

# Ngā Pūtahitanga / Crossings

Cite as: Ryan Roark, "Dystopia, Climate Change and Heritage Conservation in the Late Nineteenth Century." In *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 39, Ngā Pūtahitanga / Crossings*, ed. Julia Gatley and Elizabeth Aitken Rose, 406-15. Auckland: SAHANZ, 2023. Accepted for publication December 1, 2022. DOI: 10.55939/a5037py0jq



Graphic by Amber Anahera Ruckes

PROCEEDINGS OF THE SOCIETY OF ARCHITECTURAL  
HISTORIANS, AUSTRALIA AND NEW ZEALAND (SAHANZ)  
VOLUME 39

Conference hosted by Te Pare School of Architecture and  
Planning, University of Auckland, Waipapa Taumata Rau,  
Auckland, 25-27 November 2022.

Edited by Julia Gatley and Elizabeth Aitken Rose.

Published in Auckland by SAHANZ, 2023.

ISBN: 978-0-646-88028-0

Copyright of this volume belongs to SAHANZ; authors retain  
the copyright of the content of their individual papers. All  
efforts have been undertaken to ensure the authors have  
secured appropriate permissions to reproduce the images  
illustrating individual contributions. Interested parties may  
contact the editors.

**Ngā Pūtahitanga / Crossings was a joint conference between SAHANZ and the Australasian Urban History Planning History Group. It was the 39<sup>th</sup> annual SAHANZ conference and the 16<sup>th</sup> AUHPH conference.**

# Dystopia, Climate Change and Heritage Conservation in the Late Nineteenth Century

Ryan Roark  
Illinois Institute of Technology

## Abstract

*The architectural conservation and restoration movements emerged in the Western world in the mid-nineteenth century, in part as a reaction to the acceleration of visible aging of buildings caused by the Industrial Revolution and associated changes in air quality. At the same time, Enlightenment ideals established at the end of the eighteenth century reinforced the relatively new idea that a building could have a single author and a fixed state.*

*A new drive towards 'restoration' – the return of a building to a glorified singular past state – led William Morris in 1877 to establish the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB), whose manifesto marked the dawn of the age of conservation and essentially prohibited any interference with old buildings. What emerged was a debate between those who favoured "scraping" (restorationists, e.g. nineteenth-century French architect Viollet-le-Duc) and those who were "anti-scrape" (conservationists, e.g. nineteenth-century English architecture writer John Ruskin and architect William Morris).*

*Recent scholarship in English and eco-critical studies by Jesse Oak Taylor, Philip Steer, Heidi Scott and others has drawn attention to anxieties about climate change that began early as the mid-nineteenth century and became widespread by the turn of the twentieth, as manifest in Victorian-era English-language literature. Little has been written about the influence of such anxieties on architects at the time, although John Ruskin's lecture "The Storm Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884) is possibly the first public lecture explicitly hypothesizing anthropogenic climate change.*

*This paper examines Ruskin's later writings, the writings and architectural works of William Morris and the writings of other early members of SPAB including Thomas Hardy, to examine to what extent the "do-not-touch"*

*model of conservation can be interpreted as an early reaction of alarm about climate change.*

## **Introduction**

The architectural conservation and restoration movements emerged in the Western world in the mid-nineteenth century, leading to the establishment of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) by William Morris and others in 1877. The SPAB Manifesto marked the dawn of the age of conservation and essentially prohibited any interference with old buildings, entreating readers:

... to put Protection in the place of Restoration, to stave off decay by daily care... and otherwise to resist all tampering with either the fabric or ornament of the building as it stands... in fine to treat our ancient buildings as monuments of a bygone art, created by bygone manners, that modern art cannot meddle with without destroying.<sup>1</sup>

Morris, like John Ruskin before him (and Augustus Pugin before him) was notoriously nostalgic for the Gothic and the rustic, eschewing other contemporary nineteenth-century aesthetics and the new drive towards 'restoration,' or what Morris called 'scraping' buildings of their visible age.

In fact, the need to take a position on whether or not to 'scrape' was new to the nineteenth century, as buildings accumulated visible patina exponentially faster in the wake of the Industrial Revolution with its associated changes in air quality in cities and near factories. Morris and Ruskin, among other nineteenth-century writers, have traditionally been read as fuelled by anxieties about urbanisation and industrialisation largely on moral, social and cultural terms – i.e., upper-class Victorians experienced unprecedented existential uncertainty about their place in the world as they were confronted with more and more foreign cultures and new ideas about science and the origin of man.

