

## *A Derbyshire or Northumberland Pedagogue?*

Kenneth Hillier

When John Meade Falkner left Hertford College, Oxford in the summer of 1882, he took with him a 3rd Class degree in Modern History and no certain prospect of employment. His father had moved four miles from Weymouth to the little hamlet of Buckland Rippers two years earlier and was acting as Curate-in-charge of the church there. It was to be Falkner's own base for the next few years. His younger brother Charles remembers this period as a time of 'struggling days' financially, but interspersed with games of football and cricket (Falkner was wicket-keeper), fishing and learning to shoot.

From this tiny settlement of some thirty dwellings, in 'the depths of the country, where gas lights and policemen were equally unknown', Falkner was to find himself pitched into a very different environment. His brother takes up the story: 'By and by you "turned a stone" which proved to be a foundation stone and corner stone of your life. A certain Captain Noble was enquiring for a tutor for his son. It was not, I fancy, a very promising enquiry and I opine that the prospect of temporary work in the North was anything but congenial to you. Nobody was keen on it except your aunt and myself. Your aunt thought you would be "a very silly boy" to throw away a chance like this. She had a sort of clairvoyant intuition that this was the something John Micawber Falkner had been looking for. You had a week, I think to make up your mind in, and for six days the discussion of the pros and cons of the situation was only varied by the consideration of the cons and pros. The morning of the seventh day saw you still undecided but inclined to reason. At lunchtime you determined to accept and after lunch you wrote your acceptance.'

Charles Falkner's reference to the 'stone', of course, was a pun on the Rev. Edward Stone's name. It was Stone, a Classics Master at Eton College, who (as Falkner was to keep reminding him for the rest of his life) must have suggested Falkner to his colleague H. E. Luxmoore, who was Housemaster to John Noble. Falkner arrived at Jesmond Dene House, the Noble's family home in Newcastle-on-Tyne, on 3 January 1883. For the next fortnight, until John Noble returned to Eton, Falkner acted as his personal tutor. He appears to have been quickly accepted by the Noble family - both for his pedagogical ability and his social attributes - as on 2 February Liliias Noble, John's eldest sister, wrote to him at Eton that Falkner was still there - 'to our surprise they had taken him round the

county'.. Moreover, in early March Captain Noble himself, in a letter to John, mentioned he had written to Luxmoore about Falkner.

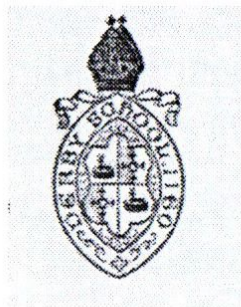
In fact, Captain Noble thought it 'not a bad plan' for John and Falkner to 'go to Lorbottle (a country house leased by the Nobles) straightaway and stay there until the exam' in April. The first surviving letter from Falkner to John Noble is dated 13 March 1883, and was sent from Buckland Rippers. Falkner was adamant that John would have to work 'at least 5 hours a day until the matric:' and that at any spare moment 'say at getting up or going to bed, learn away at the Greek irregular verbs'.

It is clear from the correspondence that Falkner tutored John in the Spring and then returned to Buckland Rippers when the Eton term started again. John came down from Eton for his summer holidays on 2 August and, presumably after a month's real relaxation, met up with Falkner again on 7 September for more extra-curricular tuition. This time, though, when John returned to Eton on 20 September, Falkner remained behind, employed to coach Philip Noble, the youngest of Captain Noble's sons. This included a three month trip to north Germany. Falkner regularly complained, in letters to John, about Philip's laziness - 'he cannot keep his mind or attention fixed for two minutes together' - and his worry that the boy would not get in to Eton. When they returned to England, they met up with John and all went up to Newcastle on the train.

Falkner spent Christmas with the Nobles and worked with John for the next three weeks on Juvenal and Horace. On 23 January 1884 Falkner travelled down to London with John and Philip, who went on to Eton the next day. Falkner, once again back at Buckland Rippers, continued to write to John, encouraging him to work at the Odyssey and suggesting Cicero and Horace (or Juvenal) for reading in the Easter vacation. Falkner appears to have been at Buckland Rippers for much of April and May 1884.

