

John Meade Falkner: Novelist and Arms Dealer

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Favourite writers are frequently people one chances upon by accident. You happen on a book, become involved in it and set out to discover more of its author's work. Sometimes the process of discovery is more subtle. References are picked up and hints come across, leading to a search. These authors are often more elusive figures and such was my process of discovery of John Meade Falkner - who was unusual both as a man and as a writer.

I shall digress into a little autobiography here. In 1966, as a schoolboy, I happened to hear the tail-end of several episodes of a serial on the Home Service [as Radio 4 still just about was]. This was, I think, on Thursday afternoons between five and six. Without listening closely, I gathered that it was about a drunken organist called Sharnall and the collapse of the tower of Cullerne Minster. While I was not sufficiently interested to pick up the story line and follow it regularly, the details entered my subconscious. I move on eight years. In 1974 I was a spectacularly incompetent postgraduate student on a Cert. Ed course at Sheffield University, doing teaching practice in a girls' grammar school in Chesterfield. One of my tasks was to teach English to a second year class and it was in preparing to do this that I first read *Moonfleet*. I had missed this children's classic in my own reading, although I remembered it being serialised about the time I stopped watching children's T.V. Keeping a class of good-hearted but boisterous 13 year-old girls in any sort of order was quite beyond such abilities as I possessed. The circumstances of my first reading of John Meade Falkner were thus not altogether propitious. However, I found *Moonfleet* an interesting, and in places moving, boys' adventure story and one of the 'plus' points of the year. Three years later, in 1977, I was a qualified librarian, a sadder and perhaps slightly wiser man, in search of a permanent job. The main source of advertisements for library jobs was then *The Times Literary Supplement*, to which perforce I became a regular subscriber. I got into the habit of reading it and chanced on an article by Sir William Haley on John Meade Falkner. At last the strands came together. Sir William's enthusiasm was infectious. In describing *The Nebuly Coat*, he unlocked from my subconscious the drunken organist and the collapsing tower, which otherwise I would never

have associated with the author of *Moonfleet*. I started to look out for Falkner's work. At that time only *Moonfleet* was in print.

In 1978, in the university library at Coleraine, I came across *The Lost Stradivarius*, a ghost story, which I read in a single evening. It was only some five or six years later that, through the Linen Hall Library, I gained access to *The Nebuly Coat* in an edition published by The Three Rivers Press, a small reprint company. It proved to be one of the most extraordinary novels I have read - and continue to re-read. Happily through the advocacy of certain enthusiasts, Falkner has in recent years become more widely known, with the result that all his three novels have been available in excellent Oxford paperback editions.

John Meade Falkner was born on 8 May at Manningford Bruce in Wiltshire. He was the son of Rev. Thomas Alexander Falkner and his wife Grace (nee Mead). There were six children, one of whom died before Falkner was born. His father was a good pastor and a scholar, but impractical and somewhat unworldly. He served as a curate in parishes in Wiltshire and Dorset, demonstrating a certain lack of forcefulness by the fact that throughout a lengthy ministry he never obtained an incumbency of his own. Grace Falkner was very much the driving force. Under her encouragement her husband became curate of Holy Trinity Church in Dorchester. Here the family lived for the next 12 years. When the Rector died in 1870 he became curate of St. Mary's, Weymouth and here the Falkners settled. At this point disaster struck. In March the whole family drank water infected with typhoid. They became critically ill and Grace Falkner died. Thomas Alexander and John became very close. The family faced financial difficulties. These did not prevent John from going to Marlborough College in 1873, after attending grammar schools in Dorchester and Weymouth. He joined a distinguished line of literary Marlburians which was to include William Morris, Siegfried Sassoon, John Betjeman and Louis MacNeice. He was a successful debater, did his first writing and cycled a great deal, visiting country churches. In 1878 he went up to Hertford College, Oxford. He loved Oxford and Oxfordshire and frequently returned to them. He visited the Cotswold Churches, later in life becoming a benefactor of Burford. In 1882 he obtained an undistinguished degree in modern history. Faced with the necessity of earning his living he took a few schoolmastering jobs. Any outside observer would have seen Falkner's likely career to have been as a struggling schoolmaster of eccentric temperament and antiquarian interests. In 1883, however, events took an extraordinary turn. He applied for and was appointed to the

