

The Religious Books in Moonfleet - a first look

Royd Whitlock

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Continuing the theme of the micro-examination of small parts of the text of *Moonfleet* this article looks at the books referred to implicitly or explicitly in the novel. It is not intended that literary allusions are probed to any depth. This has been done to an extent [1] and should, I believe, require a separate article for a fuller examination.

1.2 Again prompted by idle curiosity (as my wife maintains) this mini-project allowed the writer the pleasure of delving into unknown or half-known fields accompanied by much musing, speculation and questioning as far as the round of daily (self-build) life allowed.

1.3 Another impetus arose from wondering how JMF's intellectual interests, as exemplified by his own book collection (discussed by John Coulter [2]), might relate to the books he 'places' in *Moonfleet*.

1.4 The same methods as before have been used in this desk-top study of the background and associations of the books that figure in the tale. As always the amount of material to be discovered about each title varied immensely so selection and synthesis was essential to produce a reasonably balanced essay. For readers interested in any one particular aspect, further references and links are provided. Page numbers for quotations refer to the Edward Arnold edition published in the 1950s.

2. THE BOOKS ALLUDED TO

2.1 A total of nine books are mentioned: five are given in name, one by a generic title and the other three by means of author and/or quote. All apart from g., h. and i. are presented as actual books by title in the story. Three of the named books are of a (Christian) religious nature. The table shows how many times each book is referred to, directly or indirectly.

2.2 The preponderance of references to religious titles is interesting but not surprising considering the central role religion played in

middle class social life in Falkner's early years and perhaps even more so in the mid 18th century setting of the novel. JMF himself was of a religious (if at times undefinable [3]) persuasion. He collected books, amongst other 'fine things', especially liturgical works [4].

	<i>Title (or heading)</i>	mentions
a	(Holy) Bible [also (Holy) Scripture(s)]	6
b	Book of Common Prayer (Prayer Book	12
c	Sermons of Dr Sherlock	2
d	The Arabian Nights	4
e	History of Corfe Castle	1
f	(school) grammars	1
g	Dryden's poetry	1
h	Robinson Crusoe	1
i	Homer's Iliad	1

2.3 The Holy Bible

2.3.1 According to the King's College London's webpage, Family Bibles, so named, first appeared in England in the first part of the 18th century, partly as a way to circumvent the strict regulation in the printing of the King James' Bible. Besides the plain text found in authorised versions, Family Bibles contained annotations, maps, engravings as well as empty pages for families to record the important Christian milestones in their family life, in large, heavy tomes.

The Authorised Version itself was reproduced in an infinite number of permutations. By the late seventeenth century it had become common to bind separate engravings into unillustrated Bibles, and from around 1720 printers who lacked the royal privilege began to publish Bibles disguised as commentaries. "Family Bibles", presented as educational texts and usually

including pictures and maps as well as notes, were another device used to evade the copyright laws.

(With permission from The Bible in translation: an exhibition of items from the Foyle Special Collections Library, King's College London.[5])

2.3.2 The first reference occurs in Chapter I, paragraph 3 (page 8):

My aunt had few books ; a Bible, a Common Prayer, and some volumes of sermons are all that I can recollect now ...

This sets the bibliographic context of John's foster-upbringing, suggesting, perhaps, a rather austere and joyless experience.

2.3.3 Later in Chapter I, page 18, the schoolteacher, the Reverend Mr Glennie

... would never say whether he believed the tale [of Blackbeard's Ghost] or not, pointing out that apparitions both of good and evil spirits are related in Holy Scripture

JMF here adds another little incident that shows how central the Bible was in everyday experience - unlike today's over-media-ed stream of consciousness!

2.3.4 Then perhaps JMF adds some social realism as John wonders, in Chapter V, page 66,

... how Master Ratsey could quote Scripture so pat, and yet cheat the revenue

2.3.5 The next time the Bible is mentioned (Chapter XVI, para 4, page 185) is perhaps one of the more psychologically powerful moments in the story. Elzevir and John are returning in haste to the *Bugle Inn* after the drowning of the Well-keeper at Carisbrooke Castle. In considering his predicament the fleeing boy silently recalls with despair:

In the Family Bible lying on the table in my aunt's best parlour was a picture of Cain, which I had often looked at with fear on wet Sunday afternoons. It showed Cain striding along in the midst of a boundless desert, with his sons and their wives striding

behind him, and their little children carried slung on poles. There was a quick, swinging motion in the bodies of all, as though they must needs always stride as fast as they might, and never rest, and their faces were set hard, and thin with eternal wandering and disquiet. But the thinnest and most restless-looking and hardest face was Cain's, and on the middle of his forehead there was a dark spot, which God had set to show that none might touch him, because he was the first murderer, and cursed for ever.

