

*Concentric worlds: The Divinity House in the life of
John Meade Falkner*

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John Meade Falkner lived in the ancient heart of the city of Durham for forty years; for the last two thirds of that time his home lay, almost literally, in the shadow of the cathedral towers. My aim this morning is to examine ways in which his house on Palace Green played an important part in his life, and helps to reveal various aspects of his fascinating and puzzling character.

In the first week of June 1899, seven or eight years after he had moved home from Newcastle to Durham, the secretary of a major Tyneside industrial firm wrote to let a senior colleague know that he would shortly be moving again. He was excited by the prospect: "I have been lucky enough to get what I think is a most delightful old house in Durham... Its name also pleases me - The Divinity House". A day or so later the same businessman - and much more than a businessman, for he was Lord Rendel, who had been leader of the Welsh Liberals in the House of Commons and a close friend of Gladstone - received a letter from a retired Governor of Gibraltar: "... I must write a few lines to tell you that my youngest daughter, Eva, is engaged to be married to Mr. Falkner. It was only settled a few days ago. They have known each other for some time.... They will live in Durham". [1] Within five months of those letters John Meade Falkner and Evelyn Violet Adye were married. He was 41, she was 30. The Divinity House would be their

home until some time after John's death in the summer of 1932.



The Divinity House was a pleasing, though smallish building. It had until after the mid-nineteenth century been the home of the headmaster of the nearby grammar school and later still a privately-owned house which sat, rather incongruously, among the

more impressive, public buildings which surrounded Palace Green. Its main distinction was its position -on what Falkner once described as the ‘acropolis’ of the city of Durham, then a place of only 15,000 people. This was the ‘home base’ from which Falkner travelled daily for work, regularly to meetings and occasionally on longer foreign journeys. In retirement it would be the starting point for holidays. Here, too, he and Evelyn mixed with, and entertained, the social and intellectual élite of Durham church and university life. In short, it functioned as the centre of the various and often sharply contrasting concentric worlds within which John Meade Falkner operated.

Almost fifty years after his death, when I began to research Falkner’s life, there still survived a few people who had known him when he lived in Durham. I was fortunate to meet some of them and I corresponded with others. Among the latter was the Rev. R. Kilby Roper, who wrote to me from Italy with his recollections of Falkner in the mid 1920s. At that time Roper was an assistant in the Dean and Chapter Library. Occasionally he was invited to The Divinity House for what he described as ‘bibliographical tea parties’. He could recall their setting 60 years later: “The room was a kind of parlour, with some china and glass about... There was a double stack of 3 foot wide bookshelves, about 7 feet high that might have held some 400 books...” At more or less the same time Edmund Craster was also impressed by the 18th century furniture in the house and particularly by a fine mahogany book case built for George III, which had come from Gloucester Lodge, Weymouth. [2] (Of course, the house held far more books than the 400 or so Roper referred to - at the time he was visiting the Falkners’ home the Durham University Librarian was spending some of his spare time there preparing a catalogue of the fine library Falkner had built up over many years of discriminating collecting. He needed four or five years to compile a two-volume hand-list). For 20 years after he came to live in The Divinity House, Falkner commuted each working day by train



to Newcastle Central Station and from there to the Elswick works of Armstrong Whitworth

It was a daily trans-

lation from tranquility and beauty, and from the pleasing view from his windows of the assorted houses of a small town tumbling down to a placid river, to a very different environment - to the bedlam of a huge, blatantly modern engineering and shipbuilding complex, endlessly noisy, dusty and swathed in smoke. In contrast to Durham, here the scene was fringed with street after street of mean housing stretching down to another, bigger but this time sadly outraged river. Returning home after an exhausting day's work, Falkner might perhaps dine with the Bishop or the Dean, walk around the North Bailey to spend an hour with a friend from the University or, and often not before 9 p.m., resume work on the next page of a novel, write a poem for the Spectator or settle down to read.

