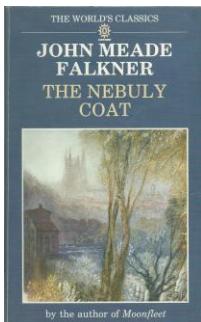


The Freewheelin' Falkner
On re-reading The Nebuly Coat
Christopher Hawtree

The essence of Falkner's third novel is that it looks back. Set four decades earlier than its publication at the beginning of the twentieth century, it roams further than its main narrative to bring forward events earlier in that century; all of this drives a plot which is buttressed by Falkner's firm grasp of Western civilization across two thousand years.



The 1988 Oxford World's Classics edition, edited with an Introduction and Notes by Christopher Hawtree

It was in such a spirit that once again I recently picked up the 1988 edition of the novel which I made for the World's Classics, for I was transported to the verdant pre-Mamma Mia! island of Skopолос. There I had daily sat outside a café whose other customers were mostly fisherman. While they recovered from their labours, I set about mine – if labour it can be called. I had with me a copy of the original, 1954 edition of the novel and a black pen. As I read the novel, more slowly than ever before, I marked a cross in the margin against anything that I thought might need an explanatory note, a task for my return to England. (This was but a brief sojourn, not an island exile akin to those of Leonard Cohen or John Fowles – or even Lord Blandamer.) Far from being the literary equivalent of splitting open a fish, this method of reading a novel drew one deeper into it, heightening appreciation of Falkner's ready command of disparate experience and knowledge. (Curiously enough, this work had come my way because the editor of Isaiah Berlin, OUP publisher Henry Hardy had enjoyed my absurdly scholarly *Spectator* review of his firm's edition of E.C. Bentley's *The First Clerihews* and our correspondence led to his agreeing with the

wisdom of my suggestion that *The Nebuly Coat* should re-appear.) Every time that I have read the novel it has been to take it slowly and to find new vistas open up. It is a novel to urge upon people, and they invariably report “wow!” of the experience. (Among these was Anthony Powell, who records his reading the new World’s Classic edition in his Journals, and Fowles himself, whose journals demand to be published in an even longer version.) In supplying a comment for the new cover, Graham Greene said that he did so with all the enthusiasm that he had felt on two previous readings, one of which had been when he mooted it for inclusion in “The Century Library” during a few post-war years as a publisher at Eyre and Spottiswoode.

To read it yet again, amidst a life which has gained some of the hurly-burly of activity upon a local authority amidst Government cuts, is to appreciate the retreat which it offered Falkner himself from the daily, varied explosive life of a large armaments company. In a typically modest, perhaps over-modest letter to Lord Rendel, who admired the novel, Falkner said that it had been written at the end of the day, snatched evenings, and he feared it was but an echo of what he hoped to achieve. Naturally, he was not going to tell a colleague that he had at least thought about it during office hours (or aboard one of his many railway journeys). That said, for all its stately, seemingly autumnal progress, the novel does – upon another reading – reveal something of its composition on the fly.

Alas, the manuscript is fugitive (quite possibly burnt) but – to judge by the surviving notebook which posited an ur-version of it – one intuits that Falkner sat down and kept on going, drawing upon everything in as similarly well-stocked a mind as that of the songwriter to whom allusion is made in this article’s title (which is not as fanciful as all that: they share a deep knowledge of folk songs and the Bible). To my regret, OUP decided not to include the transcribed notebook as an appendix to the edition.

At the same time as beginning to re-read the novel, I had been contemplating the number of characters that can be reasonably contained in a novel of average length (some 100, 000 words, although Kingsley Amis, Greene and Evelyn Waugh reckoned on 75,000). I had been thinking about the way in which a novelist marshals his cast, gets them on and off stage. Lo and behold, a few pages into *The Nebuly Coat*, Falkner refers to “these leading actors”. There is that overarching authorial voice. Within the

narrative, however, Falkner is able, without a jar, to switch from one actor's point of view to another's, often within the same chapter or scene, much of this being given to interior monologue which has a ready way with quotation and allusion (none of which incongruously dates from after the 1860s). Time and again the sombre is immediately leavened by humour.

