

*John Meade Falkner and Oxford*  
Richard Davenport Hines

We are in the Bodleian, helping to cherish its collections, and recalling John Meade Falkner, who often took refuge in these buildings, so I start with a quotation from a Bodley's Librarian, Sir Edmund Craster. In the inter-war years Craster used to stop the night in Falkner's house in Durham cathedral close – for a dozen years, until his death in 1932, Falkner was cathedral librarian and honorary lecturer in palaeography at Durham University.

'Everything about him was upon a lavish scale,' Craster recalled of his venerable host. 'Though bowed, he was still immensely tall. His brown eyes were... filled with... extreme melancholy. His mouth and jaw were quivering but massive. In his old age he seemed seemed a noble wreck of a once powerful man. Petrified he would have made a magnificent gargoyle – grotesque, benevolent, and of great dignity.' Craster knew Falkner as an Oxford paradox: as a man who described his own mentality as feudal, and collected medieval breviaries, missals and psalters, but whose working life was pitched



**JMF's height**

into the flaming noisy strife of modernity; as an antiquarian and historical novelist, who belonged in a panelled room day-dreaming about the past within sound of college or cathedral bells, but who lived for years in a space like a barracks guard-room on top of a great armaments factory in Newcastle; as an international arms dealer who conspired in Constantinople in the final phase of the Ottoman Empire, and wrote elegiac poetry about eastern antiquities and heroes on his voyage home; as a cult novelist who wrote his strange stories during inveterate train journeys across fin-de-siècle England; as a regular visitor to Naples not, like most Englishmen of his time for the ruined monuments or pretty youths, but because he managed a naval arsenal there.

I am going to concentrate this afternoon on Falkner as Oxonian, but first I must sketch the background. He was born in 1858 at Manningford Bruce in Wiltshire's vale of Pewsey. His father was a small landowner and also the

incumbent of the hamlet's small Norman church. His elder brother, a merry, adored prodigy, had died a few weeks before his birth of the blisters which an old-fashioned doctor had applied as a remedy for croup. Falkner's distraught mother insisted that her husband uproot his home and resign his church living. The father became a curate in Dorchester at a time when, as Firbank wrote, the life of the average curate at home was something between a eunuch and a snigger.



**John Meade Falkner's  
Home in West Walks,  
Dorchester**

In his mid-sixties, Falkner wrote a charming memoir, still unpublished, of his Dorchester boyhood. In places it is Proustien in its savouring of flavours, scents, colours and surfaces. Neighbours, servants, orchards, river-banks, country rambles and sea-side holidays at Swanage and Weymouth are recalled with nostalgic tenderness. Gardens, birds, hedgerows and hedgehogs, hare-bells, butterflies, wild orchids, glow-worms, bonfires, sponge-cakes, rice-buns, and candied fruits were remembered with joyful gratitude after sixty years. Although Falkner liked to romanticise and distort many of his adult experiences, he was painstaking in trying to preserve calm, clear, precise images of an idyllic boyhood amidst the comforts, cosiness and parochialism of mid-Victorian England – to him the apogee of human fulfilment rather than, as in the Middle Ages, the apogee of spiritual magnitude.

He was a joyous, playful child, always big and strong for his age; a precocious student, but when small also an eavesdropper on adult conversation, and alarmed by what he heard but did not understand. 'An impalpable fear was implanted in my infant mind,' he recalled in old age. 'This fear, and the sense of plotting against our very lives, took such hold upon me that it became a nightmare.' As an adult Falkner was captivated,

even victimised, by his dire imagination. He told Craster of 'the panic terror that seized him as he climbed', with his own superabundant imaginings, the rocky slopes of Delphi.

In March 1871 came the long-feared moment in childhood when a door opened and calamity walked in on the Falkners. The family were lunching together when someone noticed a coil of thick black string at the bottom of the water-jug from which they had been drinking. It was fished out with a silver fork, and found to be a rat's tail. The jug had been drawn from a rain-water cistern, in the bottom of which lay a decomposing rat. Worse still, it was a typhoid rat, and within days all but the father of the family were mortally ill. The children survived after a battle, but the mother – exhausted by nursing – died.

