

John Meade Falkner and Burford
Raymond Moody

This part of Oxfordshire has a distinctive type of tomb of which there are about a dozen in Burford churchyard. They are box-like chest tombs, around four or five feet high, mostly with a semicylindrical top. They are usually called 'bale' tombs because of a fancied resemblance to bales of raw wool, although a bale of wool was not this shape. They are typical of the seventeenth century, and after 1700 this style of tomb went out of fashion. But if you walk out of the south door of the church and turn left for about fifteen yards, and then walk south for about five yards you will find a bale tomb that is two centuries later than all the others.



Society Members around the 'Bale' tomb in 2003

Around its top is a Latin inscription:

*luxta fidem defuncti sunt omnes isti, non acceptis repromissionibus,
sed a longe eas adspicientes et salutantis et confidentes quia
peregrine et hospites sunt super terram.*

You will, of course, immediately recognize Hebrews chapter 11 verse 13: *These all died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them afar off, and were persuaded of them, and embraced them, and confessed that they were strangers and pilgrims on earth.* The past century has not been kind to the stone, but it is possible to make out much of the inscription on one end of the tomb: *In memoriam Guilielmi Richardson Falkner quem ad occasum* – an odd phrase for his demise but I think that’s what it is, and the date *MCMIII*. The rest is illegible. On the other end of the tomb is this, three decades later and more readable: *In memoriam Johannis Meade Falkner A.M. qui obit A.D. XI Kal. Aug. MCMXXXII*.

This is absolutely typical of one of the most contradictory men ever to come to Burford, John Meade Falkner. His younger brother William Richardson Falkner had no connection with Burford and died elsewhere in 1903 at the age of 35, but his brother chose to bury him here. The revival of a long past style of tomb, the inscription in Latin, the use of classical dating for his own inscription ‘eleven days before the Kalends in August’ and A.M. ‘artium magister’, where we would commonly say M.A. ‘Master of Arts’, these are all typical of John Meade Falkner.

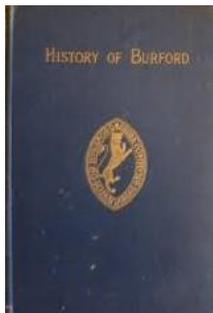
It gets stranger. The tomb was erected in 1903 over the burial of William Falkner. John Meade Falkner died himself thirty years later, in July 1932, in the north of England and – his only break with ancient tradition – was cremated in Darlington, when cremation was not very common. His ashes were brought to Burford to lie by his brother’s grave, the urn apparently in a full-size coffin. Mrs. Gretton, in that sycophantic, self-indulgent edition of *Burford Past and Present*, has a description of the coffin lying in state overnight in the church beneath the place of the pre-Reformation rood, encircled by candles and geraniums. Surely though, only the urn

with the ashes is buried beneath the tomb. The ashes of his wife Evelyn are also there under a small tablet on the south side.

So, what about the man? John Meade Falkner was born in 1858 in Manningford Bruce in Wiltshire. His father was an easy-going man who, when his family grew, with no particular vocation, took the route to ordination in order to augment his income, with curacies around Dorset. John was educated in Dorchester, Weymouth Grammar School and briefly at Marlborough. He was very tall and spare, and suffered all his life from recurrent heart trouble. I have speculated that he may have had Marfan syndrome. He went up to Hertford College, Oxford in 1878. Hertford was then a recent foundation, only four years old when Falkner arrived; though it had some tenuous claim to a link with two ancient halls of residence on the same site, essentially it was a Victorian foundation. It was again an odd choice for someone who would come to cherish antiquity so much, but it may have been less expensive.

