

“Shadow over Corfe”: a consideration of J. Meade
Falkner’s Poem *Corfe Castle*
Peter Davey

The summer night is calm and bright,
Like one long, long ago,
When the soft mist hung silver-wreathed
Over the brook below.

The heavy flag against the mast
Flapped slowly to and fro,
The donjon-keep loomed huge and vast
Against the sunset glow.

The warder on the battlements
Still paced his weary round;
From early morn he heard the horn
And the baying of the hound.

And far below in Wareham Chase
Anon he could descry
The coat of green and spear-head sheen,
Where the royal hunt went by.

But ere the sound of compline bell
The horn and hunt were stay’d,
And silence fell on hill and dell
And bosky forest glade.

The sun had left the castle roofs,
The west was still aglow;
He heard the sound of horses hoofs
Beating the road below.

From out the valley mist he came,
And at the gateway stood;
The western sky was all aflame
With streaks of crimson blood.

A long loud blast of horn he blew,
The warder knew the sound,

The broidered hunting coat he knew,
With golden baldric bound.
"Ho, porter!" At the gate he cried,
"Ho, warder mine, what cheer!
Go call the noble dame Elfride,
Tell her the king is here.

Bring water for my weary steed,
The evening falleth cool,
And I will drink a cup of mead
Before I ride to Poole."

Down the great staircase came the dame,
And at the gateway stood;
The western sky was all aflame
With streaks of crimson blood.

They brought him water for his steed,
A royal drink they brought,
She reached him up the cup of mead,
With gold and jewels wrought.

He bent him from his saddle bow,
His reins were hanging slack,
And as he quaff'd the long cool draught
One smote him in the back.

A traitor knave her gold had paid
To do that deed of sin,
'Twixt shoulder-blade and shoulder-blade
He drave the dagger in.

The warder on the castle roofs,
That evening calm and still,
Heard the wild sound of frightened hoofs
Go clattering down the hill.

One moment through the dusk he spied,
A fearful sight to see,
A frightened horse, and at his side
A man dragged heavily.

A moment and the fog-wreath white
Hid horse and man from view,
And faint and fainter down the night
The clattering horse-hoofs grew.

* * * *

From eastward inky clouds there came,
The thunder's sullen brood,
But still the west was all aflame
With streaks of crimson blood.

On Corfe-gate through that awful night
The rain and thunder brake,
Beneath the levin's dazzling light
The king-tower seemed to quake.

The warder on the battlements
Still paced his weary round;
Amid the storm a ghastly form
He saw in cere-cloth bound.

He heard the cry of murdered men
Borne upward on the air,
And, fearful, crossed himself again
And muttered o'er a prayer.

* * * *

The summer morn broke bright and chill,
The thunder's wrath was spent,
The oaks in Wareham Chase were still,
The bracken rain-besprent.

The swineherd in the morning found
[A fearful sight to see]
A weary steed, and on the ground,
His foot in tangled stirrup bound,
A corpse dragged heavily.
The blood was matted in his hair,
The mire was on his face,
But still Death left his features fair,
Nor marred his kingly grace.

They took him to the Minster church,
Fit church for royal grave,
About the knell of compline bell
They bore him up the nave.

With silent tread the bearers came
And at the altar stood,
The western windows were aflame
With streaks of crimson blood.

They laid him in the chancel floor
Beside the northern wall;
And ever on Barthelmy's night
The sunset rays of westerling light
Through painted windows ruby-bright
Across his gravestone fall.

And still on St. Barthelmy's Eve
In Corfe, so runs the tale,
They hear unearthly voices grieve
And death-lights wander pale.

And oft on Wareham Moor that night
The lone belated hind
Hears the wild beat of horse's feet
Borne madly down the wind.

Sweet Mary, pray thy Son for grace,
Who suffered here below,
To loose them from their torment-place,
The souls that suffer so.

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JMF apparently said of himself that he belonged to the Middle Ages but had been born at the wrong time. This attitude of mind was nurtured in the home through contact with his grandfather's library and his father's passion for Gothic architecture. When he became a young man, this love of antiquity grew in his study of church history, both the architecture and the manuscripts. Then in his final years, after a lifetime of such study, he was eminently qualified to become Honorary Reader in Palaeography at Durham University, the ultimate recondite pursuit.

