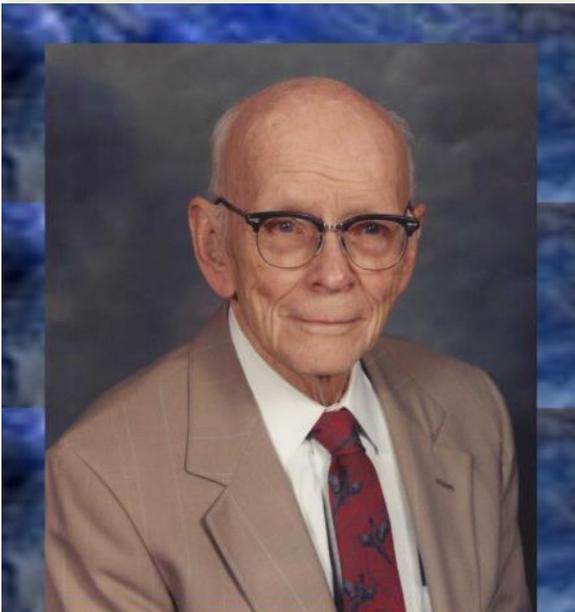


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**VAN AKIN BURD**

**(April 19<sup>th</sup> 1914 – November 7<sup>th</sup> 2015):**

*A Tribute by Jim Spates*



**VAN AKIN BURD**  
**(1914-2015)**

[A] book is essentially not a talked thing but a written thing, [a thing] written not with a view of mere communication but of permanence. [It comes to be] not to multiply the voice merely, not to carry it merely, but to perpetuate it. The author has something to say which he perceives to be true and useful, or helpfully beautiful. So far as he knows, no one has yet said it; so far as he knows, no one else can say it. He is bound to say it, clearly and melodiously if he may; clearly at all events. In the sum of his life he finds this to be the thing, or group of things, manifest to him; this, the piece of true knowledge, or sight, which his share of sunshine and earth has permitted him to seize. He would fain set it down for ever; engrave it on rock, if he could, saying: 'This is the best of me; for the rest, I ate, and drank, and slept, loved, and hated, like another; my life was as the vapour, and is not; but this I saw and knew: this, if anything of mine, is worth your memory.' That is his 'writing'; it is, in his small human way, and with whatever degree of true inspiration is in him, his inscription, or scripture. That is a 'Book'.

So said Ruskin in 1864 in Manchester, during one of his greatest lectures, 'Of Kings' Treasuries'. By 'Kings' Treasuries' he meant books. Not just *any* books, however; the *greatest* books, those 'books for all time' that contain the most brilliant posings of the essential questions with which we all must wrestle as the decades pass, the books that force us to confront the issues of what it means to be a human being and what constitutes a meaningful life. Such books are, Ruskin argued, true treasuries, far more valuable than gold. Among these he would have included the Bible, *The Divine Comedy*, (most of) Shakespeare's plays, (most of) Plato's dialogues, the poetry of Byron, Keats, and Tennyson. Reading such books regularly with care, he said, made us, over time, by that very act, more human and humane. His lecture was intended to make it palpable to his audience that, if they were reading such books at all, they were not reading them with that requisite care, and that such ignorance or negligence was directly responsible for the human and environmental catastrophe which was unfolding in nineteenth-century Britain. It was a hypothesis anyone could test. For decades, these have been among my favourite Ruskin sentences.

I've been lamenting the loss of a great friend, a fellow Ruskin scholar, one of—perhaps the *greatest*—Ruskin scholar ever, [Van Akin Burd](#). Van died in Cortland, New York; he died quietly and painlessly in his sleep in the home where he had lived for more than a half century. His passing was not unexpected. He was, after all, 101-and-a-half years old. But, for myself and not a few others, his leaving us was particularly poignant because Van held an unusual status. He was one of those few 'great friends' we are blessed with in the course of our lives.

Van Burd was a scholar whose special talent was to tell us things about Ruskin's days which we had not known. His was great work, work fit, like those 'kings' treasuries' for the ages. Without it we would know so much less about Ruskin and how he came to have his glorious and challenging views of life and the world. And so it seemed only right that I compose something to honour him and his contributions to the study of this great Victorian to whom he gave the majority of his life's energies.

