Pernicious nonsense? *Moonfleet* by J. Meade Falkner

Andrew Stibbs

Moonfleet is a book I have bought, recommended, and read with a whole class. Yet mention of it at a meeting of teachers discussing useful literature provoked cries of 'pernicious nonsense'.

You could call it nonsense because it deals in outdated, unlikely, and over-used situations like incarcerations, escapes, and melodramatic reversals of fortune. You could call it pernicious because it endorses a loving relationship between a boy and a man, because it appears to glorify lawbreaking and encourage avarice, because it titillates the reader with postponed climaxes, or because it incorporates a lot of womb symbolism. But then *King Lear* deals in outdated, unlikely and over-used situations like beggared nobles, disguises, storms, and melodramatic reversals of fortune, and you could say that, as well as 'perniciously' propounding a metaphysic incredible to today's rational mind, it endorses a father of bastards, punishes virtue, titillates with sensational violence, and incorporates a lot of penis symbolism. The complaints are as inappropriate as the comparison.

Moonfleet has many stock features of successful children's books. It is about characters who attractively break the law (Ratsey takes God's order to the Israelites to cheat the Egyptians as permission to smuggle). Their lawbreaking seems harmless, for though Cracky Jones and Magistrate Maskew die as a result of it, the one was mad and regretted it and the other bad and deserved it. John's father, we are told, was, like the hero Elzevir Block, an 'honest smuggler'. The book has running through it a sexless boy-girl attachment which allows a painless empathy, devoid as it seems to be of responsibility or challenge, and reinforced by separation, anticipation, and pathetic incidents like the funeral of Grace's father. The story has many dramatic changes of fortune, like the rescue from the vault, the loss of the inn, the escape up the cliff, the solving of the riddle, the loss of the diamond, the release from the slave ship, and Aldobrand's will, events which, if sensational, are all plausible in themselves and are spread over the life of an adventurous boy living in a lively time and place. Above all, it is the story of an adolescent freed from parental bonds without being free of lovable elders. One compares him with Jim Hawkins, Huckleberry Finn, or the children in *Gumble's Yard* or *The Silver Sword*.

Another feature of *Moonfleet*, familiar in children's books (like Alan Garner's) is its secure basis in an interesting place. This is worth demonstrating in more detail. Moonfleet, the village, has a church, a beach, a ghost, nearby cliffs, and a history, all of which the author (a palaeographer) can use both for making adventures and, eventually, for making implicit assertions about values. And, of course, it has the sea, embodiment of danger, escape, death, and so on. The locale is important enough to be eponymous. With the 'incidental' details of the exploits of lander Jordan, the sins of the Mohunes, and past wrecks, there is an authenticating plethora of names, places and dates. A description such as the following, of the churchyard after a flood, convinces the reader that the author knows what he is writing about, reinforces the boy-narrator's persona, and suspends disbelief.

> *There were streamers of seaweed tangled about the very tombstones, and against the outside of the churchyard wall was piled up a great bank of it, from which came a salt rancid smell like a guillemot's egg that is always in the air after a southwesterly gale has strewn the shore with wrack...the swampy meadows (were) strewn with drowned shrew-mice and moles.*

The characters are rooted in this place in more than a metaphorical sense (though that applies too - Elzevir's back has been as 'straight as the massive stubborn pillars in old Moonfleet church' and his face in death is 'as smooth and mellow-white as the alabaster figures in Moonfleet church'. What brings John and Elzevir back to Moonfleet beach after their misguided wanderings is more than a storyteller's coincidence. Moonfleet village is an omnipresent state of society, ordered, tolerant and continuous, acting as a criticism of John's quest. The social ideal is a liberal-conservative one of rootedness in 'one dear perpetual place' and it is significant that the goal of the plot is not a discovery but a return, to life with children and Grace and a Manor House, with private charity, leisure, and a blind eye for smuggling, in a village purged of the evil zeals of Maskew and Aunt Jane.

Stock characteristics might explain the book's popularity, but not its quality, and there is more to *Moonfleet* than its convent-

ions, and indeed more to *Moonfleet's* conventions than their conventionality. Each of the superficially 'formula' elements listed above has, as I have suggested in the case of the exploitation of locale, a contribution to make to the book's depth. It is an honest and serious book: if some of its features seem familiar, it is because they are general truths, not because they are clichés.

