

John Meade Falkner 1858-1932
Robin Davies

In April 1915 the Prime Minister Herbert Asquith, accompanied by his daughter Violet Bonham Carter, visited the Armstrong Whitworth armaments works at Elswick in Newcastle on Tyne. Some years later she recorded her memories of this visit: *'We walked for hours through a bewildering maze of machinery, in which fiery foundries roared, gigantic hammers rose and fell, and men seemed a mere incident.'* After inspecting the factories. Asquith's entourage were taken on a launch up the Tyne to see the shipping. *'I found myself next to one of the directors, whose name I had not caught. Somehow for a few minutes the war and its horrors dropped away, and we began to talk about books. "There is one book you must read" I said to him "I cannot tell you why, because its quality is indescribable - it is The Nebuly Coat." "I wrote it" he said. His name was John Meade Falkner.'* What a wonderful story!

The Nebuly Coat was one of only three novels he wrote, all in the 8 years 1895 to 1903. He also produced three travellers' guides to English counties and a county history, two short stories and 30 or so poems. All three novels have been reissued in recent years, often with an introduction by a distinguished literary figure. There is an active John Meade Falkner Society with its own annual journal, and which organized the publication of his *Collected Poems* with an enthusiastic introduction by A.N. Wilson. All three books reflect the author's interests in ecclesiology, heraldry, genealogies and general antiquarianism. At the same time, he was beginning his career with Armstrong Whitworth which culminated in the chairmanship during the First World War. How did this unusual story begin?



The Hold, Manningford

Falkner was born in 1858 at The Hold in Wiltshire which his father, an Anglican clergyman, had inherited. His father had come from Bath and, although graduating from St. John's Oxford, appeared to have no networking skills, for he remained a curate all his life in the Dorset area never obtaining

his own parish. But it seems he was well read, for his book collections included volumes on church architecture as well as religious doctrine and he knew five languages. John went to Marlborough but had to leave after putting his arm around another boy to console him from a disappointment. After private study he went to Oxford, obtaining a place at the recent foundation of Hertford College.

Hertford College

Oxford at that time was practically an exclusively male environment and students lived in fortresses of masculinity with, so it is claimed, rather misogynic attitudes. Falkner undoubtedly found this most congenial and idealized



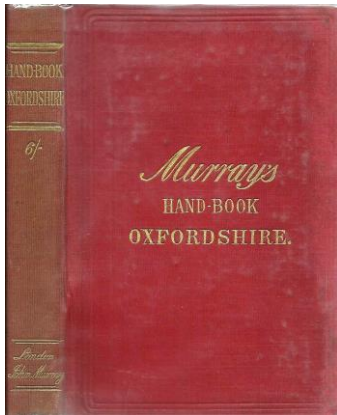
Oxford's celibacy, monasticism and medievalism, at least among the circles he frequented. It was there he developed his interest in archaeology and antiquarianism. He was a keen sportsman. He loved collecting knowledge for its own sake but does not seem to have applied himself to his studies, graduating in 1882 with a third in History. He had happy memories of his time at Oxford and regularly re-visited it. Such an indifferent degree was hardly a passport to success in any professional career and it looked like he was doomed to school-mastering until he became tutor to John Noble, son of the Newcastle industrialist Sir Andrew Noble who was an expert in artillery and a leading light at Armstrong Whitworth. John Noble was seven years younger than Falkner and his recent biographer has described him as the love of his life. It was a guiltless and chaste friendship, odd as this may seem in these sex-obsessed times.

The business was run by Sir William Armstrong who built Cragside, a marvelous Norman Shaw mansion which has been described, perhaps a bit exaggeratedly, as Northumberland's Neuschwanstein, but well worth a visit should you be in the area. Falkner was more than a servant but less than an equal; perhaps 'courtier' would describe him, obliging but not servile. He would join the family when in summer they would lease a large rural property for their entertainment and help with sports and other jollities. One such property was Lorbottle Hall, and Falkner wrote a nostalgic poem about it, entitled 'Old Memories *Prosit!*':

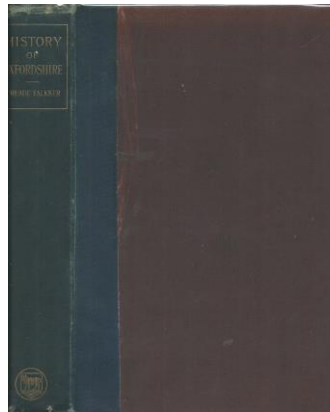
In the same year, 1885, he wrote a poem about the indignity of an Old British warrior chieftain whose remains have ended up in Dorchester Museum. I think it is a rather fine poem. It commences:

