Belief, Work and War:
some puzzles in the life of John Meade Falkner

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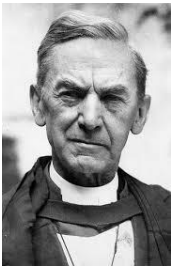
You and I are members of a successful and active society, whose purpose in meeting is to celebrate and learn more about the life of the extraordinary man whose name it bears. There remains much to be learned and there are some important puzzles to unravel. We know quite a lot about what John Meade Falkner achieved, but what drove him? Was his a rounded and integrated personality? Did he possess the virtues of consistency and constancy? Evidence from his correspondence and the witness of others seems to indicate that the answer to the last two questions is `No`. I want to explore a few of these themes this evening.

Falkner`s life was full of paradoxes. At school and university he was academically undistinguished, but he became a life-long scholar. A self-confessed medievalist, he spent almost all his working life helping to make and sell the most up to date means of mass destruction. Although he loved the rural south in which he had been born and lived until his mid-twenties, his home for the next half century was in the industrial north – and he chose not to leave that area even after retiring from business. But in addition to such various puzzling features, there is a good deal of evidence that at various times he held conflicting opinions - and a suspicion that, in his letters at least, he was willing to change them either to please, or sometimes to provoke or even outrage the man – it was almost always a man – to whom he was writing. Hensley Henson, Dean and later Bishop of Durham, and a friend during the last 20 years of Falkner`s life, once summed this up, when he described him as `that queerest of poseurs`. To illustrate these variations, I would like to draw attention to three parts of his life – his religious faith, his attitude to his often hum-drum working routine at Elswick, and his reactions to the Great War.

Though a son of an Anglican clergyman, Falkner seems to have had varied and conflicting thoughts about religion. Many of the people who met him, or knew of him, characterised him simply as a `Christian gentleman`. For instance, Mary Gretton, who knew of him in Burford, described him as an

`incorruptible Christian` and, looking back over his life many years later, Sir William Haley went so far as to suggest that Falkner saw everything *sub specie aeternitatis.* But Henson knew him personally and more fully - and was not the sort of man to be easily hood-winked – and he found it less easy to make out what his friend really believed.



Herbert Hensley Henson
1863-1947
Bishop of Durham
1920 - 1939

In mid-October 1915 there is a long entry in Henson`s diary: ` I dined with Meade Falkner, we two alone very pleasantly, and had much talk.....We had some talk about religion, in which Meade Falkner takes up a purely medieval attitude. What the Church orders or does must not be criticised or resented.....He is a very strange man and makes his conversation a shrouding veil for his thoughts more successfully than most men whom I know. There can be no doubt of his unusual ability, and of the manifoldness of his interests, and (I am disposed also to think) of the depth of his religious conviction, though the last is generally concealed by a sardonic humour`. (1) Corresponding with an older friend, the Reverend Edward Stone, Falkner was on one occasion more outspoken and in fact revealed beliefs which were less than orthodox. `To me, the omnipresence of the Deity is such an omnipresent thought, as to require sometimes checking lest it should develop into a potential Pantheism`. He added: `Pantheism is a very beautiful and seductive doctrine`. (2) Five years before, sending Stone his sympathies on a family bereavement, he had laid bare more of his own convictions – at that time. These beliefs too were scarcely of a nature which those who, year after year, saw him hurry across Palace Green to services in Durham Cathedral would expect to find. Indeed, they were both reckless and recklessly expressed. They may leave the reader puzzled. Perhaps they were intended to scandalise the man who received the letter, though the context seems to rule this out. On the other hand the existence of such ideas may help explain how a man of Falkner`s talents could also be daily preoccupied with sales of weapons of

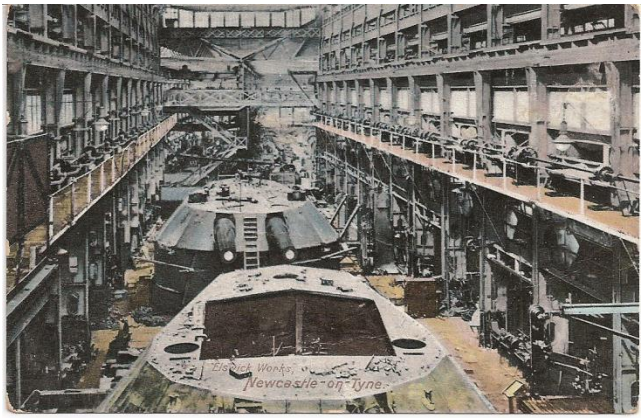
mass destruction. These remarks, let it be remembered, were included in his response to news of the death of one of Stone`s relatives: ` The longer I live, the less store I set by either life or death: both seem to me so essentially trivial and meaningless, that neither is worth much discussion or attention. Certainly, none of what are called the "problems" of life and death have much interest for me. The things that really appeal to me – more and more strongly – are the beauties of nature, the delights of literature, and the physical pleasures in which one may still indulge. The charm of the "Country", of the outdoor life with its simple pleasures, of sunny or even rainy days, and above all of starlight nights, continually grows upon me. Politics have ceased to interest me entirely and religious questions almost entirely...` (3)

