

*A Hunk of Protein*  
*John Meade Falkner - Richard Davenport-Hines*  
*(The Roxburghe Club £85.00)*  
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1858-1932. Lapidary notation can only tell a small part of it. Dates reveal but little of the cast of mind which travelled between them. As many have observed, not least Falkner himself, his long body was capped by a cranium beneath which an organ teemed with matters medieval.

To capture - almost nine decades after his death - everything that animated so distinctive a spirit is no easy task, one to which Richard Davenport-Hines has brought all the skill and brio familiar from his forays into subjects from Proust to Profumo by way of narcotics and Auden, not to mention sex, punishment and death.

Davenport-Hines's familiarity with matters Falknerian began four decades ago, when, suitably, he explored the crucial series of letters to and from Lord Rendel in the Newcastle archives. Whatever Falkner's medieval preoccupations, his temporal existence traverses a momentous era in world history. This took him from the cherished countryside (Nine Barrow Down - "what a name of incantation!") to the black smoke of industrial creation whose effects are felt now as the planet sweats and melts. Both E.M. Forster and Bertrand Russell referred to the years before the Great War as a "greenwood" compared with what came after, but we can now see that Falkner's era had set the controls for the heart of the Sun which beats upon us. In Falkner's lifetime, mankind took powered flight, and is yet to return to that earth where, time and again, he sought seclusion from all that his business life had set in train (to echo all those sheets of his writing paper headed "On the Train" as he wrote while a steam engine belchingly conveyed him to and fro across a country which he knew, and delineated, so well.

As such, Davenport-Hines arranges the biography by place-names, from Falkner's childhood in Dorchester via, er, Aldermaston ("its name is now familiar for reasons that Falkner would have found incredible") to Ventnor on the Isle of Wight where he sought refuge in what he depicted as a surreal hotel which he had hoped would ease a body yet again at odds with so fine a mind. The trajectory of this is familiar, from Kenneth Warren's biography (and his business studies) and elsewhere, while Davenport-Hines adroitly chronicles Falkner's circumstances at each stage, always making pertly apt connections and allusions: of a Falkner family sojourn in Bournemouth, he mentions the long story which Henry James set there and, persuasively, he suggests that in Oxford the later visits by Falkner were glimpsed by Ronald Firbank (who, one might add, also had a fascination with Rome, as of course did Waugh who could have looked askance at the Hertford College arrivals of a man due to meet Cruttwell whose name is pinned to unfortunate characters in such novels as *Vile Bodies*). All of this is to a purpose: with a steely calm and broad sympathy which matches Falkner's own, Davenport-Hines does not shy from stating that Falkner looked to his own interests (in the narrow and widest senses of the word) while maintaining that bonhomie which charmed those who met him. (One might recall Russell's citing in the Sixties a remark of Jowett's - "it is vital to be pushing but fatal to seem so" - as being far from lofty, if true.) For all this, if Falkner continues to elude us here, that is in the nature of the man and of the fragile fate of paper which had felt the press of human hands across it; pages notched by a nib in minutes duly took seconds to ignite. This Falkner did in the late-Twenties, at much the same time as Hardy; and yet, who knows what sits undisturbed in a cupboard or a cricket-box similar to the one in which Boswell's journals languished. One might add to Davenport-Hines's discussion of the short stories that there is in the Berg Collection at the New York Public Library a letter in which Falkner seeks the literary agent J.B. Pinker's help in selling his short stories, which suggests there could be more of them – somewhere!

A great good fortune is the survival of Falkner's letters to John Noble (Davenport-Hines does not mention the family legend that Noble's last words, a few years after his friend's death, were "Falkner!", and one can only regret that nobody broached all that this entails with Noble's wife, who lived into the Seventies). To bring a personal note, if one may, it was quite something, as winter descended upon Ardkinglas, to set all these letters around a large billiard table and assemble them in chronological order. These letters propel the biography, as do Falkner's early memoirs, a charming work written in the mid-Twenties during recovery from another debilitating illness. What one would give, though, for his letters to another lifelong friend, Henry Vassall; these could tip the record from a Noble/Rendelcentric one. However that might be, what one does miss in this biography are the delightful childhood memoirs by Falkner's sister Anne. Handwritten, these are a contrast with her voluminous typed compilation of the family across nigh on a thousand years. Dorset in the 1860s leaps from her handwritten notebooks, not least the vividly realized irony of the future armaments salesman almost blowing himself up when experimenting with fireworks.

