

Falkner in Camera
Edward Wilson

A Photograph From Taunt

ONE Sunday night your garden ways
Were drenched with sudden summer rain,
The big drops gleamed on laurel sprays
And lessened drying on the pane.

We walked between the close-cut yews,
Strange shapes of peacock, ape and man,
Trim alleys where the latest news
Still breathed a tale of Good Queen Anne.

Deep in the west the thunder clouds
Hung lowering where the storm was past,
And blazing through his purple shrouds
The setting sun burst forth at last.

He lit the low brick front of red,
The mullioned windows grouping there,
He lit the gold of Cicely's head,
The silver urn, the Derby ware.

He lit the ivied western tower,
The tower the white owls circling haunt,
The broad magnolia leaves that bower
With lustrous green the House of Gaunt.

He touched your wraps of sea-green grey,
Lady, he lit your sweet grave face,
The memory does not pass away,
The peace, the stillness of the place.

I thank you for the gifts you send,
Your lines, this masterpiece of Taunt,
And when my footsteps southward wend
Their goal shall be the House of Gaunt.

Falkner's prose and poetry demand annotation of different kinds - literary, antiquarian, topographical; certainly the Scholar will find himself, as Leonard Clark put it in his sharp poem of that name, 'blinking at motes and waving print'. Thus in 'A Photograph from Taunt' we may guess that the line 'Strange shapes of peacock, ape and man', like the topiary work itself, derives from the account of Solomon's navy of Tharshish bringing, amongst other splendours, 'apes and peacocks' (I. Kings x. 22). In the lines,

He lit the ivied western tower,
The tower the white owls circling haunt,

we hear a reminiscence of Gray's *Elegy*:

Save that from yonder ivy-mantled tow'r
The moping owl does to the moon complain.

This article, however, is concerned with two overt and (now) antiquarian references. The title, 'A Photograph from Taunt', and the words, 'this masterpiece of Taunt', are allusions to Henry W. Taunt (1842-1922), the famous and prolific Oxford photographer.[1]

As for the 'House of Gaunt', the Index to Falkner's *Handbook for Travellers in Oxfordshire* (London, 1894) lists 'GAUNT HOUSE', which is near Standlake, and on p. 98 Falkner gives this account:

a moated Manor House, now a farm. It seems to have been built by John Gaunt (d.1465), to whom in Wood's day there was a Brass in Standlake Church. At the time of the Civil War it belonged to Samuel Fell, Dean of Ch[rist] Ch[urch] 1638-1648. It was garrisoned for the King, 1644, but after a vigorous resistance was stormed by the Parliament men under Colonel Rainsborough, and surrendered May 31, 1645. Owing to the dilapidations of the siege, John Fell, Dean of Ch. Ch. and Bp. of Oxford, 1676-1686, rebuilt it, and the date of 1669 is on the mantel-piece in the kitchen.

An article on Gaunt House by C.J. Cornish, 'A Royalist Post: Gaunt House', appeared in *Country Life*, xiii, no. 338, Saturday 27 June 1903, pp. 870-2, and was illustrated by six photographs by H.W. Taunt. Prints of these photographs and of a fair number of others by Taunt of Gaunt House are kept in the Oxfordshire Photographic Archive at the Centre for Oxfordshire Studies, Central Library, Oxford; from Taunt's Daybooks the Archive has dated all these photographs to 1901.

A few of Taunt's catalogues of his picture post cards survive, but the only one to list Gaunt House is the *Catalogue of Taunt's Picture Post Cards of English Scenery, & c.*, dated January

1905 (now in the Bodleian Library, Oxford). It advertises both an ordinary sepia post card (no. 818, 'Gaunt House', s.v. 'Standlake, Oxon.', p. 20), and an 'aquarelle', defined in the preface as 'printed from Tone Blocks made by Photography in Inks of various suitable tints, and are called "Aquarelle" - a French term meaning water colour - from their resemblance to Photographs finely coloured by that medium' (no 818*, 'Gaunt House Front', s.v. 'Scenery of the Windrush River', p. 26). A black-and-white post card, labelled 'Gaunt House, Standlake, Oxon. Taunt & Co. 818', together with a photographic sepia print (no. 5936), survive in the Oxford Photographic Archive. The Archive tells me that many of their Taunt photographs of Gaunt House would once have been made into postcards, and I have chosen to reproduce one of these here.



(Oxf. Phot. Archive no. 5932; also in *Country Life*, above, p. 871, 'The Moat and Bridge').

However, the house described in 'A Photograph from Taunt' cannot be Gaunt House which has no 'low brick front of red' (st. 4) but is made of stone, and has no tower (st. 5) in the west or elsewhere.[2] Further, the tenant farmer occupiers would not be known to Falkner. The house from which Taunt's photograph, probably a post card though card no. 818, for example, states that it is available as an 8 in. x 6 in. photograph, was sent, sharing with Gaunt House 'broad magnolia leaves' (st. 5), must have been that of the 'Lady' (st. 6).

Three other poems in Falkner's *Poems* (c. 1930 and reprinted in 1933) are addressed to a Lady. 'New Year, 1892' is dedicated to M[argery] D[urham] N[oble], 1828-1929; its 'My Lady' is a term of poetic chivalry, though as it happens Margery Noble's husband, Andrew, became K.C.B. in 1893 and a baronet in 1902. In 'A Seaside Garden' an unidentified 'My lady' is spoken of as residing in a house some 'three centuries' old with 'towers' which are 'lichened' and 'grey', situated 'Beside the Hampshire sea' (so far unidentified; cf. *The John Meade Falkner Society Newsletter* no. 4, 22 July 2000, p. 1; but see below, pp. 23-4). Finally, the 'Dedication for Murray's Guide', presumably from the last stanza's reference to 'Oxford days' that for Oxfordshire (1894) rather than Berkshire (1902), begins 'Dear Lady'.

But, for the moment, the house of 'A Photograph from Taunt' remains unlocated.

As is often the case with antiquarian inquiry, light cast on one part of the scene only emphasises the darkness of the rest.

NOTES

[1] On Taunt see M. Graham, *Henry Taunt of Oxford: A Victorian Photographer* (Oxford, 1973); B. Brown, *The England of Henry Taunt: Victorian Photographer* (London, 1973).

[2] For details of Gaunt's House's history and construction see the account by S.C. Townley in the *Victoria County History of the County of Oxford* xiii (1996), p.184 (and see Plate 32 of Gaunt House by Taunt; no. 5940 in the Oxf. Phot. Archive). I have also visited Gaunt House.

The author and The John Meade Falkner Society are grateful to the Oxfordshire County Council Photographic Archive for allowing us to reproduce the photograph of Gaunt House (OPA image number: 2000/18/3)