

The John Meade Falkner Society

Founded 8th May 1999

Newsletter No. 42

8 May 2013



SUBSCRIPTION RENEWALS

I am afraid that there are still **five** subscriptions outstanding. I am hoping it has been inadvertent. If this sentence is highlighted (and the “Black Spot” occurs on your envelope), then **you** are one of the five. Please let me have the £10 (or \$15) sub as soon as possible. I don’t want to lose you.

BURFORD-OXFORD WEEKEND

Friday 12th – Sunday 14th July

The projected weekend is shaping up well.

Friday: meet up mid-afternoon to walk round Burford and visit the Church. Probable pub meal in evening.

Saturday: travel to Oxford

11.00 am: meet **Dr Christopher Fletcher** (Keeper of Special Collections, Bodleian Libraries) to view the *letters* from JMF to Christopher Wordsworth and his 1898 *Topographical Notes*.

Lunch: meet up with Jon Whiteley and his wife Linda. A reminder that Jon played the young John Mohune in Fritz Lang’s 1955 version of *Moonfleet*. I have my original posters and lobby cards ready to be autographed!

Afternoon: visit Hertford College (yet to be finalised) and other places commented on in JMF’s *Handbook*.

Evening: talk in Burford Church by Ken Warren + suggestions for a JMF gazetteer.

Sunday:

11.00 a.m.: Church Service in Burford Church (optional) + Visits to nearby JMF sites (Minster Lovell etc.)

Members leave when they have to.

Members indicating they are attending the weekend:

Robin Davies, Michael Daniell, Celia Grover, Roger Norris, George Robson, Ken and Jean Warren, Trevor Winkfield, George Woodman; and, hopefully, Alan Bell, Melanie Davy, Raymond and Joan Moody, Veronica Watts, Philip and Jean Weller.

I would be grateful for confirmation from the above (email preferably) and names of any other members expecting to attend. The previous four occasions have all been most enjoyable and I am very much looking forward to this one.

JON WHITELEY

Michael Daniell kindly sent me a full page “Profile” of Jon Whiteley from *The Oxford Times* for Thursday, 7th March, 2013. We have all read stories of the unfulfilled promise of child-stars of the silver screen. Jon won an Academy Juvenile Award for his part in the 1953 film *The Little Kidnappers* (“*The Oscar itself came through the post because my parents weren’t keen on breaking the school term*”). He admits he may have missed “*the habit of having a chauffeur and being served on hand and foot*”, but his later career as senior curator of

European Art at the Ashmolean

has been far more rewarding. We look forward to meeting him and his wife.

THE BOOK COLLECTOR: Spring 2013

Thanks to **George Ramsden’s** good offices (mentioned in our last Newsletter), we have made the pages of this venerable magazine as No. 17 in its series on “Author Societies”. **James Fergusson**, the Deputy Editor, has given our Society a very positive write-up. He presents a well-rounded, but inevitably brief, account of JMF’s “twin career” as author and businessman – “*It is surprising, perhaps, that this energetic...armaments salesman wrote anything, but he was not only an author of adventure stories...*” He also acknowledges that JMF was a serious book collector, an accomplished palaeographer and honorary librarian at Durham Cathedral.

Pleasingly, Fergusson writes “*The John Meade Falkner Society is a young society that makes up in vigour what it lacks in size*”. He details our four meetings – twice in Dorset, in Burford and Durham – and mentions that we plan to meet in Oxford and Burford this July. Fergusson refers to our *Journal* as “*engrossing*” and yours truly as “*unstoppable*”. I am still musing over the latter.

YORK MINSTER

I belong to the **Richard III Society** (40 years’ dedicated service this October), so York has been very much on my mind as the city wrestles with Leicester for the honour of re-burying that much-maligned monarch. However, *The Daily Telegraph’s* editorial for the 8th January this year had a reference to **JMF** in a piece on the Minster, under the corny title of “Heavenly Dressing”:

York Minster – the most thoroughgoingly Gothic of England’s cathedrals – is to be covered in olive oil. It is being treated like a salad not by way of an exercise in modern art, but as a well-grounded measure to conserve the masonry. Rain, especially if acidic, tends to dissolve the limestone from which the minster is built, and a coat of oil, even a molecule thick, will prevent this while allowing the stonework to breathe.

Two things are evident from this initiative. One is that ancient buildings are not dead and static but organic and inconstant need of care. (“The arch never sleeps”, John Meade Falkner repeats in that classic of architectural fiction, The Nebuly Coat. Second, medieval craftsmen knew what they were about. They would seal stone will oil too, often linseed. We do well to have the humility to come up to their standards.

I have the feeling that *The Nebuly Coat* is more widely known about, and read, than we think. There are three print-on-order versions presently available on eBay.

