

John Meade Falkner, his works and influence on
Dorothy L. Sayers
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In a letter written to her parents when she was aged 16, Dorothy L. Sayers comments enthusiastically on *The Nebuly Coat*, a book she has just read. This was the work of John Meade Falkner, a man of many talents, who lived for the latter part of his life in the city of Durham. He took lodgings in South Street in the early 1890s, but moved into The Divinity House on Palace Green when he married in 1899. This house, which was his home until his death in 1932, is marked by a small plaque. No doubt Falkner would have been most upset to see the University buildings which now stand on the site of his beloved garden on the other side of Windy Gap. He is commemorated in a splendid monument in the Cathedral cloisters, close to the staircase to the Dean and Chapter library. It is appropriate that we should consider at this Convention a man who contributed much to his adopted city and who was respected as an author by Dorothy L. Sayers.

Falkner was not a northerner in origin, having been born at Manningford Bruce, Wiltshire in 1858. His family moved to Dorchester in the following year, and later to Weymouth and Buckland Rippers, near Fleet, so that his early memories gave him the lasting love of the county of Dorset which is evident in his novels. Like Dorothy, his father was a cleric of the Anglican Church, but always a curate, not a vicar. This background imbued Falkner with a love of church architecture, history, music, and liturgical works: subjects which are woven into his writings. He was educated locally, then at Marlborough College, before reading Modern History at Hertford College, Oxford. Given his scholarly tastes, it is surprising that he emerged with a third class degree. However, in 1927, his college awarded him an Honorary Fellowship in recognition of his later achievements.

His first employment, which brought him north in 1883, was as private tutor to the children of Andrew Noble, Company Secretary of Armstrong, Mitchell and Company, of Elswick near Newcastle on Tyne. The firm was concerned with engineering, armaments and ship-building. Noble himself had been a soldier, was an expert on gunnery and explosives, and refined the science of ballistics. Perhaps there was an omen concerning Falkner's career when he blew off his eyelashes in an experiment with gunpowder at the age of eleven. All the same, the job proved a very fruitful starting point for his business

career, as well as introducing him to a family with whom he retained a close friendship. When his pupils grew up, he became Noble's personal secretary, then Noble's replacement as Company Secretary, before becoming successively, a Director, Vice-Chairman and then, in 1915, Chairman of the Board of Directors of Armstrong, Whitworth, as it had then become. The entry concerning Falkner in *The Dictionary of National Biography* claims that he was not a success as Chairman, but Sir William Haley states that 'There is no evidence that Falkner served Armstrong, Whitworth's other than competently'. It seems unlikely that a firm of this status, described as '...certainly the largest commercial undertaking in England and possible elsewhere...' would retain an incompetent Chairman for five years. He remained a Director of the Board for a further six years.

During his career he travelled extensively for Armstrongs, negotiating sales of armaments. In a speech made to the Royal Society of Literature in 1957, Sir William Haley says that 'everywhere he went, this tall, gaunt, voluble, charming man made friends by his command of languages, his dignity... and his patience'. The firm's method of salesmanship has been described as advising small countries about the armaments held by neighbouring states, then showing what Armstrongs could supply as suitable deterrents. Despite this, or perhaps because of this, Falkner received decorations from the Turkish, Italian and Japanese governments in acknowledgment of his dealings with them.

He also made good use of these travels abroad to further his own mediæval researches and in adding to his private collection of rare books. His work on manuscripts in the Vatican library earned him the gift from the Pope of a gold medal, which was presented only to distinguished scholars. His researches abroad were an extension of his English activities, exploring antiquities, especially in the British Museum, the Bodleian Library and the county of Oxfordshire, which he came to love as much as Dorset. After his retirement as Company Chairman, he spent the last decade of his life travelling and acting as Honorary Librarian of Durham Cathedral, and as Honorary Reader in Palæography at the University. The duties of the second post seem to have been light, but his obituary in *The Times* claims that his work in the library here made the collection '...probably the first among cathedral libraries in England'. He contributed the introduction to a history of the library in 1925, and, when The Statutes of the Cathedral Church of Durham were published in 1929 they were based on Falkner's Latin text.

During the course of this busy life as industrialist and scholar, Falkner found time to write a number of published books, among them three full-length novels. It is interesting that *The Times'* obituary notice of 23 July 1932, refers to him as 'a prolific writer' but only lists the history of Oxfordshire and the guide book which were his first works. An unnamed friend remedied the omission two days later with a panegyric on Falkner's life and works. He says that Falkner 'wrote beautifully, in every sense of the word, and that his annual statements (for the business) were models of lucidity, and were marked by a distinction of style that never failed him whatever he wrote'. He then gives a brief outline of the three novels and describes Falkner's poetry.