While Victorian anxieties were moral, social and cultural, Victorian literary and ecological scholars have also recently reread many texts within the new context of the Anthropocene and have argued that there was also a real anxiety and concern about literal climate change. The actual markers of long-term, irreversible climate change

would not yet have existed, but those markers had many harbingers that some Victorians at least thought they recognised. In the words of British literary scholar Heidi Scott:

Early [industrial era writing] is especially interesting as an Anthropocene study because its writers had little scientific grounding for their apprehensions, so their prolepses are staked in radically indeterminate signs, such as pollution, warmer climates and weird weather patterns.... Romantic and Victorian climate prophets worked in advance of science, and used their acute senses and well-tuned imaginations to articulate the present and future of industrial ontology.<sup>2</sup>

Just as scholars of Victorian literature have repositioned both a wide variety of realist fiction, as well as science fiction, from the nineteenth century as evidencing anxieties about anthropogenic climate change, this paper argues that the birth of the modern Western heritage conservation movement can also be considered in such terms – while not discounting moral, cultural and ethnocentric motivations.

One text that has received attention in recent years is John Ruskin's lecture "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century" (1884), which is arguably the first account of manmade climate change but which, like many of Ruskin's late-in-life writings, has been discounted as a serious or scientific text until recently because of its religious and moralistic overtones. However, much of Ruskin's lecture was devoted to his meticulously recorded observations of the sky taken over 50 years, primarily at a distance from the city. He quoted from his own diary entries, including one from 1875, in which he wrote of the ominous cloud cover and wind that it was:

... the plague-wind of the eighth decade of years in the nineteenth century; a period which will assuredly be recognized in future meteorological history as one of phenomena hitherto unrecorded in the courses of nature, and characterized pre-eminently by the almost ceaseless action of this calamitous wind. While I have been writing these sentences, the white clouds above specified have increased to twice the size they had when I began to write; and in about two hours from this time – say by eleven o'clock, if the wind continue, - the whole sky will be dark with them, as it

was yesterday, and has been through prolonged periods during the last five years.<sup>3</sup>

During his lecture, Ruskin presented his own dramatic paintings of the sky above his home in the Lake District in 1880, blown up by means of a projector and elaborate lighting scheme to the scale of the walls of the lecture room, creating an immersive experience for his audience.

Contemporary ecocritical scholar Jesse Oak Taylor was perhaps the first to posit explicitly that Ruskin's lecture is *equally* scientific and moralistic: in his 2018 essay "Storm-Clouds on the Horizon: John Ruskin and the Emergence of Anthropogenic Climate Change," Taylor wrote, "Ruskin's argument is ... not simply that anthropogenic climate change was occurring, but also that it was a distinctly moral and spiritual problem in addition to being a scientific or material one."<sup>4</sup> More recently, art historian Nicholas Robbins, considering both Ruskin's lecture and the images with which he accompanied it, has described Ruskin's climate crisis as traversing "politics, art, and the environment... [merging] Ruskin's aesthetic conception of nationalism ... with what Brian Day calls his 'moral ecology'."<sup>5</sup> Robbins has pitted Ruskin against another contemporary painter, Whistler, in that Ruskin's worldview, according to Robbins, required the body to be open and connected to the environment, whereas Whistler depicted bodily and artistic autonomy from context and nature.<sup>6</sup>

Throughout his career, Ruskin was preoccupied with the continuum of history and the interconnectedness of lives across centuries, writing in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (1849) – specifically in the Lamp of Memory – that buildings "belong partly to those who built them, and partly to all the generations of mankind who are to follow us."<sup>7</sup> As Taylor writes, "The Anthropocene is at once an entirely novel phenomenon, and one in which the past exerts unprecedented force upon the future."<sup>8</sup> Ruskin was poised to recognize climate change – or, alternately, to foresee it – because of his ecological way of thinking, continuously connecting past with present and future, and one life with all those adjacent to it.

What Taylor does not point out is that Ruskin's ecological, Anthropocene way of thinking must necessarily have coloured his attitude towards buildings and conservation; the SPAB Manifesto, which Ruskin is believed to have influenced

strongly, was published just two years after that diary entry in which he coined the term “plague-wind.”