*He slept beneath his mound of earth
Alone for eighteen hundred years;
Through centuries of death and birth,
The counterchange of joy and tears.*

In 1885, when the tutoring was over, Falkner became Sir Andrew's private secretary and moved into his house in Newcastle, Jesmond Dene, another Norman Shaw work. In 1887 he became company secretary of the Armstrong business and moved into lodgings in Durham. It is there the writing began. It appears to have been a way of relaxing after his day's work and perhaps escapism too. His first literary work was in the Murray's *Handbook for Travellers* series - this one was on Oxfordshire and it came out in 1894. Falkner felt he was an Oxford man through and through and this was reflected in this and his later '*History of Oxfordshire*' of 1899.



1894



1899

The former was a revision and enlargement of an existing book and according to his recent biographer 'set a new standard for the Murray series.' There were other later county guides but perhaps the best analogy would be with the Pevsner books - which of course did not begin to come out until the post-Second World War years - although Falkner's were much more wide-ranging, including pieces of verse and historical quotes relating

to the place featured. He particularly loved the small Oxfordshire town of Burford. Falkner considered living there, but a potential purchase fell through. However, he was a generous donor to the church, and it was to be his ultimate resting place. We forget how quiet these places would have been without the din of motor cars; roads were empty as people travelled by train or cycled or walked. A walk of 30 miles on a Sunday was thought unremarkable, although possibly more usual would be 12 - 6 miles out, a pub lunch and 6 back. In contrast to previous writers of guidebooks, Falkner aimed to visit all the places named. All these concise descriptions were a good preparation for his later novels. Works like these naturally lent themselves to idiosyncratic and pronounced views: the great Vanbrugh masterpiece of Blenheim Palace was dismissed as 'a heavy and incoherent pile'. And one particular church was deemed 'very ugly'. The Handbook too shows his love for the university and his later History calls Oxford 'the most beautiful (place) in Europe'. One is tempted to agree, although some may feel with the 'Rhodes must fall' agitation and the cancel culture it is wasted on students. I seem to remember from way back it was said the Russians had developed an atomic bomb which could kill all the inhabitants of a city but leave the buildings intact. I make no comment as where that with value might be dropped. I am sure my listeners will have their own suggestions. Some of the material in the Murray guide was to appear in his 'History of Oxfordshire' which Falkner regarded as his best work. This has been described as 'an enriching expression of an inquisitive systematizing and cultivated cast of mind'. Later on, Falkner was to do the same for 'Berkshire' (1902) and 'Buckinghamshire' (1903) and there were plans for other counties, but none of these came to fruition. His recent biographer sums them up as follows: 'Along with informative commentaries, solid facts and reliable dates Falkner infiltrated his own romantic spirit into his Murray Handbooks.'

The period 1895 to 1903 was his most productive from a literary perspective, beginning with his shortest novel '*The Lost Stradivarius*'. The story is written for a young nobleman, Sir Edward Maltravers, by his aunt Sophia, his father's sister who wishes him to know why he had been orphaned. The father, Sir John, had been at Oxford and his friend William Gaskell on his return from a visit to Italy brings with him some old sheet music. Playing together, William at the piano and John on violin, seems to conjure up a figure from the past who points him to a cupboard containing the eponymous Lost Stradivarius. Its previous owner had been an occultist

and Maltravers becomes obsessed with the violin and the black magician's history. In doing so he abandons his wife and child and his respectable life in England and goes to Naples where he takes up with a Neapolitan youth. It was not made clear what his interest in him was. Nowadays of course we would have lots of his 'smooth chest, tight trousers and well-rounded inviting buttocks' and its subtitle would be, with apologies to Thomas Mann '*Death in Naples*'. But perhaps his interest was more innocent-in the perfect male physical form as seen in a Greek statue. Be that as it may, one recent reviewer writes of it:

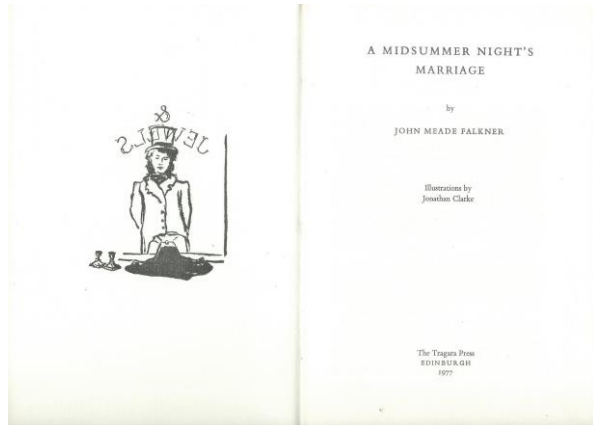
- If you love, as I do, Oxford as a setting with its lively presences, this novella is for you. If you love 18th century bad boys dabbling in necromancy and Neo-Platonism with the Hell-Fire Club, there's one here too. If you love landscapes affectionately and accurately drawn, you'll relish the scenes set in Dorset and in Italy around Naples. If you love, as I do, novels with a musical setting, this is perfect.

Finally, if you love a mystery which seems to become obvious in its unravelling but stays tantalizingly out of reach until the very end, this is brilliantly realized.

When Falkner was at Oxford there was a university phasmatological society for psychical research, which looked into ghosts, apparitions, telepathy and mind-reading. The book has some similarities with Oscar Wilde's '*The Picture of Dorian Gray*' of 1890. Indeed, the Oscar Wilde trials were in the year of the Falkner book's publication, and he later felt ashamed of it and wished all copies could be found and destroyed. Thankfully this did not happen.

His second novel '*Moonfleet*' was published in 1898 but before that a short story '*A Midsummer's Marriage*' appeared in the August 1896 issue of the National Review. This was an odd venue, as the National Review was not a literary journal but a vitriolic right-wing monthly full of warnings about the rising power of Germany and the need for beefing up our defenses. One can only assume the editor wished to support a leading light in one of Britain's great armaments firms. As with the novels, this was written in Falkner's Durham lodgings after a day's work at the Elswick factory complex. It is a kind of bridge between '*The Lost Stradivarius*' and '*The Nebuly Coat*' with several common factors. Like Maltravers in the former, the hero here, Anthony Santal, meets spectral figures and is hastened to an early grave by his fixations. Like the latter book there is heraldry, church

buildings and disorientating experiences to drive the plot. The story is simple: Santal is riding through the Warwickshire countryside on St. John's Eve and comes across the lights of a large house.



Santal is beckoned into the house by a servant dressed in black. *'The hall was bare except for a few oak settles and a quantity of pikes, helmets and armour which hung on the walls. The floor was strewn with sprigs of evergreen shrubs and there was a smell in the air of resin and spices with which the trodden leaves mingled a peculiar odour.'* He is taken to a lofty banqueting hall with a large oriel window by a dais at the far end. The tables are covered with cakes, cold meats and tankards. The panelled walls are festooned in black crepe. Soon he is greeted by a beautiful girl of eighteen years, dressed in pure white silk, with liquid blue eyes and her flaxen hair confined in a net of gold thread. She introduces herself as Cecilia Bejant and weeps bitterly after explaining she is the only child of Roger Bejant who has just died.

Celia Bejant serves her nocturnal visitor with a tempting liquor which, she explains, was brewed nearby at Laffontine Abbey. *'Santal thought of Laffontine Abbey as he had seen is a mass of ruins that very evening, and it seemed to him that the wine must be strangely old.'* After draining three draughts of this nectar Santal felt a new fire coursing in his veins and knew it was love. She told him that to the bitterness of her father's death was added the bitterness of leaving her home and going as an outcast she knew

not whither. All the estates passed by entail to a distant cousin who would have her marry him and whom she hated; and then she hid her face again and sobbed as though her heart would break. He proposes to her, she accepts, they embrace and kiss.

Cecilia leads Santal through a Gothic archway to the chapel of the house. The chapel is shadowy, for there are only a few candles lit and the air is heavy with incense. The low chanting of the priest is varied at long intervals by his reciting in a louder voice from the Catholic mass for the dead... The officiating priest is named as Theodore Brady of the Society of Jesus, a tall, clean-shaven, black-haired man in the prime of life with a pale and emaciated face indicative of abstinence and self-denial. At the end of the funeral mass, during the moments of daybreak, Brady marries Santal to Cecilia Bejant. When the groom turns to scrutinize the congregation in the dawn light, he notices a ghastly contrast between their white faces and black dresses in the low light of the rising sun. Santal's next memory is of being shaken awake by his servant and the landlord of the Winterbourne Inn, who after searching for him all night, have found him after sunrise lying in a stupor in the ruined chapel of a dismantled house, with his head on the broken altar step. Santal believes that he was stunned when his horse broke loose and that the funeral and marriage ceremonies in the church were part of a dream.

