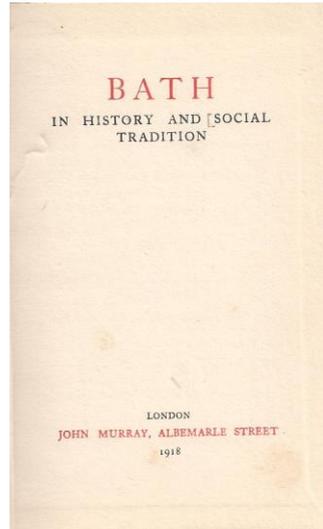
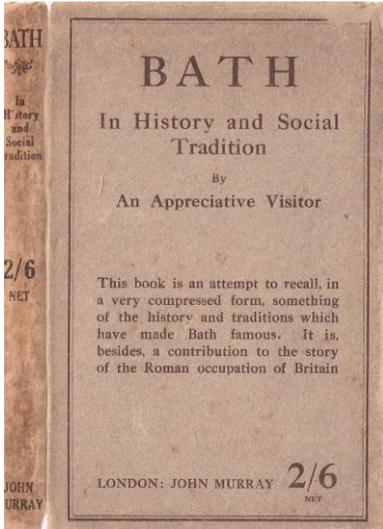


Bath in History and Social Tradition
by An Appreciative Visitor
Robin Davies



Readers will know that this *nom-de-plume* masked the identity of the subject of our society. JMF was a frequent visitor to Bath and while Chicago was, according to the song, to Frank Sinatra ‘my kind of town’ so was Bath to him. Here was gentility, culture, an easy pace of life and its walls and very atmosphere breathed the antiquarianism he loved and which was a world away from his day-job. As secretary (1896) a director (1901), then vice-chairman and, finally from December 1915, chairman of Armstrong’s ship-building and armaments company he breathed sales and accounts. Here he could relax and perhaps while languishing in the Deep Bath or Hot Pool, being caked in mud or drinking a refreshing glass of mineral waters in the Pump Room afterwards his thoughts might have wandered to those far off days when he had written his first topographical works a quarter of a century before: the *Handbook for Oxfordshire* (1894) followed by a history of that county in 1899

and the *Handbook for Berkshire* in 1902. In that same fruitful period (1895-1903) he had written his three novels until either the muse deserted him or his work with its overseas travel to exotic places like Constantinople and South America as JMF played his part in the pre-1914 armaments race necessarily took precedence. (Did he ever come across the great merchant of death, Sir Basil Zaharoff, who acted as agent for Vickers which was to merge with Armstrong's in 1927? Surely he must have done.)

The writer has no information to hand on JMF's visits to Bath before the 1918 publication date of this book but it seems unlikely that he would have gone there and not 'taken the waters'. Certainly he was to be an regular habitué between 1918 and 1931 on most occasions staying several weeks, no doubt using it as a base for visits to elsewhere in Somerset such as Downside Abbey and Woodspring Priory and perhaps to the Saxon church in Bradford-on-Avon, only then relatively recently discovered in the late 19th century, and Glastonbury, the legendary birthplace of English Christianity. Could such a place not appeal to JMF?

One such visit was in the winter of 1918/9 when he spent a month having treatment in an electric arm bath for his neuritis. Alas it was not only unsuccessful but 'had a very nasty effect upon my heart which causes me great discomfort'. Neither does it seem his visit in January 1924 was any better. In a letter to John Noble he writes:

My dear John,

....Here everything is going on the usual ding-dong course, of tedious baths, and ups-and-downs. The man thinks that my particular ailment is gall-bladder, but the G.B. has not responded to his treatment and now he talks of something rheumatoid, and radiant heat. It is all terrible nonsense, and the weather has been bad, cold, and wind, and snow; but I like this hotel, it is thoroughly well equipped, and victuals and cuisine are excellent: I can put away an immense quantity of the rather insipid lukewarm waters, and I like

sitting in The Rooms, and listening to a very good string-band, who play sad tosh in the way of music....

