

J.M. Falkner: The Secondary Sources. An Annotated Checklist
John Gretton

INTRODUCTION

This article aims to provide a listing of books and articles, biographical or bibliographical, where J.M. Falkner's life is described, or his writings discussed. My aim is not literary criticism, but rather to draw attention to the printed sources, some well-known, others more obscure, for the study of the subject of our Society. I had some personal debate whether to arrange the sources alphabetically by author or chronologically. I decided to arrange them by date of publication so as to illustrate the emerging discussion over the past ninety years of the life and work of John Meade Falkner. His own writings are only included where they have substantial introductory prefaces from other hands.

1932

The Times 23rd July 1932, with further contributions on 25th and 26th July. Obituary: Mr. J.M. Falkner Scholar and Man of Business.

The initial obituary referred to Falkner as a 'prolific writer' without specific mention of the novels and this was corrected the following Monday (the 25th) with an account of his scholarly interests, the novels and his verses, and on the next day a note on Falkner's Oxford life. See also the J. M. F. Society *Journal* no. 13 of July 2012, where a number of the obituaries are reprinted, including some from the provincial press.

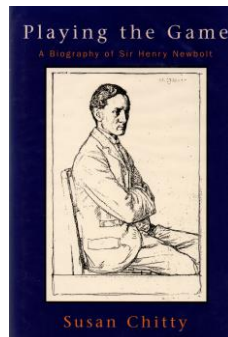
1932

My World as in My Time, Memoirs of Sir Henry Newbolt 1862-1932. Faber and Faber Ltd., 1932.

Newbolt (1862-1938) is principally remembered for his patriotic verses, especially *Vitai Lampada* of 1897 comparing the spirit behind a school cricket match with an incident in the Sudan campaign (not so improbable then as now):

"The sand of the desert is sodden red, / Red with the wreck of a square that broke, / The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead, / But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks: / "Play up! play up! and play the game!"

Newbolt has a biography, *'Playing the Game'* by Susan Chitty (1997), including the unusual nature of his domestic arrangements. Newbolt's autobiography is a rare book, as Faber and Faber's warehouse took a direct hit in the blitz of 1940. At pages 264-265 he prints a moving tribute to his old friend Falkner:



"...he was not only admired but genuinely loved by all of us. He was the Porthos of our story - a giant in bulk and height, a character of a curiously earnest simplicity and the taste of our great-grandfathers. He loved a Classic if he could find him in an Editio Princeps: he loved the Rosicrucians and would flatter his friends by including them with himself as 'We of the Illuminati'. Above all he loved the church architecture of the past, the folklore of Old England, the local speech and customs of the country villages. It was believed, and not by way of disparagement, that he wrote or re-wrote some of the best folk-songs himself, and taught them carefully to old men and children so that they might be rediscovered by laborious antiquaries. On many things of art he was a learned though unrecognised authority - on old violins, old forms of spiritual wickedness, old dances and old wines. It became the habit of some of us at the Athenaeum to make sure of the best port or claret by simply ordering "Mr. Falkner's wine".

1940

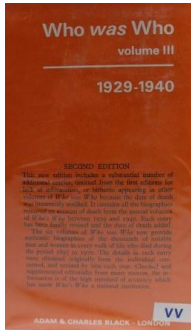
Dictionary of National Biography, supplementary volume 1931-1940. pp. 268-269: 'Falkner, John Meade (1858-1932), author and antiquary'.

An admiring record of Falkner's work and interests signed 'Alfred Cochrane', who had known his subject well from Oxford times and wrote an obituary for *The Spectator* of 6-8-1932. Of 'Moonfleet' he writes '*written in the style of Stevenson or Hardy, about smugglers or preventive men and abounding in hair-breadth escapes and exciting adventures, it has delighted every generation since it first appeared*'

Falkner's entry in the current Oxford D.N.B. is by Richard Davenport-Hines.

1940

Who was Who Vol.III, 1929-1940. Page 430, Falkner, John Meade.