One of my favourite films is *Enchanted April*. Set in the early 1920s, just after the cataclysm known as The First World War, it focuses on four wonderfully

different women who are bored with their lives or husbands, or both, who decide, for daring and excitement, that they will escape to a beautiful rented villa overlooking the beautiful Mediterranean in beautiful Italy. They won't tell anyone (including those tedious husbands) where they are going. Among them is the youngish Ruth Arbuthnot. One evening during the days when plans for the great disappearance are still evolving, Ruth is home alone, and having a miserable time of it. Her loquacious (and likely philandering) husband, Frederick, is at a party in a London mansion where those foppish folks Dickens calls 'The Fashionable Intelligence' are toasting and drinking to the publication of his new book, a novel which, like all his others, is a sensationalistic, scandal-riddled account of a London society girl's misadventures. In due course, all his approaches having been rebuffed, he returns home more than a little the worse for wear, and asks the still awake and sad Ruth if she would read his book. She asks what it is about. Appalled by the forthcoming description, she says that 'No one should ever write a book that God wouldn't want to read!' She is, of course, quite right about this, as Frederick's chagrined face tells us.

Van Burd wrote books, quite a few of them (and dozens of articles), and I believe I would not be alone in saying that not a single one contains anything that would ever offend a curious deity.

Actually, Van did not write books; he *crafted* them, books containing some thousands of his meticulous transcriptions and interpretations of Ruskin's letters which had not, until he published them, seen the light of day; letters—'those beautiful letters' I heard him call them more than once—which allowed us to see, as Ruskin had not been anxious for us to see, the great heart and incomparable genius of the man who had written them, letters which allowed our hearts to break along with their author's as his troubles threatened to overwhelm him or when he worried that the messages he so urgently wanted to impart in his books had gone awry because he lacked the imaginative ability to find the words which would convince his readers to do what had to be done to transform the needy world into a much better place.

Three of Van's most important books are *The Winnington Letters of John Ruskin* (1969)—frank and profound letters sent over the course of a decade (1858-68) to the headmistress and students of a girls' school, composed during a time of great personal crisis; *John Ruskin and Rose La Touche* (1979)—the tragic story of Ruskin's star-crossed love of a young Irish girl; and *Christmas Story: John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876-77* (1990)—a series of

private letters written during a winter in Venice, the year after Ruskin's beloved Rose died, a period when he was desperately searching for some way to communicate with her.

Of the first of these books, *The Winnington Letters*, Van wrote, as he closed his 'Introduction' to the collection, the following—simultaneously a testimony to his commitment to doing as perfect a job of editing as was possible and to bringing 'the real Ruskin' to light:

It is hoped that this volume of Ruskin's letters brings us as close to the flat table on which he wrote as does any edition of his correspondence. In later years, he believed that his books were inadequate as records of his inner feelings. 'But the truth is,' he wrote Kate Greenaway in 1886, 'my *life* never went into my books at all. Only my time.' For the record of his heart, we must turn to his autobiography, his journals, and his letters. [When writing of] his love for children—'sunlight upon lilies' [he called them] ... —Ruskin was his most spontaneous. The plan of the editing of the letters in this volume is to release this spontaneity.

When it came to crafting a *book*, Van understood, as did the thinker who was both his subject and hero, that:

The fine arts cannot be learned by competition, but, rather, only by doing our quiet best in our own way ... [We] must paint and build [and compose] neither for pride nor for money, but for love, for love of the art, for love of our neighbour, and whatever better love may be than these, founded on these.

Of this first book, Van's obituary in *The Guardian*, said: 'The publication of *The Winnington Letters of John Ruskin* ... was instrumental in initiating a Ruskin revival.' The dozens of reviews the book received in the scholarly and popular press were all laudatory in the extreme, as would be equally the case for all Van's books. Of Van's work as a whole, Clive Wilmer, the Master of the Guild wrote, in a retrospective review: 'Van's books are masterpieces of the editorial art. Through them, our understanding of Ruskin has been immeasurably enlarged: his character, his life, his emotional attachments and, above all, the relation of his ideas and preoccupations to his experiences of the world.' 'He was, by common consent,' Wilmer wrote in another place, 'the towering figure in modern Ruskin studies.'

