

*Captain J. M. Falkner of the 1st Northumberland Artillery*  
John R. Gretton

What!, I hear my readers say, John Meade Falkner was a British Army Officer? Well, yes he was, and here is the full story.

When researching the career of an eminent figure it can be useful to search the indices of *The London Gazette*, the British government newspaper devoted to recording official proceedings of either a military or civil nature including honours and awards, military or government appointments, commercial news, etc.

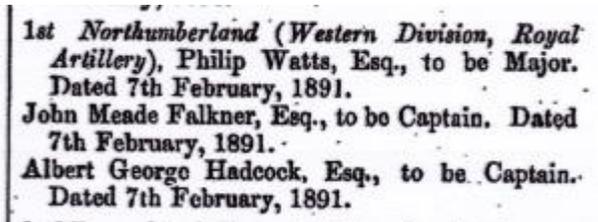
I began by checking whether Falkner's five Orders from foreign governments had been officially recorded, or "gazetted" as was the usual practice. He lists these very proudly in his 'Who's Who' entry as the Grand Cordons (the highest classes) of the Turkish Orders of the Osmanieh and of the Medjidieh, from Japan the Rising Sun (3rd class) and the Sacred Treasure (2nd class), and from Italy the Order of St. Maurice and St. Lazarus (Commander). I found the Italian Order (June 1920) and the Sacred Treasure of Japan (November 1921). John Noble is in the same list for the latter Order, also 2nd class, and a great honour as the 1st class was normally reserved for royalty or military commanders. The Ottoman orders would not have been gazetted as Turkey fought with the Central Powers in the Great War.

It is inconceivable in the context of his work that Falkner would not have been honoured by his own country, especially when the civil division of the Order of the British Empire was founded after the war, with five classes of award, specifically to recognise the many civilians who had contributed to the war effort. He undoubtedly either turned down an award or found a way to let it be known that an offer would be unwelcome. We can only speculate on the reasons for this. One possibility is that Evelyn Falkner recoiled from

becoming Lady Falkner with the social obligations the title would probably have entailed.

Thus far there were no surprises, but the next thing I found is, I think, a useful fresh contribution to Falkner's biography as a whole.

*The London Gazette* for February 6, 1891 records appointments or promotions in the Volunteer Corps, and under ARTILLERY. 1st NORTHUMBERLAND (WESTERN DIVISION, ROYAL ARTILLERY) are listed:



**1st Northumberland (Western Division, Royal Artillery), Philip Watts, Esq., to be Major. Dated 7th February, 1891.**  
**John Meade Falkner, Esq., to be Captain. Dated 7th February, 1891.**  
**Albert George Hadcock, Esq., to be Captain. Dated 7th February, 1891.**

Each entry is noted as 'Dated 7th February 1891', i.e. when their appointments commenced. These were their first military commissions as they are still styled 'Esq.', and they would have received a warrant, on parchment, signed by the Queen.

Of course, I immediately consulted the two biographies, both of which turned out to be completely silent on Falkner's military career. For the period in question Kenneth Warren notes (page 71) that "there is relatively little to indicate the nature of his early activities in Durham.", while Richard Davenport-Hines devotes his chapter six, which covers this period, solely to Falkner's early experiences at the Elswick works.

The Victorian 'Volunteer' movement was the response to a perceived need to form, to borrow a much later term, a 'Home Guard' to protect the country from internal or external threats at a time when the regular army primarily served abroad. At county level

the movement always had a distinctively aristocratic tinge, with patronage for fund raising, and leadership at officer level, coming from the great country houses. The uniforms were always splendid, with plenty of gold braid, and there was great comradeship among officers whose families had known each other for generations. On the other hand, it was normal for university men such as Falkner to be commissioned straight to a Captaincy, as a lower rank would not have been compatible with their academic achievements.

It will be noted that the three men were colleagues on the staff of the Elswick armament works. Major (later Colonel) Sir Philip Watts, the naval architect, rose to be a Director of Armstrong Whitworth and, as we shall see, in his capacity as Colonel of the 1st Northumberland Royal Garrison Artillery arranged for the 'Elswick Battery' to go to South Africa in 1900 for the Boer war. He proudly recounts this in his entry in 'Who's Who'. He died in 1926.



**Albert George Hadcock** was 30 in the 1891 census, living at Elswick Park Terrace and described as "Engineer, Manufacturer of Ordnance", though he was in fact Andrew Noble's personal assistant. He was born at Woolwich and had been a regular soldier in the Royal Artillery. He became Sir George Hadcock and an acknowledged ballistics expert whom Falkner invited to join the Board of Armstrong Whitworth in 1916. In his final 'Who's Who' entry he describes himself as "late Lieut.-Colonel Commanding 1st Northumbrian Brigade R.F.A. (T.F.)", i.e. Royal Field Artillery (Territorial Force). He died in 1936.

Falkner was the only one of the three men not to record his army service in books of reference, but Colonels Watts and Hadcock served rather longer than him and rose much higher in the command of the Northumberland Artillery. They both received The Territorial Decoration for twenty years' service in 1911.

So, the 1st Northumbrian Artillery was a considerable nursery of talent for its officers and, as they passed into middle age, one hopes that these three distinguished gentlemen made time to reminisce about the good old days when, as young Volunteer officers, they fired off their own ordnance. Falkner introduces a volunteer camp into *The Nebuly Coat* (1903). It is at page 49 of the *World's Classics* edition of 1954 and called a 'practice camp', as indeed they were. The temptations of the camp proved too much for Sophia, the wife of Framer Joliffe. There were white tents all up the hillside of Wydcombe Down and the brass band played in the evenings before the officers' dinner tent. They played on Sunday afternoons too, and to the chagrin of the Parson, the villagers went to listen. Sophia was there too, walking first on her husband's arm and then with others. Boys said they had seen her sitting with a redcoat among the juniper bushes and when the camp moved on Sophia went too with a sergeant, and never came back to Wydcombe. This is not the only autobiographical touch in that wonderful novel.