post of tutor to John Noble, the eldest son of Captain Andrew Noble of Jesmond Dene, Newcastle-upon-Tyne. As a result Falkner, who had hitherto rarely left Wessex, became resident in the North East for the rest of his life, at first as part of the Noble household and then, from the early 1890s, in Durham. Captain Noble, later Sir Andrew, was the dominant figure in the armaments firm of Armstrong Mitchell of Elswick. Falkner's duties as tutor were not arduous. He became part of the Noble family, being particularly friendly with John, to whom he communicated his enthusiasm for the Cotswold churches. He continued to develop his antiquarian and bibliographic interests. He spent much time with his own family and gave them generous financial support. This proved very necessary as the death of Thomas Alexander Falkner in 1887 revealed that their circumstances were very bad indeed. When the Noble children grew up, Sir Andrew made Falkner his private secretary. In 1896 Armstrong absorbed the firm of Whitworth. As Armstrong Whitworth it became the largest armaments firm and one of the largest businesses in Britain. Falkner became the first secretary to the Board of Directors, to which he himself was elected in 1901. He became the firm's principal international salesman. His links with Wessex remained strong. In 1899, he married Evelyn, daughter of Sir John Adye, a distinguished soldier. There were to be no children. In 1915 Falkner became Vice-Chairman and then Chairman of the Board of Directors, a post he held until 1921. The bulk of his writing belongs to the decade from 1893 to 1903. His works include guides to Oxfordshire [published in 1894] and Berkshire [1902] and a history of Oxfordshire [1899]. These are interesting and lively. However, I intend to look in more detail at Falkner's three novels.

The Lost Stradivarius was published in 1896. It is a ghost story or at least the account of a haunting. The supernatural is not the most important element, although it is a major feature. Set in the 1840s, it is the story of Sir John Maltravers, a wealthy young baronet of Worth Maltravers in Dorset and his possession and eventual destruction, through a piece of music, the *Areopagita Suite* of Graziani and especially its *Gagliarda* [composer and work are fictitious], a violin he discovers in a hidden chamber in his Oxford rooms [the Stradivarius of the title] and a set of diaries. Interwoven is the shadow story of Adrian Temple, an eighteenth century landowner and Oxford don, also a rake and a magician. He and his destiny obsess Sir John and the three objects mentioned above are associated with him. Temple's first appearance or, rather, entrance gives a flavour of Falkner's writing. Sir John is in his Oxford rooms

playing from a music manuscript his friend William Gaskell has just brought back from Italy. There is a wicker chair in the room.

Almost mechanically John put the book on its music-stand, took his violin from its case, and after a moment's tuning stood up and played the first movement, a lively Coranto. The light of the single candle burning on the table was scarcely sufficient to illumine the page; the shadows hung in the creases of the leaves, which had grown into those wavy folds sometimes observable in books made of thick paper and remaining long shut... My brother stood playing, with his face turned to the window, with the room and the large wicker chair of which I have spoken behind him. The Gagliarda began with a bold and lively air, and as he played the opening bars, he heard behind him a creaking of the wicker chair... With the cessation of the music an absolute stillness fell upon all; the light of the single candle scarcely reached the darker corners of the room, but fell directly on the wicker chair and showed it to be perfectly empty...

As time goes on Maltravers becomes completely withdrawn. He neglects his beautiful and loving wife, Constance, and ignores the birth of his son. He becomes estranged from his friend. Eventually he settles in Naples in the villa built by Adrian Temple. Sickened by his neglect, Constance dies but Maltravers takes no notice. He constantly plays the *Gagliarda* and repeats the magical experiments described in Temple's diaries. Eventually he returns to England after discovering Temple's murdered body. He is very ill and gradually repents. He repairs his friendship with Gaskell and after the violin has imploded in his final sleep-walking playing of the *Gagliarda*, dies. There is a resolution only modified by the fact that Gaskell cannot find the manuscript with Temple's spells which are still in the world and capable of evil.