Another remark of Wilmer's gives a sense of Van's enduring influence. 'In 2009,' he wrote in the retrospective just noted, 'I was writing a paper on Ruskin and Charles Darwin. Searching through my files for notes and quotations that would help me with it, I came across the offprint of an article on William Buckland who had taught and befriended Ruskin at Christ Church, Oxford, "Ruskin and his Good Master, William Buckland.'" [Buckland, an eminent geologist, was one of the last in that discipline who believed in the basic truth of the Biblical account of creation.] 'The article,' Wilmer continued, 'had been published the year before in an academic journal. Last year, when I was writing a paper on Ruskin and female sexuality, I riffled through my offprints and photocopies again, and up came another article that had been published in 2007 in an academic journal. It was called "Ruskin: On his Sexuality, a Lost Source." Both these articles were works by the same scholar, Van Akin Burd, and he wrote them at the ages of 93 and 94 respectively.'

Here's another measure, a memory shared by the English Ruskin scholar, Ray Haslam. It serves as a testimony both to Van's eminence and character (a character to which we shall return). He wrote: 'The Lancaster University *Ruskin Programme Bulletin Number 12* (January, 1997) contained a short article by myself entitled, "Ruskin, The Reverend John Eagles, and *The Sketcher*." To my amazement, the following month a letter arrived from Professor Van Akin Burd in America containing some encouraging comments and also a related article of his own, "Ruskin's Defense of Turner," the subject of his Ph.D thesis. I was dumbfounded that he should take the trouble to write and show such interest in what I was doing ... We all know Van Akin Burd as a great scholar and author of some of the finest works in the field of Ruskin studies. He has been for me an inspiration: the master researcher and editor who has set for us all the highest of standards.'

As 'final' proof of the importance of Van's scholarly work (his 'books' as Ruskin defined them), consider that when he retired from the State University of New York at Cortland, the institution where he had taught for more than three and a half decades, Van was the first in the university's history to be accorded the status of *Distinguished Professor Emeritus*; or, consider that, shortly after that retirement, a volume of essays written

by the most prominent Ruskin scholars of the day appeared bearing the title, *Studies in Ruskin: Essays in Honor of Van Akin Burd*; or, consider that, during the celebration of his hundredth birthday in Cortland in 2014, Shoji Sato, long a friend of Van's arrived from Tokyo to present Van and all who had assembled to commemorate his accomplishments with newly bound copies of a volume, *Short Essays by Dr. Van Akin Burd in Honor of his Centenary Birthday*, the contents of which he had recently finished translating into Japanese; or, consider that, during that gathering, his long-time friend and colleague in the Department of Comparative Literature at SUNY, Professor Emeritus Robert Rhodes, read a Proclamation forwarded by the New York State Assembly making Van a 'Distinguished Citizen of the State of New York'; or, lastly, consider that, at that same assembly, the Mayor of the City of Cortland, the Honourable Brian Tobin, issued a second proclamation, this one making the day of his birth (April 19<sup>th</sup>) 'Van Akin Burd Day.'

All that I've said so far concerns the creation of one kind of 'book'—the one appearing on printed pages. But there is a second sort of 'book' worthy of note: the book of a life and, as Ray Haslam mentioned, of the example that life sets.

A short time ago, I used the word 'character' and said I would come back to it.

Perhaps the event which might have signalled to a curious observer how remarkable a character Van Burd was to become occurred in 1937 when he was just 23. Already a literary soul and much under the influence of Eugene O'Neill's sea plays and Melville's novels of the South Seas, *Typee* and *Omoo*, Van determined in 1937 that he would voyage, alone, to the Pacific to see for himself where the great novelist had gotten his inspiration. As it happened, he spent a considerable amount of time on the island of Fiji, being hosted and toasted by the local tribes—and meeting there, he told me in one of our many chats, an Englishwoman on her travels: 'She was a real Lady,' he said. 'But,' he added, 'she didn't act like a Lady! I very quickly learned to keep my distance. I could see that she would be trouble and saw as well that she was determined to cause it!'