Bath must be growing more famous medically, for everyone is screwed and contorted with rheumatism, and 'these and other spectacles of mortality' meet one at every turn..... JMF

Nor was his visit of April 1928 obviously a selling-point for the cure:

JMF to JN

I shall not be sorry to leave Bath (about Saturday April 14th). I am a little water-logged, and should have left before now, had I been able to think of a better lodging...This letter, begun on Palm Sunday, has been greatly delayed, first by two more disconcerting attacks, the one occasioned me to sit down incontinently on the front steps of a house in Henrietta Street, and the other on a very moist seat in Sidney Gardens. However, I drank my pocket-pistol.....and was afterwards able to repose comfortably in a back-seat at the Abbey and hear New play a fugue of Rheinberger.



The Portico and Entrance to the Pump Room

However, he clearly loved Bath, as this from December 1930 evidences:



Grand Pump Room Hotel

My dear John,

Today as I walked down Milsom Street, when artificial lights began to show out against the pinkness of evening, and under a half-moon the great groups of beeches stood on the cliff at the bottom of the town the view was magnificent. I think Bath never was more imposing.

JMF

Certainly his wife was no encouragement:

22nd Sep 1931

My dear Rosemary (daughter),

I dined with Falkner last night and Monday night. He is not very well - bothered with boils. He won't face Rome, he thinks the journey too much for him, he will probably go to Bath, though his wife doesn't like it & he fears will make a row about it.... John Noble

But if the charm of the waters seemed elusive that of the city did not. Perhaps after the rigours of the war he felt moved to share his enthusiasm with others like him. It was certainly not designed either as a guidebook or a history although it could be used for both. A Handbook to Bath had been produced in 1888 for the visit of the British Association; this comprised a series of essays on aspects of the history, geology, etc. and presaged a similar enterprise in 1925

called the Book of Bath for the annual meeting of the British Medical Association. A volume in a series 'The story of the English towns' produced in 1922 by SPCK does not, alas, cite JMF's *oeuvre* in its list. A slightly sanctimonious sentence in its introduction gives of a flavour of it: 'The ordinary guidebooks to our city have dwelt too much upon the frivolities of its least worthy traditions and on the passing visits of royal, noble and literary notables.'

Several other books were to follow:

In JMF's lifetime:

The Bath anthology of prose and verse - edited by Charles Whitby 1928

Bath by Edith Sitwell 1932, which is entirely about those the SPCK book deplores, as is Lewis Melville's 1926 *Bath under Beau Nash-and after* and later *Bath* by RAL Smith, a Batsford book of 1944 followed by two by Bryan Little 1947 (*The building of*) and 1961 (*Portrait*). The views of other writers such as HV Morton, GK Chesterton, HG Wells and HM Bateman are cited in *Bath in quotes* (Paul Cresswell 1985). But not, alas, 'an appreciative visitor'.

Perhaps it was the lack of such volumes which determined JMF to fill the gap. His introductory note 'admits his obligation' to Barbeau's monograph of 1904 on the Bath of the 18th century and mentions three books on the architecture of that period, the life and letters of William Beckford plus, on the literary side, two volumes of both Sheridan and England's Jane. We may deduce from this a bias again not along the same lines as the SPCK book.

A book on Rome opens with the claim that: 'The origin of a town is to be found in its site' and that would be true of Bath. JMF opens with: 'Prince Bladud, Roman remains, a late Abbey Church, a capital of fashion in the eighteenth century, its decline, a high-born watering place in reduced circumstances, are pictures that present themselves when Bath is mentioned.' Bladud was the founder of Bath in the same legendary sense that Romulus and Remus were

founders of Rome. He was the son of King Lud but contracted leprosy and driven out into the wilderness. Having to become a swineherd he infected them and noticed that after rolling in a pool of water came out clean. Doing the same he too was cleansed and having been received back into his father's grace built Bath by that same pool. Later 'he went to Greece, was elected a professor in the University of Athens, returned to Bath and built a famous temple of Minerva. Much of his time was spent in magic and miracles (a thought which should have appealed to the author of *The Lost Stradivarius* and *Charalampia*) and he met his death by attempting to fly from the top of his own temple. John Wood, the great Bath architect, devotes chapters (in his History of Bath which JMF later refers to as 'a collection of absurdities') to prove the truth of every one of these statements ... the *Pickwick Papers* must remain the safest authority for the history of Prince Bladud.' It is unclear how far his tongue was in his cheek. Perhaps a clue lies in a statement about the Roman period. After referring to the lack of documentary evidence he writes 'in turning to Roman days we still move within the mist' and 'let us throw the antiquaries overboard. Let us label buildings with our own tickets and weave our own romance about them.'

