

# MIXED MOSS

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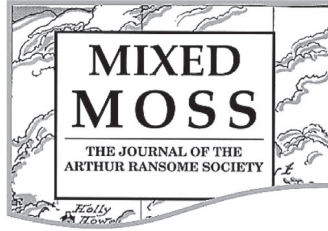
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Inside back cover : **An t-Eilean Sgitheanach** Martha Blue

# OUT OF CAPTAIN FLINT'S TRUNK



In 2020 we celebrate TARS's 30th birthday. The Society can take pride in the way it has kept the values of Ransome's adventures alive and relevant for hundreds of junior members – values of honesty, perseverance, courage, and so many more – as well as passing on the practical skills and love of the countryside that are central to the *Swallows and Amazons* series. Just as important, it has encouraged continuing research into Ransome's life and work – recent examples have been the *Encountering the Ransomes* DVD, TARS Library, which has taken on a new lease of life at Moat Brae, expeditions to Eastern Europe and the Hebrides, and of course *Mixed Moss* itself, which continues to open up new insights and debates. In this issue, we pay tribute to Hugh Brogan, whose biography was responsible for shining a spotlight on Ransome and was one of the factors that led to the Society's foundation.

This is my fifth and last year as Editor of *Mixed Moss*. It has been a pleasure and a privilege, but now it is time to hand the tiller to someone with fresh ideas and just as much enthusiasm. The new Editor is Catherine Lamont, an AusTar from New South Wales. She has interest and experience in English literature, the military, education and psychology; and since reading the *Swallows and Amazons* books to her teenager, she has been investigating them as artistic (rather than didactic) ways of providing children (and adults) with a holistic education.

So as I head off past the cross-roads buoy and into the open sea, I want to thank Paul Wilson for his meticulous proof-reading throughout my tenure. I wish Catherine Lamont every success. I know you will give her all the support I have enjoyed. I hope you will send her plenty of articles too – at [mixedmoss@arthur-ransome.org.uk](mailto:mixedmoss@arthur-ransome.org.uk) by 30 April 2021.

*Julian Lovelock*



# ASHLEY GIBSON: FROM BOHEMIA TO OUTWARD BOUND

Cheryl Paget, TARSNZ Coordinator

Ashley Gibson was a friend of Arthur Ransome's in his bohemian days and a witness at Ransome's wedding to Ivy Walker in March 1909. The friendship does not appear to have lasted and Gibson does not even warrant a mention in Ransome's biography. Gibson, on the other hand, has left us not only with a warm portrait of Ransome in his early years, but as editor of the *Outward Bound* series of books, he would have played a part in the British migration of the middle classes to the colonies in the inter-war years.

Born in 1885, John Ashley Gibson started his working life in the civil service, 'a species of job ... considered by my parents a suitable milieu for the display of such talents as my tutors had credited me with,' entering into 'great old vellum ledgers ... a quotidian record of the secret lives ... of hundreds of parsons (officially referred to as "incumbents")'.<sup>1</sup> It was a parson from Poplar known as Father Hutch who introduced Gibson to the bohemian life, taking him to meet the actors after a matinée performance of *Peter Pan*. Gibson was drawn into the bonhomie of coffee house culture at St George's Coffee House and elsewhere, as he 'played truant' from the red tape on which his office was run, eventually meeting Ransome:

Arthur showed himself no particular friend of mine til someone told him I had left all my incumbents in the lurch and gone free-lancing. He inquired, curtly, if this was so.

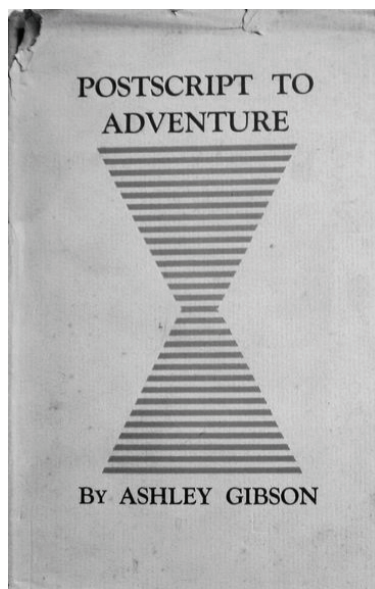
I admitted rather shamefacedly that if you could call living on your relations free-lancing –

'Naturally,' he said. 'Same thing of course. But I'll play you chess. You don't? Then draughts. Oh, damn it! Come out and have a drink.'<sup>2</sup>

Gibson is not specific in his autobiography *Postscript to Adventure* with dates or sequencing of events. This meeting with Ransome can possibly be

dated to 1909, as he goes on to say, ‘A week after that he waved me to come over and meet Edward Thomas.’

Edward Thomas considered Gibson ‘a nice but not highly gifted man’ and it was in his diary for 1909 that Gibson first appeared.<sup>3</sup> Gibson secured a job at the *Tribune*, but after its closure in 1908 found work for himself, and eventually Thomas and Ransome, at the *Literary World* commenting: ‘Ransome ... who though welcome was not so dependable in delivery of the goods, being usually caught up in a state of complete exultation over whatever original work he was doing.’<sup>4</sup>



It isn't clear when Gibson made the move from civil servant to writer; however, he was certainly writing by 1906, when he was sent by the *Bookman* to interview the elderly William de Morgan who had just published *Joseph Vance*. Gibson certainly knew Ransome as early as 1906, so it is possible he first met Thomas earlier than 1909 too.

Ransome took ‘two jolly rooms just off Carlyle Square, with a second floor window fronting on King's Road’ in the winter of 1905-1906, where he was writing ‘his masterpiece of the moment’, *Bohemia in London* (1907), and he asked Gibson to take on the rooms in spring 1907 when he went up to Cumberland (now Cumbria).<sup>5</sup> Ransome would spend autumn and winter in London to secure commissions of work, and in the spring head north:

When I went to spend an evening with him ... the shadow of Arthur, armed with pipe and hospitable beer-mug, [was] sitting with his feet on the open window's sill, two candles on the table behind him casting the silhouette of a fidgety lion right athwart the street. He plied me with tankards of beer, currant cake and stacks of good advice. He read me a chapter of ‘Bohemia’ ... then he warned me, solemnly, against the folly of the adventure I was seeking. ‘If you really want to write something,’

he said, 'go and be a bally journalist. Literature's a dog's life. Last week I felt I wanted to swop billets with a bank clerk. Then I got these proofs from Chapman and Hall. But too well I know that never in all my precious life shall I make more than sixty pounds out of a book.'<sup>6</sup>

In leaving Ransome's rooms, after drinking up 'all the beer that was left' Gibson walked home contemplating '... the excellencies of Arthur, [and] swore to abjure any base half-toyed-with project of becoming a bally journalist, and prayed my small store of books wouldn't make too bad a show on Arthur's shelves.'<sup>7</sup>

The offer of his rooms at Carlyle Studios gave Gibson the opportunity to move out of the family home for the first time. He says that he 'won Arthur Ransome's approbation' by 'giving a really respectable employment the go-by and assaulting at full tilt all the editorial *points d'appui* I could think of or discover'.<sup>8</sup> Ransome was clearly a huge influence on Gibson, and was not only instrumental in encouraging him to take up a career as a writer, but it was also his introductions to other writers such as Edward Thomas which had the greatest impact on Gibson's future career:

I admired Arthur enormously. He was such a vital creature; a sort of debonair Gorki with nice clean public school habits to set off against his somewhat Slavic disposition to shagginess (a little of it *blague*, but he had an oddly Russian air always, and has found his spiritual home since many years in the land where the ikons, samovars, and Doukhobors come from). He was indefatigable about everything he undertook: the conquest of all the publishers in Covent Garden, his love affairs, walking, swimming, swilling beer, and roller-skating.<sup>9</sup>

The rooms in King's Road enabled Gibson, aged 22, to become fully independent. Many of the rooms in the property were let to artists, but as his rooms faced south they were unsuitable for painters so were very cheap:

For lighting purposes I had to employ a multiplicity of candles, but it was fun picking up ancient brass and copper receptacles for them in neighbouring antique shops. One took one's bath, too, in a washtub on the hearthrug, but with the kettle so handy on the hob one could stew for an hour in luxury. I had a brace of landladies, a spinster of uncertain age and her widowed sister, who had been born, the pair of

them, in the house at some remote early Victorian period. They kept my rooms spotlessly clean, polished daily, my boots and all the candlesticks, and charged me an inclusive rent of eleven shillings per week.

He goes on to say: ‘Arthur had been fond of them too. He confided to me that sometimes, when he got into bed, his toes entangled themselves in a maiden lady’s transformation, lodged there by accident in the “making” process no doubt. He wondered if this was a declaration of love.’<sup>10</sup>

Gibson fills in some more of the detail of what the rooms were like to live in, although Ransome mentions the ‘Misses Gray’ in his autobiography and describes the ‘two communicating rooms’ as being in the part of the building ‘too narrow to suit painters or sculptors. ... and [I] was very comfortable there, with my books and a tiny Adam fireplace with a hob that seemed designed for my kind of simple cooking’.<sup>11</sup> Gibson also offers another caricature of Ransome:

One evening the glass door opened very decisively, and a burly young man in corduroy jacket and knickerbockers glared left and right with his hand on the door-knob, slammed it, strode a little noisily to the table by the fire, and made a great fuss of the disposal about the hat-stand of a gigantic sombrero and funny handled walking-stick.

Ransome’s (the whiskered young pup) entry into St George’s and subsequent ‘monstrous and devastating’ chuckling over a review of one of his own titles is tolerated ‘for reasons sufficient to ourselves’ by the other patrons: ‘It was really a very good guffaw, Arthur Ransome’s, vital, jolly, infectious.’<sup>12</sup> Ransome himself concurs with this description of his wardrobe, saying ‘In those days I wore a brown corduroy coat ...’<sup>13</sup> Gibson appears still to be at Carlyle Studios in the spring of 1908 when he pays homage to St George’s restaurant ‘in gratitude for the friends I met inside it who sponsored my excursions in the arts and elsewhere.’<sup>14</sup>

Gibson was a witness to the wedding of Ransome to Ivy Walker on 13 March 1909: ‘... he [Ransome] was to spend the afternoon of his wedding-day, at which it was my privilege to assist in London (he tried Gretna Green first, but the blacksmith had got some new rules), sitting on the rim of the Royal box at the Pavilion, throwing lighted matches into the air, and



bellowing with sheer joy till the house rose in protest. ... The job of holding the door of that box against the manager and his entire staff was mine for an hour.’<sup>15</sup>

1909. Marriage solemnized at <i>S. Andrews Church</i> in the <i>Parish</i>							
of <i>Fulham</i> in the County of <i>London</i>							
No.	When Married.	Name and Surname.	Age.	Condition.	Rank or Profession.	Residence at the time of Marriage.	Father's Name and Surname.
16	<i>March 13</i>	<i>Arthur Mitchell Ransome</i>	<i>25</i>	<i>Bachelor</i>	<i>Author</i>	<i>Queen's Club Gardens</i>	<i>Capit Ransome (decd)</i>
	<i>1909</i>	<i>Elizabeth Constance Graves Walker</i>	<i>27</i>	<i>Spinster</i>	<i>—</i>	<i>Bournemouth</i>	<i>George Graves Walker</i>
Married in the <i>Church of S. Andrew</i> according to the Rites and Ceremonies of the <i>Church of England</i> by <i>Licence</i> or after <i>—</i> by me,							
This Marriage was solemnized between us,		in the Presence of us,					
<i>Arthur Mitchell Ransome</i>		<i>Elizabeth Constance Graves Walker</i>		<i>Ralph Courtney Ashley Gibson Henry Toke Sudamore</i>			
<i>Arthur Mitchell Ransome</i>		<i>Elizabeth Constance Graves Walker</i>		<i>Clara &amp; Herbert Terrell John Jones</i>			

Gibson, with the enthusiasm of youth, went to Africa in 1910 with a group of friends, one of whom had got hold of a map that appeared to show existence of a gold mine in Nigeria. Needless to say, the expedition proved fruitless, and in early 1911 they were on a steam boat back to Britain, empty handed and disillusioned. Gibson returned to his life as a journalist, finding work with the *Morning Leader*, although in the 1911 census he is back living with his parents and four siblings in Hampstead. His last mention of Ransome is of taking him to meet the travel writer and (later) anti-war writer H.M. Tomlinson, which must have been some time in 1911.

In 1912, with the merger of the *Daily News* and *Morning Leader* pending, Gibson, on the toss of a coin, decided to take a job in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka) as assistant editor and leader-writer on the principal paper. He said his farewells and headed to Colombo, where he stayed until the fall of Antwerp in September 1914, which propelled him to join up.

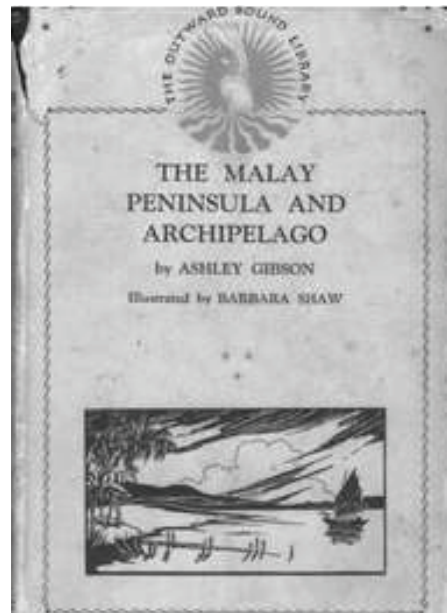
After active service at the Somme and Verdun as a Captain in the 21st (4th Public School) Battalion of the Royal Fusiliers, he was sent to hospital in England and, bored of recuperating, he signed up for service in Africa, where he was posted, as a Lieutenant in the King's African Rifles, to Nyasaland, now part of Malawi. He was sent home in 1918 with a 'mysterious brand of sickness ... a polysyllabic bug with zeds in it'.<sup>16</sup> He married Doris Freer on 27 June 1918 and found work in London at the War Museum as Assistant Curator and Secretary, but twelve months after the armistice he returned to Ceylon, finding army pay in peace time too constraining for his lifestyle as a married man with a baby on the way.

Gibson at some point became editor of the *Malay Mail* in Kuala Lumpur, before becoming editor of the *Outward Bound* series of books for J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd. First published in 1928, this series of illustrated handbooks was intended 'For the information and entertainment of travellers and emigrants and their friends at home, which aims at presenting a vivid, accurate and absolutely up-to-date view of the *life* under post-war conditions in all parts of the British Empire.'<sup>17</sup> Various Acts and schemes were developed by the British government to encourage emigration to the colonies and dominions after the First World War, including the Empire Settlement Act of 1922 and a free passage scheme to assist ex-soldiers to start a new life, so the *Outward Bound* series was part of a much larger campaign to encourage outward migration after the war.

In the editor's preface to Hector Bolitho's *The New Zealanders*, Gibson writes: 'Times have changed, not the territories. Mostly it is the women of our race who have brought that change about.'<sup>18</sup> The series is clearly aimed at families, chiefly persuading wives to follow their husbands to the colonies, and provides sensible practical advice about life in a new country in the inter-war era – a lot like English life but not quite, and to reinforce this, many of the writers were women.

*The Malay Peninsula and Archipelago*, written by Ashley Gibson himself and published in 1928, like others in the series, provides a history of the country, an introduction to folklore, nature and industry, and a chapter on 'The Englishman's Day', which tries to show that you can live as normal an English life as possible in this subtropical paradise.

*The Cities of Australia* by Kathleen Ussher, published in 1928, talks about the Sydney Harbour Bridge, then under construction to service a growing and busy city. She then describes Melbourne, rather



tongue-in-cheek, as ‘Puritan’ – ‘... there are no Sunday newspapers in Melbourne, they are prohibited by law’<sup>19</sup> – and talks directly to the housewife: ‘... the cost of living is ten to twenty percent cheaper in the Australian cities than in London ... meat is considerably cheaper, and jam is about half the price and exceedingly good.’<sup>20</sup> Bolitho’s *The New Zealanders*, also published in 1928, boasts that ‘New Zealand’s standard of education is higher than that of any other part of The British Empire’<sup>21</sup> and ‘New Zealand’s death rate is the lowest in the world.’<sup>22</sup> However, I am not sure many housewives would have been tempted to emigrate after reading his chapter on New Zealand women. He says ‘her life is never dull or empty ... in the country she is radiant because of the lightness of her potato cakes or the brilliance of her copper kettle’;<sup>23</sup> and ‘Good clothes are expensive, but the standard of dressing is less exacting and the taste of the women distinctly provincial and “ready-made”’.<sup>24</sup>

Gibson published his autobiography, *Postscript to Adventure*, in 1930, described by *The Illustrated London News* as ‘Written with the humour and outspokenness of smoking-room talk ... the first two thirds recall hilarious days ... and many friendships with young writers and painters ... about this part of the book there is a joyous spirit of bohemian high-jinks’.<sup>25</sup> In 1943 Gibson and his wife Doris celebrated their 25th wedding anniversary at their home in Yalton, Somerset, but evidently then moved back to London, as on 6 April 1948 Gibson died, aged 63, at his home at 585 Finchley Road, London NW3.

*Postscript to Adventure* provides a fascinating insight into life in bohemian London and a vignette of Ransome in his early years. Although their friendship didn’t last, clearly Ransome made a significant impression on the young Ashley Gibson, enough to persuade him to ditch a job as a civil servant and take up a career as a writer, reviewer, journalist and editor, one that was to take him to Ceylon and Malaysia, and led him to play a part, as editor of the *Outward Bound* series, in encouraging British migration to the further reaches of the Empire. We don’t know whether the friendship failed due to a falling out, or the passage of time and distance, but the smattering of recollections in Gibson’s autobiography suggests he had fond memories of the time he spent with Arthur Ransome, and exhibits warm gratitude for the important part Ransome played in his life.

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- <sup>1</sup> Ashley Gibson, *Postscript to Adventure* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons Ltd., 1930), p. 4.
  - <sup>2</sup> Gibson, p. 9.
  - <sup>3</sup> Jean Moorcroft Wilson, *Edward Thomas: From Adlestrop to Arras, A Biography* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 188.
  - <sup>4</sup> Gibson, p. 18.
  - <sup>5</sup> Gibson, p. 22.
  - <sup>6</sup> Gibson, p. 23.
  - <sup>7</sup> Gibson, p. 23.
  - <sup>8</sup> Gibson, p. 13.
  - <sup>9</sup> Gibson, p. 22. Although published in 1930, the text for *Postscript for Adventure* is dated October – December 1927. Gibson was perhaps unaware that Ransome had returned to England in 1924.
  - <sup>10</sup> Gibson, pp. 44-45.
  - <sup>11</sup> Arthur Ransome, *The Autobiography* (London: Century Publishing Co. Ltd, 1985), p. 112.
  - <sup>12</sup> Gibson, p. 8.
  - <sup>13</sup> Ransome, p. 131.
  - <sup>14</sup> Gibson, p. 12.
  - <sup>15</sup> Gibson, p. 9.
  - <sup>16</sup> Gibson, p. 184.
  - <sup>17</sup> Hector Bolitho, *The New Zealanders* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1928), flyleaf.
  - <sup>18</sup> Bolitho, p. ix.
  - <sup>19</sup> Kathleen Ussher, *The Cities of Australia* (London: J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd, 1928), p. 22.
  - <sup>20</sup> Ussher, p. 84.
  - <sup>21</sup> Bolitho, p. 32.
  - <sup>22</sup> Bolitho, p. 43.
  - <sup>23</sup> Bolitho, p. 51.
  - <sup>24</sup> Bolitho, p. 54.
  - <sup>25</sup> *The Illustrated London News*, 'Books of the Day', 15 February: 242 (1930).

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# EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE IN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

## The Case for Arthur Ransome

Catherine Lamont

A small number of authors have inspired readers either to communicate with them or develop literary societies around them. Less than 10% of the 120 societies listed in the Alliance of Literary Societies<sup>1</sup> relate to children's authors, yet Katherine Rundell suggests that the number of adults buying children's books to read themselves is increasing.<sup>2</sup> She suggests that children's books offer important experiences to adults (particularly 'the imagination [that] is absolutely essential for seeing the world truly', 'the beauty of thoughts pared down to their most naked and vulnerable' and seeing the world in a 'clear and focused way') as adult fiction rarely does. She argues that children's authors need to work very hard to attract an audience that is in many ways more discerning than readers of adult fiction seem to be. And some adult readers appreciate that.

The result is a space in which the imagination is allowed to flourish, where readers are 'reminded of how to think in a more direct fashion' and witness vulnerability. These qualities are components of Emotional Intelligence,<sup>3</sup> yet the success of children's books such as the *Swallows and Amazons* novels has been attributed to the *childishness* of both the writer and his adult readers (for example, by Nicholas Tucker)<sup>4</sup>. Likewise, emotionally intelligent components have often been completely overlooked (see William Trevor, 'Ransome's Non-duffers').<sup>5</sup>

Arthur Ransome seems to be more willing than many others to attend to (and paint more varied pictures of) the inner life of his characters. He received, and replied to, hundreds of letters asking whether his characters were real or commenting on their realness, and desiring to contact both the author and the characters if they were. This suggests that authentic authorial writing is important to particular readers ... of any age.