Did JMF have a copy or two of such a Bible in his own collection (or had he seen one in his father's library)? The description of the engraving of Cain and his family's journey in the Land of Nod is so detailed that it is tempting to speculate whether or not JMF actually experienced it. So far, no real engraving matching this description and supposed period has been located. A nineteenth century (1880) oil painting by Fernand Cormon is shown below.



(Fernand Cormon, *Cain*, 1880 (RF280), with kind permission of the Musée d'Orsay, Paris)

2.3.6 Fittingly, perhaps, the Holy Scripture features finally in the last few pages (Ch XIX, p 241) of the tale. Mr Glennie reads the Commendamus from the Common Prayer over the dead body of Elzevir Block. And then continues:

"And though I may by some be reprehended ... for presuming to refer to profane authors after citing Holy Scripture, yet I cannot refrain from saying that even the great poet Homer counsels moderation in mourning ... "

Is this a hint of the tensions surrounding the interpretation and implementing the message of the Scripture - and its relationship with non-religious thought?

2.4 The Book of Common Prayer

2.4.1 Another religious book, the 'Common Prayer', plays a pivotal part in the development of the tale. It (or text from within) is mentioned 12 times and perhaps unexpectedly serves a number of contrasting and not necessarily uplifting functions. (A mention of the 'Psalms' is counted as though for the Common Prayer Book.)

2.4.2 The Common Prayer Book is first mentioned (like the Bible) in Ch. I, page 8 [2.3.2] as part of the limited, Christianity/ religion-oriented reading available to JT in his foster home

It then figures in the Church service after the Floods (Chapter II, pp. 22-24):

... there in a pew by himself sat Elzevir Block. The people stared at him as they came in, for no one had ever known him to go to church before ; ... He took no notice of anyone, ... but kept his eyes fixed on a prayer-book, which he held in his hand, though he could not be following the minister, for he never turned the leaf.

It is as though even Elzevir Block has recognised the need to make a small show of bowing to church custom to add some credibility to his cover for the real purpose of keeping an ear open for the contraband below?

For it was certain that something was moving in the Mohune vault ... and Master Ratsey seemed to be trying to mask the one noise by making another himself, whether by shuffling with his feet or by thumping down his prayer-book.

Despite these distractions, Mr Glennie steadfastly continued with his sermon:

... if you will look at your [prayer] books, you will see that the letter "Y" is not like the Mohune's, with both arms equal, but has the arm on the left broader and more sloping than the arm on the right ... When we heard that we all fell to searching our prayer-books for a capital "Y" ...

So now it is being used as a visual aid - at least it is for a philosophically uplifting purpose!

2.4.3 In Chapter IV John's nefarious treasure-seeking in the Mohune burial vault below the church chancel and found an age-blackened silver locket chained around the neck of the skeleton of Colonel John Mohune, otherwise known as Blackbeard. Opening the locket revealed, disappointingly, a scrap of paper inscribed with

... nothing to be seen except a few verses from the Psalms of David

*The days of our age are threescore years and ten;
And though men be so strong that they come
To fourscore years, yet is their strength then
But labour and sorrow, so soon passeth it
Away, and we are gone.
--Psalm xc. 21*

*And as for me, my feet are almost gone;
My treadings are wellnigh slipped.
--Psalm lxxiii. 6*

*But let not the waterflood drown me; neither let
The deep swallow me up.
--Psalm lxix. 11*

*So, going through the vale of misery, I shall
Use it for a well, till the pools are filled
With water.
--Psalm lxxxiv. 14*

*For thou hast made the North and the South:
Tabor and Hermon shall rejoice in thy name.
--Psalm lxxxix. 6*

John dismissed these merely as charms against evil spirits unaware of their cryptic import.

2.4.4 It is not until Chapter VIII (page 93) that JMF places in JT's hands the means by which he can solve the contained secret message that will lead to fortune, misfortune and then resolution! Some time after finding Blackbeard's parchment in the vault John was returning to the *Why Not?* from a secret meeting with Grace Maskew. He was passing his old foster home when his Aunt Jane called to him that she had something for him.

