

Shilling Lives

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'A shilling life will give you all the facts,' wrote W. H. Auden. If this were the case, then the new *Dictionary of National Biography* should cost £2746.10p for its set of lives gathered in sixty volumes. It is in fact £7000, but Auden was of course writing in 1934, and so, if one allows for inflation since then, it must be a considerable bargain.

As is well known, this set was designed to replace the volumes originally edited, in the nineteenth century, by Sir Leslie Stephen, whose hard slog to produce enduringly congenial volumes exacerbated an innate depressive tendency which, in turn, prompted his daughter, Virginia Woolf, to elaborate in her novel *To The Lighthouse* upon the metaphorical, philosophical journey through the alphabet taken by a character based upon him, Mr. Ramsay.

Supplemented each decade through the twentieth century as worthy spirits, and others, died off, Sir Leslie's edition made a final posthumous bow with a 1993 volume called *Missing Persons* which gave space to those, such as Gerard Manley Hopkins, who, such were their circumstances, did not get in first time around.

The *DNB* can indeed be the first port of call for anybody who wishes to grasp of the life of Churchill, Russell, T. S. Eliot or, indeed, Hopkins but it is often at its best in those byways into which it can so readily distract the most disciplined of readers (and such digression can prove more stimulating than the task in hand, even leading to boolean searches through the CD-ROM of the entire run of *Who's Who*). Meanwhile, such *DNB* articles can bring to life those who might never receive a full biography or, if they did, it has long since vanished from general circulation and, in any case, was cast in language, perhaps from the pen of a devoted widow, which is far from the current appetite. The *DNB* entry, however, can, in its space, bring to life many a sermon writer or the woman who affected to give birth to rabbits.

Things change, and what was said of the lives of Sir Leslie Stephen himself, and of his daughters, soon after their deaths has been much augmented. A new edition was desirable, especially as it would not presume to boot out anybody from the previous one. Soon after publication, however, it became the subject of some fascinating articles, and letters, in *The Times Literary Supplement* which pointed to deficiencies and contradictions in its accounts of such diverse topics as the Tudor period and the work of Patrick O'Brien.

This makes one ask how it might appear to anybody with a penchant for the works of John Meade Falkner. After all, he himself received quite a good entry in the volume for those who died during the Thirties, and the *DNB* is a natural place in which to get some idea of those, not widely known to the public at large, with whom he was associated. Indeed, it was not until the *Missing Persons* volume in the 1990s that some of these received a place in the previous edition. One might well imagine that the shade of Lord Rendel, whose letters leave one in no doubt about his sense of his own importance, must have been mightily cheesed off that he did not enter the national record eight decades earlier; equally, Charles Lynam, of the Dragon School, was probably sanguine enough that he, too, had to wait for a record of his burial at sea, en route to Australia, at sea latitude 37° 13' N, longitude 11° 10'E.

These entries are now incorporated in the new *DNB*, but it turns out, alas, not to be the place in which to find entries for such people as Canon Christopher Wordsworth, whose friendship with Falkner was prompted by a query over one of his books and was to last over fifteen years. Palpable is the sense that Falkner needed such a diversion. There is an antiquarian intensity unparalleled in his surviving letters, one which took his mind off field-guns in wartime. He began by explaining to Wordsworth (September 23 1915) that 'I seem to know you well, from continually reading your books.' The *DNB* still has nothing for Edward Stone - of whose fascinating nature one can deduce much more elsewhere in this issue of the *Journal*. Nor is there a place for Eton's H.E. Luxmoore whom Stone's daughter called 'the most romantic of men'. Crucially, for our Falknerian interest, Luxmoore had informed Stone that a sensitive private tutor was urgently needed for one of the pupils - John Noble - who had been experiencing such difficulties in his life there that his work had suffered. Did Stone know of anybody suitable?

In a later, undated letter to John Noble, Luxmoore neatly referred to 'my most amontillado manner'. Luxmoore had only acquired this after some years' ageing in the pedagogical cask. At first, he had not appeared to be one of those rare spirits, an enthusiastic schoolmaster. A generation older than Falkner and John, he had himself entered Eton as boy in 1852, returning there from Pembroke College, Oxford, twelve years later to live with his mother. Initial diffidence made him a prey for the natural cruelty of schoolboys, but rather than shuffle off into some more tranquil profession, he acquired that skill which drew out the best in those

pupils with whom he sensed a certain kinship. As Geoffrey Madan recalled, Luxmoore's 'alarming ways were only so for the moment, and they caused him as much distress as anyone'. Alive until 1926, his presence was felt by those who lived into our own era.

