

Einar Stevens: Knight on Sailing

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What luck! Whilst rummaging about in a local second-hand book shop, I came across, and bought, a first edition of *Missee Lee* and a 1926 reprint of *Small Boat Sailing* by E F Knight, first published in 1901.

I was particularly pleased with the latter as E F Knight's writings obviously had quite an influence on AR's life. *Small Boat Sailing* is mentioned by AR on a reading list he prepared for children who had enjoyed his books. He said it 'Has everything in it that anyone could want to know about sailing small boats. (The complete list is reproduced in *Arthur Ransome and Capt Flint's Trunk* by Christina Hardyment.)

As a guide to sailing small traditional boats like Swallow and Amazon, the book contains much information, advice and wisdom distilled from E F Knight's years of sailing adventures. I am sure this book will have been on Captain Flint's bookshelves and loaned to the Swallows and Amazons as essential term time reading.

TARS members will probably be more familiar with E F Knight's *Sailing* published twelve years earlier in 1889. This must have been one of AR's favourite books, probably read as he began learning to handle boats on Coniston between 1904 and 1908. It appears twice in AR's Swallows and Amazons stories, first in WD (pages 93 and 95), where we find John reading it in the cockpit of *Goblin* while anchored near the North Shelf buoy off Harwich. John is reading it to check on the sound signals they should be making in that fateful fog that was to lead to such adventure on the North Sea. *Sailing* appears again in PM (pages 22-23), when Dick studies the chapters on sailing theory, small boats and knots, while travelling from Crewe to the lake in the north. He is making sure he will be prepared to take delivery of 'Scarab'.

If AR began to learn to sail on Coniston, it is in his book *Racundra's First Cruise*, published in 1923, that we see him develop into the competent yachtsman who was, in the summer of 1928, to help Ernest Altounyan to teach his children to sail. As *Racundra's* voyage unfolds we see AR not only learning by experience, but putting into practice the lessons he learned from E F Knight's books. Many of these lessons are then learned by the Swallows and Amazons, who through their adventures have passed them on to readers young and old.

E F Knight gave his readers the following advice if they found themselves off an unfamiliar coast in worsening weather:

If we are off a dangerous coast with only small and difficult harbours and river mouths, with which we are not acquainted, whose leading marks do not appear on our charts and into which it would be hazardous to try to find our way without a pilot, it is often the more prudent course not to seek shelter, but to ride out the gale on the open sea as best one can.

During Racundra's First Cruise there are several occasions when AR found safety at sea. Once, while anchored off the island of Runo, a change of wind sees a rapid departure out to sea. Later, whilst beating up a narrow inlet towards Baltic Port, against a rising wind, and in the dark, AR decides the best course is to turn around and seek the safety of the open sea off Pakerort.... it ended in Racundra pretending she had never wanted to put her nose into Baltic Port at all. She stopped bucketing into the wind and with a sudden restfulness and three times the speed, flew out of the bay with the wind at her heels to the open sea where she was more at home.

Did AR use these experiences as the basis for the WD adventure?

For *Goblin* and her crew to have tried to return to Harwich could easily have ended in disaster and a much shorter book. Safety lay in the direction of the North Sea and John realized this.

In 1890 E F Knight's *Cruise of the Alerte* was published; the book which became the inspiration for *Peter Duck*, which in turn ensured the success of the *Swallows and Amazons* books. The Granada paperback edition of the *Cruise of the Alerte* has an introduction by AR in which he gives this sketch of the man.

His last walking tour before going to Cambridge cost him fifteen pounds. On that small sum he took the train to Lyons, walked to Marseilles, took passage to Algiers, walked to the edge of the desert, made friends with a mixed lot of French soldiers, without officers, marched with them two hundred and fifty miles south to the last French post on the caravan route to Timbuctoo, went off alone through the Khabyle country, had his first of several experiences of being arrested as a spy, and made his way back to Honfleur, where, blackened by the sun, half starved and in rags, he thought it better to reach his father's house at night, sleep in the garden and come in with the milk in the morning so as to spruce himself up before meeting his family at breakfast.

E F Knight's books contain much information that was available elsewhere. He was, however, one of the first to deal with the sailing of small boats and to present it in a most readable form. His reputation as a daring and experienced boat-sailor without doubt enhanced his appeal and ensured that his advice could be relied upon. I wonder if John riding out the storm after the loss of the '*Wild Cat*' (ML p.42) had read pages 152 and 153 of *Small Boat Sailing*? I am sure AR had.

'If a small vessel be overtaken by such heavy weather, when she is on the open sea, that she is on danger, even when hove-to under her storm canvas, a Drogue, or Floating Anchor can be put out, a contrivance which has enabled even small open boats to ride out the heaviest gales with safety.' (SBS p. 152)