So left me standing while she went off to get it, and back she came and thrust into my hand a little prayer-book, which I had often seen about the parlour in past days, saying, "Here is a Common Prayer which I had meant to send thee with thy clothes. It was thy poor mother's and I pray may some day be as precious a balm to thee as it once was to that godly woman." With that she gave me the "Good day" and I pocketed the little red leather book, which did indeed afterwards prove precious to me, though not in the way she meant, ...

Evidently the little prayer book stayed with John from then on through the misadventures of *The Landing* (Chapter VIII) and *The Escape* (Chapter X) to the refuge of *The Sea-Cave* (Chapter XI, page 128) where it takes centre stage. During the long hours of his recovery when alone John relayed how he:

took to reading to beguile my thoughts ; but found little choice of matter, having only my aunt's red Prayer-book that I thrust into my bosom the afternoon that I left Moonfleet, and Blackbeard's locket.

Later (in Chapter XI, page 141) JT inadvertently has dropped the parchment on the floor of the cave whereat Ratsey picked it up:

What is this, son?" asked he.

"It is only Scripture verses," I answered ... "'Tis said they are a spell against Spirits of Evil, ...

Ratsey, well-versed as he was, pointed out (page 143) the error of the verse writer's numbering:

Psalm xc. 21 ... hath not twenty verses in it, all told, and this same verse is the clerk's verse and cometh tenth, and yet he calls it twenty-first. I wish I had here a Common Prayer, and I would prove my words.

And for his own secretive reasons JT did not tell Ratsey his thoughts:

brooding all the while over a strange thought that his [Ratsey's] last words had brought to me. Nor did I tell him that I had by me my aunt's prayer-book, wishing to examine for myself more closely whether he was right, after he should have gone.

As soon as Ratsey left (page 144) John

took out again the parchment, and also my aunt's red prayer-book, and sat down to study them.

John first confirmed that though each Psalm number was correct the verse numbering was in error, just as Master Ratsey had averred. He had hardly framed the reason why when he realised the verse numerals indicated the ordinal value of a word in the text of the Psalm.

... I had scarce formed the question to myself before I had the answer, and knew that it must be the number of the word chosen in each text to make a secret meaning.

He then proceeded to unlock the secret message.

I was in as great a fever and excitement now as when I found the locket in the Mohune vault, and could scarce count with trembling fingers as far as twenty-one, in the first verse, for hurry and amaze. It was "fourscore" that the number fell on in the first text, "feet" in the second, "deep" in the third, "well" in the fourth, "north" in the fifth.

Fourscore-feet-deep-well-north

There was the cipher read, and what an easy trick ! and yet I had not lighted on it all this while, nor ever should have, but for Sexton Ratsey and his burial verse.

So the Prayer-book is being used as a 'key' in John's decryption. A process repeated when John related to Elzevir how he had deciphered the message. (page 146)

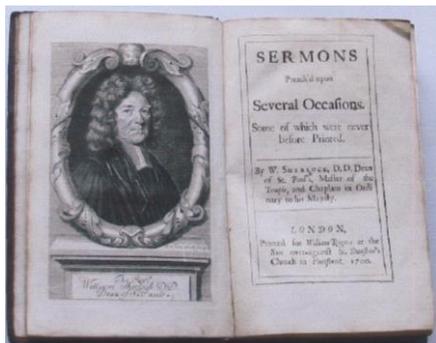
[The questions arise incidentally as to how and why Colonel John Mohune left an encrypted message (Chapter XII, page 148) but these will be the subject of another article.]

The final mention of the prayer-book comes perhaps fittingly at the end of the story (Chapter XIX, p.241). As John recovered from his ordeal in the storm on the beach of Moonfleet, in which Elzevir gave his life to save John's, Mr Glennie read the Commendamus over Elzevir body. Here the Common Prayer is fulfilling its intended purpose,

giving ... spiritual comfort to John.

2.5 Sermons of Dr Sherlock

2.5.1 This is another 'real' book that seemingly was once widely used in Christian families. Dr William Sherlock (1641 - 1701), Dean of St. Paul's in 1691, was a preacher and writer. Some 18 of his sermons were collected and published in two volumes, firstly, in 1678. Their popularity led to their being reprinted a number of times with at least a 4th edition published in 1748. Even Dr Johnson praised his style as 'very elegant' when asked to recommend 'the best English sermons for style' [6]. The volumes can still be bought from antiquarian bookshops, and copies are found in church and university libraries, such as York [7].



