

The John Meade Falkner Society

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2016 SUBSCRIPTIONS OVERDUE

I'm afraid there are still **eight members** who have not renewed their annual sub. I really do not want to lose you. Please send either a £10 note or a cheque (to '**The John Meade Falkner Society**') or use PayPal. If you have the dreaded Black Spot in your email, I am afraid you are one of the targeted ones! I am sending you the **Newsletter** but not the **Journal**.....

NEW MEMBER

We welcome **Dennis Hamley**, "whose working life – in a job, that is, not just writing – was spent in education". First a teacher at Stockport Grammar School and Queen Elizabeth's Grammar School, Wakefield, he then trained teachers at Milton Keynes College of Education and also worked for the Open University. He finally ended up as County English Adviser for Hertfordshire. His first-ever book was published in 1962, *Three Towneley Plays*, modern versions of three medieval Miracle Plays for schools, but he didn't start writing seriously until 1971, when he started his first children's novel, *Pageants of Despair*. This was published in 1974. After that he wrote in the moments free from teaching and advising until 1992. "In that year, fed up to the teeth with dashing round the county peddling the then new National Curriculum and seeing a job I loved take new directions that I didn't like, I retired early to become a full-time writer, which I've been ever since."

(Ed. I gleaned all this from Dennis' superb website, which you can find on www.dennishamley.co.uk)

E:MAIL CORRESPONDENCE FROM VIETNAM 10/08/2015

Dear Mr. Hillier,

My name is **Melanie Whitmarsh** and I am travel writer and photographer based in Vietnam.

I have spent the morning looking for information on JM Falkner and have enjoyed reading through the John Meade Falkner Society's 48 newsletters. I am looking for three things but so far without success - I wondered whether you would be able to help.

Firstly, I understand from Newsletters 38 and 39 that you have Falkner's travelling writing box. Do you have a digital photograph of it that you would be willing to email me? Or if I can push my luck: two images showing the exterior and interior?

Secondly, Hertford College describes Falkner's handwriting as beautiful and 'exquisitely decorative.' Are there surviving examples of these decorated letters and if so, do you know where I might be able to view them? I am interested in the art which 'exquisitely decorated' implies.

And finally, in what year did Falkner's fourth manuscript go missing? Can it be narrowed down to a month, or day? Are there any surviving letters from

Falkner in which he specifically mentions either the contents of the manuscript or the loss of it?

My family has recently moved to the Dorset coast so I shall go Falkner walking on my next visit to the UK. Incidentally, I popped into the heart of Ho Chi Minh City today to see if the lead bookshop - Fahasa - has any Falkner. They do! Four copies of *Moonfleet* (Collins Classics) face out on the bookshelf wedged between ... Shakespeare and Harlan Coben. (Browsing takes forever here as authors are not alphabetically listed).

The reason for my interest is that I am researching material for a book. (My father's proximity to Fleet is pure good luck and convenience.)

(a later email added)

That bookshop I mentioned, of course, now only has three copies of *Moonfleet* left - and I am now re-reading Trenchard's adventures ... (half way up the Zigzag with blood in his boots ...).

That is a very handsome writing box - much more substantial than I had imagined. It seems staggering that such an object could be forgotten on the train or pinched unnoticed, - and yet a quick Internet search shows that in 2012 over 12,000 umbrellas were left on public transport in London alone.

I'm writing a novel - in which JM Falkner has a cameo appearance. Most likely on the train from Durham.

p.s. Vietnam would be delighted to be mentioned in the next newsletter!

JMF (like Manchester United and, perhaps now, Leicester City!) reaches all over the world.

THE WEBSITE

Some of you may have noticed that the website went 'off air' for one or two weeks recently. It has a new provider and I hope, before Christmas, that it will also have a major 'makeover'. It is rather static, and I also want to put a few articles from past Journals on to it and improve the illustrations. Watch this space.

A WELCOME VISITOR

I was delighted when long-standing member (since May 2000) **Christopher Morrell** paid me a visit a week ago. He was able to spend several hours perusing the books and reading through the many JMF letters I keep in three large ring-binder files. It was good to chat to a fellow admirer of JMF as well. There is a standing invitation to any member to visit.

QUARTZ AND GOLD: FALKNER FINDS THE PLOT

“And what is the use of a book without pictures or conversation?” By Alice’s standards of literary criticism, Falkner’s *A History of Oxfordshire* (1899) would be a less-than-desirable addition to the bookshelves, and in fact it is one with which few of his novels’ readers can claim an acquaintance.

