1898

Robin Davies

Some years have made their mark in history. 1914, 1918, 1939, 1945 are straightforward enough. So too, for those who were around at the time, 1989 – the fall of the Berlin Wall and the subsequent collapse of the Communist bloc. To the older amongst us who learnt dates at school other than 1917 and 1933 – 1066, 1485, 1714 – 1898 does not have the same significance, but many things did happen in that year:

- the Spanish American War where the defeat of the former and the loss of their colonies in Cuba and the Philippines led to the Generation of 1898, a movement in Spain for national renewal initially among novelists, poets, essayists, and thinkers but also politically and in the armed forces and which arguably led ultimately to the army rebellion/national uprising of 1936

- the publication in France of the *J'accuse* open letter by Emile Zola in defence of Alfred Dreyfus, the Jewish officer accused of treason by the French army, an affair which poisoned the political and religious climate for nearly 50 years until 1945

- the battle of Omdurman, when an army commanded by General Kitchener defeated the army of the successor to the Mahdi and established British control of the Sudan with the superior fire-power provided by the armaments industry

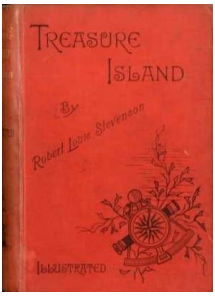
- the first fatality from a motor accident on the public highway

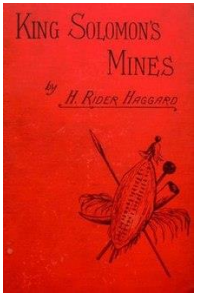
- and John Meade Falkner wrote his most celebrated novel *Moonfleet*.

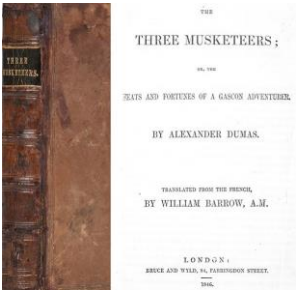
At that time, he had been 'up north' for 15 years, since 1883 when, after leaving Oxford, he had accepted a post as tutor for the son of Sir Andrew Noble, the dominant force of the Newcastle armaments firm known from 1898 as Armstrong, Whitworth. He then became involved with the business. As the recent biography of him put it: '*Fin-de-siecle England seemed over to be over-brimming with (hurry). Lady Paget, returning to England after 10 years in Vienna … regretted the convulsive speed of modernity… the attraction and repulsion of Elswick (site of the Armstrong works) made Falkner ambivalent. It was only possible for him to sustain the steady grind of utilitarian materialism if moments of visionary escapism were also permissible… He absorbed himself in writing during the 1890s to stop his entire waking existence being annexed by Elswick thoughts and actions. His novels, poems and antiquarian studies were a personal outlet, or way of escape …(JMF, Davenport-Hines pp. 105/106). His employer, Lord Armstrong had the money to indulge his escapist fantasies in his creation of Cragside and restoration of Bamburgh Castle. JMF had to make do with literary fantasies. 'The din of ordnance and shipyard were bearable to him only if he could also cherish the past, idealise the secure comforts of mid-Victorian towns and replenish himself with grateful memories of middle-class Dorset*.'

His *Handbook for Travellers in Oxfordshire* (1894) was followed in 1899 by his *History of Oxfordshire*; his other guide was his *Handbook for Berkshire* of 1902. His three novels, *The Lost Stradivarius* (1895), which featured Dorset, Oxford, Derbyshire and Naples, and *The Nebuly Coat* - Dorset again - (1903) straddled *Moonfleet* (1898). Of the first novel his biographer writes that it was 'written after dinner at his lodgings in (South Street) Durham' and enables the writer to escape 'from ordinary workaday efforts into a night-time fantasy'. It seems likely that a similar motivation

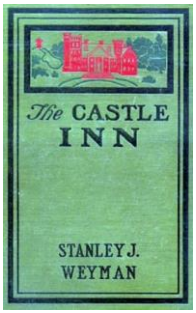
impelled this story located in the scenery of his youth. He was far from alone in this genre.