The Saxon period is 'the two lost centuries of Britain' and 'when a corner of the veil is next lifted, it is lifted on religious surroundings' with the establishment of a nunnery in Bath in 676. King Edgar is said to have founded a Benedictine Monastery circa 970 but no mention is made of him being crowned at Bath in 973 arguably the first King of Britain for he subsequently received the allegiance of not only the kings of the other English kingdoms but also that of the King of Scots and the King of Strathclyde. Which is why it is the Bishop of Bath and Wells who with the Archbishop of Canterbury has the most prominent role in the Coronation. Indeed the glorious abbey only gets 'a passing mention' as 'the last word of Perpendicular on the grand scale', although to be fair the short

mention does acknowledge its greatness for the West front with its Jacob's ladders and the fan vaulting.

The rest of the book is concerned with Bath in its heyday. From being well in the shadow of Epsom and Tunbridge Wells in 1700 it rose to being pre-eminent by 1745 largely as a result of royal patronage and the efforts of three men-Beau Nash (master of ceremonies at the Baths), Ralph Allen who had made a fortune in organising the postal service and used it to develop the stone quarries near Bath building himself the famous Prior Park and the man who designed the buildings which were to use 'Bath stone', John Wood. Referring to him and his son, JMF writes: 'In every circumspace of Bath is written the lasting memorial of the two Woods. It is a city entirely unlike any other city-homogeneous, contemporaneous and undefiled.' Despite the losses in World War II, it remains largely so even if some of the set-pieces such as Queen Square are so traffic riddled they can hardly be appreciated as they were. JMF's criticisms of Blenheim Park for its 'oppressiveness', Pugin's tedious meticulousity (along with that of de Cerceau - who he?) and Prior Park itself as being 'pretentious, lacking in repose, a giant on tiptoe, grandiose rather than grand' would not be agreed by all.



From architecture we move to literature. 'Bath throughout the eighteenth century was an irresistible loadstone for men of letters.' Fielding and Pope pass briefly in review - 'Allen put them both under great obligations which Fielding acquitted royally and Pope scurvily enough'. Horace Walpole is quoted for some disagreeable remarks about Bath; 'he is in ill-humour with the rooms, the balls, the clergy, the doctors, the waters, the tables, the ladies-with everything.' More recent biographies which include reference to his private life suggest why he should not be much interested in the ladies. Surprisingly, there is no mention that Fielding's most famous novel is set here, nor any reference to *Pickwick Papers*, many of whose scenes are set in Bath, other than that semi-facetious one cited earlier. And only a glancing reference to Dr Johnson, great friend of the famous socialite Mrs Hester Thrale who was a constant visitor to Bath and who married an Italian singer at St. James's church (destroyed in World War II). Both were friends of the diarist Fanny Burney who is buried in St. Swithin's, Walcot.

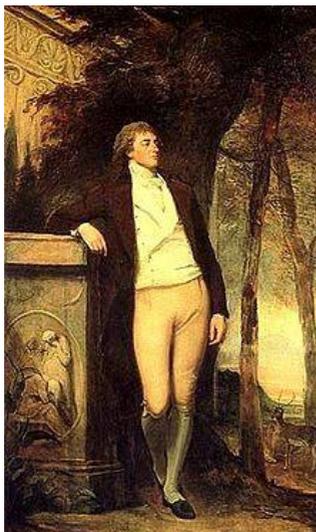
According to JMF, 'women and dice' had always been the great magnets of Bath' although he cannot detect this being reflected in literature; one would not expect this in Jane Austen and it is not found in Sheridan. As a leaving visitor had it: 'Farewell dear Bath, nowhere so much scandal, nowhere so little sin'; so perhaps Horace Walpole had it right after all. There is of course the theatre, which hosted such notables as Sarah Siddons. But there was another Bath which paralleled the Bath of fun, that of the 'lower town (which) went on much as it does today with its humdrum business and comfortable religion.' With visits earlier in the eighteenth century from John Wesley and then the establishment of the Countess of Huntingdon's Connexion' (whose chapel today houses the Building of Bath Museum) it was not entirely so. But then came firstly the retired clergyman, such as Jane Austen's father, who 'invaded Bath at the end of the eighteenth century, and the retired officer followed him in the earlier years of the nineteenth.' It is the former to whom is attributed the decline and fall of Bath in an 1841 book of

that title. JMF rather blames changing opportunities with the opening up of the Continent following the end of the Napoleonic Wars so people could go to continental spas such as Baden and Aix as well as other destinations. In a hundred years Bath had risen and fallen to become 'an ordinary county town except for a handful of faithful invalids drawn thither by the little understood and less exploited waters'.

