

A Socialist Utopia in the New South: The Ruskin Colonies in Tennessee and Georgia, 1894-1901

W. FITZHUGH BRUNDAGE

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W. Fitzhugh Brundage's *A Socialist Utopia in the New South* is the first published book-length study of the Ruskin Colony. Ruskin played a significant role in the communitarian movement during the late 1890's, and publication of a complete account of the Tennessee and Georgia phase of the colony's existence has been needed for some time. Brundage examines the people and the ideas responsible for the settlement of Ruskin. He places the Ruskin story within the larger context of nineteenth century political and social change and gives careful consideration to the role of Ruskin within the socialist movement. Brundage also proposes to offer revisionist "ideas about the possibility for social experimentation in the New South, the importance of the communitarian tradition in the United States, and the evolution of late nineteenth-century radicalism." He believes that the problems within the colony contributed to the Socialist Party's abandonment of communitarian socialism and also offers the thesis that the presence of Ruskin in Tennessee and Georgia demonstrated a tolerance in the New South for social experimentation.

Julius Wayland, a newspaper man and key figure in the radical press during the early twentieth century, started the Ruskin Colony in 1894 and planned the colony around one industry, his newspaper, the *Coming Nation*.

Brundage describes Wayland's socialist ideology as an amalgam of the Christian ethic, free labor republicanism, and a strong admiration for the corporate model for organization. The definitive study of Wayland's life and thought is Elliott Shore's *Talkin' Socialism*, and although Brundage does not differ markedly from Shore's interpretation, he offers a succinct analysis of Wayland's influence on the Ruskin community.

Brundage suggests that the people who came to Tennessee were much like Wayland. Their reform instincts emanated from a Protestant and artisan sense of justice, inspired by Populism and a reading of Edward Bellamy. Brundage concludes that Ruskinites were a diverse group from almost every state in the union to include a small number from Europe. He describes daily life and work in the community and Ruskinites' attempts to provide a rich cultural experience through lyceums and educational reform. He believes that the diversity of people in the colony made it next to impossible to succeed, and ultimately, the colony resembled a company town rather than a model for cooperation. Internal factions brought the colony under receivership, and the Tennessee phase of the Ruskin Colony ended in 1899.

A small group moved to Georgia where sickness and hunger ended their bravest efforts to prove the rightness of their communal ideology. Nevertheless, Brundage concludes that they were a community of "sensible, intelligent, earnest and industrious people" who, in spite of their bickering and dissension, shared a fascination with the ideal of cooperation.

The initial failure to give women a vote generated a festering dissension in the colony, and recognizing the importance of this issue Brundage devotes a chapter to women. He believes that the women who came to Ruskin were typical of the women in the socialist movement and suggests that Lydia Kingsmill Commander, author of the Women's Column for the *Coming Nation*, exemplified the women in the colony who were drawn to communal life through the domestic feminism of Charlotte Perkins Gilman and the Social Gospel Movement. Brundage maintains that they resented their exclusion from the political life of the colony and the patronizing attitudes of male leaders, but they faced the same dilemma as women socialists outside the colony. How could they participate in a movement that retained traditional attitudes toward women?

To solve this problem they formed women's organizations but at the same time worked to exert more political influence in the colony. Brundage maintains that although Ruskin did not meet women's expectations, it did in the end offer the promise of a better life. The *Coming Nation* was the financial backbone of the colony, and Brundage does a good job in analyzing the newspaper under the editorship of the leaders who took over after Wayland left the community. In his last chapter, Brundage examines the role of Ruskin and the *Coming Nation* within the larger socialist movement. After the 1896

election, the staff of the newspaper took a non-partisan stance and refused to ally themselves with any political party. Brundage argues that this non-partisan ideology placed Ruskin colonizers on the outside of the socialist movement and thus hastened their isolation, contributing to the ultimate failure of the Ruskin Colony.

Brundage writes with a compassionate objectivity about the Ruskin people, most of who left the colony with little to show for their hard work and deprivation. Brundage's work clearly demonstrates the importance of the Ruskin Colony in the history of American socialism and communitarian reform. In recalling the significance of her years in Ruskin, Irene Johnson wrote that no experiment is a failure, and perhaps this is a fitting epitaph for the Ruskin Colony.

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