

# *The Young Lloyd Mifflin Writes John Ruskin*

By Matthew Guntharp

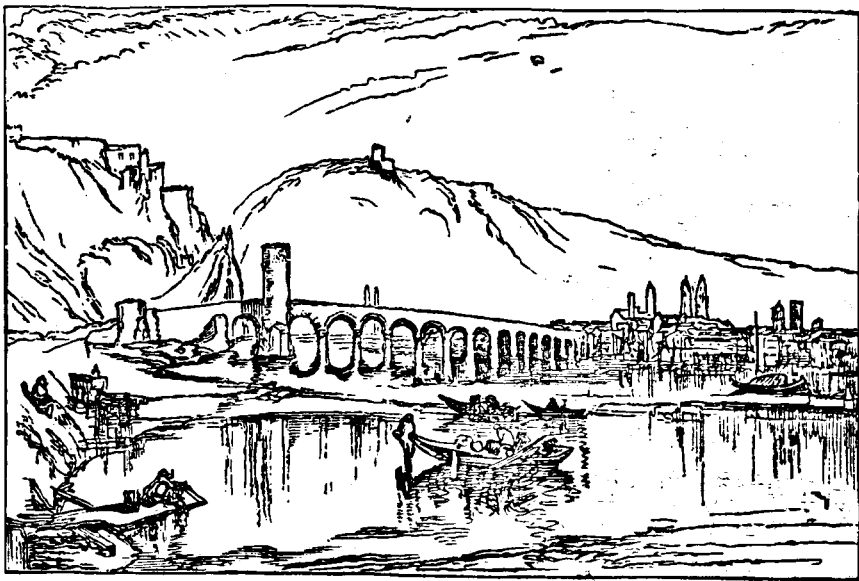
## *A Bibliographic Note*

*T*he letter herein transcribed is currently held by The Pennsylvania State University Library's Rare Books Room which obtained it from Henry Bristow in 1973. John Ruskin, the addressee, gave the letter to Dr. Drewitt, a pupil of his at the Oxford School of Drawing.<sup>1</sup> He, in turn, gave it to Frank Short who was preparing to do an engraving of the Turner water color discussed by Mifflin in the letter.<sup>2</sup> I am grateful for the library's permission to print the text and offer my sincerest appreciation and thanks to the entire staff of the Rare Books Room, especially Mr. Charles Mann, who made my task both easy and enjoyable.

I have attempted to reproduce the letter as closely to the way it was written as is feasible. I corrected a few spelling errors, underlined book titles, and, in one instance, capitalized the initial word of a sentence. For the most part, however, I retained Mifflin's punctuation or, which is often the case, his lack of it. Communication in one's letter-writing is often integrally tied to certain individual stylistic peculiarities. Thus, I have kept his emphatic underlining of words and occasional use of dashes. Mifflin's curious omission of commas throughout what is obviously a semi-formal scholarly dissertation contrasts interestingly with the demanding requirements of the literary style he pursued later in life.

Lloyd Mifflin's letter contains two important drawings which I felt artistically unqualified to render in the body of the text. I, therefore, included a photo copy of the letter in the appendix. Since Mifflin makes frequent reference to Ruskin's woodcut of Turner's "The Bridge at Coblenz", I have included a

copy of it as well. The inability of a photo copy to capture the delicacy of Turner's water color persuaded me that a facsimile of it would be of little value to the reader.



*Ruskin's sketch of Turner's "Bridge at Coblenz."*

## *Introduction*

Lloyd Mifflin, "America's Greatest Sonneteer", published over five hundred sonnets in his lifetime.<sup>1</sup> I believe that a dentist named Merrill Moore actually published more but his sonneteering was on the verge of being pathological. Because Mifflin was so prolific, it is surprising that he spent the first part of his life as an artist and that he did not become a professional writer until his fiftieth year.

Mifflin was born in 1846. From about the age of fourteen, he expressed a keen interest in drawing and painting. His father, an accomplished artist as well, was at first reluctant to allow his son to pursue a career in art, but he eventually gave his consent and help.

In 1869, after several years of studying at home, Mifflin set out across the Atlantic, hoping to refine his style and techniques by working with European painters. Traveling in such turbulent times (the Franco-Prussian War had not yet reached its 1870 end) was no easy matter. Mifflin, nevertheless, managed to make his way across both the Continent and the British Isles where, pursuing

and eventually developing a style akin to Turner's, he became totally dedicated to English Romantic painting.

In 1872, Mifflin paused at Coblenz along the Moselle in order to study the relationship between Turner's water color of the "Bridge at Coblenz" and the actual scene. Reviewing Ruskin's *The Elements of Drawing*, in which Turner's painting is discussed at length, he found numerous deviations from reality in Turner's composition. Mifflin felt compelled to write Ruskin.