Oxford worked its spell on him. Oxford has a mystique all its own. Quiller Couch wrote *“Know you her secret none can utter Hers of the book and triple crown?”* It was the world of Matthew Arnold and the Scholar Gypsy, the dreaming spires, of the medieval past that has never completely gone away. I can speak of this first-hand, for after graduating in sciences at Cambridge I migrated to Oxford in 1952 and was swept by the magic of the place: this was where I should have been all along. It could be that you need a particular preference of mind in the first place to be captivated. But Falkner had it and he was. And as was the custom of the time, he made excursions around Oxford by bicycle, covering surprising distances, considering the then undeveloped nature of the bicycle and the state of the roads. At the time bicycling was a leisure pursuit for gentlemen and ladies, garbed for propriety rather than speed:

Thame, Ewelme, Stonesfield, Witney and, of course, Burford. We do not have a date for his first visit, but he was certainly here by 1882



Monk's History

and he was captivated. By 1891 he was a subscriber to Monk's little *History of Burford*. Much later, in 1920, he subscribed for five copies of Richard Gretton's *The Burford Records*. At Whitsun 1888 he led a party consisting of John Noble, his older sister Liliias, and possibly their mother, into rural Oxfordshire over a weekend, to Ewelme in one direction and Burford in the other.

In 1883, six months after Falkner's graduation, a housemaster at Eton, H.E. Luxmoore, introduced him to one of his pupils, John Henry Brunel Noble, seven years his junior. Noble had apparently suffered from stress while preparing for Oxford, and Falkner, who, we must suppose, knew the Oxford system, was called on as a source of help. It became a close friendship and he regularly visited the family. Later in the spring he received an invitation from John Noble's father to become the supervisor and companion of his son and also to tutor his younger brother. Falkner had serious misgivings about this appointment but, with no other clear plans for his future, in the end he accepted. John Noble, first his pupil and then his friend, later became Falkner's partner in his benefactions to Burford.

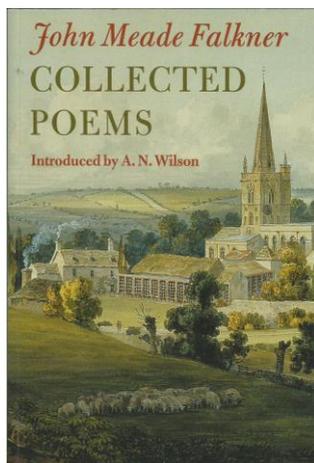
John Noble's father was Sir Andrew Noble, an internationally famed ballistics expert and the operational head of Sir W.G. Armstrong and Company, later Sir W.G. Armstrong Mitchell and Company Ltd. And, later still, Armstrong Whitworth and Co., a vast engineering and armaments conglomerate on Tyneside. The Nobles lived away from the works in great comfort and style and, for the first time, Falkner,

whose family background was modest, experienced the lifestyle that adequate money brought. As his tutoring responsibilities died away, he became personal secretary to Sir Andrew Noble and later, around 1890, company secretary. Eventually, in 1915, remarkably he became Chairman of the Company. In 1920, in declining health, he retired. In 1932 he died.

Falkner disliked the north of England and hated the grime and the ethos of factories and their environment, but his involvement with heavy industry on Tyneside was his business life and it gave him prosperity. In those days the premises of Armstrongs stretched for a mile along the banks of the Tyne. The industrialist side of him is often forgotten now, so much so that he is usually listed as 'novelist and antiquarian'. He is remembered for three novels: *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895), an eerie story of demon possession; *Moonfleet* (1898), a Stevenson-type tale of smugglers, which has been taken up for cinema, television and radio; and *The Nebuly Coat* (1903), in which he merges heraldry, architecture and church matters. This is probably his best but least read book. His own acquired heraldic arms are a nebuly coat with a falcon, which appear in several places in Burford church. He also produced *A History of Oxfordshire* and, for the publisher John Murray, produced guides to *Oxfordshire* and *Berkshire* and a later guide to *Bath*. The guides are a fruit of his extensive bicycle rides.