In a post-war essay, V.S. Pritchett called Falkner an “amateur”, a term echoed recently by William Boyd, but tucked inside my copy of the new World's Classic edition I found a postcard from A. N. Wilson who was “having a very restorative holiday in Shetland after a big row with the BBC”: he noted that “as you say, there is nothing else quite like it – though bits of Hardy linger in the mind as the plot unfolds (but then the plot isn't the main thing about it)”.

Think about many novels, and in fact they form a chamber drama, whether taking place in a small locale or internationally. *The Nebury Coat* turns upon half-a-dozen main players. In his cover comment for the new World's Classic edition, Graham Greene said, “what a masterly opening page, humorous and enticing”. That page gives most of its space to Sir George, senior partner in Farquhar and Farquhar; he re-appears every so often, a huffing-and-puffing, gainsaying fellow whose manner would not have been out of place in an Ealing comedy (James Robertson Justice, perhaps). *The Nebury Coat* is notable for an array of supporting actors, minor players, many of them off-stage, such as “some peeping Toms who looked over the low green blinds as the omnibus passed”; or briefly glimpsed, such as the gloriously, ignominiously named Mr. Noot who, in the church, “shut the book, with a glance of general fulmination through his great round spectacles”.

That is a phrase, as are so many, that could find a place in Waugh. A delight in reading the novel once again is to find so many such sidelights which delineate minor characters indelibly. Without all these people being mentioned, caught in a phrase along the way, the crowd scene of the novel's ending would have seemed implausible.

No character gets it so much in the neck as mincer-turning Mr. Joliffe who, after Sharnall's death/murder, “gave away a packet of moral reflections *gratis* with every pound of sausages, and turned up the whites of his eyes

over the sin of intemperance, which had called away his poor friend in so terrible a state of unpreparedness”.

It is a capacious novel which, *pace* V. S. Pritchett and William Boyd, can accommodate digression. Such, from the start, is the novel's great central sense of place – a fact not lost upon another enthusiast for it, E. M. Forster –, so much so that Cullerne, unlike its church, can bear much weight put upon it. The Bishop's visit for lunch occupies many pages – before and after the event – but does not obtrude. Similarly, the rhapsody/threnody about the delights and rigours of lodging-house life fills more than a couple of pages but no more demands a blue pen than do the many observations and *aperçus* which animate Proust's novel. “It is not a rich life, for men as a rule set up their own houses as soon as they are able to do so; it is a life of work and buoyant anticipation, where men are equipping for the struggle, and laying the foundations of fortune, or digging the pit of indigence.” Falkner had known lodging-house life well – including the unfortunate night when he relieved himself in a shoe by mistake – and there is real passion a hundred pages later, when he gives a paragraph to note that “it has a magic of its own – the bedroom fire. Not such a one as night by night warms hothouse bedrooms of the rich, but that which burns but once or twice a year. How the coals glow between the bars, how the red light shimmers on the black-lead bricks, how the posset steams upon the hob! Milk or tea, cocoa or coffee, poor commonplace liquids, are they not transmuted in the alembic of a bedroom fire, till they become nepenthe for a heartache or a philtre for romance? Ah, the romance of it, when youth forestalls tomorrow's conquest, when middle life forgets that yesterday is past for ever, when even querulous old age thinks it may still have its 'honour and its toil'”.

