

# The John Meade Falkner Society

Founded 8th May 1999



Newsletter No. 45

8 May 2014

## SUBSCRIPTIONS

There are still **16** subscriptions outstanding – rather a large percentage of a Society with only 55 members. I do hope it is because it has slipped your memory and I look forward to receiving the £10 sub before too long.

If the above is in red, it applies to you!

## FIFTEEN YEARS

The Society was founded on the anniversary of John Meade Falkner's birthday in 1999. It is encouraging to note that, of the 14 names listed in the first *Newsletter* that July, eight are still members:

**Kenneth Hillier** (then Ashby-de-la-Zouch, Leicestershire, now Kings Newton, Derbyshire); **Christopher Hawtree** (Hove, Sussex); **Edward Wilson** (Worcester College, Oxford); **Alan Bell** (then London, now Edinburgh); **Kenneth Warren** (then, Hexham, Northumberland, now Wellington Heath, Herefordshire); **Roger Norris** (Crossgate, Peth, Durham); **Hamish Guthrie** (Oakville, Ontario, Canada); and **Raymond Moody** (Burford, Oxfordshire).

Four of the remaining six have, alas, since died (**John Noble**, **Nicholas Aldridge**, **Kathleen Falkner** and **Ruth Falkner**). Thus, the Society has only 'lost' two original members through resignation. Thank you for such loyal support over the years.

## JMF IN THE NATIONAL PRESS

Once again, an admirer of JMF has ensured his work is kept alive. **Christopher Howse**, in a *Daily Telegraph* article, "There's no jot of shame in leaving the books on your shelf unread", ended on a positive note. i"Dr. Johnson...on being asked if he had read a much discussed new book all the way through, replied hotly: 'No, Sir. Do you read books *through*?' Well some I do, more than once (*The Nebuly Coat* by John Meade Falkner, or *The Diary of a Nobody*).

Again, in *The Daily Telegraph* (8.4.2014), an **Editorial Comment**, no less, headed *Fiddling with the facts*, paid tribute. "As the expert told Tommy Cooper, when he brought him an oil painting and an old violin, 'What you have there is a Rembrandt and a Stradivarius. Unfortunately, Stradivarius was a terrible painter and Rembrandt made lousy violins'. But until today we had thought that a Stradivarius stood out for the quality of its sound.....anyone still unconvinced by the potency of ancient objects – for good or ill – should read John Meade Falkner's classic ghost story *The Lost Stradivarius*.

There was also a long article in the *Newcastle Journal* for 23 December 2013, by **David Whetstone**. Stimulated by the Sky TV drama, he wrote "*Moonfleet* stirs special

memories for me", having lived

for a time in Weymouth. Whetstone (a great name for a Dorset smuggler) then gives an accurate resumé of JMF's life and achievements. He ends his piece, "John Meade Falkner died on July 22, 1932, in Durham but his ashes are buried in a churchyard in Burford, Oxfordshire. *Moonfleet*, as you'll see at the end of the week, remains very much alive".

(Thanks to Edward Wilson for this information).

## VULPES LIBRIS

is a collective of bibliophiles talking about books. Book Fox (*vulpes libris*): small bibliovorous mammal of overactive imagination and uncommonly large bookshop expenses. Habitat: anywhere the rustle of pages can be heard.

JMF has two of his three novels reviewed, both by "Hilary". On 1 December, 2009, *The Nebuly Coat* was tackled:

"*The Nebuly Coat*...for many years...was a hidden treasure, grudgingly shared by its admirers with others who might give it the acclaim it deserves. I am delighted to see it widely available again. It is an idiosyncratic, complex and excellent mystery novel. At the heart of it are the interlocking stories of the fate of a building, and the fate of a family....

"There are pleasures to be got from this novel over and above a superb and highly original mystery. Falkner has a wonderful sense of atmosphere, allied with a feeling for topography. His landscape can be mapped and illustrated. He describes the Minster as well as Pevsner would. The Minster community is as finely drawn as in a Trollope novel, so it appeals to my taste for Barchester Chronicles, and at the same time, while completely unlike the works of Dorothy L Sayers, I get the same sort pleasure from this novel as I do from hers. That pleasure derives from revelling in erudition lightly worn, an antiquarian, Anglican appreciation of church bells, church music and liturgy, church architecture, and the community that sustains it all. Add to that history, heraldry and a nostalgia for Oxford, and I'm in seventh heaven....

Falkner's output is so slim, but each of his three works of fiction is a gem of originality."

Then, on 10 January 2014, Hilary returned, with a review of *The Lost Stradivarius*. Lack of space precludes more than a brief extract: "it is a superbly plotted, richly detailed and highly original tale – with a sense of unease that gradually ramps up until I felt prepared for the dénouement".

If you have access to the Internet, why not visit the site - <http://vulpeslibris.wordpress.com>, to read the rest and other reviews?

## 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* (1955), directed by Fritz Lang. Scared out of my wits, I little realised that the names Mrs Minton, 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 Lang had seized the opportunity to drag this firebrand cultural icon 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 Sky had commissioned Element Pictures to commence 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. However 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).

As a consequence Element Pictures'scriptwriter Ashley was faced with abridging the book in a big way, thus leading to the omission of 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 and there is no climbing of the Zig-Zag, which in the book and the BBC's 1984 version is rivetingly spun out.

But Ashley was alert to modern expectations and demands. His adaption goes further than the book and the 1984 production by exploring the blossoming relationship between John and the rather colourless Grace. Yes, viewers these days expect some nudity and one or two kisses that are more than just smackers! So 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 Element Pictures seem to have spared no expense in finding spectacular locations (in Ireland), and we are treated to a pleasing array of costumes and sets. And there is 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 at my first viewing. My overview is that bringing what Sky describes as a gothic melodrama to a wide audience was a well-intentioned, worthy venture which nicely takes its place in the panoply of film and stage productions of the much-loved novel.

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 - 1984 - 2013: how long will it be before we are treated to a 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!

**George Robson**

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

## 2014 JOURNAL

I have received/have been promised four articles so far.

**Ken Warren** - *Belief, Work and War: some of the puzzles in the life of John Meade Falkner*; **Ray Ion** and **George Robson** - *The In-Laws* (the Noble Family); and two articles, on *Falkner's Farm* (in Wiltshire), and an aspect of *The Nebuly Coat*. There will also be another **JMF Poem**, not yet published; and, perhaps an example of his **letter writing**.

Best Wishes,

**Kenneth Hillier**

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