

LILIAS TROTTER

almost famous

In last year's centennial commemoration of John Ruskin's death, **one name** was missing: Liliat Trotter, an artist Ruskin thought could rival his idol, painter J.M.W. Turner. Why was Liliat lost to history? Her biographer, Miriam Rockness, plumbs the mystery.



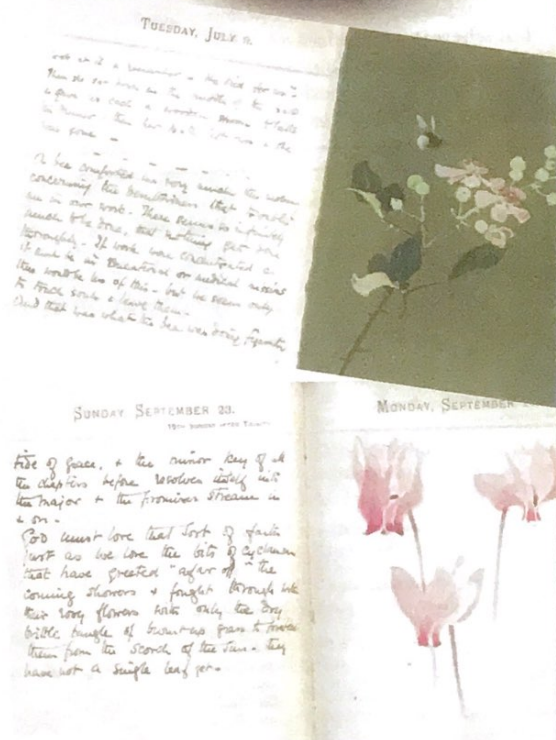
IN OCTOBER 1876, THE GREAT MAN WAS STAYING at the Grand Hotel in Venice. John Ruskin, artist, critic, social philosopher and a towering figure in Victorian England, was fifty-seven years old. Broken-hearted after the death of his great love, Rose La Touche, he had taken a leave from his position as a fine-arts professor at Oxford University and retreated to the city whose ancient buildings had so inspired him twenty-five years earlier. But now Venice simply seemed a city of decay. Ruskin's despair deepened. Then a portfolio of watercolors and a note were delivered to his room.

The note said: "Mrs. Alex Trotter has the pleasure of sending Professor Ruskin her daughter's water-colours. Mrs. Trotter is quite prepared to hear that he does not approve of them—she has drawn from childhood and has had very little teaching. But if Mrs. Trotter could have Mr. Ruskin's opinion it would be most valuable."

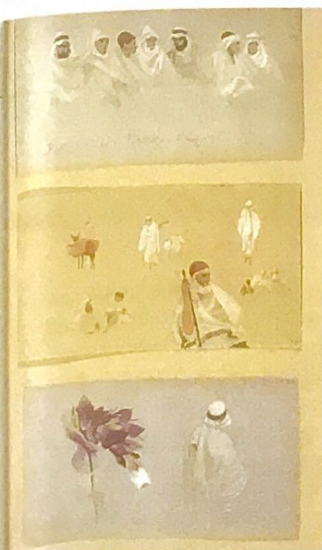
Ruskin's response is best related in his own words: "When I was in Venice in 1876—it is about the only thing that makes me content in having gone there—two English ladies, mother and daughter, were staying at the same hotel. One day the mother sent me a pretty note asking if I would look at the young lady's drawings. On my somewhat sulky permission a few were sent, in which I saw there was extremely right-minded and careful work."

Thus began a unique friendship between John Ruskin and Liliat Trotter, the twenty-three-year-old daughter of a distinguished London family. The author of *The Stones of Venice*, the definitive artistic and architectural history of the city, took her under his wing, squiring her about on sketching expeditions and inviting her to study with him upon her return to England. Quickly he became convinced that she had a rare artistic talent, which, if cultivated, would make her one of England's "greatest living artists."

