

Rome - John Meade Falkner in the Eternal City

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Before the railways, visitors to Rome from the north would arrive at the Porta del Popolo. Here they would see the grand façade of the church of Sta Maria del Popolo and inside the two great Caravaggio paintings of Saints Peter and Paul, the Christian counterparts of the two classic founders of Rome-Romulus and Remus. Three options presented themselves - to the left the Via del Babuino which led to the premier Marian church, Sta Maria Maggiore-in the centre the Corso, main shopping and commercial street leading to the huge monument to Victor Emmanuel, first king of United Italy (known colloquially as 'the Typewriter') and the Piazza Venezia, location of the former Venetian Embassy from whose balcony Benito Mussolini would bellow to his adoring followers - and to the right the via di Ripetta, less distinguished than the others but leading to the banks of the Tiber and thence to the Vatican. Such would have been the destination of the great Catholic converts, John Henry Newman, Henry Manning and Queen Christina of Sweden.

John Meade Falkner (henceforth JMF) would have arrived in Rome with as much enthusiasm but some distance away, on the eastern side, at the railway station, a decidedly less romantic entry point but more convenient for the hotel he stayed at, certainly in the later years, the Grand in Via Victor Emmanuel Orlando. It was within walking distance although in view of his portly frame and all the luggage needed for a stay of some months, one doubts if he often walked. Then there was his wife, Evelyn, and one is reminded of the interwar politician Sir Samuel Hoare's malapropism that upon leaving Paris 'Lady Hoare was left behind with the baggage'. (Rest of? Carrying it?)

JMF's first non-business visit was in 1883 with Sir Andrew's youngest son Philip, then 13, on a Grand Tour, followed by one in 1886 with the (chaste) love of his life, John, Sir Andrew's third son: German culture and Italian art - a more elevated itinerary than that of the Grand Tourists of a hundred years earlier - no mention of Venice which perhaps still had some lingering reputation as 'the brothel of Europe'. Little is recorded of the many business visits, some in connection with the shipbuilding works at Pozzuoli, near Naples and including at least one during the World War and it was not until his retirement from the chairmanship of Armstrong Whitworth that he had the leisure to visit Rome and linger there.



The *Archivum Secretum Apostolicum Vaticanum*.

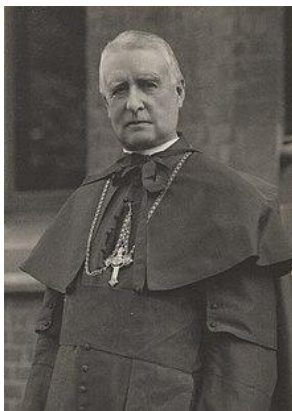
His visit in October 1920 (with Evelyn) lasted for the rest of the year and in November he was happily ensconced

in the Manuscripts Room of the Vatican Library working on early Roman missals comparing them with their English derivatives, the Uses of Sarum and York. The library was open every day except Thursday and, unsurprisingly, Sunday from 8.30 to 12.30 and JMF was there from around 9.15 until it closed.

In 1922 JMF was in Rome for 6 months. It was an interesting year. Pope Benedict XV died in January and JMF had visited him lying in state - he was an unconditional admirer of him. Then came the Conclave which resulted in the election of Pius XI who had edited the Ambrosian Missal and had served as Prefect of the Vatican Library. JMF's response to this was unqualified gratitude: 'People may talk of Conclave intrigue but ... it does not matter because they are over-ruled by Providence.' ('JMF - abnormal romantic' by Richard Davenport-Hines, 2018 p.273). Then in May came the first Eucharistic Congress since the World War which brought 120,000 visitors to Rome. Meanwhile the financial and political situation worsened with the failure of a bank and consequent collapse of some associated enterprises. The Fascist coup in Fiume and further instability culminated in the 'March on Rome' which brought Benito Mussolini to power. Not that this bothered JMF: 'I am sick of the word Democracy'. Along with many other, more distinguished, observers than himself such as Winston Churchill and the proprietor of the Daily Mail, Lord Rothermere, he admired the strength shown in the Fascist state. 'Falkner was untroubled by the drift to totalitarianism' wrote his biographer. No doubt most businessmen felt the same - no strikes and no troubles with militant trade unions.

From 1924 the Librarian was the Englishman, Cardinal Francis Gasquet, (1846 - 1929) who may have been known to JMF earlier as both were members of the Atheneum Club in London. Gasquet was

a Benedictine monk and one-time prior of Downside Abbey in Somerset. He wrote a number of historical works although the appellation ‘historical’ has been disputed; perhaps ‘controversial’ might be more appropriate. Be that as it may, he was a useful ‘friend at Court’ and ‘interested Falkner in the general subject of canonization and (in particular) that of Henry VI’. (*op cit*). Incidentally Gasquet’s titular church was Sta Maria in Portico (*aka* Sta Maria in Campitelli) which had a number of British connections including that of an earlier cardinal, Henry Benedict Stuart, the younger brother of Bonnie Prince Charlie and his successor as *de jure* king of England and Scotland had this as his church. The practice was established there of praying for the conversion of England which according to the Catholic historian Fr Nicholas Schofield has continued to the present day.



