

*John Meade Falkner and Lord Rendel*  
*- a contretemps*

“It has been common to regard Falkner’s industrial career as the rather odd day-to-day pursuit of a man who was essentially an artist.. [and].. it is hardly surprising that those who have written about his literary achievements have paid scant attention to his business career; in so doing they have perpetuated the image of Falkner as a man of culture who somehow drifted into the alien world of work. This does less than justice to him.” Thus, Kenneth Warren in his biography of Meade Falkner, starts his chapter ‘Secretary and Director’.

Warren mounts a convincing argument in Falkner’s favour - “the evidence of the Armstrong Board minutes, and the extensive correspondence between the principals of the firm, indicate that whatever his later defects proved to be, for many years his abilities and his services were alike most impressive even in unexpected fields”. Falkner the Secretary began to be used in important negotiations, both at home and abroad. For instance, he represented Armstrong’s at meetings of all the main European and American armour makers in Paris and helped to ensure that Whitworth’s transition from rival to fully-fledged partner of Armstrong’s was as smooth as possible.

When a few months after Lord Armstrong’s death in December 1901 Sir Andrew Noble fell ill, Falkner wrote to Lord Rendel about the long-term leadership of the firm. Clearly he was being regarded as a key figure in any such deliberations. But, it was increasingly obvious that the Armstrong directors were as often divided as united. The ‘executive’ directors, whose work base was Elswick, were led by members of the Noble family - Sir Andrew, John and Saxton (later based in London) - and Falkner. The ‘absentee’ directors, who lived and worked elsewhere but attended Board meetings and AGMs, needed to be kept informed of all important issues. Falkner gradually became the main channel of communication with Lord (Stuart) Rendel, whose links with Armstrong’s went back further than any other director, bar Sir Andrew.

Falkner’s frequent journeys to London or Manchester (so many of his letters are headed “In the Train”) and his increasingly onerous duties at Elswick led to regular bouts of illness, often brought on by sheer exhaustion. It did not help that Rendel was becoming increasingly suspicious of the influence that the Noble

clique (in which he included Falkner) were having on the firm, often, as he felt, to its detriment. Rendel had been a member of the Board since 1883 (between the late 1860s and 1880 he had been a partner in the then private firm) and Vice-Chairman from 1901. He was also the company's largest shareholder and therefore had a vested interest in keeping a close eye on its affairs.

Many of Falkner's letters to Rendel survive and, as Ken Warren points out, the deferential tone of the early ones gives way to a more independent manner. Increasingly, Falkner is seeking to justify his role in the firm. We find him in June 1907 telling Rendel that he has not "the smallest misgiving as to my own position here: and as you saw at the last meeting I try to avoid any taking of petty, or personal views. My only feeling is from the point of view of this great firm, & its great interests. 'Oh the pity o't'. The great thing to aim at, is not to be discouraged by long series of foot-trammelling and snubs".

Throughout 1908, one finds Falkner repeating this line, viz. in March - "I feel sure that, however I may have spoken, or however much our views may differ, you will give me credit for only having at heart, what seems to me the good of our great firm." Rendel's suspicions that, as Vice-Chairman, he was not totally in the loop was perhaps not assuaged by Falkner's plea: "One more thing - Please do not think my action disingenuous in first advising you not to come to our meeting on March 5th, and then taking up a position against the bonus shares..." In fact, Rendel wrote to John Noble in mid April, complaining, "of what use are Board meetings? We never discuss anything and we rarely have anything to discuss. If we have any matters raised it is not in a way or in a shape meant for real discussion..." It did not help Rendel's temper that in July "an abcess declared itself in one of my very few remaining teeth. I have had to have it removed and cannot now use any of the teeth real or false on which I depend wholly" which precluded an intended meeting with Falkner the next day.

By early October, Rendel was thoroughly alarmed at the position at Elswick. He confided to another, sympathetic director that he "had thought that Sir Andrew was the only grave anxiety. I think now that we may easily fall out of the frying pan into the fire. To me it is the difference between fearing that the kitchen chimney may set the house on fire, and finding that the whole roof may at any moment fall in. And I see that a new danger is upon us. In truth we are not any longer under an autocrat. Sir Andrew has lost his teeth and claws. He has no real grip and no nerve. He is in fact in the hands of the four men. They know it They are closely allied in profiting by an

interregnum and their own practical regency to establish a small oligarchy which may well be worse than Sir Andrew's autocracy. For it will have no prestige whatever.... not one of the four has secured high outside credit...