Beyond the shock and grief, the death of Falkner's mother brought material hardship. She had been the business head of her family, and her husband's liaison officer with his parishioners and the outside world. The doctors, nurses, invalid food, funeral costs sent him into debt. As a helpless widower, he could not control household expenses, and amassed huge accounts with shopkeepers. The family sped from prosperity to privation. He became reclusive, and let the house be despoiled by flood-waters from both holes in the roof and backed-up drains which flooded the kitchen and basement with inundations of sewage. The childhood idyll had ended. Falkner attended Dorchester grammar school before a spell at Marlborough College. There his high-spirits and academic prospects had a sudden, stunning end, when a master spotted him hugging with friendly welcoming relief a school-friend who had just emerged from a dreary stint in the school sanatorium, and expelled him for unspeakable vices.

Falkner read history at Hertford College, Oxford, where he became an eager student of archaeology, ecclesiology and architecture. In later life he quoted Landor as saying that the three most romantic places in the world were Oxford, Durham, Rome – in that order. His sense of the university was that of Gerard Manley Hopkins: 'Towery city and branchy between towers | Cuckoo-echoing, bell-swarmèd, lark-charmèd | rook-racked, river-rounded.' When the classical philologist Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff was taken to the top of Magdalen Tower on a summer's afternoon, saw the undergraduates in cricketing whites, rowing kit or tennis gear ambling about the streets, he snarled: Eine Luststadt! A

Pleasure Resort! On the river with oars and on courts with rackets young Falkner was a lusty sportsman yet he was also dreamily bookish: a companionable introvert, for whom Oxford remained always a pleasure resort with a touch of monastic solace.

Like the sons of other poor curates, Falkner put himself on the books of Gabbitas and Thring after graduating from Hertford. His fortunes improved in 1883, when he went as a tutor to cram for Eton and Balliol the sons of Sir Andrew Noble, an artillery expert set on becoming the dominant force of the Newcastle armaments company Armstrong, Whitworth. As well instilling in seventeen-year-old Johnnie Noble the spirit and grammar of the Iliad and Odyssey, he took the youth (who was in some senses the love of his life) for months of German lessons in Hanover, and on a Grand Tour of Italy and the Hapsburg empire. By 1885 he was back in the Noble houses in Newcastle and Northumberland as the racquets coach, jester, and private secretary to Sir Andrew Noble. Finding himself in a phase of domestic docility, although not servitude, he assuaged his pride by furtive parodies of power.

About 1888 he was appointed secretary to the board of directors of Armstrong's. He perfected a manner that seemed useful, discreet, confiding and independent-minded. The Armstrong board of directors resembled a monarchical Court divided by factions and dynastic affiliations. In addition to the Noble clan, including two of Sir Andrew's sons and a son-in-law, there was Lord Armstrong's family – to which Falkner tied himself by a tactical marriage in 1899. The third faction was headed by a Gladstonian Liberal leader, Lord Rendel, whom Falkner cultivated by sending epigrammatic, ironic and conspiratorial letters which disarmed the old poseur. Rendel instigated Falkner's appointment as an Armstrong director in 1901. The technology and power of Armstrongs' business thrilled Falkner: 'It is to me hunting, fishing, shooting and everything else all in one', he told Rendel in 1905. When the increasingly ineffective Noble refused to retire as chairman, Falkner became his severe critic, correctly predicting that Armstrongs would be defeated and consumed by its chief rival, Vickers. Lord Rendel complained in 1909: 'Falkner ... is brilliant, romantic and picturesque, but like Rosebery, not so sagacious as he is clever. He would make us, if loyal, an always invaluable colleague, but a reckless and ruinous master'. By 1912 Rendel's son-in-law Henry Gladstone, another Armstrong director, described Falkner as 'the

main strength of the Company: nobody else counts very much'. After fourteen years of patient, watchful service and serpentine plotting, Falkner became chairman of this huge business at the height of the munitions crisis in 1915. During the war he kept a bed in his office, although the banging and slamming of artillery metal made it hard to sleep. For years he had made an annual six weeks' pilgrimage to German spa towns. 'Of the Germans,' he wrote during the war, 'I have the highest opinion. They are higher, and cleaner, and much simpler livers than we are. These stories of atrocities I set down as the wickedest fiction.'

