

John Meade Falkner and Thomas Hardy
Richard H. Taylor

Christopher Hawtree (*Newsletter* no 23, 3 January 2007) is right to identify neglect of Thomas Hardy's friendship with Falkner by almost all Hardy's biographers, but I suspect this is because it is so sparingly documented. Although, even in his eminence, Hardy remained a secretive and elusive countryman who liked to cover his tracks, and indeed consigned many papers to those 1920s bonfires, enough letters still survived to fill seven substantial volumes. Among these saint's relics, however, only one letter to Falkner survives, the one to which Hawtree alludes, sent on 17 December 1911, when Hardy was 71 and Falkner 53, in response to Falkner's comments about Hardy's 1909 volume of poems, *Time's Laughingstocks*.¹ Hardy's appreciation of Falkner's praise is evident - "To get letters that can really be called such in the old sense is a pleasure I seldom experience nowadays," he writes, and says that he would not have found Falkner's letter too long even "if it had extended to five times as many pages" - but it is a slender thread upon which to hang any extensive biographical reference. Although as Hawtree says Hardy lightly upbraids Falkner for being so conscious of the vanity of life at his age, Hardy is at his most disingenuous when he tells Falkner "I am pleased to hear that Nature appeals to you more & more. I fancy, though I am not sure, that I have lost some of my zest for it under the sense of the apparent undesirableness of the universe." Over many years Hardy enjoyed saying how little he nowadays enjoyed things, yet the pleasure half-concealed behind the world-weary disclaimers sometimes cannot be contained. This solitary surviving exchange between them shows that Falkner may be congratulated on having pleased Hardy sufficiently to inspire him to retract his own gloomy assertion in his very next sentence: "True, [Nature's] existence may not really be undesirable ..."

There are three other surviving letters, all from Hardy at his Dorchester home, Max Gate, to his first wife Emma on occasions when she was away, in which Falkner or Falkner and his wife are mentioned. In the first, dated 21 November 1903, Hardy has just read *The Nebuly Coat*, which had just been published, and (as

Hawtree quotes) Hardy calls the novel "an interesting romance of the old-fashioned sort."² Although long immersed in the study of Hardy, I write as a neophyte with regard to Falkner. With all deference to Hawtree and other Falkner enthusiasts, I am not sure that there are *many* readers for whom "*all* [my italics] of Hardy's novels could be exchanged for Falkner's *The Nebuly Coat*," but I have lately read that novel, for the first time, with delight and pleasure, and readily acknowledge its virtues. Hawtree gently chastises Hardy for his comment being what he calls "something of a restrained remark," by which he means that he thinks Hardy doesn't do *The Nebuly Coat* justice. Perhaps not, and technically he is restrained. But Hardy was a restrained man, who tempered his enthusiasms and his praise in the same way as we have seen him above rhetorically play down his own zest for Nature. I would not interpret Hardy's comment as disparaging, or disdainful with faint praise. The phrase "of the old-fashioned sort" is not necessarily pejorative, and from Hardy it is equally likely to be a compliment. Hardy's fictive vision in prose and verse is shot through with the backward glance, and he had plenty of time for romances of the old-fashioned sort. He wrote some himself: when Hardy classified his novels into groupings for the Macmillan Wessex Edition of 1912, "under heads that show approximately the author's aim, if not his achievement, in each book of the series at the date of its composition" (as he put it in his General Preface of October 1911), an entire category is devoted to **ROMANCES AND FANTASIES**, which includes four out of Hardy's fourteen novels (*A Pair of Blue Eyes*, *The Trumpet-Major*, *Two on a Tower* and his last novel, *The Well-Beloved*), as well as one of his volumes of short stories, *A Group of Noble Dames*.

One of these novels, *A Pair of Blue Eyes* (1873), bears a close affinity to *The Nebuly Coat* in several respects. As Hardy writes in his March 1895 preface, the novel "was written at a time when the craze for church-restoration had just reached the remotest nooks of western England, where the wild and tragic features of the coast had long combined in perfect harmony with the crude Gothic Art of the ecclesiastical buildings scattered along it." His story "found in the ordinary incidents of such church-renovations a fitting frame for its presentation. ... The place is (for one person at least) the region of dream and mystery. The ghostly birds, the pall-like sea, the frothy wind, the eternal soliloquy of the waters, the bloom of dark purple cast that seems to exhale from the shoreward

precipices, in themselves lend to the scene an atmosphere like the twilight of a night vision" - a description which would surely have appealed to Falkner, and which prefigures his own setting for *The Nebuly Coat*.