The poems were written throughout Falkner's life. Some were published in *The Spectator* 'where they never failed to attract attention by their peculiar dignity and charm'. A collection of them was privately printed about 1930, and again by his widow in 1933. Philip Larkin chose to include three of them in *The Oxford Book of Twentieth Century English Verse* [1973].

Falkner's other literary work consists of two short stories, published in periodicals, and part of a fourth novel that he allegedly wrote and left on a train. The first of the short stories, *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*, was published in *The National Review* in 1896 and is a supernatural story reminiscent of *The Lost Stradivarius* which had appeared the previous year. It is interesting that it introduces a family whose coat of arms incorporates the nebuly design, a precursor to the novel which followed in 1903. The other story, printed in *The Cornhill Magazine* in 1916, was Falkner's last published work of fiction. Called *Charalampia*, it is a kind of fable or fairy story, supposedly translated from a Greek original.

The surviving novels were all produced whilst Falkner was employed by Armstrong, Mitchell and Company. This caused the author V.S. Pritchett to refer to him rather disparagingly, but perhaps a little enviously, as 'An Amateur' in the title of the chapter he devotes to Falkner in his book, *The Living Novel*. He concedes that Falkner is a meticulous writer and an expert at conveying a sense of place. Both characteristics are evident in the first novel *The Lost Stradivarius*, published in 1895. This begins in an Oxford college which is lovingly described, as is the town, 'the most beautiful' of English cities. Derbyshire, Dorset and the Italian scenes are equally well portrayed. The narrator of the story is a woman and Falkner carries this off well. She is Sophia Maltravers, whose brother was principally affected by the supernatural happenings of the plot. The

account is written for her nephew, her brother's son, himself now a student at Oxford. Although the narrative introduces many of Falkner's personal interests: music, heraldry, old customs and antiquities, these do not detract from the plot, which moves fast. As in the later *The Nebuly Coat*, a family crest and a family portrait are important to the dénouement. The book skilfully portrays the disintegration of a personality under stress. Pritchett compares Falkner with Sheridan Le Fanu [the subject of Harriet's studies in the Bodleian, in *Gaudy Night*] but asserts that he lacks the latter's 'psychological curiosity and the uneasiness of his imagination'. He also considers, as I do, that Falkner spoils the mystery 'by setting our minds at rest'.

Moonfleet, the second novel, was published in 1898, when Dorothy was five years old. She read it when she was fourteen. It has proved to be the most well-known and well-read of the three long works of fiction. Over the years it has been used as a class-reader in many schools. This is not necessarily a good fate for a book, as being forced to read it at an unnatural pace is likely to alienate some children. However, the book is an excellent choice for interested teen-agers, as it is a lively, often thrilling, adventure story concerned with smuggling, among other things. It is reminiscent of *Treasure Island* in some respects. There are many enthralling scenes, like the one where the young hero is trapped in a tomb in the dark. He dislodges a coffin and finds that he is clutching something which feels unpleasant. It turns out to be the beard of a long-dead corpse. A longer passage, of several pages, brilliantly describes how the same lad has to struggle up a cliff to evade pursuing customs men in spite of a broken leg and vertigo. The first of these two scenes may have lingered in Dorothy's mind. In the tomb the boy finds a locket containing a piece of paper on which are written some verses from the Psalms. He gradually becomes convinced this could be a clue to the whereabouts of a long-vanished jewel stolen by the villain whose coffin had split open. The supposition is correct. The paper is indeed a cipher which leads to the discovery of the missing jewel bricked into a castle well. To recover it the boy hero descends the well with trepidation and inevitable success. Although consigned to children, this book is worthy of a wider readership.

The setting is the Chesil Beach coastline of Falkner's beloved Dorset. He skilfully conveys a sense of place in descriptions like this of a deserted quarrying area:

This turf was not smooth, but hummocky, for under lay heaps of worthless stone and marble drawn out

of the quarries ages ago, which the green vestment had covered for the most part, though it left sometimes a little patch of rubble peering out at the top of a mound. There were many tumble-down walls and low gables left of the cottages of the old quarrymen; grass-covered ridges marked out the little garden-folds, and here and there still stood a forlorn goose-berry bush, or stunted plum- or apple-tree with its branches all swept eastward by the up-channel gales.