Falkner also wrote a body of poetry, beginning in his Marlborough days when he took a school prize for his verse. Individual poems were published from time to time in *The Spectator* or the *Cornhill* magazines. Rather as an afterthought, a collection of 38 poems was put together at the end of his life and was going through the press at the time of his death. Paper backed in brown or green, copies lingered in book shops. I remember buying a copy in the 1970s in

the second-hand bookshop that was at one time on the corner of Church Lane. The John Meade Falkner Society was formed in 1999 and published in 2005 a limited edition of 300 copies, containing 45 poems, with an introduction by A.N. Wilson. There may still be more out there. I have been sent one poem since. The subjects are largely ecclesiastical and nostalgic or wistful, even melancholy in mood. The passage of time is his theme, the season is always autumn, the weather misty, his landscape haunted, and quiet restful death is



hovering in the gloom. I wonder how much the twilight tone of his verses was influenced by the death of his mother when he was twelve, and the premature deaths of sister and brother. Re-reading them while preparing this, my opinion of Falkner as poet has risen. Go to them when you are in elegiac mood. Three of his poems are specifically about Burford, three Ballades. The first is from the visit he made with members of the Noble family in 1888, and is dedicated to Liliias, John Noble's sister. The second is dated 1890 and is dedicated to John Noble. The third is undated, *A Last Ballade of Burford*, dark and of a real churchyard character, and I believe it to be much later. You can learn much about Falkner by reading the poems.

What was so special about Burford for him and also for others? All of us here know Burford is the centre of the habitable universe, that any cosmic travelers going from, say, Alpha Centauri to Betelgeux will pass through Burford on the way, and generally turn

up on our doorstep pleading that their ancestors came from Burford and can we tell them about them. But leaving the little green aliens aside, what is it that in its own way is so magnetic about the town? Falkner was not alone in feeling it. We have lived here very happily for fifty-six years now and I suppose I am too near to see it clearly, but it certainly has a magic for many. Falkner's Burford is not our Burford, where the streets are never quiet, where the traffic pours through, and you can see a hundred people on the High Street and not know one of them, for Burford's own residents number a bare thirteen hundred.

**Good Friday
in Burford**

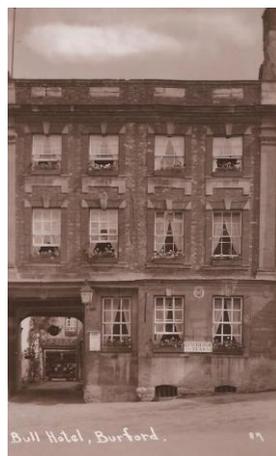
1901



When he first came, the fashionable resort of the eighteenth century with its races was long gone. That was killed by the railway that never reached Burford. Nor was Falkner's Burford the agricultural market town that still remembered the stage-coaches. It was 1870 when the great agricultural depression that was to last till 1940 set in, the market collapsed, and the town went to sleep. Then, after 1910, the world discovered Burford again. Bicycle touring had for a few years been fashionable, the motor car was arriving. The Priory, derelict through the nineteenth century, was well on the way to restoration and Emslie Horniman, of the tea merchant family arrived as the *deus ex machina* with the money to

put the town in order. Burford was moving into its role for visitors. But Falkner's early visits were in the gap between 1870 and 1910 when Burford was still dreaming of the past and not yet preparing for its future. It was the Burford of Beeching's poem: *'The grey old town on the lonely down'*. After his first recorded visit in 1882, he was back with a party of the Noble family in 1888. He wrote to John Noble on one occasion: *"To me Burford is, I suppose, a sort of fetish. Certainly, the church is much more to me than a survival of youthful enthusiasm. It is a vigent pleasure"*. (Typical of the man; you will not find 'vigent' in the dictionary, he had constructed the word from the Latin verb 'vigeo', to be lively or flourishing. Is it a mere matter of chance that the word waited for Falkner to coin it?) At one time he was on the point of becoming a resident or at least a freeholder of Burford. The Great House could be rented then for £34 a year or bought for £1200. But when his interest was known, the price escalated to £2200. He held back, partly on account of the problems of two local personalities, and nothing came of this and he never lived here. He always stayed at *The Bull*, and customarily stayed in that very room in which the last of the Swinbrook Fettiplaces had died after suffering a stroke in the High Street.