In a chapter in the collection *Ruskin’s Ecologies*, I have argued that despite the fact that Ruskin is remembered largely as an anti-scaper due to his association with SPAB, earlier in life, in *The Seven Lamps*, he had embraced the idea of spoliation and even hinted at a model I liken to contemporary radical adaptive reuse interventions in which the new architecture is bold and honest about its contemporary origins – and therefore extends what he considered to be the “life” of the building.<sup>9</sup> By the time he wrote “The Storm-Cloud” lecture, Ruskin was evidently more fatalistic in describing what he called the “malignant quality of wind, unconnected with any one quarter of the compass,” and he was perhaps less optimistic about what nineteenth-century architects might do with older building stock.<sup>10</sup>

Much of my chapter for *Ruskin’s Ecologies*, which I called “The Afterlife of Dying Buildings,” focuses on Ruskin’s ideas about life and death – both of plants and of buildings. He was concerned that the lifespan of buildings was shortening – because of the folly of the restoration camp, among other practices with which he disagreed, but also because of the changing climate – which of course also comes back to the follies of man. In “The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century,” Ruskin warned that “you may perhaps have to roof, if not wall, half London afresh before we are many years older,” explicitly because of pollution, which he conflated a bit with climate change while also describing climate change in terms similar to how we now understand it, as something that happens consistently over decades.<sup>11</sup> Although the conservation movement could not save buildings from industrial-era pollution, Ruskin’s urgency to protect buildings from the folly of restoration seems to go hand-in-hand with his anxieties vis-à-vis the inevitable fallout of industrialisation. The founders of the SPAB revered what Ruskin in *The Stones of Venice* called “time-stains” – which were largely the work of pollution, and yet at the same time Ruskin was afraid that pollution would destroy half of London’s buildings in his lifetime.

The SPAB manifesto is credited primarily to William Morris. While Morris was not as prolific a writer on the subject of man’s moral turpitude and the sad fate of British architecture as Ruskin was – and few were – he strongly embraced pastoralism and also wrote of buildings in terms of life and death. In the manifesto, Morris wrote that architectural restoration perversely sought to “strip from a building this, that, and the

other part of its history – of its life that is – and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was.”<sup>12</sup> Morris demonstrated a similarly ecological way of thinking about past architecture, present man and future generations in his 1884 lecture “Architecture and History,” delivered to the SPAB and focusing on the evils of Restoration. He wrote:

... the untouched surface of ancient architecture bears witness to the development of man’s ideas, to the continuity of history, and, so doing, affords never ceasing instruction, nay education, to the passing generations, not only telling us what were the aspirations of men passed away, but also what we may hope for in the time to come.<sup>13</sup>

While Morris’s main topic was Restoration, he was also consistently put off by industrialisation and capitalism, and his novels – in particular his eco-socialist utopian novel *News from Nowhere* – have been read as sympathetic with some of Ruskin’s ideas in his “Storm-Cloud” lecture. Morris’ socialist visions were grounded in the belief that capitalism would never permit ecological equilibrium.<sup>14</sup>

As a novelist, Morris explored alternative realities through time travel – both between the nineteenth century and a heavily romanticised version of medieval times, in *A Dream of John Ball* (1887), and between the nineteenth century and an imagined utopian future, in *News from Nowhere* (1890) – in both cases he uses the time travel as a framing to critique the nineteenth-century urban, capitalist, industrial society which troubled him. The framing device of *News from Nowhere* is a dream on the part of the narrator, William Guest, who dreams of a utopian land where citizens are happy to share the mostly agrarian labour equally, where fossil fuel consumption is significantly reduced, and which has significant aesthetic resonance with Morris’ romanticised vision of medieval England.

When Guest’s pseudo-time travel begins, he does not at first realise he is still in London and remarks upon the absence of “smoke-vomiting chimneys” and of the “sound of rivetting and hammering.” Notably, he remarks upon the buildings he sees that, “The stone was a little weathered, but showed no marks of the grimy sootiness which I was used to on every London building more than a year old.” He goes on to contrast the eco-socialist society’s buildings against those of the Victorian era, calling the former “alive, and sympathetic with the life of the dwellers in them,” with the

implication that buildings in his own day are instead dead or dying.<sup>15</sup> Although Morris' SPAB Manifesto positions Restoration and a lack of good craftsmanship as the major threats to old buildings in his era, his novel makes clear his anxieties about the fatal effects of industrialisation on buildings.