Having first acted as private tutor to two of the sons of Sir Andrew Noble, Falkner had moved on to become secretary to their father, and after that, in turn, was made company secretary, director, a leading negotiator for major armament contracts, the acting chairman and finally chairman of Sir W.G Armstrong Whitworth and Company. It seemed a rather unexpected career path for the academically-minded son of a south country parson. Even so, to colleagues, and above all in correspondence with the largest owner of Armstrong shares, the powerful and ever-watchful Stuart, Lord Rendel, Falkner eventually represented himself as wholly committed to working for the commercial success of the firm. In a 1904 letter to Rendel his statement of devotion to the company in which they were both now prominent members seemed unqualified:` There was a time when I looked forward to the day when I could leave Elswick, but that feeling is long since passed ; and my greatest happiness is to see our great firm doing well`. But he then went on to make the sort of exaggerated claim which causes doubts to arise: `Her [i.e. Elswick`s] spell has fallen irresistibly upon me, and I am devoted to her soul and body.....No one except those at Elswick know the attraction of her, the mother that bred and fed us`. (4) Later he made other declarations of faith in and commitment to Elswick , but he also revealed a quite different attitude to his everyday work.

Edward Stone, when a Classics master at Eton, had once given the young Falkner holiday lessons, including what decades later were remembered as `some first hints in Latin verse`. Stone even seems to have played a part in Falkner`s move to the North East sometime during the middle months of 1883 – as the latter much later claimed when he referred to him as one

`who sent me here` (5) Early in the 20th century the two men resumed a correspondence which till then seems to have lapsed. Falkner mentioned his uncertainties about the nature of his daily work but at the same time made clear that he realised how difficult it would be to change course. Writing from Elswick in September 1902 – he seems never to have been put off writing by the uncongenial atmosphere of the place, or by the fact that he should, presumably, have been concentrating on his daily work - he told his former classics tutor: `With me all is well – at any rate from the material point of view. I am a director now of this firm, and a managing director. But sometimes I have grave misgivings whether life in these dreary, grimy, money-making places is really worth living. Our climate and surroundings are so distasteful. Sometimes I think of giving it all up, and coming South to live in some little house, and in some sunny spot, and vegetate or write. But with every year such change becomes a harder matter, and one does not know whether one could find happiness now without some strenuous work to do. ` (6)

When the Great War began, Falkner seemed uncertain in his opinions about it. Less than three weeks later he gave Edward Stone a vivid impression of the vast operations of which he was now effective head: `I have a bed in my room here, and sleep here now, or wake, for my nights are troubled enough. Just beneath my windows, we have had to put up temporary factories for field guns; and the banging and slamming and the sawing of iron make such a noise at night that sleep is sometimes quite impossible. We are working full tilt, day and night, Sundays and weekdays.



We have some 200 soldiers and sailors in the works as a guard, and the output of war material is enormous`. But the same letter also revealed his uncertainties about the cause in which he was so heavily committed:` I hope we may remain a great, or become a greater nation: but I am sure that if we are to, we want a thorough purgation and cleansing from excessive luxury and all the evils which it brings with it. It may be that this scourge of war will cleanse us. Of the Germans I have the highest opinion. I think that they are higher, and cleaner and much simpler livers than we are`. A little further on he returned to the transformation of Elswick already carried through to meet the German challenge, though typically some of the things he wrote about seem to have been exaggerations:` It is a strange scene at night – all the shops working exactly as in the day, the dull grumble of the machinery, the searchlights sweeping the river intermittingly, the patrol boats and the calls of the guards, and now and then a rifle shot or two when some boat does not answer the challenge and, just opposite my window, Jupiter blazing`.(7)

At the end of 1915, 16 months after the war began, but when he had already been effective head of Sir WG Armstrong Whitworth & Company for three years, Falkner formally succeeded Sir Andrew Noble as chairman. Britain was struggling in the middle of what was now recognised as the greatest war in its history; Armstrongs was one of the world`s leading armament companies. The context was recognised by the newly elected chairman as rich in thought-provoking features. On New Year's Day 1916, he wrote to Philip, Noble`s youngest son, whom he had tutored 30 years earlier. He made clear that he knew very well that in many ways he was a strange successor to Lord Armstrong and to Sir Andrew Noble, for – as he neatly summed it up, `...the animal inside the lion`s skin is not a lion`. (8) Even the setting for this confession of faith – or rather of doubt - seemed incongruous, for the new industrial leader was this time writing from the comfort of his own home, The Divinity House, almost in the shadow of Durham Cathedral. Later that year in a Sunday diary entry, Henson made a fuller comment on his ecclesiastically-inclined, armaments-manufacturer friend. He was puzzled: `Meade Falkner invited himself to dinner. We talked and turned over books for two hours, and then walked around the College admiring the Cathedral under the brilliant moonlight. He is the more enigmatic, the more I see of him. His knowledge is vast and multifarious. He reads Greek in bed daily at Elswick. [For, under the

pressure of wartime conditions, he often slept there.] Scholarship and shells go oddly together, but he is an embodied paradox`. (9)

