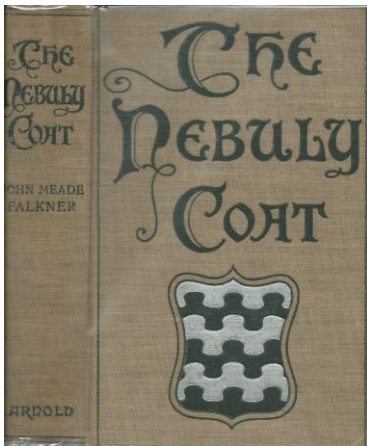


The Nebuly Coat John Coulter

Thackeray called *Vanity Fair* a novel without a hero – quite untruly, for if constancy figures among the heroic virtues, poor Dobbin is one of fiction's great heroes. *The Nebuly Coat* is a genuine novel without a hero; the vain, priggish Westray does not begin to qualify, and a true Victorian like Falkner could hardly take a murderer for his hero. The decadent Edwardian Roy Horniman did it four years later in his blackly comic *Israel Rank*, a novel perhaps influenced by *The Nebuly Coat*. Rank, the suave, sardonic natural aristocrat, gifted with great sexual magnetism, has something in common with Falkner's Lord Blandamer, quite apart from his murdering for a title.

The guilt of Blandamer could scarcely be proved to the satisfaction of any likely jury by the evidence produced within the story, which would not have hanged a notorious felon, much less a peer of the



realm; it is proved by the venerable tradition of poetic justice. Blandamer has to die a dramatic and symbolic death, like Bill Sykes in *Oliver Twist* or Stapleton in *The Hound of the Baskervilles*, precisely because he is guilty. Falkner's various tongue-in-cheek protestations of ignorance as to Blandamer's guilt [1] were the standard response of the mystery writer to fans asking naïve questions.

It is one of the strengths of *The Nebuly Coat* that so much of the story is told through conversations and the thoughts of the characters. Falkner glides easily from the mind of Westray to that of Sharnall, from Sharnall's to Anastasia's, with little intrusion of the direct authorial voice, which tends, perhaps for that reason, to be jarring and uncomfortable when it does appear. In the scene of the arrival of Westray's warning letter at Fording (pp. 326-34) [2] we are admitted into the mind of Lord Blandamer, and during the pivotal meeting in the gallery (pp. 342-

50) we switch back and forth between the thoughts of Blandamer and Westray. Throughout, there is a full admission of guilt in Blandamer's internal monologue. The final proof is revealed only in the last sentence of the novel, by the news of the codicil. What motive could Lord Blandamer have for making so insignificant a man as Westray his trustee and the guardian of his child? Only gratitude for an extraordinary mercy, and a bribe to continued silence. How could a guardian expose his ward to infamy?

The Nebuly Coat does not have a hero, but it does have a heroine in the delightful Anastasia Joliffe, correct and reserved on the outside but within a mass of seething romantic fantasies. In accordance with a familiar device of the English novel (*Tom Jones*, *Humphry Clinker*, *Oliver Twist*) her innate refinement is the result of her obscured gentle birth. In an early scene (p. 100) she is found reading *Northanger Abbey*. Like Jane Austen's Catherine Morland (a Donna Quixote) Anastasia dreams of Prince Charming, and like Catherine she eventually wins him, though for her there is to be no happy ever after. Anastasia is not only dreaming of romance but writing a thrilling novel herself, like the heroine of Hardy's *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, one of the books that influenced *The Nebuly Coat*. Anastasia's situation at the end of the story presents a close parallel to that of Amelia in *Vanity Fair*. They are the widows of men they regard as perfect heroes, and mothers of infant sons who must be raised as worthy successors to these domestic saints. In each case a suitor of the widow knows the sordid truth about the dead husband, but cannot reveal it; and both Dobbin and Westray are left trustees and guardians of the orphan heirs.