Who was Who reprints in decennial volumes the final *Who's Who* entries of deceased persons. The entries are autobiographical, in the sense that they are compiled from information supplied by the subjects and then edited into a house style. Falkner's entry is the only source I have seen for his membership of the Oriental Club in addition to the Athenaeum. The 'Oriental' was founded in 1824 in Hanover Square under the Presidency of the Duke of Wellington. It is for those who have lived, worked or travelled in the East and Falkner qualified as a result of his journeys to

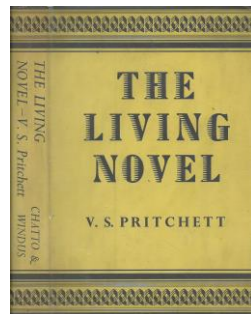
sell arms to the Ottoman Empire, including his personal interview with the Sultan. A feature of the Club, probably of interest to Falkner, was that it has always taken seriously the quality of its food and wines. Their curries are reputedly legendary. The Club is now in Stratford Place, W1.

1946

The Living Novel by V.S.Pritchett. Chatto & Windus, 1946.

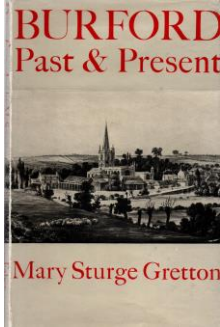
This book gathers essays on British and Continental authors. Falkner's chapter is headed *An Amateur*, so Pritchett's theme is the non-professional writer. He is lukewarm towards the merits of *The Lost Stradivarius* and *The Nebuly Coat*, which he dismisses as *mystery stories tintured by scholarship, now too slow and unmysterious for our taste*. However, he is fulsome in his praise of *Moonfleet*, *'a story of*

adventure that will have a permanent place among the minor genre pieces of our literature. Here is a novel which has the sustained excitement, if not the richness of character, of the best work of Stevenson'. There follow four pages of beautifully written praise of the novel concluding 'We detect the flash of a minor master, *Moonfleet* arrests the mind because it has satisfied the eye. We have seen something that is small, perhaps, but exquisitely, affectingly well done'.



1950

Burford Past and Present by M. Sturge Gretton. London, Martin Secker, 1920, 1929 and Faber and Faber, 1945, 1950.



Mary Gretton's final edition of 1950 is the important source for Falkner, where her pages 148-149 recall his coffin laid in the church in 1932 between candles and scarlet geraniums. She remembers him thus: *'on evening after evening of Summer and Winter he came to stand at the door of Burford Vicarage carrying an ecclesiastical treasure which he had redeemed from misuse in some unfrequented corner of Europe'*. She then lists the contents of some of *'those romantically arriving parcels'*: the Spanish Processional Cross, the splendid altar frontals, the silver crucifix, and, later, the installation of the Lady Chapel windows. The present writer must state that he is not related to the Grettons of Burford. More recent historians of the town are Raymond and Joan Moody, whose *'The Book of Burford'* (1983) records Falkner's *'almost mystical attachment to this area'*.

1952

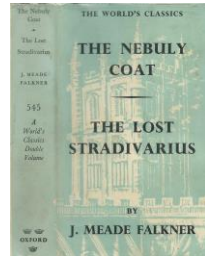
Burke's Landed Gentry. 17th ed., 1952

The Falkner family had been listed in this classic work of reference since 1921, but the 1952 edition gives a more complete series of dates as the family expanded. See pages 798-799: FALKNER OF NORTH NEWNTON: lineage and descendants of Robert Falkner (1788-1834), grandfather of John Meade Falkner, who in turn took much pride in the armorial of the falcon and nebuly coat which illustrates the entry. Burke describes J.M.F. simply as Librarian to the Dean and Chapter of Durham and Reader in Palaeography for the University. In 1952 the Head of the family was John Meade's nephew Thomas Alexander Meade Falkner, born in 1904, the son of Charles Falkner. Tom Falkner had been in India between 1925 and 1948 with the Cambridge Mission to Delhi, and from 1944 to 1948 he was Secretary to the Anglican diocese of Delhi. On his return home, he took up a similar position in Salisbury. He donated items of family interest to Durham Cathedral library, including his uncle's medals and decorations.

