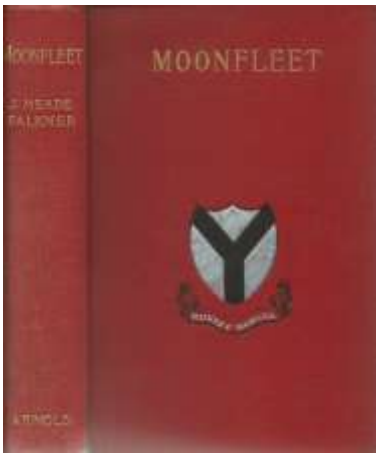


A Review of Moonfleet by John Meade Falkner
Dennis Hamley

Not long ago, the young adult author Jan Needle and I had an unresolved discussion - I won't quite say argument - on the relative merits of *Treasure Island* and *Moonfleet*. Well, Jan, I've thought a lot about it since then, looked again at *Treasure Island* and your present-day sequel *Silver and Blood*, as well as other reincarnations such as Bob Leeson's *Silver's Revenge* and Andrew Motion's *Return to Treasure Island*, and realised that Stevenson's novel has reverberations way beyond its own confines. I don't think *Moonfleet* has quite the same universal quality. The ending exhausts its own possibilities. It's a complete closure, and doesn't seem to me to ask any more questions in the way *Treasure Island* does. I wish it did - and don't think I haven't considered trying to find them by writing an *hommage*. But no: for this reason, if no other, that's why I now agree that *Treasure Island* is the superior book.



Moonfleet

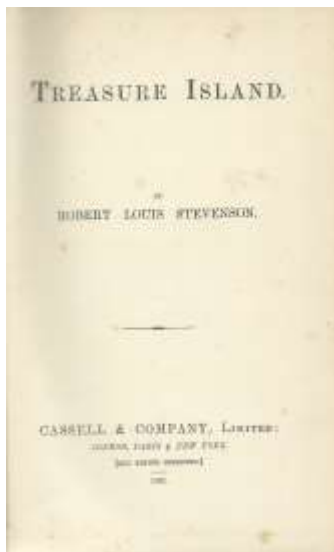


First editions

Treasure Island

This doesn't mean that *Moonfleet* isn't a brilliant novel which transcends its adventure story genre as much as *Treasure Island*. But it does mean that, in a minor sense, this review is a sort of public recantation - yet also a reminder that, despite my reservations expressed above - yes, maybe I was wrong and there are many possibilities and unthought-of

consequences presaged in the novel's resolution, so if I have time and live so long, I might bend my mind to it!



Title pages of the first editions

John Meade Falkner (1858-1932) was something of a polymath. After relinquishing his post as Chairman of Armstrong Whitworth, the arms manufacturer, he combined the jobs of Reader in Palaeography at Durham University and Librarian at Durham Cathedral. He also wrote three novels, *The Lost Stradivarius*, *The Nebuly Coat* and, of course, *Moonfleet*. He is reputed to have written a fourth which he unfortunately left on a train somewhere between Durham and Newcastle, I sympathise because I once accidentally put my only copy of a novel in progress out with the rubbish. I sometimes regret that I was born too late to have a good rootle around the London and North Eastern Railway (or, in his day, the Great Northern Railway) Lost Property Office. I might have found the MS at the back of a cupboard and passed it off as my own. (No, I wouldn't really). *The Nebuly Coat*, by the way, is an atmospheric cracker of a thriller. But *Moonfleet* is different.

To start with, it is a stylistic tour-de-force, much as is Catherine Czerkawska's *The Physic Garden*. From the very first page an individual first-person voice is established, conversational, idiosyncratic and yet poetic and resonant - and once established it never slips. There must be few novels with such a comprehensively established sense of place: Moonfleet, as a village with a sustaining society, has an actuality, almost a tactility, together with a sort of magic - this is a place where strange things will happen. I always find this astonishing and wish I could even come close to it. It also has an artful narrative technique, which is established on the first page by a skilful use of John's Aunt's copy of the *Arabian Nights*, presaging not only future suspense but also that we are entering a world grimly realistic but touched by magic. The novel's form is its heart and meaning, which is true of all good stories.

I can't resist an extended quotation, an encounter between Maskew and Mr. Glennie, the schoolmaster, to show the narrative idiom in action: John Trenchard's individual voice, Falkner's eye for significant detail, the vignette of action and even violence and the tiny but vivid transmission of character issuing in action, so we have shafts of understanding about Maskew, Mr Glennie and John himself. The angry, overbearing Maskew has entered the school and slapped the schoolmaster round the face with a sole. We'll forget the usual modern rejoinder, 'Which is better, to be slapped round the face with a wet haddock or...?' and concentrate on the prose.