Among his vast academic credentials, John Ruskin was an expert on Turner. He personally owned several of his works and frequently rendered them in the form of woodcuts and engravings in order to illustrate points of composition, linear movement, and perspective. Such was the case regarding the "Bridge at Coblenz" as analyzed in *The Elements of Drawing*. Ruskin had apparently seen the bridge because he points out several specific instances in which Turner altered the actual view. One must assume that he was, therefore, not ignorant of Mifflin's observations. It would seem that Mifflin's letter made little impression on Ruskin. Neither his diary nor his published letters mention his having received or returned Mifflin's correspondence despite the earnestness of its plea.

Shortly after his sojourn in Coblenz, Mifflin returned to his Columbia, Pennsylvania home. For the next twenty years, he painted, drew, and etched mostly landscapes and, as every artist must, portraits. Mifflin never gained prominence but instead, became increasingly economically hard pressed so he finally abandoned painting after a bout with a lung disease which he blamed on the inhalation of paint fumes. He then turned to writing poetry.

Mifflin published his first book of sonnets in 1897.<sup>2</sup> For the next decade, he turned out volume after volume. In the last years before his death in 1921, his productivity finally slowed. Mifflin published only a few additional sonnet collections in the last five years of his life.

In both his painting and poetry, Mifflin wholeheartedly dedicated himself to the presentation and recording of beauty. Not often philosophical, his lyrics are instead descriptive and imaginative. He often seems to almost paint in verse. Mifflin chose to work almost exclusively in the sonnet form. He enjoyed the challenge of its rigid and demanding requirements. With exacting poetical craftsmanship, Mifflin's lyrics move precisely within the sonnet's metrical and rhyming contour.

Returning to Mifflin's letter, one cannot fail to notice, in the young man's writing, those qualities which later so characterized his poetry. Romantic, imaginative, at times almost dreamy, he describes Turner's painting: ". . . I felt the power of the wonderful mind which so exalted everything it contemplated. The fortress is ennobled, the bridge made airy, the tower exalted, the city raised, the hills lifted up — everything deified, everything idealized, everything better than it is. . . ." Ornate, almost sentimental at times, Mifflin's letter lacks only the maturity, precision, and discipline which later shaped his verse. The following

excerpt from "A Tuscan Pastoral" offers an interesting comparison to the lines of the letter just quoted.<sup>3</sup>

The russet levels of Italian leas  
Reach far away to where the mountain clips  
The quiet vale. A near, the streamlet dips  
Purling beside us. Vine-enwreathed trees  
Rise, till their tops might hail the midland seas;  
And now a kid within their shadow skips  
Near the recumbent goat that slowly nips  
The thymy pasture as it lies at ease.

Though Mifflin's letter is frequently verbose, clumsy, and occasionally repetitious, it possesses an undeniable charm. While it did not succeed in getting Ruskin to delve more deeply into Turner's water color, it must surely have flattered him. Receiving such a laudatory appraisal of one's work is certainly gratifying. Mifflin writes, "I have written this much because I hoped it might not be disagreeable to you to know that one more at least makes use of the practical knowledge which you have written, and guided by your example, tries to fathom the reasons of excellence and beauty in Turnerean Art." A teacher could ask for no more than to know that he has imparted some of his knowledge to another.

### Appendix I

Dusseldorf, 2b, Stern Strasse  
26 Aug., 1872

Mr. John Ruskin

Dear Sir,

Two months have passed since I wrote the enclosed letter and tossed it aside afterwards thinking I would not intrude upon you with that which seemed so personal and so small an affair. Since then I have been up the Rhine and have had much delight in study of the town and bridge of Coblenz and of the Fortress across the Rhine from both of which Turner composed a picture.<sup>1</sup>

I brought a volume of your *Elements of Drawing* with me from America, for the purpose, and cut out the pages with the woodcut of Turner's picture of the old Bridge; I walked round the city, round the fortress and around the bridge, viewing each thing from every side and as I compared the little engraving with the reality I felt the power of the wonderful mind which so exalted everything it contemplated. The fortress is ennobled, the bridge made airy, the tower exalted, the city raised, the hills lifted up — everything deified, everything idealized, everything better than it is. Photographers are a stupid set, and all their pictures of the old bridge are taken from some point which leaves the tower

