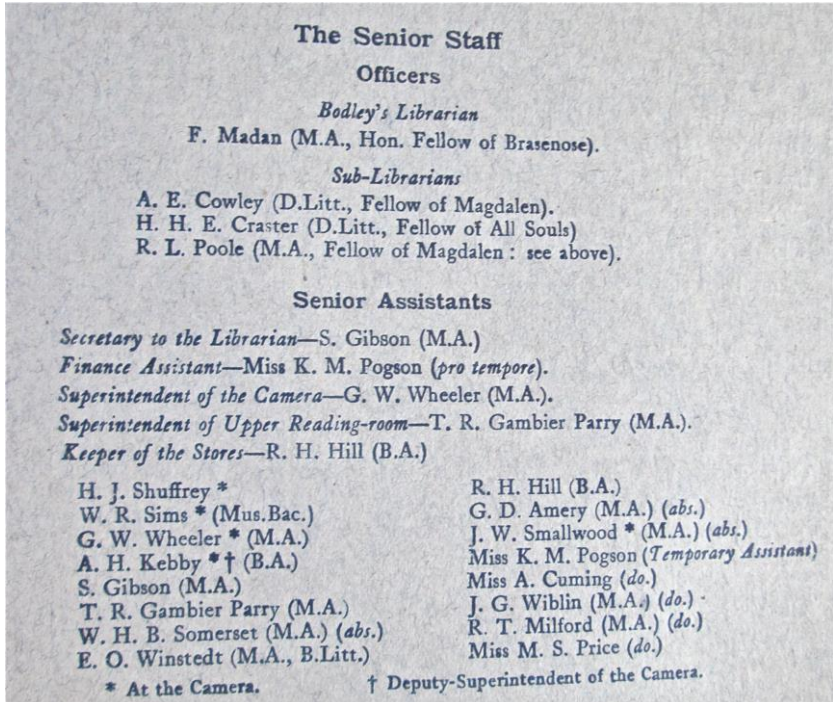


Naming the Oxford Three
Michael Daniell



Oxford's Bodleian Library staff list as it was in early 1919

In a Personal Note at the beginning of the 1954 Oxford World's Classics edition of *The Nebuly Coat and The Lost Stradivarius* Sir Edmund Craster wrote of John Meade Falkner:

His visits to Oxford were of three days' duration, and he spent them – a little surprisingly – not at the Mitre but at the Randolph. And he had one guest for dinner each night. They were always the same chosen three; always in the same order, the order of their seniority on the staff of the Bodleian Library; always, so far as the season allowed, the same menu. (i)

Who might those three have been? If one takes the year 1919, (ii) when the demands on the Chairman of Armstrongs might have diminished, John Meade Falkner, then aged 61, might just have been meeting Falconer Madan who retired as Bodley's Librarian in April 1919 aged 68. Madan had been at Marlborough College 1864-70 (JMF's years there were 1872-77) and he had joined the Bodleian as a sub-librarian in 1880. He gained a high reputation as a bibliographer. He was described at his retirement dinner as:

A master of detail, yet never losing sight of the larger issues, he opened his heart to us, the heart of a true librarian, keenly alive to the human element in the care of books, full of sympathy with the associations of such a place as the Bodleian. (iii)

Madan was succeeded as Librarian by Arthur Cowley, then aged 58. Cowley's field was Semitic studies and his achievement in the 1920s was in developing libraries, especially the Radcliffe Science Library and the Rhodes House Library, to take the pressure off the main Bodleian collection. He would have had less in common with JMF than Madan, so it is possible that he was not one of the select three, though the *ODNB* records him as having "... a remarkable capacity for friendship ... immensely sociable, he was a member of several Oxford common rooms, various dining clubs, and two London clubs, the Athenaeum and the Union". Less creditably, the memoirs of Lord Wolfenden mention Cowley's appetite. "*One evening [at Magdalen College] the first strawberries of summer appeared. Cowley, Bodley's Librarian, a rubicund bon viveur, helped himself to a shovelful of them, a pound of sugar and a pint of cream.*" (iv)

Cowley's place as one of the sub-librarians was taken by Edgar Lobel (1888-1982). Lobel's speciality was the study of ancient languages but his interests were much broader. His biographer says: *He travelled widely in Britain and in Europe during vacations, and was remarkably well-informed not only about European Literature*

but about a whole range of topics including wine, botany, and topography. (v)

So perhaps he was an appropriate dining companion for JMF, but we can't be certain. However, I do feel sure that the 40-year-old Craster himself was one of the three. Born in 1879, he had joined the Bodleian as one of two sub-librarians in 1912 and succeeded Cowley as Librarian in 1931. On 12 December 1923 JMF wrote to Canon Wordsworth about a recent trip to Oxford:

I took the volumes of the [Muchelney] Breviary and the Shepton Beauchamp Missal down to Bodley, where they roused some real, I think, interest. There are no liturgists there now, of the type of Bannister, or Wickham Legge (vi); Gambier-Parry, and Craster, are probably the upcomers, but Liturgiology is not properly within their purview. On the other hand, Craster is an excellent judge of palaeographic date. Falconer Madan, who is an old friend of mine, also saw them.

Craster came from Northumberland and though not a liturgist would have shared interests with John Meade Falkner. A colleague, Prof E.F. Jacob, quoted an address Craster gave to Surrey librarians: *Cultivate the charm of humility and be not afraid that your humility may be misunderstood. Much quiet amusement is to be derived therefrom ... Get to know your readers and share their pleasures and enthusiasms.* (vii)



It was Jacob who said that perhaps the best representation of Craster was the gargoyle of him by the south entrance to the Old Bodleian's quad.

Sir Edmund Craster still looks out over the quad of the Old Bodleian Library, Oxford

Madan, and subsequently Cowley, plus Lobel and Craster might have comprised the three. (viii) But this was not necessarily so. There are other candidates. One might be T.R. Gambier-Parry (1883-1935). He studied Sanskrit and compiled the library's bibliography of Sanskrit manuscripts. But in 1912 he had edited the Colbertine Breviary, and he then helped Wickham Legg (*sic*) edit the Sarum Missal. One of his special interests was heraldry. Something of his character is revealed in his obituary in *The Times* which mentions:

In the Bodleian, if to some people he was slightly alarming at the first encounter, no trouble was too great to take when help was needed. (ix)

Another candidate would be Strickland Gibson (1877-1958). He held various posts in the Bodleian and in his 20s he wrote several important works on book bindings. In 1921 he was one of the founders of the Oxford Bibliographic society. His 1958 obituary said, "*As a librarian and bibliographer Gibson was an army in himself alone.*" (x)

Any of these six might have attracted JMF's attention: what a pity we cannot know which three were chosen.

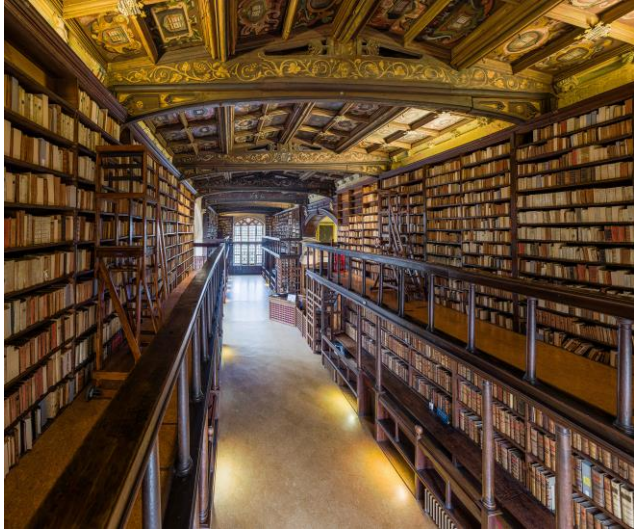
Should we be surprised that JMF stayed at the Randolph Hotel rather than the Mitre? The Mitre was a traditional coaching inn on the High Street and had some medieval features. The Randolph only dated from 1864 but it was in the tradition of the grand hotels to which JMF would have become accustomed on his business travels. It would probably have had a good cellar and would also have been prepared to cater for individual tastes in food. How I wish we could know that particular menu that JMF demanded for those three librarians. Is there a clue in *The Nebuly Coat* when Sharnall, inviting Westray to dine in his room, insists, "*Don't be too long, or the turtle will be cold, and the ortolans baked to a cinder*"? (xi)



Oxford's Randolph Hotel as it would have appeared to JMF in the 1920s

Notes:

- i. *The Nebuly Coat* p.xiv in the 1954 Oxford World's Classics edition.
- ii. 1919 was incidentally the year in which the Bodleian obtained its first typewriter. Sir Edmund Craster, *History of the Bodleian Library* (1952) p.250
- iii. The Revd. G.A. Cooke, Regius Professor of Hebrew, speaking at a valedictory dinner for Falconer Madan. *The Bodleian Quarterly Record* Vol. II No. 23 p.263
- iv. Lord Wolfenden, *Turning points* (1976) p.54. With thanks to Dr. B.C. Barker-Benfield for this information.
- v. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- vi. John Wickham Legg (*sic*) died in 1921, aged 78.
- vii. E.F. Jacob in Appendix B of Sir Edmund Craster, *The History of All Souls' College Library* (1971), p.118, published posthumously after Craster's death in 1959.
- viii. Kenneth Warren, *John Meade Falkner* (1995) pp.260-261.
- ix. *The Times* 19 February 1935 p.16
- x. *The Times* 20 February 1958 p.10
- xi. *The Nebuly Coat* p.23 in the 1954 Oxford World's Classics edition.



Duke Humfrey's Library, Bodleian Library,