1954

Oxford University Press. The World's Classics no. 545: *'The Nebuly Coat' and 'The Lost Stradivarius'*. 1954.

This charming little book reprints the two of Falkner's novels which were not copyrighted elsewhere. It was particularly appreciated at the time, and subsequently, for the *Introduction* by G.M.Young, and the *'Personal Note'* by Sir Edmund Craster, the latter being a short biography of his friend Falkner: *'He lived in a world of romance, of music, of book-collecting, and of medieval churchmanship ...Everything about him was big and upon a lavish scale. ... In his old age he seemed a noble wreck of a once powerful man... When not in the Library he was in the Abbey Church. I can yet see him, clad in his Oxford gown, lolloping across to the Cathedral, a pile of music scores under his arm...he was all of a piece; a very memorable man.'*



1960

The Book Collector Autumn 1960: Some Uncollected Authors XXV John Meade Falkner by Graham Pollard.



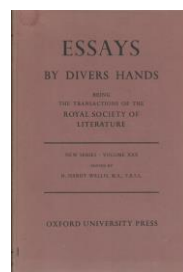
Pollard, a graduate of Jesus College Oxford, was one of the most distinguished bibliographers of his generation, but also something of a rebel since he held party card no. 1 in the Young Communist League of Great Britain. He came to prominence in 1934, when he and John Carter published the results of their researches into suspicious printings of a series of literary texts by eminent Victorian authors. Modestly (actually, also cautiously) entitled *An Enquiry into the Nature of Certain XIXth Century Pamphlets* (Constable & Co., 1934), their study proved beyond reasonable doubt, through type fonts, papers and provenance that the collector Thomas James Wise had caused to be forged, and sold at high prices, spurious 'editions' of a host of authors including both Brownings, George Eliot, D.G. Rossetti, Ruskin, Stevenson, Swinburne, Tennyson and Thackeray. Wise was still alive but retreated behind ill health and the protection of his wife and made no comment. The future careers as bookmen of the two young sleuths were assured.

To be chosen by Pollard was, therefore, something of a posthumous honour for Falkner. Following an introduction including notes on Armstrong, Whitworth & Co., J.M.F.'s own library, and his international reputation as a palaeographer, Pollard lists ten items, some with 'a' and 'b' entries. A useful feature of the checklist is that the items were described from the holdings of the Bodleian or British Museum libraries with their precise receipt dates. Reprints are listed down to 1955. He misses the '*Ad Majorem*' chants, even though Falkner mentioned the publication in his *Who's Who* entry; and, of course, Murray's '*Buckinghamshire*' was only recently researched in the Murray archive. Unfortunately, he assumes that '*Oxfordshire*' and '*Berkshire*' were original works for Murray rather than revisions, light in many places, of the work of Augustus Hare. In the Bodleian copy of '*A History of Oxfordshire*' Pollard found the publisher's prospectus for the work, which enabled him to list the various formats in which the book appeared. Pollard distinguishes usefully between the brown and green wrapped *Poems*. The present writer notices some similarity between the fonts and presswork of the Durham County Advertiser Ltd., which in 1925 printed the '*History of Durham Cathedral Library*', to which Falkner contributed, and the brown cover printing. Pollard's 'Falkner' was reprinted in a larger page size in 2003 in '*The Pleasures of Bibliophily, fifty years of The Book Collector, an Anthology*', the only 'uncollected author' to be so honoured.

1960

John Meade Falkner by Sir William Haley, K.C.M.G. Read 3 October 1957. In *Essays by Divers Hands*, Being the Transactions of the Royal Society of Literature, New Series vol. XXX, Oxford University Press, 1960, pp.55-67.