As indicated, over the years Falkner made his home into the centre of a lively social life among the elite of Durham society - though it must be acknowledged it is not clear how frequently it played that role. Hensley Henson, first as Dean and from 1920 as Bishop, visited and dined with the Falkners; in turn, he entertained them. Controversial himself, Henson was clearly fascinated, and puzzled, by a man who managed to combine real scholarship and an enthusiasm for the classical and the medieval with work of a completely different kind - perhaps overseeing negotiations for the construction and sale of a battleship to Abdul Hamid or haggling for orders for field guns. Among other friends from the cathedral were its distinguished Dean, James Welldon, and Arnold Culley, the organist. Another institutional occupant of part of Palace Green, the University, also provided him with close, and sometimes life-long, contacts. Its Librarian, Edward Stocks, was a friend, correspondent and helper for over thirty years, and Falkner was a welcome visitor to the Stocks' relatively humble home in Quarry Head. In later years, when he took them to visit Burford, Mrs Stocks painted water colours of the meadows down by the Windrush. Another Durham friend had a part in both church and university, for Alfred Guillaume was Professor of Hebrew and Oriental Languages and also Rector of St. Mary le Bow. Evenings on which Falkner visited Guillaume's home at 27, North Bailey sometimes became very jovial. One of Guillaume's daughters told me half a century later how, after he had placed his hat on the piano, he would sit talking to her parents, while the children lying quietly in bed, listened to peels of laughter from downstairs. Anthea Radice (née Guillaume) also remembered how differently Falkner and his wife reacted when in the company of ecclesiastical or academic Durham; he was at ease among his

intellectual equals, Evelyn was overawed. As Anthea put it: “The conventions and correctness mattered so much to her - but he could sail over the lot!” [3] It was a mark of his broad perspective and inherent generosity of spirit that, in addition to entertaining leading members of church and university, Falkner also sometimes welcomed much humbler members of Durham society to his home. As well as people like Kilby Roper, this extended to include boys from the choir school. They in turn were mightily impressed by a man who could apparently combine a keen interest in their involvement in cathedral services or their sports on Potters Bank with his own eminent - and to them rather mysterious - role in helping maintain the military power of Great Britain, a nation they had been taught to believe still ruled the waves.



Innumerable journeys for work or pleasure took the owner of The Divinity House further from the comfortable, congenial, quietly civilised Durham society of which he gradually became an integral part. From the railway station less than a mile away from his home he frequently travelled to company meetings in Manchester and London, or for holidays - often to Somerset, Berkshire or Dorset - or perhaps to visit family and friends. For years Oxford was a regular and favourite destination - from which he would go on by rail and ‘bus to Burford. In turn, many friends came north to enjoy the Falkners’ hospitality in Durham. Their visitors in the summer of 1902 included the 70 year-old William Cass, vicar of Burford, and Mrs Cass who spent a week with them. Among many others, they later entertained the Secretary of the British Museum, Arundell Esdaile - ‘that strange man’, as Falkner once described him. There was Falconer Madan from the Bodleian Library, and Edmund Craster, then an under-librarian and also at the Bodleian, who sometimes stayed over at The Divinity House on his way home to Northumberland. During the Great War Falkner met and soon became a friend of Christopher Wordsworth, canon of Salisbury cathedral. He too was invited to Durham, but in this case it seems doubtful whether a visit ever occurred. One of the 1922 guests provided Falkner with an opportunity to reveal his ‘Roman’ inclinations. As he reported to Wordsworth, Dom Beyssac

“...wore his Benedictine habit, and in the evenings when light began to fail it was (to me) a pleasant sight to watch him walk up and down on the flagged path in front of The Divinity House saying the Office”. [4]



The Divinity House, like the far grander and better known Cragside and, after that, Andrew Noble’s home, Jesmond Dene House in Newcastle, played a part in the affairs of Armstrong Whitworth. Stuart Rendel, by this

time owner of the largest financial interest in Armstrongs, spent the night there in 1901, when he came north for a vital board meeting. This helped reshape the company after the death of Lord Armstrong and led to Falkner’s election as a director. Rendel seems to have stayed with the Falkner’s on other occasions. Some visitors to Elswick opted for this far more congenial Durham setting rather than spending the night somewhere in Newcastle upon Tyne. One instance was an international occasion during World War I. On 7 June 1918, the rapidly ailing American Ambassador to Great Britain, Walter Hines Page, wrote from Sandwich to his son, “Your mother went early on her journey to launch a British battleship”. [5] In fact, Mrs Page had travelled to the North East, was that night a guest at The Divinity House, before next day at Elswick officiating at the launch of *HMS Eagle*, one of the Royal Navy’s first aircraft carriers.