It has recently reappeared in both hardback and paperback but, as Michael Daniell emphasised in his piece (Falkner Society *Journal*, 2010) there is a particular delight to be found in the four editions originally published by Elliot Stock. Even the main edition is printed upon fine paper and has an ageless binding. Pick up the book and one is not only transported some 120 years to a time when Falkner could assert of Oxford, “that it is the most beautiful city in the United Kingdom few unbiased persons will be found to deny - many will say that it is the most beautiful in Europe”, but across some two-thousand years.

In many ways the book is a history of England as it impinged, to varying degrees, upon the county (and increasingly the city). Time and again there is a vignette which stands as a symbol - a veritable picture - of a period. Throughout, with its quirks, sentence construction and vocabulary, it is not too fanciful to imagine oneself in a fireside armchair as Falkner beguiles the room with something for which he was renowned: conversation.

To a chronicle obliged to cover so much (and it hurries across the last two centuries after dwelling on the Civil War), he brings that vital imagination which in his fiction conjured a scene in a sentence or two. He puts himself in the place of a Roman confronted by English vigours after languishing in sunny Italy. In fact, “in the spring the breath of his violet-beds would be as soft and sweet as in Oxfordshire woods to-day; in the summer his quadrangle would be gay with cathae, and his colonnade festooned with roses and helichryse. If we are to believe in the *triclinium aestivum* of Hakewill, it says much for the warmth of those far-away summers that he was driven to build a summer dining-room with a north aspect, and without heating flues. And when the long nights fell and winter cold set in, the slaves heaped higher the charcoal fires in the *prae-furnium*; and the master sat in rooms far better warmed than Oxford country houses now, or sunned himself at mid-day in the sheltered quadrangle, taking his exercise in the warm side of the colonnade among his gay stuccoes and fluted columns. Could we for a moment raise the veil, we should probably find that the country life of 400 A.D. in Oxfordshire was not so very dissimilar to that of to-day. Could we disabuse our minds of the conventional tales of imperial debauch, of the wild luxury of the capital, and all the professional exaggerations of darkness-and-dawn theorists, we should probably recognise that the darkness was neither so obscure nor the dawn so bright as it is painted, and that the well-to-do Roman of rustic Middle-England was by no means the victim of social and religious despair that some would have us believe, but rather, a useful, a peaceful, and a happy person.”

It is a one of book’s many striking scenes, and a reminder that Falkner was a master of the long sentence; only when tapping finger upon the paper does one tabulate that the last one is fashioned from eighty-seven words, and that its opening “could” is some neatly-judged distance way from the “we should” which it heralds; that pathway between them contains, as does the whole book, that mark of a true writer, the ability to capture a phenomenon in a phrase which makes something fresh from commonplace words. If anything, “professional exaggeration” is even more resonant a phrase now than it was 120 years ago.

Falkner wrote almost all of his work within a decade, and it is not too much to fancy that the measured cadences of “a useful, a peaceful, and a happy person” reflect the cast of mind of somebody able to write this substantial book alongside three classic novels and undertake all the touring for his two incisive Murray guides.

His life would change with that steady advent of cataclysmic world events in which his firm played a part, wittingly or otherwise. Meanwhile, such is Falkner’s prose, it is difficult to resist quoting him, of noting his ready way with such terms as “hypocausts” and a likening of the contemporary countryside to “the north coast of Africa to-day, where in the waste and the wrecks of Rome - the houses lining the narrow streets, the bases of the colonnaded pillars, and even the triumphal arch - still stand gaunt, shattered, and alone”. Of Eadric Streona, Eadric the Gainer, “it seems a matter for consideration whether all the crimes which are attributed to Eadric could actually have been committed by him, they are so numerous; but the fall of Ethelred was certainly and largely due to his perfidious counsels and to his repeated treachery in the field”. Of six centuries’ fighting after the Romans’ departure, Falkner notes, “the tale of restless anarchy is at times so perplexing as to be almost incredible”.

One can almost picture him shudder as he reflects upon that period between Roman idyll and “the medieval mind” to which he was avowedly partial. Not that subsequent years were to be free from the grotesque. His eye lights time and again upon such incidents as a particularly debauched era at Magdalen, whose Vice-President was charged with baptising his cat “and of resorting to illicit conjuring for the discovery of treasure”. For such behaviour, College members, when subjected to a Commission, duly “compurgated themselves” - a splendidly-chosen verb for clearing a charge.