The Bull



It was the church in particular that engrossed his attention. The Victorian reconstruction of Burford Church had been projected in 1870 and the church had been reopened after the first phase in May 1872. However, it was far from complete and the work continued, on and off, for the rest of the century and beyond. Falkner with his

financial resources was to have part in this. He formed a friendship with William Cass, Vicar from 1871 to 1906, and Cass and his wife occasionally stayed with the Falkners in Durham. On one occasion he supported the Casses financially in a family crisis. And here is another enigma. In his guide-books, a recurrent theme was his dislike of the Victorian style of restoration of ancient churches. He was as vigorous as William Morris in his rejection of the wholesale use of industrial products. Burford, which in its first phase of reconstruction woke the wrath of Morris, was an example of this: *“You’ve turned out the old flagstones replacing them with so many square yards of Brummagen tiling.*

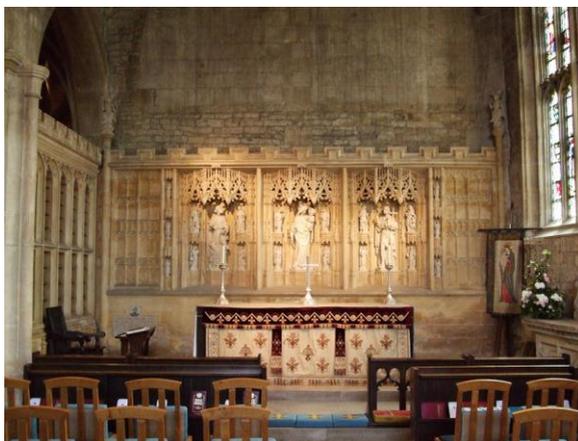
You’ve turned out the priceless old glass of the windows which have been in for centuries and replaced it with your so-called Cathedral glass at so much a square foot.” Falkner came here when the industrial reconstruction of Burford Church was in all its brash newness, but this does not seem



to have deterred him. A footnote to this is that when the Friends of Burford Church was founded in 1946, one of the earliest benefactions was the replacement of these tiles in the Sanctuary with Farmington stone. When did Falkner’s gifts to the church begin? There are two fine seventeenth Italian altar frontals displayed in the church which came early in the 1890s. Around 1900, he and John Noble were considering some kind of endowment for Burford that should be educational, musical and ecclesiastical. The idea came to nothing and subsequently the church alone was the subject of his munificence. In 1902, a Canon Greenwell, a friend at Durham, received a Spanish processional

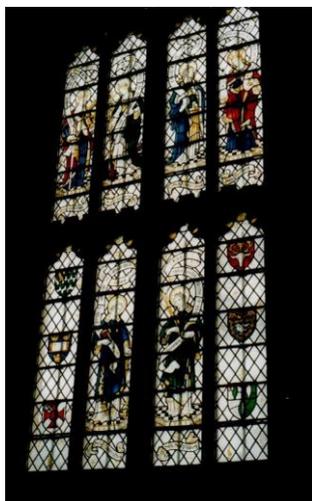
cross, which he passed to Falkner for Burford. There may also have been a fine hanging sanctuary lamp. After the death of Cass on the last day of 1906, William Emeris arrived as Vicar and Falkner continued the Burford relationship.

Very obvious are Falkner's gifts to the structure. The figures of Mary and Gabriel which flank the high altar were given by Falkner and John Noble in 1901 on condition the niches themselves were restored by local effort. In that year his sister Mary died at the age of 45, and the next year his younger brother William died aged only 35. That was the occasion of the tomb in the churchyard. He placed a memorial window in the church to both of them – *Mariae Grace Falkner Guilielmo Richardson Falkner sorori et fratri amantissimis amantissimis* – at the west end of the south aisle.