Falkner was a good deputy but a weak leader, and was superseded as chairman in 1920 by a bombastic, sham-Napoleonic Sir Fred Goodwin figure who implemented a catastrophic diversification policy out of armaments production, so that Armstrong's went bust in 1926. As the company's chief Edwardian overseas negotiator, Falkner had long, anxious and sordid spells abroad trying to secure armaments contracts – most notably in the vicious Constantinople of Sultan Abdul Hamid. The corruption, plots and rivalries both intrigued and disheartened him both there and in his other prime hunting-ground, Italy. A man of occult moods and volatile nerves, he kept his balance by imagining and idealising men far away in Oxford, living obscure and untroubled lives with rare volumes within arms' reach. He tried to visit Oxford every term. His visits were always of three days' duration. He stayed at the Randolph, where on each night he entertained a single guest. During every visit the same three men dined with him, always in the same sequence, which was that of their order of seniority on the Bodleian staff. He ordered, with seasonal adjustments, the same menu each night.

Falkner was excited by arsenals producing high-technology weapons of devastation: one letter, written on the train carrying him from Newcastle to Oxford began, 'Christmas Eve, and everywhere wars, and rumours of wars, and more business for us!' He wrote business letters in the unfurling curlicue script of a feudal scribe. 'I am a medievalist with the cramped schoolman's mind,' he wrote from his munitions factory at the height of war production in 1915. 'I should like to drink of the blameless herb nepenthe, to fall asleep, and wake in some old abbey with figs ripening on the cloister wall.'

As an undergraduate at Hertford he had been the close friend of Charles Lynam, known as 'Skipper'. After graduating in 1882, Lynam became a master and then in 1886 headmaster at the Oxford Preparatory School, later known as the Dragon. During the 1880s he and Lynam was on bicycling explorations and river outings all over Oxfordshire. A flippant diary record of one of these was published in the Dragon school magazine: it has a striking similarity to *Three Men in a Boat*, which was not published in book form until some months later. Throughout the 1890s Falkner was a familiar, jokey visitor at the Dragon, taking pupils on expeditions to Ryecote, Fairford, Godstow, Wytham and other historic or picturesque destinations.

Falkner was a member of the Horace Club, founded in Oxford in 1898 for those with a taste for versifying: his contemporary members included holders of Oxford chairs and heads of houses as well as Raymond Asquith, Maurice Baring, Hilaire Belloc, Laurence Binyon and John Buchan. One poem of 1898, 'The Last Church', dedicated to John Noble, has been likened to Hardy's 'God's funeral' and to Larkin's 'Church-going'. It is a work of piety, written in a mood of rueful solitude and in expectation of the imminent expiry of Christian faith. He imagines Noble and himself finding a remote (Oxfordshire?) church:

It will be dark when we get there,  
With a dim light inside,  
The lich-gate open set there,  
The west door open wide,  
Twelfth century, triple moulded,  
Chevrony, billet, beak,  
No church-locking clerk to be scolded,  
No keys to eek.

We shall find no organ pealing,  
No singing boys to hear,  
Only twelve weepers kneeling,  
Six and six by a bier:  
We shall not see their faces  
Cowled and turned to the east,  
But there will be left two places  
Behind the priest.

Falkner's journeys to Oxford – time-consuming as they were for a Newcastle industrialist with cosmopolitan entanglements – were cherished

by him. 'I am an Oxford man and most holidays I spend in Oxfordshire,' Falkner wrote from the factory to John Murray in 1890 proposing to compile a volume in Murray's County Handbook series. Hitherto, such handbooks were compiled by hacks who relied on obsolete printed sources and visited few of the places that they either praised with indiscriminating enthusiasm or ignorantly dismissed. He noted that the current Murray's guide was not stocked by most Oxford booksellers because it was obsolete. Readers who visit Oxfordshire have antiquarian interests, yet (he told Murray) 'it is precisely in the archaeological part and especially in the churches that Murrays *Guide to Oxfordshire* is so very wanting.' He was sure that an up-to-date, comprehensive account of this historic county 'would command a very large sale in the university, especially at times like Commemoration when there are many visitors.'

