

John Meade Falkner M.P.?
George Robson

Over some months now I have been looking through dozens of letters written in JMF's own hand (apart from the three that he typed!) and which he sent to Lord Stuart Rendel from places as diverse as Durham, Newcastle, Manchester, Burford, Weymouth, Cannes, Rome and Constantinople.

The letters, alongside replies that Rendel wrote, are now stored as part of the substantial 'Rendel Papers' in the archives department of the Discovery Museum in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and they provide a wealth of material in our quest to better understand and appreciate JMF.

With JMF and Rendel being fellow directors of Armstrong Whitworth on Tyneside, a lot of the material found in the letters refer to business. But now and then more personal matters surface and I have extracted here part of a letter JMF wrote to Rendel on August 27th 1903 (ref. 31/7049). This was the final day of a fortnight's holiday JMF and his wife were taking, staying at 5, Brunswick Terrace, Weymouth (can we take it they would have revisited Wyke Regis and Fleet?)

The extract is rather mysterious, befitting an author/poet, and indicates that JMF's political views were in the process of transformation:

Somehow I look to you as Tennyson's:

*'I sit as God holding no form of (political) creed
but contemplating all.'* *

*And get you on a serene pedestal about whose feet indeed clouds
may drift, but whose head is always in the sunlight and far above
politics.*

*As for me politics interest me less and less. You have risen above
them; and I have perhaps fallen below them.*

*What there is of me is, I am afraid, leaving radicalism, and getting
encrusted in torism.*

*I might be ashamed of confessing these to you, but I am not a bit for
(however such circumstances may have labelled you a radical) you
are at heart and by constitution a conservative of conservatives,
with all the love of pleasant things and pleasant surroundings and*

the gracious predilection for dignified tranquillity that is in the best tory tradition.

[*from Tennyson's 'The Palace of Art' (1832), verse 54]

This letter dovetails into a section of a letter JMF wrote to Rendel from Constantinople almost twelve months later - August 4th 1904 (ref. 31/7053). We have here highlighted a significant dilemma JMF was facing at that time:

**STRICTLY PRIVATE AND FOR THE CARE OF ARTHUR
VERE ESQ.***

This is purely a personal matter, but I feel sure you will forgive my mentioning it to you, the more so because in some of its aspects the question is one that might appeal to you. I have been standing this last week at one of those definitive partings-of-the-way that come to us sometimes (but seldom I fancy) in life. They have asked me to stand for the Tyneside seat as the official Conservative candidate for the next general election. Sir Andrew has telegraphed me strongly asking me to do so. My own personal conceit prompted me to accept at once. It would have been unnatural if this had not been so. It is a big constituency, and though its history is Liberal, a Conservative just got in at the last election, and it is a good 'fighting' seat.

I thought the matter over very carefully, and came to the conclusion that if I went for this it would mean my giving up really active work at Elswick. Financially, I could have managed that and a political career must always, I suppose, exercise a certain attraction.

So for a day or two I wavered dreadfully, but at last I thought my work really lay with Elswick, and telegraphed to decline.

It is sure to give me some regrets in the future, but on the whole I think it is best so. Do you not?

I should much like to be fortified by your views after I get back to England, for my stay here is so uncertain that letters may probably not reach me any more at Constantinople.

[* a company secretary at Armstrong's]

This might strike us as an example of 'what might have been'. However, although JMF was right to state the Conservatives just won the Tyneside seat at the 1900 general election, the outcome in 1906 was to be very different:

1900
H C Smith (Con.) 7,093
J A Pease (Lib.) 6,730

1906
J M Robertson (Lib.) 11,496**
J Knott (Con.) 6,885

Conservative majority 363

Liberal majority 4,611

This happened amidst the 1906 Liberal landslide - the most remarkable reversal of electorate fortune up to that date. The Conservatives lost more than half their seats - holding 156 and losing 246. There was nationally a 10.3% swing away from the Conservatives and only three cabinet ministers held their seats. The national turn-out of 83% was a record which holds to this day.

It surely cannot be imagined that JMF's prominence in the constituency's Elswick Works and his contacts in Tyneside could have even remotely countered the Liberal surge, despite its candidate having no connections whatsoever to the region.

In his article 'John Meade Falkner and Sir Nicholas O'Connor' (Journal Volume 1 Number 1, 2000), Christopher Hawtree quotes from a further 1906 JMF letter: *We are in the thick of elections, I had another period of tremendous pressure to stand for Parliament: but I feel devoutly thankful that I did not. In theory it is pleasant enough, but in practice electioneering up here is terribly exacting and sordid, and the present election seems particularly personal and envenomed.*

So it seems JMF made the right decision to steer clear of attempting a political career. It certainly speaks volumes of his commitment to Armstrong's at a time when he had not yet been appointed Chairman. There is more evidence of this single-mindedness in statements found within other letters from JMF to Rendel, examples being:

July 10th 1904 (from Constantinople): *The game is being played here in the present instance for a large stake: and Turkey is an extensive market which is opening when others are closing. So I feel it my duty to see things through and may be here as much as a fortnight longer.* (ref. 31/7051)

February 1st 1905 (from Cannes): *I shall always devote myself absolutely to the firm's business* (ref. 31/7055)

November 18th 1908 (from Elswick, Newcastle): *Elswick is everything to me so long as I remain at Elswick* (ref. DF/NOB/3/2/2)

March 7th 1910 (from Constantinople): *Whatever foolishnesses I may commit (and no-one knows better than I how many these are), I have only the same object as you have - the good of the firm. My ways of seeking it may be different ways from yours, but in spirit we mean to be travelling the same road* (ref. 31/7056)
(the underlining is JMF's)

Further, as reported in the 2000 **Journal**, Christopher Hawtree found this within a JMF letter:

Elswick's spell has fallen irresistibly upon me, and I am devoted to her, soul and body, for she makes calls on our bodies too. No one except those at Elswick know the attraction of her, the mother that bred us, and fed us.

Whilst we may speculate as to what calibre of M.P. JMF would have been, I am confident fellow Society members will agree that Armstrong Whitworth, the University of Durham, Durham Cathedral, the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Company, the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Company and many other organisations and individuals would have been much the poorer had JMF taken the other route at that 1903 'parting-of-the-way' and had the political climate of that time been different.

****John Mackinnon Robertson** (1856-1933) was a prolific journalist and a passionate advocate of rationalism and secularism. Having unsuccessfully fought the Northampton seat as an independent radical Liberal in 1895, he later achieved electoral success in the north-east, serving as the Tyneside member of parliament from 1906 until 1918. His political radicalism had developed in the 1880s and 1890s, during which he was an active follower of the secularist leader Charles Bradlaugh - firstly in Edinburgh then later in London. An advocate of the Jesus-Myth theory, Robertson wrote ten books arguing strongly against the historicity of Jesus. These books include 'The Baconian Heresy of Confutation' (1913), 'The Shakespeare Canon' (1922), which are both available through the booksellers *Alibris*, and 'The History of Freethought in the Nineteenth Century' (1929) which may be purchased through *Amazon*.