The Lost Stradivarius displays Falkner's characteristic themes - an obsessive quest leading to destruction and the power of the past to impinge on the present, with consequences not merely for the guilty, although this is question-begging, but the innocent and the good. It has been read as an attack on aestheticism and decadence. Comparisons could be made with Pater and Wilde and while the author's perspective is very different from theirs, it is very much an 1890s novel. Neoplatonic philosophy and Falkner's reading in it are major features. *The Lost Stradivarius* demonstrates Falkner's power as a landscape writer. There are superb descriptions of Oxford, Dorset, Derbyshire and Naples, furnishing an example of the tendency of some Victorian writers to regard Italy as a sort of

metaphor for the dark and dionysiac side of human nature. An interesting fictional comparison can be made with J.H. Shorthouse's *John Inglesant*. Indeed, this novel and its author, who manufactured vitriol in Birmingham, provides several points of comparison with Falkner. *John Inglesant* is subtitled 'A Philosophical Romance'. The same could be said, perhaps with more justification, of *The Lost Stradivarius*.

What would Falkner write next after this philosophical ghost story? The least expected answer might be a classic children's adventure story. Yet this is precisely what he produced three years later, in 1898. *Moonfleet* is his best known novel. Even more than *The Lost Stradivarius* it is intensely topographical, as tied into Dorset as Hardy's novels. There are also vivid scenes on the Isle of Wight and in Amsterdam. John Trenchard lives in Moonfleet [sited with some license on the coast running from the eastern end of Chesil Beach to the Isle of Purbeck]. He is 15 when the story opens in 1757 and lives with his severe aunt, his parents being dead. Entering the vault of Moonfleet church in search of the diamond of a member of the extinct Mohun family, the wicked Colonel John Mohun known as Blackbeard, he discovers that it is the headquarters for smugglers led by the innkeeper, the half-Dutch Elzevir Block and John's friend, the sexton Ratsey. John is trapped and eventually rescued by Elzevir and Ratsey. Block's own son has been killed on a smuggling expedition by the magistrate Maskew on whom Block has sworn vengeance. John is in love with Maskew's daughter Grace. Maskew succeeds in depriving Block of his inn. Before leaving the village they smuggle one more cargo. They are ambushed by soldiers and Maskew, whom the smugglers have earlier caught spying is killed. Block and John are proclaimed outlaws and escape to the Isle of Wight. By means of a formula found in Blackbeard's tomb in Moonfleet vault, they discover the diamond in the well of Carisbrooke Castle. John is obsessed by the idea of returning to Moonfleet a rich man, able to marry Grace Maskew. They flee to Amsterdam. They are cheated of the diamond by a merchant Aldobrand to whom they try to sell it. In attempting to retrieve it from his house, John and Elzevir are arrested and sentenced to penal servitude for life. Years pass. They are sent as galley slaves to the East Indies. The ship is wrecked on the coast at Moonfleet. John alone survives, Elzevir being drowned in saving him. John finds that the diamond merchant, to whom the diamond has brought ill-luck, has out of remorse left his money to him. As an act of expiation he founds almshouses. He marries Grace and lives happily ever after.

This very different novel shares common themes with its predecessor. Again the destructive power of an obsessive will to possess something is explored and once more destruction falls on both the corrupt and the innocent. Once again the past reaches out into and exacts a price from the present. As in all Falkner's novels a heraldic device features. The cross-pall of the Mohuns, a Y with equal arms is used with some subtlety. The characterisation is skilful. Even Grace Maskew, the long-suffering heroine, comes alive as much as the more colourful male characters.

Falkner is never quite straight forward and there are a couple of hidden touches of humour. For two years Falkner attended Hardye's school in Dorchester. Some 30 years later he appropriated the names of the headmaster, Rev. Thomas Ratsey Maskew, for both his villain and for a sympathetic character. There is a bibliographical in-joke. The year after my teaching I catalogued 17th century books in the National Library of Wales. I came across the imprint 'E typis Bonaventurae Elzeviri'. I thought of *Moonfleet* but did not make the connection. Of course, there was no coincidence. Falkner the bibliographer gave the surname of the great Dutch printing family to his half-Dutch character and the Christian name of one of them to the ship with the contraband cargo - the *Bonaventure*. When I re-read *Moonfleet* after nearly 20 years there was much I remembered: Maskew's funeral, the discovery of the diamond at Carisbrooke, the shipwreck, and, in spite of my teaching, the girls - or some of them - responded to the novel.