Eight decades later, however, Sir Kenneth Clark, in the



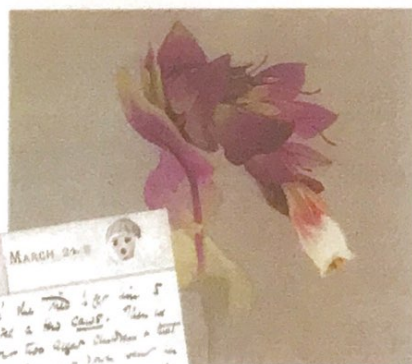
Liliat, pictured at twenty-seven, ventured to Algeria in 1888 to found a Christian mission. In journals, this page, she captured the desultory bee and the cyclamen. As shown by her sketchbooks, opposite, she followed Ruskin's dictum to paint what she saw. For the cover of "Sand Lilies," a devotional leaflet, she used opaque white, a color that delighted Ruskin. Opposite, bottom: This view of Liliat's balcony in the Arab section of the Casbah was painted for her last book, "Between the Desert and the Sea," published in London in 1927.



introduction to his biography *Ruskin Today*, mentions Ruskin's "ecstasy" over the drawings of a Lilius Trotter, noting that she is no longer remembered and implying she was not of artistic consequence. He had little cause to argue otherwise. Lilius's paintings, which Ruskin so proudly championed, are buried in the Print Room of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (I found them under the name "Lillian Trotter"). Even to those who know how to spell her name correctly, she is an unexplored footnote in the pages of John Ruskin's highly documented life.



I crossed paths with Lilius Trotter only by chance. A decade ago, two elderly sisters decided to winter in my hometown, Lake Wales, Florida, due to a fire at their usual seasonal site. Visiting the local Presbyterian church, of which my husband is the minister, they noted his surname and discovered our families had been entwined some years back, when my husband's mother was a missionary in China. This happy bit of news led to a dinner engagement where, for the first time, I heard the name Lilius Trotter, a woman the sisters knew only through the beautifully illustrated devotional books she began publishing in the 1890's.



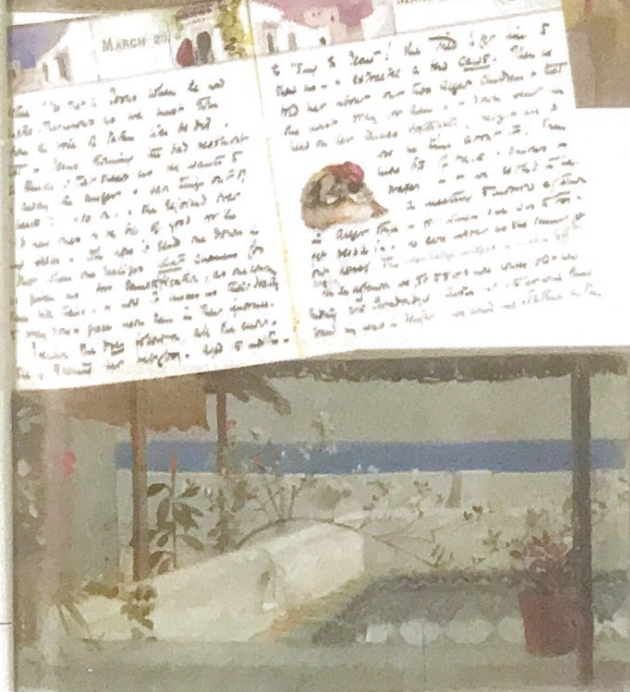
I listened, enthralled, as they told of this wellborn daughter who met Ruskin at the same time she encountered another calling—social work. I heard how Lilius volunteered with the fledgling YWCA at Welbeck Street Institute, a hostel for working girls, and how her heart reached out to women of a more questionable occupation—the prostitutes at Victoria Station—whom she brought to the Institute for training in "honorable employment." The story progressed to a stunning climax. In 1888 at the age of thirty-five, Lilius decided to abandon all possibility of artistic fame

and found a Christian mission in Algeria.

As the sisters talked, I realized that their pressing concern was their collection of Lilius's popular devotional books. They were about to dissolve their library and feared that no one would appreciate Lilius's work as they did.

Several months later, to my complete surprise, a package arrived with a cameo biography of Lilius and a tiny devotional leaflet. Over the next several years, one by one, without announcement, other volumes appeared in my mailbox, until the loveliest arrived—an Algerian sketchbook, *Between the Desert & the Sea*—with a note from our friends informing me that this was the final volume of their collection.

By then I was totally besotted by Lilius. I began to see if I could arrange to have her books reissued and was told that the only way they had a chance of being marketable was if her reputation were revived. A biography had to be written. Without thinking, I began eight years of detective work.



Ruskin dazzled Lilies, telling her "she would be the greatest"

A tantalizing reference in the cameo biography the sisters sent me indicated that Lilies had preserved "thirty little diary volumes." Where were they? And what had become of the Algiers Mission Band, the organization of some thirty men and women who joined Lilies in Algeria? My search took me on an extraordinarily circuitous path to Loughborough, England, and the office of Arab World Ministries, a step-grandchild of Lilies's mission. There I was amazed to discover her archives: a rich reservoir of books, leaflets and, most compellingly, her diaries and journals—miniature—illuminated by exquisite watercolours and strong sketches.