I feel that I have deceived myself hitherto in my estimates and hopes of the four men - the Elswick Quadrilateral... Falkner was their principal 'go-between' (with Rendel and others). In truth, as I now see, he is essentially one of them... Perhaps his special business was to keep me quiet by the due administration of confidences mixed with hostile criticisms of Sir Andrew..." Rendel ranted on, mainly against Falkner's deceptions for another three pages, ending with this trumpet: "Falkner I now find is essentially one of the Junta and his real aim is to rule the Co. at no long date. John (Noble) is or will be too rich and apathetic to take the lead himself, Saxton has not enough ability. Cochrane will have his share. I shall soon be out of the way..."

By mid October, the literary hostility had clearly spilled over into the Board meetings, with Rendel and others champing at "Falkner's half-confidences, which are more dangerous than Sir Andrew's silence". It is in this context that the following three letters were written. The first, from Falkner to Saxton Noble at his home in 69, Eaton Place, London. and marked "Personal & Pressing"

November 17th. 1908  
Elswick Works,  
Newcastle-on-Tyne.

My dear Saxton

Thank you much (*sic*) for the speedy return of the naval architect's paper, duly signed by your father. Bartholomeo who is a good fellow, was I think really touched by your father signing, when so far from well. I dare say he will write you a line of thanks.

I enclose you a letter from Lord Rendel. Up to now, I have not replied - but have telegraphed to say I will send a reply tomorrow. It is a difficult letter to answer. I do not want to be too cordant, even after this apology. I had written the letter which I enclose but Cochrane says it is too stiff and persuades me to burke [smother] it. Please let neither Lord Rendel's letter, nor mine, out of your hand, but give them back to me on Thursday.

Our order list is very small; and today we got our tender for 108 4" mountings refused. 49 with shield & 50 without. I suppose Coventry will have taken most.

I hope your father goes on well. Please give him my love. Ever Yours  
but in much haste JMF

The letter he had just received from Lord Rendel appears a model of decorum, considering the latter's real feelings.

14 November. 1908  
2, Clarendon Terrace.  
Brighton.

My dear Falkner.

I was quite unprepared to find at the last meeting how keenly you had felt my language at the previous meeting when we parted in much disagreement but not as I thought in any resentment.

Except for the surprise of it I should have tried my best to restore our friendly relations at once.

I missed the next opportunity of the special Board and now the death of Vavasour & illness of Mr. Andrew make me at my age very anxious to lose no further time.

I beg you to forgive me for what you regard & what may well have been want of due personal consideration for you at the Newcastle meeting. No doubt you failed to recognise why I should be so moved & vehement.

We cannot hold aloof from one another with any loyalty to new work. Even if we could, I would not if I could by any means help it. From regard for you & gratitude for your devotion to our business and recognition of your great duties to it I should leave nothing undone which could bring us & keep us together. I beg you to let it be so and to forgive and forget.

Believe me to be  
Sincerely yours  
Rendel

Falkner's other enclosure, the letter he never sent, can either be seen as that of an upright colleague, who feels gravely misrepresented, or as another example of his attempt to keep Rendel 'quiet' by yet more half-confidences.

November. 17th. 1908  
Elswick Works,  
Newcastle-on-Tyne.

Dear Lord Rendel

Thank you for your kindly-meant letter. I should have answered it yesterday, but I was very busy all day, and in the evening had to take Sir Andrew's place at a small dinner.

First - Let me say that so far as any personal matters are involved, I am quite ready to accept your suggestion, and consider the incident as closed. It would be unworthy, and narrow-minded, of me to harbour any personal resentment. Also please do not think that I ever had any intention of sulking in my tent. I never meant to imply that I was not going to take part in the further progress of the Brazilian negotiations. All I did say was, that I felt unable to go with you to see the Rothschilds. That, it is obvious that I cannot do: but, so long as I remain with the Firm, you may be absolutely certain that (to the best of my judgement) I shall devote myself to its interests in every possible way.'