The references to Falkner in the other letters to Emma are not profound. On 24 September 1908 Hardy tells her that "Mr and Mrs Faulkner [*sic*], who are staying at Wey[mou]th were present [*on a "drenching" visit the previous day to see the excavations by local archaeologists of the amphitheatre at Maumbury Rings, with Hardy and others, "with sticky chalk-mud halfway up to our knees"*] drenched & plastered like the rest: she said she wished you had been there."³ And on 30 September he writes: "Oh, yes - the Faulkners came yesterday: they are staying at Weymouth, leaving on Sunday."⁴

More piquant is the spirit of Horace Moule which Christopher Hawtree interestingly identifies: "in Falkner's depiction of Sharnall, there is an echo of their friend Horace Moule, who, beset by drink, killed himself at Cambridge in 1873 a few months after Hardy's last visit to him." Horace Mosley Moule (1832-1873), a gifted scholar and teacher eight years Hardy's senior, was Hardy's closest friend in his early years, and was to some extent his mentor, enlarging the scope of his reading and encouraging his writing. For several years Moule was a literary reviewer, and Hardy regarded him as "a scholar and a critic of perfect taste." In 1873 Hardy visited Moule in Cambridge, and before parting on 20 June they went to King's College Chapel: "A never-to-be-forgotten meeting," Hardy writes in his 'disguised autobiography,' *The Life of Thomas Hardy*, "H.M.M. saw me off to London. His last smile."⁵ The recollection was poignant because they never met again before Moule died by cutting his throat on 21 September, after murmuring "love to my mother - easy to die," the coroner later ruling "temporary insanity." He is the subject of several of Hardy's poems, notably "A Confession to a Friend in Trouble," "Standing by the Mantelpiece" and, on Moule's death, "Before My Friend Arrived."

Hawtree identifies in *The Nebuly Coat* both the echo of Moule's character in Sharnall and a parallel with Hardy's experience as an architect undertaking a church restoration in Cornwall, in the course of which he met his then future wife, Emma Gifford. The fictive parallel with *A Pair of Blue Eyes* is striking too. It was of

course Hardy's Cornish romance that also occasioned the scenes and, to some extent, the characters of his own novel, in which the central character, Stephen Smith, is a young architect undertaking a church restoration in Cornwall. And, as I wrote some years ago in *The Neglected Hardy*, Hardy's character Henry Knight "seems to compound the author and his literary mentor, Horace Moule ... his characteristics are predominantly those of Moule ... a man who felt his life to have been a failure and who was similarly sexually inhibited."⁶

If there *was* any adversely-meant restraint in Hardy's comment about Falkner's novel, of which I am not convinced, then it might have been a touch of *déjà vu*, since thirty years earlier Hardy had himself described an almost identical situation in *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, a circumstance all the more personal because in his case it had been based in part upon his own experience.

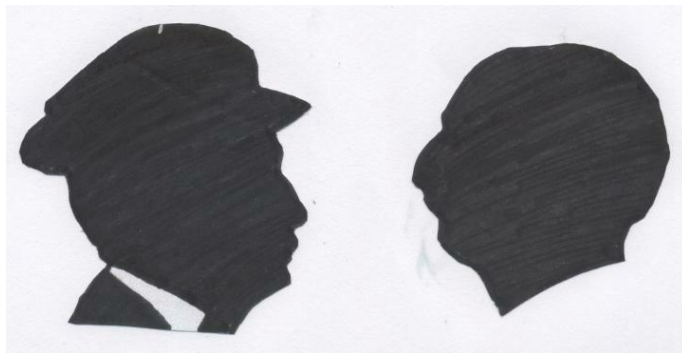
What remains beyond doubt is Hardy's rich appreciation of Falkner's enthusiasm for his verse - which he called, in the same 1912 General Preface mentioned above, "to myself the more individual part of my literary fruitage." Falkner's unqualified praise in 1911 would have been gratifyingly divergent from what, in the same year, Hardy characteristically called "the curiously blundering reception"⁷ of some of his verses; and his sympathetic understanding of Hardy's philosophical position must equally have gladdened Hardy's heart. Falkner's warmth and perceptiveness were in striking contrast to the strictures which inspired Hardy to write bitterly the previous year in his distinguished autobiography, in a passage later deleted before publication by his widow, about how he "was grotesquely denounced as a blaspheming atheist" by G.K. Chesterton (whom he scornfully called "a phrasemongering literary contortionist") and "rebuked by dogmatists, because he had turned into verse the views of the age."⁸