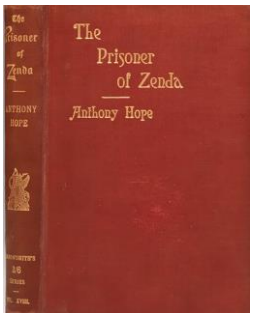
Of pirates and buried treasure Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) must be known to all and Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines* (1882) has buried treasure without the pirates – as, much earlier, does Alexandre Dumas' *Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) the same year as *The Three Musketeers*. Indeed, the whole decade of the 1890s is a treasure trove of adventure novels for boys of all ages.



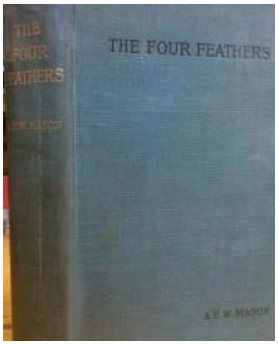
1890 saw the start of a the remarkable series of around 30 historical novels (16 in the 1890s alone) of Stanley Weyman, whose powers of descriptive writing should be invaluable to students seeking to immerse themselves in the period of his novels, many of them set in late 16th and early 17th century France. His offering for 1898 was *The Castle Inn*. *Under the Red Robe* is perhaps his most famous and has been filmed. *Ovington's Bank* was filmed for Television in 1965. Several, such as *Chippinge* and *A Gentleman of France* were still in print in the 1950s.

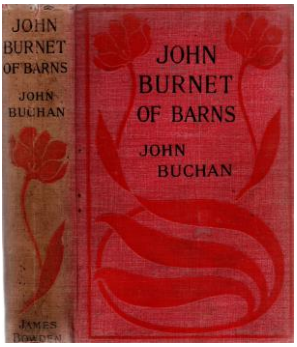
1891 brought Conan Doyle's *The White Company*, about a group of English mercenaries in the Hundred Years' War and was his attempt to break away from Sherlock Holmes, whom he had killed off (for the first time) that same year.

1894 was the year of Anthony Hope's *Prisoner of Zenda,* which must be one of the greats of the genre particularly as it created a fictional country, Ruritania, which has a fascination of its own. Filmed several times, it was followed by an equally exciting but less successful sequel, *Rupert of Hentzau* in 1898.



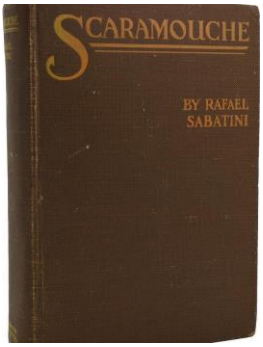
That was the year of our first non-British entry, Emilio Salgari and his *The Black Corsair*, which started a series which lasted until 1908. He wrote an amazing 200 stories and novels. That brings us back to pirates.

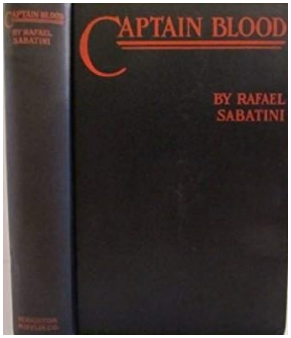




Piratical might be a description certainly applied by the French revolutionary authorities to *The Scarlet Pimpernel* (1903) of Baroness Orczy, who really was Hungarian. One half expects that she would be like the glamorously named Lola Montez, mistress of King Ludwig I of Bavaria, actually an Irish actress. Mention should also be made of AEW Mason, whose *The Four Feathers (*1902) was one of the most famous adventure novels of all time and which has been filmed at least twice. John Buchan just gets into our period with his second novel *John Burnet of Barns* (1898), although his great fame comes later with *Prester John (*1910) and then his Richard Hannay novels - *The Thirty-Nine Steps* of 1915 and *Greenmantle* the following year.

