

*“A dream – The first thing that has made my heart pound”  
(Nikolaus Pevsner)*

George Robson

Tyneside was to be the place of work for JMF for thirty-five years during which, and also in his retirement years, he chose to live in a city of which he wrote: *No city in England can show the equal of this group of buildings – the grim castle, the superb Cathedral- set up on a crag above the river.* After having lived on Tyneside at Jesmond Dene House or in lodgings, in either 1892 or 1893 he found new lodgings at number 42 South Street (also known as *Abbey View*), Durham City, where he remained for almost eight years. To this day the doors of the upper rooms of the house display room numbers and it was in one of these rooms that JMF wrote his admired novels *The Lost Stradivarius* and *Moonfleet*.



***The Divinity House***

In the Spring of 1899 Falkner seized the opportunity to purchase a house which was to remain his home for the rest of his life. At the time he wrote to colleague and friend Stuart Rendel I have been lucky enough to get what I think is a most delightful old house in

Durham. Its name also pleases me – *The Divinity House*. The house, now the University Music School, lies at the south-western end of Palace Green – a large open space which had been cleared of slum buildings around 1100 – and no more than one hundred yards away from the great north door of the cathedral. At the time this was the only private residence on Palace Green. Westwards the house looked down over a narrow band of trees steeply down to the River Wear and across to where he had formerly lived at South Street. To the north and across a little lane known as Windy Gap JMF had his gardens and a stone's throw beyond that rose the forbidding but impressive Durham Castle.

Each workday JMF travelled to and from Elswick by train. Elswick's huge workshops stretching along the polluted River Tyne with noise, dust and incessant but inevitable materialistic preoccupations contrasted hugely with his evening returns to the gentility and serenity of his adopted home town, dominated by its glorious cathedral standing high up on its crag.



JMF's links, involvements and affection for with the cathedral gradually grew. On Sundays he usually attended Morning Service, remaining in place for the organ voluntary. When at home he began to attend the weekday

services and became a familiar figure amongst the afternoon congregations. He maintained the cathedral to be the most impressive church in the world and would regularly stand within the west front and survey the long great nave, past pillar after pillar of its huge supports down to the screen and the choir beyond. And above that the glory and majesty of the rose window.

JMF possessed a lifelong impish sense of humour of which a number of examples are known. On one occasion he took into the Elswick offices a jar containing a worm and some lettuce leaves. He announced that this was a rare example of a bookworm and many fell for the deception. Another example of his vivid imaginings is demonstrated in that he opined that, as he sat in the stillness of the cathedral, he could scent the incense that had imbued the pillars during the centuries of the monks' residence. This all inspired him to the extent that he wrote a poem to mark the passing of the year in 1911. On 30th December that year *The Spectator* published a work to both mark the passing of the year and as an evocation of the cathedral:

### **Silvesterabend**

The mists are gathering in the nave,  
They creep from bay to bay,  
Column and arch and architrave  
Fade in the dusk away.

The mists are gathering in the nave,  
The choir lights struggle dim,  
The year is tottering to its grave,  
We sing a funeral hymn...

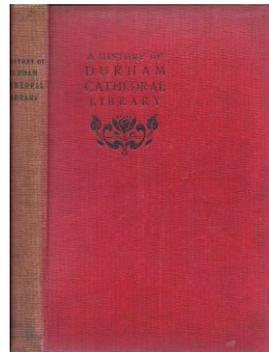
JMF's involvement with the cathedral included associating with the cathedral organists and choirmasters. For some years he knew and associated with Philip Armes and later formed a close bond with Armes' successor Arnold Culley, with whom he worked on the production of *Ad Majorem* Psalter. (see JMF Society Journal number 19, July 2018).

Another close associate of JMF was Edward Vazeille Stocks who was the university's librarian from 1901 until 1934. There was much collaboration between the cathedral and the university libraries. JMF and his wife were often guests at the Stocks' home at Quarry

Heads and the friendship matured also at *The Divinity House* where Stocks catalogued and updated JMF's ever-expanding library.

Late in 1921, nearly a year after he gave up the chairmanship of the company, JMF was invited to help the cathedral and was appointed as Honorary Librarian. In a letter to John Noble he wrote: *The Chapter here who are rather in difficulties about their library have asked me to be Honorary Librarian with no conditions but merely to give a general oversight. I could not refuse help, the more because I am much attached to the cathedral, and the immense treasure of books which it possesses deserve a very reverend care and require some strengthening of supervision.*

As a consequence, in 1925 a history of the library was produced and although it was published under the name of assistant librarian H.D. Hughes the 33-page introduction and an additional chapter – *Some Later Durham Bibliophiles* - were credited to JMF. A detailed description and review of JMF's time as Honorary Librarian can be found in Kenneth Warren's book, *A Paradoxical Life* chapter 24 (The Long Mellow Years).



At the same time as he was appointed Honorary Librarian, the University honoured JMF by appointing him Reader of Paleography. This was a bit of an anomaly as at the time the subject did not exist at the university and therefore his responsibilities were light. But the position gave him access to both the university buildings and their academic circles.

JMF died on Friday 22nd July 1932 and was interred at Burford following cremation at Darlington. To coincide with the funeral a memorial service was held in Durham at the cathedral. This was

attended by an array of friends, associates and representatives of organisations JMF was involved with. These included his wife Evelyn, Bishop Henson, Edward Stocks, members of the Noble family and representatives of both the Newcastle and Gateshead Water Board and the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Board both of which JMF had been a director. Arnold Culley oversaw the music – one of his last duties before retiring the following year and moving south.

Shortly after the memorial service the Dean and Chapter erected a memorial plaque in the cathedral's cloister:

