

“Imperious Tyranny and Infinite Gusto”

John Meade Falkner the Sportsman

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In recent decades, it has become *de rigeur* for a biographer to turn up all manner of lurid details, so much so that Lytton Strachey's alliterative sleight of hand over General Gordon and the open bottle now seems mildness itself. Even so, nothing can prevent a gasp when reading of Falkner's trip to Dorset in the late summer of 1910. He and his wife, Evelyn, were ostensibly spending their time in Dorset at the excavations of Memory Rings. Here, however, was cause for greater scandal than any 'black book' at Elswick and the pattern of financial disbursements somehow found by Lord Rendel that year.

As Falkner later confessed to Edward Stone, the Eton schoolmaster resident in Dorchester, with whom at a young age he had first studied Classics: "the imperious tyranny of golf has fallen upon me, late in life, and my days were spent from sunrise to sunset on Came Down golfing..." Under a 'full and unfaltering sun" he golfed all day and only at dusk did he bicycle in to see how the excavations were going. He was now 52 and, as always, preoccupied by suffering from his curiously bad health. Earlier that year, in January, he had even sent Stone the address of a firm in the Strand which published a fifty-page booklet by Charles Emmanuel Reinhardt, who, by dint of lactic ferments, advanced his notion of *120 Years of Life and How to Attain Them*. Falkner thought it an interesting subject, these putative sixty-nine more years that could be his. "I believe much in the theory, though I fear that we should bore our friends dreadfully, if we were really to attain that longevity."

It is difficult to imagine ever being bored by Falkner (although one must wonder how he would have winced at life in 1978, not least the plethora of golf courses). Even if one were accompanying him around a golf course, he would have been spirited company - more Wodehouse than Arnold Palmer. Which image brings with it the reflection that sport played more of a part in his life than many realise. As a child he had attended the school run by Henry Moule, Vicar of Fordington St. George and author of the worldwide bestseller *Manure For the Million*. The school could hardly boast of its 'sports facilities'. To wit, a great rough grass field - at Memory Rings - in which they played both cricket and football "with infinite gusto but without any of the artificial burdens of level pitches or goalposts."

Equally *ad hoc* was his fishing, which figures in the often idyllic recollections which both he and his sister wrote of childhood in Dorchester. The sport was, technically, poaching but the yield - minnows and dace - invariably proved feeble. One day, at Bockhampton, things changed. While standing on a bridge, Falkner felt a fair-sized perch take the bait, and then another - as many as ten of them, the last of which avenged its dead companions by causing him to fall into the deep pool. It was a struggle to emerge and then to run home in a bedraggled state, all the while hoping the catch, secreted in the pockets of his best suit would be sufficient compensation its drenched condition. Even the immediate bed with which he was rewarded did not dim his joy. "My father sacrificed himself and ate some of them for breakfast next morning, saying that they were the finest perch he ever had eaten. It was a compliment which stayed with me for a long time though I dare say that my father had never eaten perch before."

Charles Lynam later told John Betjeman that at Oxford Falkner had been "a good cricketer & racquets player". Perforce, it came to take up more of his time as tutor to John Noble, whose father, Sir Andrew's letters are relentless urging him to work hard and play hard, especially at handball and cricket. Typical is this admonition: "about cricket stick to it. It is obvious that from your being out of condition and other causes it will take you some time to get into form but it will come - practise every day to professional bowling and bowl yourself but not too much." The following day this had to be qualified, letters apparently having crossed in the post: "I thought it would be much better if you played cricket a little - I think your doctor is wrong to stop it altogether as it would have an effect on your spirits."

That it cheered Falkner's spirits is shown by a consolation which it brought during his stint, via Gabbitas and Thring, as a teacher in the summer of 1884 at Derby School, whose Headmaster was "a funny sort and rather inclined to the bottle". Although this was his first visit to the county which forms a part of *The Lost Stradivarius*, the most important thing for now was that he was among the 15,000 in Nottingham at the end of the triumphant series against Australia. Later that summer the Australians were pitted against Middlesex, and, back in Buckland Rippers, the *Sportsman* was still his regular reading - especially its letters page which, like that of the local newspaper, was replete with "sheer utter idiocy. One wouldn't think fellows could write such stuff."

The Headmaster offered Falkner a permanent job at the school, and he deliberated over this; it is possible that his mentioning

it to John Noble galvanised the family into offering him a new position; without which, Falkner might have been - like his friend Vassal at Repton - another Derbyshire schoolmaster rather than the author of several masterpieces. As it was, he would often be at Jesmond, and, for some years, cricket there was a regular part of his summer, and John Noble's diary offers a glimpse of his rowing prowess: on their first trip to Italy, they visited a church late one Sunday, only to be abused by the chaplain and, instead, went out to sea with a local, "and snorted about there for most of the morning - an amusing man had one or two unpleasant and Italian traits about him." Which remain enigmatic, until the afternoon, when the sea was as smooth as glass, so "Bell and Falkner manfully pulled both ways without any assistance."

There is no room here to quote from the log which Falkner kept of a journey along the Thames with Charles Lynam and W F. Cooper at Easter 1889, a log which owes something to *Three Men In A Boat*, which was published as a book later that year but had appeared as a serial from February. It is a miniature masterpiece, and perhaps does not exactly count as sport. As Arthur Godley, the future Baron Kilbracken, Private Secretary to Gladstone, Under-Secretary of State for India, and friend of Falkner's recorded, such river-journeys were more akin to reading-parties in his day, which was fifteen years earlier: they seemed "to fill a large part of my recollection of those Oxford summers"; he made the journey to the capital nine times, once or twice in a row-boat, but otherwise always as part of a crew of "three men in a sailing-boat of the type then used at Oxford; they carried one large fore-and-aft sail and a centre-board. There went a certain amount of skill to the proper management of them in the narrow waters of the Thames, and there was, on a tiny scale, a real element of adventure, with here and there a very slight spice of danger, about the whole business. One never knew in the morning where one would sleep in the evening... there was an infinite variety in one's experiences, no two voyages being in the least like each other, except in so far as they were all intensely enjoyable... the Thames was on the whole, at that time, virtually an undiscovered country, when the British public, in the late 'seventies, began to discover it, my voyages came to an end."

Falkner's work and health meant that sport came to something of an end for him, and so, when one reflects upon the diverse sports which he had enjoyed, his late discovery of golf seems quite reasonable - perhaps rather more so than any, as-yet-undocumented, brewing up of lactic ferments.