A second story illuminating his character is more poignant. It was 1944 and Van, then in the Navy, was in the South Seas again but this time it was for a much deadlier reason. His unit had been among those chosen for the invasion of the island of Okinawa as the American forces made their embattled way north toward Japan. It was a harrowing



Mayor Tobin reading his proclamation—with Van, his daughter, Joyce Hicks, and his great-grandson, Thomas Cain to the right; on the occasion of Van's 100<sup>th</sup> birthday.

experience and although, during the landing and after, Van came out unscathed, many of his compatriots did not. When the fearful fighting was over and the island was secured, some American forces were assigned to stay on to help rebuild the island's shattered villages. Van, a lieutenant, was one so assigned. With his fellow Navy officers and regular seamen, he spent some months at the task, becoming in the process a revered figure among Okinawa's inhabitants. Here is how his long-time friend, Bob Rhodes, put it during his eulogy at Van's funeral service a few days after Van's death: 'When he was leaving, the townspeople gathered to say farewell and the mayor spoke some words that Van kept and, later, shared with me: "The town of Kochiya is on the way to re-establishment and this has been accomplished primarily by Lt. Burd and his staff's sincere efforts. [The process] is not finished yet, but it has been greatly shaped by these efforts. You will never be able to find anyone who does not respect and love him in this town.'" Another measure of this admiration was in the way the people of Kochiya addressed him. Having a collective difficulty pronouncing his name, our English sounds very foreign in their ears, he was always called, 'Ben Bardo San,' the Honourable Van Burd. Character.

Here's another indicator. I was privileged to know Van for twenty years and, during all that time and all our conversations, I never heard from him (if I can alter a line from an old cowboy song) a disparaging word—about *anyone*. The closest I ever knew him to approach the negative, and the instance barely touches the outer orbit of the word's meaning, was a comment he made about a younger Ruskin scholar whom he thought should have been a bit more careful in how he transcribed and interpreted a previously unpublished Ruskin letter. That was it.

Here is Bob Rhodes' praise of his friend: 'For 63 years, Van was my teacher,

mentor, colleague and friend, and in all those years and in all those roles, he never failed me, even once.'

Some years ago when we were talking about that inevitably approaching moment, Van asked me if, 'when the time comes' (always his phrase), I would make sure that his books and papers would go to places where future Ruskin scholars could use them. I, of course, accepted. And so, in partial fulfilment of this charge, I travelled to 22 Forrest Avenue in Cortland about two weeks after his death to collect these vital materials. As I was placing some of his papers into a box to take home, a card fell to the floor. Picking it up, I found that it had been sent by a much younger friend, David Janik, to commemorate Van's 100th birthday. David had grown up knowing Van well, his father, Del, being one of Van's colleagues at SUNY Cortland. On the card's cover was a single line from Tennyson's 'Ulysses.' It read: 'I am a part of all that I have met.' Opening the card, one finds this heartfelt message: 'I am lucky to know you!' Inside as well are written the following lines:

Dear Van,

I could not find a card with a Ruskin quote, so Tennyson will have to do! It is true! [Here an arrow draws the reader's eyes to the quote opposite.] You are one of the most remarkable people I know. I have been blessed to have you as a friend, neighbor, teacher, grandfather figure, and storyteller. You have had a rich and beautiful life full of spectacular adventures. I continue to enjoy these stories each time I see you.

I have appreciated all of your advice and encouragement. I so much appreciate that you listen to my views and stories in return. Visiting with you is something I look forward to every time I come to Cortland.

I am so pleased to have been with you on your 100th birthday. So let's celebrate!

You have been lucky to have had such a long, healthy life, a life filled with love, intellectual pursuit, and friendship.

Love, David.

It is only *character* which spontaneously generates such sensibilities.

In the days following Van's passing, many comments and tributes to him came my way, all telling of how special, how wonderful he was. They

were all profoundly worded treasures—like David Janik's, expressing enduring gratitude for having had the chance to know him and telling of great reverence for the gifts his life had bestowed on them. In my view, one sums up them all. It was written by Howard Hull, Chairman of the Ruskin Foundation and Director of Brantwood. Thinking of Van's departure, Howard wrote:

It was a day set in the stars; but who among us could have guessed that Van's candle could burn so wonderfully long and bright? I rejoice in the beauty of the man. The beauty of his spirit, his kindliness, his integrity, the clarity of his mind, and the wisdom of his judgements. Pamela and I were privileged to encounter Van in the best of moments: working at a Ruskin letter on his typewriter in a packing case deep in the woods of Michigan; at home with us at Brantwood; on the balcony at Jim's house overlooking lovely Seneca Lake in Geneva. Van was an impeccable scholar—really, the very definition of all that a scholar should be—guided always not only by the empirical evidence but by his humanity. He recognised the responsibility that he assumed in studying so closely another man's life. It seems to me that with great generosity of spirit he marvelled and he cared.

