unpleasantly” followed by a second letter on the same day to say “you will think my wits are gone really, but this was all written without understanding you kind letter and its feelings.”25 On the following day Ruskin wrote again: “the only thing that I really want is that you should become all the things that you might be as a painter and a judge of painting.”26 This was a tacit admission of failure; for despite the enabling impact of Ruskin’s patronage on Fairfax Murray’s career, he had achieved nothing by way of influence. Once more a protégé, his creation, was moving beyond his reach. Dante Rossetti understood Murray better: “the development of the dealer through the artist is so very strong in him” he wrote to Janey Morris. 1879 ended on a better note; Ruskin was busy on the catalogue for the Sheffield museum – “your name is six times on the first page27 . . . I hope to carry on things a little more pleasantly with you now”28 he added a few weeks later.

From now on, Ruskin would no longer commission work; Fairfax Murray, and others, must paint copies speculatively, a risky basis for business with the Professor since a recurrent cause of friction between Ruskin and his many copyists was his repeated failure to acknowledge receipt of work he had commissioned and his habit of sending work back or simply keeping it but refusing to pay. As his health declined, he was less able to manage the volume of work he had always on hand. (The loyal Thomas Rooke languished a whole year in Venice at his own expense awaiting Ruskin’s further instructions.) Fairfax Murray’s relations with John Ruskin shifted further from copyist to advisor and agent. He whetted Ruskin’s appetite with a photograph of a Della Robbia relief. “I beg you to secure the Luca” he replied excitedly from Brantwood on Christmas Day 1879, living for the next six weeks in an agony of apprehension – “Clear rosy dawn and sunrise after starry night, at last. I very sleepless or dreaming of business – that Murray as dead and my cheque returned, and the Luca lost . . .”29 until at last it arrived in February. Ruskin’s letters now swung unpredictably between satisfaction and criticism; they also displayed his disregard for the normal contractual conventions. In reply to a letter from Fairfax Murray about payment for work commissioned in Venice three years before, Ruskin airily replied that “the reason I didn’t write was I didn’t like the Prato drawing.”30 The next note said simply: “I send you cheque for £25 . . . sorry you were bothered – my head’s on yet and that is all I can say of it.”31 In June Fairfax Murray completed the first of two Botticelli fresco copies, Venus and the Graces, and the following letter was unusually congratulatory: “The Botticelli is here and it is entirely admirable . . . with this I am much more than satisfied. It is a most wonderful piece of drawing – greatly honourable to you . . . tell me what will perfectly satisfy you for it – I send £50 on account.”32 Four weeks later he wrote: “Please note that I will not advance money; and I cannot have you dependant on my instant answer even when drawings are sent . . .”33
Ruskin spent the next four months in Northern France, and in December 1880 set to work on six month's accumulated correspondence: "I am greatly ashamed at finding that Bacchus and the Fates had not been returned as I said. I will now keep them," followed next day by a further letter "I am ashamed to say I have now found all your drawings," and promising him more work for Sheffield. Whatever might have come on this, on 21st February Laurence Hilliard wrote to say that Ruskin was extremely ill once more, three years almost to the day from this first bout of dementia. In September 1881 Ruskin wrote for the first time in eight months "I am entirely delighted to hear from you again. When St Jerome (Carpaccio's St Jerome and his Lion in the Scuola di San Giorgio degli Schiavoni) came I was still badly ill, and it chanced to be the first thing I opened when I came downstairs and I took it for part of the diabolism that had been possessing me and didn't know whether to keep it or not... I like St Jerome greatly - I think you said it was to be 15? - I send £20 for it and the Carpaccio (The Death of St Jerome). I think you can safely go on sketching for me when you have nothing better to do." The second Botticelli fresco arrived in October: "I am glad to have (them) at £100 each... you will have more final profit, if not satisfaction, for work done for me than anyone else," but two days later Ruskin was raging again: "... you must not send me pictures painted with stick-liquorice." Silence prevailed until, in April 1882, he wrote that "since I saw you I have had another attack of violent delirium leaving me after 3 weeks of it gravely shaken and stunned; I only got in at the National Gallery on Friday last but I'll meet you there this week - Thursday? - and have another look and talk." They had spoken of a series of Turner copies, but Ruskin was now lukewarm, or simply too weary.