Perhaps the last hurrah of Georgian Bath was the 1818 visit of Queen Charlotte accompanied by her son the Duke of Clarence, later William IV. The Royal party arrived with great pageantry in carriages, drove through the city accompanied by a large number of troops. Alas, only a few days later they had to leave for the funeral of her grand-daughter Princess Charlotte Augusta who had died in childbirth. (The Prince Regent, later George IV, had set up a rival resort in Brighton, not to the advantage of Bath). (1)

By 1840 'the Upper Rooms were little more than a shadow of former splendour' and the days were gone when a 'Bath ball was possibly the most splendid spectacle in Europe... but the glorious heritage of its buildings remains.' Nash, Allen, Woods. One more giant remains to grace JMF's pages: William Beckford. 'As Prior Park was a material expression of the middle of the eighteenth century, so William Beckford was a metaphysical expression of its close'. Son of a West Indian plantation owner, said to be the wealthiest man in England, who became Lord Mayor of London, Beckford travelled overseas 'an omnivorous amateur collector' and being inspired to write the Gothic novel *Vathek*. In this is the construction of a vast tower and this idea was to become an obsession. Firstly, he built Fonthill Abbey, which JMF describes as 'an immense and wildly fantastic place, built in Wyatt's vapid wedding-cake Gothic... there were galleries 330 feet long in which lamps burned all night; there was a dining-room that could seat 300 people' and so on. 'As the Tower of the Pied Horses is the central figure in *Vathek* so a great tower was the predominating feature of Fonthill. It stood in the

middle of the house and was over 300 feet high, but five years after it was built it totally collapsed. Beckford at once rebuilt it and some twenty years later this second tower fell and ruined half the house. But by that time Fonthill had changed hands and Beckford had moved to Bath.' He bought two houses in Lansdown Crescent, made them into one and then bought a site on the hill where he could build his last tower, designed by H.E. Goodridge. There he could sit or lounge in the room at the top, read and admire the view.



William Beckford



Lansdown Tower

When he died he was buried in a mausoleum near its base as part of a public cemetery he had given to the authorities. Falkner waxes truly indignant at it being 'left in a deplorably neglected condition by authorities as void of gratitude as of appreciation.' Perhaps Falkner admired a man with the money to do what he could only dream of. (2)

Bath, he concludes, rather lyrically, 'like Rome or Oxford, was ever a place of bells...In the great days they rang venally for every

distinguished and undistinguished arrival... The Abbey bells rang, too, for funerals ... and when they tolled for Beckford they rang the curtain down upon the last romance of the eighteenth century... He wrapped himself in (Castle of) Otranto mystery; he moved in a world of his own where caliphs and houris jostled monks and troubadours, where poets and painters posed in abbeys and castles, surrounded by priceless treasures of the East and West.’ In a world of the author of *The Nebuly Coat* and *Moonfleet’s* imagination. So it is not perhaps surprising that here Falkner stops. After 1844, nothing; for him anyway. Even before that the architecture is limited to the Woods. So nothing on John Pinch, last of the great Georgian architects who oversaw the development of the Bathwick estate on the other side of the river, after Robert Adam’s lovely shop-lined Pulteney Bridge. Nor on the revival of Gothic architecture and its parallel in religious medievalism, the Oxford Movement, with its call to the church to a greater understanding of its heritage. No such bells rang for Falkner - at least not in this book.

So we end with the almost perfunctory, like Private Eye’s drink-sodden journalist to his editor ‘is that enough?’: ‘If even in Bath faint ripples of a far-off war are felt today, the City still preserves its dignity sober and serene, still offers a warm cradle for old age and infirmity to rock themselves to sleep. So let us again praise God for good hot water and for all good things, and for those famous men, Nash, who brought the company; Allen who brought Wood; Wood, who staged the colonnaded terraces upon the sunny slopes.’

1. I am indebted to Sheila Edwards of the Bathwick Local History Society for this and other comments.
2. Members interested in William Beckford might like to know of the International Beckford Society which has its own journal and various activities; see its website for further information.
<http://beckford.c18.net/wbsocietypresentation.html>