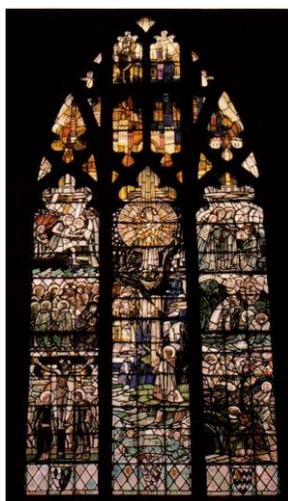


But it is the Lady Chapel which had escaped the early phases of the reconstruction that received most of his attention, in which John Noble joined. From the Reformation to 1870, of course, there were no altars in the church at all, only a wooden Lord's Table in the chancel. Falkner provided an altar for the Lady Chapel, designed by

Sir Ninian Comper, and the stone tracery screen to the north of it. You will find the arms of both Falkner and Noble to the side. Then came the fine reredos designed by E.B. Hoare. The 21 figures in the niches by Esmond Burton were provided later (1930s?) by the Cheatele family, in memory of their parents. The work in the Lady Chapel was complete in 1913. Here we have a view of Falkner's enthusiasms. He wrote rather frivolously to John Noble: *"They had high jinks at Burford on Saturday. There had been 21 clergy in the choir and a great perambulation with the processional cross and the Verger's BVM wand. The new white altar cloth was put on the Mary Altar and Emeris (for the first time warming to the subject) writes it was simply glorious."* Emeris was a very different man from Cass, a much quieter and gentler man, much less of a ritualist, and probably rather embarrassed by Falkner's ceremonial excesses.



Falkner and Noble windows
Lady Chapel



Falkner and Noble windows
South Transept

The first two windows on the south side of the Lady Chapel were provided by a bequest by Falkner and carry his arms and those of Noble. You will also find the nebuly coat in the base of the superb 1907 Whall window in the south transept. Across the base of this window is the inscription *Orate pro bono statu trium Johannum qui hanc ecclesiam dilexerunt*: Pray for the good state of three Johns who have loved this church. Falkner and Noble, of course, but the third John is the medieval John Leggare whose name appears in an odd position on the outside stonework of this window. So, with the memorial window in the south aisle, the church has four windows given by Falkner and Noble.

So much for Falkner's gifts to the structure. He also gave religious artefacts to the church. I have already mentioned the altar frontals and the processional cross, which has an added inscription on the staff tying it to the church. I think he also placed an altar in St. Thomas chapel, and provided a jewelled cross for that. A fifteenth century Italian chalice of gilded metal, to which Falkner had an inscription added: *Capella de S. Thom: in eccles: di. Jh; Bapt: Burford Oxon 1913* the chapel of St. Thomas of Canterbury in the church of St. John Baptist Burford Oxon. And to keep that company, a modern silver gilt paten hall-marked 1913, with the same inscription. A small early seventeenth century Flemish silver chalice and paten, I think, was also given by him. He cherished his anonymity in these gifts, but I think that a modern large chalice and paten hall-marked 1903 may also be his.

The Lady Chapel was his special care. He gave a modern silver chalice and paten there hall-marked 1911. The base of the chalice is inscribed *Altari in capella Beatae Virginis Mariae in Ecclesia de Burford indignus dono dedit die natalis Domini mcmxi*. The paten inscribed *Domini per Mysterium Sanctae Incarnationis Tuae Libera nos*: Lord by the mystery of thy holy Incarnation set us free. Also for

the Altar there, he gave two fine candlesticks, hall-marked 1911, one inscribed on the base *Viderunt eam filiae Sion*, and the other *Et beatissimam praedicaverunt*. To go with these was a silver crucifix 30 inches high, , hall-marked 1912, and inscribed below *Quomodo si cui mater claudiatu (?) ita Ego consolabor vos* with the initials J.H.B.N and J.M.F.