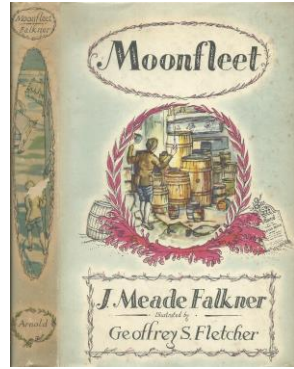
A few years later Santal decides to marry but:

'As the ceremony proceeds to its climax a voice rings out in the church 'I forbid you to proceed for this man is already married'. Santal recognizes the heckler as Fr Theodore Brady. He can only respond by admitting the truth. After this blow he seems to lose his mind and his health. He leaves the area and a couple of years later dies. As he is about to be buried, the officiating clergyman faints and a Catholic priest steps forward to carry out the service. It is Fr Brady, the Jesuit.

In a letter to a colleague at Armstrongs in 1904 Falkner says: *'I never take myself seriously as a writer of fiction and am painfully aware of my limitations'.* His biographer writes that for him: *'Writing fiction was a great relaxation, a recuperative, and a mental refuge from surroundings that are uncongenial.'*

And so we come to the book which is probably his best known: 'Moonfleet'.

This has been compared to Robert Louis Stevenson's 'Treasure Island' and Rider Haggard's 'King Solomon's Mines'. It was designed as 'entertainment for boys who want fun.' As with the earlier novel, it is set in Dorset and shaped by Falkner's early life in Bournemouth, the Purbecks and Weymouth, an area redolent of the world of the smuggler and the Exciseman. The setting is a fictionalized version of the real village of Fleet, which is behind the Chesil Beach just



up the Lyme Bay coast from Weymouth, Moon being a derivation of the Mohune family who owned the area. The story concerns a diamond obtained by a Mohune ancestor in unsavory circumstances and is narrated by a young local man called John Trenchard who discovers a hidden passageway under the churchyard and while investigating further has to hide when the smugglers arrive there. The diamond is deduced as being at Carisbrooke Castle on the Isle of Wight. It is located but a murder forces Trenchard to flee to the Hague where he is cheated by a Dutch diamond merchant. He is framed for another crime and imprisoned for 10 years and then sentenced to be transported to the Dutch East Indies. While the ship is passing through the Channel a terrible storm is unleashed and it is forced onto the shore. There follows a thrilling description, which begins:

'We had been out a week, I think—for time is difficult enough to measure where there is neither clock nor sun nor stars—when the weather, which had moderated a little, began to grow much worse. The ship plunged and laboured heavily, and this added much to our discomfort; because there was nothing to hold on by, and unless we lay flat on the filthy deck, we ran a risk of being flung to the side whenever there came a more violent lurch or roll. Though we were so deep down, yet the roaring of wind and wave was loud enough to reach us, and there was such a noise when the ship went about, such grinding of ropes, with creaking and groaning of timbers, as would make a landsman fear the brig was going to pieces. And this some of our fellow-prisoners feared indeed, and fell to crying, or kneeling chained together as they were upon the sloping deck, while they tried to remember

long-forgotten prayers. For my own part, I wondered why these poor wretches should pray to be delivered from the sea, when all that was before them was lifelong slavery; but I was perhaps able to look more calmly on the matter myself as having been at sea, and not thinking that the vessel was going to founder because of the noise. Yet the storm rose till 'twas very plain that we were in a raging sea, and the streams which began to trickle through the joinings of the hatch showed that water had got below'.