The language is difficult (it was published in 1898) but, if it seems pompous sometimes, it is vivid often. When it matters, there is a striking descriptive accuracy and particularity. The passage about the churchyard is an example. Falkner has a marvellous ability to convey 'what it must have been like'. The silence of a summer's day is indicated by John's hearing the drumming of turnips flung in a cart on the hillside half a mile away, the cold of a winter's night by the crisp sound of grass under his feet, the imminence of bad weather by his observation of rooks 'pitch-falling'. Much of this 'local colour' has a structural function. The description of the scene in Carisbrooke Castle is a prefiguring of the fate John is bringing on himself by going there, and the colourlessness and greyness of the dawn landscape at Hoar Head is that of the face of the victim Maskew and that of John's probable future at that moment. The characterisation is similarly vivid, with Ratsey's constant excuses for taking liquor and Maskew's bargain hunting and 'grey eyes that could pierce a millstone if there was a guinea of the far side of it'.

Falkner does not clog the narrative with 'fine writing' or descriptive digressions. When he does appear to clog, it is with 'philosophical' observations, though some of these have point in retrospect, like the embarrassing 'Ah, sweet boyhood, how eager are we as boys to be quit of thee, with what regret do we look back on thee before our man's race is half-way run!' At key points, he secures the memorability of what he describes by realistic detail, just as John, in heightened mood at a crucial moment, fixes the details of Aldobrand's garden in his head. Examples are the description of the parchment bag containing the newly found diamond as 'like those dried fish-eggs cast up on the beach that children call shepherds' purses', the noise as the turnkey falls down the well 'like a coconut being broken on a pavement', or the 'little red hole', drilled successively in Maskew's forehead by one of his soldiers' guns, in John's memory by its significance for his future, and in our consciousness by that simple, vivid phrase. The appearance of the soldiers on the clifftops, an event which saves Elzevir from murder, kills Maskew and makes exiles of the hero and narrator, is described thus:

The sky behind them was pink flushed with the keenest light of the young day, and they stood out against it sharp cut and black as the silhouette of my mother that used to hang up by the parlour chimney. They were soldiers, and I knew the tall mitre caps of the 13th, and saw the shafts of light from the sunrise come flashing round their bodies, and glance off the barrels of their matchlocks.

The language, far from being a drawback, is the book's strength.

The book has exciting, climactic incidents (making it especially suitable for an episodic, edited presentation to a class) - the violation of the corpse, the climbing of the zigzag, the fight above the well, the fight for life with the surf on the beach. Such incidents, each realised with almost obsessive detail (like the piece of skin uniting the hairs of Blackbeard's torn-off beard, or the clean patch it has left on his discoloured grave-clothes), stay fixed in the memory. Some of them may have more than a narrative function. Consider how John descends into the earth to find the diamond, twice, and solves its riddle underground, and how Elzevir first saves him by carrying him up a steep, narrow and twisting path as a burden on his back.

The organisation of the suspense in these incidents, as when in the wellhouse fight the point blank bullet hits the chain, the turnkey staggers over the parapet, Elzevir catches him by the belt, and the belt breaks, are examples of Falkner's craft.

The book titillates: it is a sort of legitimate pornography of the adventure urge. Often, when he breaks off for his digressions, it is immediately before a prepared climax, when both the digression will be the more noted and the climax more anticipated and enjoyed for its postponement. When John hears the footsteps approaching him as he lies helpless in his cave-sanctuary, he digresses on how a new noise, however faint, is noted in the loudest hubbub, and when he sees the '**Y**' on the well wall he tells how one is similarly hypersensitive to one's own name. Such observations strike me as true and novel, marks of a 'psychological insight' the author displays elsewhere in his account of John's inexplicable guilt at discovering the smugglers at the church wall, of the Moonfleeters' ambivalent attitude to wrecks which both take life and bring wealth, and of his

reactions (both his 'stream of consciousness' and his boyish retrieval of the fish to cook) to Maskew's assault on Glennie with a fish in the schoolroom. It is no coincidence that the necessary details of 'Compton's Toss' are given just before the climax of the death struggle at the well top. The gradual revelation of Elzevir's death is like Charlotte Bronte's of Rochester's survival, in reverse. But the climaxes come. Though he titillates, Falkner, unlike the pornographer, delivers the goods. I shall give two other examples of ways in which he binds and unites the complex sequence of adventures. The first is his use of 'time bombs'. By these I mean early incidents and remarks, apparently irrelevant but sufficiently stressed to suggest they are worth noting, which come home later. They give significance (raising suspicion with their detail) to material which otherwise might seem only preparatory to narrative, and they suggest (correctly, I think) that the collection of adventures has a less arbitrary unity than that of happening to a single boy. Examples are the reading of *Aladdin* at his aunt's which he remembers usefully in the well, Ratsey's pedantic knowledge of the psalms which comes in useful for solving the riddle, or remarks like 'the blood went pounding round and round in my head, as it did once afterwards when I was fighting with the sea and near drowned'.