Without him, Falkner would not have become John Noble's tutor, and, had that not been the case, then he would not have joined Armstrong Whitworth and... well, in discussing the new *DNB* in *The Times Literary Supplement* last year Nicholas Barker made the point - mentioned nowhere else - that it was a financial crisis in the firm that compelled JMF to augment his income by turning to fiction. However that might be, the firm is a suitable place with which to begin a survey of the sixty volumes' Falknerian tinge.

Stafford Linsley's new account of Lord Armstrong is brisker, but no shorter, than the earlier, elegant one. The outline of Armstrong's career - across eight decades of the nineteenth century, buried on its very last day - remains the same, again incorporating a (this time rather shorter) account of his father, but Linsley makes plain at one point - in the creation of the River Committee in Newcastle - that 'once again Armstrong had exploited his connections, sometimes familial, in the intertwined business and political communities of Newcastle, which were the sources of economic and social power' and also points out a fact evidently not thought dignified stuff for the earlier chronicle, namely that 'it had long been Armstrong's practice to sleep in a factory office to deal with any problems which might arise on the night shift' (as we know, Falkner adopted such a practice).

The earlier account did not shy from stating that 'the government, having ordered 3000 of Armstrong's superior guns by 1863, then blundered in its mid-1860s' return to muzzle-loaders, something to which it 'so obstinately adhered for the next fifteen years that England not only lost her supremacy in respect to her artillery but fell dangerously behind the rest of the world'. Not mentioned then, however, is the four-and-a-half-month strike and lock-out of 1871, to which Linsley gives a very interesting section, a substantial proportion of the entry. Of this attempt by the workers to secure the nine-hour day to which other employers had already agreed, Linsley notes of Armstrong that 'as head of the largest works in the area, he took the lead in co-ordinating the employers' resistance, and acted provocatively in importing labour from the south of England and the continent... it is generally believed that Armstrong's faulty leadership unnecessarily prolonged the strike, enraged local public opinion, and lowered his personal reputation.

His attitude during the strike must have altered his workers' perceptions of him, and therefore of the firm'. Linsley goes so far as to say that 'Armstrong, the former paternalist, appeared in a guise approaching that of a tyrant, prepared to ditch his workforce for imported labour'.

Linsley makes much clearer that this was the pivotal point for Armstrong's semi-retreat to Cragside while the earlier account skates over the cause of it by simply saying that 'in later life, Armstrong's happiest hours, when not employed in planting or building, were devoted to electrical research in his laboratory at Cragside'. What's more, no hint there of something stated by Linsley that 'he was an invalid in his last years and, according to oral tradition, exhibited a degree of paranoia'. Meanwhile, there is no forgetting what he did achieve, and Lindley notes the importance of the fact that 'in 1872 a delegation of the Iwakura mission, aimed at increasing Japan's knowledge of western industries and culture, had been shown around Tyneside by Armstrong, and a beneficial and lasting impression was left on both parties'.

As Linsley puts it, in his enjoyment of Cragside's fastness, Armstrong knew that 'the works could safely be left in the hands of his lieutenants'. Among these of course was Sir Andrew Noble, whose life was originally chronicled by Alfred Cochrane, whose piece is incorporated in one by Linsley (who, curiously, again does not mention in his bibliography Kenneth Warren's informative *Armstrongs of Elswick*). Unlike Cochrane, Linsley is able to state that 'the company went into relative decline early in the twentieth century. . Noble had become unimaginative and conservative in engineering design, autocratic in dealing with his managers, and dynastic in his approach to his succession - two of his four sons, Saxton and John, became directors of the company'.

One could almost say that if that sentence was not dictated from the hereafter by Lord Rendel, it is certainly being relished by his shade. In life, Rendel had wheedled out the fact - in a way that remains not quite clear - that there had been some dubious accounting at Elswick, to the benefit of the Nobles, in the early years of the twentieth century. The revision of John Grigg's piece which appeared in *Missing Persons* adds the fact that 'Rendel frequently, together with George Armistead, acted as host, confidant, and companion, regularly playing backgammon with Gladstone in the evening' but the entry continues to make no more than a sentence's mention of his connection with a firm, Armstrong's, of which he had a sure grasp, albeit from a distance: Grigg's account gives no hint of

the relentless, understandably obsessive way in which, pen ever at the ready to perpetrate a near-impenetrable script, Rendel chronicled in letters to whoever might listen, his disgust at what he saw as shortcomings which were well-nigh criminal. The entry, however, adds considerably to the bibliography, with listings of manuscript locations, which others might draw on to fuller effect, for, as cantankerous as he might appear, Rendel has a great interest even if one cannot doubt that Sir Andrew Noble would have been more congenial company (well caught in Sir Henry Newbolt's memoirs).

The entry for Charles 'Skipper' Lynam of the Dragon School is much the same as in *Missing Persons*, and is a reminder of a friendship with Falkner of which one continually wishes that there were more record (the Log of their Thames trip is evidently by Falkner). Conversation between them must have been interesting, for Leslie Plimmer notes that Lynam 'was a radical and something of an agnostic, and read a long paper on the evils of war at the Union Society when such views were certainly not popular', and, again, it is a shame that - so far - little can be disinterred about their friend Harry 'Jugs' Vassall.