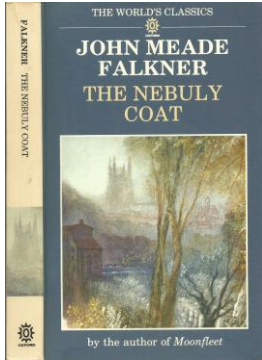
John survives the shipwreck, but his mentor and father-figure, Elzivir, does not. John marries his childhood sweetheart and the book ends:

'But as for us, for Grace and me, we never leave this our happy Moonfleet, being well content to see the dawn tipping the long cliff-line with gold, and the night walking in dew across the meadows; to watch the spring clothe the beech boughs with green, or the figs ripen on the southern wall: while behind all, is spread as a curtain the eternal sea, ever the same and ever changing. Yet I love to see it best when it is lashed to madness in the autumn gale, and to hear the grinding roar and churn of the pebbles like a great organ playing all the night. 'Tis then I turn in bed and thank God, more from the heart, perhaps, than, any other living man, that I am not fighting for my life on Moonfleet Beach. And more than once I have stood rope in hand in that same awful place and tried to save a struggling wretch; but never saw one come through the surf alive, in such a night as he saved me.'



John and Evelyn outside The Divinity House

In 1899 Falkner moved from lodgings in Durham to The Divinity House opposite the Cathedral on the occasion of his marriage. It does not seem to have been a great affair of passion but more a marriage of convenience - he wanted to be settled in his own house and needed a wife to look after it - she wanted to get away from home. Probably not incidentally, she was also related to a big shareholder in Armstrong Whitworth which was useful in bolstering his position there. He was already its company secretary and was to become a director in 1901.



His final novel was *The Nebuly Coat* which was published in 1903. It was arguably his finest - certainly the longest. My OUP paperback edition has 400 pages. Falkner said he wrote it 'as a consoling distraction' when he was mourning the deaths in quick succession of his sister and brother. He drew on the plots and attributes of books they had enjoyed together in their youth. 'Conspiracy, usurpation, disinheritance, retribution and a final restoration of justice' all featured and all set within the context of church restoration - an issue which was very topical at

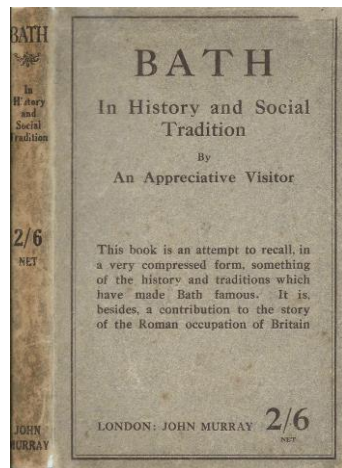
the time. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings had been founded by William Morris in 1879 to counter the modernizing enthusiasms of parish clergy. Cullerne Minster is the central character, and its fictional features are described in the same loving detail as Falkner had employed in his Murray Handbooks on real buildings. *The Nebuly Coat* has been described as 'a rare novel - a mystery story that turns on the process of architectural restoration'. Falkner liked to give his readers something to ponder. During the novel the Minster organist is murdered, and the main (human) character is suspected. It is not made clear if this was justified. Indeed, Falkner received over 100 letters after its publication asking him to confirm or refute this. To this he could only reply he did not know. Some of you may remember the film of the Raymond Chandler novel *The Big Sleep* starring Humphrey Bogart. In this A is murdered by B who is then murdered by C who is then also done in. But who by? The film director rang up Chandler and asked him to which Chandler replied '*I am hanged if I know*'.

After that? What happened to Falkner's literary career? Did the muse desert him? The writer of historical adventures who was very popular at the same sort of time, Stanley Weyman, had written getting on for 20 books and, when publishing his last, said that he wanted to leave while the quality was still at the same high level. Such a consideration hardly applied to someone with Falkner's small output, but then he was not a professional writer but someone who wrote as an escape from the pressures of his work. As he took on more responsibilities at Elswick and more travel as the company's diplomatic face with regular visits to Italy,

Constantinople, and South America it must be clear that these were too much for him.

The period before the First World War was a busy one for the arms business. Later on, the manufacturers were blamed for the conflict-an idea which was reflected in the Labour Party opposition to rearmament in the 1930s - armaments mean war - but it was rather the rivalries of Continental powers that caused the war. While it brought an end to overseas sales trips, the pressure changed to meeting the demands of the politicians who had failed to give the manufacturers the consistency of orders they needed before it. During those four years, Armstrongs supplied 54 ships, 13000 guns, 15 million shells as well as tanks, airships and over a 1000 aircraft as well as bombs, grenades and armour plate. Falkner oversaw all this, often staying at the Elswick plant overnight. In December 1915 Falkner became chairman of the company and this required further travelling down to London where the company maintained an office. Falkner stayed in rooms in Hanover Square and perhaps in the evenings or on the train he found the time and mental energy to write a short story '*Charalampia*' concerning a Byzantine princess. It was published in 1916 by Cornhill magazine.