Of course there was more sleuthing to be done. Map in hand, I roamed London's West End searching out her early homes and haunts. Curator in tow, I hunted down the paintings Ruskin had given to the Ashmolean Museum. And in a stroke of luck, I came upon her grandnephew in Surrey, who showed me, among other treasures, the very sketchbook that Lilies had produced under Ruskin's guidance in Venice.

What had this great tastemaker, himself an extraordinarily talented artist, seen in an unschooled twenty-three-year-old? Was she simply another in a series of young women who piqued his fancy?

Lilies Trotter was exactly Ruskin's type. Young and pure, cultured and beautiful, she may well have elicited a proposal on his part. I have never been able to find documentary evidence, but among her friends, it was assumed a marriage offer had been made. But Lilies had other plans. A strong-minded woman informed by deep reading and by practical engagement with the problems of society, she had interests far different from the delicate, refined Ruskin. No, the bond between them was art.

Lilies viewed the world as Ruskin did, with "heart-sight as deep as eyesight," to borrow a phrase he used to describe his hero, J.M.W. Turner. She adored nature and was moved to tears, as was he, upon first sighting the Alps. All she lacked was a teacher. All he lacked was a student. He had brought such artists as John Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti to prominence. Now it was Lilies's turn.

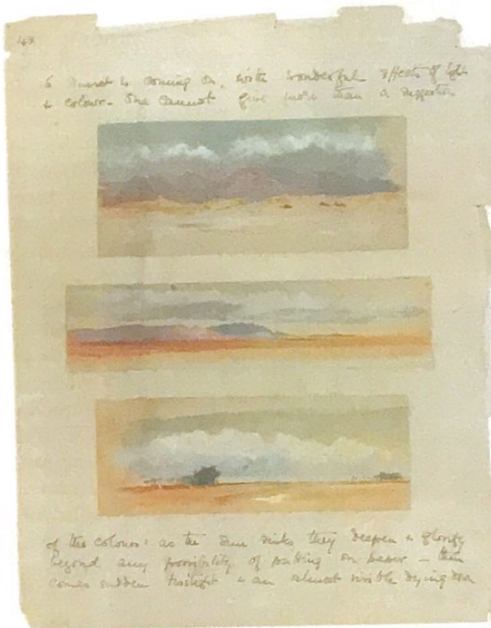
While few could equal his mastery as a watercolorist, Ruskin considered himself more an educator than an artist. He often taught drawing privately, in addition to serving as Oxford University's first Slade Professor of Fine Arts. Ruskin believed that without a knowledge of drawing, one could not fully appreciate nature: "I would rather teach drawing that my pupils may learn to love Nature, than teach the looking at Nature that they may learn to draw." He told his students, "Go to nature, in singleness of heart." Techniques must be acquired hand in hand with the skill of "learning to look."

Lilies saw immediately. As Ruskin later said in his 1883 Oxford lecture, "The Art of England," where he cited her talent as a way of inspiring his students, "She seemed to learn everything the instant she was shown it, and ever so much more than she was taught."

Her first lesson, upon her return to England, took place at Brantwood, his home in the Lake District, where she was accompanied by her sister Margaret. As the visit neared, Ruskin fretted: "If only you could come now! Oh dear, I'm afraid it's going to rain tomorrow, and now—it's exquisite...the woods are in such glory... Love to Margaret. Her room's little but close to your turret, and she can skip across in the early morning." Other fortnights at Brantwood followed, along with lessons at Lilies's London home. When they were apart, Ruskin monitored her progress through letters,

writing: "The drawing is wholly perfect and lovely" or "This lily and the chiaroscuro gateway are simply and by far the best lessons I have in their kind in the Oxford Schools."

At Brantwood, the house, like the man, was an education in itself, with its vast and various collections—minerals, Greek coins, pottery, seashells—and art treasures amassed abroad. The days were regulated by Ruskin's routines: letter writing before breakfast, written work in the morning, art lessons in his study or outdoors, and reading aloud in the evening after dinner. On one occasion, Lilies admitted a dislike for the color purple, calling forth stern rebuke from Ruskin as witnessed by her sister: "Cupboards full of lovely minerals were opened, rock crystals and amethysts of every shade were spread forth, flowers were picked, water-



Above: Traveling by camel to the desert in 1893, Lilies paused to capture twilight. Ruskin marveled over her unique ability to rapidly record images. Opposite: An oasis home in Tolga.