Canon Wordsworth of Salisbury was another Anglican friend. Writing to him, during the terrible bombardment which preceded the slaughter on the Somme, Falkner made clear that Henson had not misrepresented him, or the way in which he was able to mix a variety of interests with the brutal urgencies of wartime business. He told Wordsworth`....I have your *Breviarium ad usum Sarum* in a bookcase in my business room. It is a very large room with windows and a big bay looking out over the river Tyne. In a corner is my bed and for the last two years I have slept there some nights every week. There is the constant drone and hum of machinery all the night, but before I turn in, I often sit an hour with your *Breviarium*. It is a delightful and gratefully sedative reading` (10)

By the end of summer 1915 he seemed more convinced than he had been in the early weeks of the war of the necessity for an Allied victory, but even now, as in his letter to Stone many years before, he referred to dreams of escaping to a very different world. In a P.S he wrote: `The war gives us cause for thought and anxiety for all the fine lives lost and for the terrible money cost. But of the issue I have no doubt at all: the Germans are fighting with the halter around their necks`. Even so, on the previous page, this head of a firm which at its wartime peak would employ some 70,000 men and women working relentlessly to produce 20th century war material had written:` Yet I am a medievalist with the cramped old schoolman`s mind, and to me change is terrible. I feel as if I should like to drink of the blameless herb nepenthe, to fall asleep and wake in some old abbey of Touraine with the figs ripening on the cloister wall`. (11) Such a remark was not out of character for Falkner, but it was scarcely helpful, positive, thinking when looked at from the point of view of armies running desperately short of field guns and of shells, and losing vital battles as a result. We have no record, I think, that Gustav Krupp von Bohlen und Halbach did not express similar longings for retirement, but it seems unlikely that he shared these aspirations of his fellow head of a world-ranking armaments firm.

Falkner was, however, representative of the general opinion of armament makers in two important respects – he denied that his company`s activities fostered war, and, after the fighting was at last over, he claimed that its

services remained essential to preserve the peace which it had helped to secure. In illustrating this approach he used a homely imagery which was superficially at least persuasive – an essential function of the great armament firms was that they helped to police the world.

On Saturday 18 April 1914 the 20th Annual General Meeting of Armstrong Whitworth had been held in Newcastle. Not only was it the last AGM before the outbreak of the Great War, but also the last at which Sir Andrew Noble took the chair. *The Times'* report referred to a question asked by one of the shareholders, a Mr D. Amphlett. He had said `there was a question of general interest which he wished to raise and which he desired the chairman to answer. One not infrequently heard that armament firms were the instruments of fomenting war scares or international friction`. He wanted their chairman `to emphatically assure the shareholders on this`. Instead of Noble, it was Falkner who replied. He told the meeting that the company `thought that the suggestion was really such a silly one....that it was scarcely worth answering`. He went on: `If the shareholders wanted to be reassured, they should look upon the firm as equipping the police of the world, in furnishing the means for the suppression of disorder. That was really how they ought to be regarded. The suggestions in the papers were incredibly foolish and mischievous. In the words of Mr Churchill, they were "Hellish insinuations"`. Amphlett thanked him for his emphatic denial, and Falkner took the chance to drive home his point: `We are glad of the opportunity of absolutely and definitely repudiating any such allegation. It is merely the phantasy of fools`. (12)

A little more than four years later, as slaughter and destruction continued, but the end was beginning to come into view, in the course of remarks at the 24th Ordinary Annual General Meeting in mid- September 1918, Falkner told shareholders that the directors were convinced that national spending on the provision of war materials would need to remain at a high level: `Some people anticipate that with the end of the war the demand for war material will practically cease. I do not think so. Demand must necessarily slacken, greatly slacken, but if the war has taught any military lessons, it has taught the necessity of adequate preparation and equipment. It is not likely that we shall be allowed to fall again into such a state of deplorable unpreparedness as we were in before the war`. Again he pointed out that armament firms supplied the needs of the `policemen`

who kept international disorder at bay. At first sight it may seem surprising that, after all the death, destruction, wear and tear, so much of the old comfortable imagery survived. But perhaps this was the greatest paradox of all; an aging intellectual still felt it necessary – or believed that it was possible - to justify the continuing existence of a giant capitalist enterprise, whose main *raison d`etre* was to produce the power to destroy civilisation, the fruits of which the whole of the rest of his life proved that he valued so much.

Notes

1. H Henson diary 19 October 1915
2. JMF to Edward Stone. December 1910
3. JMF to Edward Stone 7 November 1905
4. JMF to Lord Rendel 15 January 1904
5. JMF to Edward Stone 24 September 1915
6. JMF to Edward Stone 9 September 1902
7. JMF to Edward Stone 26 August 1914
8. JMF to Philip Noble 1 January 1916
9. H Henson diary 5 November 1916
10. JMF to Christopher Wordsworth 25 June 1916
11. JMF to Edward Stone 24 September 1915
12. *The Times* 20 April 1914 p 20