Later still, ‘the last of the swashbucklers’ (as his biographer described him) the half-Italian Rafael Sabatini, whose works included *The Sea Hawk*, (1915) *Scaramouche* (1921) and *Captain Blood* (1922), again several of which were filmed.





This wave of adventure novels is matched in our own day by spy fiction (Fleming, Deighton, le Carre, Cuming, Downing) and crime located in places frequented by tourists e.g. Donna Leon’s Venice. Perhaps the inheritor of the crown of Dumas and his successor is the Spaniard Arturo Perez-Reverte with his adventures of Captain Alatriste, a soldier in the period of Spain’s wars in the Low Countries.

What was the reason for this explosion of adventure fiction?

Perhaps it was a growth in literacy spurred on educational reforms which also showed itself in the development of popular newspapers. It must have been too the explosion of imperial feeling. In 1877, Queen Victoria had been declared ‘Empress of India’ and in the 1880s Burma was added to it; and then, for the twenty years 1880-1900, Britain expanded her empire in Africa. This imperial feeling was stoked by the novels of G.A. Henty, who clearly had an inexhaustible imagination, producing 122 novels between 1867 and 1906, often with titles like *With Clive in India* or described as ‘a tale of …’. On a more serious level, were books like Sir John

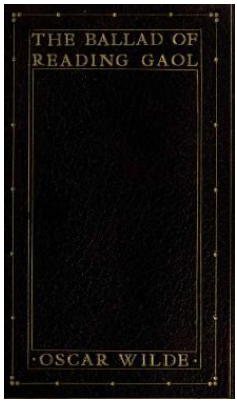
Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883) and Ruskin's lecture on 'Imperial Duty' in 1870, published in 1894. Poetry helped as well: Rudyard Kipling and, at the time of the Boer War (or The Anglo-South African war of 1898-1902), Henry Newbolt popularised the imperial mission. In 1904, Britain's Colonial Secretary of the time, Joseph Chamberlain, launched his campaign for Imperial Preference which heightened feelings for Empire to fever pitch among a large part of the population.

But at the same time, as we can see with JMF's business career, the late Victorian era was one of progress, with an impressive array of new technologies – the motor car, the telephone, the fountain pen, the light bulb and record discs. It was, too, an era of change in architecture. 1898 was the year of the Secession building in Vienna, when just as Darwin and Freud had broken new ground in their ideas, so younger architects and artists wished to do the same and break away from the existing way of doing things.

The Yellow Book 1894 - 1897

In an age of industry, they wanted beauty for its own sake. It was new art for a new century. This was not unique to Vienna, for it followed in the footsteps of Art Nouveau in France and the British version, the Arts and Crafts movement of William Morris, with its hearkening back to the Middle Ages and similar styles in Brussels.

The Cult of Beauty was the title of a 2011 V&A exhibition devoted to the Aesthetic Movement 1860-1900 - so at the tail-end of our period. Their practitioners believed that art existed only for its own sake - it was essentially amoral, a complete contrast to the view held for practically all the nineteenth century.



By the 1890s this movement had sunk into Decadence and in 1898 its high priest Oscar Wilde published the *Ballad of Reading Gaol*.

These latter themes have strayed somewhat from the wholesomeness of the adventure novel and, short of some unexpected revelations, one can hardly link the author of *Moonfleet* with such events; although his biographer suggests some psychic speculations in contemporary Oxford may have influenced *The Lost Stradivarius*. Perhaps we should leave the last word with the author's Oxford friend W.P. Ker (cited on p.166 in the biography): '*Few things are more amazing, when one considers it, or more creditable to the human race, than the fact that the talent for adventure and for tales of adventure should be common everywhere to all nations and languages.*'