Falkner had many pre-war connections with Bath, but for the waters he had visited the spas of Germany. His only book since '*The Nebuly Coat*', '*Bath in History and Social Tradition*', was published in 1918 under the nom-de-plume of '*An Appreciative Visitor*.' It was a slight book – only 85 pages with widely spaced lines. Falkner knew Bath well. Here was gentility, culture, an easy pace of life and its walls and very atmosphere breathed the antiquarianism he loved, and which was a world away from his day-job. Falkner seems to have genuinely poor health, although his correspondence from Bath later breathed hypochondria. Still, it got him away from home and in the post war period he would stay for several weeks, using it as a base for visits to elsewhere in Somerset, such as Downside Abbey and Woodspring Priory. It

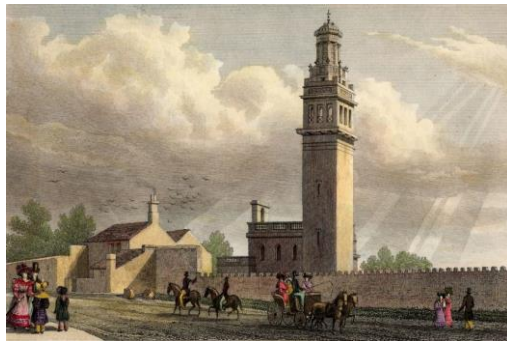


is not clear if the waters did him any good, but he certainly loved the city. The book he wrote was clearly not designed either as a guidebook or a history, although it could be used for both.

The book opens with: *'Prince Bladud, Roman remains, a late Abbey Church, a capital of fashion in the eighteenth century, its decline, a high-born watering place in reduced circumstances, are pictures that present themselves when Bath is mentioned.'* Bladud was the founder of Bath in the same sense that Romulus and Remus were the founders of Rome. He was the son of King Lud but contracted leprosy and driven out into the wilderness. Having to become a swineherd, he infected them and noticed that, after rolling in a pool of water, they came out clean. Doing the same, he too was cleansed and, having been received back into his father's grace, built Bath by that same pool. Later, he went to Greece, was elected a professor in the University of Athens, returned to Bath and built a famous temple of Minerva. Much of his time was spent in magic and miracles (a thought which should have appealed to the author of the *Lost Stradivarius*) and he met his death by attempting to fly from the top of his own temple. John Wood, the great Bath architect, devotes chapters (in his *History of Bath* which Falkner later refers to as 'a collection of absurdities') to prove the truth of every one of these statements ... the *Pickwick Papers* must remain the safest authority for the history of Prince Bladud.' It is unclear how far his tongue was in his cheek. Perhaps a clue lies in a statement about the Roman period. After referring to the lack of documentary evidence he writes *'in turning to Roman days we still move within the mist'* and *'let us throw the antiquaries overboard. Let us label buildings with our own tickets and weave our own romance about them.'*

The rest of the book is concerned with Bath in its heyday and his slashing strictures on some of the architectural gems would not be agreed by all although his summing up would: 'the glorious heritage of its buildings remains.' As well as famous names like Beau Nash one more giant graced his pages, William Beckford. I had better give any snowflakes among you a trigger warning. He was the son of a West Indian plantation owner, and said to be the wealthiest man in England, who became Lord Mayor of London. Beckford travelled overseas 'an omnivorous amateur collector' and being inspired to write the Gothic novel *'Vathek'*. In this is the construction of a vast tower and this idea was to become an obsession. Firstly, he built Fonthill Abbey which Falkner describes as *'an immense and*

wildly fantastic place, built in Wyatt's vapid wedding-cake Gothic... there were galleries 330 feet long in which lamps burned all night; there was a dining-room that could seat 300 people' and so on. 'As the Tower of the Pied Horses is the central figure in 'Vathek' so a great tower was the predominating feature of Fonthill. It stood in the middle of the house and was over 300 feet high but five years after it was built it totally collapsed. Beckford at once rebuilt it and some twenty years later this second tower fell and ruined half the house. But by that time Fonthill had changed hands and Beckford had moved to Bath.'



Beckford's Tower, Lansdown, Bath

He bought a site on a hill overlooking Bath where he could build his last tower and where he could lounge in the room at the top, read and admire the view. When he died, he was buried in a mausoleum near its base as part of a public cemetery he had given to the authorities. Falkner waxes truly indignant at it being '*left in a deplorably neglected condition by authorities as void of gratitude as of appreciation.*' I expect he admired a man with the money to do what he could only dream of. I know I would.