A sole is at best an ugly thing to have on one's face, and this sole was larger than most, for Maskew took care to get what he could for his money, so it went with a loud smack on the floor. At this, we all laughed, as children will, and Mr Glennie did not check us, but went back and sat, very quiet, at his desk; and soon I was sorry that I had laughed, for he looked sad, with his face sanded and a great red patch on one side, and beside that, the fin had scratched him and made a blood-drop trickle down his cheek. A few minutes later the thin voice of the almshouse clock said twelve and away walked Mr Glennie without his usual 'Good day, children', and there was the sole left, lying on the dusty floor in front of his desk. It seemed a shame that so fine a fish should be wasted, so I picked it up and slipped it in my desk...

I think this passage of resonant, perfectly judged prose to transmit a small but significant episode is masterly.

The plot is of trial, initiation and growing up, a classic structure for many novels intended for young people and shared of course by *Treasure Island*. John Trenchard makes a circular journey from *Moonfleet* out across the world, through huge danger and even a sentence to life imprisonment, and back to *Moonfleet*, led by the ambiguity, the fool's gold if you like, of the Mohune diamond. This experience tests him, morally and emotionally as well as physically. He passes the test - redemption is more straightforward in Falkner's world than it is in Stevenson's, let alone the master story-teller Joseph Conrad's. The Mohune diamond (evilly come by: Colonel Mohune's spirit hovers over the village and the story throughout) has a function much like the San Tomé silver mine in Conrad's *Nostromo*, but in this simpler world the corruption is eventually warded off through action.

All the characters, no matter where the thrust of the novel leaves them on its scale of values, are flawed. Elzevir Block is a magnificently ambiguous character with crimes behind him yet we never doubt John's trust in him. Maskew is evil, even contemptible - and yet he fathered Grace. Minor characters - Mr Glennie the schoolmaster, Ratsey the sexton, Aldobrand the cheating merchant and John's aunt Mrs Arnold, who brings him up, are succinctly and memorably drawn

Falkner presents a sensitive delineation of adolescent taking-on of experience. There are two central relationships - John and Elzevir Block, leader of the smugglers and landlord of the *Mohune Arms* (the *Why Not?*, where the regulars play backgammon, game of chance and hazard, every night - another significant image), and John and Grace Maskew, daughter of the magistrate. The first is a substitute father-son relationship, subtilised by the ambiguity of Elzevir's moral code and the acute conflict of loyalties that allegiance to Elzevir means to John. Elzevir is, morally and nearly actually, responsible for the eventual death of Grace's father, who is the scourge of the smugglers and killer of Block's own son. John has a heavy price to pay for the resolution of these loyalties. So does Elzevir.

The John-Grace relationship is tactfully and, not surprisingly, even inhibitedly described. However, the novel's conventions mean that no more is needed and their growing involvement is persuasive and sensitive.

The relationship between William and Jenny in Catherine's *The Physic Garden* is reminiscent of it, although in *Moonfleet* there is no betrayal. This restraint makes credible a feature which in any other context might be mocked for being a hollow cliché. Before John leaves *Moonfleet* on his quest, Grace says she will leave a candle burning for him in the window. 'Maskew's match.' John is away for years: he comes back a different character from the boy who left. But the candle burns still, a constant over so many years and the one fixed point in the terrible events of the story's ending. In another context and with an inferior author this might have been trite. So strong are the structures, values and relationships in this wonderful classic novel that it becomes a vital, central metaphor: another element in its heart and meaning.

At the start of this review I mentioned the idea of *hommage*. In my residency on War for the Edinburgh Ebook Festival I talk about a wonderful scene in Erskine Childers' *Riddle of the Sands* which so impressed me that I needed to write my own version of it, which I put in my early World War 1 novel *Very Far From Here*. It's the same in *Moonfleet*. There is a crucial episode which takes place in the well-house of Carisbrooke Castle. Its potential for sheer horror scared me stiff when I first read the book many, many years ago. I longed to emulate it. Well, at last I have, because I supply my own version of it, far removed in time and place, in a short novel in the Shades series for the educational publisher Ransom. *Sixteen Bricks Down*. I think that in that context it works quite well. It was very satisfying to be able to breathe a sigh of thanks to my wonderful guide and mentor. A tiny *hommage* after all.

Well, *Moonfleet* may not have the same dizzying powerful clout of *Treasure Island* but that doesn't stop it from being a wonderful, wonderful classic novel. Its haunting images have stayed with me for three-quarters of my life. You'll find *Moonfleet* on every Ebook platform and also in Puffin Classics, Wordsworth Classics and probably Classic lists I've never heard of. You may even, if you're very lucky, find a first edition published by Edward Arnold in 1898.

This review was first published on August 7th, 2014, in Eclectic Electric, the review site of Authors Electric, a collective of authors now working independently (www.authorselectric.blogspot.com).
Dennis Hamley's own website is: www.dennishamley.co.uk .