Abbot Gasquet

A seven-month long visit followed in October 1926 staying at the Grand Hotel. There are at present several hotels of that name but none of them are the one he stayed at, which is now called the St. Regis and part of the Marriott chain. Looking at their website it is certainly grand, having been founded by Cesar Ritz in 1894 and according to the Blue Guide, ‘the first hotel in Rome with private baths and electric light. Elegant salons, glass ceilings, trompe d’oeil designs and a magnificent ballroom, all contribute to the belle epoque atmosphere’. JMF preferred it to the Minerva for its modern comforts, notably running water in the bedrooms. (It seems probable he stayed at the Minerva earlier, as it was quite close to the Armstrong offices at 9 Via Parlamento). One thing he did not like was the ‘jazz-thrumming in the public rooms’ - an early version of Muzak one wonders. One also wonders how many retired businessmen and their wives could afford to stay there for 7 months at a time but, of course, sterling was a strong currency then and no doubt the lira was not. Anyway, he usually ate out at restaurants to avoid the high cost of using that in the hotel. Although he was an accomplished linguist his efforts were not universally successful. Kenneth Warren in his biography tells the story of him taking a young fellow researcher out for lunch ‘and there addressed their

waiter in faultless eighteenth-century Italian. The waiter could not understand a word.' (p.231)

The hotel was also convenient for his research, as there was a tram which went from outside the hotel to the Vatican where he spent the morning. He clearly was not just whiling away his time for he filled 40 notebooks with his researches and earned a coveted gold medal from the Pope. The afternoon was spent strolling around the shops and museums - Evelyn was a keen sightseer. Having once referred to her as 'neither affected nor fashionable but sober-minded and yet mirthful person who takes pleasure in simple things' (*op cit* p.201) it is perhaps surprising they put up with each other for months on end. But then no doubt they had got used to it and, anyway, they had the mornings to themselves.

By the last recorded visit, in March 1929, JMF's health had caught up with him and his weak heart prevented lengthy walks. The Grand was some way from what might be called the English quarter around the Plaza di Spagna - Babington's tea rooms, the Keats-Shelley House and the Anglican church. Church, yes. For Rome is more than noisy cars and the Vatican more than dusty muniments. What of the Faith? The Faith of the Saints who were martyred and are commemorated there headed by the Successor of Christ's closest follower St. Peter. The person who came closest to uncovering JMF's religious opinions was probably Hensley Henson, the Dean of Durham from 1913 to 1918 and then Bishop from 1920 to 1939. In between he was Bishop of Hereford, an appointment which led to protests from orthodox clergy for his supposed heretical views - heretical even for a Church of England which stretches the definition of 'broad' so far it could snap - so perhaps some qualification is needed when noting his comments on JMF.



Hensley Henson

JMF had been a regular attender at Durham Cathedral since moving to the Old Divinity House in 1899 but never received Holy Communion. When taxed on this he replied (according to Henson in

1928 - *op cit* p.201): ‘with a confession of a vague, almost pantheistic sacramentalism. He disclaimed any disposition to join the Roman Catholic Church, with which he acknowledges much sympathy. But the Pope is more than he can stand.’ This last statement reads oddly with his very favourable sentiments on both Benedict XV and Pius XI as recorded in his correspondence. Perhaps it was designed to deter any further deeper enquiries. After JMF’s death Henson recorded this assessment: ‘His preferences were Roman rather than Anglican and though he spoke respectfully of the Established Church he was contemptuous of Anglo-Catholicism.’ This seems even odder, but may reflect some semi-snobbery towards a movement which made much of its appeal to the ‘working classes’. Ultimately Henson was left ‘divided in mind as to whether he could most fitly be described as a pagan or as an Erastian medievalist.’ (*op cit* p.297). Elsewhere, Davenport-Hines says that ‘Falkner’s own religious feelings were impenetrable even by close friends.’ (p.63). And ‘dogma, authority and scholasticism were attractive to (him).’ (p.198). His obituarist in *The Times* called him a ‘medievally-minded humanist. He was drawn to those Vicars of Christ who were harsh zealots in imposing their Christian dogmas even as they sank themselves in dissolute paganism.’(p.266). To which one can only say - hey hold on!

Elizabeth I said she would not look into men’s souls. Perhaps it is expecting too much for complete consistency. It might seem odd to go to Durham Cathedral services for years and never receive the sacrament. It might seem odd to spend such a long time in Rome working in the Vatican and not be able to respond to the encompassing arms of the Bernini colonnades outside St. Peter’s. Was he just an ecclesiastical voyeur? Accepting that the Church of England was in schism from the Body of Christ, looking from the outside but unable to make that final step. Perhaps he did not feel it mattered that much. As the psalmist nearly had it: ‘A devout and holy life thou wilt not despise.’