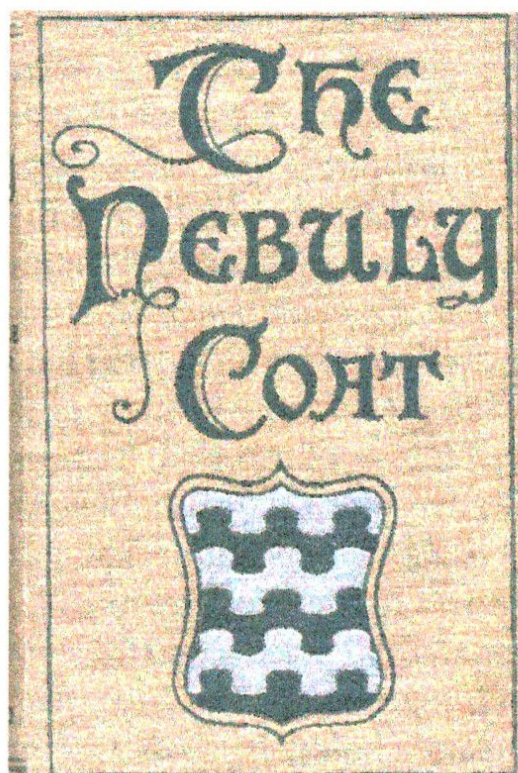
The village church plays a substantial part in the plot, especially in one gruesome scene when the floods arrive - '... There was the churchyard flooded, though 'twas on rising ground, and the church itself standing up like a steep little island'. During a service there is a sound from the crypt, thought by the congregation to be coffins floating, and knocking against each other.

The characters in this novel are not elaborate, but the developing relationship between the young hero, Trenchard, narrator of the story, and his 'adopted' father, Elzevir Block, is sympathetically drawn. This relationship forms a significant part of the plot. The heroine, whom Trenchard marries in a 'happy-ever-after' conclusion, has a very small part to play, and is little more than a cipher. Trenchard's aunt has more character as a strict and forbidding guardian, but she, too, has only a minor role in the narrative.

Falkner's last novel, *The Nebuly Coat*, appeared in 1903. Trevor Hall in his collection of essays, *Dorothy L. Sayers: Nine Literary Studies*, has written an interesting piece on the similarities between *The Nebuly Coat* and *The Nine Tailors*. He mentions that Dorothy had stated to friends in Kirkcudbright that '*The Nebuly Coat*... was a book of which she was very fond and much admired'. We know this also from the letter already quoted. She again refers to it in her review of E.C.R. Lorac's detective story *The Organ Speaks* in *The Sunday Times* of 3 February 1935. She says 'It was written over thirty years ago by John Meade Falkner, and the people who love it cherish it in their hearts with a shy and secret passion'. (For that eulogy to Falkner we can perhaps forgive Dorothy's reference throughout to the subject of the review as 'Mr. Lorac' or 'he'. E.C.R. Lorac was, in fact, one of the pseudonyms of Edith Caroline Rivett.)

The Nebuly Coat is the nearest book to a detective story that Falkner wrote, and is the best of his three novels. Dorothy continues her reference in the review by saying that 'It was a kind of romantic mystery story, unique in its period...' Once again a church building is important in the plot, as are music, heraldry, genealogy and bell-ringing. The characters are better rounded than in the earlier novels, and Falkner's sense of humour is more evident.

There are two main strands to the plot. One is the restoration of the great church (referred to as a Minster) which is a character



in its own right. Dorothy claims its tower is the main character 'that dominates the whole of the atmosphere and action'. The other strand is the unravelling of the mystery surrounding the local grand family, the Blandamers, whose coat of arms, the nebuly coat, is prominent in the church. A young architect, Edward Westray, sent to supervise repairs to the church, brings the two strands together. He lodges with an impoverished, genteel spinster and her niece. He finds that the half-brother of his landlady, Miss Joliffe, (father of

the niece) has claimed to be the true heir to the Blandamers. This man, Martin Joliffe, conveniently dies after a visit from a mysterious stranger when he is about to disclose the outcome of his researches into the Blandamer family.

Martin's fellow-lodger, the church organist, an eccentric, alcohol-addicted musician, carries on the researches. He too dies mysteriously. After premonitions that a man with a hammer is going to kill him, he is found dead in the organ loft of the church with his wounded head lying on one of the organ pedals. This causes a continuous sound '...like the death groan of a giant'. This description is used when Sharnall, the organist, is happily playing his own composition to Westray. The latter, however, is distracted by his concern about the condition of the tower, and the phrase is perhaps used as a premonition of the fate of both man and tower. The finding

of the body is described by Dorothy as 'One of the great discovery-scenes of murder literature'.

