

Brigit Sanders: The Ship's Baby Speaks

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The Ship's Baby Speaks

Little Vicky, a fat baby, like pictures of Queen Victoria in old age' grew up to be a young Bridget, with a starring role in Secret Water. Brigit Altounyan, youngest of Dora Collingwood's five children (the others, of course, were Taqui, Susan, Titty, and Roger) had to be pressed to become TARS President, but who could be more appropriate? Here, slightly adapted, are the speeches she made at the June launch of the society at the Windermere Nautical Trust's Steamboat Museum.

I discovered as a child that there was a disadvantage in being the youngest of five and Ship's Baby. I was always being left behind. Now, as Ship's Granny, I find myself being pushed up front. Only time will tell if this is a good idea!

Most of you here tonight responded either to a discreet little notice on the door of the Arthur Ransome room at Abbot Hall Museum in Kendal, or to the appeal for funds to restore Amazon. So first I must thank the Director of Abbot Hall Vicky Slowe, and her staff, for that early initiative in proposing an Arthur Ransome Society, and Christina Hardymont for launching the Amazon Appeal, which brought such an overwhelming response. Launching the Appeal was only the beginning of Christina's involvement. She also produced Despatches and the membership leaflet, and answered most of your letters personally. But for her encouragement and energy throughout, I doubt whether the Appeal would ever have taken off.

Now, I sympathise with those who want to cut the cackle, the committee and the constitution and get on with the pirates, parrots and pemmican. But, as I'm sure you realise, without organization we wouldn't be here tonight. We launched a steering committee in mid-winter. Even though the seas were calm, we were glad to have two former navy men at the helm, our Chairman David Carter and Secretary Dick Kelsall. Dick learned all about communications systems when he lived as a boy across the valley from Arthur Ransome, so don't be surprised if you get letters in semaphore. From Abbot Hall, Vicky Slowe, Philip Dalziel, John Marsh and Janet Dugdale all gave expertise and enthusiasm. My husband John, a Ransome enthusiast long before we met, has put in very long hours keeping records, thinking up ideas, and working on the constitution.

Next, I must thank Diana and David Matthews of the Windermere Steamboat Museum. Not only have they taken on yet another boat to add to their distinguished collection of OAPs, but they have also let us loose here tonight. Our thanks also go to Catherine Allard, Manager of the Museum and her

assistant Lee Clarke. There have been others further afield – Keith Paull, Roger Wardale, Russell Royle – who have managed membership, conducted surveys, and supplied useful information and that vital ingredient, encouragement. Special mention must be made of Fison's Pharmaceutical, who responded generously and unconditionally to a tentative appeal for funds from my nephew Peter Altounyan (Roger, his father, was working for Fison's when he discovered the vital asthma drug Intal), of Jonathan Cape who have made a generous contribution towards the cost of the Journal, and of the Arthur Ransome Club of Japan who sent a four-figure donation to the Appeal. We are honoured and delighted to have here tonight Tamami Nakayama, who has come over especially for the occasion.

Before naming the boat, I'd like to present to Janet Dugdale of Abbot Hall a small gift for the Arthur Ransome Room at the Museum, which many of you must have visited. A pair of slippers. They are very like the slippers given to Arthur Ransome by our family over sixty years ago: no ordinary slippers but a pair of Yemenis, slippers for which Aleppo was famous. They were made of crimson leather with purple buffalo hide soles rather like Little Black Sambo's shoes, and they made wonderful presents. If you have seen an early edition of *Swallows and Amazons*, you will remember its dedication: 'To the Six for whom it was written in exchange for a pair of slippers'.

Imagine if you can, that I am six years old and leaning over a stone bridge across the marshes in the Antioch plain in Syria. There in the water, on the end of a fishing line, is a big black creature thrashing its powerful tail. At the other end of the line, and standing beside me is a huge man with enormous sweeping moustache.

'A monster, I've caught a monster' he booms as he struggles with a catfish on the line. That is my first memory of Arthur Ransome. He was writing *Peter Duck* when he came to visit us in Syria, bringing with him a beautiful little craft: a 10 foot, clinker-built dinghy, for us to sail on the marshes. It was called *Peter Duck* of course.

Nearly sixty years on, there are still children discovering *Swallows and Amazons*, *Swallowdale*, *Peter Duck*, and the rest. To show that this Society has not been formed only to satisfy nostalgia, I am going to ask Katy Jennings to represent the younger generation and help me to rename Mavis as Amazon. I met Katy at the East Coast Boat Show last year. She had persuaded her father to drive there from Yorkshire to see Ransome's much-loved little ship *Nancy Blackett*, (the original of *Goblin*, in *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea*), on show for the first time since she had been rescued by Michael Rines.



SEATED (LEFT TO RIGHT):

Arthur Ransome, Roger and Brigit

So to Amazon. I used to be a little anxious about this renaming ceremony - fearing that if we had presented you all with a perfect dinghy, all painted and rigged, those of you who had never seen the Old Lady might have wondered how on earth all your money had been spent. I need not have worried. Mavis, as I shall call her for the last time, needed much more attention than we thought. Timbers in awkward places needed replacing, which meant that more of her structure had to be disturbed than we had anticipated. So her restoration is not yet finished, and you are seeing 'work in progress'.

'Now Katy . . . (At this point a capacious bottle of grog swung and smashed against the bow, and ...)

'I name you Amazon. May you inspire with the spirit of adventure all those who visit you!'

Brigit Sanders