There are several respects in which *The Nebuly Coat* may be described as Shakespearean. If Lord Blandamer cannot be regarded as a hero, he does make some approach to the status of a tragic protagonist like Macbeth or Richard III. The easy mingling of comic and tragic elements in the novel is also Shakespearean. It begins in almost Trollopian vein with Sir George Farquhar and Canon Parkyn; only on the emergence of Sharnall from Parkyn's entourage does the

mood darken, and the two strands intertwine easily almost to the end of the story. A third Shakespearean trait is the use of double time. This is explained by J.W. Lever:

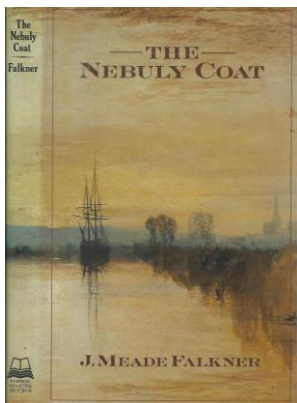
“Elizabethan playwrights were little concerned with strict consistency of time, and Shakespeare was no exception. What mattered to him was its dramatic significance for the audience. In *Measure for Measure*, as in *Othello*, a kind of ‘double time’ operates. Tension is all-important in the main plot, where everything turns upon the imminent execution of Claudio. In the comic scenes, however, the tension is deliberately relaxed, and time becomes vague and elastic.” [3]

A small example of Falkner’s use of double time is the mystery of Westray’s luggage, which on p.5 is a modest bag being driven from the church to the Blandamer Arms, but on p.29 has swollen to a huge portmanteau which two women can scarcely carry upstairs at Bellevue Lodge. How did this luggage, of whatever size, get from the hotel to the boarding house? For dramatic purposes Falkner has accounted for every second of Westray’s time from his leaving the hotel omnibus at the church until his arrival at Bellevue Lodge, and he has neither visited the hotel nor despatched a messenger; Miss Joliffe has no servant or vehicle to send, yet there at Bellevue Lodge the portmanteau is, waiting to be carried upstairs. Two time schemes are working here simultaneously, the urgent one of the consultation in the church and the disturbing walk through the back streets with Sharnall, and the normal leisurely one in which travel arrangements are taken care of in an orderly way.

There are few indications of date in *The Nebuly Coat*, and those are strangely inconsistent, but with one or two exceptions they point either to the mid-1860s or to the late 1870s and early 1880s. That drawn from the franking of Lord Blandamer’s letter to Westray (p.116) can be dismissed as a mere anachronism, like the hats in *Julius Caesar*. The privilege enjoyed by peers and M. P.s of sending letters free by signing the cover was ended in 1840, on the introduction of the Penny Post, and the action of *The Nebuly Coat*, with its well-developed railway system and its church restoration and anti-church restoration movements, cannot possibly be set before 1840. Lord Blandemar’s amusing his young wife, almost at the end of the story, “by reading from the ‘Ingoldsby Legends’, a

new series of which had recently appeared” (p. 333), may be just another anachronism, as the third and last series of the legends was published in 1847, two years after Richard Harris Barham’s death. But Falkner was perhaps thinking of *The Ingoldsby Lyrics*, which were edited by Barham’s son in 1881.

Another reference to time can only be regarded as a blunder by Falkner or his publisher. Sharnall tells Westray that Michael Joliffe died ‘fifteen years ago’ (p.27), that Euphemia gave up the farm at Wydcombe after her father’s death (p.25), and took the *Hand of God* ‘fifteen years ago’ (p.24). Yet Tom Janaway’s account to Westray is that Martin Joliffe kept the farm for an unspecified period after Michael’s death, and that Euphemia did the work well while Martin spent the profits, till all ‘came to the hammer’ (p.58). Janaway is the more reliable witness, having lived at the farm until Michael’s death, for which he was in part responsible. The only way to approximately reconcile these two very different accounts is to suppose that the ‘fifteen years ago’ on p.27 is a mistake or misprint for ‘fifty years ago’, a conventional round figure. The years between the death of Michael and the taking of the *Hand of God*, or some of them, would have been those during which Euphemia ran the farm. But this typographical escape for Falkner seems closed by the statement on p. 63 that Euphemia was ‘half-way through the deep gorge of middle age’ when her father died; irreconcilable with Arnold Hunt’s calculation [4], which places that event in her eighteenth year.



The most precise indication of date in the novel, and the one on which Mr Hunt founded his table, is provided by the marriage certificate that falls from the damaged picture frame; a single slip of paper, though it is subsequently referred to as ‘the documents’. This is the record of the marriage of Horatio Fynes, the old Lord Blandamer, and Sophia Flannery (both aged 21) in 1800, and the note below it of the birth of Martin Joliffe eight and a half months later. From this and from some

ages and periods of time mentioned in the novel (but ignoring others) it is possible to place the action in or around 1866. There is

another anachronism here, for in 1800 marriage registers did not give the ages of the bride and groom, and 'marriage lines' were merely a certified copy of the register entry.