Bath, he concludes, rather lyrically, '*like Rome or Oxford, was ever a place of bells...In the great days they rang venally for every distinguished and undistinguished arrival... The Abbey bells rang, too, for funerals, ... and when they tolled for Beckford, they rang the curtain down upon the last romance of the eighteenth century... He wrapped himself in (Castle of) Otranto mystery; he moved in a world of his own where caliphs and houris jostled monks and troubadours, where poets and painters posed in abbeys and castles, surrounded by priceless treasures of the East and West.*' This was a world very much in tune with that of the author of '*The Nebuly Coat*'

and 'Moonfleet's' imagination. So, it is not perhaps surprising that here Falkner stops. After 1844 nothing. For him anyway. Even before that the architecture is limited to the Woods who built Georgian Bath. So, nothing on the revival of Gothic architecture and its parallel in religious medievalism, the Oxford Movement with its call to the church to a greater understanding of its heritage. No such bells rang for Falkner at least not in this book.

So, we end with the almost perfunctory, like *Private Eye's* drink-sodden journalist to his editor 'is that enough?': *'If even in Bath faint ripples of a far-off war are felt today, the City still preserves its dignity sober and serene, still offers a warm cradle for old age and infirmity to rock themselves to sleep. So let us again praise God for good hot water and for all good things, and for those famous men, Beau Nash, who brought the company; Ralph Allen who brought Wood; Wood, who staged the colonnaded terraces upon the sunny slopes.'*

Falkner retired from Armstrongs in 1921. Although many who had been important to the war effort at home received honours he did not - perhaps he did not contribute to Lloyd George's political fund. In retirement he spent a lot of time both in Bath and in Rome, spending the morning in the Vatican library researching early liturgies and the afternoon sightseeing or shopping. He had remained a director of the company and the fees provided him with the funds to enable him to make purchases of rare manuscripts and missals. In 1922 he stayed there for 6 months and a similar period in 1926. In his retirement Falkner became Honorary Librarian of Durham Cathedral and he wrote a history of it in 1925.

Falkner died in 1932 and was buried in the churchyard of Burford Parish Church - a strange choice one might think, considering his family associations were with Wiltshire and Dorset and his life had been centered on Durham and Newcastle. But he and his friend John Noble had been benefactors of the church and he had always loved Burford. John Betjeman wrote of him: '(he was standing by the tomb in Burford churchyard) *glad in a way to think John Meade Falkner never saw the mechanical barbarism of today. He lived when it was still possible to find undisturbed England, before the sky hummed with the Blessings of Science and the fields went red with ribbons of bungalows for housing the poor jellyfish who quiver beneath its benefits.'* It is perhaps difficult to distance an arms

manufacturer from 'mechanical barbarism' but is certainly true of his literary work.

What might one make of the way in which he made his living? Writing an article for the John Meade Falkner Society Journal a few years ago on the infamous merchant of death Sir Basil Zaharoff, who had been the chief overseas sales agent for Vickers, I concluded:

'Basil Zaharoff died in November 1936 in Monaco. Some of his obituaries recorded his benefactions but others were not so pleasant - 'millions died that he might live' was a common theme. What does it say about the hero of our society that he could have spent his career in this milieu? According to one biography: 'There was the shady Zaharoff, with whom, nonetheless, he seems to have had an easy enough relationship' And elsewhere: 'They seem to have been on friendly terms.' Basil Zaharoff died while Germany had been rearming for three years and we had only just started. Two years later a triumphant Germany had taken over Austria and Czechoslovakia. Barely two after that we were battling for our lives and very grateful to have the guns we needed.

As Kipling wrote: 'It's Tommy this and Tommy that and chuck him out the brute but it's saviour of his country when the guns begin to shoot.'

Many years ago, when I was a teenager living at home, I went with my mother to a talk at the National Book League offices in Vauxhall Bridge Road. It was given by a crime writer - I cannot remember who it was except that it was not our Blessed Lady of Torquay. I have always remembered one thing she said: *'If I can prevent someone putting arsenic into their husband's tea, I feel my book has been worthwhile'*. I cannot aspire to this level of response but if I can encourage one of my listeners to look at a John Meade Falkner novel or even to join the John Meade Falkner Society, I shall feel the last hour and all the preparation has been worthwhile.