W. Sherlock's Sermons

Preach'd upon Several
Occasions
Printed in 1700

Somewhat confusingly, possibly, William Sherlock's son Thomas also produced (1754?) a collection of sermons (which were referred to in a letter of Jane Austen). But the dates would preclude Thomas Sherlock's sermons being meant since Moonfleet opens in 1757 and Aunt Jane had been using them for a number of years in bringing up John (Chapter I p.8)

My aunt had few books; a Bible, a Common Prayer, and some volumes of sermons are all that I can recollect now

2.5.2 After John returned late for tea, having discovered an entrance to an underground passage, and incurred his Aunt Jane's ire (Chapter III, p.34):

"So understand", she went on, "that I will not have you out again this evening, no, nor any other evening, after dusk. Bed is the place for youth when night falls, but if this seem to you too early you can sit with me for an hour in the parlour, and I will read you a discourse of Doctor Sherlock that will banish vain thoughts, and leave you in a fit frame for quiet sleep."

Aunt Jane seems to use a sermon of Dr Sherlock as a dose of 'heavenly grounding' - to bring him back to reality as she sees it.

2.5.3 Subsequent to the accidental death of Maskew and his own wounding in his foot when the landers were surprised by the posse of soldiers, John regretfully reviewed his situation (Chapter X, p.106):

I felt sick with pain and bitterly cast down to think that I was like to come so soon to such a vile end; so only gave a sigh, wishing heartily that Maskew were not dead, and that my leg were not broke, but that I was back again at the Why Not? or even hearing one of Dr. Sherlock's sermons in my aunt's parlour.

To compare listening to a sermon of Dr Sherlock's as "even" preferable to the prospect of judicial death is some kind of compliment! No doubt a reading of the sermons would help us appreciate JMF's point. A reading of the sermons shows a rather prolix style by today's standards, which may well have taxed a young lad's emerging literacy skills. The content, too, may well

have left John little the wiser at best and at least mentally/morally uneasy!

SERMON 18, page 527 et seq:

The Progress of Wickedness and the Difficulties thereof

... There is not any one Vice, how fond soever they may be of it themselves, but what will condemn in other Men as a great Evil, especially when they themselves suffer by it; nor any one Vertue, how averse soever they are to practise it, but what they must commend in other Men as that which does a great deal of good, especially when they themselves receive good by it. Now can any Man possibly perswade himself that that is evil, which at the same time he confesses does a great deal of good : Or, that to be good, which he confesses does great evil and mischief?

2.5.4 So it seems very likely that JMF was well acquainted with the books and their contents. The Sotheby catalogue of JMF's books lists such volumes [8]. The Sermons may also have been mentioned in at least two other fiction books: one, *The Autobiography of Christopher Kirkland* (by Lynn Linton) and the other *A Soldier of Virginia* (by Burton Egbert Stevenson). At present it has not been determined whether William's or Thomas's sermons are indicated.

3. CONCLUDING REMARKS

3.1 For each of the three books mentioned some assessment of their roles in the story has been made above. The Bible may be said to supply the underlying philosophy and source of justification and guidance? (valid or not) against which the characters' actions unfold. The Book of Common Prayer plays a more deliberately central and incident-specific role. Dr Sherlock's Sermons get a rather negative treatment, it seems!

3.1.1 The surprising thing is that with such a relatively high incidence of references, direct and indirect, to religious books this reader was not really aware of the fact, either at the age of 12 when first read and now on re-reading some decades later! No doubt this is partly due to my 1940s - 50s vaguely Christian upbringing and to

JMF's skill in interweaving such references so believably. (What readers of a different faith would feel might be interesting to hear.)

3.1.2 That JMF does this so successfully is an indication of his knowledge and insight of such books and their place in society. And also perhaps because he wrote about what he knew. After all, there are a number of ways a secret message could be encoded, although the very ubiquity of the 'key' meant that it was such an ordinary, everyday artefact of mid-eighteenth life that its cryptic role was easily overlooked, as perhaps Colonel John Mohune intended!

3.1.3 Do some of the passages give us some insight into JMF's psyche? Because it is difficult in writing fiction to not give any hints as to the views and ideas espoused by the writer (unlike, say, writing for a scientific journal, where subjectivity has to be minimised) what interpretations can be made? So, although knowledge of the central religious books may be/have been widespread and experience of Christian liturgy frequent (in mid-eighteenth England) how much penetrates the psychological core? Master Ratsey, the Sexton, is perhaps a prime example of someone leading an irreligious life, but well acquainted with/able to mouth its teachings - literally making 'lip-service'. At the time of writing, JMF would no doubt be aware (along with other literati such as Hardy) of the religious hypocrisy in society. Was he making a gently ironic comment or is Ratsey a 'mere' literary plot device?