Again - Please do not think that I resent criticism - or that I do not like other people holding views in opposition to mine - or that I am not prepared loyally to submit to any decision of my colleagues. None of these ideas are true. In the case under discussion, I said to Rothschilds that any signature of Saxton Noble's, or mine, would be subject to ratification by our board, and I only signed under the words *Ad referendum* - a fact, that it might be worth while to verify; though I do not care to verify it myself. Therefore there is no just ground for imputing to me any desire to arrogate to myself authority that properly belongs to the Board.

Gladstone tells me that what had most effect on you, was the belief that you had been kept in the dark as to the £364,000 being used to pay for the first two ships. It was news to me that you did not know it. It never occurred to me that you did not. In fact it seemed to me such an obvious part of the bargain, as to need no insisting upon. No Government in the world could be supposed to allow a sum of £364,000 to remain indefinitely idle.

We only are in possession of this £364,000 through something like an oversight. The first contract was for three much smaller ships - and the third ship had to be delivered in 27 months.

The sum of £364,000 was paid, as 2/10 of the smaller ship, on the supposition that it was to be delivered in 27 months. Afterwards, when the size of the ships was much increased, it was proposed only to order two ships instead of three. Eventually we induced them to order 3: but the 3rd was not to be delivered until 72 months instead of 27.

That is, we need not lay hand to her at all for 4 years; and to me, it seems obvious that the Government forgot that they had paid us a sum of £364,000, the interest of which they were practically to lose for 4 years.

For the purposes of your argument, you said that this £364,000 was paid, because we pledged ourselves to build a ship at so long a posterior date and that we should never undertake so to build without such a sum. But I do not suppose that you would seriously lay down this doctrine in cold blood. To do so, would imply a lack of knowledge of the conditions under which modern business is conducted, and of the prices on which our tenders are based. From my standpoint, I should be glad to tender for any amount of battleships, three years ahead, on a payment of £50,000 a ship or less. In fact we have often tendered for ships ahead in the past and bound ourselves (I fancy) without any deposit at all.

Another point which you pressed was that a contract, once made, had never been abandoned by Elswick without definite money compensation, that no motives of policy would justify such an abandonment. But, not to go very far back, I remember that on pressure from the Minister of Marine in Italy, Sir Andrew actually cancelled the signed agreement for the sale to Italy of one of our speculative cruisers. The ship was a long time afterwards sold to Chile. Sir Andrew reported the cancelling fully to the Board - and you were present at the meeting.

But turning from detail to more general considerations. As our board grows smaller by natural processes, it ought to grow more harmonious, and more really united. But instead of that it seems to me to run a risk of losing unity, and it certainly is not so harmonious as it used to be. Perhaps this is a sign of increasing vigour - I do not know. But still I deplore these personal attacks - such as that on Sir Andrew Noble a few months ago - such as that on Saxton Noble, and me, a few weeks ago. These scenes seem to me unnecessary. They produce serious cleavages where unity is essential.

We must differ sometimes - but let us differ courteously, and without recrimination.

It was peculiarly painful to me, to be publicly censured, and to be treated as a child, and ignoramus in business, just at a time when Sir Andrew and John were going away for some months.

Believe me, it was not any petty personal bitterness, which filled me with dismay - it was the feeling that you thought that the servant of the Company, on whose shoulders the heavy day by day responsibility of this great place must rest for some months was a dunce at his trade, and quite unfit to bear the burden.

That dismayed me - and again the vision of divided counsels, and the importation of personal aloofness, or enmities, dismayed me more. We must avoid these things in future. At the present time we need unity: I am quite prepared to promote that unity, by absolutely effacing from my memory all the personal part of the last incident. We shall, I hope, meet on Thursday as if nothing had happened: and I hope that in the future you and I may find ourselves on the same side, as often as possible.

Elswick is everything to me, so long as I remain at Elswick, and Elswick must be much to you, through your great stake in the place. Our interests ought to be always coincident.

Yours very sincerely

J. M. Falkner

Rendel did not live to see his prophesy about Falkner come true. He died on 5 June 1913. On 24 September, four months later, Sir Andrew Noble was too ill to take the chair and Falkner substituted for him, seemingly for the first time. Sir Andrew died on 22 October 1915 - on 16 December the Board elected John Meade Falkner as Chairman of Armstrong Whitworth. The Elswick Quadrilateral, the Junta, the Camarilla that Rendel had warned against had seemingly triumphed. The "go-between" had essentially been "one of them".

(This article owes much to Ken Warren's researches and his biography of Meade Falkner and to the help of George Robson)