The second way he unites the story is by repetition of superficially trivial elements which keep early events in the memory as later ones are encountered, providing resonance. This is a sort of reverse of the 'prefiguring' technique described above. Both provide a web of cross references uniting strongly directed narrative. Three examples will illustrate this. The blood trickle on the condemned Maskew's face reminds John (the point is made explicitly) of that on Parson Glennie's face when Maskew had assaulted him. The Mohune's '**Y**' emblem recurs - as theme of Glennie's (apposite) sermon, sign of John's and Elzevir's home and smuggler's den, clue to the treasure, and brand of John's reduction to slavery and responsibility to lift the Mohune curse. That it is the mark of Cain is characteristically hinted by a digression on a picture of Cain and the use of the word 'wander' - and that brand on Elzevir is bleached out when he arrives dead and sanctified on his home beach. Third, there are the candles: from the carving of Elzevir's murdered son's tombstone at the beginning, to the death of Elzevir at the end, many of the pivots of the plot are in darkness and therefore bring in candles. It is a candle that signifies to John that there is a ghost in the churchyard, Blackbeard's coffin, beard, riddle and, finally, diamond,

are all found by candlelight, and the riddle is solved by candlelight. But candles are used in daylight too, to time the auction by which Maskew throws Elzevir out of his home and livelihood and to time the last moments of life Elzevir allows to Maskew in his planned revenge. A candle tests the gas down the well where the diamond is hidden, and again its light means life and its extinction death. Most strikingly, a candle is 'Maskew's Match', the sign of, first, Maskew's avarice, second, Grace's faith, and the light by which John's life is saved and whose preservation has meant the continuance of life and hope.

In each of these examples of 'superficially trivial elements' there is more going on, it seems to me, than mere 'craft', than a weaving of gratuitous links. The first link, of blood trickles, has a moralising function - it emphasises retribution. The second, the '**Y**', is an emblem of the book's moral diagram, and the third, the candle, could be a symbol of knowledge, then life, then faith (possibly a significant sequence).

I think the book is honest, for all its romantic fantasy-fulfilment, for all the irony (to which I have suggested there is more than coincidence) of the final wreck's being on Moonfleet beach, and for all the fortuitous agencies of the 'happy ending' (which may indeed be supernatural too, since Aldobrand's death hallucinations suggest the spirit of Blackbeard). The events and feelings of the book are true to life. Just as the mysteries (the noises from the vault and the ghost) and happy accidents (the last landing's anticipation of Maskew's raid because of a freak tide) have eventually rational explanations, so do John's near miraculous escapes. The explanation is often Elzevir's great, but still fallible, strength, and his love and loyalty. Throughout the book, the main characters' lot is suffering - neither treasure hunting nor smuggling is glamorised. Elzevir loses his son, his home, his freedom and finally his life. John undergoes vicissitudes like Bunyan's Christian, and it is only when he has lost all hope that he is saved. The complexity of moral judgement and the relativity of virtue are presented in the context of John's growing understanding and tolerance - through his affection for Ratsey's weaknesses, his growing appreciation of his adopted father's, Elzevir's, grimness, and his traumatic compassion for Maskew before Maskew's death.

The ideal state depicted at the end, with the lord of the manor winking at the smuggling, the locals boozing in the traditional inn, and Ratsey, head of the Bedesmen 'gathered in the fulness of

Years', seems sentimental to me, and I think it perhaps is symptomatic of some failure to grow up (on the author's part) that the final utopia is so like John's fantasy of the future as he seeks the diamond, as a boy:

> *I would make myself the greatest man in Moon-Fleet, richer even than Mr Maskew, and build a stone house in the sea meadows with a good prospect of the sea, and marry Grace Maskew, and live happily, and fish.*

Socially, that is nostalgia for a pre-industrial society. Nevertheless, the hard realities of life are faced. John, though he has grown to see that his aunt meant well, still cannot grieve at her death. It is only when he has suffered physical and moral degradation that he gets the wealth he is now in a (moral) position to use well. The violence (the turnkey's or Maskew's death) is *pointfully*, not gratuitously, horrific. Such realism earns the author the right to kill off his hero without a sense of sentimentality. It is against a background of the 'dance on air' at Dorchester Jail, or David Block's corpse on the recurrent trestle table at the inn, in short against the cruelty of the law, that we must see the apparent sentimental equation of the smugglers' law-breaking with robust commonsense and liveliness. After all, the father of Ratsey, the most sentimentally portrayed character, died of cold from standing in a river to watch a smuggler hang.

Honesty about the nature of life and fortune, and the context in which it seems appropriate to discuss some of the book's techniques, leads me to call the book serious, and to discuss it as a novel, rather than as a children's adventure. It has underlying moral concerns, even if they are not consistent or clearly worked out. The 'rootedness' mentioned above is an example.