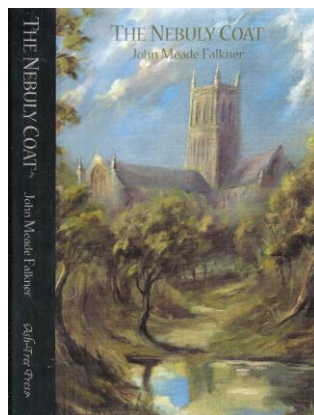
The dating based on the document in the picture frame is incompatible with the unfortunate experience of Tom Janaway at Beacon Hill Fair (pp. 47-57), 20 years after Sophia Joliffe ran away from her husband. This must be dated no earlier than 1837, because the 'gaffer behind the counter' at the drinking tent, when calling time, said 'God save the Queen'. Michael Joliffe died a fortnight after the fair, and Janaway moved to Cullerne on the day of the funeral. At Cullerne Janaway took odd jobs until the sexton fell sick, then helped to dig graves, becoming sexton when the old one died. That was 'forty years ago come Whitsun' when Janaway told the story to Westray in the minster (p.57). Even if the Beacon Hill Fair incident was in the first year of Victoria's reign, and Janaway's promotion from odd-job man to sexton was very rapid, the conversation in the minster could hardly be earlier than 1878. It might of course be urged that the barman's 'God save the Queen' was another Falkner anachronism, or a lapse of memory in Tom Janaway.

The atmosphere of the story and many of its minor details suggest 1880, when Falkner was a young man, much more than 1865, when he was a little boy. Among these are the 'faded photographs' (p. 34) left among Martin Joliffe's unsold effects. The one of a boating crew, surely intended as a memento of Martin's Oxford life forty years earlier, would be impossible if the date of the story is 1865, just possible if it is 1880. The photo of the Carisbury Field Club expedition, and the several other references to field clubs, sit far more comfortably in 1880 than in earlier decades. Arnold Hunt has shown that the reference to the *ABC of Gothic Architecture* used by Sharnall at Oxford makes 1876 the earliest possible date for the story. The first page of the novel strongly indicates 1877 or 1878 as the year of Westray's dispatch to Cullerne. It begins with a tirade by 'Sir George Farquhar, Baronet, builder of railway-stations, and institutes, and churches, author, antiquarian, and senior partner of Farquhar and Farquhar'

“Well, good-bye, Westray; keep your eyes open, and don't forget that you have an important job before you. The church is too big to

hide its light under a bushel, and this Society-for-the-Conservation-of-National-Inheritances has made up its mind to advertise itself at our expense. Ignoramuses who don't know an aumbry from an abacus, charlatans, amateur faddists, they will abuse our work. Good, bad, or indifferent, it's all one to them; they are pledged to abuse it.”

The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, the evident inspiration of the Society-for-the-Conservation-of-National-Inheritances, was founded by William Morris in 1877, so that 1878 was a likely time for Sir George Farquhar to be worried about it. It was also the year of the death of Sir George Gilbert Scott, the most probable model for Sir George Farquhar. Scott was the architect of the Midland Grand Hotel at St Pancras Station, of the Sandbach Literary Institution, and of countless churches, a prolific writer on architectural subjects, and the unquestioned king of church restorers. At the time of his death, he was working on the restoration of Tewkesbury Abbey and Bridlington Priory.



William Morris began his public attack on the Restorers with a letter dated March 5, 1877 to the editor of *The Athenaeum*:

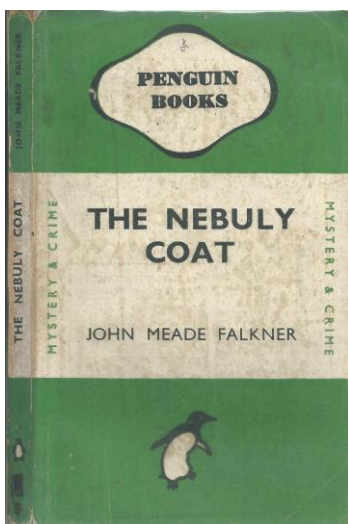
“My eye just now caught the word “restoration” in the morning paper, and, on looking closer, I saw that this time it is nothing less than the Minster of Tewkesbury that is to be destroyed by Sir Gilbert Scott. Is it altogether too late to do something to save it – it and whatever else of beautiful or historical is still left us on the sites of the ancient buildings we were once so famous for? Would it not be of some use once for all, and with the least delay possible, to set on foot an association for the purpose of watching over and protecting these relics, which, scanty as they are now become, are still wonderful treasures, all the more priceless in this age of the world, when the newly-invented study of living history is the chief joy of so many of our lives?... I admit that the architects are, with

very few exceptions, hopeless, because interest, habit, and ignorance bind them, and that the clergy are hopeless, because their order, habit, and an ignorance yet grosser, bind them; still there must be many people whose ignorance is accidental rather than inveterate, whose good sense could surely be touched if it were clearly put to them that they were destroying what they, or, more surely still, their sons and sons' sons, would one day fervently long for, and which no wealth or energy could ever buy again for them." [5]

