

‘A very small result’?

John Meade Falkner's A History of Oxfordshire
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At about 140,000 words, John Meade Falkner's *A History of Oxfordshire* (1899) was the longest book he published. It is also possibly the work for which he is least recognized. In the early 1890s he had persuaded the publisher John Murray to commission him to revise Murray's *Handbook for Travellers in Oxfordshire*. Establishing his credentials, Falkner wrote, 'I have travelled all over the county till I know every stone of it, ... I have I think probably one of the largest private collections of Oxfordshire books and an enthusiasm for the county, which you will probably think blinds me to other considerations.' (1) A subsequent letter to Hallam Murray in 1893 mentions, 'Berkshire is already I believe in Elliot Stock's small county history series, but Oxfordshire is not'. (2) Was it about this time that JMFK started thinking of himself as the author of *A History of Oxfordshire* in Elliot Stock's series?

Elliot Stock (1837-1911) was a successful publisher, best known now for the series 'Book Prices Current'. He started his 'Popular County Histories' series with *A History of Norfolk* (1885) by 42-year-old Walter Rye who described himself as a tricyclist and who was also the first Englishman to run the 5-minute mile.



There were three editions:
50 Large hand made paper at 21/- 250
hand made paper at 10s. 6d. Ordinary
cloth edition at 7s. 6d.

Other volumes had followed. Elliot Stock had a reputation for the 'get up' of his books, and the series style of burgundy boards with half-bound blue spines blocked in gold with the county arms look well on a library book shelf.

The demy-octavo text pages were printed on cream wove paper, there were engraved headpieces to the chapters, and a clear page layout with running headlines.

Apparently Elliot Stock usually printed at Ballantyne's London office near Covent Garden though this was never acknowledged in his books. (3) It seems the series authors were given a free hand with the organisation of their books: some chose a geographic approach, some thematic (general history, legends, archaeology), some chronological; most books in the series were about 300 pages long. One author wrote: 'In my anxiety to produce a Guide to Northumbrian History that the Quaysider from Newcastle can really carry on his bicycle, and the countryman afford to read under the shade of his bastle-house, I have had recourse to compression almost hydraulic.' (4)

JMF introduces *A History of Oxfordshire* with a brief Preface in which he explains why he does not fill his book with extensive references. As he did not provide a bibliography (some titles in the series did) we cannot tell what sources he would have used. Malcolm Graham has listed the early attempts at Oxfordshire history and the increasing number of town and village histories that appeared in the 19th century, (5) and we have to assume that JMF had these in his library. The history may be a synthesis of previous histories, but its appeal lies in its accessibility and the lively imagination that JMF brings to his writing. In the chapter on the Roman occupation he describes the '... woods, in which lurked not only the boar and the wolf, but also, no doubt, many wild and evil men, outlaws and outcasts, survivals of the older tribes and bitterly anti-Roman.' (6) He describes the Norman overlord Robert D'Oily having an evil dream 'in which he saw himself arraigned before the Blessed Virgin, and tormented by imps.' (7) And of the Empress Maud's escape from Oxford in 1141 he writes, 'The surroundings seem strangely familiar, and it requires no great effort of imagination to picture the wintry scene, the level mantle of sparkling snow, the frozen river and ditches, and perhaps a searching wind sweeping over the levels of the Thames Valley as pitilessly as it does today'. (8) When writing of the friars he compares them to the Salvation Army 'to use a derogatory comparison'. (9) Does one detect a hint of envy when he writes of John Leland appointed "'Antiquary Royal," with full powers to rummage in abbeys and documents to his heart's content'? (10) Certainly, JMF gives full coverage to religious houses in *A History of Oxfordshire*. In the matter of the dissolution of the monasteries there is

no doubt where JMF's sympathies lay. Dr London – one of Thomas Cromwell's commissioners – is described as 'one of the most odious of the odious visitors'. (11) The destruction gives rise to some powerful writing. 'Even at this distance of time it is difficult to suppress a feeling of regret and indignation on reading of the destruction of so much that was beautiful ... The leaves of priceless manuscripts were blown about the Oxford quadrangles, were made "blanshers" to frighten game, or were used in Oxford privies.' (12)

JMF always has an eye out for an emotive scene. He cannot resist straying a few miles over the county border to describe the battle of Edgehill (1644, (13) so allowing one to make a direct comparison with a description of the battle in Samuel Timmins' *A History of Warwickshire* (1889) in the same series. (14) Timmins refers to Lord Lindsay's 'quaint, brief prayer' before the battle; for JMF it is 'brave Lindsay's well-known prayer.' Timmins writes 'the old Beacon Tower still remains where the first signal-fire was lighted in the cresset to flash the news to London by way of Ivinghoe, forty miles away,' while JMF's version has it 'Late on the Sunday night some Parliament men climbed the beacon-hill at Burton Dasset and lit a fire on the old stone beacon-turret that still stands there. It is said that watchers at Ivinghoe, in Buckinghamshire, forty miles away, caught the twinkling signal, and passed it on to Harrow-on-the-Hill, and so to London.' It is the vigour and rhythm of JMF's language that counts. The scene of the battle must have lingered in JMF's mind for his poem 'Edgehill' with its memorable lines:

'I hear the horse-hooves crashing through
The cat's ice in the sedge.'

was published twelve years later in *The Spectator*. (15)

JMF knew how to tell a story and was perhaps writing *A History of Oxfordshire* at the same time as he was writing *The Lost Stradivarius* (1896) and *Moonfleet* (1898). There are stories in *A History* that are cameos. I think of the story of Francis Viscount Lovell of Minster Lovell – 'an air of romance surrounds the very name of Lovell' (16) - who '... had made himself peculiarly obnoxious because, though a Lancastrian, he played turncoat and took office under Richard III. On Henry VII's accession he was attainted, but escaped to the Low Countries and returned to fight at Stoke. After the battle he was never

seen again.’ But JMF continues with the legend that Lovel returned to his home by the River Windrush where ‘he hid in a vaulted chamber, of which only an old housekeeper knew the entrance. There she fed him for months till death called her away suddenly with her secret untold, and the doomed man was left to starve, locked in his unknown retreat.’ There follows the account of the discovery two hundred years later of a hidden chamber with the skeleton of a man sitting at a table. The Oxford photographer Henry Taunt took evocative pictures of the ivy-clad ruins at Minster Lovell and had *A History ...* been published a few years later it might well have been thought suitable for illustration with ‘original photographs’ on glossy art paper. Thankfully this did not happen and JMF’s stories live in print solely dependent on his words.



The ruins at Minster Lovell

In a footnote on page 240 JMF writes ‘Of romantic Burford mention is made elsewhere’. It is a tantalizing hint about a place with which we expect JMF to write with particular enthusiasm. But surprisingly there is not much about the town and church, and the associated stories are of events slightly further afield at Capp’s Lodge near Wychwood and of Tangley, ‘... a small Elizabethan house, romantically situated ... in a wooded glen called Tangley Bushes.’ Thieves tried to break into the house but there was forewarning of the plot and constables were posted within. ‘After the family had ostensibly retired to rest, a small look-out

shutter in the hall door was slid back, and a man's arm was seen inserted and feeling round for the bolt inside. The arm was seized by the constables, and the man, seeing himself a prisoner, cried to his comrades, "Cut! cut!" So they lopped him with their swords at the shoulder, left his arm inside, and rode off with their maimed companion.' (17)

It is easy to imagine JMF writing his history alongside his novels though he had to fit this work round the increasing demands of his job at Elswick and its requirement for travel. Yet he still found time for Oxfordshire holidays. (18) He was turning 40 and was about to get married. He was writing history in the style of his period and so neglected social and economic aspects, and his work was about to be eclipsed by research associated with archaeology and the ambitious efforts of projects such as the Victoria County History. He can be reasonably criticised for dwelling too much on the history of the university of Oxford and for rushing through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. (19)

1906 edition



But his book must have been successful for it was one of the few county volumes that Elliot Stock reissued in a 'cheap edition' in 1906. Though reduced in format, the 'cheap' binding was as stylish as the main edition with gold-blocked Gothic titling and a panel of black-blocked *fleurs-de-lys*. When JMF sent a copy of *A History of Oxfordshire* to Hallam Murray on publication of the main edition, he wrote: 'You may not have time to look into it for months or years or never – but I should like you to have

a copy. It is a very small result of long and pleasurable work.' (20)

NOTES:

- (1). JMF to A.H.Hallam Murray 25 June 1892 in the John Murray Archive in the National Library of Scotland.
- (2). JMF to A.H.Hallam Murray 20 Feb 1893.
- (3). *Book Collector* (1971) Vol 20 page 40.
- (4). Cadwallader J.Bates, *The History of Northumberland* (1895) page ii. Significantly only the Northumberland and Suffolk volumes claimed the title of *The History of ...*
- (5). Malcolm Graham, 'The Development of Local History in Oxfordshire' *Oxfordshire Local History* Vol 2 no 8 pages 290-297.
- (6). John Meade Falkner, *A History of Oxfordshire* (1899) page 28.
- (7). *ibid* page 55.
- (8). *ibid* page 67.
- (9). *ibid* page 83.
- (10). *ibid* page 167.
- (11). *ibid* page 157.
- (12). *ibid* pages 160-161.
- (13). *ibid* pages 226-228.
- (14). Samuel Timmins, *A History of Warwickshire* (1889) published by Elliot Stock, pages 8-11.
- (15). *The Spectator* 28 October 1911.
- (16). John Meade Falkner, *A History of Oxfordshire* (1899) page 132.
- (17). *ibid* page 309.
- (18). Sir Herbert Craster wrote in his 1954 Introduction to the World's Classic edition of *The Nebuly Coat*: 'I did not quite believe my old friend in his account of the immense cycle rides he had taken when writing the history of Oxfordshire'. page xii.
- (19). cf. Kenneth Warren, *John Meade Falkner 1858 - 1932: A Paradoxical Life* (1995) pages 93-94.
- (20). JMF to A.H.Hallam Murray 2 August 1899 in the John Murray Archive in the National Library of Scotland.