1960 was an important year for Falknerian studies. Sir William's lecture delivered in 1957, with Cecil Day Lewis in the chair, was published in 1960. Haley had edited '*The Times*' during a distinguished career in journalism and television. He gave an affectionate and perceptive lecture, aligning Falkner not with Thomas Hardy but with another businessman-novelist, William De Morgan, the author of the popular *Alice-for-Short*. '*Both are - whether justly or not- now remembered as poor businessmen but good story tellers there were attractions in the idea of an armaments manufacturer who was a learned medievalist, especially in*



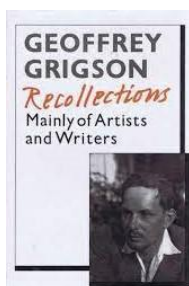
palaeography and liturgiology, who was never happier than when talking about black letter, demonology, and old church music ... Falkner travelled widely on behalf of his firm in both Europe and South America ... and everywhere he went, this tall, gaunt, voluble, charming man made friends by his command of languages, his dignity and his patience".

In assessing the novels and stories, Haley reverses the preferences of V.S. Pritchett. Sir William is for *'The Nebuly Coat'* and *'Charalampia'*: *'Whereas Falkner's two earlier stories were tours de force which gave some scope for him to parade his hobbies, in 'The Nebuly Coat' we have the whole man. We have also a novelist proper, not merely a teller of tales'*. Haley later names that novel a 'work of art, in the other two he was a good craftsman'.

1984

Recollections Mainly of Artists and Writers by Geoffrey Grigson. The Hogarth Press, 1984.

Grigson is interesting in two ways - he greatly admired Falkner's writings, some of which he republished, and he recounts the story of the visit by the young architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner to *The Divinity House*, Falkner's home in Durham.



My copy of the book came with a review cut from *The Spectator* of 22-9-1984 by P.J. Kavanagh, where the book is called *'entertaining and frequently outrageous'*. Grigson was evidently sometimes 'difficult' but he had six brothers who were all killed in the World Wars or in a 'plane crash, so a certain cynicism might be excused. It was Grigson who republished in 1948 *'Charalampia'* together with *Seven Poems* in his journal *The Mint*.

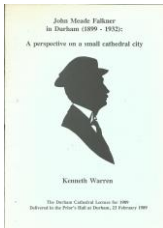
He also tells in *'Recollections'* the fascinating story of Nikolaus Pevsner's dinner date with Falkner, which was told first-hand by Pevsner, his next-door neighbour in Hampstead. Susie Harries in her biography of Pevsner records her subject's loneliness when he first fled to England from Germany, his university colleagues at Göttingen becoming increasingly attracted to the Nazis. He decided to have a look round his new country,

aided where possible by letters of introduction, mainly from the Finnish art historian Tancred Borenius or the art scholar Jim Byam Shaw. I think his letter of welcome to Durham must have been from Borenius, an older man (born 1885) more likely to have known Falkner.

Durham was the high point of Pevsner's journey, and he loved the cathedral: '*A dream, I'm bowled over*', he told his wife Lola. Pevsner presented his letter at The Divinity House to the butler, as Falkner was out, while marvelling that a cathedral librarian, all he knew of his host at the time, could afford to employ a servant. Soon a call came to Pevsner's hotel inviting him to dine, and the same butler showed him into the drawing room with the guest even more astonished at the display of medieval and other treasures. What a wonderful place England must be, he reflected, where librarians lived in such grandeur and served vintage claret at dinner. He only found out later the true source of Falkner's wealth. It also shows Falkner's kindness, as Pevsner had previously been rebuffed from other houses.

1989

John Meade Falkner in Durham 1899-1932.: A perspective on a small cathedral city by Kenneth Warren. The Durham Cathedral Lecture, 1989.

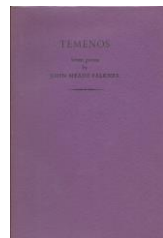


The lecture was delivered in the Prior's Hall, Durham on 23 February 1989.

1993

Temenos, Seven Poems by John Meade Falkner selected and introduced by David Burnett. The Tragara Press, 100 copies, 1993.

