

A Poem by John Meade Falkner
Raymond Moody

Burford, Oxon. (I)

The white coach-road across the down
 Between its ivied walls,
The valley where the windows frown
 In Lovel's ruined halls;
 The signpost, and the way that falls
To Burford lying low:
 A charm they have that never palls
Where Windrush waters flow.

The pavement echoes to our feet;
 Unchanged of changing fate
The Stuart houses down the street
 Bask on in sunny state.
 No jerry-builder's brick and slate
Have marred their sandstone glow;
 The cedar shades the scalloped gate
Where Windrush waters flow.

But Tanfield's home is desolate,
 At morn the summer breeze
Sighs through the halls, disconsolate,
 Where Lenthal took his ease:
 His marbles and his panelled frieze
Lie sunk a mile below,
 His stuccoes rot beneath the trees
Where Windrush waters flow.

The prisoned heiress, and the deed
 That signed her home away:
We know the tale of guilt and greed,
 And how the barges lay
 Below the lawn at close of day
Piled high, a sorry show,

And how they sunk them on their way
Where Windrush waters flow.

Beneath the sheltering spire there rest
The bones of Lenthal's pride;
There Tanfield lies, for ever blest,
With her his faithful bride;
And Mister Matthew Prior that died,
Struck down by murderous blow,
Long since, one April eventide,
Where Windrush waters flow.

There Spicer sleeps who gave the fame
Unceasingly to shine;
There "Prisner Sedley" carved his name
In stormy '49;
Legarde is buried by the shrine,
And there, in stately row,
The scions of Sylvester's line,
Where Windrush waters flow.

Noll Cromwell shot his turncoats five,
Will Dowsing broke the glass,
But still the good traditions thrive
In genial rector Cass;
The imaged saints, the polished brass,
On Peter's altar glow,
And gently past the churchyard grass
The Windrush waters flow.

ENVOY

Princess, forsake your North awhile,
The North wind and the snow;
Fly South with us, where meadows smile
And Windrush waters flow.

Oxford, Whit Sunday, 1888.

John Meade Falkner was a Romantic; no doubt about that. Reading the corpus of his verses in the privately published volume, one might go further for the epithet Gothic does not come amiss; the warmer side of Gothic, perhaps, seldom the dark side, though I would not speak for the novels. His churches are candle-lit in the mist of autumn evenings; the shades of the past emanate from the remembering stone. Burford was a suitable theatre for him to display his sense of ghostly presence, and having lived there for over forty years, I have often felt that in a November twilight when the mist rises from the Windrush over the churchyard, it might be possible to meet such a man as Simon Wisdom, epitome of Elizabethan Burford, gathering his cloak around him as he hurries along the Guildenford to the church he knew so well. While several of Falkner's poems, especially those where he revels in the evocative quality of ecclesiastical details, might have a reference to the town, two are specifically headed "Burford, Oxon". One is dedicated to L.H.G.N. [Lilias Noble] and dated from Oxford, Whit Sunday, 1888. Around that day in 1888, Falkner led a party including John Noble and his sisters on an expedition into rural Oxfordshire including Burford. This poem was written to be given to Lilias Noble on that occasion. The other poem is dedicated to J.H.B.N. [John Noble] and dated May 18th, 1890. Both are relatively early works; his Murray's *Handbook for Travellers to Oxfordshire* was not published until 1894, and his *History of Oxfordshire* in 1899. It is the first of these poems that has particularly engaged my attention.

A Romantic is one who views life through glasses of his chosen tint, and he will select or amend the facts to fit his image of reality. There is more romance than history in the first Burford poem, but there is also a neglect of obvious detail that seems positively wilful. The poem begins faithfully enough. In 1888 the approach to Burford from the east was much as it is now, though the coach road is no longer the white [and very dusty] road repaired with crushed stone, but tarmac realigned, and rather than pass by Old Minster Lovell you are likely to have come along the Witney bypass, and to leave the main road [if, like Falkner before you, you wish to descend the length of the High Street] not at a simple turning but at a large roundabout. Then the problems with the poem begin. He was not yet engaged in writing a guide to the county, but I have the greatest difficulty in believing that he did not know that the Cotswolds are

limestone and not sandstone, and that Burford's ancient houses, some of which must indeed be Stuart, though most are Elizabethan, were famously both built and roofed with that stone. The "*scalloped Gate*" I cannot now identify, but may well have been the entrance to the Priory. In 1888, and indeed into the early twentieth century, the Priory, the mansion house of Tanfield and Lenthall, was certainly desolate, since financial embarrassment forced the Lenthalls to sell up, when the estate was bought by a neighbouring landowner and the house stood empty and decaying.