Falkner was in his mid-forties when writing the novel, and beset by piles, the operation upon which he duly described in a letter whose detail is something at which Joyce might blanch. There are other, similar scattered references to “the dark gorge of middle age”; elsewhere “youth looking at an old maid traces spinsterhood to man's neglect. It is so hard to read in sixty's plainness the beauty of sixteen – to think that underneath the placidity of advancing years may lie buried, yet unforgotten, the memory of suits urged ardently, and quenched so long ago in tears”; and, with the years, “despair of any continuity of godliness follows, and then it is that good resolves, becoming a mere reflex action of the mind, fail in their

gracious influence, and cease to bring quiet. These conditions can scarcely occur before middle age, and Westray, being young and eminently conscientious, was feeling the full peacefulness of his high-minded intention steal over him, when the door opened, and the organist entered."

Sharnall is, of course, a man whose ideals have been wrought asunder by middle age. Despair has poured upon him. In one scene, literally so. There is an essay to be written about rain in English fiction (it often figures in the last paragraph of a novel). Weather, in all its variety, is a hallmark of *The Nebuly Coat*. Sharnall "did not know how tired he was till he stopped walking, nor how the rain had wetted him till he bent his head a little forward, and a cascade of water fell from the brim of his worn-out hat". This is a superb, concise image which reminds one of P.N. Furbank's observation, with reference to Hardy, that the landscape of nineteenth-century novels fomented the invention of photography and the moving image. Westray is also, on at least two occasions, beset by the rain.

The archives of John Murray contain a letter from somebody who, as early as the Twenties, proposed a film version of the novel. One might wonder how it could have possibly worked without dialogue, let alone the technical demands of the fissures and collapse of its end (a doddle in an era when the stroke of a keyboard can activate the software to rid the world of Paris from Independence Day).

That said, perhaps it is as well that the novel has never received the Sunday serial, the Merchant-Ivory treatment, for it is a work which every reader's mind screens upon its pulsing cells – and to lose the novel's pervasive air of meditation would be akin to film's removal of Wodehouse's continual, miraculous way with an outlandish metaphor. (That said, a film version could bring a fine soundtrack disc: "his eyes roamed through the building as he listened, but he did not appreciate the music the less. Nay, rather, he appreciated it the more, as some writers find literary perception and power of expression quickened at the influence of music itself".)

What camera could match such a description as this? "The promise of the early morning was maintained. The sky was of a translucent blue, broken with islands and continents of clouds, dazzling white like cotton-wool. A

soft, warm breeze blew from the west, a bird forgot that autumn had come and sang merrily in a garden bush, and Cullerne was a town of gardens, where men could sit each under his own vine and fig-tree. The bees issued forth from their hives, and hummed with cheery droning chorus in the ivy-berries that covered the wall-tops with deep purple. The old vanes on the corner pinnacles of St. Sepulchre's tower shone as if they had been regilt. Great flocks of plovers flew wheeling over Cullerne marsh, and flashed with a blinking silver gleam as they changed their course suddenly. Even through the open window of the organist's room fell a shaft of golden sunlight that lit up the peonies of the faded, threadbare carpet."

One can well imagine the satisfaction with which Falkner looked up from the page after writing that. It is indelible observation to a purpose. What's more, it reminds us that the novel opens in autumn.

For all its variedly stately progress, in harmony with the outward calm of Cullerne, *The Nebuly Coat* takes an Einsteinian loop in time – or does it? Falkner took his eye off the page at times. A few pages in, the conductor of the carriage leaves Westray at the church (and in the rain), and says "if you get out here, I will drive your bag to the hotel". There is no mention of the bag being retrieved thence as – eleven pages later – Westray asks of those gathered in the church "if anyone could tell him of suitable rooms".

As much of the novel has, one way or another, to draw in times past – in particular the long monologue about Sophia's dalliances, soldiers and all –, Falkner appears to create an unusual autumn. At page 62, Westray has spent a week in the lodging-house; come page 78, a further month has gone by, work upon the church has begun; at page 134 a week has passed; at page 148 there has been several occasions when Westray has gone to London; page 165 informs us that at least another week has gone by; on page 188 more weeks have gone by, accommodating Lord Blandamer's Saturday visits to Anastasia.