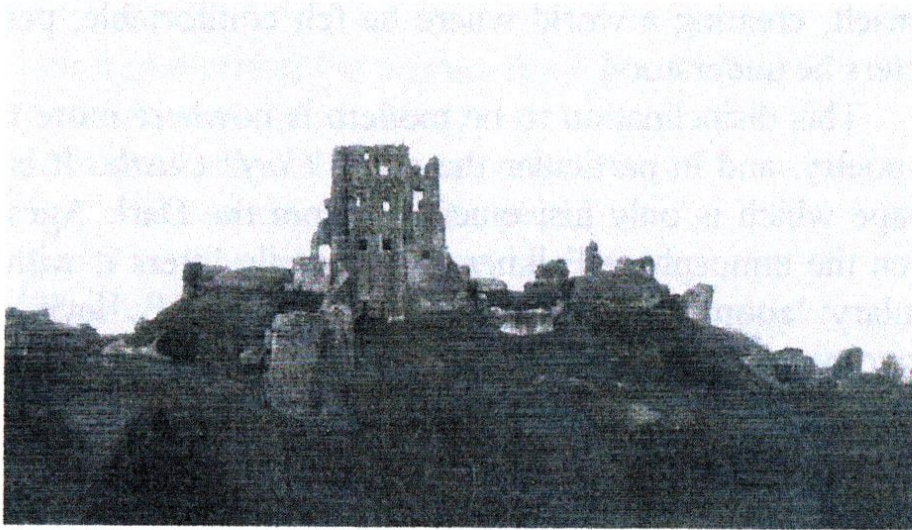
It is not surprising, therefore, that all his fiction is set in the past and is suffused throughout with the spirit of those times. This was his particular genius, that he could make that world so convincing. He never attempted to be a 'modern' writer. He wrote for himself, creating a world where he felt comfortable, peopled by characters he understood.

This disinclination to be modern is nowhere more true than in his poetry, and in particular the poem *Corfe Castle*. It is set in a landscape which is only just emerging from the Dark Ages, and to heighten the atmosphere Falkner unashamedly litters it with antique vocabulary: 'anon', 'descry', 'ere', 'quaff'd', 'spied', 'levin', 'twixt', even two anachronistic tenses - 'brake' and 'drave'. For his subject matter he has chosen the assassination of Edward the Martyr at Corfe in 978 AD. But is this writer who is so fastidious with language and who grew up in Dorset equally fastidious about historical fact, or was he, working at his home in the north, basing it principally on legend? Furthermore, was he attempting anything more than the dramatization of an event in the dim past? We may find that it contains some enigmatic elements. (Numbers in brackets will refer to the stanzas in this 30-stanza poem.)

There are three aspects of the poem I should like to consider, beginning with history and legend. Historically, the poet gets off to a shaky start, placing the event in the summer [1 and 22]. Edward's murder took place in wintertime - March 18th to be exact. The King was said to be hunting with hounds in Wareham Chase, later referred to as Wareham Moor. In the Isle of Purbeck this wild hunting ground of the Saxon kings was also known as the Royal Warren. There were many deer within its dense forests of oak which grew there until the reign of Henry III. JMF's picture of the castle at Corfe is one, the elements of which we can easily recognize - the donjon keep [2], the battlements [3], the gateway [7], the great staircase [11], the king-tower [19].

The problem is that in the year 978 AD the castle had not been built. George Banks, whose family owned the castle at the time of the Civil War, in his book *The Story of Corfe Castle*, published 1853, makes a claim for there being a single strong tower on the summit of the hill built by King Alfred, but he has absolutely no evidence for this. The most ancient part of the ruined structure which remains today is a herringbone wall which was part of the Old Hall dating from about the time of the Norman Conquest. The assassination was said to have taken place at Corvesgate - or Corfe Gate - the name given to the pass through the hills at the village of

Corfe. Edward was visiting a lodge ['hospicium'] on the great manor of Kingston [the 'ton' of the king] where he knew his step-mother, Ælfthryth, and his half-brother, Æthelred, to be.



Falkner cannot be blamed for using accounts of Edward's death which were available to him. George Banks' description includes some of the miraculous incidents surrounding the affair which eventually led to Edward's becoming a saint. These formed part of the monastic histories written a hundred years after the event. Thomas Bond, in his history, written in 1883, is more sceptical of the miraculous element, but does not question the story of the wicked stepmother. Not until we read a contemporary account - Cecil Cullingford's *History of Dorset* - do we find that 'no concrete evidence has survived to implicate the beautiful Ælfthryth.

Falkner uses the accepted legend because it has the right ingredients of gothic horror to sustain the atmosphere he wants. The innocent young king is hunting in the woods and becomes separated from his companions. He remembers his brother and stepmother are nearby and decides to visit them. While requesting refreshment, he is stabbed to death by some of the Queen's courtiers. This is the culmination of a plot hatched by Ælfthryth - 'her gold had paid' [14] - to see her own son, Æthelred, placed on the throne.