In a private letter Morris called Scott 'a damned old thief' [6]. The manifesto of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, written by Morris in 1877, pleaded for 'Protection in the place of Restoration':

"a strange and most fatal idea, which by its very name implies that it is possible to strip from a building this, that, and the other part of its history - of its life that is - and then to stay the hand at some arbitrary point, and leave it still historical, living, and even as it once was. ... a church of the eleventh century might be added to or altered in the twelfth, thirteenth, fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth, or even the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries; but every change, whatever history is destroyed, left history in the gap, and was alive

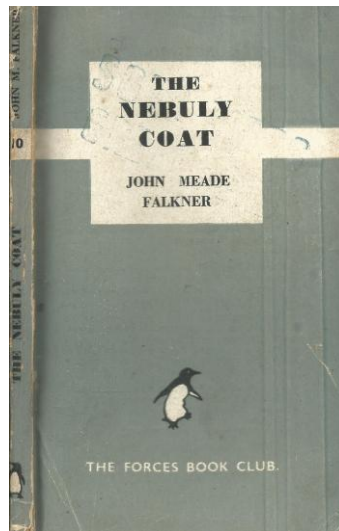
with the spirit of the deeds done midst its fashioning. The result of all this was often a building in which the many changes, though harsh and visible enough, were, by their very contrast, interesting and instructive and could by no possibility mislead. But those who make the changes wrought in our day under the name of Restoration, while professing to bring back a building to the best time of its history, have no guide but each his own individual whim to point out to them what is admirable and what contemptible; while the very nature of their task compels them to destroy



something and to supply the gap by imagining what the earlier builders should or might have done.” [7]

Curiously, the desecration of Tewkesbury Abbey was not the outrage that first set Morris on course to challenge the Restorers. It was the changes made by George Edmund Street to the church of St John the Baptist in Falkner’s own beloved Burford, which Morris visited in 1876, a decade before Falkner knew it well. Morris and his co-founder of the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, Philip Webb, had worked for Street in the 1850s, but twenty years later were quite out of sympathy with his ideas of restoration. It is striking that in his *Handbook for Travellers in Oxfordshire* of 1894 Falkner devoted four pages (197-200) to the Burford church and deferentially quoted Street on its beauty and interest, but said nothing about the restoration except that the chapel of St Thomas à Becket “has been well restored” and that the rich sedilia and the canopied niches on either side of the altar “cry for restoration”. It would seem that in the decade between the *Handbook* and *The Nebuly Coat* Falkner’s views on restoration had shifted like an unsteady tower. The works at the church that he himself financed from 1902 were placed in the more respectful hands of Ninian Comper and Edward Barclay Hoare.

Other possibly models for Sir George Farquhar are Street and Sir Arthur Blomfield, who inherited the crown of king of the restorers on the death of Scott in 1878. Falkner may have heard the anecdotes that Thomas Hardy liked to tell about Blomfield, for whom he worked in the 1860s. Hardy’s fateful trip to St Juliot in Cornwall in 1870, when he met his first wife, was an architectural job not unlike Westray’s, undertaken for a Weymouth architect after he left Blomfield’s service. Falkner may have heard Hardy describe the experience, and would certainly have read the novels that drew upon it, most



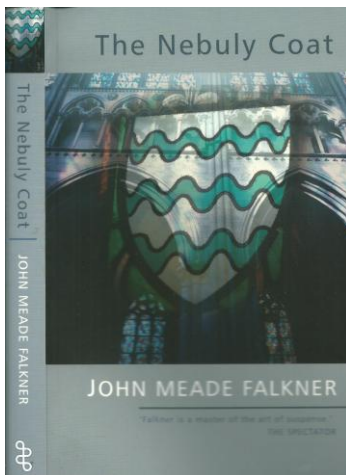
notably *A Pair of Blue Eyes* of 1873 and *A Laodicean* of 1881. The former was written, as Hardy explained in his preface to the 1895 reprint, “at a time when the craze for indiscriminate church-restoration had just reached the remotest nooks of western England.” Its plot includes the collapse of a church tower during restoration, with a woman crushed to death beneath the ruins.