When William Guest wakes up in his own time in his bed in Hammersmith, Morris briefly echoes Ruskin's "storm-cloud" language, as realisation dawns on Guest like "a black cloud rolling along to meet [him], like a nightmare of [his] childish days."<sup>16</sup> Morris shared much of Ruskin's horror at the direction mankind was taking by the late nineteenth century, although Morris's aesthetic and socialist solutions remained largely superficial – for instance, Nowhere's inhabitants still dig for coal. Morris offered no way out besides a fantasy of an alternate reality which is at least as nostalgic and backward-looking as it is progressive and forward-looking. In his own present day, the best solution he had was the "cease-and-desist" as laid out in the SPAB Manifesto. As Heidi Scott puts it:

If Ruskin's diabolical vision was a call to action, Morris seems to have heeded it with his wishful prophecy of a pro-social but anti-technological Good Anthropocene.... however, the 'romance of stasis' inherent in the Green Movement obscures the steep challenges of the Anthropocene's damage to Holocene climate equilibrium.<sup>17</sup>

*News from Nowhere* is just one example of Victorian CliFi, or "climate fiction," which imagines an alternative reality in the future catalysed by the inevitable collapse of the fossil fuel-dependent economy. Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* (1872) and W. H. Hudson's *A Crystal Age* (1887), like *News from Nowhere*, offer up the optimistic possibility of a return to idyllic pastoralism after the collapse, while Richard Jefferies' *After London, or Wild England* (1885) and H. G. Wells' *The Time Machine* (1895), among other late Victorian apocalyptic fiction, suggest that humanity will reach a point of no return – both morally and ecologically.

While science fiction was on the rise, the bulk of Victorian fiction is notable for its realism – its attention to the details of daily life. In the mid-century, industrial novels like Charlotte Brontë's *Shirley* (1849), Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1854) and much of Charles Dickens' body of work explored the increasing social and class divide created by the industrial revolution, including graphic descriptions of factory conditions,



child labour and the soot of the cities. In 2016, Indian novelist Amitav Ghosh argued in *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* that Victorian realist fiction was so fixated on the details of the daily that it in fact glossed over the nonhuman, geological time and the catastrophic.<sup>18</sup> However, it was precisely the attention to the daily details of weather over 50 years that allowed Ruskin to notice (or to believe that he noticed) a change in climate.

In addition to John Ruskin and William Morris, another early and active member of the SPAB was the prolific Victorian realist novelist Thomas Hardy, who had a short-lived career as an architect before the success of *Far from the Madding Crowd* (1874), the first of his many novels set in the fictional agrarian district of Wessex, England. Hardy's novels are for the most part notoriously bleak, portraying the hardships of rural life, especially in an increasingly industrialised world.

Humanities scholar Philip Steer has called many of the characters of Hardy's tragic novel *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891) "climate refugees of a kind, caught between hostile climates and the environmental wreckage wrought by agribusiness."<sup>19</sup> Hardy's nostalgia for England the way it was before he knew it is nowhere more evident than at the end of *Tess*, when the police arrest Tess for murdering her rapist, at Stonehenge, where she has sought temporary refuge. Tess's paramour exclaims, "Older than the centuries; older than the d'Urbervilles!" when they realise where they are.<sup>20</sup> Like Ruskin, Hardy could be called an ecological thinker by way of his emphasis on the connections between generations, between present-day characters and the built artifacts of the past, and between the human and the nonhuman, with farm animals often acting as near-protagonists.

In an essay on "The Climates of the Victorian Novel" (2021), Steer argues that *The Mayor of Casterbridge* (1886) is Hardy's novel which most clearly shows the difference between weather – a local and fleeting phenomenon – and longer-term climate and "the extent to which capital mediates the experience of both," and the patterns he notes are present in many of the Wessex novels' plots.<sup>21</sup> The recurring plot is that a poor farmer is destroyed by a catastrophe in the weather or a related fluke, while a farmer with more money, credit or prospects can afford "a longer-term view, overlooking the real-time fluctuations of weather and instead acting in accordance with the known stability of the climate."<sup>22</sup> Although Hardy ultimately comes down on the side of believing in long-term climate stability, his work is permeated by an anxiety about

small-scale catastrophes and the lack of protection from them for many of his characters.