It is possible, but not recorded, and certainly not mentioned afterwards, that the paths of Falkner and the future Bishop Herbert Hensley Henson crossed at Oxford, where, after a tragic childhood, Henson eked out an existence, his fortunes changing in 1884 by election to a fellowship at All Souls. Alwyn Winton's original article about this long-lived, beguiling, irritating, kindly and cantankerous man has been replaced by a longer, incisive one by Matthew Grimley who does not demean him by giving greater emphasis to those shortcomings, such as the time when, 'in 1925, after Henson had attacked the strikers in the *Evening Standard*, the dean of Durham, J.E.C. Welldon, who had probably been mistaken for Henson, was beaten and kicked at the Durham miners' gala and almost thrown into the River Wear'.

Startlingly, one learns at the end of the piece that, well known as it was (described by Henson himself) that for over thirty years the household comprised himself, his childless wife and her companion Fearn Booker, come 1987 'Henson's relationship with Miss Booker formed the basis of a best-selling novel by Susan Howatch, *Glittering Images*, in which Henson appeared as Alex Jardine. But, as the author herself made clear, there was no evidence whatsoever for her racy fictional depiction of a sexual relationship between the two'.

Let us hope that Miss Howatch does not dwell further upon Falkner's life than the tantalising glimpses given of him in Henson's journal (the manuscript of which contains only a few more). Certainly, though, it could be the stuff of fiction: the lacunae in the record combining with so diverse, so abundant a nature to allow something upon which the imagination could build to dizzying effect, giving us more of this self-styled 'eternal romantic': a man who in three novels published between 1896 and 1903 anticipated so many of the twentieth century's preoccupations (there is no record that he read Freud, but his comments would have been fascinating). Falkner sat in the Vatican Library could be the start of another *Da Vinci Code*; or his visit to Rio, magically described in a letter, the opening of a thriller akin to the one purportedly stolen on the train between Newcastle and Durham.

Author of 'long marvellous letters', to use Auden's phrase, he kept none, or few. The bonfire which he made at Elswick - described to John Noble - is, for us, as grim a thought as that one made by Hardy upon which most of Falkner's letters went (a few survive in the Dorset County Museum).

The original *DNB* entry for Falkner - by somebody who knew him well, Alfred Cochrane - caught some of his character, and happily positions *The Nebuly Coat* as his 'masterpiece', but much of the life, such as his childhood and the intricacies of his business dealings, received no meaningful comment. These shortcomings are admirably filled by somebody who could never have known him, the tirelessly witty Richard Davenport-Hines. A prolific contributor to the new *DNB*, he has written books on diverse subjects, with one on Proust forthcoming, and is as at home in Falkner's business life as his personal concerns in all their variety. 'Bachelordom was his natural vocation: in his own phrase he regarded women at Oxford university with the repugnance he otherwise reserved for black beetles'. No source is given for that remark, although Davenport-Hines lists, from the Newcastle archives, some neatly chosen quotations about those business matters: 'it is to me hunting, fishing, shooting and everything else all in one,' he told Rendel, and Davenport-Hines makes a good case that Falkner 'revelled in diplomatic scheming' while also giving due weight to Rendel's view (to Henry Whitehead) that 'he is brilliant, romantic and picturesque, but like Rosbery, not so sagacious as he is clever'.

Of *The Nebuly Coat*, Davenport-Hines breaks new ground with the observation that that 'it is enhanced by precise architectural and musical scholarship: the plot reflects Falkner's talent for

mystification which so successfully served his armaments interests. The story's ostensible villain Lord Blandamer resembles Falkner: widely travelled, with scholarly avocations, evasive and intriguing, making a cynical marriage, yet behaving decently to his bride, ruthless and deliberative in pursuing his interests, yet punctilious in courtesy. Though apparently a murderer, Blandamer achieves a heroic stature surpassing the weakly virtuous men of Cullerne. (In 1905 Falkner was himself granted armorial bearings only slightly different from the fictional arms of Lord Blandamer.)'

This is a model of a shilling life, bright to behold but, not flashy, and offering real insight - the sort no less valuable for being open to dispute - and blessed with such detail as Falkner having 'the intense eyes of an insomniac'. It would have taken a change in the very nature of humanity for every page of the sixty volumes to be on his level, and, whatever the set's shortcomings, one must be grateful to all those who toiled for hours at a rate that would have had the Elswick workers downing tools all the sooner - but, then again, the writing of shilling lives is more congenial than assembling field-guns, and now one might turn to see what is made afresh of Sir John Adye and Sir Henry Newbolt.