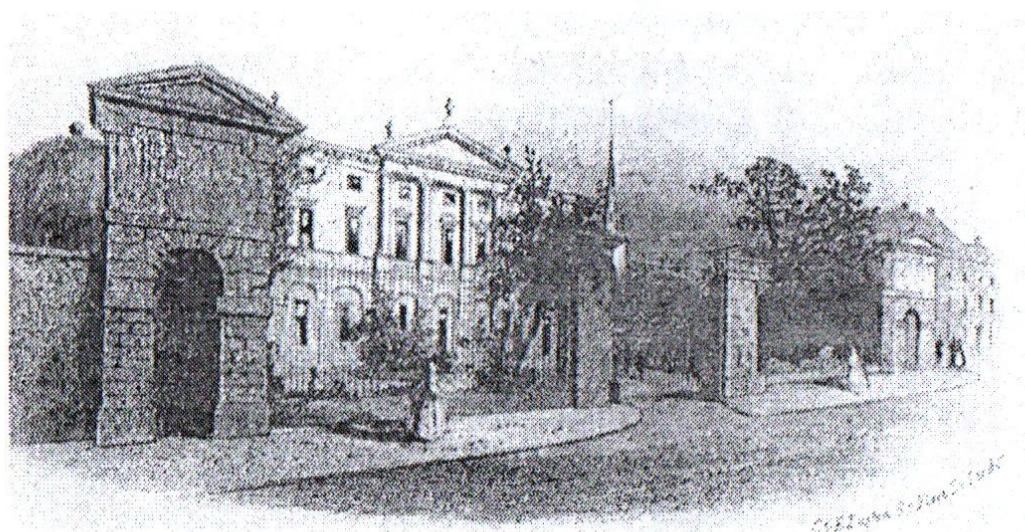
Although he was obviously well regarded by Captain Noble and his sons, Falkner was still employed on a temporary basis and there were long periods of the year when he would need to find other remunerative work. Charles Falkner alludes to this with his phrase 'struggling days' and implies that his brother worked for a time at the 'Chigwells' but that Falkner was 'ill in bed there more than half your time'. He also recalled that when Falkner was at Derby 'that you spent all your "screw" in entertaining boys to strawberries and cream'. This throwaway line about Derby would have meant little had four letters from Falkner himself to John Noble not survived.

On 8 June 1884, Falkner wrote to John from Buckland Rippers, bemoaning the fact that he had not heard from the latter for a long time. Half way through the letter he threw in the news that 'tomorrow I am going to take a form at Derby school for 4 weeks for Lowndes - the amateur scull.



So if you write to me, I hope you will soon address it to me at "The school Derby" - I trust in providence to pull through it somehow; but I think I see a scornful smile irradiating your face when I tell you that I have to teach among other things French & German! They tell me it is a very jolly school. They have a good river there - the Derwent - and keep racing-boats.'

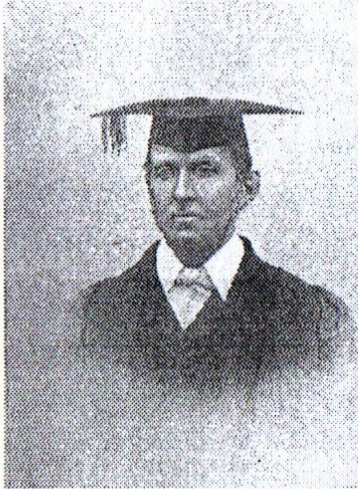
Derby School had had a long and chequered history. The date of its charter was 21 May 1554 and for three centuries it was held in a Tudor building in St. Peter's churchyard. It reached its nadir under the Revd. James Bligh, Headmaster from 1793 to 1834, when the numbers steadily decreased to a total of four in 1826 and only two a year later. Then, for a time, William Hope - later to become vicar of St Peter's - was the only pupil. There were but minor improvements until 1863, when the Charity Commissioners prepared a scheme for the school under the Charitable Trusts Act. This provided for a wider curriculum to include modern subjects and a division into an upper and lower school. That same year St. Helen's, the fine town house of the Strutt family was sold by Lord Belper to the Derby Corporation who converted it to house the revived school.



**St. Helen's House, Derby in 1861**

Two years later, in 1865, the Rev. Walter Clark became Headmaster. He had been head boy at Shrewsbury School under Samuel Butler and, winning an Open Classical Scholarship at Magdalen College, Cambridge gone on to great success there. Now he was Head at twenty-seven years of age.

### **Rev. Walter Clark**



When the Schools Inquiry Commissioner visited the school in 1867 he found that 'the number of scholars has been rapidly rising and is now 88, about a third being boarders'. All the boys learnt Latin, Divinity, Arithmetic, History and Geography, whilst 75 pupils learnt French and Greek in the senior school. There is no doubt that Clark was an inspiring leader. For the Annual Speech Days, he attracted celebrity speakers - the Marquis of Hartington, the Earl of Carnarvon and, in 1872, the Prince of Wales. He built the first chapel and soon had over twenty scholarships attached to the school. In 1877 a large additional classroom and dormitory accommodation were built and they were opened by the Prince of Wales. Although, on 28 January 1884, the Headmaster had asked the Governors for a Testimonial in the event of his applying for an appointment as Headmaster at some other public school, he was still there when Falkner arrived on 9 June.

In 1878 the Rev. Clark had appointed Jefferson Lowndes as a Classics master. His decision may well have been influenced by the fact that Lowndes was fast making a name for himself at Henley Regatta. That summer he had come second in the Diamond Challenge Sculls and helped his Oxford college, Hertford, come second in the Visitors' Challenge Cup. Between 1879 and 1883 Lowndes won the Diamond Challenge Sculls (one of the world's top single sculls events, established in 1844) and the Wingfield Sculls between 1881 and 1883. The Rev. Clark had established a School Rowing Club at Derby and Lowndes' influence was soon to be felt. Whilst Falkner was filling in for him, not only did Lowndes - racing for the Twickenham Rowing Club and paired with D. E. Brown - win the Silver Goblets; but the local newspaper *The Derby Mercury*, was able to trumpet the success of Derby School. In the Final of the Public Schools Challenge Cup, the team beat Hereford School and Magdalen College School, Oxford 'easily'.

It may be no more than coincidence that both Lowndes and Falkner had been at Hertford College in 1878, but it might explain the latter getting the temporary job at Derby. It is more likely that the famous agency Gabbitas and Thring were responsible, as Falkner had received another offer of a tutorship through them to coach a son of the Countess of Lathom, which he passed on to his brother Charles.

Falkner said virtually nothing about his new colleagues in his letters to John. There seems to have been around nine others, apart from the Headmaster. On paper at least, several were well qualified: Dennis Coyle was a late Exhibitioner at the Royal College of Science, Dublin; John Iddon, who taught Mathematics, was a Fellow of Sidney Sussex College, Cambridge and 11th Wrangler; J. R. Morgan was a Classical Scholar from Jesus College, Cambridge; Ernest Rice was a Late Scholar, also from Jesus College. Two were to become Headmasters themselves: the Rev. Robert Stuart de Courcy Laffan, who had gained a 1st class Classics degree at Merton College, Oxford, became Head of King's School, Stratford on Avon and then Principal of Cheltenham College 1895-99; and Frank Stuckey, of Pembroke College, Cambridge who became Head of Leadenhall House School, Harrogate. Jefferson Lowndes, once he returned from his successes on the Thames only stayed at Derby another year, becoming Headmaster of St. Kitts Grammar School in the British Leeward Islands in 1886.

In Falkner's letter of 15 June to John Noble, he praised the school and its pupils: 'This is a very nice place - and the boys are awfully jolly and I get on pretty well with the German but the French is rather a sweat...' and again in a letter exactly a week later 'they seem to me to have a specially nice set of boys here; and I get a good deal of fun one way or another making jolly expeditions up the river, the Darley Vale part being especially lovely. I fished here last Friday but only caught two moderate trout'. He certainly did not seem overworked: 'We get ½ holidays here pretty often, always 3 regular ones a week & almost always 1 or two more extra ones - & no school till ½ past nine in the morning, at least not for me, so I have a pretty easy time of it'.

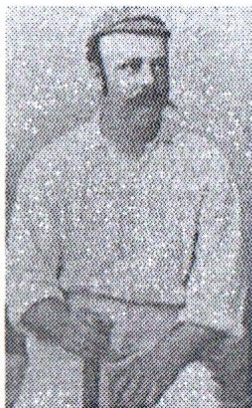
Cricket appears to have been one of Falkner's enthusiasms in this period. He himself played in a match 'for the first time this summer and did fairly well for me, catching two men & making 10: but I felt so bad after that I am afraid I shall not be able to play again'. This may have referred to the match between Derby School

and Ashbourne on 19 June, where the latter's 172 was far too large a total for Derby's feeble 79.