That makes at least ten, even thirteen weeks, which would bring us within sight of Christmas (which goes unmentioned); however, on page 206, it is too early in the year for Sharnall to have a fire lit when it should be the very time for one; a month after his death, Westray hears from the stationmaster that he had written a similar ticket that night; at least ten days' leave is granted to Westray by Sir George on page 275, which, further

down, notes that a further month has gone by; three weeks then pass without a visit from Lord Blandamer until events telescope into his marriage to Anastasia. Despite that curious reference to its being too early in the year for Sharnall to have a fire (when it would have been December), any totting up of these passing weeks must take the marriage into the spring of the next year; something which is perhaps confirmed by the reference on page 319 to the honeymoon's protraction until the autumn – a year after Westray's arrival in Cullerne. After this, Blandamer and Anastasia winter in Paris, and so it passes that a year after the wedding, she gives birth to a son. With which comes the proposal to ring the bells to welcome their return, something which takes place in the autumn (a jump of six months in two pages), two years after Westray's arrival. By page 328 it is again winter, a fire is allowed, and events speed up with the discovery of what lies behind the daub which hangs on Westray's wall. Scarcely a few days pass, but on page 387 "on this still autumn evening there was something terribly amiss with the tower", and the rest we know.

To make the novel fit the chronology, Falkner should have deleted that "autumn" - but it is a novel suffused with autumn. His descriptions dwell upon that season, in both its light and shade, warmth and wet. Falkner gives such scant description to the other times of the year that one has to pause and tabulate them. A phrase or two here and there could have highlighted this. Then again, that is to miss the point, for Falkner has created his own world, one in which he can freewheel, changing tone within a harmonious whole. It is a novel which finds room for Anastasia's novel-in-progress and Westray's poetry, and even has a touch of the Indiana Jones at one point: for twenty-five years Lord Blandamer had been "a wanderer abroad: in France and Germany, in Russia and Greece, in Italy and Spain. He was believed to have visited the East, to have fought in Egypt, to have run blockades in South America, to have found precious diamonds in South Africa. He had suffered the awful penances of the Fakirs, he had fasted with the monks of Mount Athos; he had endured the silence of La Trappe; men said that the Sheik-ul-Islam had himself bound the green turban round Lord Blandamer's head. He could shoot, he could hunt, he could fish, he could fight, he could sing, he could play all instruments, he could speak all languages as fluently as his own; he was the very wisest and the very handsomest, and – some hinted – the very wickedest man that ever lived, yet no one had ever seen him."

Our lament at the loss of Falkner's fourth novel can hardly be assuaged by imagining all the derring-do he could have extrapolated from such an outline. And, his being Falkner, who is to say that such a novel could not have incorporated passages similar to this one from *The Nebuly Coat*? A theme of it is the way in which so many – perhaps everybody – hankers after a lost life, even if it is not on the scale of Lord Blandamer's purported adventures. Quiet desperation caught so well in this hints at a grasp of profound passion: observed with Proustian incisiveness, it is a far cry from Falkner's laconic announcement of his own marriage: "the gambits of the great game of love are strangely limited, and there is little variation in the after-play. If it were not for the personal share we take, such doings would lack interest by reason of their monotony, by their too close resemblance to the primeval type. This is why the game seems dull enough to onlookers; they shock us with the callousness with which they are apt to regard our ecstasies. This is why the straightforward game palls sometimes on the players themselves after a while; and why they are led to take refuge from dullness in solving problems, in the tangled irregularities of the knight's move."

Is it perhaps not too much to infer from this a modicum of Falkner's feelings for John Noble? Be that as it may, a further reading of *The Nebuly Coat* has one urging this serenely seething novel upon others – and wondering whether they too will pause over the brief passage in which "the cloud had returned to Westray's face. If he had been the hero of a novel his brow would have been black as night; as it was he only looked rather sulky."

Hero of a novel, he lives beyond it, and that is a mark of the genius – amateur or otherwise - which makes *The Nebuly Coat* exist without recourse to the confines of a calendar