Falkner's fresh responsiveness to, engagement with and high praise for *Time's Laughingstocks*, for which Hardy said thank you for "honouring me by reading it so carefully," evidently charmed and delighted Hardy, and even inspired him, uncharacteristically, to give Falkner that sound therapeutic advice for his insomnia! Their friendship was probably not among Hardy's most intimate - the salutation "My dear *Mr* Falkner," in its inclusion of the title of address, contrasts with Hardy's epistolary habit of

omitting the title in letters to his closer friends, and the complimentary close "I am, sincerely yours" has a similarly contrasting slight formality. But there is warmth nevertheless and it was clearly a friendship that endured. I share Christopher Hawtree's regret that it is, sadly, so little chronicled.

REFERENCES

- [1] Richard L. Purdy and Michael Millgate, eds. *The Collected Letters of Thomas Hardy*, Vol.VII (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1988), pp.153-4.
- [2] *Ibid*, Vol III, p.87.
- [3] *Ibid*, Vol III, pp.335-6.
- [4] *Ibid*, Vol.III, p.340.
- [5] Richard H. Taylor, ed. *The Personal Notebooks of Thomas Hardy* (London: Macmillan, New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), p.63.
- [6] Richard H. Taylor, *The Neglected Hardy* (London: Macmillan, New York: St Martin's Press, 1982), p.42.



[7 and 8] *The Personal Notebooks*, *ibid*, p.259

Dear Mr. Hardy
John Meade Falkner

September. 12. 1905

The Divinity House,
Durham.

Dear Mr. Hardy

Many thanks for your prompt reply to my letter. I am glad that the obstetrics of the Dorchester Antiquities are arranged for, and I shall look forward to it, and to your preface. I am very sure that none but Dorchester people know how much they owe to the ambient of the place itself - to the genius loci working upon them in youth. In your case that influence has probably shown itself more than in any other. In my case it has had a great influence, and has at least given me the power of appreciating you - and the quintessence of Dorchester & Dorset that is exhibited in your writings. There are many other people - born or bred in Dorchester, in which the influence of the place is easily recognisable - but it is in you that it is most manifested. I do not suppose that Dorchester of today- with its new suburbs - its new breweries - its new houses - new shop-fronts, and commercialised high street (- commercialised I mean above St. Peters -) can be exercising quite the same influence in the rising generation, as that older Dorchester did in our youth - but I do not think that all the enchantment can be gone out of it. In spite of vulgar "fancy warehouses" full of cheap art nouveau, and in spite of picture postcards - there are still many things that have not bowed the knee to Baal - and there are the old eternities of Maiden Castle, and Pummery, and Memory Rings, and that splendid view of Tordington fields and the hills beyond, as seen from the Road in front of your house - and the innumerable barrows. These things must always leave their mark. I do not know whether you went to the Grammar School as I did: but I think of modern restorations, destructions and be-devilments the doing away of the Old Grammar School was one of the most atrocious. I doubt if any place in the whole world is more instinct with the combination of prehistoric & Roman tradition than Dorchester - and yet so far as I know there is no conceivable mention of Dorchester in any itinerary or other

document, and no trace of even its name in any recorded Roman history.

Thank you for asking me to join you at Ely. I wish I could come, but I have to be in London on Sunday, and back here on Monday, so I cannot manage it. I should have enjoyed it. A broad sluggish flowing river, the great flat meadows, the cathedral in the background with its vast length & fantastic outline - and the hint of a lost body, an incomprehensible suicide. I cannot imagine a more Hardy-esque *mise-en-scène*. It seems cut out to suit your mood, and to have the rudiments of a novel for you - if only you would write us other novels. And if it suits your mood it would suit mine, and I wish I could come.

But if now it is impossible, I hope another day we may be able to make an expedition together - only it will be hard to find so curious a motif as on the present occasion. My answer to your letter has been delayed because in the middle of it I had to go to the North of Scotland for only a few hours.

I hope that the Dorchester Antiquities will be a better book than Mr. Moule's *Old Dorset*. That seemed to me a dull book, and uninteresting. I dare say that was because I liked old Mr. Moule so much & found him always so entertaining - that I expected to find the book as interesting as the man. But it is not.

Yours with all kind regard

J. M. Falkner

Some day when we meet - you must remind me to tell you of a very curious letter which I received (by the same post as yours) *apropos* of young Moule's "death". It is too foolish to write about.