Then again, Falkner was a clergyman's son, and the book can be seen in terms of Christian ethics, even if the good life it eventually arrives at is that of a comfortable country parson rather than that of a saint. Take wealth: whether or not it is easier for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven is a concern of the book. John enters his heaven (as lord of the manor) unburdened of the cursed Mohune wealth (which had been accumulated by treachery, has come to John through luck, and is exorcised by being used for charity) but blessed with the Maskew wealth. The Maskew wealth is only slightly less

ill-gotten (presumably) than the Mohune wealth (it is too ill-gotten to take Maskew to heaven), but it has come to John through his love for Grace Maskew. The needle's eye blocks only the camel loaded with stolen goods. Good news for the Established Church.

Then there is the choice of way of life, symbolised, as the parson points out in his sermon, in the fork of the Mohune's cross-pall. John follows the steep, indirect and difficult way to his heaven, just as, thanks to Elzevir, he escapes up the zigzag where he who looks aside must surely die. But it is not for want of trying to take the broad straight arm of instant wealth that leads to hell. What saves John? Unless luck is the sign of grace, it is not grace (for that - she - is his reward, not his means), but fortune, faith, and Elzevir. The path of avarice often leads John downhill (into the vault, the well, the slave ship's hold) and it is always Elzevir who saves John and brings him up the difficult path again. It is Elzevir who stays with John, saves him, warns him against the diamond and finally dies for him. The analogy with Christ is suggested by Elzevir's Biblical speech and ways in which he is described, as in the 'Greater love...' text on his tombstone. If Elzevir is the saviour, John is the saved, and salvation, in the book, is gaining all by losing all, and a happiness from integrity and content, not wealth and aspiration, and a love which transcends poverty, disgrace and death.

Life is a journey in the story. As in *Pilgrim's Progress*, some of the incidents (the well) and scenes (the prison) have an allegorical flavour, though not to the same extent, and the characters don't. A burden is carried and lost and then a mark (though it is Elzevir who carries the burden and Cain's mark that is put on them). There is none of Bunyan's puritanism or determinism (the central figure of *Moonfleet* must change, like Everyman, but not like Christian) and the goal is home, not heaven, so far as those two are not equated. But the idea of life as a journey through hazards and needing integrity and faith, is there.

John keeps coming back to the text on the backgammon board in Elzevir's inn: 'As in life, so in a game of hazard, skill will make something of the worst of throws.' Elzevir's skill and strength and the faith between him and John, preserve John through the worst of life's throws. It is stressed that the people of Moonfleet make the best of bad throws by exploiting the wrecks they nevertheless deplore - a sort of reverently opportunistic attitude to life. And fortune is the leading determinant of life's course - as it must have been to eighteenth century sailors and smugglers. The 'melodramatic

reversals of fortune' are thus part of a view of life rather than a writer's trick.

The book is an assertion of the power of faith and love against that of avarice. Elzevir's love saves John's life at the cost of his own, and Grace's love and faith help John's return, give him something to return to, transcend his fall in station, to a wanted man then a branded slave, and are a recurrent criticism, throughout his youthful adventures, of his lust for wealth and his hatred of Maskew. The story's villain's, Maskew, Aldobrand and the turnkey, are motivated by avarice and the vice is shown to be its own punishment. What has put the curse on the diamond is Blackbeard's avarice and failure to keep faith. In contrast, the book's sympathetic personalities are all characterised by faithfulness, despite the involvement of some of them in smuggling and the deceptions practised to get and sell the diamond (all of which ultimately cause trouble). John and Grace keep faith with their childish love, and Ratsey with his 'wanted' friends, Glennie with his integrity when he speaks out against Maskew, and Elzevir with John's first claim to the diamond and his decision to pursue it. John reflects that Blackbeard had 'sold his honour...for a bit of flashing stone.' John loses his 'honour' in a social sense, which is why he thinks Grace will not marry him, but never in the sense that Blackbeard lost his. It is an appropriate irony that John's inexpedient truthfulness to Aldobrand about his name is the agent of tracing him as the true owner of the diamond. Perhaps it is a less appropriate one that Maskew's treachery should earn his own men's bullet, thus sparing Elzevir from the execution - a coldblooded vengeance which Elzevir would have reluctantly gone through with in order to keep faith with those friends whose lives would be jeopardised by Maskew's survival.

Yet faith and love do not necessarily bring their own reward on earth. They do for the narrator, but not for the hero. As Glennie's verses on David's tomb, which provoked Maskew's assault, point out: the wicked should repent at the last (as Blackbeard, Maskew and Aldobrand do) because the final arbiter is God's post mortem judgement. The book retains the character of an illustration to the sermon on the Mohune's cross-pall's broad and narrow paths. *Moonfleet* is an adventure, a slice of life, and a complex fable on the conflict of faith and avarice and the pursuit of the two paths. The message is that one comes back to childhood's happiness by the bearing of misfortune, by luck, and by faith and love, even when hope has been lost.