A reminiscence of my own. For many years, at approximately three-week intervals, I travelled to Cortland from Geneva, New York to visit Van. As I entered his home, almost always he would welcome me from his living-room couch where he had been resting or reading. Next to the couch, on a



One of Van's favourite photos of Jim and him together. They are pictured at Michelle Lovric's palazzo on the Grand Canal, Venice.

small table, would be his most recent *Times Literary Supplement* and his current Ruskin reading. During his last months, among the latter were Robert Hewison's *Ruskin on Venice* (the definitive account of Ruskin's time in and love for that incredible city on the Adriatic), Robert Brownell's *Marriage of Inconvenience* (a recent interpretation based on new and convincing evidence concerning the catastrophe of Ruskin's marriage to Effie Gray, suggesting, in the main, that Effie, rather than Ruskin—who, for decades, has gotten the bulk of the blame—was primarily responsible for the calamity), Sara Atwood's lecture, 'The earth veil': *Ruskin and Environment* ('She's a fine new, young Ruskin scholar,' Van said repeatedly) and Jim Dearden's *Rambling Reminiscences: A Ruskinian's Recollections* (Jim being, by Van's description, 'My great Ruskin friend of almost six decades!')

On one of my last visits, as I walked toward him, he proclaimed: 'Jim, there are two new books on Ruskin we must get and talk about. One about hundreds of his daguerreotypes, all of which have been lost for nearly a century and a half (Ken and Jenny Jacobson's *Carrying Off the Palaces: John Ruskin's Lost Daguerreotypes* reviewed elsewhere) and another by Sarah Quill, a revision of her book, *Ruskin's Venice*:

*The Stones Revisited*. Do you remember how we took her first edition with us when we went to Venice in 2004 and, using her map, spent at least two days hunting down the most interesting of the palazzos Ruskin wrote about? The most interesting ones were those hidden down the by-streets? And do you remember how we spent hours studying the figures on the capitals of the Ducal Palace in St. Mark's Square? What a wonderful time that was! How I wish we could go once more and take this new edition with us! And all this from a 101 year old man who was perfectly well aware that he would never leave Cortland again.

It was a wonderful trip! The highlight of the many we took together.

About a week after Van died, I said, in an email to Howard Hull: 'As the days pass, his loss is ever more keenly felt. It is hard to realize that there will be no more trips to Cortland. No more soup, egg salad sandwiches, and coffee for lunch. No more talk about recent Ruskin publications. No more Ruskin gossip! (Not that there ever was much!) Even to the last, when we were both aware that that end was nearly upon us, we never acted as if it would arrive. Our last lunch together, about a week before he left us, was as sweet as the dozens which had preceded it.'

I saw him last two days before the end. He was, by then, bedridden. Though his ability to communicate was impaired, we had a lovely visit, recollecting our many travels in the service of the great Victorian to whom he had dedicated his life's work. At his request, I read him the passages from Jim Dearden's *Reminiscences* where Jim recalls his first and subsequent meetings with Van. Van was delighted.

It is hard to know how to say goodbye to such an incredible life and friend. Van was unique among the people I have known. He was not only a great intellect, he was possessed, like the genius he taught us so much about, of the greatest of hearts. He was unfailingly kind, generous, and loving. It is a rare thing to have such traits so pronounced in one soul. At the same time, he was remarkably down to earth, in some essential way just a regular person living a normal life—unpretentious, never disingenuous, never envious of others.

Two years ago, I conducted an interview with him about his 'life of Ruskin' for *The Companion*. At the end, I asked if, after nearly seventy years of working on Ruskin, he had any regrets. Van said: 'Well, there are things I'd like to have done and things I'd still like to do but, to tell the truth, I've no regrets. I've lived a magic life.' We are so very lucky to have known him. As another great writer once had one of his characters remark of another great character: 'Take him for all in all, he was a

man. We shall not look upon his like again.' Van's life, like his printed books, was a 'Book' in Ruskin's sense, a book that God would have been delighted to read (and who, almost surely, already has).

