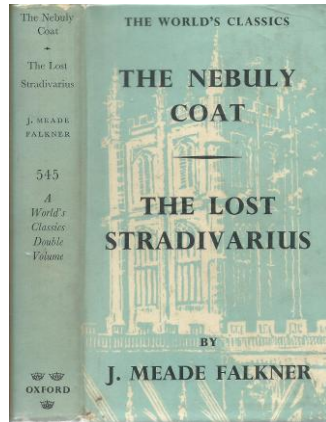


Mystery at the Minster John Saumarez Smith

Readers take something of a risk if they go back to a book they have much enjoyed but not picked up for thirty or forty years. As a book-seller, I was constantly reminded of such favourites because I could recommend them to friends, either new or second-hand. During that period John Meade Falkner's novel, *The Nebuly Coat*, spent several years out of print but it appealed to small imprints as a reprint, and a reappearance was always welcomed. I probably read it for the first time in the admirable World's Classics edition. Only in the last few weeks, inspired by my rereading, have I reminded myself about Falkner himself in the judicious introduction by G. M. Young and the personal note contributed by Sir Edmund Craster, a close friend from Northumberland.



The biographical details are unusual. As a young man from a clerical family in Wiltshire, Falkner was recruited after Oxford as tutor to the children of Sir Andrew Noble, a Newcastle manufacturer of armaments. He graduated to becoming Noble's secretary and, soon, to the Board of Sir W. G. Armstrong & Co., later Armstrong-Whitworth. There, fascinated by the international dealings of the company, he rose to become Chairman. In his retirement he lived in the cathedral close at Durham where he was appointed Honorary Librarian. He became a familiar figure, slightly dishevelled, to be seen carrying musical scores across from The Divinity House, where he had settled, to the privacy of his library.

Scholar and antiquarian, he wrote two Murray county guides, to Oxfordshire and Berkshire, and a successful history of Oxfordshire. He was extremely tall with large, melancholy brown eyes; although he married, there were no children and it was said that he had a natural vocation as a bachelor. For his time, he left a considerable fortune, probably in bequests to his old Oxford college, the Bodleian

Library and Durham Cathedral. G. M. Young listed Falkner's main academic interests, outside his full-time business career, as architecture, music, heraldry and genealogy. *The Nebuly Coat* gave him every chance to show off all four. Its plot revolves round the Minster at Cullerne, identified by some, from the description of the surrounding country, as Rye, but in fact an amalgam of many possible English towns or cities. Chapter One opens in a London office where a leading titled architect is briefing one of his young hopefuls on the structural problems of the Minster.

The Minster plays a central role, spiritual as well as physical, in the lives of everyone who lives there. Music, particularly church music, is well represented by the memorable character of Mr Sharnall, the long-term organist, an impoverished but talented musician with a fondness for whisky, and possibly based on one of Falkner's acquaintances in Durham. The plot owes as much to his interests in heraldry, which provides the book's title, and to genealogy in the mysterious background of the local landowner, Lord Blandamer.

These interests are however simply the bricks with which the book is built. Falkner was a romancer and, though there are some obvious holes in the plot, his characters are marvellously vivid: Euphemia Joliffe, a spinster who has spent most of her limited funds supporting her feckless brother Martin; the self-important Canon Parkyn and his wife, who are both anxious to impress their elevated status on Cullerne; Anastasia Joliffe, Euphemia's niece, who catches Lord Blandamer's eye and is courted by him; and Lord Blandamer himself, generous benefactor to the Minster and a fictional aristocrat of rare learning and courtesy.

In scenes that involve the clergy, Falkner has more than a touch of Anthony Trollope: 'Of course,' says Canon Parkyn, 'no real knowledge of Latin can be obtained without a University education, but still chemists and people of that sort do manage to get a smattering of it.' And Westray, the young architect, could easily have figured in a Trollope novel – a bit of a prig, unaware of what other people might think of him, but devoted to saving the wonderful Minster, where 'the arch never sleeps'.

This resounding maxim recurs throughout the book. When Lord Blandamer is married, quietly in London, the people of Cullerne

want to celebrate by ringing a three-hour peal from St Sepulchre's tower. Westray opposes the idea as likely to endanger the fabric, but he is over-ruled and a passage follows on the music of the church bells.

How they rang and swung and sung together, from Beata Maria, the sweet silver-voiced treble, to Taylor John, the deep-voiced tenor . . . There was a charm in the air like the singing of innumerable birds; people flung up their windows to listen, people stood in shop-doors to listen, and the melody went floating over the salt-marshes, till the fishermen taking up their lobster-pots paused in sheer wonder at a music that they had never heard before.

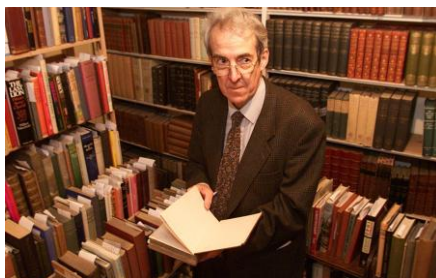
Some readers will have been brought up on Faulkner's *Moonfleet*, a boys' adventure story set on the Dorset coast. Others may prefer his *Lost Stradivarius*, another romance, staged in Oxford, but more Gothic in feeling and markedly less visual. Still, to my mind *The Nebuly Coat* remains his masterpiece.

Note

This article was first published in *Slightly Foxed* – *The Real Reader's Quarterly* No. 24 Winter 2009. I am immensely grateful to John Saumarez Smith's widow Laura and Jess Dalby of *Slightly Foxed* for granting me the permission to reproduce it here. *Slightly Foxed* is an excellent magazine for bibliophiles. Its website is: <http://www.foxedquarterly.com/>

At the end of the article the following few lines were placed:

In a way characteristic of his life as a bookseller, John Saumarez Smith remembers J. M. Faulkner's nephew as a contemporary and colleague of his own father when they worked for the diocese of Salisbury. John was already a keen visitor to Beech's bookshop up the road from their office.



John Saumarez Smith