Falkner's third and most substantial novel was published in 1903. The origin of *The Nebuly Coat* lies in an event some 40 years before its publication. In 1866 the restoration of Chichester Cathedral had begun. On 21 February, during the builders' lunch hour, the citizens watched horrified as the central tower simply sank into the Cathedral. Recriminations followed against the Chapter, who it was alleged had not been sufficiently energetic in pursuing the work. From this foundation Falkner wove his extraordinary story. His Southavonshire is a not immediately recognisable southern county. Not that Falkner's description is any the less vivid or three-dimensional. Cullerne, like Chichester, is a silted-up port and this beaching conveys a general suspension of function. It is gently decaying and gossip appears to be its inhabitants' main activity. Edward Westray, a young architect, arrives, sent by his London firm to supervise the restoration of the Minster tower. Westray takes lodgings with Miss Euphemia Joliffe and her niece Anastasia. The Minster organist Sharnall also lodges with them. At the same time

Lord Blandamer returns from living abroad to Fording, his ancestral seat. He visits the Minster and, to the surprise of everyone, agrees to fund the restoration. Martin Joliffe, Anastasia's father, has died before the novel opens. He has spent his life and reduced his sister Euphemia to penury in trying to prove that he was the rightful Lord Blandamer. The Nebuly Coat [the Blandamer coat of arms] had become his obsession and destroyed him. Sharnall goes through Martin's papers and begins to suspect that his claims were justified. One night Sharnall is found dead in his organ loft. The coroner's verdict is death by misadventure as a result of a drunken fall, but doubts remain. Westray takes over Martin Joliffe's papers and resolves at least to satisfy himself about Sharnall's death. Meanwhile Lord Blandamer's attentions to Anastasia have been causing highly-spiced gossip in Cullerne. Largely to save her reputation Westray proposes to her. Not surprisingly he is rejected. All these events are interlaced with Westray's efforts to persuade the snobbish, lazy rector and the fashionable head of his firm that the tower is in serious danger. Lord Blandamer marries Anastasia. In due time an heir is born. Westray discovers that Martin Joliffe was indeed the rightful heir and that Lord Blandamer knows it. He goes to Fording to unmask him but finds he cannot do it and simply surrenders his proofs. He is summoned back to Cullerne by a message that the tower is collapsing. He returns and is trapped in the building. Lord Blandamer rescues him, but is killed in the process. The tower is rebuilt by Lady Blandamer and the last sentence of the book reveals that just before going to his death Lord Blandamer had named Westray co-guardian of his heir.

The Nebuly Coat is a richer and more complex novel than its predecessors. The characterisation is superb - Sharnall with his drunkenness and irascibility more than balanced by decency and generosity. Westray with his weakness, his priggishness, a certain honesty and total professional integrity, above all the enigmatic Lord Blandamer - half hero and half villain, or 3/8ths hero and 5/8ths villain - or vice versa. The women characters show a definite advance. Anastasia Joliffe is a rather more positive heroine than Constance Maltravers or Grace Maskew. There are numerous lesser cameos - the snobbish rector whose relentless complacency shields him from seeing the emptiness of his pretensions; we have all met his like. There is the fashionable and reassuring senior architect whose professional skills tend to be taken on trust. There are the non-human characters - the Nebuly Coat itself, Cullerne town and, supremely, the Minster and especially the tower with its constant refrain of 'The

arch never sleeps’.

The moral outcome is ambivalent. Once again there is a destructive quest. Martin Joliffe, Sharnall and perhaps Lord Blandamer, have all been destroyed. Lord Blandamer almost embraces his own death as an expiatory sacrifice. In a strange way justice is done. The infant Lord Blandamer at the end of the novel is Martin Joliffe’s heir through the female line. He is this in a sense both the rightful and the wrongful Lord Blandamer. Falkner leaves his readers to work this out for themselves.