Ransome's own views on writing for children – indeed for anyone – seem to support the argument that the writer's own emotional state or need is a

key factor in the writing process. In a letter to his American publisher, Helen Ferris, he wrote:

Unless I am writing something that is good fun FOR ME, not for somebody else, I cannot write at all. The children who read my books are never addressed. I don't even know they are there. ... A book written consciously FOR some audience other than its writer is almost sure to be pulled out of focus by its purpose, so that it cannot be a good book ... whether for children or for grown-ups.<sup>6</sup>

While the writing of the *Swallows and Amazons* novels has often been attributed to Ransome's attempts to process his distress about disappointments in real family life, they might equally be inspired by the joy he experienced in discovering W.G. Collingwood, his wife, his children, and eventually the grandchildren who triggered the writing of *Swallows and Amazons*. (It may be worth noting that in addition to the slipper-giving grandchildren mentioned in the original dedication, Collingwood also had a grand-daughter called Ruth.)<sup>7</sup> The coexistence of both distress and joy in the novels may be another factor that contributes to their 'magic', as may be the messages of *hope* that Sally Thomas suggests is present in them (in 'Not Duffers, Won't Drown'):

The very simplicity of this dream ... is the deep magic of the *Swallows and Amazons* books. The need of children to be world makers is the truth these stories tell.<sup>8</sup>



Although Ransome's novels are often described pejoratively as 'holiday adventure' stories, there are many passages devoted to exploring emotional experiences. The variety of techniques used to respond to emotions is also unusually high, particularly in the 'Lake' novels. Emotional challenges are given significant attention. These include being accused unfairly of lying, wrecking a boat, being left on an island alone, being proved 'right' about buried treasure, successfully steering a runaway boat to safety, and feeling 'unwanted'. In addition to the standard 'grown-up' repertoire of suppression,

denial and distraction found in the 'stiff upper lip' culture of the 1930s (responses which all have their place, but tend to be over-used), additional strategies for managing feelings are described or explored. Some examples in the book include introspection, meditation, 'time to oneself', 'sleeping on it', going for a swim, taking action, talking about the problem with others, reassuring touch, humour, acknowledging mistakes, and describing the physical sensation of being tearful. The fact that feelings are described and explored directly is unusual in children's literature of the time, and the amount of time describing them is even more so.

By exposing (or speaking from) his heart in his writing, Ransome did something very special and unusual for the time: he validated the emotional and spiritual lives of not only children but also the adults who read his books in an artistic, non-didactic way. He made discussing emotions acceptable. In acknowledging and exposing aspects of his own emotional experiences, he created a connection between his readers, himself and his characters. Could this explain the desire of many to read the same books over and over again and to connect with the author, characters and others who feel the same? In a study involving five children and five adults reading *Swallows and Amazons*, Fiona Maine and Alison Waller suggest it does: 'feelings of empathy ... act as a tool of engagement ... [which] may manifest itself in wanting to be with, or be like, characters'.<sup>9</sup>

It is Ransome's writing 'at the same level as his child readers' and his realism which many believe set him apart from other writers. Even though the *Swallows and Amazons* novels are often described as a 'series', Dulcie Pettigrew points out that there are many differences between them: there is no one character or setting that remains the same in all the books, different genres are used, and different adventures take place.<sup>10</sup> It may be easier to describe them as a portfolio rather than a series, connected by themes such as Ransome's transforming his own challenging experiences (for example, estrangement from his daughter) into something more positive.

Ransome's work reminds me somewhat of a technique in Robbe-Grillet's novel *La Jalousie* in which the author explores the experiences of a man observing the interactions of his wife and a neighbour from various viewpoints. Watching through Venetian blinds called 'jalousies' (also French for 'jealousy'), the hidden narrator replays the scenes from different psychological angles. Ransome's experiments in fiction similarly seek to

explore the way different characters respond to different scenarios at different times in different books. Rather than adopting any particular method, he relied on intuition and inspiration, and any consistent theme can really only be deduced retrospectively. There was no overall plan for the collection – just a plan for each book once the plot had ‘arrived’, often from friends and, in the case of *Great Northern?*, in the morning mail.

Instead of developing his characters in a linear way across the novels, Ransome seems to focus on one or some characters in a particular book, and use other characters (consciously or not) as the stimulus for that character's development. Sometimes these secondary characters fail to develop as logically as expected; they are used as needed in *that* book and often develop more predictably elsewhere. But I don't think this apparently haphazard development need be a problem. It may, in fact, be more closely aligned with readers' experience of other people than a consistent growth would allow and so be more true to life. After all, other people's development (and even our own) doesn't often appear to progress neatly in the way that child development texts suggest it should. How many times are real people told ‘You should have grown out of that by now!’? (Excuse me, who says?) The important thing for Ransome's commercial success (whether deliberately courted or not) was, I believe, for the books to cover enough experiences of enough different characters at different ages, pursuing different interests and in different circumstances, to attract a following from as broad a cross-section of society as possible.

Perhaps the *reduction* of this difficulty in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, which focuses on only the four Walker children, contributes to its being generally regarded as the most satisfying for adults reading it for the first time. While some describe this book as a *bildungsroman* or rite-of-passage story for the older boy, John, others suggest it is a rite of passage for the whole family. For example, Julian Lovelock argues that all the characters grow through this experience, and are different in *Secret Water*, where they are more interested in the mapping project than playing games.<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, maritime historian Michael Bender expresses concern about John and Susan's apparent regression in the sequel, even challenging the ‘seamanship’ of both fourteen-year-old John Walker and Ransome in *We Didn't Mean to go to Sea* (an argument I don't think can be sustained if a close reading of the text is made).<sup>12</sup>





*We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea: Cooking and Steering*

While I tend to agree with Michael Bender that John and Susan's neglect of the younger children in *Secret Water* does seem to be less responsible than one would expect of people who have successfully negotiated their rite of passage across the North Sea, perhaps this is the point. Does anyone really grow up? Don't adults continue to make mistakes (and hopefully learn) forever? Another explanation could be that John and Susan's development has to take second place to the plot or to the development of the younger characters, but I think the 'realism' card (which acknowledges the limitations of the term 'grown-up') may be a stronger one to play.

The fact that Ransome may not successfully resolve the question in *Secret Water* need not be a weakness: indeed, it could be its strength. Educators and psychologists know that the most powerful learning occurs in the context of strong emotions and that negative feelings tend to have a more lasting effect. Perhaps the discomfort we feel about the way the older children in Ransome's later books behave is drawing attention to something important: if 'growing up' is about suppressing your heart, should we aspire to it? John

and Susan's focus on getting the adult job of mapping done leads to the near-drowning of the younger children. Blind adherence to society's rules is not the answer, as Commander Walker has always impressed on his children. As Titty says in Chapter X of *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, 'Let's do what John says ... Daddy'd say the same ... You know ... When it's Life and Death all rules go by the board.'

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<sup>1</sup> <https://allianceofliterarysocieties.wordpress.com/>

<sup>2</sup> Katherine Rundell, 'Why Harry Potter and Paddington Bear are essential reading ... for grown-ups', *The Guardian*, 20 April 2019.

<sup>3</sup> Daniel Goleman, *Emotional Intelligence* (New York: Bantam Books, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Nicholas Tucker, 'Arthur Ransome and Problems of Literary Assessment', *Children's Literature in Education*, 26, 1995.

<sup>5</sup> William Trevor 'Ransome's Non-duffers', *New Statesman and Nation*, 1969.

<sup>6</sup> Letter to Helen Ferris, 20 March 1938, in Hugh Brogan (ed.), *Signalling from Mars* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1977), p. 254.

<sup>7</sup> Christina Hardyment, *Arthur Ransome & Captain Flint's Trunk*, 2nd ed. (London: Frances Lincoln, 2006), p. 74.

<sup>8</sup> Sally Thomas, 'Not Duffers, Won't Drown', *First Things*, 233, May 2013, pp. 24-25.

<sup>9</sup> Fiona Maine and Alison Waller, 'Swallows and Amazons Forever: How Adults and Children Engage in reading a Classic Text', *Children's Literature in Education*, 42, pp. 354-371.

<sup>10</sup> Dulcie Pettigrew, 'Swallows and Amazons Explored: A Reassessment of Arthur Ransome's Books for Children', *New Review of Children's Literature and Librarianship*, 15(1), 2009, pp. 1-20.

<sup>11</sup> Julian Lovelock, *Swallows, Amazons and Coots* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2016).

<sup>12</sup> Michael Bender, 'Was Arthur Ransome's John Walker a Competent Seaman?', *The Mariner's Mirror*, 105 (1), 2019, pp. 81-85.

## APOLOGY

Following the publication of *Mixed Moss 2019*, Robin Selby wrote highlighting errors in Sophie Neville's article 'X Marks the Spot where they Ate Six Missionaries', in particular regarding the dates of *News from Tartary* (by Peter Fleming) and *Forbidden Journey* (by Ella Maillart). As Robin rightly pointed out, these books were published in 1936 and 1940 respectively and were read by Ransome in later life. So they were not part of Ransome's childhood and could not, in fact, have influenced *Swallows and Amazons*. Robin also pointed out that it is John and not Titty who sees the potential of the lighthouse tree.

Sophie and the Editor thank Robin for bringing these errors to our attention, for which they apologise, and they are happy to set the record straight.

# LITERARY LICENCE OR ERROR OF FACT?

## Astronomy and Astro-navigation in Arthur Ransome's Writing

David Goodwin

In sailing matters, Arthur Ransome prided himself on doing whatever it took to become an expert. For example, he took careful notes for *Peter Duck* from a copy of the *Channel Pilot* while on board the steamer to Syria to join the Altounyan family, and in 1936 he sailed to Flushing and back as a reconnaissance for *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*.<sup>1</sup> And he was a stickler for detail, for example telling one of his illustrators: 'It very rarely happens that the steersman sits as you have drawn Susan.'<sup>2</sup> Ransome was also particular about checking geological facts, consulting a mining expert (Oscar Gnosselius) for *Pigeon Post*, and being able to say with confidence: 'I believe there are no mining errors in the book.'<sup>3</sup> But did Ransome exercise similar care about his astronomical details? This article suggests that the small discrepancies in *Winter Holiday* and *Peter Duck* fall within the ambit of literary licence, but the astro-navigation errors in *Missee Lee* indicate a definite gap in Ransome's knowledge.

### Winter Holiday

On the second page of *Winter Holiday* the reader learns that Dick has a telescope and a book about astronomy, and wants to find a good place for an observatory.<sup>4</sup> This signposts clearly that astronomy will be a strong thread in *Winter Holiday*, and indeed the observatory is the means through which the Callums meet the Walkers and Blacketts, and signals hung on its wall are central to the misunderstanding concerning the North Pole. Christina Hardyment offers convincing grounds for a barn at Barkbooth (54° 18' 27.9"N; 2° 54' 11.2"W) being Dick's observatory, based on the signalling system Ransome had with the Kelsall family at Barkbooth, about a kilometre

across the valley from Low Ludderburn where he was writing.<sup>5</sup> This raises the question of whether Dick could have seen what he is supposed to have from the Barkbooth barn.



*Barkbooth barn (Photo: David Goodwin)*



*Dick's Observatory*

To answer that question, we need to speculate about the approximate date and time that Dick was observing. In the fictional world, *Winter Holiday* is set in the winter school holidays – say about mid-December to early January – and quarantine for Nancy's mumps extends this period. A message is left on Cache Island on 28th January (*WH*, p. 194), and Dick and Dorothea go

past the island on 10th February (*WH*, p. 291). Dick could not have established his observatory before early January, because on the first evening of observing he says to Dot: 'Get the chapter on the January sky' (*WH*, p. 32). In real life, *Winter Holiday* was published in November 1933 and we



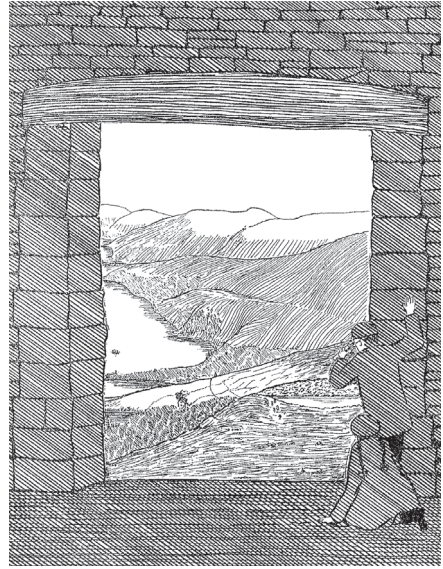
know that by 2nd March of that year Ransome told his mother that there was still snow on the ground and the book was ‘beginning to feel more like a story’.<sup>6</sup> By 11th July he informs Wren Howard at Jonathan Cape that he has ‘the whole thing on paper’ and is ‘frantically working at the revision’.<sup>7</sup> So it is probably fair to say that in mid-January of 1933, writing in the barn at Low Ludderburn (54° 18' 46.7"N; 2° 54' 56.4"W), Ransome would have been conscious of seeing the night sky viewed by his characters as *Winter Holiday* took shape in his head and was set down on paper.

We know the approximate time of day when Dick was observing. The Ds have dinner at about midday – ‘half past twelve’ (*WH*, p. 18) – followed by the reconnaissance and a cup of tea at 4pm (‘Come you in at four o’clock for a cup of hot tea,’ says Mrs Dixon). And they have a meal after the observations and before Mrs Dixon goes to bed: ‘You’ll be wanting dark for your star-gazing, and I’ll give you your supper later’ (*WH*, p. 25). Their recce is prolonged by seeing the Swallows and Amazons going up the field to Holly Howe, and Dorothea comments that she and Dick will be late for tea (*WH*, p. 28), so let us say the Ds drink tea around 4.15 – 4.30pm. ‘An hour later they were climbing the track again’ (*WH*, p. 30) – in other words, about 5.30pm – perhaps reaching the barn around 5.45pm. The sun has already set (at 4.18pm, we are told by planetarium software such as *Sky Charts* or *Sky Map*), and by 5.45pm it would have been dark. The Callums get the fire lit (with the dust jacket of Dick’s astronomy book), so perhaps by 6.15pm they are looking for stars. The time is not critical, but for argument’s sake let us assume that Dick is viewing Taurus by about 7pm on 15th January 1933, at the latitude and longitude of the Barkbooth barn. Today it is a simple matter to enter such a time and place into planetarium software.

Software also allows us to set the view direction, in this case where Dick would have been facing. In the book, the lake is visible from the barn (see the picture following), and the fictional lake and the real lakes comprising it run north/south. It therefore follows that the outlook from Dick’s observatory is somewhere to the east of north. This is consistent with the Barkbooth barn, which we can find from Google Earth to be oriented approximately 36° east of north.

‘What a place to look out from,’ said Dick. ‘And for all the northern stars ...’ (*WH*, p. 27) – and from the barn Dick credibly sees the Plough (Ursa Major), the Pole Star (Polaris), ‘and Cassiopea on the other side of it,

almost opposite the Plough' (*WH*, p. 32). But then Dorothea says that the star book suggests looking for Taurus with its giant red star Aldebaran, and Dick says he can see this, plus 'the Pleiades away by themselves ... just over the top of the hill'. The software tells us that such a thing would not have been possible from Dick's observatory. Taurus would have been at the azimuth about 135°, behind the line of the barn front and quite high in the sky, not just over the hill. The constellation would only have been low to the horizon in mid-afternoon, when it was still daylight, and any later in the evening it would be even higher and further behind the barn.



*The Martians in Sight*

What is interesting and possibly revealing is that the south-east window of Ransome's writing barn faces about 139°, so that Taurus at azimuth 135° would have been almost perfectly framed by the window if Ransome glanced out at the assumed date and time of Dick's observation, and probably high enough to be seen over the treeline.

We can be sure that any discrepancies Ransome permitted were either on account of literary licence or neglect, not because he lacked an understanding of what could and could not be seen in the night sky at different latitudes. He definitely knew, for example, that as we move north or south, the celestial poles tip up or down in the sky by the corresponding angle, so that for an observer at the North Pole, the Pole Star (Polaris) will be directly overhead. Ransome knew this because Dick did: in *Winter Holiday*, when Dick goes outside to look at stars and Dorothea asks where he's going, he says, 'Just to look at the Pole Star... Of course it won't be really overhead, but still ...' (*WH*, p. 43). So either Ransome did not stop to think what would be visible from the Barkbooth barn, or he deliberately bent the truth in the interests of narrative in the same way that he conflates Coniston and Windermere to make the fictional lake in *Swallows and Amazons*. Just as Ransome manages

to capture the spirit of the Lake District while taking liberties with its geography, so he succeeds in capturing the romance of stars while bending the rules of science a little. What lends weight to this is Dick thinking to himself: ‘And there they were, Taurus, Aldebaran, the Pleiades, obedient as slaves ... He felt an odd wish to shout at them in triumph, but remembered in time that this would not be scientific’ (*WH*, p. 34).

The astronomical thread in *Winter Holiday* continues after the observatory becomes only a signal station. Dick views stars from the *Fram* (Captain Flint’s houseboat) and from the North Pole, and from both he can see the whole sky, unimpeded by the barn. It is then that he sees the twins Orion and Gemini (*WH*, p. 251), sightings that are consistent with the place and date and time. Also plausible is Dick at the ‘North Pole’ telling his sister: ‘Orion’s sword showed clear for a moment, north and south. Anybody could see the hilt end was pointing straight at us’ (*WH*, p. 343). Orion’s sword does indeed point approximately N/S when it is near its zenith, and while this is not only true for an observer at the Pole, Dick has shown that he is not a slave to science.

What we seem to be seeing here is greater pragmatism by Ransome over astronomical details than about, say, geology or sailing. He either did not notice which stars would have been obscured by the barn or else he couldn’t care less.

### **Missee Lee**

What about celestial navigation errors in *Missee Lee* (briefly mentioned by Ted Alexander in *Despatches* in 1996)? At the start of Chapter 2, Captain Flint stands by the deckhouse, sextant to eye, and John waits beside him with a stop-watch for the sun to be at its highest so they can work out latitude and longitude (*ML*, p. 25).<sup>8</sup> Captain Flint calls ‘Now’, John presses the button of the stopwatch ‘to get the exact second’, and then the two of them go into the deckhouse to work out their position. From within comes ‘the murmur of the navigators, words like zenith, meridian, versine, logarithm ...’ (*ML*, p. 26). These are intriguing words, certainly, which impart a kind of maritime mystique to the scene. We read that ‘Nancy knew what some of them meant, but could never remember which word meant what’ and a close reading of *Peter Duck* and *Missee Lee* suggests that in matters of astronomical navigation Ransome could perhaps identify better with Nancy than with John or Captain

Flint. He even sounds for a moment like a whimsical Dorothea Callum, moved by the undeniable poetry and romance of the words without fully understanding their meaning – because both in taking time at noon, and by using versines for a latitude determination, Ransome is plain wrong. That paraphernalia and jargon are only required for position lines to stars or the sun observed away from the observer's meridian, typically around mid-morning or afternoon for the sun. Such calculations do indeed require accurate time and, in Ransome's day, logarithms and versines for the solution of a spherical triangle or else pre-computed tables in several bulky volumes. But not for a latitude fix at noon. Observation to half a minute of arc (30") is all one can expect from an experienced navigator at sea, and the sun might be within 30" of its highest point for about five or ten minutes depending on the observer's latitude and the time of year.<sup>9</sup> That kind of time interval does not require a stopwatch. In practice, to compute a latitude at noon, the altitude of the sun (i.e. the angle above the horizon) is observed at its highest point (when it transits the local meridian), corrections are made for refraction and a few other variables, the sun's angle north or south of the equator is applied (its declination), and out comes the latitude. Logarithms and versines are not needed, and nor is time.

Of course, in his capacity as author rather than technical expert, Ransome might have decided that reading about both a morning position line and a noon latitude observation would be tedious for the lay-reader and injudicious from a literary point of view. But in that case he could easily have described a morning or afternoon fix that incorporated the stopwatch and technical terms wafting from the deckhouse. Gibber could have copied the motions of the navigators with a pair of scissors equally well earlier or later in the day. The point is that although Ransome sometimes invokes literary licence where expedient, nowhere else in his books does he use that licence to fudge technical matters, nor does he invoke it lightly. Even for *Missee Lee*, which Hardyment describes as a 'pure romance, not pinned in time and reality at all', Ransome exercised some care over the detail.<sup>10</sup> At first he wanted Missee Lee to have coxed the Newnham College boat, and to have the rudder up on her study wall on Dragon Island, but he took advice that it was not usual for the cox to keep the rudder, so Missee Lee played hockey instead. It looks as if Ransome felt that he was sufficiently well versed in astro-navigation and had no need to consult an expert.

One section of *Missee Lee* makes a reader wonder whether the anomalies concerning accurate time and spherical trigonometry at the beginning of Chapter 2 are not a one-off mistake rather than a rooted misconception. When Captain Flint gets hold of the sextant again in Miss Lee's temple (*ML*, p. 253), he says that he can make a good guess at the longitude and wants to take an observation at noon – presumably for latitude – so long as he is able to get a sea horizon. It therefore looks as if Ransome at least knew that a meridian altitude yielded latitude not longitude. However, although no chronometer, stopwatch or trigonometrical tables are mentioned, an error about time is still apparent in the conversation with Taicoon Wu (*ML*, p. 262), when Wu spots the Sextant and says:

‘This is six-tant. You take melidian altitude ... You put finger on map ... so ...’

‘Here, I say,’ said Captain Flint, ‘what do you know about meridian altitudes?’

‘Olo seaman,’ said the Taicoon Wu, ... ‘Take *time* for my Captain when him take melidian altitude.’ [italics added]

*Peter Duck* also mentions sun observations, but adds nothing to our knowledge: ‘Every day at noon Captain Flint worked out the ship's position and marked it on the chart with a little cross of red ink and the date neatly written beside it’ (*PD*, p. 210).<sup>11</sup> And ‘At midday Mr. Duck came on deck again and Captain Flint took observations of the sun and worked out the ship's position’ (*PD*, p. 219). A position (both latitude and longitude, as in *ML*, p. 25) is not impossible at noon so long as it is done in conjunction with observations made at different times of the day or with dead reckoning. For example, Captain Flint could have observed a position line at mid-morning, and at noon have combined this – corrected for estimated distance travelled – with the noon latitude.