What force he brings to describing a University which, in 1547, is not only dwindling but “craven and truckling, anti-Papal but still Catholic”. As vivid a scene is Elizabeth, confined at Woodstock and finding amusement as “she coquetted with astronomy”. Of another house, he notes its subsequent “sadly docked dimensions”.

Not so much a history of Oxfordshire, it is a discourse upon it, with something of the stray facts and strong opinions which are the very stuff of a novel by Thomas Love Peacock. He must have been an inspired teacher and tutor, one who would not brook Ofsted “guidelines”.

How he makes one hanker to read the 1677 *Natural History of Oxfordshire* by Robert Plot. “‘It is an ‘immortal’ work, full of the ‘ingenuity’ of his times, seasoned with a proper adulation of all who ‘favoured his design,’ and refreshing for the genial credulity which pervades it from cover to cover. He rejoices in storms, echoes, ‘chemical’ earths, stones and waters, in strange birds and stranger beasts, in mighty trees, in humming springs, in giants and giantesses, in portents, prodigies, and phantoms. Nothing escapes his net. White linnets and pyed pheasants move his wonder, and his special delight is in vitriol and vitriolic humours, to which he attributes much that he cannot otherwise explain. In the quartz of his exuberant fancies is found the gold of numberless interesting facts about the Oxford of his day, and even the dreary chapters on earths and waters repay the effort of reading.’”

This is the very spirit echoed by Falkner’s own book.

Christopher Hawtree

LORBOTTLE HALL - an update

Those who attended the Society’s Northumberland gathering in July 2015 were unanimous in voting Lorbottle Hall as the most intriguing and beautiful place that we visited.

Between 1874 and 1884 the Noble family took up a lease on the Hall which they visited periodically for recreational sports. Over the last three years of the lease they were joined by family resident tutor JMF who, on his final visit, penned a moving poem titled *Farewell to Lorbottle Hall*.

In 2014 the Hall was bought by Jeremy and Kate Hoskins, who embarked on an extensive modernisation of the Hall. Unbeknown to them when they purchased the Hall, the discovery of extensive dry rot and asbestos has meant work will be ongoing until at least the end of 2017. The Hall is currently covered in scaffolding.

The delightful housekeeper Amanda, who welcomed us so warmly with coffee and sandwiches, has now moved on to look after a National Trust property elsewhere in Northumberland (Wallington Hall). The flat she has vacated is now used by the Hoskins on their occasional fleeting visits to inspect the ongoing work.

George Robson called at the Hall during May this year and left with the workmen two large framed photographs taken in 1883/4 with the understanding they will pass them to the Hoskins when they next visit in early June.



The purpose of the presents is to further show our appreciation to the Hoskins for their interest in the Society and their ready accommodation of us last year. (It might also serve as ‘a sweetener’ for future contacts/visits by the Society!!)

During his brief visit George photographed the Ladysmith Bell, which hangs in its belfry at the rear of



the Hall. This was presented in the 1920s to the then owners of the Hall by Lord Baden-Powell during one of his visits. The bell had been rung at Ladysmith during the siege to alert inhabitants to incoming shells from Boer guns.

(Thank you, George, for the memory of a wonderful day)

JOURNAL No.17

You will either be getting the latest **Journal** with this Newsletter or, if the latter is being sent by email, by standard mailing.

I am very grateful to the five contributors for ensuring the standard is again both high and of great interest. Two articles are original, two are transcripts from talks and one a transcript from a radio talk – given as long ago as 1984. I am also appreciative of Christopher Hawtree’s shorter piece in this Newsletter.

I am already on the hunt for contributions to the 2017 **Journal**. I know there is literary talent amongst the members and that they have a pleasing variety of interests relating to Meade Falkner, his life and times. I would like something on JMF’s medals, given by the pope, Japan and Turkey. They are looked after by Durham Cathedral Library. A further look at his short story *A Midsummer Night’s Marriage* would also be quite interesting. I also know one member would like to follow up on the recipients of the books Meade Falkner sent with dedications. Short biographical treatments of some of his colleagues at Elswick would also be of interest in their own right.

DORSET 2017

I am also turning my attention to the programme for our return to Dorset next July. This will be our third visit as a society to the area. My own preference is to base ourselves in Dorchester again, probably staying at the same hotel, which is ideally situated for the town centre and JMF’s early home in West Walks.

Obviously, we must visit Fleet Old Church again, but I am open to suggestions for other ideas (Weymouth itself, Buckland Ripers Church, Portland Bill?)

Best Wishes,

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