

## Chronology and *The Nebuly Coat*

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Many members of the John Meade Falkner Society will probably be familiar with John Sutherland's delightful series of books - *Where was Rebecca Shot?* et al. - exploring 'puzzles and conundrums in classic fiction'. In homage to Professor Sutherland - and with tongue only slightly in cheek - I offer my own investigation of a problem in *The Nebuly Coat*. The problem can be stated quite simply. In which period of the nineteenth century is the novel set?

We can take our bearings from the long-lost marriage certificate, discovered by Westray in Chapter 20, which provides us with the only fixed chronological marker in the entire novel. From this we learn that Martin Joliffe's parents were married on 15 March 1800, and that Martin himself was born slightly less than nine months later, on 2 January 1801. On the fateful day when Tom Janaway loses his master's money at Beacon Hill, young Martin has only recently 'come back from Oxford' (i.e. having recently graduated from the university) - which brings us to the early 1820s, with Martin himself in his early twenties. And if we are to trust Tom Janaway's recollections, as told to Westray in Chapter 4, more than forty years have elapsed since then. 'I left farming the same day as old master was put underground, and come to Cullerne, and took odd jobs till the sexton fell sick, and then I helped dig graves; and when he died they made I sexton, and that were forty years ago come Whitsun'. This suggests that the action of the novel takes place in the mid-1860s.

In fact we can be slightly more precise than this. In Chapter 7 we learn that Martin Joliffe was forty-five when he married Miss Hunter. Their daughter Anastasia must have been born soon afterwards, as we are told that Miss Hunter 'did not live long to endure her father's displeasure, but died in giving birth to her first child'. Presumably, then, the marriage took place in 1846, and Anastasia was born in 1847. And when we first encounter Anastasia, in Chapter 2, the narrator tells us that she is 'about nineteen', with a face that still retains the 'rounded outline' and 'delicate bloom of girlhood'. Ergo, the action of the novel takes place in 1866 or thereabouts. This is confirmed by the description of Miss Euphemia Joliffe, Anastasia's aunt and Martin's half-sister. She must be only a few years younger than Martin, who was aged three when her parents were married, and still 'a little boy' when she was born. This suggests that she was born around 1806 - and indeed, when the

novel opens, she is 'a woman of sixty, tall and spare, with a sweet and even distinguished face'.



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With the Blandamer family, we have to start at the end and work backwards. When the novel begins, old Lord Blandamer has been dead about a year - and the local doctor states that he 'died at eighty-five', which would mean that he was born in 1780, and (plausibly enough) that he was twenty years old at the time of his clandestine marriage to Sophia Flannery. The new Lord Blandamer, his grandson, is now 'a man of forty',

having left England shortly after he graduated from Oxford and spent the next twenty years travelling abroad ('a wandering that was to prove half as long as that of Israel in the wilderness', we are told in Chapter 21. In Chapter 1 we learn that his parents were married 'two-and-forty years ago come Lady Day', and drowned in Cullerne Bay when their son was still a baby. He must therefore have been born in 1825 - and the fateful quarrel with his grandfather, which first caused him to doubt whether he was the legitimate heir, would have taken place in 1843 or 1844, when he was 'in his second year at Oxford' and 'as an undergraduate... felt it his duty to set the whole world in order'.

The 'back-story', as movie-makers say, can therefore be reconstructed as follows (with the two Lord Blandamers, grandfather and grandson, denoted as I and II for the sake of simplicity):

- 1800 Marriage of Sophia Flannery to Horatio Fynes (Lord Blandamer I)
- 1801 Birth of Martin Joliffe
- 1804 Bigamous marriage of Sophia Fynes (née Flannery) to Michael Joliffe
- 1806 Birth of Euphemia Joliffe
- 1807 Sophia Joliffe deserts her husband and children
  
- 1824 Death of Michael Joliffe
- 1824 Marriage of Lord Blandamer II's parents
- 1825 Birth of Lord Blandamer II
  
- 1846 Marriage of Martin Joliffe to Miss Hunter
- 1846 Lord Blandamer II leaves Oxford and sets out on his travels
- 1847 Birth of Anastasia Joliffe
  
- 1865 Death of Lord Blandamer I; his grandson succeeds to the title
- 1865 Death of Martin Joliffe
- 1866 Edward Westray arrives at Cullerne; beginning of *The Nebuly Coat*

Falkner evidently took great care over his chronology; and one's respect for his skill as a novelist is increased when one appreciates the artful way that he has scattered clues throughout the novel, giving the reader just enough information to enable the chronology to be reconstructed. Particularly ingenious, to my mind, is the way that the entire reconstruction rests on a single piece of evidence - the evidence of the marriage certificate, which is as crucial to the novel's chronology as it is pivotal to the plot.