Were Ransome's mathematical skills equal to the challenge of spherical trigonometry? Early in life he found mathematics difficult, and it is a subject in which once having fallen behind it is difficult to catch up. However, Ransome's slow start was partly attributable to his poor eyesight, and when A.E. Donkin saw the chance of showing in him a spectacular example of what good teaching could do, he ‘was translated in two terms from the depths to the heights, from the dull valleys of elementary arithmetic to the



exhilarating mountain air of differential calculus and the binomial theorem'.<sup>12</sup> In comparison with calculus, the straightforward problems of astro-navigation would have been well within Ransome's grasp if he set his mind to mastering them. We learn from *Racundra's First Cruise* that he possessed a sextant and stopwatch, and designed a shelf high enough to take a Nautical Almanac, which suggests he had received instruction in the subject or at least read up the theory.<sup>13</sup> But did he ever use that gear in earnest? Astronomical navigation would not have been needed on his Baltic voyage, and although Ransome was experienced in the use of compasses and their deviations, with unsatisfactory second-hand logs, and with tides, winds, lighthouses and buoys, he never had any real need for celestial navigation. He sailed mainly in coastal waters, and deep-sea astronomical navigation is an art that needs regular use if it is not to become rusty.

### Conclusions

Ransome succeeded in capturing the poetry of sailing (*We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*); mining (the lure of the gold and the drama of smelting in *Pigeon Post*); and of stars and navigation (*Winter Holiday*, *Missee Lee*, *Peter Duck*). Where possible he was also at pains to get his facts correct and, where he knew a subject well, was a good communicator about even quite obscure details. In fact, the name of Arthur Ransome is almost a byword for an ability to explain technical matters simply, with even landlubbers reaching the end of the *Swallows and Amazons* series using esoteric terms such as sheet, painter and halyard like old friends. Where he knew little about a subject, he generally took advice, as with mining details in *Pigeon Post*. But even where he knew a subject intimately (such as the geography of the Lake District), for him reality had to be subservient to the narrative:

... there has to be a little pulling about of rivers and roads ... and by now I know the geography of the country in my books so well that when I walk about in actual fact, sometimes it seems to me that some giant or earthquake has been doing a little sceneshifting overnight.<sup>14</sup>

In the same way, although Ransome had a deep love of stars and a reasonable knowledge base, *Winter Holiday* shows us that he was quite pragmatic about astronomical details and vocabulary. When Roger calls Ursa Major 'the Saucepan' (*WH*, p. 51), it is almost as if Ransome is replying rather than Dick: 'It's much more like a saucepan than some of the things

they call it by.’ However, some distortions go beyond pragmatism or literary licence. Although Ransome knew the rudiments of astro-navigation, he was better practised in coastal navigation, and unfortunately the eight mistakes on the semaphore plate in the first edition of *Missee Lee* were not the only ones in the book: Ransome also had a misconception about observing time for meridian altitudes.

Perhaps he couldn’t care less. Perhaps we hear an echo of his voice through Nancy: ‘I suppose you’ve come to the Arctic to watch an eclipse?’ she asks Dick. ‘But there’s not going to be an eclipse,’ Dick replies. ‘Oh well, Nancy says, Don’t be so particular’ (*WH*, p. 46).

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<sup>1</sup> Rupert Hart-Davis, ‘Epilogue’ to Rupert Hart-Davis, ed., *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976; reprinted 1985), p. 350.

<sup>2</sup> Hugh Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome* (London: Pimlico, 1984; reprinted 1992), p. 344.

<sup>3</sup> Brogan, *Life*, p. 345.

<sup>4</sup> Arthur Ransome, *Winter Holiday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> Christina Hardyment, *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984; reprinted 1988), p. 51. Also personal correspondence, 3rd January 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Hugh Brogan, ed., *Signalling from Mars: The Letters of Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), p. 214.

<sup>7</sup> Brogan, *Signalling*, p. 218.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Ransome, *Missee Lee* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1941).

<sup>9</sup> A.C. Gardner, *Navigation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1958; reprinted 1981, 8th impression), p. 123.

<sup>10</sup> Hardyment, p. 170.

<sup>11</sup> Arthur Ransome, *Peter Duck* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1932).

<sup>12</sup> Hart-Davis, p. 61.

<sup>13</sup> Arthur Ransome, *Racundra's First Cruise* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1923; 3rd ed., 1948), p. 153.

<sup>14</sup> Hardyment, pp. 28-29.

## Acknowledgements

The *Winter Holiday* part of this article began as a talk in January 2018 to the Arthur Ransome Society in the Perpetual Guardian Planetarium, Otago Museum, Dunedin. Thanks to Cheryl Paget for organising the weekend, to Dr Claire Concannon for her almost telepathic control of the planetarium, and to Christina Hardyment for confirming details of the Barkbooth barn.

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# RESTORING *NANCY BLACKETT*

Michael Rines

In 1988 I bought the sunken wreck of Arthur Ransome's favourite boat *Nancy Blackett*, named after the tomboy leader of the Amazons. She took three years to restore and cost me £40,000. Why I did it I still can't say, because I was no Ransome fan. I had not read any of the *Swallows and Amazons* novels, even though as a boy I loved books about ships and the sea – books like *Treasure Island*, *Robinson Crusoe* and *Swiss Family Robinson*, and the many sea stories written for boys by the Victorian novelist William Henry Kingston, plus Percy Westerman's stories about Sea Scouts.

What's more, I already owned the ultimate modern cruising boat, a 32 ft Prout fibreglass catamaran fitted with every item of modern equipment from radar to hot and cold running water and a fridge; moreover, having at one time owned a wooden yacht, I knew that even one in good condition is a commitment to spending more time on maintenance than on sailing. And *Nancy* was in far from good condition. In fact, she was terminally sick, lying on her side in the middle of Scarborough harbour, slowly filling with stinking mud. I was therefore one of the least likely people to rescue her. This, and the many weird coincidences attending my restoration, tempts me to think that I was somehow fated to do it.

The most important coincidence was that, though I was not a Ransome fan, I was probably the only person in a position to rescue her. I had good connections with Scarborough Marine, the only boatyard in the town, and was able to arrange the first stage of the rescue with them. I also had good relations with the manager of Fox's Marina at the head of the Orwell in Suffolk. He let *Nancy* lie there ashore for more than two years without charge and gave me a substantial discount on the materials I needed from the chandlery. Then, because I was a public relations consultant, I knew how to get publicity for what I was doing, and got big stories placed not only in all the leading newspapers (biggest picture of the day in *The Guardian*, *Telegraph* and *The Times*), but also on radio and television. On one occasion when

*Nancy* was back in the water we had camera crews from both BBC and ITV filming on board while we sailed. One crew had to hide in the saloon while the other interviewed me in the cockpit. The publicity enabled me to win important support from companies such as International Paints (the specialist boat paint supplier), Black & Decker (for power tools), Thornycroft (for a new engine at cost price) and various electronics firms for navigational equipment. Without the help provided by these companies I could not have afforded the restoration

So how did I get involved in all this? I was brought up in Scarborough, where my parents lived all their lives. In later life, whenever I visited them, I used to go down to the harbour to look at whatever boats were in. On one occasion I saw *Nancy*, then in immaculate condition, with perfect paintwork and gleaming brass portlights. I was working in London at the time as a magazine editor, and when I got back to my office I told my secretary, Deborah McIntyre, about this lovely boat, because I knew she was a keen sailor. I didn't tell her what the boat's name was, because it meant nothing to me and I had forgotten it. However, Deborah said that her father had once owned a boat similar to the one I had described. She said her name was *Nancy Blackett*. That jogged my memory, and I said: 'But that's the name of the boat I'm telling you about!' I made a point of looking out for *Nancy* whenever I was in Scarborough. Sadly, her owner neglected her over the years. The photograph below shows her lying against the rough stone outer harbour wall without fenders, which had seriously damaged her planks. She filled with water when the tide came in and emptied when it went out.



Several lines held Nancy more or less upright against the wall, but someone loosed them off and she fell over, cracking several frames and lots of ribs. When there were gales, huge North Sea waves burst over the outer pier. One washed a car off it, and it fell on *Nancy*. Both her main hatch and fore hatch were missing, and the cockpit floor had gone. She was wrecked inside and out. On a later visit, I found her in an even more pitiable state. She was, in truth, a write-off. In May 1988 the Scarborough harbourmaster told the borough council that *Nancy* was a hazard to other boats, so it was proposed that she should be lifted out, placed on the Marine Drive and planted with flowers. As *Classic Boat* magazine said, that would be an undignified end for any boat, but tragic for one that had been as much loved as *Nancy*. Arthur Ransome would not have been the only one of her former owners to turn in his celestial bunk. I tracked down and interviewed all but one of them, and what they had to say revealed that *Nancy* had led an interesting life, both before and after Ransome's ownership.

*Nancy* got off to a bad start. Her builder, Shuttler's boatyard in Poole, went broke at an early stage of her construction. Fortunately, the unfinished boat was bought in 1930 by David Hillyard's well-respected Littlehampton boatyard. When she was finished, she was offered at the 1930 Olympia Motor Show for £535. She was bought by Seymour Tuely and Norman Morley, who named her *Spindrift*. Against Hillyard's wishes, they rejected having a traditional gaff rig, preferring the more modern Bermudan which was just becoming popular. In 1988, Morley, then aged 90, told me 'Hillyard objected to it because the slides which carried the luff of the mainsail up the mast on a metal track frequently jammed. This problem was overcome by attaching the sail instead to hoops, which slid freely up and down the mast. This became important years later, because in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* John was able to climb the mast using the hoops like a ladder to get his first sight of the Dutch coast.

Using hoops round the mast was not the perfect solution, because they could not be pulled up higher than the spreaders. To minimise the problem, the spreaders were fixed higher up the mast than was normal. Above that, the luff of the mainsail was always loose. However, there was one benefit. In a crowded harbour, one could always find *Nancy* by looking for a mast with high set spreaders. Tuely and Morley introduced another innovation that was to feature in the book. They had a portlight fitted in the aft end of the



saloon so the compass and its candlelight could be out of the wind and rain but visible to the helmsman. Susan took pride in keeping it well polished.



*Ransome many years later, with the porthole to his left.*

After the first year's sailing, Tuely and Morley converted to cutter rig, two foresails instead of one. To do this, they had to fit a longer bowsprit.

At the end of 1932, *Spindrift* was sold to Paget Bowyer, an engineering student, for £420. He bought her with the money given him for his 21st birthday. He gave her a new name, *Electron*. He considered this particularly appropriate because the atom had recently been split at Cambridge. Surprisingly, even though bigger foresails had been fitted, he told me they were 'miniature and absolutely absurd, suitable only for a dinghy'. So he fitted bigger sails. What's more, he did not share Tuely and Morley's dislike of having the main set on a track and slides, so the hoops had to go.

He made a further change, not strictly by choice. He had sailed into Yarmouth harbour on the Isle of Wight in a squall and hit the stern of the third Lord Melchett's boat. No damage to his lordship's boat, but *Electron's* bowsprit was broken. Bowyer had it replaced with an even longer one. In yet another change, he got rid of the candlelight compass arrangement and fitted an electric light.

Bowyer based *Electron* in Poole Harbour for four years, but bought a bigger yacht in 1935, and sold her to Ransome for £525. He said the negotiations had not been smooth and that Ransome grumpily walked away before returning the next day to complete the purchase. By this time Ransome was in the process of moving from Ludderburn in the Lake District to Broke Farm in Levington on the Orwell, because he wanted to get back to sea sailing. Ransome needed to sail Nancy from Poole to Pin Mill on the Orwell, and it turned out to be an epic voyage in a period of great gales.

Having brought *Nancy* safely home, one of the first things Ransome did was to change the boat's name to *Nancy Blackett*. He said, 'But for Nancy I should never have been able to buy a boat'. He also removed the mast track and returned to hoops. This was because the effort of hauling up the mainsail was less with hoops – important for him because he was no longer fit, weighing seventeen stones and suffering from piles and ulcers. Later, he ruptured himself while sailing *Nancy*.

In 1936 *Nancy* was well used: 25 journeys with Ransome 'taking endless pleasure from his new coast and enjoying the fellowship of fishermen, barge sailor-men and other professional sailors who, recognising that the sea makes no distinction between professional and amateur, treat us who merely play about in boats as members of their own brotherhood, on one sole condition: that we shall take our sailing seriously'. He had an enjoyable sail to Portsmouth and back, but his longest single passage was across the North Sea to Flushing to provide the raw material for *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* – in which, of course, *Nancy* plays the part of *Goblin*. Large parts of the book were written on board, because in the cottage next door to his house there was 'a child whose pleasure it was,' as he said, 'to lean out of a window and shout at nobody in particular for hours on end'.

*Nancy* was kept busy in 1937 with 37 trips. Notably, one was with two children, George and Josephine Russell, who lived in Broke Hall in Nacton, just across the valley from Ransome's house. He sailed them round to Walton Backwaters and camped on Horsea Island. This was in preparation for his next book, *Secret Water*. However, in September, under pressure from Evgenia, who had never been happy with Nancy's tiny galley, Ransome sold her. At least he could console himself that her buyer, Reginald Russell, was a fan. Russell called his house Blackett Cottage and kept *Nancy* in the Backwaters, which had become her home.

Russell was a worthy owner, having survived three-and-a-half years in the trenches in the Great War, winning the Military Cross. He spent every moment he could on the water and, like Ransome, encouraged youngsters to sail. We have no records of *Nancy's* journeys in 1938, but she was laid up at Walton during the War. Russell ran a prisoner-of-war camp nearby and had some of his German charges work on her. We know she was back in the water before the end of the War, because David Reid, who as a boy sailed with Russell, remembers being on board at Pin Mill on VE Day. They were moored close to a flotilla of landing craft and Russell spent most of the night in the dinghy pulling drunks out of the water. He sold *Nancy* in 1949 after frightening himself when he suffered a heart attack and fell overboard.

*Nancy's* new owners were Francis and Myfanwy Knight, who kept her for five years in the Backwaters and made numerous North Sea crossings. They painted her black, which *Nancy* probably did not like and perhaps explains why, in the great floods of 1953, when her berth was next to Walton Sailing Club clubhouse, she lifted the gutter off the roof with her bowsprit. In 1957 pressures of business forced the Knights to sell *Nancy*. She was bought by Commander Bernard MacIntyre RN, my secretary's father. His father had given him the money to buy the boat when he was down in the dumps after missing a promotion. His son, Mark, told me that he and his sister Deborah had been weaned on *Swallows and Amazons* and re-enacted the stories on *Nancy*.

Commander MacIntyre kept *Nancy* in the Backwaters. He painted her white and gave her tan sails, so she must have looked very much as she did when Ransome sailed her. Ironically, in 1960 when MacIntyre did get his promotion, he was posted to Bonn as a naval attaché and had to sell *Nancy*. She was bought by George Batters, who worked for the Forestry Commission, and it was he who took her into exile in Scarborough on the North East coast. He is the only former owner I was unable to trace, but we do know that during his ownership away went the hoops again. He eventually sold her to builder William Bentley, who kept her for 23 years.

Bentley was no Ransome fan and was very cross if anyone referred to *Nancy* as Ransome's boat. Perhaps that was why he painted her green. He had to replace the bowsprit, and claimed that he made the new one from a beam taken from the Brontës' Haworth church, where he had undertaken some restoration. For most of the time he owned her, Bentley kept *Nancy* in

immaculate condition but in later years she was sadly neglected. Even though he was not able to look after her, he was strangely reluctant to let her go. However, after hours of negotiation, I persuaded him to sell: I simply could not have allowed her to become a flower bed.

I had *Nancy* brought down on a lorry to Fox's yard at the head of the Orwell, and I found the boat was in an even worse condition than I had thought:

- 4 cracked frames
- 26 cracked ribs
- 1/8th hull planking gone
- 1/5th of deck gone
- Mast cracked
- Bowsprit cracked
- Tiller cracked
- Rot in deadwood
- Rudder beyond repair
- Forehatch gone
- Main hatch gone
- Cockpit floor gone
- No sails
- No rigging
- Loo destroyed
- Upholstery rotted
- Rubbing strakes and toe rails gone
- Transom gone
- Saloon doors broken
- No engine
- No propeller and no prop shaft
- Her interior required a complete rebuild

You will be familiar with the expression 'Everything but the kitchen sink'. In *Nancy's* case, even the galley sink was missing. Much of her inside furniture was literally a heap of junk unloaded off the back of the lorry, but there were some interesting items. One was a ten-man Icelandic trawler's inflatable life raft. It was many years out of date, and I had the problem of disposing of its potentially dangerous compressed-air cylinder. It had a toggle attached to its valve so I attached a long line to it, cowered behind a wall and tugged. The roar it produced could have been heard a mile away. There was also a full set of distress flares and rockets about 50 years out of date, for which I had to call out the Bomb Disposal Squad.



*Inside Nancy Blackett's Cabin.*

Now I needed to find someone to restore the wreck. I mentioned it to one of the postmen who in those days collected the mail from our house and, by a happy coincidence, he had a neighbour who he thought would be interested. That's how traditional shipwright Stan Ball, a Dunkirk veteran, came to work on *Nancy* for two years. When Stan emigrated to New Zealand to join his daughter, I found a replacement, again by coincidence. A storm had washed up a wooden boat on Nacton Shore, and my son had made her safe by tying her to a tree and reporting the fact to the harbourmaster at Pin Mill. Her grateful young owner came to thank us. He was training as a naval architect and had just finished restoring the rescued boat. 'How would you like to tackle another?' I asked. And that's how James Pratt came to finish *Nancy's* restoration.

I went to great lengths to restore *Nancy* to exactly how she had been when Ransome owned her. For instance, when I had the new sails made I insisted that they should be exactly the same size and shape as the originals, even though the sail-maker protested that the foresails would be hopelessly inefficient. Where fittings were still on the boat but in poor condition I restored them:



- I got the lovely old brass bilge pump in the cockpit working. I fixed all the paraffin cabin lights and the paraffin navigation lights.
- Greg Palmer restored the original loo, having learned from restoring the similar one on *Peter Duck*.
- I had the clock restored by the antique clock maker in Woodbridge and the barometer overhauled in Lowestoft.
- I spent an age searching for a paraffin-burning stove, and in the end found one on the Isle of Wight.
- I found an antique enamel washing up bowl and managed with great difficulty to cut a hole in it for the plug.
- I tried desperately hard to restore the original fuel tank, which had been fitted under one of the cockpit seats. When I could not, I had a square cut out of the top of the tank where the filler cap was fitted and fixed it poking through the cockpit seat so it looked as though the tank was still there. I did that because running out of fuel was such an important part of the *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* story.
- I found antique brass throttle and gear levers to fit to the new engine.
- The compass that was viewed through the portlight in the cabin bulkhead was missing, but I found an old one that had been on a Norwegian lifeboat.
- I had rope fenders made.
- My wife made the blue cushions for the bunks.
- I fitted an echo sounder and a VHF, but I fixed them so that they could be hidden when Nancy was on show.
- I found an old copy of Ransome's favourite sailing guide, *Knight on Sailing*, and placed it in the saloon.

I had hopelessly underestimated the time the restoration would take and had rashly offered to show *Nancy* as the star attraction at the 1989 East Coast Boat Show. As the date for the show approached, *Nancy* was nowhere near ready to go in the water. I was getting desperate. In the weeks before the event, I was paying seven people to work on her and money was cascading out of my bank account. Fortunately, though she could not be shown afloat, at least she looked quite good from the outside and we showed her ashore. So on the glorious dawn of Wednesday, 17 May 1989 we were ready.



*Nancy in her restored pomp, ready to inspire a new generation of Swallows.*

I had arranged for three of the surviving Swallows to join us to celebrate *Nancy's* resurrection. Titty declined, because she had fallen out with Ransome years before. I have since learned that trouble was caused because he had tried to adopt her. Roger, who had worked for Fisons Pharmaceuticals in Ipswich, had died early, partly as a result of having experimented on himself in the development of Intal, the asthma inhaler.



*Leaving Alma Cottage: Taqui Stephens (John Walker) on the left, Susan Villard (Susan Walker) centre, and Brigit Sanders (Bridget Walker) right.*

In fiction, in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* and *Secret Water*, the Swallows had stayed at Alma Cottage at Pin Mill, so I arranged with Ron and Hettie Watts, who owned the Cottage, for them to stay there in real life for the first time. Susan came from France for the event, Brigit Sanders from the Lake District and Taqui Stephens from London. Taqui was still a dare-devil in her old age. Later we left the Show by a rough track with a low wall at the side and, unlike any other lady in her 70s, Taqui insisted on walking on top of the wall, balancing with her arms out like a six-year-old. I had also arranged for Josephine Russell to come. Sadly, her brother, George, had been killed at Alamein and it seemed she never really recovered from that; she never married. As well as showing the boat mounted on a trailer, we pitched a marquee alongside to show exhibits from the restoration.



*The Swallows with Katy Jennings, who had travelled with her mother all the way from Scarborough to see Nancy.*

We had arranged for *Arwen*, a boat belonging to the Cirdan Trust (a charitable organisation which organises sailing for disadvantaged young people) to take us from Fox's yard at the head of the river down to Levington Marina. When we reached the boat, I offered to hand each of the





From Broke House we came to my home in the grounds of Broke Hall, Nacton. The weather was glorious and we had lunch outside – quite convivial, as the number of bottles and glasses testified. Journalists and photographers made free of the house. The *Daily Mail* photographer dragged our antique chaise longue through the house onto the back lawn to take a picture of Taqui reclining on it. Sadly, I don't have a print of that, but a photograph of the three Swallows leaning out of one of our windows did appear in the following day's paper

In the evening, I organised a celebration dinner for 33 guests at the Butt & Oyster, Ransome's favourite pub. We had a very traditional English menu (steak and kidney pie), with wine and champagne provided by Greene King. I had invited people connected with Ransome and with the restoration, including the Swallows and Josephine Russell. It had been an important day because, as Brigit later said, it led to the formation of The Arthur Ransome Society.