Falkner built a new model for county guidebooks for the expansive age of cut-price railway weekend excursions, touring cars and charabancs. Before visiting a district he sent circulars to its clergy and leading residents, which explained his project and sought access to buildings. He inspected every hamlet, village and town, and every college in the university. 'I have travelled all over the county till I know every stone of it,' he wrote after two years of work. Oxfordshire stood on a higher footing than other counties, he believed, and merited scrupulous care. His project planning, architectural scrutiny and informative summaries, together with his scorn of philistinism, set a standard which culminated in Pevsner's guides. When Nikolaus Pevsner was still a lecturer at Göttingen, he visited Durham to meet Falkner, whose methods he was to take as a model. The quattrocento portraits on the walls and the fine wines at table impressed the earnest young visitor.

Falkner devoted holiday escapes from Newcastle to exploring Oxfordshire, and to verifying his information. He began with the route from Witney to Burford. He could not believe that Augustus Hare, the editor of the previous Murray's Handbook, had ever visited the places described. He was, however, not the sort of dry-as-dust antiquary who hoarded facts, and valued them all equally, because they could be verified. He did not enjoy delving into a mass of inert research material. He preferred facts that were responsive or could be transmuted. He promised that his guidebook would have 'peculiar charm', because he intended to make it 'more

anecdotal and less sternly utilitarian than those of Baedeker & others that one could mention.’ Really, his object was to inspire imagination.

Until a late stage the economising Murray planned to combine Berkshire, Buckinghamshire and Oxfordshire in one volume. Falkner defeated this notion. Because of its university buildings, ‘Oxfordshire stands on a different footing to most other counties’, he told Murray. Having gained this point, Falkner urged that in addition to the customary large fold-out map of the county, there should be detailed plans of Christ Church, Merton, All Souls, Magdalen, New, St. John’s and Worcester colleges. Murray’s acceded to this, with the exception of All Souls, and added Wadham, Trinity and Balliol. Hitherto Murray’s devised their guidebooks for tourists, but discounted local readers who sought reliable knowledge about the places where they lived. Falkner convinced Murray that this must change.

Like Proust, Falkner delighted in etymologies, place names and exotic soubriquets. A notebook survives in which he listed the given names of the engines of the South Western Railway trains that steamed to and from Weymouth in 1874. Centaur, Hawk, Hector, Pluto, Python, Shark, Siren, Tornado and Vulcan were some of them. In his handbooks Falkner loved litanies of names with historic resonance: particularly he liked old halls, decorated in stained glass with the arms of its former possessors: to quote one example, the windows of the Forster family, celebrating their alliances with the families of Delamare, Sandes, Hungerford, Barrett, Kingsmill, Harpsden, Milborne, Achard and Popham. One can hear, too, his pleasure in enumerating the geological formations of Oxfordshire under their old names: Banbury marble, marlstone, Great Oolite, cornbrash, coral rag, Greensand, Gault. As a child, Falkner enjoyed botanical field-trips with his father, and the botanical details in his handbooks are lovingly compiled. Mixed in with the Latin descriptions are the dialect soubriquets: Bog bean, water Frogbit, Yellow loosestrife, Adder’s tongue, Herb Paris, Squinancy wort, wood Gromwell, Bistort, Limestone Polypody. On a single June day in the 1890s Falkner counted nearly 400 varieties of plant within the city boundaries of Oxford.

His approach to Oxfordshire topography is similarly inflected. He relished the irony of a moribund hamlet being called Hampton Gay and the pretty name of a fetching village, Brightwell Baldwin. He liked the fact that the

hamlet of Enslow, near Tackley, with its ivied bridge over the Cherwell, was generally known as Gibraltar, especially to the bargemen who halted at its canal wharf and drank in the famous inn, Rock of Gibraltar. In the 1890s, Falkner believed, Oxfordshire was 'ordinarily considered unpicturesque.' He wanted to correct the many university men who thought that there was nothing worthwhile architecturally to see in the county outside Oxford. He intended his Handbook to encourage undergraduates to snatch days of summer term to explore the hills, woods, rivers, manor-houses, castles and battlefields of Oxfordshire. The view from Arncott's wood at Beckley over Ottmoor, the views of Oxford from Elsfield, the panorama from Shotover, the views from Handborough and Thame church towers, from the windmill at Nettlebed or from the Chiltern steeps at Stokenchurch – all these were a joy to Falkner that he wanted to publicise and share.