For more than 20 years involvement in Armstrong business meant that Falkner was frequently away from home for considerable lengths of time. Sometimes he was in distant places, occasionally under difficult circumstances. A year before his marriage he had visited Essen to negotiate the rights for Armstrongs to



use the Krupp processes for making armour; in later years he represented the firm at the Paris meetings of the armour plate syndicate - an international cartel designed to keep all producers in

business and maintain high prices for their product. Some members of his small, close Durham circle might well have been puzzled to find that on such occasions their quiet, learned friend was closely associated with men of the character, personality and value systems represent by men of the stamp of Albert Vickers, the Schneiders, Basil Zaharoff or Charlie Schwab. Over the years Falkner made innumerable visits to Italy, which contained Armstrongs' only important overseas operations. Characteristically, on these trips he usually managed to mix pleasure with business. In this way he spent many days working in the Vatican Library, where he was said to have filled over 40 notebooks with notes - all in Latin. (But were his own reports about how he spent his time always to be relied on?) C. L. Graves once recalled he had received a letter from Falkner who was then in Florence. In it he mentioned he was visiting the city for the 49th time! [6] He managed an occasional excursion to the gardens of the Villa d'Este. On a number of occasions before 1914 he took the long rail journey to Constantinople, there to compete with a good deal of success with other leading armament makers for orders to supply guns and warships to a tottering Ottoman Empire. Even during the war he made at least two working visits to the continent. On one of them, in the first quarter of 1917, he was again in Italy, but he found that it was now very different from the land of history, romance and classical delights that he enjoyed so much in peacetime. Italian armies were in serious straits; the time he spent there he described as "six difficult and exacting weeks". [7]

Usually when John went overseas on business, Evelyn stayed in Durham, but they did travel together in the summer of 1906 when he made a sales trip of more than usual significance. Armstrongs had been invited to negotiate to supply up to three battleships to Brazil. There was a successful outcome to his meetings there, but the longer-term consequences were less satisfactory. 'Minas Geraes', the first of the warships to be built, was launched at Elswick in September 1908 and delivered at the beginning of 1910. It arrived in Rio de Janeiro in April, and by November its crew had mutinied, killed the captain and fired on Rio. The second battleship, the 'Rio de Janeiro', was laid down at the same time as the 'Minas Geraes' but was much modified as building continued. In 1912 it was rendered relatively ineffective when that year Chile ordered two battleships with bigger guns - also from Armstrongs. In 1913 the 'Rio de Janeiro' was sold to Turkey and renamed 'Sultan Osman I', but in August 1914 the Great War began as it was preparing to leave

the Tyne. It was seized by the Admiralty and, after being renamed 'HMS Agincourt', joined the Grand Fleet. This confiscation was followed by a transfer to Turkey of the German warships 'Goeben' and 'Breslau', an event which played a part in bringing the Ottoman Empire into the war on the side of the Central Powers. In this sense at least, Falkner's 1906 visit to Rio de Janeiro can be seen to have been an early move in a complex sequence of events which led through to the horrors of Gallipoli and of the long drawn out Mesopotamian campaigns.

In mid November 1920 Falkner resigned the chairmanship of Armstrong Whitworth, which he had held for just a month under



five years - though he had been effective head for a year or so longer than that. Now partly retired, he took up new interests in Durham itself, in the university as 'Reader in Paleography' - a nominal post - and as Honorary Librarian to the Dean and Chapter. There was time

to attend afternoon services, and, dressed with appropriate formality, he would walk across the 'graveyard' to the cathedral and, carrying a pile of musical scores, make his way to his place in the choir.

Henson summed up his connection with the life and worship of the cathedral in a diary entry made in the week of his death: "His fondness for music, deep knowledge of architecture, and real concern for religious matters led him to attend the services of the cathedral assiduously, but he never received Holy Communion... I once challenged him on the subject of his absence from Communion, and asked him whether, in his heart, he was a Papist. He explained the first by confessing opinions which were rather pantheist than orthodox, and the last he flatly denied." [8]