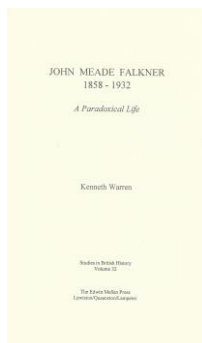
David Burnett's Introduction is a substantial essay concentrating on the contradictions in Falkner's life of scholarship and business, amounting to an inner conflict. He concludes that Falkner is a very minor poet without technical innovation and with a limited repertory of poetic



forms. Possibly realising this to be too harsh a verdict, he then turns to Falkner's 'precise or evocative natural description' and the punctilious and polished craftsmanship of the verse: 'there is a profound awareness of dissolution and dilapidation, a deep sense of mutability, of the pastness as well as the presence of the past'. The title 'Temenos' places Durham Cathedral and Palace Green as a 'sacred enclosure' for Falkner's life.

1995

John Meade Falkner 1858-1932, A Paradoxical Life by Kenneth Warren. Studies in British History Volume 32. The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston/Queenston/Lampeter. 1995.



The Edwin Mellen Press appears to specialise in self-publication, as it advertises weekly in *The Times Literary Supplement* under the line 'Publish your scholarly book with Mellen, peer reviewed.' Presumably Mellen have no obligation to keep their back catalogue in print, which accounts for the extreme scarcity on the market of the first full biography of Falkner. This is unfortunate, as Warren's book is a well-researched and pleasantly written biography which could usefully be distilled into an accessible text for the general reader who does not

currently have an affordable biography of Falkner.

1995

Book & Magazine Collector December 1995: J. Meade Falkner by Mark Valentine and Richard Dalby.

This 'popular' magazine often resurrected authors who, if not obscure, were possibly not in the forefront of the minds of the public. It is no longer published but must have had a reasonable circulation in its day. One attraction was the valuations given for first editions, in 1995 for 'The Lost Stradivarius' £75-£100, for 'Moonfleet' £100-£150 and for 'The Nebuly Coat' £75-£100. The illustrations include a still of Jeremy Brett playing the Stradivarius from the ITV film of 1966. The authors have uncovered the Arnold 'educational' edition of 'Moonfleet'

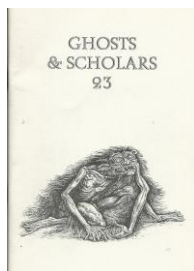


with the particularly tedious 'Questionnaire' for pupils to answer at the end of the book, e.g. 'Chapter XIX : On the Beach. Do you consider the title of this chapter a suitable one? Give reasons for your answer. Can you think of a better title?'. Mercifully, all other 'Moonfleets' are free from pedagogic interference.

Mark Valentine also wrote a perceptive Introduction, with much on the late Victorian revival of the Neo-Platonists and other mystery sects, for the Tartarus Press reprint of *The Lost Stradivarius* of 2000 (limited to 300 copies).

1997

Ghosts & Scholars no 23, 1997. A Haunted Library Publication (Rosemary Pardoe, Runcorn, Cheshire). Dale Nelson: J. Meade Falkner, pp. 46-48.

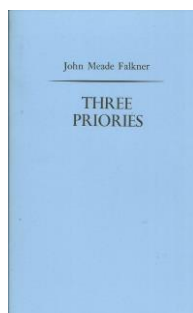


This is a splendidly quirky, though scholarly, periodical around ghostly fiction with accomplished line illustrations, some quite scary.

2009

Three Pories. Wolvercote, The Atlantis Press, 2009. Edition limited to 75 copies hand-set and printed by Michael Daniell.

Kenneth Hillier's *Introduction* concentrates on Falkner's medieval mind: 'he was a medievalist to the core', writing to a friend that he had 'a Breviary mind'. During the Great War the chairman of one of the largest armaments businesses in the world was writing 'Yet I am a medievalist with the cramped old schoolman's mind ...'.



In 1981 the same press had reprinted Falkner's *A Roman Villa, Chedworth* with a two-page introduction.

2010

The Medieval Book, Glosses from Friends & Colleagues of Christopher De Hamel. Edited by James H. Marrow, Richard A. Linenthal, & William Noel. Hes & De Graaf Publishers, Houten, Netherlands. See pp.387-394 'Medieval Manuscripts Owned by J. Meade Falkner by A.S.G. Edwards.