One of the controversial features of Street’s restoration of St John the Baptist was the installation of a tiled floor. Encaustic tiles figure memorably in one of the comic highlights of *The Nebuly Coat*, when Euphemia Joliffe, blending memories of the Wydcombe Church of her youth and the Cullerne Minster of her old age, gives Euphemia her confused thoughts on church restoration. It might be Jane Austen’s Miss Bates speaking:

“I am sure if anyone had offered to restore Wydcombe Church when I was a girl – and specially a nobleman... I should have been delighted, but, dear me! in those days people were so blind as never to think of restorations. We used to sit in quite comfortable seats every Sunday, with cushions and hassocks, and the aisles were paved with flagstones – simple worn flagstones, and none of the caustic tiles which look so much more handsome; though I am always afraid I am going to slip, and glad to be off them, they are so hard and shiny. Church matters were very behindhand then. All round the walls were tablets that people had put up to their relations, white caskets on black marble slates, and urns and cherubs’ heads, and just opposite where I used to sit a poor lady, whose name I have forgotten, weeping under a willow-tree. No doubt they were very much out of place in the sanctuary, as the young gentleman said in his lecture on “How to Make Our Churches Beautiful” in the Town Hall last winter. He called them “mural blisters,” my dear, but there was no talk of removing them in my young days, and that was, I dare say, because there was no one to give the money for it. But now, here is this good young nobleman, Lord Blandamer, come forward so handsomely, and I have no doubt at Cullerne all will be much improved ere long. We are not meant to loll at our devotions, as the lecturer told us. That was his word, to “loll”; and they will be sure to take away the baize and hassocks, though I do hope there will be a little strip of something on the seats; the bare wood is apt to make one ache sometimes. I should not say it to anyone else in the world but you, but it does make me ache a little sometimes; and

when the caustic is put down the aisle, I shall take your arm, my dear, to save me from slipping.”” (pp. 124-5)

Many of Falkner’s chronological inconsistencies were probably involuntary, the result of haste and indifference. It was only a novel, and the Oxfordshire guide and history were much more important works in their author’s opinion. Shakespeare clearly cared little for tidiness in his plots, and was working under too much pressure to pay attention to detail. In the theatre an audience has no leisure to notice minutiae of time and place, and cannot turn back the pages to recollect a name or date. Falkner seemingly had the same attitude to his work, even though the novel reader can much more easily check and compare. Both thought of themselves as producing ephemeral literature and had no expectation that they would ever be the prey of carping critics.



None of these slips diminish the essential quality of the novel. Just as a fine performance of Shakespeare sweeps the audience along without any thought of loose ends, so a good reading of Falkner, which is a fast, breathless reading, is happy to accept the setting of *The Nebuly Coat* as Cullerne, without any worry about a real original, and the time as just vaguely Victorian. Falkner was outstanding in the evocation of place and subtle in the analysis

of character, but his greatest strength was narrative drive, the description of events simple and complex. The great set-pieces in *Moonfleet* are justly celebrated, and in *The Nebuly Coat* Dorothy L. Sayers was right to admire the finding of Sharnall’s body as “one of the great discovery-scenes of murder literature” [8]. The collapse of the Cullerne Minster tower is, with the shipwreck in *Moonfleet*, one of Falkner’s two narrative masterpieces. The leading subjects of the book, the Blandamer inheritance and the church restoration, are brought together and combined into a noble symphonic climax worthy of Falkner’s close contemporary Elgar.

- [1] 'Did Lord Blandamer murder Sharnall?', The John Meade Falkner Society Journal volume 1, number 5 (July 2004) pp. 28-31.
- [2] Page references to *The Nebuly Coat* are to the first six impressions of 1903-4.
- [3] The Arden Edition of William Shakespeare: *Measure for Measure*, edited by J.W. Lever (Methuen, 1965) p. xiv.
- [4] 'Chronology and *The Nebuly Coat* by Arnold Hunt, The John Meade Falkner Society Journal volume 1, number 5 (July 2004) pp. 23-7.
- [5] The Collected Letters of William Morris, edited by Norman Kelvin, volume I (Princeton University Press, 1984) pp. 351-2.
- [6] Morris, op. cit., p. 365.
- [7] Morris, op. cit., pp. 359-60.
- [8] 'John Meade Falkner, his works and influence on Dorothy L. Sayers' by Christine R. Simpson, The John Meade Falkner Society Journal volume 1, number 4 (July 2003) pp. 28-37.