E.C.R. Lorac's book, reviewed by Dorothy, also has an organ making '...a strange and hideous cacophony in the night'. The organist is found sprawling over four manual keys, eliciting the comment from the reviewer that 'Mr. Lorac feels it necessary to turn on the full organ to produce the same reactions of horror that Mr. Falkner could call up with a single pedal-point. A more recent detective story, *Wycliffe and the Last Rites*, by W.J. Burley uses a similar sound of 'a sustained chord of discordant notes' to draw the vicar's attention to the body of a murdered woman in his church. In this case the keys are deliberately wedged. Church organists seem an unlikely group as targets for murder, but Edmund Crispin [himself a musician] slaughters two - one has his throat cut while actually playing for a service (in *The Case of the Gilded Fly*); the other is stunned and poisoned. His organ is later instrumental in setting of a device to kill another cathedral official (in *Holy Disorders*). Colin Dexter also kills off the organist (one of a number of victims) in *The Service of all the Dead*. I have no evidence to show that any of these authors was influenced by Falkner, but who knows? It is possible that Ellis Peters, best known for her Brother Cadfael books, might well have been influenced by both Falkner and Dorothy. The plot of *A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs* involves the illicit use of a burial vault by smugglers, as in *Moonfleet*, and the placing of two corpses in a tomb where they do not belong, much as in *The Nine Tailors*. Another small coincidence in Peters' book is that Dorothy's favourite hymn, 'O Quanta Qualia', is sung at a church service.

To return to *The Nebuly Coat*. Westray feels that Sharlall, the organist, could not have injured himself sufficiently to have been killed by falling on the pedal. The 'blunt instrument' of many a detective story is suspected. Thus is unfolded the makings of a detective plot. Clues are given (for example, the purchase at a suspicious time of a first-class railway ticket). A poorly painted picture is heavily sign-posted as of importance in solving the mystery of family relationships. The identity of the murdered seems obvious, but it is not spelled out. Westray confronts the man he suspects, and is, in turn, saved by him when the tower falls. The two plots are thus neatly dovetailed in their ending. Trevor Hall says that Lord Blandamer, the suspect, enters the church inexplicably, but it seems quite clear that in saving Westray he is redeeming himself and restoring the honour of the family.

Characters are more fully developed in this book. Of Westray, Dorothy said 'I can't bear the architect - he's such a self-righteous young man', and she is right. Falkner does not portray him with much sympathy and he appears a thorough prig. One of the funniest parts of the book is concerned with his decision to propose to Anastasia Joliffe, his landlady's niece, although he feels she is beneath him socially. 'The great renunciation must be made; he, Westray, must marry beneath him, but before doing so he would take his mother into his confidence, though there is no record of Perseus doing as much before he cut loose Andromeda.' After Anastasia had refused him 'He attempted to lie awake at night... For several meals in succession he refused to eat heartily of such dishes as he did not like'. He was, all the same, a conscientious worker and anxious to save the church tower.

Falkner also has fun with Anastasia, who is fond of reading Jane Austen, and imagining herself in the role of Catherine Morland, heroine of *Northanger Abbey*. She sometimes feel shame at her aunt's deferential attitude, especially to Lord Blandamer. Unlike Westray, though, she is ashamed of her snobbish feelings. The sufferings of the genteel poor like Anastasia and her aunt are portrayed with delicacy. Their situation was not unfamiliar to Falkner. His childhood was far from affluent, and his mother died when he was thirteen years old. (She died from typhoid fever after drinking contaminated water. Falkner relates that a rat's tail was found in a container of drinking water.) After his father died he helped to support his brothers and sisters financially. His sisters set up a boarding-house and Miss Joliffe may be partly based on them. Lord Blandamer is harsh and reserved, self-reliant and implacable. His actions, including his proposal to Anastasia, are motivated by self-interest. Despite this, Dorothy evidently admired him.

Of the main characters Sharnall, the organist, is the most interesting. Some critics have likened him to a character from Turgenev. There is pathos in his struggle to give up alcohol, especially after he acts as host to the Bishop, his friend from student days at Oxford. The Bishop's visit to Sharnall is a source of irritation to the rector, one of the many minor humorous characters. Some of the scenes and characters are reminiscent of Trollope - especially the rector's wife, who is a lesser Mrs. Proudie. It is possible that Falkner's father suffered at the hands of just such a selfish, opinionated, penny-pinching clergyman as the rector of Cullerne. The curate there is shown as a poor down-trodden creature: '...white-haired Mr Noot, whose zeal in his Master's cause had left him so

little opportunity for pushing his own interests that at sixty-five he was stranded as an underpaid curate in the backwater of Cullerne'.