But it was watching and following the fortunes of others that he refers to most often in his letters to John Noble. Whilst still at Buckland Rippers he rubbed salt in Antipodean wounds: 'The Australians are getting a good deal knocked about aren't they - I am very glad of it', but was 'sorry poor Murdoch isn't doing much - I rather believe in him'.

Falkner must have been alluding to the match between the Australians and an All England Eleven at Aston Lower Grounds in Birmingham, held over three days at the end of May. Although Australia had won by 4 wickets, the scores (82 and 26 by England and 76 and 33 for 6 for Australia) were hardly inspiring.

### **Billy Murdoch**



Billy Murdoch had only scored 7 and 1, but, 29 years old that summer, he was probably Australia's finest batsman of the period. He had made and cemented his name in the Australian teams of 1880 and 1882, and soon was to figure in the amazing Test at the Oval in August. After a draw at Manchester and an England victory at Lord's, it was vital that Australia won the last Test to salvage an overall draw. Murdoch did his best. Winning the toss, Australia batted...and batted ...and batted. They amassed the enormous total of 551 (declarations were not permitted until 1889) with Murdoch contributing 211 - the first double-century in Test cricket (the record was to last until 1903) Also for the first time in Test cricket all eleven players bowled during Australia's innings, W. G. Grace keeping wicket while Lyttelton took four wickets with lobs! The match ended in a draw. As a further aside, in the England team was A. G. Steel, a virtual contemporary of Falkner's at Marlborough College in the 1870s. Steel captained the school XI in 1876, Falkner's last summer there, and was regarded by some as good enough for England even then. He developed into an outstanding all rounder, reckoned by his peers as second only to W. G. Grace.



**Allan G. Steel**

Falkner had just missed, by a mere five days, seeing the Australians play Derbyshire at the County Ground, Derby, where the latter had been comprehensively beaten. He did manage to get to Nottingham on 14 June 'to see the finish of the Australians v. Notts. It was v. exciting, nearly 15,000 people there & a splendid ground. Blackham made 45 not out & Giffen 25 towards the end & won the match for the Aust.:. Just before they got the required number Giffen ran himself out. He is a jolly looking beggar & batted freely & well yesterday'. The 25 year-old Giffen was to play for Australia until 1896, becoming All-Round Cricketer of the Year in 1894 'by general consent being regarded as the greatest all-round cricketer yet produced by the Australian Colonies'.

Blackham (1854-1932) was regarded as Australia's first choice wicketkeeper from its first ever Test in 1877 to 18 years later. He was named by Wisden as one of its Cricketers of the Year in 1891 and was selected as an inaugural member of the Australian Cricket Hall of Fame. Such was the quality of player that Falkner watched that fine June afternoon in 1884.



### **Jack Blackham**

Falkner also recalled that after the match 'a fellow gave an exhibition of diving & swimming in the Trent which is a very fine river at Nottingham. He dived 30 feet into the stream & swam well'.

All in all, Falkner appears to have thoroughly enjoyed his time at Derby. He is almost certain to have watched with the school the two or three detachments of the 3rd Dragoon Guards as they passed through the town towards the end of the month; and, back at Buckland Ripers, he wrote to John Noble: 'You will see from this address that I have left Derby. I had a very nice time indeed there. The masters & boys were very jolly and I was very distressed at leaving. I came down here last night (12 July). The school is a very pleasant one "aber nicht moralisch" at least not very - and the headmaster is a funny sort and rather inclined to the bottle (in fact, the Rev. Clark lasted, soberly or otherwise, another five years, dying in harness and early on Friday morning, 12 April 1889). He was very nice to me and offered me a mastership there after Christmas but I don't suppose I shall take it'.