I was first, in a very real sense, a student under Van's remarkable mentorship. After a short while, we became colleagues. Then, finally, dear friends. But he was cherished by a multitude. By his beloved family, his devoted friends in Cortland, his equally devoted friends in the Ruskin world, and by the wonderful caretakers who did just that—took 'care' of him during his last years. We all loved him.

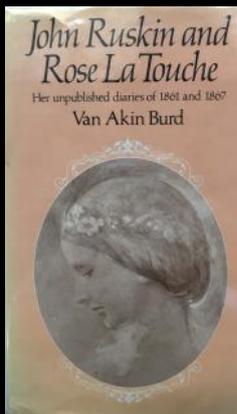
The angels have sung him to his rest and I presume (a little enviously, but I will gladly wait my appointed turn) that by now he has already had some fine chats with Mr Ruskin about the meaning of it all. Not being privy to that, I thought I would end with one of my favourite imaginings concerning 'the meaning of it all,' the last stanzas of Yeats' 'Lapis Lazuli,' a poem 'about' a large green stone with some quite unique carvings. Yeats composed it in 1933, just a few years before a young, adventurous Van Akin Burd sailed for Fiji.

**Two Chinamen, behind them a third,  
Are carved in lapis lazuli.  
Over them flies a long-legged bird,  
A symbol of longevity;  
The third, doubtless a serving-man,  
Carries a musical instrument.**

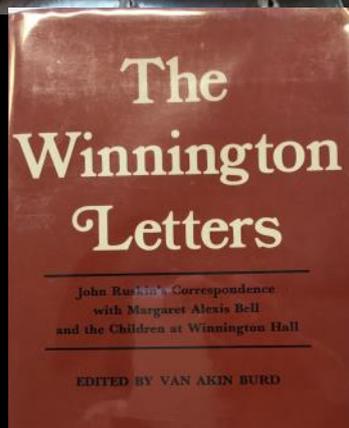
**Every discoloration of the stone,  
Every accidental crack or dent,  
Seems a water-course or an avalanche,  
Or lofty slope where it still snows;**

**Though doubtless plum or cherry-branch  
Sweetens the little half-way house  
Those Chinamen climb towards. And I  
Delight to imagine them seated there;  
There, on the mountain and the sky,  
On all the tragic scene they stare.  
One asks for mournful melodies;  
Accomplished fingers begin to play.  
Their eyes mid many wrinkles, their eyes,  
Their ancient, glittering eyes, are gay.**

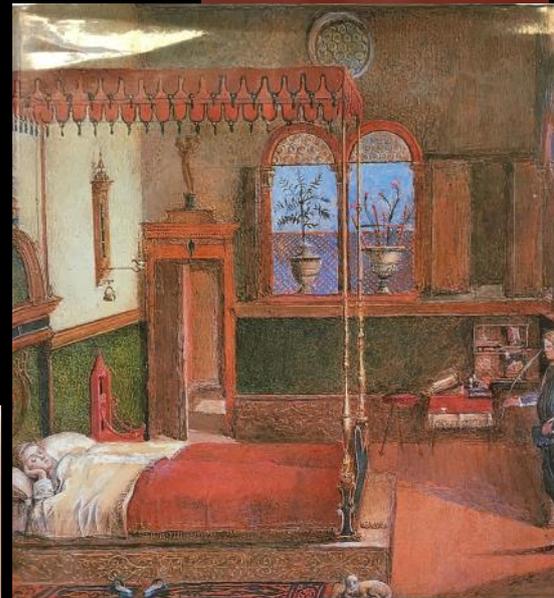
*My thanks to Stuart Eagles for the image of Van used at the beginning of this tribute, and to the Guild for the use of quotes from Clive Wilmer and Ray Haslam. Thanks are also due to the ever-patient, ever-keen-eyed Jenn Morris for her editorial suggestions.*



(Above) The candle lit for Van by Michelle Lovric in the Church of San Giovanni Crisotomo in Venice, a few days after his death.



(Right and below) The images of some of Van's finest books—his enduring legacy.



## Christmas Story

John Ruskin's Venetian Letters of 1876–1877

Edited, and with an Introductory Essay on Ruskin and the Spiritualists, His Quest for the Unseen, by Van Akin Burd