As in *Moonfleet* the town and its surroundings are carefully evoked. Like Moonfleet village, Cullerne is on the coast and floods are caused by winds and tides. Descriptions of the church by day and night, and of its past history form an integral part of the plot. Just as Sharnall has the premonition about the man with the hammer, Westray is haunted by fear of the tower collapsing. He feels its weight '...like the incubus' and an imagined refrain from the over-burdened arches plays on his mind. The bells of the church have not been rung for many years for fear of damaging the tower's structure.

It is the foolish rector, urged by his wife, who precipitates the final tragedy by insisting that a peal be rung to celebrate his Lordship's wedding. This is a mere three hour peal - as nothing to that rung at Fenchurch St. Paul on New Year's Eve. As Trevor Hall observes, the description of the bells is not unlike that in *The Nine Tailors*. 'How they swung and rung and sung together, the little bells and the great bells, from Beata Maria, the sweet silver-voiced treble, to Taylor John, the deep-voiced tenor..' During the peal these ringers too have their casks of beer ready for refreshment. Westray stays in the tower, fearful 'of its safety during the peal. 'He crept deafened with the clangour down the stairs into the belfry.. He felt the tower sway restlessly under the swinging metal'. This is a more restrained passage than Dorothy's 'The whole tower was drenched and drunken with noise. It rocked and reeled with the reeling of the bells and staggered like a drunken man'. Hall states that both he and Barbara Reynolds have pointed out that '...great writers are inevitably inspired to some extent by those whose work they have admired'. The similarities in *The Nebuly Coat* and *The Nine Tailors* that Hall lists are essential to the plot in each case. They are: the role of the church building, the mystery concerned with a local family, a terrible disaster and, of course, the bells themselves. Similarly, the floods round the church, the missing emerald necklace and the cipher which leads to its recovery owe something to the plot of *Moonfleet*.

To conclude, I should like to point out some other similarities between the lives and characters of the two authors. Both were children of clergymen and drew on childhood memories for vignettes of family and parish life. Scenes in the rectory at Fenchurch St. Paul, like the clothing club room, are full of authentic detail. Falkner casts a humorous eye on the Dorcas Club where middle-class ladies make garments for lesser mortals. He and Dorothy were

widely read and made copious literary references, including light-hearted adaptations. Falkner's 'The bloater was left to waste its sweetness on the morning air' is worthy of Lord Peter. Both wrote poetry, including light-hearted rhymes in the novels. Humour is characteristic of both. More seriously, they were similarly imbued with a love of music and scholarship and had wide interests. Dorothy shows her knowledge of heraldry, one of Falkner's hobbies, in her collaboration with C.W. Scott-Giles to create *The Wimsey Family*. Neither were afraid to experiment with different literary forms. They also shared an appreciation of the dedication necessary to the creative artist. Falkner refers to 'the conscientious attention and sympathy that the creative artist must give to his own work'. Unlike Dorothy, Falkner was not deeply interested in the doctrine of the Church of England. Kenneth Warren, who wrote a brief account of his life *, says he was 'more attached to the fabric and the functions rather than to any carefully defined doctrine'. Like Lord Peter, he had a fine collection of rare books and manuscripts, which the University Librarian spent several years cataloguing in his spare time. Sadly, it was sold and dispersed after Falkner's death. The catalogue of the Sotheby's sale is in the University Library here.

Falkner was not such a consistently fine writer as Dorothy, but what he wrote is good and well-crafted. At his best he is a master of description and suspense. The passage in which a servant takes horses to market to sell for his master, then loses the money paid to him, is worthy of Thomas Hardy, who was a friend of Falkner's. I cannot better Dorothy's description of the fall of the church tower as 'one of the most beautiful and heartrending pieces in romantic fiction'. His literary output was a small part of his long and active life, but his three novels, at least, should not be forgotten. Two of them obviously impressed Dorothy L. Sayers and influenced her when she wrote that masterpiece, *The Nine Tailors*.

[* see the first article in this Journal]

The Dorothy L. Sayers Society was founded in 1976 to promote the study of the life, works and thoughts of this great scholar and writer, to encourage the performance of her plays and the publication of her books by and about her, to preserve original material for posterity and to provide assistance for researchers. It is a registered charity and has its own website: <http://www.sayers.org.uk/society.html> . The Dorothy L. Sayers Centre can be contacted by e:mail on centre@sayers.org.uk .