...living painter and do things that would be Immortal."

colours of birds by William Hunt, mountain scenes by Turner, were all called into contribution by her master to persuade her of the greatness of the heresy. She never dared to object to purple again."

As Liliass's immersion in painting deepened, so did her commitment to her spiritual calling. Her part-time work at Welbeck Street Institute evolved into the full-time role of "Honorary Secretary." She helped open London's first affordable public restaurant for women, so that working girls would not be forced to eat bag lunches on city sidewalks.

Ruskin complained that Liliass paid less attention to him—and to her art. "I pause to think how—anyhow—I can convince you of the marvelous gift that is in you." He worried that her city life affected the character of her art, writing, "The power in these drawings is greater than ever...but the sense of color is gradually getting debased under the conditions of your life—the vileness of all things visible in London, and the labor and sorrow of your usual occupation."

In May 1879, three years after meeting her in Venice, Ruskin invited Liliass to Brantwood and put before her the brilliant future, which he maintained would undoubtedly be hers—if she were to give herself fully to the development of her art. Dazzled, Liliass wrote to a friend that Ruskin felt "she would be the greatest living painter and do things that would be Immortal." With his talent as a teacher and his power as cultural leader, Ruskin could launch her career single-handedly. But the offer came with a caveat. To become "Immortal," she would have to "give herself up to art."

The conversation shook Liliass to the core. "At first," she wrote, "I could only rush about in the woods all in a dream, and it was all like a dream for the first day or two. Since then an almost constant state of suffocation half intoxication so that I can hardly eat or sleep." After days of agonizing deliberation, she saw she could not devote herself to both art and ministry. She wrote, "I see clear as daylight now I cannot give myself to painting in the way he means."

How could she turn down this matchless opportunity? Many of Liliass's friends and family members were shocked and disappointed by her decision. And indeed, anyone venturing into the Ashmolean Museum will find it heart-wrenching. There, in frame after frame, are works by Ruskin disciples—Millais, Rossetti, Holman Hunt, Ford Maddox Brown. Liliass's works, clearly their equal in artistry if not complexity, are filed away, viewable only by request.

No one knew better than Liliass how her renunciation of Ruskin's offer would affect her life. Many years later, a life-long friend recounted that "the ache of desire was with her to the end, not so much on the many days when she did no drawing, as on the days when she took up her brush...conscious of the pain of the artist who takes up an unpracticed tool and knows full well to what beauty he might bend it if he could but give to it his strength and life."

She continued to paint and Ruskin continued to tempt her toward a career in art. In 1885, he wrote to Kate Greenaway, the popular illustrator, describing his ideas for a girls' drawing school in London with Kate and Liliass as "the Dons, or Donnas, of it." In 1886, he wrote to the Duchess of Albany, including a sketch "by my best of pupils, Liliass Trotter."

But Liliass's life would change dramatically in the fall of 1887 when a missionary from Algeria came to speak at the YWCA. Unexpectedly she found herself called to help the women of Africa. By springtime, she had set sail. For the next forty years, until her own death in 1928, she brought her spiritual vision—"the light of the knowledge of the glory of God"—to the cloistered world of Arab womanhood, to children in the streets of the Casbah in Algiers, to Sufi mystics in the desert Southlands. All the while she remained faithful to Ruskin's vision. With her pocket sketchbook and her keen eye, she lived the credo he outlined in *Modern Painters*: "The greatest thing a human soul ever does in this world is to see something, and tell what it saw in a plain way. Hundreds of people can talk for one who can think, but thousands can think for one who can see."

By publishing her African paintings in British devotional albums, Liliass did reach many thousands of people in her time. But most importantly, she lived contentedly, filling her small leather-bound page-a-day diaries with watercolors of all that she saw, exulting, "Oh, how good it is that I have been sent here to such beauty!"

Just as she never forsook her art, she never forsook Ruskin. She sent paintings, letters and love from Africa, and visited regularly when she returned, one of the very few people whom he admitted to Brantwood as the end neared. In 1899, only months before his death, Liliass sent him a hymnal, explaining, "It has been full of light and blessedness to me—I have such a feeling that it will have some rays for you." With "grateful & loving memories," she signed herself, "Liliass Trotter." But to Ruskin she was St. Liliass, the one who followed her "own path happily" and basked in "the light I cannot find."

Miriam Rockness is the author of *A Passion for the Impossible: The Life of Liliass Trotter* (Shaw Publishers). For additional information, see page 98.