From the tone and content of his letters to John Noble over this period, it is fairly clear that Falkner much preferred a future with

the Noble family. However jolly a group the boys were, they were no match for a potential life amongst the industrial aristocracy of the North-East. He continually urged John to work harder - 'it is a crying shame that you don't put your abilities to better use' - and was delighted to get an invitation from his Eton charge as 'I am sure that I need not say how glad I always am to come north again'. He followed this up, however, with a mutual chastisement. 'I think though if I come these holidays that we really ought to turn over a somewhat new leaf in work. I quite admit that the fault is as much mine as yours that we haven't worked much hitherto: but I think you really ought to do a little steady work this summer vac: even one hour or 1½ hours a day for certain would be more than we really do very often - and I fancy one could almost get that in the morning before you go shooting &c. Of course it would be a drag more or less: but as you will go to Oxford in October I think we ought to do a little of the main necessary work. It doesn't seem to me fair to Capt Noble not to do a little more than we do do....'

Falkner was also in correspondence with Captain Noble that summer and all was settled by the time John arrived in Newcastle on 1 August. Falkner followed on 23rd of the month and work of a sort continued off and on until 8 October. Two days later the two of them went to Oxford to get a cap and gown for John in readiness for his first term at the university. For the first few months of 1885 this pattern continued. Falkner retiring to Buckland Ripers when John was at Oxford and Philip at Eton, and reappearing in the Noble household for the Easter vacation. On 15 March, Captain Noble wrote to John that he would 'leave to Falkner and you' to settle what you will do but I recommend you to make a point of spending a few days either here (Jesmond Dene House) or at Lorbottle'. By mid April Falkner was at Lorbottle and on 1 May, Philip wrote to his brother, 'I suppose you know that Falkner is staying up at Newcastle till you come back from Oxford'.

Falkner must have known that he could not go on being a tutor to the boys for ever and, although the emotionally and physically fragile John increasingly leant on the older man for support, the Noble times could suddenly end. A throwaway line in a letter to John on 17 May shows that another marker was being successfully laid down: 'I go down to Elswick every day now and like all the work I get to do'. From such small acorns mighty oaks do grow: first as Captain Noble's Secretary; then as Secretary to the firm; then a place at the directors' table; a vice-chairmanship; and, finally, the job of Chairman itself. The Tyne at Elswick might not



have been as conducive to Falkner's romantic imagination as the Derbyshire Derwent, but financial stability was even more vital to a man who felt responsible for his younger siblings as well as himself.

Falkner gave Derbyshire a key role in his fiction. In his short story *A Midsummer Night's Marriage* (1896), the hero 'Mr. Anthony Sandal, a Gentleman-Commoner of Christchurch, Oxford, was a person of some distinction, being young, handsome, and possessed of large landed property at Minsteracres, in Derbyshire'. After completing his university course, Santal's time was spent in improving his Derbyshire property 'and in efforts to ameliorate the conditions of his tenants'. His affections having become engaged to a Miss Willoughby, the only child of a neighbouring landowner, the marriage was arranged to take place in June 1824 in the little church of Brant Willoughby. Then disaster struck.....

A year earlier, in 1895, Falkner had had his first novel published. *The Lost Stradivarius* is set in Oxford, Dorset, Naples and Derbyshire. Constance Temple, Sir John Maltravers' sweetheart and later wife, has her home at Royston and some of the most highly charged scenes are set in the Derbyshire mansion. Peter Davey (in the *John Meade Falkner Society Journal* Volume 1 Number 5, July 2004) has put forward a case for the original of Royston being Mayfield Hall just west of Ashbourne. Certainly there is the Talbot Greaves connection and it lies not too far away from Derby itself.

Falkner described Royston in some detail in Chapter 8 - 'though Elizabethan in date and external appearance, succeeding generations had much modified and enlarged the house; and an ancestor in the middle of the last century had built at the back an enormous hall after the classic model, and covered it with a dome or cupola'. The chapter then progressed to the chilling scenes in the picture gallery which gave a shape to much of the rest of the novel.

The Noble family's gain may not necessarily have been Derby School's loss. As one who has spent a lifetime in that exhausting profession, I feel that Falkner would, in many ways, have been a fish out of water. Unlike Mr Grimwig in *Oliver Twist*, who knew only two sorts of boys - mealy boys and beef-faced boys - Falkner may have found his charges 'jolly'; but a four week summer term interlude is hardly the same as the semi-penal stretch that is the norm for pedagogues. Falkner might well quote Shakespeare's famous line 'to be a boy eternal' on the title page of *Moonfleet* and, unlike many 'who talk of Robin Hood, but have never shot his bow', he had at least aimed a few arrows; but he made a very wise decision to forsake the chalk face for the mud banks of Elswick.