A volume of these, along with Falkner's memoirs, would make a handsome collection - perhaps capped by the Log, evidently Falkner's work, recorded during a voyage along the Thames; very much in the spirit of *Three Men in a Boat*, which had just been serialised, this Log is mentioned, not cited by Davenport-Hines but brims with his great spirit of fun. That relish of comedy perhaps makes *The Nebuly Coat* his finest work.

Falkner's humour can become occluded by his residual gloom and by a job - a career - to which he was bound by a certain loyalty and, as Davenport-Hines unobtrusively emphasises, a relish of the finer things in life, from claret to clavichords. As for life's woes, Davenport-Hines does not cite one of the most startling letters a novelist has ever crafted (and Falkner did craft, he did not go in for a

rush redolent of Lawrence): a detailed description of the piles and their removal by a sedulous operation; what's more, this was not written to his wife, who remains a shadowy figure hungry for city life, but to Rendel lest it be thought that he was shirking his duties at Elswick.

In working on Falkner, it became increasingly depressing when publishers said that there is no market for a book about him; this was in the face of the fact that anybody who picks up *The Nebuly Coat* relishes it, and longs to know more of a man who brought so much to bear upon its narrative around the age of forty (and, newly married, was writing it in the evenings after a busy day in the train or out of it).

As Davenport-Hines has found, despite his being published by many firms, this handsome biography appears in an edition of which just four-hundred copies are for sale. Even so, many a commercial publisher is now hard pressed to sell a thousand copies of a widely-reviewed book, and Davenport-Hines's is a book in which, with time, many will roam: that is the best way in which to read it rather than the clip at which a reviewer takes anything. Time and again, Davenport-Hines succinctly touches off so much. *The Lost Stradivarius* is odder the more one looks at it. The social irresponsibility of the aesthete, the blockheadness of the duty-bound Christian, the purblind outlook of sexually inexperienced people, and the doctrine of life for art's sake are aired without commitment or censure of any sort. Meade Falkner's tone is neither epicene nor virile: he is clear in what he writes, but ambiguous in what he means." (Davenport-Hines calls him Meade Falkner when the books are under discussion, Falkner being kept for the life upon which they drew.) He can be blunt ("the discovery of this racket ended Rendel's trust in Falkner"); in becoming a part of those hefty hidden pay-outs of 1909, Falkner had come from his early tentative experience of Jesmond Dene life in 1885: "he saw how often decisions were taken by men who saw less than half of things. He

understood that in a jealous and hostile world, he might prosper if he did not seem threatening. He made himself necessary but inconspicuous. He used candour to dissimulate.” In making a case for the compact pleasure of the Murray's Handbooks, with unknown Aldermaston a favourite spot, Davenport-Hines notes that “Meade Falkner savoured quaint failure, historic redundancy and the pensive charm of dereliction”.

Such incisively romantic language animates a book which belongs as much to Davenport-Hines as it does Falkner. The success of any book can rest in its prompting one to read others. Perhaps, by the time you read this piece, I shall have finished Amelia Edwards's novel *Barbara's History*, an influence upon the young Falkner siblings (if elided in their mother's reading aloud some of its sensational moments). To read, and to study, Falkner is a lifetime's education, a course of study which had seemed to come so easily to him. Exactly how he did this remains a mystery, and that is perhaps a sign of genius which transcends the subtitle of “Abnormal Romantic” which Davenport gives the book. Falkner cannot be reduced to words on a page; far from the agenda paper of his daily life's work, he transcends even those words which Davenport-Hines deploys so well, informatively and surprisingly.

To which latter end, he moots at the outset that, before long, biographers could have recourse to DNA samples. One might balk at that, conjure up though it does a midnight foray in Burford churchyard redolent of those scenes far to the south which animate Moonfleet. And, with that image of Falkner as part of a science-fiction story, one cannot help but recall a section from Joe Moran's recent *First You Write a Sentence* (“the elements of reading, writing... and life”): “A sentence should feel alive, but not stupidly hyperactive. We live a lot in the passive voice, since reality is an authorless poem being written without our help. Cushioned by the bubble wrap of modern comforts, we convince ourselves that we decide our fates. But we are just carbon-based life forms, careering

through space on a medium-sized planet. We were thrown into the world without being consulted, and will be thrown out of it when a major organ gives up on us. Our bodies are husks, carrier bags for our genes, which are our only shot at immortality. That gelatinous hunk of protein that is sussing out these sentences, your brain, will one day remind you that you are not its master. Sometimes life just is". Whether Moran knows it or not, there is a Falknerian voice in his paragraph. Falkner's life just was, and we are fortunate to have come along afterwards - and to have so accomplished, so enjoyable a guide as Davenport-Hines to what was a more remarkable hunk of protein than most, even when deployed on the cricket pitch.