Falkner threw up problems as well as enigmas. Canon Emeris, as Vicar here, was adamant that the Church, as Mrs. Gretton wrote of him, should not 'suffer a locked door or a sacristan's patrol'. Perhaps in former times respect, or even superstition, had made churches immune from theft, but no longer. One can be high minded, like Canon Emeris, on deliberate principle, and leave valuable treasures unsecured on display. But there are three considerations on the other side. Is it fair to put temptation in the way of the weaker brethren who will undoubtedly be around? Or secondly, is it disrespectful to the donors to hazard their gifts? Or thirdly, should one not with worldly wisdom, be a careful custodian of the church's treasures? However, the magnificent silver candlesticks and the crucifix, the gift of Falkner to the altar he provided in the Lady Chapel are no longer with us. There are silvered wood replacements made by the late Commander Fison of Filkins. There is a Biblical precedent for this: look at 2 Chronicles chapter 12 vv. 9, 10.

What sort of man was Falkner? He married late, and almost it seems in a fit of absentmindedness, for his wife played no great part in his life, and there were no children. She was, it seems, devoted to him, but friendships perhaps took first place. He was the type, probably now extinct, of the Victorian bachelor don. In fact, the nearest parallel I can think of is M.R. James, whose birth and death are exactly four years later than Falkner's and, indeed, he shared James's fascination

with the mysterious supernatural, and esoteric antiquity. Falkner's novel *The Lost Stradivarius* might well have been written by James. But M.R. James was not a Victorian industrialist and armaments salesman. He was an academic and Biblical scholar, expert in old manuscripts, Provost of King's College, Cambridge and later Provost of Eton, and writer of *Ghost Stories of an Antiquary*. Falkner was, in his youth in Oxford, touched by the aesthetic movement (and Walter Pater, high priest of the aesthetic movement, was then at Brasenose), was in retirement the Honorary Librarian to Durham Cathedral and, again honorary, Reader in Palaeography in Durham University.



M. R. James 1862-1936

But there was another Falkner. The man whose working life put him at the head of the world's largest armaments manufacturer, whose only rival before the Great War was Krupps in Germany, and head of the vast grimy complex on Tyneside. That man travelled the world selling the machinery of destruction, in genuine and sober fact peddling battleships to Japan and Brazil and artillery to the Ottoman Empire, driving the arms race, stoking up wars in South America. Sometimes men with deeply contrasting lives struggle to keep them apart. Letters that arrived at Christ Church, Oxford addressed to 'Lewis Carroll' were returned unopened and marked 'Not known at this address' by the Revd. Charles Lutwidge Dodgson, mathematics lecturer at the college. For Dodgson, alias Carroll, it was a status or social problem, not a moral one. We must not, I think, read twenty-first century attitudes back into the nineteenth or early twentieth. Before 1914, there was an acceptance of warfare as part of human

life. I do not think Falkner saw a moral dimension to the arms trade. While travelling the world, he kept his antiquarian eye open for treasures. His role as an armaments industrialist financed his scholarly and antiquarian activities. Industrialist one might say by accident, but scholar by conviction; and lover of Burford and its church, for which we may sincerely remember him. Like Wren's epitaph in St. Paul's, here we may say *Si mounumentum requiris, circumspice*. If you want his monument, look around you.

Footnote: *The Whall window in the south transept. Probably as a tribute to the two Johns, and linking them to the mysterious medieval John Leggare, the subject of the panels in this window is St. John: disciple and Apocalypticist. I have long had a problem with this, for though many (and I am one of them) think that the disciple and the writer of the fourth gospel may be the same person, I have yet to encounter anyone who thought that the writer of the Johannine Epistles, and the writer of the Apocalypse were also that person. But Whall obviously did.*