The following year, *Nancy* was again at the Ipswich show, but this time afloat and complete. John Gummer graced the event with his presence, and notoriously fed his children hamburgers just off the end of *Nancy's* bowsprit.

I used *Nancy* for just one season, 1990, and enjoyed some memorable sailing. She performed very well, even on one trip down the Wallet against a strong wind and against the tide. She confounded the sail-maker's prediction that the sails were not big enough, but I sold her in spring 1991. I had not bought her to sail ourselves. She was not a boat Ann (my wife) and I could handle on our own, and Ann was not happy with a boat that heeled; *Nancy* needs a minimum crew of two fit men. I was fortunate to find a buyer, Colin Winter, who was a Ransome fan with a wife and two children who all enjoyed the books. He kept *Nancy* in Southwold. When he put her up for sale, The *Nancy Blackett* Trust, led by Peter Willis, was formed specifically to buy her. What I had done was to create essentially a museum piece. What I had not done was equip *Nancy* for sailing in the 21st century. That is something Peter and The *Nancy Blackett* Trust have rightly done. Rightly, because *Nancy*, like any old wooden boat, is a living thing. She had to be used or die, and much of Ransome's legacy would have died with her. Ransome was not shy of innovations and would have leapt at the idea of electronic navigation aids. He would have been delighted by the improved performance of the bigger head sails bought by the Trust. He would have welcomed the restoration of the

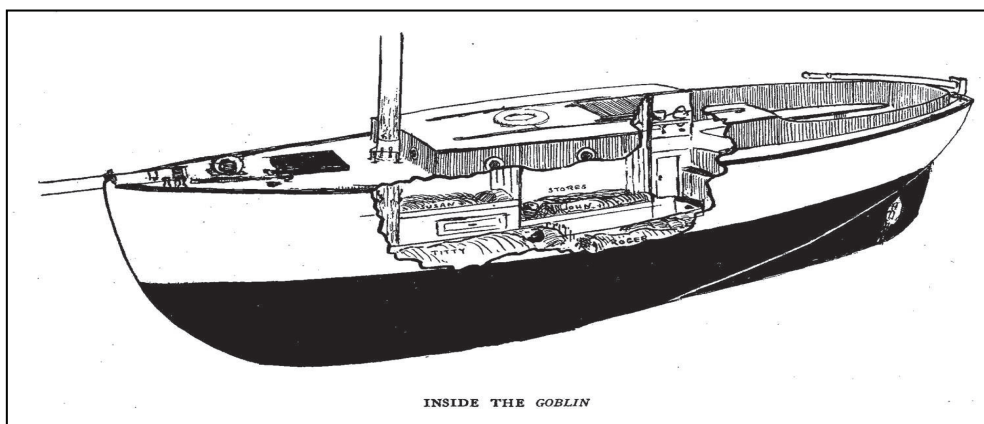


masthead back stays – something I had missed. He would have applauded the fitting of oak splines in the boat's seams instead of caulking. But he would have found it hard to believe that, more than 80 years after she was built, she would be in better shape than the day she was launched.

*Nancy* being so well kept and so well equipped is very important. It has made all sorts of things possible: her appearance in the list of top ten classic boats; appearances on BBC's *Countryfile*; starring in films (*Ginger and Rosa*); some memorable voyages – notably the commemorative re-enactment of the North Sea crossing in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*; hugely successful appearances at classic boat shows and The Fleet Review in 2005; Ransome events which have helped to sustain the interest in the Ransome heritage; the introduction to sailing and to the *Swallows and Amazons* stories for parties of school children; and let's not forget the pleasure of sailing on the boat of their dreams that so many Ransome fans have been able to experience.

In the course of the project I had a lot of generous help. I've met many very fine people and made some fine friends, not least the three Swallows, Christina Hardymont, Peter Willis and the sadly missed Hugh Brogan and Roger Wardale.

I still don't know why I took on the restoration of *Nancy Blackett*, but it has been very rewarding. I'll never forget the number of people who have come on board with tears in their eyes and said Ransome's books had been a major influence on their lives. Many have been inspired to sail, and even today you could use *Secret Water* to navigate your way into Walton Backwaters.



# RANSOME AND LANGUAGES

John Pearson

Arthur Ransome sought to make his position on foreign languages clear. In his autobiography, recalling the time when, in the summer of 1913, he began ‘wolfing the elements of Russian’, he writes ‘Of this I must say something, lest people should think I am making any claim to be a linguist. I have always been very bad at languages.’ Earlier, describing his contacts with France and the French language, he had written ‘I am no sort of polyglot.’ It may be of interest to examine how much truth there might be in these downright assertions of Ransome.

An initial caveat should be entered, as people’s linguistic abilities are a subject about which a great deal of nonsense is spoken. How often does one hear remarks such as ‘She was of course very good at Swahili’? These assertions usually mean next to nothing. For a start, almost no-one saying such a thing is personally in a position to judge its truth. And one could add that such claims hardly ever make the necessary distinctions between ability to speak the language concerned, to understand the spoken language, to read the language and to write it. A given person’s abilities often vary greatly from one of these aspects to another, and also of course from one period of their life to another.

Happily, in the case of Ransome, there is a good deal of evidence about his linguistic abilities, interests and achievements, and especially about his Russian and French. We should begin with these, but a surprising number of other languages will be worth a word too.

The question of Ransome and **Russian** is of special interest and we know quite a lot about it, for example from the autobiography, the Brogan biography and Ted Alexander’s *Ransome in Russia*. Moreover, the period in which he lived in Russia and used his Russian is of course of special historical interest.

Ransome first set foot in Russia in June 1913, at the age of 29. He wanted to learn some Russian quickly with a view to reading Russian folk-tales in the original, so two of the most important conditions for success in learning a

language were united from the start: to be in a country where it is the national language and to have a serious need to learn it. We should discount Ransome's remark in the autobiography that, for anyone wishing only to read Russian folk-tales, 'Russian is one of the easiest of languages'. It is not clear why he said this; in the first place, the relative difficulty of a foreign language depends on what your mother tongue is; but if it is English, then several languages must quite clearly be easier than Russian: the west and north Germanic languages such as Dutch and Swedish, fairly close relatives of English; and even French, where we have the Battle of Hastings to thank for the very extensive similarities of vocabulary. In Russian, by contrast, Ransome was learning a language generally considered difficult for Anglophones.

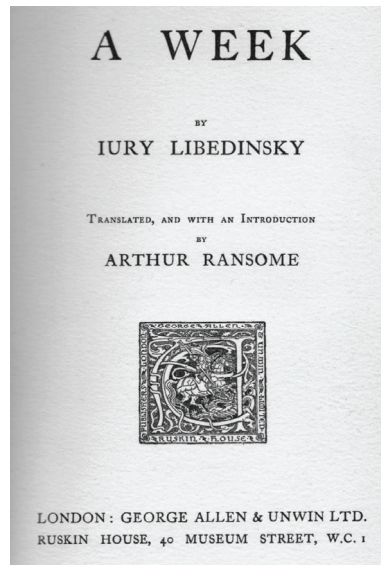
It seems clear that Ransome's progress with Russian was notably rapid. He writes '... bad linguist as I am, I was able at the end of a very few weeks to begin filling notebooks with rough translations of stories from the Russian.' More impressively, he records being able to 'chatter in and understand Russian' by mid-1914, so after only six months of actually living in the country. On his first visit to Vergezha, after about nine months in Russia, he was writing that he 'talked with peasants even more delightful and witty than north of Englanders'. This is good going. He mentions in autumn 1914 'my good working knowledge of Russian'. By early 1915 he could enjoy at the theatre plays by Chekhov and Turgenev.

By September 1915, after about sixteen months actually in the country, he was working for the *Daily News*, with a clear professional requirement to read serious grown-up Russian fairly easily, to understand spoken Russian and to speak it reasonably fluently. It is well known that in due course he had many conversations with the leaders of the Russian revolution, including Lenin, Trotsky, Bukharin, Zinoviev and Chicherin. One can suppose that on these occasions the interviewees and not Ransome did most of the talking, and some of them may have repeated themselves a lot and sometimes spoken English or possibly French; but I have seen no suggestion that his capacity to speak Russian and understand the spoken language at that level was considered inadequate by his interlocutors. One should note, however, that nothing in his correspondent's job would have required him to *write* serious Russian competently. And as late as 1917 he still refers to 'my simple Russian'. Moreover, Ted Alexander records that at least when Ransome

interviewed Lenin, the main language used was English (and Ransome's questions were usually made available to Lenin in advance). However, many of his other conversations and interviews are certainly likely to have been in Russian, as his interlocutors would often not have been able to operate effectively in any other language or to provide an interpreter. Ransome attended, moreover, many political assemblies and conferences, at which there was probably often no interpretation.

The interviews recorded in the *Encountering the Ransomes* DVDs contain tantalisingly little information about Ransome's Russian. This is not surprising, since one would ideally have needed an interview with a person knowing Russian who knew Ransome in Russia and heard him in linguistic action. We are at least a generation too late for that. The only echo we have comes, inevitably second-hand, from interviewee William Peters, the son of the economist of the same name, who knew and worked with Ransome in Russia. Peters junior reports that his father considered that Ransome had 'very useful Russian ... a good command of colloquial Russian', but not as good as Peters himself, and certainly not as good as New Zealander Harold Williams – but the latter was a particularly remarkable linguist. Ransome himself records in the autobiography that, after Williams, 'Peters spoke better Russian than any of us'. But these comparisons are not of much help in situating Ransome at a specific place on a meaningful scale of competence in Russian.

Ransome later wrote translations into English of works in Russian, and not just informal translations of folk-tales such as he had prepared for his own use in writing 'Old Peter's Russian Tales'. In 1923, interested in the effects of the Revolution on Russian writing, he undertook what Brogan calls a 'hasty' translation of *A Week*, a short novel by Iury Libedinsky. A collection of Ransome's translations of Caucasian fairy stories was never



published, but later in life he translated parts of a Russian book on fishing and turned down a handsome fee of £1,000 (around £60,000 today) for translating Sholokhov's long novel *And Quiet Flows the Don*. I do not know how good his translations were; it would be interesting to obtain an informed view on this.

It seems fair to conclude that Ransome quickly learnt a lot of Russian, very soon more than adequate for his original objective of translating folk-tales, and later, again relatively quickly, enough for him to operate successfully as a respected foreign correspondent enjoying repeated close contact with Russians at all levels, including the most senior. He was also able to translate full-length works in Russian. We might already conclude that Ransome had a certain gift for languages, even if modestly (or perhaps false-modestly) denied or unacknowledged. This tendency to understate his abilities in Russian was persistent: in reporting talking with a policeman met on Moon Island during the *Racundra* voyage in 1923, he said: "Then I tried Russian and found he could talk Russian just about as badly as I talk it myself."

It may be of interest to note here how Evgenia and Ransome handled language in their own relationship. When they first met he already knew a lot of Russian, while she is said to have understood little English and spoken less. But she seems to have acquired English quickly, and later on came to write it almost perfectly – while retaining a strong Russian accent in speaking. So having started off speaking Russian together they must have shifted to English at a date and in circumstances which it would be interesting to investigate – very possibly before moving to Britain as a married couple in 1924. Ransome says in the autobiography that in due course he lost almost all his Russian except for the ability to read it. Evgenia, too, on two trips back to the Soviet Union after Ransome's death, found that she had forgotten almost all her mother tongue.

What we know of Ransome's **French** tends again to confirm his capacity to learn a language quickly and to a usefully high level. In his early adult years, searching for success as a writer and with a consuming interest in western literature, Ransome frequently went to France, mainly to Paris, which he loved, and was in contact there with French literary figures, including Anatole France, Paul Fort and Remy de Gourmont. According to the autobiography, in spite of having had a French nurse, 'the redoubtable Victorine', he remembered little French from school or his father's earlier



efforts to teach him some. However, as with Russian, he seems to have learned quite a lot in the end. It is not clear how well he spoke it, but he must have been good enough to escape being thought to be wasting the time of France and the others when conversing with them, probably in French, about literature. Moreover, when later in life Ransome spent some time in Egypt and the Sudan reporting on politics for the *Manchester Guardian*, as told in Nancy Endersby-Harshman's *From our Special Correspondent ...*, some of his interviews were conducted in French – though it is not known whether an interpreter was sometimes present.

Again, as with Russian, Ransome produced translations of French literary works. One of these was Gourmont's *Une Nuit au Luxembourg* (1906), *A Night in the Luxembourg* (1912), the left-bank Parisian park. Ransome's translation of the strange events of that night is careful, faithful and complete but for one or two omitted sentences – one at least of these perhaps left out as being mildly erotic – a far more faithful translation, as we shall see, than many of the translations from English of the *Swallows and Amazons* books. My only criticism of it is, indeed, that it tends to be too faithful to the original in a way which might have displeased Winston Churchill: where, as so often, the same word exists in both languages, Ransome tends to use the same word in English, when a different more 'Anglo-Saxon' word or expression would for my taste have been better. The result is that Ransome's translation often feels, for me, more staid and formal than the original.

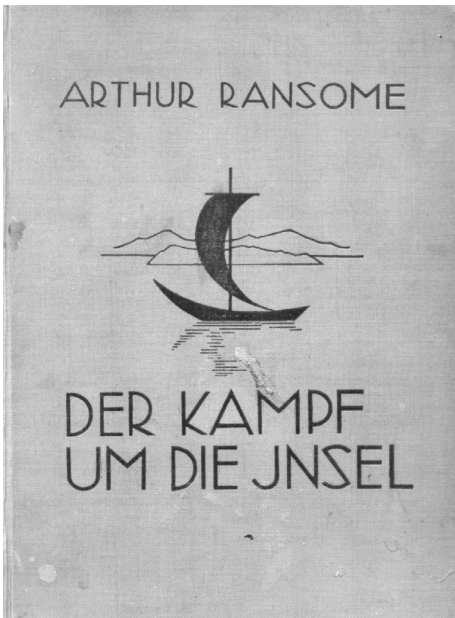
Curiously, in pursuing, much later (1947), the idea – which did not come to fruition – of translating a French edition of West African folk-tales, Ransome adopted precisely the opposite approach, writing that he was 'ruthlessly turning [the work] out of polysyllabic French into the simplest English I can muster'.

Later in life Ransome lost, as with Russian, most of his ability to speak French, but he claimed to be able still to read both languages 'with the utmost ease and pleasure'.

Ransome was therefore a competent translator from French and probably from Russian. The *Swallows and Amazons* books were themselves translated into eighteen other languages, as described in Robert Thompson's *Ransome's Foreign Legion* (Amazon Publications, 2009). Ransome, having a double interest in the matter as author and translator, commented on several of

these translations, often objecting with reason to the frequent deletions from and additions to his texts, misunderstandings of sailing terms, etc.

These comments tell us something about Ransome's knowledge of some of the languages of these translations. As early as 1934, for example, we find him comparing a recent translation of *Swallows and Amazons* into **Czech** with a slightly earlier **German** version: 'The [Czech] translation is a great deal more careful than the German one, and though the translator has followed the German in changing the title to *The Struggle on the Island*, he has put ten times the brains into the actual job, most ingeniously evading the difficulty of the literary allusions (Darien for example) without doing any damage to the story. I was very pleased with what I could make out of it.' (Ransome's 'on the Island' should have been 'for the Island'.)



*German (1933)*



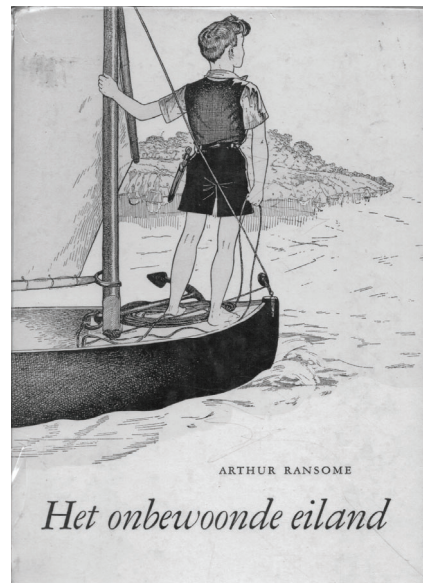
*Czech (1934)*

One wonders what Ransome could in fact make out of this Czech translation. Significant omissions and additions, for their part, can often be seen on the page whether one can read the language or not. But registering more subtle changes or, conversely, the degree of faithfulness to the original, requires real understanding of that language. Could Ransome's knowledge of Russian have helped him with the Czech? And what about his knowledge of

**German?** When refusing, a few years earlier, the job of *Manchester Guardian* correspondent in Berlin, he had claimed, as mentioned in the autobiography, that he knew no German. But his reactions to the German translation suggest that he could read some German: ‘The translation is extremely bad. The translator has not been content to leave out parts of my manuscript. He has inserted original remarks of his own, toned up my writing where for very good reasons I have been soft-peddalling, and gone so far as to put into the mouth of Captain Flint a sentimental comment on the children of the very kind I most detest.’

Ransome was unhappy too about some of the **Swedish** translations (‘silly to omit much of that detail which is precisely what the right-minded infant values’). But it can hardly be judged from this whether he really knew much Swedish, though he might well have picked some up during several periods spent in Stockholm. Referring to communication difficulties experienced on Dagö during the *Racundra* cruise, he remarks that ‘All three of us [Arthur, Genia and the Ancient] knew a few words of Esthonian and made what play we could with them, but when it came to serious business had to use Russian, German or Swedish.’ And later, with the men of Rūno, ‘As we walked we talked, a sort of Volapuk or Esperanto, composed of German, Swedish and Russian words stirred well together ...’

Margaret Ratcliffe’s two recent books on Arthur Ransome’s *Twilight Years* indicate here and there that even late in life he maintained an interest in the translations of the *Swallows and Amazons* series. His diary for January 1956 (when he was 71) records a comment on a **Dutch** translation of *Swallows and Amazons*: ‘They have changed the title but the illustrations are good’; and he adds a list of the languages into which the series had by then been translated: ‘11, I think’. Over three years later he writes that a



*Dutch (1955)*

new Czech translation of the same book is ‘better than the earlier ones’.

Ransome also had varying degrees of contact with and knowledge of a respectable range of other languages.

I am tempted to begin with **Latin**, because I have a clear impression that he was fond of the language. But again he tends to discount his knowledge: he reports in the autobiography that, because of his father’s idea of raising his children trilingually, he was ‘learning Latin from my father almost as soon as I could speak (I forgot what I had learnt almost at once and it was never any use to me at school)’. He does seem to have enjoyed Latin at his first school, in Leeds, but maintains that at his next school in Windermere all he got from it was a reading of Virgil’s *Aeneid* book 2, ‘passages of which I still remember’. Later, at Rugby, when an irritated master told him to come round later to his house ‘when I will give you something to remember’, AR quoted with apposite wit from the same book ‘Timeo, Danaos et dona ferentes’ (‘I fear the Greeks, even when bringing gifts’) and the master let him off. More sadly, when earlier he was examined for a scholarship to Shrewsbury School, he got the superlative of ‘parvus’ wrong (though he really knew it of course) and was told brutally and on the spot by the headmaster, ‘No scholarship for you here’. At Rugby, however – perhaps a sign of things to come – he recalls that he did reasonably well whenever his task was not to turn English into Latin but Latin into English. But he also notes that he had a copy of the *Essays of Elia* bound into a cover of Caesar’s *Gallic Wars* – something to read during the ‘interminable lessons’.

A mixed record therefore, but one feels that Ransome did at least greatly enjoy writing the many pages of *Missee Lee* devoted to the attempts of the Swallows, Amazons and Captain Flint to improve their Latin under the tutelage of their captor – using, among other texts, *Aeneid* book 2. In preparing for this he seems too to have enjoyed writing to his friends for material such as the gender rhymes. The result is amusing and contains quite a lot of accurate Latin.

Just before the end of *Missee Lee*, when the heroine is changing her mind about returning to Cambridge, she refers movingly to her old counsellor as ‘Vir pietate gravis’, meaning something like ‘a man honoured for his noble goodness and wisdom’. This quality of ‘pietas’ was something like an ideal for Virgil, who applies it to Aeneas himself right at the start of the epic (‘insignem pietate virum’, *Aeneid* 1.10). I think Ransome must have been

aware of this Virgilian echo. Of **classical Greek** at school we hear only that ‘My Greek grammar was hopeless but I was taking great delight in the limpid Greek of the New Testament.’

Russian and French were not the only two languages which Ransome determined to learn rapidly with a view to reading them at least. On a brief trip to Bucharest in 1916, just after Rumania had entered the war on the Allied side, he ‘bought a Roumanian Grammar and Dictionary and set about learning to read Roumanian as quickly as I could’. He got to the point where he could read newspapers and found **Rumanian** ‘not too difficult’.

Arthur and Evgenia spent, on and off, quite a lot of time in Estonia, both when it was still part of the Russian Empire and after it had gained independence. He reports, as mentioned above, ‘learning a little **Esthonian**’. This came in useful much later, as reported on the *Encountering* DVDs by James Shaw Grant, editor of the *Stornoway Gazette* at the time Ransome visited Lewis to fish and prepare *Great Northern?* In around 1946, with Estonia again under Russian control, Ransome heard in Stornoway that an Estonian fishing boat bearing Estonian refugees had arrived in the harbour. He hurried there, found the boat and greeted its occupants in Estonian. They were delighted; one of them flung her arms around his neck. But then Ransome ran out of Estonian and switched to Russian. The Estonians then assumed him to be a Soviet official and tried to flee. (In the end, however, the boat and its occupants safely crossed the Atlantic and found refuge in Canada.)

Ransome seems on the other hand not to have learnt much **Latvian** – though no doubt a lot easier than Estonian – in spite of the time spent in Latvia. However, as TARS member Andrew Thackrey has pointed out, Riga had then long been and still was a largely German-speaking city.