For the tourist he recommended roads, bicycle paths, the Randolph hotel, the Marlborough inn at Witney, the Spread Eagle at Thame, the White Hart at Chipping Norton, and, 'on a less pretentious scale', the Harcourt Arms at Nuneham. He assured visitors that Oxfordshire 'natives are courteous, and pleasure-loving.'

There is an unmistakable undertow in his book in which he celebrates Stuart and Parliamentary Oxfordshire. He describes the dying John Hampden riding from Chalgrove to Thame, goading his horse to leap the brook at Haseley, clutching the horse's neck as he did so, because he knew that he was too weak to remount if he forded the brook on foot with the horse's bridle in his hand. He includes a page on the landscape and tactics of the battle of Edgehill, even though it lies beyond the Warwickshire boundary. 'So steep and unexpected is the escarpment,' Falkner wrote, 'that the view comes with the suddenness of magic, and the scene, with the magnificent woods, mostly beech, clothing the slopes ... is one that can never be forgotten.' Nearby, at Cropredy, he recommends the eagle-shaped lectern, supported by brass lions, as comparable to that of Merton College chapel. 'In the churchyard are many interesting headstones, with that fine scrollwork of fruit and flowers in high relief in which the county is so rich. On more than one are legends which carry the imagination back to the time of the civil wars.'

He enthuses about the Great Tew circle, and quotes Clarendon's eulogy to 'blameless' Lord Falkland. He deplores brash Victorian church modernising and 'beautification', which made fine buildings seem 'vapid.' Outside the

university, over the course of twenty years, it was his solace to fund the restoration and adornment of Burford church, where he is buried.

Writing of Caversham, which lay in Oxfordshire until boundary changes in 1911, he ignores its Victorian expansion as a Reading suburb, and recalls it as the location of a medieval priory of Black Canons. Before the Reformation this priory held, he reports with the almost inaudible irony in which he specialised, or so its inmates claimed, 'the spear that pierced Our Saviour, brought hither by an angel with one wing: a piece of the holy halter Judas hanged withal: the holy dagger of King Henry VI: and the holy knife that killed Sainte Edward.'

At one time Falkner hankered to write a separate Murray's handbook on the Thames; on its tributaries (the Windrush, Evenlode, Glyme, Cherwell, and downstream the Ock and the Lambourne); and on man-made waterways (the Oxford and Warwick, the Wiltshire and Berkshire, the Kennet and Avon, the Thames and Severn canals). He was attracted by quaint failure and historic redundancy, which had to his mind the pensive charm of dereliction. Abandoned wharfs and backwaters put him into the same temper of mind as Gibbon among the ruins of Rome resolving to write *Decline and Fall*.

In thirty minutes, I must keep my focus on Falkner tight. I can answer questions, if they are asked, about his three contrasting novels, *The Lost Stradivarius*, *Moonfleet*, and *The Nebuly Coat* published between 1895 and 1903. Now I close by saying that Oxford nurtured Falkner's mind and affections, that it kept him calm when he plunged into boardroom strife and fed Europe's appetite for war with instruments of death. He was a fatalist, who refined his senses of tragedy and destiny from his lifelong study of the classics. He felt so responsive to Thomas Hardy's sense of life's little ironies that he fibbed about the closeness of their friendship. He had learnt, at that cheerful lunch in 1871 when the decomposed rat's tail was fished out of the water-jug, that good things get smashed. He would, I think, have accepted with a doleful shrug that his popularising antiquarianism helped to turn the public parts of central Oxford into a heritage museum, to reduce the market towns of the county into snapshot opportunities, and to turn its by-ways into a bedlamite coach-park.