3.2 As Herbert points out the great religious books provide linguistic models for a story written in simple, dignified English [9]. Being familiar with the language of liturgical writings of some antiquity would no doubt provide a valuable reservoir for the dialogue set in an earlier historical period. And as Herbert further remarks the use of repetition [of word and concept] is one of the chief characteristics; three examples drawn at random are shown below.

Chapter VII, page 95

...and Master Ratsey said, " Well, Jack, so thou and Elzevir are leaving Moonfleet, and I would fain flit myself, but then who would be left to lead the old folk to their last homes, for dead do not bury their dead in these days."

Chapter XV, page 177

The turnkey ... reached out his hand to me crying- "Where is the treasure? Where is the treasure? Give me the treasure!"

Chapter XIX, page 239

At the brand she stared, and said, "Speak not of wealth; 'tis not wealth makes men, and if you have come back no richer than you went, you are come back no poorer, nor poorer, John, in honour. And I am rich and have more wealth than I can rightly use, so speak not of these things; but be glad that you are poor, and were not let to profit by that evil treasure. ... "

Compare this with a passage from an 1830s Old Testament opened at random:

Jeremiah, Chapter XVII

*21 Thus saith the LORD, Take heed to yourselves, and bear no burden on the sabbath-day, nor bring it in by the gates of Jerusalem.
22 Neither carry forth a burden out of your houses on the sabbath-day, neither do ye any work; but hallow ye the sabbath-day as I commanded your fathers.*

Clearly this aspect could be explored in much greater depth using computer aided text analysis techniques, as has happened with many other works of literature.

3.3 That JMF chose to use 'real' books could be seen as consistent with his descriptions of the physical setting of the novel based on observation and experience rather than entirely on invention. He weaves the imagined actions of his characters into a real and recognisable physical world. This is in contrast to some modern authors, such as Lynne Truss who appears at best to believe that " ... a writer is not automatically disadvantaged by first-hand knowledge." [10] Perhaps it takes an exceptional talent to create a complete and believable other world such as Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*.

3.4 A final thought is that the dialogue rather than the narrative shows more noticeably the influence of the King James' version. And as that Bible was intended to be read out aloud in Church, perhaps *Moonfleet* would make a greater first impact were it heard rather than read (privately and silently). The BBC Audiotope [11]

would be ideal, but certainly not the Fritz Lang 1955 Hollywood film version. (Even the principal actor is reported to have had a low opinion of the film! [12])

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

My thanks are due to Raymond Moody for a most informative exchange of emails that has helped to shape my knowledge of the development of the Bible and the Common Prayer Book.

NOTES

1. JMF = John Meade Falkner
2. JT = John Trenchard

REFERENCES

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- [2] Coulter, J. 'John Meade Falkner as a Book Collector', *John Meade Falkner Society Journal*, Vol 1, No. 5, July 2004, pp. 3-12
- [3] Warren, K. 'John Meade Falkner, A Paradoxical Life', Edwin Mellon Press, 1995, Chapter 23
- [4] Warren, K. *ibid* Chapter 26
- [5] <http://www.kcl.ac.uk/depsta/iss/library/speccoll/exhibitions/biblex/ebib.html>. 'The Bible in translation: an exhibition of items from the Foyle Special Collections Library, King's College London.'
- [6] Boswell, J. *Life of Johnson*, Oxford World Classics, 1998, page 913
- [7]http://libcat0.york.ac.uk/F/2N9MIBJPTGBJEEPAD7PQ1P23JDKCJDSFR9A458RP8HLCLE2B-43259?func=full-set-set&set_number=000211&set_entry=000001&format=999
- [8] Coulter, J. *ibid* p.7 Lot no. 71 in the Sotheby's Sale is as follows: Sherlock (William) A Practical Discourse concerning a Future Judgement, *old red morocco, panelled back and sides*, 1699 — [Allestree (Dr.)] The Ladies Calling, *old red morocco, two-line border round sides, decorative line panel with an ornament at corners, panelled back, g. E. Oxford*, 1693 — Pelling (E.) Practical Discourse on the Sacrament, *old red morocco, panelled back and sides, g. E. 1692*; and 2 others, *in old morocco*
- [9] Herbert, M. *ibid* pp. 31-34
- [10] http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/uk_news/magazine/6339747.stm
- [11] *Moonfleet*, BBC Radio Collection, 1999
- [12] <http://www.highbeam.com/DocPrint.aspx?DocId=1P2:5022607>