The 'Volunteers' were often slighted as "weekend soldiers", but the commitment was real, with regular drills at a hall near the works and an annual summer camp at Tynemouth where they could fire blanks from the shore batteries. This is an important reflection of Falkner's genuine interest in his chosen profession, a practical hand's-on, open air, experience away from the office. The large number of Elswick employees among the 'other ranks' will have taken an equal interest in test firing the products of their labours. The Volunteers were not obliged to serve overseas, but many opted to do so. Falkner's increasing seniority in his civil career made it impossible for him to join them and, anyway, by the time of the

Boer war he had already resigned his commission. When the Elswick Battery went to Cape Town ten years later, under different officers, it was commented that they were the only unit to arrive with ordnance of their own making!



### **Northumbrian Gunners – Volunteer Artillery**

When the Volunteer forces were first raised in the mid-nineteenth century it was planned that the units would be confined to Yeomanry and Cavalry, and not include Artillery. However, the 1st Northumberland was the first corps of artillery volunteers in the country and was embodied as a result of a public meeting at Tynemouth in May 1859 when a naval Commander warned of the damage an enemy ironclad could do to the town's defences in the event of war. Over the years the number and effectiveness of the coastal batteries steadily increased and, of course, this was meat and drink to the Elswick works. Some years later, in December 1914, the system was sorely tested when three German cruisers bombarded the undefended towns of Scarborough and Whitby causing 40 casualties, the first on British soil since 1690. The cruisers only met resistance when they steamed north to the defended port of Hartlepool where they were seen off by the town's two batteries,

each of three 6-inch guns. This was the type of warfare Falkner, and the men under his command, had prepared for twenty years earlier.

The Elswick Battery's role in the South African war is in itself an interesting story. Early in 1900 Armstrong Whitworth's were possibly rather surprised to receive an order from Lady Meux for six large calibre naval guns to be mounted on carriages for use on land. Their range was double that of standard British artillery of the time, and they were considerably heavier requiring four, as opposed to three, pairs of horses. The guns were 'borrowed' from a Japanese ship building at Elswick and converted to field pieces, with the longer carriages for eight horses, at the works. In the immediately published account of the first phase of the Boer War: 'With the Flag to Pretoria' by H.W.Wilson (1900) there are two superb contemporary photographs of the interiors of the munitions workshops at Elswick with the giant lathes and naval guns on the factory floor (vol.1, Page 212).



**'C' Section of the Elswick Battery, South Africa, c1901**

Lady Meux gave these as his own property to the Commander-in-Chief, Lord Roberts. She was the wealthy wife of Sir Henry Bruce Meux of Theobalds Park, Cheshunt, Hertfordshire. Valerie Susie Meux, born Langdon, was a brewery heiress and also an

enthusiastic amateur Egyptologist. She died in 1911. The 1st Northumberlands obtained unique authority, via the influence of Colonel Philip Watts, to take the guns to the Cape with men drawn mostly from the factory. They were the 'Elswick Battery' and the 244 Officers and Men sailed in a troopship in April 1900, with their guns going in crates direct from the works in another transport. They distinguished themselves in South Africa, with two of the officers receiving the Distinguished Service Order, and two of the men, Sgt. T. Howarth and Battery Sgt. Major W. Smith each awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal. This will have been the source of much pride back in Newcastle. Subsequently, the War Commission, to which Sir John Noble gave evidence, acknowledged that the Elswick guns were much superior in range and handling to the ordinary field guns.



The movements of the Elswick Battery are well chronicled in contemporary accounts of the Boer war, especially the chapter in John Stirling's 'Our Regiments in South Africa' (1903). Their finest hours came when they accompanied Sir Ian Hamilton on his famous 'March'. In June 1901 they handed the guns over to a fresh unit and sailed for home, arriving back in July. After the war Lord Roberts distributed the guns, one each to Ladysmith and Cape Town. The

other four were brought back home, one for Eton College, one to Roberts' garden at Ascot and two initially to Theobalds Park, though they are now at H.M.S. Excellent, the shore base at Portsmouth.

Artillery training for the Northumberland force later became much more organised, through the purchase in 1911 of 20,000 acres of the Redesdale Moor, a previously desolate area, where the annual camps were then held, a long line of tents and white painted huts. There was plenty of space for artillery firing training of the smaller guns and, from 1914, Armstrong Vickers tested their field guns there before they were shipped off to France and Flanders.

If one exists, a real 'find' would be a photograph of J. M. Falkner in his Northumberland Artillery Captain's uniform. As the helmet would have added some inches to his already considerable height, he would have been an impressive figure.

John Meade Falkner served for exactly five years as a Volunteer Officer, completing the period he would have signed on for. *The London Gazette* for 11 February 1896 has: 1st NORTHUMBERLAND, WESTERN DIVISION, ROYAL ARTILLERY.

**Captain J. M. Falkner resigns his Commission.  
Dated 12th February 1896.**

I think these new findings very much confirm Falkner's dedication to his chosen career. He understood the use and purpose of artillery at first hand, he had trained his men, camped with them, and together they had fired off the guns they had made. He wasn't purely an intellectual who had drifted into armaments, they were more fully a part of his life in his 'thirties than may have been previously appreciated.