SKY'S MOONFLEET – A REVIEW

As a reward for passing the eleven plus - hence grammar school rather than secondary modern - my parents arranged a family visit to the cinema to see the newly released *Moonfleet* adaption, directed by Fritz Lang. Scared out of my wits, I little realised that the names John Mohune, Jeremy Fox, Lord James Ashwood and Redbeard were merely the creation of the adaptor Jan Lustig. I didn't even realise there was a book called *Moonfleet* let alone an author called John Meade Falkner. However with classy actors and actresses George Sanders, Viveca Lindfors, Joan Greenwood, Jack Elam (more at home in westerns, perhaps) and John Hoyt (always a scene-stealer), the film was sure to have its interests. And of course charming little Jon Whiteley evoked lots of concern and compassion.

I found in much later years that Fritz Lang's film was shot on the California coast and at MGM backlots. And it had other peculiarities. Amongst them was the fact that James Dean - in the prime of his short-lived fame - made a number of visits to the sets during filming and, finding the whole thing risible, was rude and dismissive. It would surely have added to the film if Fritz Land had seized the opportunity to drag this firebrand into the cast. John Hoyt and James Dean together would have been something to behold.

It was more than twenty years after this introduction to Falkner at the local Essoldo cinema that I came across JMF's novel and it has proved to be the only book I have ever read which I 'couldn't put down'. I guess I am not the only Society member that found the book a life-changer. I wanted to know more about the author and any other books he had written So it was a happy day when the internet pointed me to The John Meade Falkner Society and thus the opportunity to learn more and meet up with other Falkner enthusiasts.

Being a teacher of English gave me the opportunity to imbue many schoolchildren with Falkner's world and it was a thrill to many of us when the BBC announced in 1984 that it had created an adaption of *Moonfleet* within six half-hour episodes.

The series proved to be exceedingly faithful to the book and little detail was omitted. Even the dialogue was largely lifted from what Falkner had written:

'All is well!' shouts John from the depths of the Carisbrooke well (I spotted a double entendre here which I guess few others have done!)

'The Lord has sent evil angels among us' muses Parson Glennie to John as they walk from the church together after the floods had shifted the barrels in the vault.

'So good-bye, John, and God save us both!' - the last words Elzevir spoke to John.

An eminently satisfying adaption with very little left wanting, in my view. Therefore I kept the VHS tape that I had carefully made for twenty years before, noticing it was deteriorating, I transferred it to DVD disc.

And what a blessing I did this. The BBC never released the series commercially and thus, by making copies, I have been able to bring it to many people, both inside and outside our Society.

In the autumn of 2012 I was alerted to the fact that Sky1 were commencing work on a new adaption of *Moonfleet*. I managed to get in touch with both the scriptwriter Ashley Pharaoh and co-producer Claire Ingham. Both promised to keep me up-to-date with progress. Perhaps rather unwisely on reflection, I sent both a DVD of the

BBC's 1984 version. Both thanked me saying they would look at it after their version was released.

And so, as a seasonal treat, and with much heralding on all Sky channels, we were presented with the two-part version on 28th and 29th December 2013.

Subtracting the opening credits and the adverts, the total run-time is one hundred and five minutes as opposed to the BBC's advert-less two hundred and eighty-eight minutes (almost three times longer).

So Sky's scriptwriter Ashley was faced with abridging the book in a big way and he omitted scenes that most of us in the Society would deem crucial. For example the discovery and exploration of the tunnel and vault is over in seconds. There is no climbing of the Zig-Zag which both in the book and in the BBC adaption is rivetingly spun out.

To meet modern requirements Sky goes further than the book and the 1984 production in exploring the blossoming relationship between John and Grace. Yes, viewers must have some nudity and one or two kisses that are more than just smackers! And here we have a John much older than the sixteen years Falkner has him to be and certainly much more worldly-wise than the youngster we meet in the 1955 and 1984 adaptations.

On the plus side, it must be acknowledged that Sky seemed to have spared no expense in finding spectacular locations (in Ireland), a pleasing array of costumes and sets and excellent use of computer enhanced graphics, the technology of which was not available in 1955 and 1984.

So the production looks splendid.

As for me, I found that by watching the production a second time it showed in a more favourable light than first time viewing. My overview is that it was a worthy, brave venture to bring a much-loved novel to the screen.

Society member **Ray Ion** in *Journal 13* reminds us that the 1984 adaption was the second time the BBC brought *Moonfleet* to the television screen.

In 1964 there was a version which included in the cast Frazer Hines as John, Patrick Troughton as Ratsey and that admirable actress Jean Anderson as Aunt Jane. Sadly no recording of the production seems to exist so it is impossible to offer views of its merits.

1955 - 1964 - 1982 - 2013

How long will it be before we are treated to fifth screen version of *Moonfleet*? But then, more immediately, I ask myself this. Will Element Pictures follow up my suggestion that Falkner's masterpiece *The Nebuly Coat* be brought to the screen? Much overdue.

A DVD OF THE BBC'S 1984 MOONFLEET IS
AVAILABLE FOR £8 VIA KENNETH HILLIER

Best Wishes,

Kenneth Hillier

nebuly@hotmail.co.uk

Greenmantle, Main Street, Kings Newton, Melbourne,
Derbyshire DE73 8BX