A.S.G. Edwards, the deputy editor of *The Book Collector*, bases his study on the Sotheby catalogue of December 1932. He identifies the commissions held by the professional antiquarian booksellers who executed the bids in the room. He names Sir John Noble as the most significant private buyer, but the firm of Quaritch actually bid for him. However, H.R. Creswick, the Keeper of manuscripts at Cambridge University Library bid in person. Edwards then lists Falkner's medieval manuscripts over four pages, with their current locations, many in American theological libraries, but with 32 unlocated. It is a meticulous piece of research

2018

John Meade Falkner Abnormal Romantic by Richard Davenport-Hines. Printed for The Roxburghe Club, MMXVIII. An edition of 500 copies, of which 400 are offered for sale.



This is the second full biography of Falkner, following Kenneth Warren (1995). The Roxburghe Club is the premier British society of bibliophiles with half of the membership drawn from the titled aristocracy, including those who show an active interest in their inherited libraries, along with their own acquisitions. Since the last war the membership has been widened to include the most eminent scholarly bibliographers and notable collectors, currently including the comedian Barry Humphries, who together make up the other half of the membership. By tradition, each member presents a privately commissioned book to their

fellows in a specially bound copy while the rest of the edition in cloth is sold by Maggs Bros. of London. The Falkner biography was presented to the Club by the Hon. James Stourton, once a member of the JMF Society.

The Club was the brainchild of the prolific bibliographical writer the Revd. Dr. Thomas Frognall Dibdin (1776-1847) whose works are sometimes

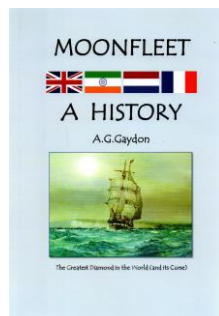
described as enthusiastic rather than accurate. In 1812 he hosted a dinner in a London tavern to commemorate the sale of the library of John, 3rd Duke of Roxburghe who had died in 1804. It had been the height of aristocratic bibliomania. From this, the Club was founded with 31 members, later enlarged to forty. A former member Sir Geoffrey Keynes noted in his autobiography that in his day *'The members tend to be rather elderly with the result that the 'turnover' is all too rapid'*; but, then, he was a medical man.

I have noted two reviews of the Davenport-Hines biography, in *The Book Collector* of Summer 2019 and the JMF Society *Journal* for 2019.

2019

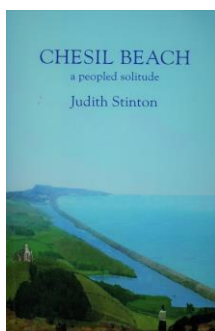
Guide to Moonfleet. The Facts behind the Story. By A. G. Gaydon. PublishNation, 2019.

A lively and extensively researched account of the truths and legends around the *'Moonfleet'* story with good colour illustrations.



2021

Chesil Beach, a peopled solitude. By Judith Stinton. Harlequin Press, 2021.



The author begins her charmingly written book with Falkner, John Trenchard, the Mohunes, the *Why Not?* and the plaque placed by the Society in Fleet Old Church.

2000 and current

The John Meade Falkner Society Journal.

Annual on 22nd July, each anniversary of its subject's death, and now approaching the 23rd issue. A full listing of the contents, upwards of 100 articles, is openly available on the Society's website with those available to read online highlighted in blue.

The *Journal* is augmented by the members' *Newsletter*, which reached its 70th number in July 2022. The society owes everything to the inspiration of Kenneth Hillier.

Online and ongoing: *The Henson Project* (The Chapter of Durham Cathedral).

The diaries of Dean, later Bishop, Herbert Hensley Henson (1863-1947) are now being published online, expertly annotated, and including revealing references to Falkner whom he clearly regarded as something of an enigma. To give the flavour, here is the entry for 16 January 1916; '*That queerest of poseurs, Meade Falkner came in to supper and stayed on talking paradoxes until nearly 11 p.m.*' They were both members of the Athenaeum. Henson was Bishop of Hereford 1918-1920, but returned to Durham as Bishop in 1920, so we may hope for more to come...