

John Meade Falkner: Novelist and Antiquary
Peter Davidson

I sometimes wonder if others like myself who often look at manuscripts ever pause, as I do, over the flyleaves which record the names of former owners: perhaps one of the great eighteenth century collectors or the familiar marks of the libraries of our own century. I doubt, however, if many pause as frequently as I do over the names from the more shadowy region of the late Victorian antiquarians; allowing the imagination to wander into the world of those scholars and gentlemen who cared enough for the past to collect these things. Men who lived out lives which seem to us enviably gentle and obscure; living in panelled rooms within the sound of college clock or cathedral bells, leaving small record of their untroubled lives. Leaving perhaps scholarly essays, a library catalogue, a few discriminating lines of translation, or perhaps some erudite ghost stories, designed to be read to the children of others.

John Meade Falkner, who was born in 1858, belongs to that world and drew much of the matter of his writings from it.

You may know Falkner's Stevensonian adventure story *Moonfleet*, but he was also author of two accomplished and strange novels: *The Lost Stradivarius* and *The Nebuly Coat*. Falkner's works were printed in his lifetime and have occasionally been reprinted since, but I believe that they have never, outside a limited circle, had the appreciation which they deserve. This is a pity, for while *Moonfleet* shows Falkner's mastery in a conventional romance, *The Lost Stradivarius* moves with equal assurance to the limits of the antiquarian ghost story and *The Nebuly Coat* (a wild, haunting book) goes beyond social or literary conventions into the strangest territories of Falkner's imagination.. *The Lost Stradivarius* offers a discreet challenge to Victorian assumptions, a challenge which is equally quietly withdrawn; but *The Nebuly Coat* is lonely, bizarre and defiant.

Those qualities which make *Moonfleet* memorable (the poetic use of historical detail; the creation of atmosphere) are present in abundance in the other novels. But there is a great difference between them: *Moonfleet* tells the story of a man who is able to return, after a period of lawlessness and adversity, as squire to a village which he fled as a boy, to take upon himself the mantle of the dead aristocrats who had been squires before

him, and to live at peace with both the present and the past. Both of the other novels are concerned with men who can make no such safe and eventual return: men who cross the accepted boundaries and remain outside: men who can make no peace with the English society of the nineteenth century.

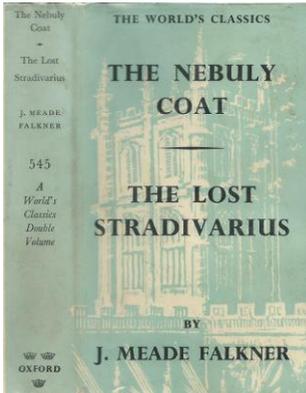
In both of these novels, Falkner displays talents which he had developed in a high degree: a talent for history which is shown both in the sensitive use of antiquarian detail, and more importantly, in a notably detached and precise perception of his own century and its limitations. His gift for writing about the supernatural equals that of his scholarly contemporaries; and he is more concerned than many of them that unearthly events should illuminate more earth-bound problems.

He's at his best when he's concerned with the past and how his characters act in relation to it: antiquarians obsessed with their heraldry and their ancient music; or those who have ceased to live in the present, those haunted and ensnared by the past, ruled and destroyed by the phantoms of untold mistakes.

In *The Lost Stradivarius* this past is embodied by a violin which falls into the hands of a young Baronet, an undergraduate at Oxford and (still possible as the Regency gives way to the Victorian era) a musician. As he plays from a manuscript of Italian music, unearthly, hovering presences are drawn to the college rooms in the summer evening, and he is led by the diabolic power of music and violin to abandon his wife, heir and estates, travelling to Italy where he is broken by the ghosts which his art has called into the present.

The title of *The Nebuly Coat* seems more obscure at first, but the 'coat' is a heraldic coat of arms, and 'nebuly' describes the irregular outlines of the bars which cross the shield. A coat of arms gives us the hint that the novel will concern itself with lost heirs and the contenders for a title. Nebuly, nebulous, clouded and indistinct warns us that it will take place in a twilight region where nothing is certain, and that goes for the moral landscape of the book too. The full description of the shield 'barry nebuly of six, azure and argent' brings colour to the picture forming in the mind: blue and silver waves of the sea to hint at the setting, a town lost in the coastal marshes of Dorset, a port from which the sea has retreated, a port of

stranded pride. In this desolate place, the return of the Lord of the Manor, the bearer of the coat of arms, hurls a set of characters who might be from any novel of provincial life into unthinkable, tragic events.



The Oxford World's Classics edition (1954), with an Introduction by G.M. Young and a Personal Note from Sir Edmund Craster.

Our pleasure in *The Nebuly Coat* comes from its extension of our experience, its breaking of boundaries. Perhaps our pleasure in *The Lost Stradivarius* is that of recognition, its excellence within a known tradition. There is a sequence of English fiction which might recognise Dickens's *Edwin Drood* as a common ancestor. Fiction of autumn and winter, study lamps through a fog, the learned bachelor societies of college or cathedral attended by fears as night draws on, whether they be supernatural terrors from the past or the intrusive violence of the present. Falkner's *The Lost Stradivarius* can claim a high place in that company. Like *Edwin Drood* it tests and explores the morality of the world which it inhabits, rather than using it simply as a picturesque background. Falkner's plot is not unlike an extension of the plot of one of M. R. James's short stories but the intentions of *The Lost Stradivarius* go deeper: Falkner's hero is no guiltless scholar who mutters a few arcane words, calls up an abomination and emerges from the encounter shaken but morally unscathed.

A more useful comparison might be with Henry James, with his *The Turn of the Screw*. In that novella, as in Falkner's novel, the appearance of the ghosts is not in itself frightening, the horror is that they appear in answer to some call from within the living. There is some seed of evil in an apparent innocent which summons the forms of the dead to give it embodiment. Any terror in Falkner's book is in the end independent of the

ghosts: the handsome young Oxonian, with his estates and his taste for music has already within him the seed of that corruption which responds at once to the evil music of the hermetic galliard which has found him.

Falkner is using his fable to consider the uses of creative power: music and the past are not evils, they can be the source of life to a creative mind, but they are both things of power, and all power is capable of being directed to destructive ends – ‘With sword thou mayest kill thy father and with sword they mayest defend thy prince.’ I spoke earlier of *The Lost Stradivarius* offering and withdrawing a challenge, ceasing its investigation when the conventional limits are reached. Falkner’s hero is exorcised in the end and comes home to die like a good Victorian, thus implicitly vindicating the conventions which he has flouted. On a reading of *The Lost Stradivarius* alone, we would have to allow Falkner a great success within a limited genre, but we might note that Falkner never speaks in his own voice, using the device of discovered documents, and we might connect this technical reticence with a willingness to accept a conventional ending. We might even feel that Falkner lacked the resolution to work out the implications of those ideas which he was gifted enough to find.

What must be allowed is that *The Lost Stradivarius* embodies an exceptionally clear perception of the limitations of the Victorian age: at the end of the novel the survivors turn away in horror from the things of the mind. The guardian swears that the hero’s son will be brought up ‘to hold a cricket bat but never a violin bow’. In his youth, in the eighteen-thirties, that same guardian was himself a musician, but he has done that which the hero could never do, he has dwindled and adapted into the Victorian idea of a gentleman, abandoned the possibilities (good or bad) of the past to make his peace with the present.

The date at which *The Lost Stradivarius* is set fixes a point in intellectual history: that time in the third decade of the nineteenth century when, in effect, the eighteenth century ended. When the beef-and-claret element headed for the hunting shires and when the men of taste, men like Falkner’s hero, those last English amateurs who were genuinely at ease with the arts past and present, took refuge in the Italy of their youthful grand tours, away from an England which had grown insular and disapproving. At that time arose one of the most persistent cultural ghosts of the nineteenth century: the idea that to be very good at any artistic

endeavour is somehow dangerous, if not diabolic. To be morally good, in the view of those manly generations who took their tone from the Rugby of Dr. Arnold and the lesser schools which imitated it, it is essential to be mediocre.

So, to an extent, the hero of *The Lost Stradivarius* fits the stereotyped figure of the fiddler who has made a pact with the devil, but Lord Blandamer, the hero-villain of *The Nebuly Coat* is alone in Victorian fiction: a creation so unconventional as to make even Heathcliff or John Jasper in *Edwin Drood* seem almost comprehensible. Like the hero of *The Lost Stradivarius* he has travelled abroad and seen terrible things, but he is strengthened and not destroyed by them. He is without awareness of guilt and has no doubt in himself, and his creator never suggests that things should be otherwise. Falkner leaves us in no doubt that he is of finer stuff than the other characters in the novel, that he has a curious, unanswerable right to the disputed title which he bears. He is a musician and a murderer; he is also a genius, a man who combines coolness, perception and spontaneity. Yet (and Falkner makes this clear with no softness, no temporising) a man of such stature can only relate to the limitations of Victorian provincial society by becoming a monster. The novel is truly experimental in that it weighs all accepted virtues against Blandamer's amoral brilliance.