out.<sup>2</sup> So usual with their leaving the really best things unrecorded, and so always with thousands of Rhine photographs, I could find numerous copies of the prosaic bridge at Cologne, entire; and at Bonn copies of the last new statue, but not one copy of the Roman Ruins, the arches, windmills and quaint houses, which are passing away unrecorded. Therefore I can send you no copy of this tower or the old Bridge, but I give you an outline which I made on the spot to note how much better an architect Turner was than the builder. It is viewed from Turner's point of view, looking down the river, and across the Rhine toward the Fortress — Turner has *doubled* its height, and placed a buttress at its base for support, besides taking away that top-heavy look which my sketch exhibits. He has raised the arches, and to a finer curve. The hill behind the bridge is low and mean in form but Turner has raised it three times, and crowded it with a castle — an echo of the bridge tower, and a remembrance of some Rhine hill above Coblenz. There *is* no castle within possible sight of this point. He has taken the *profile* of Ehrenbreitstein from a point *across* the Rhine near the railway bridge and used it in his view of the Bridge.<sup>3</sup> He has made the rock steeper and has knocked off the corners of the prime squares which are the highest. His outline of the fort is not that which I found it to be from any distant point, but that which I *felt* it to be where I stood at its base, a pigmy, and looked up and wondered. I found one point from which the spires of Coblenz arranged themselves in 7 couples, distinctly and separately. The one untruth of Turner's picture — or of the woodcut — is the termination of the distant hill, abruptly to the left, as if it sloped down to the water. From the woodcut I conceived the Rhine as flowing between the profile of the fort and the distant hill, but it flows in the direction of the bridge and *from* the extreme right, at which place, and *not* at the other, the dip in the hill should have been made. He gains a lovely line but misleads: all the rest is true yet not literal. I think he exalted by depressing, he subjugated the non-essential and made many things smaller than they existed, to show the excellence of the beauty which these things marred.

I have learned much from my study of Coblenz, and see Turner's power more than ever before. I have you to thank also, dear sir, for your little book and its woodcut directed me to the place. One word more, you speak in that book of Turner's changing the size of the arches of the bridge. I suppose he did it from his feeling and knowledge, but it almost seemed to me as if the change had been suggested by an arched road visible from that bridge, which leads up the rock to the Fortress, and of which arches — perhaps nine in number — no two are alike. Remembering your words the road struck me at once as a possible cause of Turner's innovation.

I have written this much because I hoped it might not be disagreeable to you to know that one more at least makes practical use of the knowledge which you have written and guided by your example, tries to fathom the reasons of excellence and beauty in Turnerean Art. This is one reason, and the other is to ask you earnestly, as one in the dusk, for more light, and to assure you again of

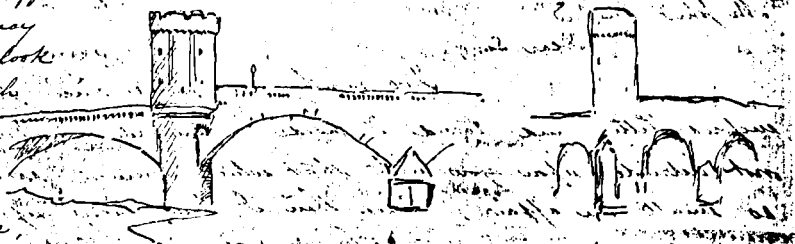
the practical value, to art students, of a larger and more exhaustive, and more amply illustrated work upon kindred topics to those you treat in *Elements of Drawing* and in "The Task of the Least" in *Modern Painters*. Life is so short, and we are old before we find out for ourselves that which others know well already, only we have not heard it, for their lips are sealed.

point of view, looking down the river, and across the Rhine, to the Forters - Turner has double'd its height, and placed a buttress at its base for support. Besides taking away that top-heavy look which my sketch exhibits.

We has raised the arches, and to a finer curve.

The hill behind the bridge is low and mean in form but Turner has raised it three times, and crowned it with a castle - in each of the bridge towers, and a remembrance of some Rhine hill about Coblenz.

There is no castle within reasonable sight of this point.



Fragment of Mifflin letter containing Mifflin's sketch of Bridge at Coblenz.

You once hoped you might one day place such knowledge in a form suitable for students. Will you not devote a little period to that kindness now, while it is yet day, for night cometh wherein no man can work.

I beg of you not to consider that which I have written - hastily and on the instant - impertinent or intrusive. Few hold you in higher estimation, among your stranger-friends. And when I have asked you to think all I have written sincere, then I have finished and remain, dear sir, with the highest estimation your obliged student

## *Notes from the Bibliographic Note*

1. I could find no identifying reference to Dr. Drewitt. He was, presumably, on good terms with and familiar with the work of both Ruskin and Short.

2. Sir Francis Short was renowned for his mezzotint illustrations of Turner's paintings. Born in 1857, Short turned to engraving as a profession. He quickly gained the recognition of Ruskin who encouraged him to devote much of his life to reproducing Turner's work. Frank Short died in 1945.

## *Notes from the Introduction*

1. Hearshey Sneath entitled his book on Mifflin *America's Greatest Sonneteer*. I believe that Mifflin's tombstone also bears such an epitaph.

2. *At the Gates Of Song*, Mifflin's first published work, contains about one-hundred-fifty sonnets.

3. "A Tuscan Pastoral" can be found in the *Collected Sonnets of Lloyd Mifflin, Revised by the Author*, Henry Frownde, London (1905).

## *Notes from the Text*

1. Coblenz is a city in West Germany at the confluence of the Rhine and Moselle Rivers.

2. This is an interesting evaluation of photographers since Mifflin himself, later in life, dabbled in photography, particularly of landscapes.

3. Ehrenbreitstein is a small village across the Rhine from Coblenz.

4. It is curious that Mifflin signs his name with a "Jr.". His father's name was John Houston Mifflin.