With *The Nebuly Coat* Falkner’s skills as a novelist can be seen to develop. What would follow? The answer is amazingly very little. Falkner said that he had practically finished a fourth novel and lost it on a train between Durham and Elswick. We have only his evidence that his novel ever existed. Is this another joke? For 13 years he published nothing. Then in the *Cornhill Magazine* for December 1916 a short story appeared. *Charalampia* has the unusual setting of the Byzantine Empire in AD 581. It is a fable of somewhat obscure meaning, describing the journey of its eponymous heroine to the convent of the Akemites and her metaphorical journey in self-knowledge and [just a little] maturity. The setting and the period are interestingly realised. The headstrong teenage princess is rather more fun than Falkner’s other heroines, I have to say. One cannot say that *Charalampia* is a major piece of writing but it conveys a tantalising sense of the novels Falkner might have written and did not. In 1918 he published, anonymously, *Bath in history and social tradition* ‘by an appreciative visitor’. This is a lively and entertaining, if hardly original, historical essay. Falkner also wrote poetry, much of it with an elegiac note. No-one could describe it as great and the range of verse forms is limited. Yet they are accomplished, the emotion is genuine and there is a distinctive voice. And that was that. Falkner resigned as Chairman of Armstrong Whitworth in 1921 and as a director in 1926. In 1929 he became Honorary Librarian at Durham Cathedral and Honorary Lecturer in palaeography at the University. He produced valuable scholarly writing but no more literary works. He remained a major figure in Durham, gradually withdrawing into an increasingly medieval atmosphere [a late letter was misdated 1391]. He died on 22 July 1932 and his remains were buried in Burford.

What then are we to make of John Meade Falkner? His literary and professional lives do not seem to meet. *Charalampia* looks incongruous in a magazine where it is surrounded by such titles as ‘Tales of a flying patrol’ and ‘In the North Sea’; and, for that

matter, 'Dublin Days: the Rising' by Mrs. Hamilton Norway. His literary admirers imply that Falkner was a rarefied spirit who drifted into the arms business by accident, was utterly unfit for it and only stayed in it because he needed to earn his crust. The reality is more complex. In the first place, the crust was substantial. At his death he left an estate worth £210,000 [roughly £3.5 million today] - and he had been a generous man. This was all money he had made in business. Any unhappiness he felt in the world of commerce would seem to have been endured stoically. As a salesman he was very successful indeed. Brazil, Argentina and Turkey were among the many countries he visited, It is true that he was not a success as Chairman of the Board, but the times were difficult and non-literary business men have found it equally difficult to adjust to changing conditions and markets.

The arms trade is not like any other. John Betjeman said that he was "glad in a way to think JMF never saw the mechanical barbarism of to-day. He lived when it was still possible to find undisturbed England, before the sky hummed with the Blessings of Science and the fields went red with ribbons of bungalows". A man who sold armour-plated battleships and shells ought to have been able to view bungalows and pylons with a certain degree of equanimity. Falkner's firm supplied both sides in the Russo-Japanese War. Some of the Allied forces at Gallipoli met their deaths through weapons supplied by Armstrong Whitworth. Falkner never expressed any qualms about his work or gave evidence that he was even aware of a moral problem, yet a highly sensitive man must surely have had or have suppressed some feelings about it. Perhaps the fiction deserves another look.

The Lost Stradivarius provides some pointers. The first is factual. The Neapolitan settings so brilliantly described derive from the mundane circumstance that Armstrong's had a factory outside Naples which Falkner must frequently have visited. The rest are more suppositious. In *The Lost Stradivarius* the narrator refers to "that mental dislocation which accompanies... the declaration of war". A man of Falkner's age could not have experienced this in Britain in 1898. Had he observed it on his professional travels? Did Adrian Temple's magical experiments really not remind him of the development of weaponry? And look at the themes of his fiction - the impact of the past on the present, destructive quests devouring guilty and innocent alike, good or semi-good outcomes brought about by ambiguous means. Are not these reflections likely to occur to an