For the latest word on the story, I recommend Barbara Yorke's fascinating account - *Edward, King and Martyr: A Saxon Murder Mystery* - in *Studies in the early history of Shaftesbury Abbey*. Her work is based on the earliest text by Byrhtferth. From this we learn that Edward used to abuse and beat his own attendants, and that Ælfthryth began her campaign to have him removed in favour of her own son soon after the death of her husband. She was not alone. A civil war had broken out between the ruling families

who held power, and Ælfthryth's justification was that, although her son was younger, he was superior by birth as Edward had been conceived before his parents had been consecrated as king and queen. So although she wanted Edward removed, there was a distinct political faction ready and waiting to perform the act.

To return to the poem. 'They took him to the Minster church' [25]. In the poem this takes place the day after the murder. In fact, it was about a year later that Edward's body was removed to Wareham, but the church of Lady St. Mary at Wareham is not the church in the poem. At one time there were many minsters - ['mynster' = the church of a monastery] - with a college of priests, though in most cases this name has since been dropped. St. Mary's was in fact a minster, but the description of the burial in the poem does not fit the facts. 'They laid him in the chancel floor / Beside the northern wall' [27] writes Falkner, but he is obviously thinking of the Abbey at Shaftesbury where the body was subsequently taken. But even here the poet, no doubt inadvertently, telescopes the facts. According to Barbara Yorke, Edward was moved to Shaftesbury in 979, but he was buried in the churchyard. It was not until 20 June 1001, after a subtle political and spiritual process ending in Edward's being recognized a saint, thereby exonerating those responsible for his murder, that the body - [if it really was his body!] - was laid to rest within the Abbey. Shaftesbury Abbey may have been a minster at this time, but no one can say for sure.

The second aspect of the poem I want to examine concerns what happens after the murder. Four times Falkner uses the image of the western sky being 'all aflame / With streaks of crimson blood'. What is he doing if not laying on the gothic atmosphere, thick and dark? There is another image, Miltonic in character - 'The thunder's sullen brood' [18], and then, when we reach stanza 20, there are echoes of the ghost scene from *Hamlet*:

Amid the storm a ghastly form
He saw in cere-cloth bound.

He heard the cry of murdered men
Borne upward on the air. [21]

There is no indication who these murdered men might be. We seem to have moved beyond the realm of history. Maybe it is time to reflect that we are reading lines from the author of *The Lost Stradivarius* and *A Midsummer Night's Marriage*, a master of the supernatural tale. On one level *Corfe Castle* is a ghost story. Later we hear that 'on St. Barthelmy's Eve / In Corfe... They hear

unearthly voices grieve / And death-lights wander pale'. After extensive searching in the main works on Dorset folklore, I have to say there is no reference to this at all. However, it did occur to me that the pale, wandering lights were reminiscent of the churchyard at Moonfleet where 'Blackbeard might be seen with an old-fashioned lantern digging for treasure'. This is Dorset, after all! Falkner's final flourish is the ghost horse -

The lone belated hind
Hears the wild beat of horse's feet
Borne madly down the wind. [29]

- leading, in the last stanza, to a solemn, quasi-religious plea for redemption for 'The souls who suffer so'... whoever they may be.

This seems to be linked to what I consider the enigma of the poem, the third aspect which calls for some sort of clarification. Falkner refers to 'Barthelmy's night' [27] and 'St. Barthelmy's Eve' [28]. St. Bartholomew is the patron saint of tanners [because he was flayed] and his feast day is August 24th. There appears to be no connection between him, nor the date, with Dorset folklore. Then there is the question of why JMF chose the French form of the name, slightly truncated. The Eve of St. Barthélemy is infamous in the history of France as being the start of a massacre of the Protestants by the Catholics which began in Paris before spreading throughout the country, and which lasted for six weeks. Tens of thousands were slaughtered. It was one episode in a much longer period of religious strife, but it happened in 1572. Again, one has to ask, what does an event which took place in 1572 have to do with Dorset and the death of Edward the Martyr in 978?

I feel I am clutching at straws here. The massacre which began on the Eve of St. Barthélemy was instigated by Catherine de Medicis. She had become queen in 1533 on marrying Henri II. When he died in 1559, she became Regent. When her eldest son died, she continued as Regent until her second son, Charles, was old enough to assume power. He was King at the time of the Massacre. Subsequently, Catherine's third son, Henri III, became King, and she died only seven months before him. It is said of Catherine de Medicis that she had but one politic: to keep her sons on the throne.

It is just possible that JMF is drawing some kind of parallel between Catherine and Ælfthryth, who had become queen to Edgar, and who then wanted to see her son, Æthelred, proclaimed King. She would also have been Regent as he was only twelve years old. But if this is so, it does suggest a rather bizarre attitude to history on the part of the author.