A word about the Celtic languages. **Welsh** scrapes in here because of Ransome’s boat *Coch-y-Bonddbu*. Its name is that of a fishing fly, and it means ‘red with a black base or bottom’ (cf. the Snowdon ridge Crib Goch – red ridge). Perhaps Ransome never knew that.

Scottish **Gaelic** makes, I think, no appearance in *Great Northern?* except as an incomprehensible local language. But I see that in preparatory reading for the book Ransome discovered that ‘Great Northern diver’ is in Gaelic ‘Muir Bhuachail’ – sea shepherd or herdsman, an attractive name.

To complete the list, we should note Ransome’s remark as a young man



that ‘I had already been recording what I could of gypsy language from Leland and Borrow’s *Romano Lavo-Lil*, and had made friends with several groups of travelling showmen and tinkers, some of whom ... were still talking **Romany**.’ Indeed, Nancy Endersby-Harshman claims in ‘Arthur Ransome in Paris’ (*Mixed Moss*, 2015) that Ransome ‘taught himself the Romany language’.

A final point: beyond standard English, Ransome shows in the *Swallows and Amazons* books familiarity with various **regional varieties of English** and in particular Lakes English, broad Norfolk and of course ‘Ginty language’. Brogan says that ‘his ear for regional speech was excellent’ and I think this is borne out by the way Ransome spells it in the books.

In conclusion, we can admit that Ransome was not a linguist, at least not in the sense of a philologist interested in languages for their own sake, their origins, development, structure, characteristics, interrelationships .... However, languages did play a significant part in his life and he cannot be held to have been at all anti-languages. He clearly had a certain talent for learning languages; three times he energetically set about rapidly learning the French, Russian and Rumanian he needed for professional purposes. He was able to translate full-length books from French and Russian into English and continued to be able to read both languages with pleasure even when he no longer needed them professionally. We have seen also that he had contact with and interest in a surprising number of other languages.

The main uncertainty concerns how good he was, at his best, at speaking Russian on serious subjects to serious people and understanding the spoken Russian they addressed to him. Clearly he had enough Russian to converse in everyday situations; it has also tended to be assumed that he could converse fluently in Russian with senior political figures about serious subjects and fully understand their remarks. It remains unclear, however, just how good he was at this, as we know, I think, too little about the material conditions of these interviews: possible use of interpreters, use of questions sent in advance, use of English or French by the interviewee .... It now seems too late for us to learn more about this. If pressed, I would judge his Russian as having been well above A-level standard, but perhaps not as good as that of a good graduate in Russian. The distance between these two levels is admittedly a wide one, but it is very hard to be more precise. If only we had just a few minutes’ recording of some of those conversations .....

# THE BEST OF RANSOME'S VERSE

Kirsty Nichol Findlay

We know that Ransome's first publicly published writing, while he was still at Rugby School, was verses on the death of Queen Victoria. We know that as a young man he scribbled verse in his notebooks. We know that his first meeting with W.G. Collingwood as a young man was when Collingwood saw 'what he thought was a corpse washed up on that flat rock' in the Copper Mines Beck at Coniston. 'He asked me what I was doing and I told him I had been trying to write poetry. Instead of laughing, he seemed to think it a reasonable occupation,' and so, in 1903, a course of life-long friendship with that family was formed.<sup>1</sup>

But despite Ransome scarcely ever throwing away a notebook (let alone draft material) of his own volition, not much of this scribbled verse remains; there are occasional examples of his facility as a versifier in letters to friends, but nothing to alert us to a scrap of talent or how he might express in verse his passion for the natural world. One notebook, undated, bought in Paris at the Galeries de l'Odeon just before the First World War, bearing addresses in Hatch and St Petersburg, and with notes about fairy stories completed (one dated December 1915 is 'The Shepherd's Pipe'), contains this poem:<sup>2</sup>

## A Swallow Brooch

An amber velvet sky;  
A score of swallows flying;  
Ten francs with which to buy;  
A little woman sighing  
For something new and strange.  
Ten francs with which to buy:  
So little would derange  
That flight of swallows there.  
'Tis done, and now I swear  
That under brighter dawn  
In sky of whiter lawn  
No swallow ever flew, and flying  
Flutters the wings on such a happy sighing.

This clearly dates from a period after Ransome had left his wife Ivy; it is a love-lyric, and nearly a villanelle; the setting is a market in a town in France – it could be Montmartre, in Paris; the fact its form is not quite secure adds to the frisson of strong personal emotion. It derives from personal observation – a moment observed and recalled; a brooch is seen for sale, pinned on a piece of velvet on a stall; ten francs will buy it; it is bought, and pinned on the white blouse of the lady, who had loved it on sight, and on whom it gains new life. But who are the actors? Is the whole scene observed by an onlooker? Or is the person whose voice brings us the scene, and who re-lives it now, also a major actor in it? Or is it a scene slightly derived from literature – perhaps influenced by the de Maupassant he had been working on?<sup>3</sup>

Who pays for the brooch? Are the ten francs the lady's or the man's? Is it the man who pays – and are the ten francs his last? Like the best Bohemians, do they then go without supper?

Given the emotional content, the latter seems more likely. A man surrenders his ten francs. Then: who is the man who gives it as a gift to the lady whose blouse is of white lawn? Is it the speaker himself, or is he observing a touching scene with unknown participants?

The mysteries in this little poem add to its strength – and to its sense of reality. Using a Wordsworthian technique of 'recollection in tranquillity' it seems truly 'in the moment', and its unpolished directness has a real power. It's the best surviving example of what Ransome could do in verse.

It is poignant that as early as this his subject is swallows, and has a lovely woman who will wear them at her heart – they move and seem to fly as she breathes. We can re-read Chapter XII of the *Autobiography* about Ransome's happy days in Paris and we may think of Miss Gavin, with whom he explored the markets and ateliers of Montmartre, and who was one of the three ladies, together with Barbara Collingwood and Margaret Lodge, who formed his 'beautiful heroine' in *The Elixir of Life* (1915).<sup>4</sup>

Touchingly, and perhaps by chance, the poem is followed by a sketch of The Old Man of Coniston from High Cross.

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<sup>1</sup> See the *Autobiography*, pp. 80-81.

<sup>2</sup> Brotherton Library, Leeds, undated.

<sup>3</sup> e.g. 'La Parure', 1884, about love and the sacrifices made to repay a diamond necklace that after all wasn't diamond.

<sup>4</sup> Letter to Geoffrey Ransome, March 3, 2015.

# HUGH BROGAN

in conversation at the Pin Mill Jamboree, May 2017

*Hugh Brogan, who died in July 2019 at the age of 83, was a distinguished historian and author of The Life of Arthur Ransome (1984). The biography did much to return Ransome to public consciousness and was a major factor in the founding of TARS. In 2017, Brogan was 'in conversation' at the Pin Mill Jamboree; and here, as a tribute to a great supporter of TARS, is an edited transcript of what he said was 'probably going to be my last public performance'.*

*You were writing about American History and you chose to write a biography of Arthur Ransome. Can you tell us why you did that?*

Yes, I think it was destiny. An author operates partly from unconscious motivation – I was fortunate to be born with skills which could enable me to have an authorial career. I was helped by the fact that both my parents were authors, but I think I was unconsciously from a very early age looking for 'the work'. And I 'met' Arthur Ransome when I was at the age of nine, in the sense that I was given a copy of *Swallows and Amazons* and it had the inevitable effect. But one effect it had on me which I wasn't aware of, and nobody else was aware of it, was that I saw there was something to be said and over the next thirty years or so I was beginning to accumulate ideas and information about Arthur Ransome. Not unconsciously of course but I didn't realise what I was doing

Then in 1973 or 4, the first film of *Swallows and Amazons* came out. It was reviewed in *The Sunday Times* by someone whose name I forget. It wasn't a 'fannish' review and it said what a 'frightful old Tory' Arthur Ransome had been. Well, this was too much for me and I wrote a very angry letter to Jonathan Cape, the publisher, saying it was clear what was needed was a biography of Arthur Ransome, and if they liked I would write it. At the time I had published one very small book, so I was not a hot commodity. But Jonathan Cape agreed I should write the book. Evgenia agreed I should write the book, and said we should meet. But fortunately she died, because I can't be sure I would have been up to her standards.

We're concerned with ARs motivations but perhaps mine would throw a light on his. In a sense, a great many books are in essence autobiographical and this supposedly applies to Arthur Ransome.

In 1973 or 4 Arthur Ransome was still immensely popular, but he wasn't news and after his death in 1967 they had published his autobiography, rigorously edited by Rupert Hart-Davis, and the film came out, so his name was still alive but the possibilities of Arthur Ransome weren't realised. One of the indirect results of my biography was the foundation of The Arthur Ransome Society, which Christina Hardyment was as responsible as anybody for. I was the voice of the time saying we want to know more about Arthur Ransome and I have been studying Arthur Ransome ever since.

There was a huge amount of latent goodwill and interest in AR. You only had to ask – I asked everyone who was suggested to me and they all responded. I can't think of a single disagreeable response and of course that tells us something about Arthur Ransome. Everybody liked him.

As for the process of writing the book, I took to going to the University of Leeds where all the papers are kept, and to Abbot Hall in Kendal. I took to tramping the Lake District – I was a real martyr to the cause. I came back from one expedition with a sore ankle. I put this down to having climbed a mountain in the quest for Arthur Ransome, but it wasn't. It was gout ....

I knew very little about Arthur Ransome when I started. I knew he had married Trotsky's secretary, which I may say wasn't common knowledge at the time. And I knew he'd been *The Guardian's* correspondent on the Russian Revolution. Oh yes and I knew he'd got into trouble about Douglas and Oscar Wilde .... And then this remarkable man began to emerge. You started to see what was important in his life ... and my business was to write it down. I reread my book a couple of days ago and I was glad to see that most of it was direct quotations from Arthur Ransome himself, or his wife or his relations, and that's what I hope I'd achieved. He came to life and spoke.

***What more do you wish you had put into your book or changed?***

There are some things – corrections were made in one of the later editions, unfortunately I can't remember which ones. But I think they're mostly rather small. There were two *Lottie Blossoms*, which I didn't discover. A sprinkling of small things like that. If I were asked to revise the book thoroughly – I'm too old and fatigued – I dare say I would discover more things that need doing,



and other people have made discoveries since. But the only big controversy about Arthur Ransome at the moment is his role in the Russian Revolution, and the dispute is public. There's been good work and bad work done on it. I stand on the whole by what I said, what I meant anyway, that Ransome was an honourable and talented Englishman who found himself caught in this extraordinary drama and did his very best to come through it intact ....

Ransome recognised at an early stage that the Bolsheviks were going to win, and he had a great respect for them, more probably than they deserved. And he wanted Britain to accept the Bolshevik victory and work on from there, which of course is what Britain was eventually forced to do during the Second World War. But I can't say Ransome was right or wrong because that would mean I knew the truth about the Russian Revolution. I don't know the truth. It remains one of the great issues people have to decide for themselves according to their knowledge and insight. I think if the Revolution could have been strangled at birth it would have been a jolly good idea, but it couldn't be strangled and you're left with the old, old problem of what on earth to do about Lenin, Stalin, Gorbachov, Putin. It goes on and on.

***What about Ransome's time around Pin Mill? He moved a lot in his life. Do you think he had much affection for this area?***

Oh yes. ... what a fidget he was – he never kept a boat ... or a house for more than three years. He whizzed around the country, and some of it he could blame on Evgenia, and did. She insisted on leaving Pin Mill in 1940 because there was such a noise of battle overhead .... So they went back to the Lake District which she hated because it was so damp, but at least it was quiet ....

Arthur Ransome ... couldn't settle. Which I must say I find very strange. I moved to Wivenhoe in 1977 and I've been there ever since – I'll probably be buried there too. He wasn't that sort of man. He was always looking. There was a trait in his character which needs examination and explanation. I didn't do it in my book because I never thought of it, but it's staring you in the face. His character ... is fascinating in itself ... and we need to ask about this fidgety trait and what sort of effect it had on his career and his work.

***And the Pin Mill area?***

He loved places, he was very good on places, he was very conscious that his family originated in Ipswich. Years ago I was reading *Swallows and Amazons*

and wondering why Captain Flint was named Jim Turner, and I think you'll find that Turner was one of the names of the Ransomes and Rapier firm – I've forgotten the detail, but I discovered he gave Jim Turner the name Turner because of the Ipswich connection. It was a way of claiming Captain Flint for himself.

Anyway Ransomes and Rapier was the great engineering and machinery firm in Ipswich and Arthur was directly descended from them. His branch of the family left Ipswich in his grandfather's time, so he says in the *Autobiography* that when destiny brought him back to the East Coast he felt he was coming home. And I think it's also fair to say that, if it hadn't been for the Second World War, he'd have lived in Pin Mill a lot longer than he did. He'd probably have changed houses again but I think he might have stuck here. He liked the East Coast and he liked it for all the right reasons – I like the East Coast myself. Ransome was a son or a grandson of Suffolk ...

Anyway, Ransome settled at Pin Mill and looked around and really he'd hardly got his feet wet when he had the idea for *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*. He went cruising up and down the Orwell and out to sea and discovered Hamford Water. There's a cryptic phrase in the *Autobiography* that he'd discovered a Mastodon in Hamford Water. Well we all know who the Mastodon was but he doesn't make it very clear. Anyway he's telling us he'd had another idea .... Someone said earlier he was afraid when he left the Lake District his inspiration would dry up, but the inspiration wasn't in the Lake District, it was in him and so he came to this part of the world and ... discovered there were just as many stories – his stories – here as there were in Lancashire, and he set about the work .... I'm sure if Ransome had been able to stay in Pin Mill we'd have had more East Coast or Broads stories ....

Why did Ransome come to Pin Mill? According to him, Evgenia went closely over the map and selected Pin Mill as the best anchorage and she was quite right – Pin Mill was THE right place; but the Broads were not very far away and he continued to make expeditions to the Broads while he was living here. But then [because of the bombing] he went back to the Lake District and we got *The Picts and the Martyrs* out of that ....

### ***Did Ransome have a favourite house?***

Here's an example of their being the enemy of their own happiness. Their favourite was undoubtedly Ludderburn. They left Ludderburn, and one of

the reasons they gave for leaving was that it didn't have modern plumbing. Well, if you're a highly successful author in 1934 you can jolly well have modern plumbing installed. But why go to the immense trouble and expense ... of moving all the way from Lancashire to Suffolk, when for rather less trouble and certainly less expense they could have modernised Ludderburn? If there is an answer, I don't know it, except Arthur's fidgety character. With one breath he's worrying that if he leaves the Lake District he'll lose his inspiration, and with the next he feels that the Lake District's rather played out. He raved about Ludderburn and Evgenia liked it too. Low Ludderburn is a very charming house up on a mountain with a view. Anybody would be happy there, and they were happy. But instead they decided to move to Pin Mill. And at Pin Mill there were endless complaints. At Levingon next door was a small child who howled all day, and at Harksted Hall the rooms were too small for Genia, which is rather like the galley in *Nancy Blackett*. And then they moved to London – well, people played radios in London. Life was quite unliveable .... There's a wonderful story about a flat in Weymouth Street they wanted to move to. Arthur had to be interviewed by the landlord's committee. He came in and sat down and said I've got all the papers here, and if you want to know who I am .... 'We know who you are. My son is always pestering me for the next Arthur Ransome book.'

***When the Swallows and Amazons books first came out, they came out in the run-up to Christmas. Do you think Ransome felt pressure to get something for the printers on time?***

Ransome was a man who always felt under pressure – he was a great worrier; very exuberant, but a great worrier. And he'd been a journalist so he accepted deadlines. He never let that consideration weigh with him. He wrote the books and worked on them until they were ready. I think he only missed Christmas in 1935. There's never any feeling of rush in the structure of the books; they grow naturally and end where they should.

***Why is Ransome so popular?***

Because he's very good! ... Ransome conceived a very thoroughly worked out theory of what fiction is and believed very strongly you've got to have a conflict of ideas. The books are very high-brow achievements. They may not look it, but they are.

# ‘CRAMMED WITH PROMISE’

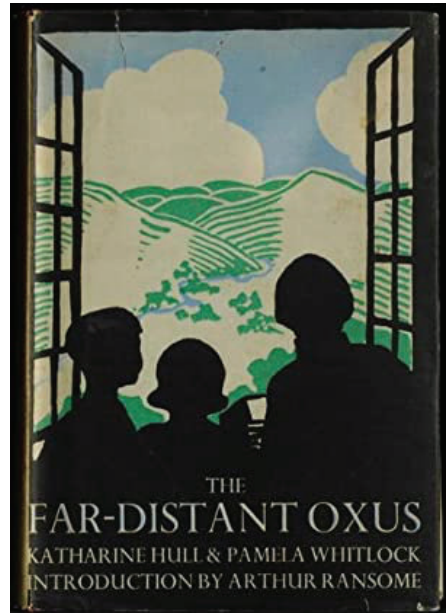
## The correspondence of Arthur Ransome and Pamela Whitlock

Hazel Sheeky Bird

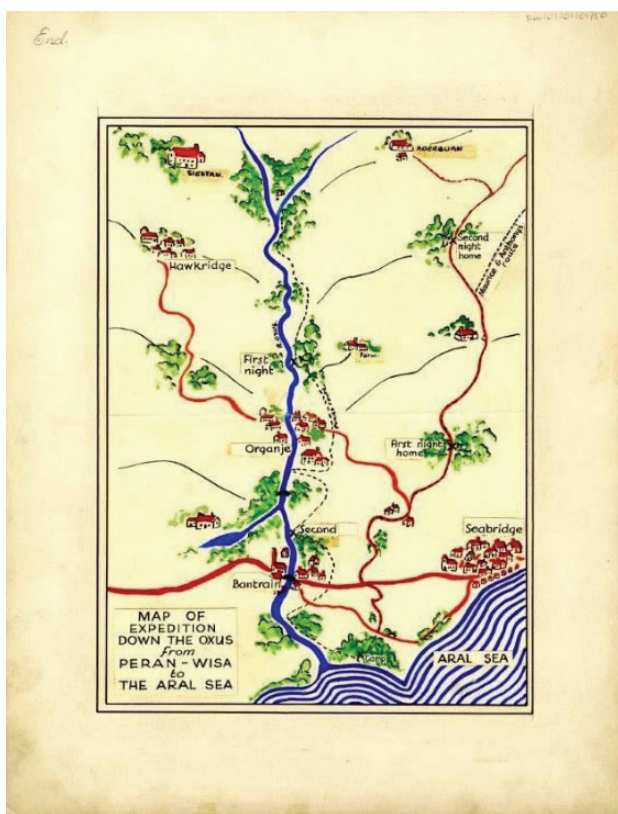
The connection between Arthur Ransome and Pamela Whitlock will be well-known to most TARS members; it has become, after all, something of a legend of children’s book history. In 1937, Ransome received a complete, handwritten manuscript from two schoolgirls, Katherine Hull and Pamela Whitlock. Despite initially believing it to be a hoax, he went on to champion the book with Jonathan Cape and was instrumental in bringing it into print.

The book, *The Far Distant Oxus*, became the first in a trio of novels (it was followed by *Escape to Persia* in 1938 and *Oxus in Summer* in 1939). Set on Exmoor, the novels recount the holiday adventures of the Hunterly and Cleverton siblings, as well as the mysterious Maurice, as they ride ponies and generally mess about, famously building a hut with glazed windows between a single lunch and teatime. It is likely that most of our knowledge about this incident comes from Hugh Brogan’s *The Life of Arthur Ransome* (1984) (hereafter *Life*) and

*Signalling from Mars: The Letters of Arthur Ransome* (1997) (hereafter, *Signalling*). What is probably not known is that Brogan’s re-construction of this episode was almost entirely based on conversations with Pamela Whitlock and a series of letters from Ransome that now form part of her literary archive.



This archive is held by Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children’s Books, based in Newcastle upon Tyne. Deposited by the Bell family (Pamela Whitlock married John Bell, senior editor at Oxford University Press, in 1954), the collection contains 53 typed and handwritten letters from Ransome. The letters span the years 1937 to 1964 and the majority are addressed to Pamela Whitlock (six are to her father, Mark Kingsley Whitlock, and four are addressed to both Pamela Whitlock and Katherine Hull). Of these 53, 26 were written between 1937 and 1939, the *Oxus* years, and the remaining 27 letters (1940-1964) chart the following years of friendship that existed between Ransome and Pamela Whitlock.



*Pamela Whitlock, ‘Map of Expedition Down the Oxus from Peran-Wisa to the Aral Sea,’ hand drawn map c. 1937 in Pamela Whitlock archive, Seven Stories, the National Centre for Children’s Books, PW/01/01/01/50. All images and quotations from the Pamela Whitlock archive are reproduced with kind permission from the Bell family.*



The letters actually make up only a small part of the Pamela Whitlock collection. As literary archives go, the scale of the Whitlock collection is relatively modest. On the shelves, it amounts to two 15 x 11 inch boxes. Opening up the boxes though, one is immediately struck by the vitality of the contents. While Pamela Whitlock and Katherine Hull shared the writing of their novels, Pamela Whitlock drew all of the illustrations and maps. As such, the collection contains her hand-drawn maps for the *Oxus* novels (the vibrancy of which is sadly lost in the Fidra re-print), vivid inked illustrations and tailpieces for all three novels, along with an assortment of headpieces and dingbats for *Crowns*, an A5 sketch pad containing drawings of animals, particularly horses, folders of press clippings and reviews, and notebooks from Pamela Whitlock’s time in the WAAF, replete with drawings of horses (below) tucked in amongst the details of how to change a car battery. Alas, the famous *Oxus* manuscript is not in the archive.