What follows is mysterious. The purchaser of the estate in 1828/9 - whose indirect family still own the land - was the respectable, if unromantic, Mr. Charles Greenaway of Barrington Grove. His family had made money in Gloucester and purchased Little Barrington Grove manor, adjoining Burford on the west, with its house Barrington Grove in the previous century. He bought Burford Priory and manor, but continued to live at Barrington until his death in 1859. His widow Charlotte continued in possession until 1875, when her late husband's niece Miss Youde succeeded as lady of the manor. The poem is explicit in its details: an heiress was imprisoned, and the fittings of the house were stripped and shipped by barges which then sank downstream. William John Lenthall, eldest son [and sixth generation from Speaker Lenthall of the Long Parliament] inherited the Priory and estate in 1820, heavily encumbered. There was no heiress [Lenthall had only sons, of whom only one reached maturity] nor, as far as anyone now knows, was there any underhand dealing. Nor would it have been possible then or since to have floated more than a schoolboy's canoe under Burford Bridge and downstream. Perhaps when the house was empty, some fittings were stripped [but they would have gone by waggon] though we know that many remained. The famous Lenthall pictures were sent to auction at Christie's by Lenthall himself in 1826. When Falkner returned to the subject of Burford Priory in a sentence in his county history, he wrote simply that "*Greenaway dismantled and abandoned Burford Priory, and left it, as it stands to-day [1899], little better than a picturesque ruined shell*".

The later stanzas compound the departures from historical fact. Mr. Speaker Lenthall was far from being a proud man - indeed, Clarendon considered him timid and barely equal to the office, his famous words to Charles I were delivered from his knees - and at the end of his life, there are indications that he felt that he had failed to play a worthy part. His will requested that he be buried without ceremony under a plain stone with only "*Vermis sum*" [Ps. 22]

inscribed on it. Tanfield was not "*for ever blest*" - he was execrated in Burford memory and folklore as the grasping oppressor of the town, and his wife, no doubt faithful enough, as the appropriator of an aisle for their grandiose tomb. Falkner missed an opportunity here: the arrogant and corrupt judge that Tanfield truly was would surely have been a more "gothic" figure. Mr. Matthew Prior [1664-1721] was the poet and diplomat: it was Mr. John Prior, not as far as I know any relative of Matthew, but friend, neighbour and steward of the third Lenthall and trustee of the son he left at his early death, who in April 1697 was murdered by Lord Abercorn, as his great black grave slab in the church declares. Cromwell ordered the execution of three mutineers, neither five nor turncoats. The iconoclast Dowsing's career is well documented, and it was entirely in the eastern counties. He is never mentioned in connection with Burford and, as in so much of the country, we do not know when or by whom Burford's glass was broken. My bet would be on eighteenth century youth. Surely Falkner already knew Cass well enough to know that he was Vicar and not Rector. What shall we say? Well, on the credit side, Spicer did leave a bequest in his will for a chantry light, "*Anthony Sedley Prisner 1649*" was carved in the lead of the font during the imprisonment of the "Leveller" mutineers, the Sylvester tombs do line the Lady Chapel, and John Leggare, burgess of the town and feoffee of lands here, is likely to be buried in the place.

Kenneth Warren in his biography of Falkner, on which I have relied heavily, has examined the writing of this poem, how John Noble was asked to assist, and supplied some variant readings. Now, although the poem is dated from Oxford on Whit-Sunday, 1888, Whit-Sunday 1888 was on May 20th. Kenneth Warren [p. 187ff.] quotes correspondence with John Noble dated 9 May 1888, in which Falkner wrote on Elswick works memorandum paper and sent a draft of the poem. Falkner was still in the north when he wrote the poem, and remote from his facts. Falkner's original draft of verse 4 read:

The prisoned heiress and the deed
 That signed her home away,
We know the tale of shameless greed,
 Of guilty Greenaway;
 Where knightly Falkland came to pray
The seedling chestnuts grow,
 The Jacobean stalls decay
Where Windrush waters flow.

Noble contributed the third to fifth lines that appeared in the final version, writing them on the draft, and the lines that follow were altered by Falkner himself. It is perhaps unfair to carp again, but the stalls in the Priory chapel were not there, nor the chapel itself, when Falkland was around. He died at Newbury in 1643, and the chapel was built by Speaker William Lenthall around 1660 and consecrated in the year of his death, 1662.

Where did Falkner obtain his “prisoned heiress” story from? In spite of a great deal of investigation, I have been unable to uncover anywhere an origin for it. There is no hint of it in the writings of W.J. Monk, historian of the town around 1900, in Fisher’s brief miscellany of 1861, or the notes of Titcombe, or Hutton, or the works of the Grettons. In 1888 the matter was well within living memory, and the character of the Greenaway family a matter not only of knowledge, but of living reputation, though it is highly unlikely that Falkner knew any of the family and the poem obviously had only the most limited circulation: it is probably known to more persons in Burford now than then, and that is only a few. It is, of course, a more romantic story than the tale of mounting mortgage debts, largely caused by the expenses of the Parliamentary enclosure of the estate, that the documents tell. But why was Falkner so careless of other facts, when the truth was so accessible? or why would he have included what must be defamatory invention, when near relatives of his subject were still in the town? You may well feel that these are pernicky and unkind criticisms; and you may be right; but as historian of Burford, I have long looked in vain for any truth in this story, and have found none. I must conclude that romance is posing in the clothes of history, and that the mysterious poem will remain impenetrable.