Ruskin returned to Italy in August 1882, visiting his copyists in Lucca, Pisa and Florence, where he met up with Murray once more: "... the Benozzo drawings (Abraham leaving Babylon with Sarah and Lot, from frescoes in the Campo Santo in Pisa) will I have no fear be a valuable addition to the museum." On his return he wrote to Fairfax Murray "Your summary of sketches puts me right about all of them... I had entirely forgotten about the Benozzo in the almost unsupportably various business which I am now managing or trying to manage..." Then, in December he wrote once more: "I must pause for a while in purchases for Sheffield as the subscriptions are too low to admit of the rate at which I have been going on lately." Weeks later, in January 1883, Ruskin dismissively informed Fairfax Murray that "I can't find the Benozzo (The Birth of Jacob and Esau) and I can't make up my mind about this Perugino... I have not time to see to their packing or I should settle the question by sending them back... I am quite well in general health so you must not mind waiting a week or two till I'm able to turn round..." Fairfax Murray's formal reply ended the relationship; "I would willingly wait not a week but a year without troubling you on a question of money but unfortunately so little of my work is paid for that the want of any amount due disturbs my economy... you can pay me £60 or £100 as you please."

Fairfax Murray had not yet achieved the financial security that would follow in the mid-1880s and despite constant problems over tardy payment he might well have stepped back from a permanent break. It was his weariness of Ruskin's capricious assessments of work commissioned and then neglected, and
his dogmatic pronouncements on painting, that lay at the heart of the rupture. It was John Ruskin who saw in Fairfax Murray’s early drawings the talent that led to his life’s work in the art world, and who had paid for its development out of his own pocket. Fairfax Murray’s bitter epitaph is all the sadder: “All those whom Ruskin has advised have turned round and cursed him” he wrote to William Spanton. Six years later, Ruskin was silenced by ill-health. At the time of Ruskin’s death, Charles Fairfax Murray was one of the most important marchand amateurs in the international market of the late nineteenth century.

NOTES

Ruskin’s letters to Charles Fairfax Murray are in the collection of the Pierpont Morgan Library, New York.

3 Georgina Burne-Jones to Fairfax Murray, 16.11.1901, John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, Brit. Mss 1281.
4 Ruskin, Collected Works ed. Cook & Wedderburn, XXXVI, 503, n. 2.
5 Ruskin to Charles Augustus Howell, Collected Works XXXVI, 503.
6 Ruskin, Collected Works XXXVII, 669.
7 Gerald Reitlinger, The Economics of Taste, Barrie & Rockliff, 1961, 70.
8 Edward Burne-Jones to Charles Fairfax Murray, 6.12.1872, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas.
9 Ibid.
11 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 3.5.1873.
12 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 25.5.1873.
13 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 29.11.1873.
14 Ruskin, Collected Works XXII, 337-8; 22.337-8; Ariadne Florentina, Ch. 2.
16 William Morris to Fairfax Murray, 27.5.1875, Harry Ransom Humanities Research Centre, University of Texas.
17 The frescoes in the Choistro Verde, damaged by flood in 1966, are by Paolo Ucello.
18 The frescoes of The Triumph of St Thomas Aquinas in the Cappellone degli Spagnuoli (1365) are by Andrea Bonaiuti called Andrea da Firenze, first attributed to him by Della Valle in 1786. Documentary confirmation was discovered in 1918.
19 Fairfax Murray to William Spanton, 14.6.1875, Dulwich Picture Gallery.
20 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 22.12.1877; picture now in the reserve collection, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.
21 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 25.2.75.
22 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 7.8.1878.
23 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 20.3.1879.
24 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 14.8.1879.
25 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 14.8.1879; second letter.
26 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 15.8.1879.
27 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 25.10.1879.
28 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 10.12.1879.
29 Ruskin Diary 19.1.1880.
30 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 17.5.1880.
31 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, undated 1880.
32 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 30.6.1880.
33 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 1.8.1880.
34 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 18.1.1881.
35 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 19.1.1881.
36 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 3.9.1881.
37 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 18.10.1881.
38 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 20.10.1881.
39 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 23.4.1882.
40 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 27.8.1882.
41 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 28.10.1882.
42 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 11.12.1882.
43 Ruskin to Fairfax Murray, 16.1.1883.
44 Fairfax Murray to Ruskin, 20.1.1883.
45 He was, for example, unable to afford the travel to London to attend Rossetti’s studio sale in September 1882.
46 Fairfax Murray to William Spanton, nd January 1883, Dulwich Picture Gallery.