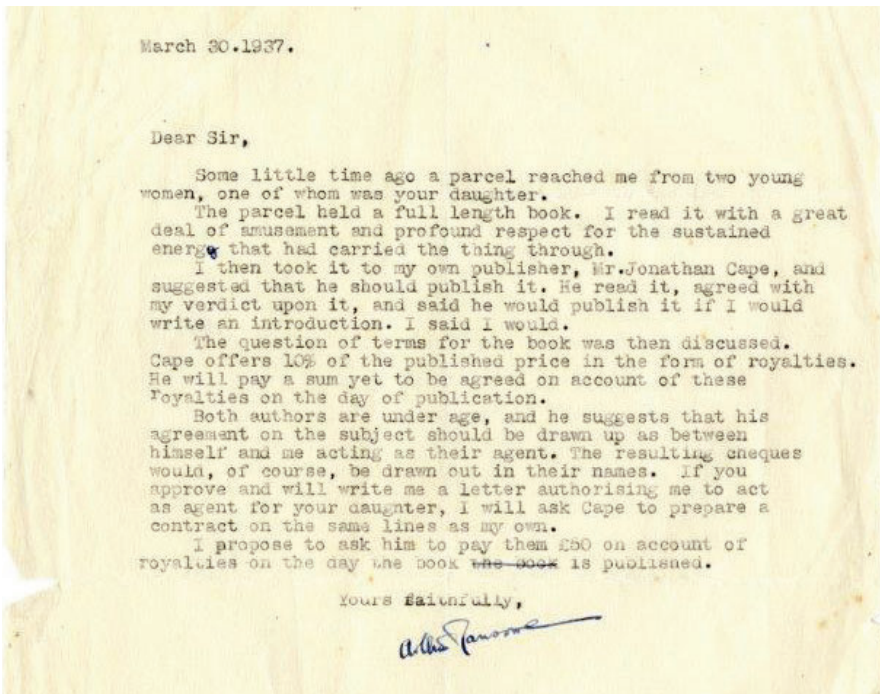


*Pamela Whitlock, 'black and white illustration of horses on back cover of orange Royal Airforce Notebook,' c. in Pamela Whitlock archive, PW/04/01.*

Reading the letters in the archive is a unique experience, one that collapses the span of many years into an hour. While the content of a good number of the letters is publically available (13 are included in *Signalling*), experiencing the letters one after another, without interruption, produces an entirely new understanding of the connection between Ransome and Pamela Whitlock; a connection that is easily overlooked amongst the great number of Ransome’s correspondents in *Signalling*, for example. So, although some of the content is there for us to read, the sense of a long and deeply-held friendship is missing. Brogan points the way to this understanding, describing Pamela Whitlock

‘Crammed with Promise’

(along with John Bell and Rupert Hart-Davis) as one of the few ‘devoted friends’ (*Life*, p.421) to whom Ransome was increasingly close in his later years. However, this observation, tucked away at the very end of his book, is easily lost in the impending sense of closure as he describes the end of Ransome’s life. The aims of this piece, therefore, are twofold: the first is to illustrate the true extent of Ransome’s involvement in the publication of the Oxus novels; the second is to reframe Ransome’s friendship with Pamela Whitlock through the lens of the unpublished letters in the Pamela Whitlock collection. All subsequent quotations in this piece are taken directly from these letters (PW/02/01).



March 30.1937.

Dear Sir,

Some little time ago a parcel reached me from two young women, one of whom was your daughter.

The parcel held a full length book. I read it with a great deal of amusement and profound respect for the sustained energy that had carried the thing through.

I then took it to my own publisher, Mr. Jonathan Cape, and suggested that he should publish it. He read it, agreed with my verdict upon it, and said he would publish it if I would write an introduction. I said I would.

The question of terms for the book was then discussed. Cape offers 10% of the published price in the form of royalties. He will pay a sum yet to be agreed on account of these royalties on the day of publication.

Both authors are under age, and he suggests that his agreement on the subject should be drawn up as between himself and me acting as their agent. The resulting cheques would, of course, be drawn out in their names. If you approve and will write me a letter authorising me to act as agent for your daughter, I will ask Cape to prepare a contract on the same lines as my own.

I propose to ask him to pay them £50 on account of royalties on the day the book ~~was~~ is published.

Yours faithfully,

*Arthur Ransome*

*Arthur Ransome, 'letter from Arthur Ransome to Mark Kingsley Whitlock, 30 March 1937,' in Pamela Whitlock archive, PW/02/01/04.*

The now famous lines, ‘Some little time ago a parcel reached me from two young women, one of whom was your daughter,’ comes from Ransome’s letter of 30 March 1937 to Mark Kingsley Whitlock (above). As Brogan rightly observes in his *Life*, neither the girls nor their families had any knowledge of the book-publishing business. While Ransome insisted that the

agreement with Cape be drawn up between the publisher and the girls’ fathers, he effectively acted as ‘their Virgil in the book-trade’ (*Life*, p. 353).

We get a sense of this in *Life* as Brogan quotes from letters dated 12 April 1937, to Mark Kingsley Whitlock telling him that he will, ‘look after the book all right’, and from 29 April, 29 July and 22 August 1937, to Pamela Whitlock, giving various words of advice on her illustrations and book cover. What the Whitlock collection tells us for the first time, however, is just what Ransome meant by ‘look after’. Brogan tells us that Ransome sent the manuscript to his own typist in Ipswich (*Life*, p. 353). The letters tell us that he did far more.

PW/02/01/108  
NEWINGTON,  
IPSWICH,  
SUFFOLK.

April 23. 1937

Dear Mr. Whitlock.

I saw Cape's yesterday  
and the agreement is all right.  
They will pay each author  
£20 on account of royalties  
on the day of publication. You  
can safely sign the agreement  
as it stands.

The MS is now being  
prepared for press in two copies.  
I am sending it to the firm  
in Ipswich who do the typing of

NEWINGTON,  
IPSWICH,  
SUFFOLK.

my own books and know just  
how the job must be done. Their  
costs are very low, and the  
title will have to be decided  
before the authors. I will  
send it to you when it comes.

Yours very truly,  
Arthur Ransome

Perhaps you will do me know  
when Pamela is ~~in~~ home  
from Exmouth, so that we can  
arrange for her to come down here  
for the day.

Arthur Ransome, '2-page letter from Arthur Ransome to Mark Kingsley Whitlock, 23 April 1937,' in Pamela Whitlock archive, PW/02/01/108.

We know from *Signalling* that Ransome asked Jonathan Cape to ‘prepare a contract on the same lines as my own’ (letter to M.K. Whitlock, 30 March 1937, p. 241); the letters in the archive tell us that Ransome also negotiated the girls’ advance with Cape. During this time, Ransome advises Mark Kingsley Whitlock that he had, ‘Better hold [signing] the agreement till you hear from me’ (20 April 1937). Three days later, Ransome confirms the

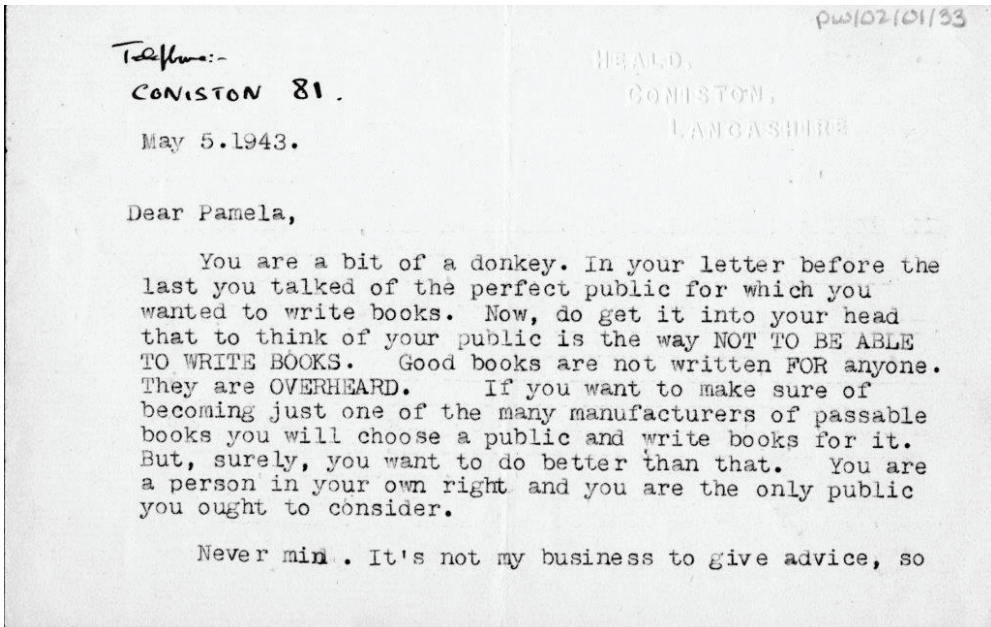
details of the advance, £20 to each author on account of royalties, writing, ‘You can safely sign the agreement as it stands’ (23 April 1937). The letters also suggest that Ransome oversaw the production of the book, although the full extent to which he did this remains a little unclear. For example, on 7 July 1937, he asks Pamela Whitlock, ‘Which chapter does “Anthony waiting for Elitta” illustrate? I think the others are in their right places’. The proofs also passed through Ransome’s hands. Then, on 12 August 1937, he writes that Pamela Whitlock must read through the proofs, ‘AT ONCE for printer’s errors,’ and advises that she does not, ‘try to make any more large scale corrections or omissions, because now the book is actually in page such corrections cost a lot and publishers are hard hearted on the subject’. Rather than send the proofs back to Cape, he says, ‘send it back to me just as fast as ever you can’. When queries did arise, it was Ransome who resolved them. The letters suggest that Pamela Whitlock questioned either the use or position of the tailpieces she prepared for the novel: Ransome writes (19 August 1937) that, ‘As soon as your letter came I sent a violent stirrer up to Cape’s,’ and that it was, ‘all right. They are being used everywhere when the chapter does not come down to the foot of the last page’.

It is clear that Cape wrote directly to Ransome, rather than Mark Kingsley Whitlock, who was the legal agent for his daughter. For example, in a letter to Pamela Whitlock, from 2 September 1937, Ransome quotes a substantial portion of a letter to himself from Cape about the issue of her fee for the illustrations; Cape paid £20 for the illustrations. Ransome’s frank comments to Pamela Whitlock, regarding Cape’s offer, demonstrate the integrity of the advice he gave to the young author/illustrator. Writing as one professional to another, he says, ‘My comment on this is that it seems rather little, but he paid me less for the pictures to PETER DUCK. In fact he paid me nothing at all. But I got more for the pictures in later books. And of course this is your first shot and what really matters is that he shall make a success of the book.’ Over the next three years, as the letters attest, Ransome continued to steer Pamela Whitlock through the sometimes baffling business of re-negotiating her artist’s fees (17 May 1938), in light of the novels’ success, along with the girls’ advance royalties; he also advised on the signing of the American deal with Macmillan (20 April 1938).

A break in the correspondence, between 31 December 1939 and 24 December 1942, marks a shift in the focus of the letters, with Ransome’s role



as a literary mentor, and his obvious respect for and friendship with Pamela Whitlock coming to the fore. Some of Ransome’s best-known observations on writing, and particularly writing for children, come from letters that he wrote to Pamela Whitlock. For example, he writes on 23 October 1944, that she should, ‘Get into [your] head the melancholy fact that children are omnivorous. They will like almost anything.’ Ransome also shared his conviction with Pamela Whitlock that a writer must follow their ‘own internal compass and nothing else’ (24 December 1942). Using a slightly different image (10 May 1944), he says she is now listening to her ‘internal tuning fork’ and advises that she should concern herself with this alone. In another well-known pronouncement from the same letter, he repeats the advice first given in the letter below (5 May 1943), that, ‘All good books are overheard,’ and that the ‘ONLY audience’ she need think about is herself.



*Arthur Ransome, 'letter from Arthur Ransome to Pamela Whitlock, 5 May 1943,' in Pamela Whitlock archive, PW/02/01/33.*

It is useful to put these comments into their context. The letters from the mid-1940s through to the early 1950s mark a period in Pamela Whitlock’s life when she was struggling to find her voice as a writer; Ransome’s obvious empathy with her experience is palpable in his letters.



Consider the letter of 10 May 1944 again, which concerns Cape’s rejection of one of her manuscripts. (A note in the archive from John Bell states that Pamela Whitlock destroyed the manuscript before their wedding in 1954.) Ransome writes that he agrees with Cape’s decision, but goes on to write about her development as a writer in encouraging terms. He comments that the problems with the manuscript stem from ‘the difficulties under which it was written’. He goes on to say that the ‘deeper reason’ for these problems is that, as a writer, ‘you are growing. You can’t help it.’ In an extended metaphor, repeated in subsequent letters, he writes, ‘Have you ever watched a moth working its way out of its chrysalis? The book is like that. It is simply crammed with promise. Whether you know it or not, you are reaching out towards something better ... than anything you’ve had a shot at yet.’

Across the years, Ransome continued to encourage Pamela Whitlock’s writing, offering comfort and congratulations in equal measure. When she received an unfavourable review in *The Times* for her 1952 book, *The Sweet Spring*, he writes that he has read the book twice (30 March 1952): ‘I ... liked it very much and still more the visible signs of bursting chrysalis.’ Two years later (16 December 1954), he congratulates Pamela Whitlock on her book *All Day Long* (1954), saying ‘it will set many minds afire that will long afterwards thank you for throwing sparks among the tinder’.

While it has only been possible to touch upon the content of the letters here, it is clear that 1937 marked the beginning of a long-held and genuinely affectionate friendship between Ransome and Pamela Whitlock. According to Pamela Whitlock’s family, she largely set aside her literary ambition after her marriage and, like many other women, devoted herself to raising her family of five children. In light of Ransome’s obvious praise, it is, perhaps, time for a reappraisal of her literary work. Of equal interest are Pamela Whitlock’s letters to Arthur Ransome, if they still exist. As with so much archival material, the Whitlock archive throws up more avenues for potential research than it resolves existing ones. It does, however, provide specific context for some of Ransome’s best-known comments on the practice of writing for children and reveals the importance of his long-held friendship with fellow author, Pamela Whitlock.

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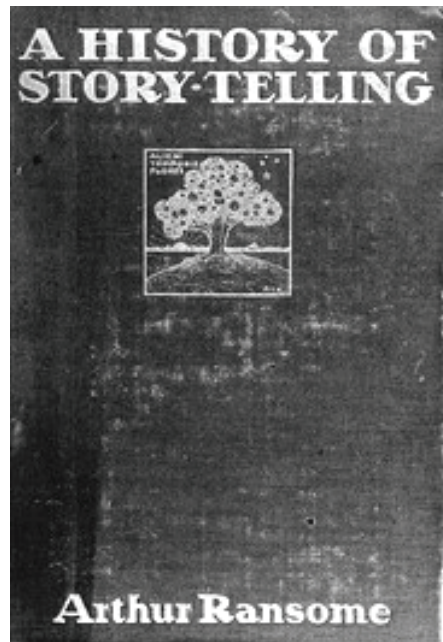
# INSPIRED BY BALZAC?

Peter Hyland

‘Roger, aged seven, and no longer the youngest of the family, ran in wide zigzags ...’ The opening sentence of *Swallows and Amazons* must be one of the most well-known in the twelve books (along, perhaps, with the wording of the famous telegram on the following page). It sets the tone for the novel and also brings in activity, and a very brief puzzle – why the zigzags? It could not be more typical of Arthur Ransome. However, there are two ordinary words in the sentence which to my mind are, in a quieter way, a vital clue to the way in which he made his characters and plots so real: the words ‘no longer’.

To understand how Ransome acquired the skill needed to create characters with apparently real lives, an obvious starting point is his book *A History of Story-Telling*, published in 1909 and shortly to be republished.<sup>1</sup> In this book Ransome considers, in

chronological order, the authors whom he regards as important in the historical development of the art of narrative. He describes the various story-telling methods and how they work and, in some cases, their drawbacks. There are no direct indications as to which of the methods Ransome considered



in intensity with each author considered, and here some detective work might establish which particular techniques were to stay in Ransome's mind and perhaps re-appear in the *Swallows and Amazons* stories over twenty years later.

It does seem to me that Ransome expresses an extra enthusiasm and interest when he discusses two nineteenth-century French authors, the realist Honoré de Balzac and the romantic Théophile Gautier, both of whom had been mentioned by him in *Bohemia in London* (1907) and both of whom he would have read in French. It is only fair to acknowledge that other French authors featured in *A History of Story-Telling* have also been linked with Ransome's style, but for me it was only while reading Ransome's appreciation of Balzac that bells started to ring in my head.<sup>2</sup>

Balzac was a workaholic. Ransome points out admiringly that Balzac's writing hours were different from everyone else's, and that he wore special clothes while he was writing and constantly drank coffee: 'The paraphernalia of work were likely to induce the proper spirit .... There could never be a doubt in his mind as to the purpose for which he was there.' One thinks of Ransome later on in his special 'work room' in the stone barn at Low Ludderburn, sitting at the carefully placed desk.

Of Balzac as a novelist, Ransome wrote: 'Life would always mean more than books ... His people never existed for the sake of his books, but always his books for the sake of his people.' On reading that, I immediately thought of the Walker children, who give no impression of being manufactured 'for the sake of' a Lake District holiday adventure story; on the contrary we feel that *Swallows and Amazons* was written as a lively report on what had actually happened to this family on holiday one summer. It reads like something which the author feels we really ought to know about.

In *A History of Story-Telling* Ransome, a keen chess player, goes on to compare a novelist's characters with pieces on a chessboard. In older fiction, Ransome claims, they were mere pegs of wood, but Balzac made them assume human detail, no longer depending for their meaning on the ingenuity of the author:

*They make their moves in their own rights ... The hero of a Balzac novel is not the reader, in borrowed clothes, undergoing a series of quite arbitrary experiences. He cannot be made to do what the author requires, but fills his own suits, and has a private life.*

Well, a leading character, a heroine, who makes her moves in her own right and, we feel, is not necessarily obeying the author – now who does that suggest?

*She grabbed her skates. She scrawled on a bit of paper, 'They're at the North Pole.*

*So am I. Tell Uncle Jim. Nancy,' and left it for her mother.*

*'But, Miss Nancy,' said Cook.*

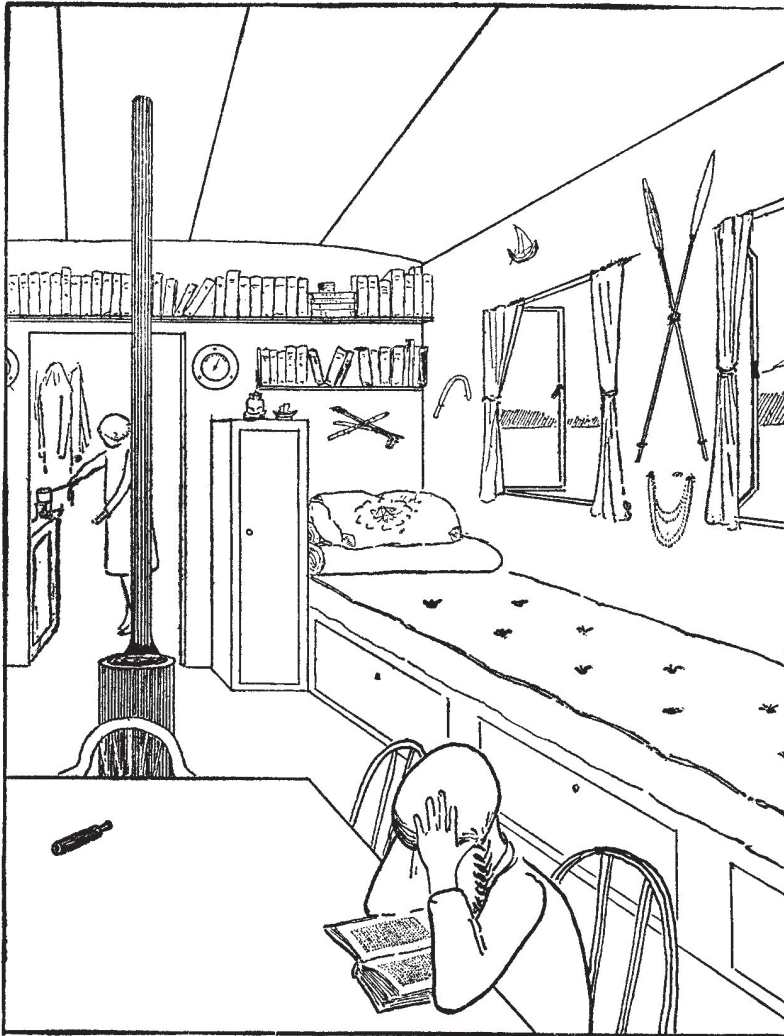
*'I've only grabbed a cake,' said Nancy, and the door swung to behind her.*

Who could stop her? It has even been suggested that Nancy Blackett, far from being made to do what Ransome required, was fully capable of bossing him about. Peter Willis in his book *Good Little Ship* remarks that: *'The Picts and the Martyrs* gave Nancy the leading role she'd no doubt stormed into Ransome's study and demanded.'<sup>3</sup> It follows that if Nancy ever wore a suit, she would certainly fill it, but does she have a 'private life'? Yes, to my mind she does, in that we are rarely told, in any of the books, what she is actually thinking as opposed to saying or doing. This is in contrast to Titty and Dorothea and also, on occasion, John, Susan, Roger and Dick. Peter Hunt, in *Approaching Arthur Ransome*, refers to 'the distance at which Ransome continually keeps her [Nancy] throughout the series'.<sup>4</sup>

With regard to Balzac's character delineation, Ransome writes admiringly, '... he was able in novels ... to give the colour of each man's life expressed in his actions, in his talk, in his choice of clothes, in the furniture of his room'. Ransome uses the word 'man' because he was writing in 1909; today we would say 'person'. However, there *is* a man in the *Swallows and Amazons* stories whose lifestyle is succinctly expressed in his talk and in his furniture (in a cabin rather than a room):

*'Lost a mast? Holed her too? Well, these things will happen.'* (Captain Flint views the wrecked Swallow.)