But for such a chronologically precise novel, *The Nebuly Coat* is curiously lacking in period detail. There is very little to suggest that it is set in the 1860s - indeed, I would defy any reader to work out the date without engaging in the sort of laborious chronological reconstruction that I have attempted here. It would have been perfectly easy for Falkner to have inserted a few references to contemporary political or ecclesiastical affairs, for the sake of verisimilitude, but he conspicuously refrains from doing so -

and the result is that the novel has an almost timeless quality, floating rather hazily somewhere in the mid-nineteenth century. What is even more striking is that Falkner, for all his care over chronology, seems to have been surprisingly careless when it came to adjusting some of the minor details to make them consistent with the date.

On the one hand, several details in the novel belong unmistakably to the 1870s. In the prologue, Sir George Farquhar's sarcastic comment about the 'Society for the Conservation of National Inheritances' can only be a reference to the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings, founded in 1877. In Chapter 11, Mr. Sharnall reviews his memories of life as an undergraduate at Oxford, now 'forty years' ago: 'country rambles and country churches and Willis with an *A.B.C. of Gothic Architecture*, trying to tell an Early English from a Decorated moulding'. J. H. Parker's *Glossary of Terms used in Grecian, Roman, Italian and Gothic Architecture*, retitled *ABC of Gothic Architecture* in later editions, was first published in 1836; so if we are to take the 'forty years' literally (and it seems that we are, since Falkner repeats the phrase several times), the action of the novel cannot very well take place before 1876. Another indirect pointer to chronology can be found at the very end of the novel, where the crowd gathered to witness the collapse of Cullerne Minster includes the local Catholic priest, observed by Lord Blandamer to be 'reciting something in a low tone, and crossing himself at intervals' - provocatively Popish behaviour which, in a small town like Cullerne, would probably have caused a riot at any time before the late Victorian period.

On the other hand, certain details seem more consistent with the 1850s or even the 1840s. The local doctor, Dr. Ennefer, has published a pamphlet 'on the means adopted in Cullerne for the suppression of cholera during the recent outbreak', a publication which might have seemed rather out of date by the 1860s, when the causes of cholera, and the means of its prevention, were generally understood. More significantly, the liturgical arrangements at Cullerne Minster - where weekday matins has been abolished, and weekday evensong is only a 'thin and vanishing shadow', with no congregation - seem to belong to an era before the Oxford Movement. In Chapter 6, the narrator comments: 'archaeologic interest was at that time in so languishing a condition that few, except professed antiquaries, were aware of the grandeur of the abbey church'. This could conceivably be said of the 1840s, when the Gothic Revival in church architecture was just getting into its stride;

but it seems quite inappropriate to the 1860s, when interest in such matters was far more widespread.

What are we to make of these inconsistencies - apart from the fact that Falkner could sometimes be careless over anachronisms? They show, I think, that Falkner was divided in his own mind about the chronological setting of the novel. On the one hand, he was drawing on his own memories of country churches visited as a schoolboy in the 1870s - hence those giveaway details, like the *ABC of Gothic Architecture*, which reflect his own antiquarian interests and pursuits. Yet, at the same time, he plainly wanted to evoke a vanished past - a world where churches were still untouched by the hand of the restorer, and clergy were still sunk in eighteenth-century torpor. In the end, he seems to have compromised by setting the novel in the 1860s, midway between these two extremes. Much of the novel's power, it could be argued, comes from this conflicting tug between past and present, and from the impression it builds up in the reader's mind, almost subconsciously, of Cullerne as a relic from a bygone age, about to be swept away by the tide of progress. In the end, the precise chronological anchoring of the novel matters less than its depiction of a society on the brink of change - a depiction into which Falkner introduced his own ambiguous feelings about the modern era.