Together, Ruskin's, Morris' and Hardy's writings suggest that the anxieties that led to the founding of the SPAB – and the conservation movement as a whole – extend to anxieties about the material fate of the climate and of man's place in his environment, quite literally, in addition to all of the canonical Victorian anxieties about the waning of the British empire, the origins of humanity and rapidly changing mores. Following Ruskin's and Morris' language, the birth of the heritage conservation movement in England was largely about extending the "life" of the building in an ecological sense, both materially and metaphorically.

So, why is this reframing of the advent of the conservation movement important to the way we practice architecture today? I believe this reframing, in conjunction with Ruskin's early-in-life ideas about the vitality of buildings as carried on through the hands of many generations of workmen, might help us also to reframe how we think of the conservation of culturally dominant heritage today, to ease some of the associated strictures and to embrace the ability to build on older buildings and foundations boldly with the mark of the modern day, while preserving and maintaining what Ruskin and Morris saw as the inherent life and spirit of the original.

## Endnotes

- 
- <sup>1</sup> William Morris, Philip Webb and other founding members of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, *The SPAB Manifesto*, 1877, [www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto](http://www.spab.org.uk/about-us/spab-manifesto).
  - <sup>2</sup> Heidi C. M. Scott, "Industrial Souls: Climate Change, Immorality, and Victorian Anticipations of the Good Anthropocene," *Victorian Studies* 60, no. 4 (2018): 592.
  - <sup>3</sup> John Ruskin, "The Storm-Cloud of the Nineteenth Century: Two Lectures delivered at the London Institution, February 4th and 11th, 1884," (Project Gutenberg, 2006), Section 21, [www.gutenberg.org/files/20204/20204-h/20204-h.htm](http://www.gutenberg.org/files/20204/20204-h/20204-h.htm).
  - <sup>4</sup> Jesse Oak Taylor, "Storm-Clouds on the Horizon: John Ruskin and the Emergence of Anthropogenic Climate Change," *19: Interdisciplinary Studies in the Long Nineteenth Century* (2018), 26. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.16995/ntn.802>.
  - <sup>5</sup> Nicholas Robbins, "Ruskin, Whistler, and the Climate of Art in 1884," *Ruskin's Ecologies: Figures of Relation from Modern Painters to The Storm-Cloud*, ed. Kelly Freeman and Thomas Hughes (Courtauld Books Online, 2021).
  - <sup>6</sup> Robbins, "Ruskin, Whistler, and the Climate of Art in 1884."
  - <sup>7</sup> John Ruskin, *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* (London: George Allen, 1890 [1848]), 358.
  - <sup>8</sup> Taylor, "Storm-Clouds."
  - <sup>9</sup> Ryan Roark, "The Afterlife of Dying Buildings: Ruskin and Preservation in the Twenty-First Century," *Ruskin's Ecologies*, ed. Freeman and Hughes.
  - <sup>10</sup> Ruskin, "The Storm-Cloud."
  - <sup>11</sup> Ruskin, "The Storm-Cloud."
  - <sup>12</sup> *The SPAB Manifesto*, 1877.

---

<sup>13</sup> William Morris, "Architecture and History and Westminster Abbey" (London: Longmans, 1900 [1884]), 1-2.

<sup>14</sup> Elizabeth Carolyn Miller, "William Morris, Extraction Capitalism, and the Aesthetics of Surface," *Victorian Studies* 57, no. 3 (2015): 395-404.

<sup>15</sup> William Morris, *News from Nowhere* (Hammersmith: Kelmscott Press, 1893 [1890]), 10-11.

<sup>16</sup> Morris, *News from Nowhere*, 304.

<sup>17</sup> Scott, "Industrial Souls," 606-7.

<sup>18</sup> Amitav Ghosh, *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (Penguin Random House India Private Limited, 2018 [2016]).

<sup>19</sup> Philip Steer, "Reading Classic Novels in an Era of Climate Change," *The Conversation*, May 22, 2017, <https://theconversation.com/reading-classic-novels-in-an-era-of-climate-change-75843>.

<sup>20</sup> Thomas Hardy, *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (Leicester: W F Howes Ltd, 2012 [1891]), 644.

<sup>21</sup> Philip Steer, "The Climates of the Victorian Novel: Seasonality, Weather, and Regional Fiction in Britain and Australia," *PMLA* 136, no.3 (May 2021): 374.

<sup>22</sup> Steer, "The Climates," 376.