*There were the long settees on either side ... the neatly folded red blankets ... and all the things that this strange uncle of Peggy's had brought back from his travels, a knobkerry, a boomerang, a model catamaran from Ceylon, a bamboo flute from Shanghai, bright-coloured leather cushions from Omdurman, a necklace of shark's teeth. All these things ... were hung on the walls, out of the way, between the windows; for, though the place was a little like a museum, it also had the neatness of a ship's cabin. (The cabin in the Fram.)*



AIRING THE FRAM

However, for me, Ransome's most intriguing comment in *A History of Story-Telling* is this one:

*Balzac knows and makes his reader feel that his characters have not leapt ready-made into the world to eat and drink through a couple of hundred pages and vanish whence they came. They have left their mark on things, and things have left their mark on them. They have lived in pages where he has not seen them ...*

Whether Ransome took Balzac's example to heart or not, one of the most distinctive and realistic features of the Swallows and Amazons series is that



the children have lives outside of the books ‘where we have not seen them’. At the beginning of *Swallowdale*, Roger, tightly wedged in before the mast, found that ‘a year had made a lot of difference’. Two chapters later, John, Susan and the Amazons wanted to catch up ‘about schools and about all sorts of things that had been happening since Christmas’. There are other reminders of the periods between adventures although Ransome wisely keeps them brief: ‘All that long time of lessons and towns was as if it had never been’ – Titty in *Swallowdale*. Alas, there is sometimes a price to pay for implicit belief in the children’s existence outside the stories: who has not sighed at that poignant last sentence to *The Picts and the Martyrs*: ‘Not with the Swallows coming, and Uncle Jim, and five whole weeks of the holidays still to go?’ Five weeks when things simply *must* have happened, but we will never know what.

As to the things we *do* know about, they ‘leave their mark’ on the children to the extent that they are cross-referred to from one book to another. The result is a familiarity which is both exciting and reassuring, although the past is never allowed to impede the future:

*‘I say,’ said Titty ... ‘What’s it going to be? It won’t be the North Pole again ...’*  
*‘Too jolly hot,’ said Roger.*  
*Peggy looked at them. ‘Gold,’ she said.*

This overwhelming sense of continuance throughout the series actually begins with the first sentence of the first book. Roger is described as ‘no longer the youngest ...’ Imagine if Ransome had written ‘Roger, aged seven, and *not* the youngest of the family ...’ How static that sounds! Instead, the situation is mobile – Roger was the youngest until recently, but now he isn’t. Evidently a new sibling has arrived. The family is changing, and there will be consequences. Things are on the move. All this is implied by the words ‘no longer’. Compare Ransome’s Balzac: ‘His world was not a world of dream ... but, according to his mood, was an elaborate piece of mechanism.’

I would guess that Ransome, consciously or unconsciously, absorbed the methods he admired so much in the work of Honoré de Balzac. This is despite his 1931 dismissal of *A History of Story-Telling* with the comment ‘I don’t think much of it’ in a letter to his American publisher.<sup>5</sup> At that time Ransome did tend to disparage his early works. However, he confessed in the *Autobiography* that, back in 1907, before starting on *A History of Story-Telling*, ‘I

was again worrying over the technique of narrative which I found at once so interesting and so difficult.’ I remain convinced that what Ransome observed about Balzac’s technique of narrative was something he did not forget.

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<sup>1</sup> i.e. by the Arthur Ransome Trust as the fourth in its series of Ransome reissues.

<sup>2</sup> The late Tim Johns considered Gustave Flaubert and Guy de Maupassant to be the chief influences on AR: see his ‘Preface to the “French Collection”’ in *Collecting Our Thoughts*, ed. M. Ratcliffe (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2015), pp. 121-127.

<sup>3</sup> Peter Willis, *Good Little Ship* (London: Lodestar Books, 2017), p. 69.

<sup>4</sup> Peter Hunt, *Approaching Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 118.

<sup>5</sup> Letter to Ernestine Evans, 12 January 1931, in *The Best of Childhood* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2004), p. 51.

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

I was interested in the mention of Ernest Simon in Ted Evans’s article in the 2019 *Mixed Moss*, page 59.

Given the context, this must surely be Ernest Emil Darwin Simon MP 1879-1960, Lord Simon of Wythenshawe, Chairman of the BBC Governors 1947-1952.

During most of the 1950s, I would meet Lord Simon (more accurately, ‘be taken in to meet’) each Boxing Day afternoon at a children’s party in Broomcroft, his home in Didsbury (now the Manchester University Vice-Chancellor’s official residence).

The reason I knew his grandchildren was that my parents had bought, in 1950, their first house from his younger son Brian (who was moving from Manchester to become Professor of Education at Leicester). Previously we were ‘back garden neighbours’ in West Didsbury and my mother often did shorthand typing for Brian for his non-academic publishing work.

My parents found their new house was far too large even for a family of four, so we had many varied lodgers over the years including Sociology Professor Peter Worsley (who coined the phrase ‘the third world’), the Jaspans (whose baby boy Andrew much later became editor of *The Scotsman* and *The Observer*) and Michael Blakey, the timpanist of the BBC Northern Orchestra, whose room held a full jazz kit including marimba!

*David Middleton, Poole.*

# WHO IS THE GREAT AUNT?

Alan Kennedy

Titty took *Robinson Crusoe* with her on the first voyage of the *Swallow*, thinking it would serve well enough as a practical handbook for the novice explorer. She apparently shared her creator's love of books, only reluctantly leaving behind a heavy German dictionary because 'it might be the wrong language' for the natives of Wild Cat Island. *Swallows and Amazons* has barely got going before we learn that she knows enough of a sonnet by Keats to christen the lookout *Darien*. All in all, she seems a bookish little girl. Which, oddly enough, may provide the answer to a perennial Ransome question: *who is the Great Aunt?*

Chapter 17 of *Swallowdale* brings us to the point in the story where the Swallows have played their trick on the visiting Amazons by hiding in 'Peter Duck's'. They are now all standing near to the cave sharing dark thoughts about their formidable relative, the Great Aunt. 'If only we could get the G.A. to go,' says Nancy, providing a few half-hearted suggestions as a joke. But it is not a joke for bookish Titty, who comes up with the elaborate, and rather sinister, idea of making an image and sticking pins in it. We can only guess as to how she came by this esoteric knowledge; all we have is the laconic remark, 'I found it in a book.' Nancy is robustly unconvinced by the whole idea: 'Pins would blunt on her,' she says, 'she wouldn't notice it.' But Titty doesn't give up, proving herself surprisingly well-informed on the subject of sympathetic magic: 'Perhaps they ought to be silver ... it said in that same book about shooting witches and were-wolves. They always had to use a silver bullet.' At this point Susan closes the matter down ('it's a bad sort of magic'), leaving Ransome himself to hint at things to come: 'The potatoes, unluckily, were in one of their bad moods. Peggy and Nancy kept on prodding them, almost as if each potato was a voodoo doll ...'

The chapter famously ends, of course, with Titty alone in the cave nervously wondering what to do with the molten candle-grease round the lanterns. 'It isn't wax,' she says, 'but it's good enough for the Great Aunt.'

Anyway it'll have to do.' We know well enough what then ensued, but the question I want to raise is one step back from that. When Titty said she had read about all this in a book – exactly *which book*?

It is a difficult question to answer because of its double nature. On the one hand, speculating about the reading habits of fictional characters might be thought indulgent, if not silly. On the other hand, an author as careful as Ransome invariably means *something* by a specific allusion, particularly when he repeats it. So perhaps the question should be re-phrased: why is he telling us Titty read it in a book? Which book did *he* have in mind, and what would be the consequences of our knowing?

We already have a clue in the reference to silver bullets. Although folklore is rich in ways of despatching witches, shooting them is actually rather unusual. There is only one fairy tale that Titty might plausibly have read that comes at all close. This is the little-known Brothers Grimm story entitled *The Two Brothers* – a hotchpotch of archetypal fairy tale motifs: helpful animals; thrice-repeated quests; a flaming dragon; abandoned children; rivalrous twins; a lost princess; death by decapitation; even resurrection. But buried in this bizarre miscellany a wicked witch does indeed shrug off lead bullets only to be laid low by something silver (albeit buttons, rather than bullets). Further confirmation lies in the fact that the witch meets the same fate as the wax image that slips through Titty's fingers: 'they seized the witch, bound her and laid her on the fire ....'

This then seems the answer to our question – while writing *Swallowdale*, Ransome intended us to believe Titty was familiar with the work of the Brothers Grimm. If we go back fifteen years it is easy to see why. In 1913, before secretly acquiring a passport to make that first fateful journey to Russia, he had written a story for his daughter Tabitha, to read when she was old enough (she was only three at the time). A strange allegorical fantasy, filled with cod scholarship, *The Blue Treacle* is sub-titled *The Story of an Escape*. At first this seems a natural enough allusion to Ransome's own impending flight, but the story itself does not remotely bear such an interpretation. For one thing the name of the heroine is 'Tabitha' and she is clearly the person who escapes. Ransome puts the crucial words into the mouth of the dragon in the story: 'all I have to do is give Tabitha a pass-port'.

*The Blue Treacle*, for all its many imperfections, is that relatively rare thing, an explicitly articulated statement of wish fulfilment: a promissory note left

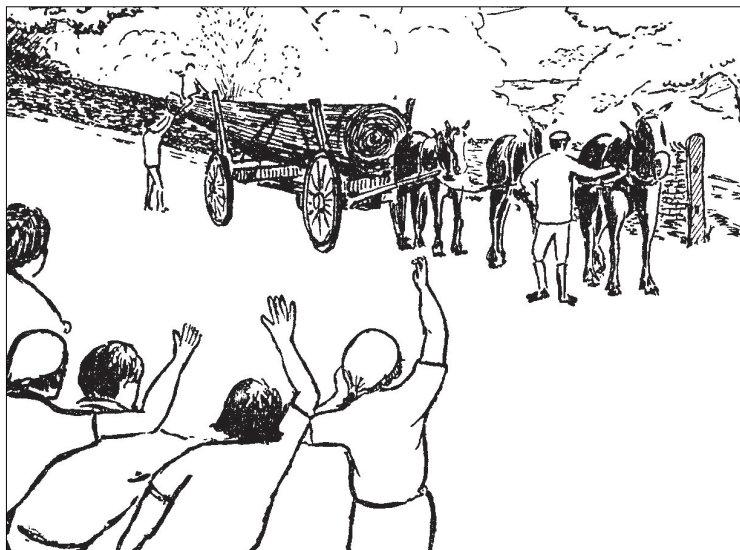
for another ‘Tabitha’ to redeem years later in vastly more sophisticated fiction.<sup>1</sup> It also represents Ransome’s first attempt to weave fairy tale into his fiction, something destined to become a defining feature of his mature work. It is hardly surprising, therefore, to discover his choosing *The Goose Girl* as the backdrop to his fantasy.<sup>2</sup> This touching Brothers Grimm story is about an abandoned girl struggling against the odds as she grows into maturity. The denouement – inevitably in the circumstances – involves her happy restoration to the abandoning parent.

I have written elsewhere about Ransome’s hopes that his daughter might construe the plot of *Swallows and Amazons* as atonement for his own act of abandonment.<sup>3</sup> Writing the book, Ransome demonstrated his debt to the Brothers Grimm yet again with a number of allusions to a second goose girl story, *The Goose Girl at the Well*. The heroine there bathes by plunging her head into the water of a well and when she weeps her tears are pearls. (He returns to Titty’s ‘pearl diving’ game in *Swallowdale*.) Significantly, it is a fairy story filled with reflections on marriage. Wish-fulfilment elements in *The Goose Girl at the Well* would have not been lost on him. As the King eventually recovers his lost daughter, an old witch declares: ‘You might have spared yourself the long walk ... if you had not three years ago unjustly driven away your child, who is so good and lovable ... she has preserved her purity of heart. You, however, have been sufficiently punished by the misery in which you have lived ... Thereupon the door opened, and the Princess stepped out in her silken garments, with her golden hair and her shining eyes, and it was as if an angel from heaven had entered.’

Alas, there is no evidence that Tabitha drew any such spectacular conclusions from the plot of *Swallows and Amazons*. Any hopes of a swift reconciliation with his daughter were dashed. At the very least, he had expected her to accept an invitation to come to Low Ludderburn (and stay for an unspecified duration). The visit never took place, fuelling a new conviction that her mother was responsible for keeping father and daughter apart. There is probably some truth in this. In his *Biography*, Hugh Brogan claims Ivy forbade Tabitha to visit, on the grounds that she risked being drowned. Perhaps this was a joke – Ivy was only too aware of the hours Ransome spent fishing. Perhaps shipwrecking all of them in *Swallowdale* was meant as a joke in return. One thing seems clear, however: his beliefs on the point determined the creation of the Great Aunt: an obdurate fairy tale



witch, disagreeably stalking the pages of a pastoral romance; ever-present yet, curiously, never seen.



*The Return of the Able-seaman*

From its opening pages, with its over-used adjective ‘little’ we are invited to see the characters in this extraordinary novel as ‘tiny figures in [a] gigantic, almost fairy tale, landscape.’<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in the illustration of Titty’s return, perched triumphantly on the woodman’s log, her figure is so small it is barely visible. It seems likely Ransome had fallen under a spell himself, woven by the work of the controversial anthropologist Margaret Murray. Stefana Stevens, the literary agent who commissioned *Bohemia in London* in 1906, had become one of his closest female confidantes. She was aware of Murray’s work (her daughter studied Egyptology with Murray) and, knowing his interest in folklore, would have pointed him towards her books – *The Witch Cult in Western Europe*, published in 1921, and the more popular *The God of the Witches* that appeared the year *Swallowdale* was published. Murray was a controversial figure, but Ransome was already sympathetic to the view that ancient myth, folklore and fairy tale provided links to a (superior) agrarian way of life that industrialisation was rapidly rendering extinct.<sup>5</sup> Her claim that fairies and elves had their origins in the existence of a prehistoric race of cave-dwelling ‘little people’ seduced him sufficiently to fill *Swallowdale* with symbols of fairy tale life, including the first of several occurrences in his

fiction of that most potent of all such symbols, a secret cave.<sup>6</sup> It was a seduction he came to regret.

We are introduced to the cave in Chapter 12 of *Swallowdale*, Ransome associating it with Titty by allowing her to name it 'Peter Duck's'. The text immediately goes into apparently unnecessary detail emphasising how unclean the place is, repetition of this trivial detail arming the reader for a task Susan performs two chapters later. 'Out you go,' she says, insisting she must work alone, 'It isn't fit for you to stay in until we've got rid of the dust.' Thereafter, preparations for cleaning the cave with a broom take on all the significance of a ritual, with descriptions of cutting the carrying pole to make the broom; gathering heather for the broom; waiting while Captain John makes the broom; watching him whip cord round the broom; and, finally, poking the broom handle into the roof to discover the air hole. Underlining its ritual nature, Ransome does not let us witness Susan at work – brooming the cave ('brushing' would seem to understate things) becomes a secret of its own. We are simply told, much later and when it is all over, that 'Susan had made a different place of it.' To understand what sort of different place we must return to the *Goose Girl at the Well* – to the point where the Goose Girl has been secretly observed by her lover. Trembling with fear, she runs back into the old woman's house, now described as 'perfectly clean, as if the little mist men [sylph], who carry no dust on their feet, lived there.' The relevance of the text here to Ransome's hopes of persuading his daughter to break free of her mother needs no further comment. The story also echoes aspects of *Cinderella*, a Brothers Grimm allusion that Ransome turns to in *Pigeon Post*.

*But the old woman only laughs, saying, 'I already know all.' She leads her into the room and lights a new log in the fireplace. She does not, however, go back to her spinning but fetches a broom and begins to sweep and scour. 'All must be clean and sweet,' she says. 'But, mother,' said the maiden, 'why do you begin work at so late an hour? What do you expect?' 'Do you know what time it is?' asked the old woman. 'Not yet midnight,' answered the maiden, 'but already past eleven o'clock.' 'Do you not remember,' continued the old woman, 'that it is three years today since you came to me? Your time is up, we can no longer remain together.'*<sup>7</sup>

If we take seriously Ransome's beliefs about his estranged daughter, the symbolism of the candle-grease doll seems highly ambiguous. Titty may, or may not, have put an end to the Great Aunt, freeing the Beckfoot prisoners.

But in carrying out her spell the reader must believe her a witch herself – the very character she is allegedly casting out. Doubts over the efficacy of her witchcraft are sustained over several chapters of the book, to become a modest source of tension in an otherwise placid story. But if Titty Walker is indeed intended to represent Tabitha (without quotation marks), the only rational reading of the narrative requires her to liberate herself – an outcome which makes identification of the Great Aunt particularly intriguing.

We next encounter the Great Aunt in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, written in 1942 at the Ransomes' new house, The Heald. Grandly situated in seventeen acres with fishing rights and access to Lake Coniston, the house reflected the fact that Ransome was now quite rich. Long gone were the days of fetching water from the Low Ludderburn well. In the narrative sequence of the *Lake* novels, two years have passed since the children were camping in Swallowdale; last year they were tramping the High Topps in search of gold. In the real world, eleven years separated the two books, three of them involving a war that in 1942 had no certain outcome. His first wife's death in 1939 had brought Ransome no rapprochement with his daughter. The reverse, in fact, because in an almost Chekhovian misunderstanding relations between them had been soured for good. Ransome had ignored a letter from her suggesting he might like to 'buy' his library (she needed financial help, he had the funds, and this was surely the least embarrassing way of asking). When he eventually discovered the books had been sold, both of them had burnt what few bridges remained. The war notwithstanding, it was a consolation he had come back to his beloved lakes. He was now living close to the very woods where he had once imagined Titty and Roger lost in the fog. In *The Picts and the Martyrs* he could find room for neither of them.

In some ways it is difficult to believe this strange book was written by the author of *Swallowdale*. His wife, never less than critical, in this case hated it to the point of desperation: 'Evgenia had never been ruder about one of her husband's books. She found it dead, worn out, dull, and hoped that Cape would use such paper as was saved for it (under wartime rationing) to reprint the existing books in the series.'<sup>8</sup> I believe her criticism misguided; the book is neither dull nor dead. It is, however, significantly *different* – representing a sudden, complete, and radical change in Ransome's narrative technique. To understand the motivation for this, we need to return to Margaret Murray.

‘Please ask father about Picts,’ writes Dorothea to her mother in chapter 7. ‘He said something about people thinking that fairies and things were invented because of the Picts who were living secretly in caves and only coming out at night ...’ Clearly, Professor Callum had also heard of Margaret Murray. Seven chapters pass before we hear his response. Folklorists used to have such a theory, we are told, but it had long since been ‘exploded’. Ransome had seen the fictional possibilities in Margaret Murray’s witch-cult theory and deployed them to great effect (in his defence, so had many others, including Robert Graves). Now, faced with public and compelling critical attacks on her ideas, he was forced to acknowledge the limits of fairy tale. He settles the matter in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, denying the reader any escape by making the Callums’ father an Egyptologist. Apart, that is, from Dick’s final enigmatic words on the subject: ‘With us the theory won’t really be exploded unless the Great Aunt finds out.’ Even then, we don’t discover exactly what he meant until the story is virtually over.

Ransome’s return to Coniston had allowed him to re-establish a boyhood friendship, albeit in sad circumstances. Following a series of devastating strokes, Robin Collingwood had given up his Oxford chair in Philosophy and come home to Lanehead to die. Partly paralysed, barely able to speak and confined to a wheelchair, the days had gone when the two men exchanged proofs of their books, Ransome cheerfully declaring philosophy ‘much too clever for me’. Secretly, however, he had always consoled himself that there was at least one intellectual domain in which he excelled. As long ago as 1906, he had confided to his mother ‘I am going to read all the English Folk Lore books that there are. With that knowledge behind me, I shall be better equipped than any other fairy merchant going ... it is the one subject it is possible to excel in without a degree.’ He was now to become aware of how idle a boast this had been: Robin’s interests were far closer to his own than he had ever imagined, and far deeper. Although Collingwood published virtually nothing on the subject in his lifetime, his papers reveal an astonishing grasp of European magic and folklore. Suppressed by his editor, on the grounds that it was not properly philosophy, he had written extensively on the anthropology and archaeology of fairy story, including a book-length work for the Folk Lore Society on the 345 recorded variants of the *Cinderella* story. It is inconceivable that when the opportunity arose he would not have shared with Ransome his very negative opinion of Margaret

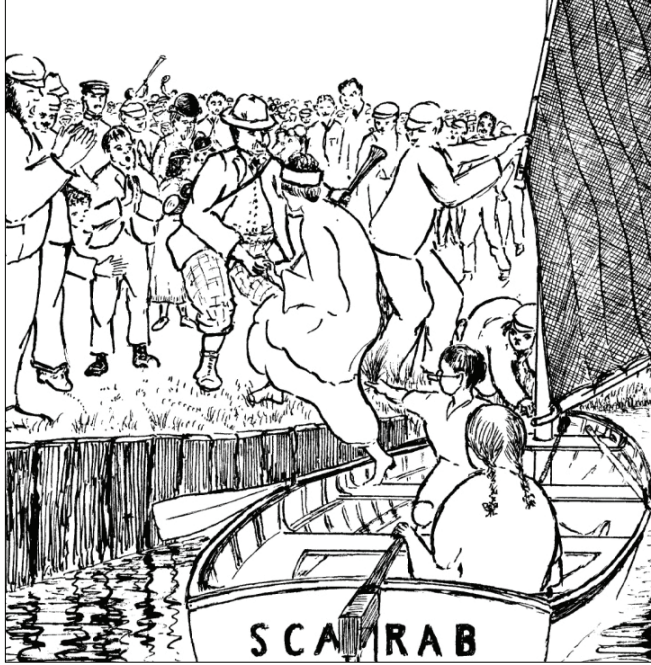
Murray's speculative anthropology (his copy of her book was heavily annotated with scathing criticism).<sup>9</sup> There was another reason to turn away. In a penetrating analysis Collingwood demonstrated as a-historical attempts by German scholars to use folk and fairy tale to underpin the Aryan racial myth. Both men were uncomfortably aware how easily folklore and 'pagan passions' could be recruited to the cause of Fascism.<sup>10</sup>

The implications for the composition of *The Picts and the Martyrs* were self-consciously dramatic. Although the book is dense with *personal* allusion – what Dora Collingwood identified as the 'secret japes and details that your general public doesn't know anything about'<sup>11</sup> – *intertextual* allusion to myth, folk and fairy tale has disappeared. This decision could hardly be other than a deliberate strategy. Although she could not put her finger on it, this is surely the hollow at the heart of the book that prompted Evgenia's emphatic rejection. After all, fairy tale trappings were the magical defining features of her husband's fiction.