Although more time was now spent in Durham, for a number of years in the early 1920s Falkner retained his place on the Armstrong board, and for a short time also continued to travel on company

business. Immediately after his resignation as chairman he reported on their Italian operations and in late 1923 he visited Spain in company with Charles Ellis of John Brown's. Until the autumn of 1925 he regularly attended board meetings. During the summer of 1926, having now resigned his directorship, he made occasional visits to Elswick to go through and destroy "great hoards of my own letters". After this, apart from two local and not too exacting business commitments - on the boards of the Newcastle and Gateshead Water companies - journeys to and from The Divinity House could at last be made to satisfy his own wishes. Until 1929 he and Evelyn continued to visit Italy - where he welcomed the greater order and discipline Mussolini seemed to be achieving - but gradually rail journeys within England came to dominate their travels. From the early autumn of 1931 to June 1932, just after his 74th birthday, they were in the south of England, first on holiday in Bath, then during his long illness in Ventnor and after that he recuperated in Weymouth. In the first part of June they returned to The Divinity House. On 30th., after calling to see them, Henson recorded: "Meade Falkner... is a complete wreck and has a moribund aspect and manner". Three weeks later he was dead.

Over the next few days warm appreciations of his richly talented character were expressed in Durham cathedral, in Burford Parish Church and in press obituaries. Naturally, as with those assessments, the main interest of this Society is in his literary work and endlessly fascinating cultural life. But I for one can never forget that the main source of the wealth he had lavished for so many years on The Divinity House, its great collection of books and other fine contents, was the manufacture and sales of the means of mass destruction. For almost a third of a century this attractive house, almost in the shadow of the towers of Durham cathedral, incomparably placed above the river Wear, had been the home for one who was in turn a secretary, director, leading salesman and eventually chairman of one of the world's leading armaments firms. As Hensley Henson rather cautiously expressed it in his diary entry: "The association of a man of his character, gifts and interests with the position of chairman of a great armaments firm was startling". [9] It was in fact not only incongruous but a standing challenge to any claim to really 'understand' John Meade Falkner. The sophisticated techniques of destruction and slaughter had provided the commercial underpinning of all his intellectual activities, and for his friendships with the leaders of church and university.

Falkner's mortal remains were taken from The Divinity

House on Tuesday, 26th July to Darlington crematorium. From there his ashes were carried for interment in Burford churchyard. His will directed that The Divinity House should be sold, and Evelyn moved to London. Throughout their marriage she seems to have remained quiet, unobtrusive and, in both appearance and demeanour, an almost mouse-like partner. In the whole vast wealth of her husband's correspondence, she received scarcely more than a rare, almost incidental, mention. But, even so, their former home and her own recollections revealed something of her real love for the multi-talented



endlessly puzzling - and probably often quite infuriating - man with whom she had shared her life. One piece of evidence points to simple devotion. Inside the cover of the Bodleian Library copy of Falkner's poems is a letter sent by Evelyn in July 1933 to Falconer Madan, thanking him for his help in getting them ready for publication. She referred to the long years they had spent in The Divinity

House and to his comings and goings, and then added: "It will be precisely a year this week since he died. I find it impossible to believe that he is not merely away for a short time - just as in earlier years I used to feel when his business took him to Athens, Constantinople and elsewhere. I hope I may never lose this feeling of as very short separation." [10]

The only other clue I have to Evelyn's love for him is one that I find touching in its simplicity. It came to me in a letter written in her old age by Helen Stocks, daughter of the Durham University

Librarian, and recalls events when she had just left school. On some occasions, when both John and Evelyn were away from home, Helen looked after their small garden at the rear of The Divinity House. She found that in the lawn there Evelyn had sown a small patch of night-scented stocks. The flowers formed the initials 'JMF'.
[11]

NOTES:

- [1] J.M. Falkner to Lord Rendel 1st June 1899; John Adye to Lord Rendel 2nd June 1899.
- [2] R.K. Roper to Kenneth Warren August 1980; Edmund Craster 'Personal Note' in The World's Classics edition of *'The Nebuly Coat'*, 1954 p.xi
- [3] Anthea Radice to Kenneth Warren 26th February 1981
- [4] J.M. Falkner to C. Wordsworth 17th October 1922
- [5] *Life and Letters of W.H. Page* II p.390
- [6] C.L. Graves 'Recollections of Mr. J.M. Falkner' *The Guardian* 5th August 1932 p.632
- [7] J.M. Falkner to C. Wordsworth 9th April 1917
- [8] Hensley Henson Diary entry 23rd July 1932
- [9] *ibid.* 25th July 1932
- [10] Evelyn Falkner to Falconer Madan 16th July 1933
- [11] Helen Bright to Kenneth Warren 31st July 1986