It is hard to convey the power of *The Nebuly Coat*, but it has an influence which binds those who have read it strangely together. I have often had the experience of meeting someone for the first time (a librarian at an old school; an émigré scholar in Italy) and when *The Nebuly Coat* comes up in conversation at once there is the understanding common to those who share an uncommon experience.

The novel, which has a fascinating, very oblique relation to Hardy's fictions, starts slowly as the young architect, Edward Westray, comes to supervise the repairs to Cullerne Church. Cullerne is a place of the lost, the washed-up: the decayed gentlewoman whose family has been ruined in an attempt to prove its right to Lord Blandamer's title, to bear the *blue* and silver waves of the nebuly coat as its arms. There is also Nicholas Sharnall, the church organist, a man whose talent has wasted into drink and bitterness. Even the opening has the curious quality of a dream, a quality born of the evocation of Cullerne and its great church, of the rain which blurs its

outlines, of the mist which envelopes its stones. If the novel were to continue in this vein it might offer limited pleasures to the reader: a fable of the old England in decline, a pleasing, melancholy, scholarly tale of confused heirs and collapsing towers. Images remain in the mind, even from this first part: the rainy autumn evenings with the piano faltering in the lodging house called *The Hand of God*; the voice of the church itself which mutters in Westray's dreams 'They have bound on us a burden too heavy to be borne, the arch never sleeps'.

But there is more to the novel than this: from the moment when Lord Blandamer returns to Cullerne, from the moment when he appears at evensong and sings with unearthly sweetness and accuracy, there is a convulsion that perhaps even the author had not suspected. The whole town is animated by the force of the nobleman who would not hesitate to destroy every person in it should they get in the way of his holding the title with its almost magical coat of arms.

The protean Lord Blandamer has little difficulty in defeating those who stand against him: both Westray and Sharnall are, in a sense, creators, architect and organist, they practise the approved and safe arts of church restoration and liturgical music, but they can neither initiate nor control. Only Blandamer sees the truth of Westray's assertion that the great church is shifting to its ruin; Sharnall's musical gifts are appreciated only by Blandamer.

The morality of the later part of the novel, the part dominated by Blandamer, is intricate, convincing and unresolved. Westray goes in all his righteous inexperience to confront Blandamer with his guilt; but Blandamer says nothing as they pace the great house, and his power joined with the power of the past of his family, is enough to secure Westray's silence. The virtuous young architect becomes an accessory to murder and falsification; the bargain is sealed in a glass of blood-red wine.

The strange events are mirrored in an odd, distant narrative voice, which describes things as though they were seen on the other side of a great lapse of time: where the minutiae of provincial life need scholarly explanation. Strangest of all is the end where Blandamer, his work done, calmly and ironically dies in the fall of the great church, a fall which leaves Cullerne without Lord or landmark, invisible from the sea.

As you might imagine from the novels themselves, Falkner was a Dorset man. His constant preoccupation with the uses of power might hint at his surprising profession, that of Chairman of the armaments firm of Armstrong Whitworth. He wrote little fiction after the turn of the century, though perhaps, given the themes of his novels, it is no coincidence that he chose to live in the citadel of Durham, in a beautiful house and on the edge of a precipice. He kept a secure place in the world of the living, relating to the past only as a sensitive antiquarian, and yet there was some restless element in him which impelled him to write of men of much the same cast of mind as himself, less prudent if more determined, who lived out their imaginations to the full. He lived until 1932.

We might end by turning antiquarian ourselves, to find traces of this gifted, reticent man, who left behind him, apart from the novels, only these few signs: a guide book, a popular county history, both excellent of their kind. Three scholarly short stories. A book of nostalgic verses and a good number of verses in manuscript. The record of a fourth novel which its author left in a train and never took the trouble to recover.

He also left a fictional shadow amongst the unfinished drafts of the great manuscript scholar and writer of ghost stories, M.R. James, a character who must be intended as some kind of coterie allusion to Falkner, just as a version of the nebuly coat appears in a real fifteenth century east Anglian manuscript which James catalogued late in his career.* In James's fragment an antiquarian of means offers to finance the restoration of the church at Burford in Oxfordshire (as Falkner did in actuality) and the proposal is made to remove the monument of a seventeenth century politician of ill memory. Before this action can release (one assumes) that thing which the monument which the monument has hitherto secured to stalk the fictional Falkner, the fragment breaks off, an unfinished private jest between two great antiquarians of the turn of the twentieth century, both compelling travellers in the darkling fictional England of ghosts and shadows.

* For those who like manuscripts, James's story is in Cambridge University Library, Additional Manuscript 7484.1.28(i); and the Nebuly Coat appears on folio 15 r of the fifteenth century Book of Hours of an East Anglian knight, Aberdeen University Library, MS. 25.