The strategy is evident throughout the book, to the point where it takes on the nature of a kind of running 'jape'. Repeatedly (even teasingly) Ransome brings the reader to the threshold of an allusion, only to draw back. I will consider three examples. First, the Dogs' Home itself, the central *motif* for the book. Two children, a boy and a girl, are brought to a tiny house set in woods. Allusion to *Hansel and Gretel* is sustained on much less evidence in *Swallowdale* (the children's patteran); here it is carefully avoided by grounding the story in the practicalities of camping. Not for a moment does the reader see Dick and Dorothea as food for witches. Rather, they become partners in an odd kind of miniature Bohemian marriage. The allusions are wholly personal, in this case combining the simplicity of Low Ludderburn life with memories of carefree days in Chelsea, complete with tea-chest table and jam-jar flowers. The second example is possibly more striking. Ransome sets the scene for a repetition of Susan's ritual cleaning, only to draw back, giving no more than a sly wink to readers in the know: 'I'm sure Susan would say we ought to have brushed it out first,' says Dorothea, 'but we haven't a brush.' Finally, we are provided with a sophisticated structural echo from *Swallowdale*. There, over several chapters, the reader is left to speculate about Titty's spell, threading witchcraft into the very fabric of the novel. Here, we have a dead rabbit. The reader certainly wonders when Dick will get round to skinning it, but magic is not involved. The Ransome of *Swallowdale* or even *Pigeon Post*



would surely have dipped into *The Golden Bough* for thoughts on death – folklore is hardly short of examples. Instead, he gives us town children faced with the reality of the slaughterhouse. It is an impressive piece of writing, but almost as far from *Swallowdale* as one could imagine.



*The Great Aunt Steps Ashore*

So who is the Great Aunt – the person we are only allowed to see in a single, unexpected, illustration? ‘Perhaps Great Aunt Maria is not just a fairy tale witch after all,’ suggests Julian Lovelock, pointing to her profile in the illustration of her stepping ashore in Chapter 29, adding ‘she is younger than we might have expected’.<sup>12</sup> And indeed, the reader’s expectations were more than reasonable. In the course of nine pages in Chapter 23 the Great Aunt is described eleven times as an ‘old lady.’ Add to that, epithets like ‘old girl’, ‘old Miss Turner’ and ‘old body’ and surely we had a right to imagine someone no longer thirty. In any case, the author hammers the point home: her recollection of pompous Colonel Jolys is as a ‘little boy of fifty years ago’ and she is clearly the older of the two. How can we avoid the conclusion that Ransome intended this illustration as one final ‘jape’? We are prepared (more than prepared) for an old woman; we are shown a woman, no more than

thirty, awkwardly posed with one foot in each of two worlds. Given this is a book in which the personal displaced the textual as a source of allusion, there is surely only one reasonable interpretation. This is an *envoi* for someone now incapable of sharing the life Ransome nostalgically re-created for Dick and Dorothea in their Pictish hut – Low Ludderburn life, for want of a better description. It is the image of a young woman who would never know what she missed.

Ransome intended to leave the Swallows out of *The Picts and the Martyrs*. In the end, he found a place for Titty, after all. He may have thought it was the least he could do.

<sup>1</sup> Arthur Ransome, *The Blue Treacle*, ed. Christina Hardyment (Kendal: Amazon, 1993).

<sup>2</sup> Parallels between *The Goose Girl* and *The Blue Treacle* are too many and too explicit to be coincidental. Apart from points of detail, both stories deal with an abandoned girl; both deal specifically with physical, emotional and sexual development; and the heroine's restoration to the abandoning parent forms the denouement in both. Bruno Bettelheim treats *The Goose Girl* under the heading 'Achieving Autonomy', in *The Uses of Enchantment* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), p. 136.

<sup>3</sup> Alan Kennedy, 'Reflections on the Great Aunt', *Mixed Moss*, 2019, pp. 10-16.

<sup>4</sup> A complete analysis confirms Julian Lovelock's observation: the adjective *little* occurs 281 times in *Swallowdale* and 159 times in *Pigeon Post*, a book of about the same length. See Julian Lovelock, *Swallows, Amazons and Coots: A Reading of Arthur Ransome* (Cambridge: The Lutterworth Press, 2016), p. 39.

<sup>5</sup> Murray practised magic herself, including formally cursing academic rivals. During WWI she mixed ingredients for an image of Kaiser Wilhelm II in a frying pan and melted him in front of the fire.

<sup>6</sup> 'It is now a commonplace of anthropology that the tales of fairies and elves preserve the tradition of a dwarf race which once inhabited Northern and Western Europe ... venturing out chiefly at night and coming into contact with the ruling races only on rare occasions.' Margaret Murray, *The Witch Cult in Western Europe* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1921), p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> The reason Robin Goodfellow carries a broom is discussed by Wendy Wall in: 'Why Does Puck Sweep?: Fairylore, Merry Wives, and Social Struggle', *Shakespeare Quarterly*, 2001, pp. 67-106.

<sup>8</sup> Wayne G Hammond, *Arthur Ransome: a Bibliography* (New Castle: Oak Knoll Press, 2000), p. 132.

<sup>9</sup> Wendy James, 'A Fieldworker's Philosopher: Perspectives from Anthropology', in David Boucher, Wendy James and Philip Smallwood (eds), *R. G. Collingwood: The Philosophy of Enchantment* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 2007), p. lxxii.

<sup>10</sup> See Fred Inglis, *History Man: The Life of R. G. Collingwood* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 2009), pp. 201-246.

<sup>11</sup> Christina Hardyment, *The World of Arthur Ransome* (London, Frances Lincoln, 2012), p. 28.

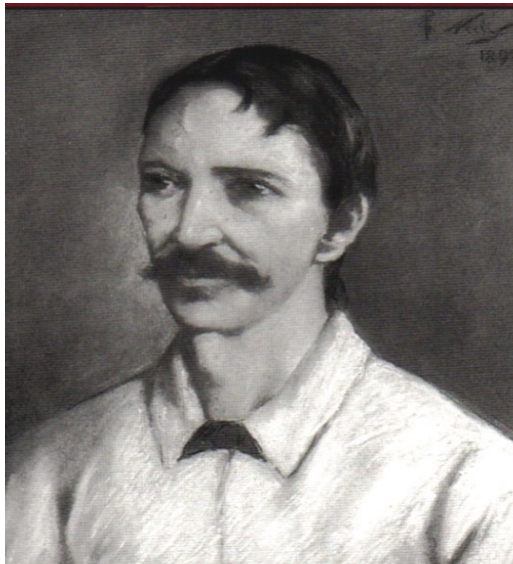
<sup>12</sup> Lovelock, pp. 193-194.

# A FOOTNOTE TO RLS ... AND THE CRAB CONNECTION

Kirstie Taylor

Quests start in unexpected ways ... as do the ideas for books. I've said it before that 'Only Connect' takes one into highways and byways of literature and history leading to mines of information – most of it fools' gold, but fun.

Having now got as far as Volume Seven (September 1890 – December 1892) of Booth and Mehew's brilliant collection of the letters of Robert Louis Stevenson, I was savouring every word of it, only too aware that my hero has only one more volume to live. In letter 2339, to H. Rider Haggard (summer 1891), RLS describes how he had intended to write a saga, but been anticipated by Haggard's *Eric*. He continues: 'Another common impulse we both had – to appropriate Mr Knight's crabs; and there again you got ahead of me; and the tale of the Castaways of Soledad ... lies forever castaway itself ...'



*Portrait of RLS c.1892, from the cover of the Letters*

A note to the letter reads:

*In fact Haggard, hurt by the storm of unfair accusations by the critics in the spring and summer of 1887 of plagiarism in She and other novels, included a note on 'Authorities' in his Allan Quatermain published in that year, acknowledging his (very slight) indebtedness to other works. He recorded that he owed 'the idea of the great crabs in the valley of the subterranean river' (chapter 10) to 'an extract in a review from some book of travel of which I cannot recollect the name'; in a footnote he added that it had been suggested to him that this was 'The Cruise of the 'Falcon', 'with which work I am personally unacquainted'. The Cruise of the 'Falcon' (1884) – an account by journalist and author Edward Frederick Knight (1852-1925) of a voyage to South America and the West Indies in a small yacht – was one of the books praised by RLS during discussions at Saranac with T.R. Sullivan (T.R. Sullivan, 'Robert Louis Stevenson at Saranac', Scribner's, August 1917). In chapter 32 Knight relates how his party was attacked by giant land crabs when camped for the night in a ravine in Trinidad.*



*'... we commenced war on the monsters ...'* H. Rider Haggard, Allan Quatermain

WHAT?!? E.F. Knight? Crabs? Ransome! *Peter Duck*! Cue excited phone calls to the TARS Librarian, Winifred Wilson, who produced *The Cruise of the Falcon*; *The Cruise of the Alerte*; AR's notes on the former and on *The Cloak that I Left* (Lilias Rider Haggard's biography of her father) ... and encouragement. Now I know that there have been articles in *Mixed Moss* and several books about the connections between E.F. Knight, AR. and *Peter Duck*, but I still just had the impression of Knight as the author of a sailing manual. Wrong again! When Knight had a hankering to travel back to 'far lands, warm seas and islands of spice' (*The Cruise of the Falcon*, chapter 1) unlike Peter Duck ("It was blue water as I was thinking of") he was in a position to buy, equip and crew his own boats to sail to South America and the uninhabited island of Trinidad in search of treasure.

Cue book-buying (any excuse!). The internet (with Winifred's help, of course) produced a print-on-demand copy of H. Rider Haggard's autobiography, *The Days of my Life* – a very good read. Second-hand bookshops (remember them?) gave me: *Just So stories*; *The Dynamiter*; *Allan Quatermain*; and *King Solomon's Mines* – which last I thought I had, but can't find. Don't tut at the state of my house, I'm in good company: RLS lost the above letter to Rider Haggard in 'the hideous mess which accumulates about the man [and woman!] of letters ...' and found it a year later! It was only sent off with an apology in summer 1892.



*Portrait of Rider Haggard from the cover of The Days of my Life*



Cue lots of background reading – even unto solid unemotional facts from the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (1957 edition) on brachyura. We'll come to them shortly. But what really interested me was how that world of literature – the writers and their works – all connected and interconnected. It may come as a shock to the internet generations but authors were posting their 'likes' (and otherwise) across the world in the nineteenth century when AR was a child. By 1890 RLS had settled in Samoa, chosen in part because there were regular and reliable mail steamers making monthly visits. There were occasional problems but RLS was still very much in touch with the literary world. I wonder if anyone is keeping modern authors' emails as assiduously as RLS's correspondents kept his engaging missives? Authors knew each other, they wrote fan letters to each other, sent books to each other, criticised each other ... and fed off each other's work. That was the world that AR aspired to when he went to London in search of Bohemia.

As seen above, Rider Haggard had attracted criticism when 'stealing' good ideas, but as he said in his *Allan Quatermain* afterword: 'A novelist is not usually asked, like an historian, for his "Authorities".' Which is just as well, as inspiration comes in all sorts of cross-fertilisation – a scene with wolves in Rider Haggard's *Nada the Lily* sparked Kipling into *The Jungle Book*. *King Solomon's Mines*, the book that allowed Rider Haggard to escape the Law for Literature, came about because: "Travelling up to London with one of his brothers they started discussing *Treasure Island*, just then making a great success. Rider said he didn't think it was so very remarkable, whereupon his brother replied, rather indignantly: "Well, I'd like to see you write anything half as good – bet you a bob you can't." ' (*The Cloak that I Left*)

AR took *Treasure Island* with him on the journey to Aleppo to stay with the Altounyans and write *Peter Duck*. In his unfinished critical study of RLS, AR had written: '*Treasure Island* alone is without blemish or error in construction.' but then he ruins it by continuing, 'And it is not a novel ...' WHY? I *do* hope by the time he came to write *Peter Duck* that AR had changed his mind and equally that he had not, as a *litterateur*, dismissed *Treasure Island* as 'just' a children's book. RLS himself thought yarns of adventure merited serious consideration: 'Some kind hand has sent me your tale of *Solomon's Mines*; I know not who did this good thing to me; so I send my gratitude to head-quarters and the fountainhead. You should be more careful; you do quite well enough to take more trouble, and some parts of your book are infinitely

beneath you. But I find there flashes of a fine weird imagination and a fine poetic use ...' (Letter 1470 to H. Rider Haggard, October 1885). Later RLS jokingly suggested that as Rider Haggard's stories got better as they went on and as RLS had difficulty finishing his own works, they should form a partnership (Letter 1531, January 1886). A story can have literary worth and still be fun – students of 'children's' literature know this. 'RLS wrote tales of adventure. That is true enough, but not the whole truth. He is a bridge between the likes of H. Rider Haggard and the achievements of Conrad and has something in common with both of them' (*Dreams of Exile – Robert Louis Stevenson, a biography*, Ian Bell, 1992). And an author only begins the book – they have no control over what in it inspires the readers.

So let us return to the crabs. Does nobody other than Doctor Dolittle have a good word to say about them? Just what is it about these creatures that made them a leitmotif of loathing? Whether or not as a result of reading Knight's lurid account in *The Cruise of the Falcon*, RLS had already used crabs as objects of fear in *The Dynamiter*.

AR seems positively restrained in *his* description of crabs and their habits. In *Peter Duck* they might be thieves and heartless cannibals, not to mention giving Captain Nancy the rampant heebie-jeebies, but that's nothing compared to Knight's 'factual' narration. His crew were 'in danger of being eaten alive by the land-crabs'. 'They have hard shells of a bright saffron colour and their faces have a most cynical and diabolic expression'; '... the loathsome land-crabs might well be the restless spirits of the pirates themselves for they are indeed more ugly and evil, and generally more diabolical-looking than the bloodiest pirate who ever lived.' That's all just from *The Cruise of the 'Alerte'*; there is more – much more.

In his copy of *The Cruise of the Falcon*, AR made a couple of notes about 'landcrabs' as he obviously saw their potential for creating fear. After sixty years, Peter Duck still has a horror of the crabs he met as a shipwrecked child – but especially 'them that showed up at night' (*PD*, chapter V). There was a belief that in exotic 'other' lands things are larger than life: in *Cradock Nowell: a tale of the New Forest* R.D. Blackmore wrote: 'And so he sailed for the gorgeous tropics where the size of every climbing, swimming, fluttering, or crawling thing (save man himself) is doubled.' Night-time crabs like night-time fears are doubly doubled – especially if one is alone! '“They probably seemed bigger in the dark. You see the young P.D. hadn't even got a fire to

see them by, and he hadn't got a whole lot of friends to help scare them off. ..."' (PD, chapter. XXIV).

Yet being in a group doesn't prevent the feelings of fear and disgust the crabs inspire – and the consequent desire to destroy them. Knight writes of killing hundreds – mind you, his attitude to wildlife in general is more Jemmerling's than Dick Callum's. Rider Haggard piles on the horror and the killing as well:

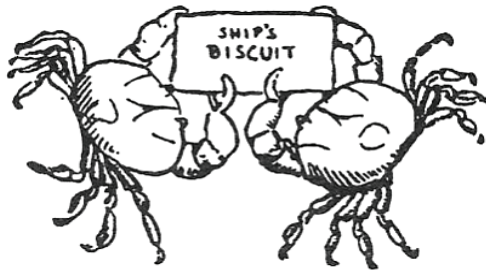
*... a huge species of black freshwater crab, only it was five times the size of any crabs I ever saw. This hideous and loathsome-looking animal had projecting eyes that seemed to glare at one, very long and flexible antennae or feelers, and gigantic claws ... From every quarter dozens of these horrid brutes were creeping up ... Umslopogaas took his axe and cracked the shell of one with the flat of it, whereon it set up a horrid screaming which the echoes multiplied a thousandfold, and began to foam at the mouth, a proceeding that drew hundreds more of its friends out of unsuspected holes and corners. Those on the spot perceiving that the animal was hurt fell on it like creditors on a bankrupt, and literally rent it limb from limb with their huge pincers and devoured it, using their claws to convey the fragments to their mouths ... there was something so shockingly human about these fiendish creatures – it was as though all the most evil passions and desires of man had got into the shell of a magnified crab and gone mad. They were so dreadfully courageous and intelligent, and they looked as if they understood. The whole scene might have furnished material for another canto of Dante's 'Inferno'. (Allan Quatermain, chapter X)*

At least the Fair Cuban has an ulterior motive for the overwrought scenario she gives her wicked master as she lures him into a fever-saturated bayou, 'its banks alive with scarlet crabs ... "If, by the least divergence from the path, we should be snared in a morass, see, where those myriads of scarlet vermin scour the border of the thicket! Once helpless, how they would swarm together to the assault! What could a man do against a thousand of such mailed assailants? And what a death were that, to perish alive under their claws!"' No wonder later, as he lay dying, he whimpers, "Don't leave me to the crabs!" (The Dynamiter)

It's all a bit hysterical, isn't it? Why? Kipling's Pau Amma merely laughs when told of the destruction he causes as King Crab playing with the sea – unsympathetic, but then he's cut down to size and becomes a vulnerable

inhabitant of the Scheme of Things. If crabs scare *Nancy* ... then we all need to be afraid ... or do we? Whether crabs are anybody's favourite creature or not, the demonising of a species (whether black, scarlet or saffron) is worrying. Especially as E.F. Knight used some of the same adjectives he heaped on crabs – 'hideous'; 'loathsome' – on *peoples* he met in South America.

However, I'll leave you with a final thought that does seem to suggest that Knight's crabs can have an effect on artistic sensibilities. Apparently, in 1935, Jean-Paul Sartre tried mescaline. For a long while afterwards Sartre said, 'I started seeing crabs around me all the time ... they followed me into the street, into class.' He knew they were hallucinations but still felt he had to talk to them (*Mescaline: a global history of the first psychedelic*, Mike Jay, 1992). H. Rider Haggard, Robert Louis Stevenson and Arthur Ransome used only their imaginations to conjure up *their* crabs – I hope.



### Further reading

H. Rider Haggard, *Allan Quatermain* (1887); *The Days of my Life* (c.1926).

Lilias Rider Haggard, *The Cloak that I Left* (1951).

Christina Hardymont, *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk*, 1st ed. 1984; *The World of Arthur Ransome*, 2012.

Rudyard Kipling, *Just So Stories* (1902).

E.F. Knight, *The Cruise of the 'Falcon'* (1884); *The Cruise of the 'Alerte'* (1890).

Hugh Lofting, *The Voyages of Doctor Dolittle* (1923).

*Mixed Moss*, various volumes.

Kirsty Nichol Findlay, *Arthur Ransome's Long-lost Study of Robert Louis Stevenson* (2011).

Arthur Ransome, *Peter Duck* (1932).

Robert Louis Stevenson, *The Letters of Robert Louis Stevenson* (8 vols), ed. Bradford A. Booth & Ernest Mehew (1995); *The Dynamiter* (1885); *Treasure Island* (1883) – no crabs, just for the joy of it!

Roger Wardale, *Arthur Ransome: Master Storyteller*, 2010.

# ***THE BIG SIX AT 80***

## **A Birthday Reflection**

**Peter Willis**

At the beginning of 1940, the Ransomes were settled into Harkstead Hall, about a couple of miles inland from their beloved Pin Mill, and, importantly, on the same side of the River Orwell, unlike their previous home, Broke Farm at Levington on the north bank. The name perhaps exaggerates its size – in fact Evgenia reportedly found the rooms a bit small – but it was a comfortable four-square farmhouse. They had moved in the previous April, and Ransome had divided the summer months between sailing his new yacht, *Selina King*, and finishing *Secret Water*, published in November 1939.

Now, he was ready to start in earnest on his next book. Once the title had been sorted out it would become *The Big Six*, a successor to *Coot Club*.

The germ of the idea had been implanted two years earlier, back in the winter of 1937-8. In the October, soon after the completion of *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, Arthur and Evgenia took a week's holiday in a motor-cruiser on the Norfolk Broads. At about this time, he somehow strained himself, suffering an umbilical hernia which put him in hospital in Norwich for about six weeks, from 24 November to 4 January. It was during this period of enforced idleness that he fully indulged his passion for detective stories. Soon after he got home, he wrote to his friend Margaret Renold, who appears to have suggested a detective theme for his next book.

'Detective. Why not?' replied Ransome. 'Now then. George Owdon of *Coot Club* is obviously the right criminal....' And he's off, plotting and planning. 'The detective work must be forced on them TO CLEAR THEMSELVES of some villainy of which, thanks to George Owdon, they are bearing the blame. What the devil can it be?'

However, apart from some set-pieces – the visit to the eel-man and the subsequent attempt to smoke the eels, and the landing of the pike, followed by the visit to the Roaring Donkey, none of which has any intrinsic link at



that stage to any putative plot – that’s about as far as he got then. The Broads book was set aside in favour of supervising the building of *Selina King* (and writing up some set-piece episodes towards a never-realised book about that) and the writing of *Secret Water*.

During the first half of 1939, however, he put himself on a crash-course in the writing of detective stories by becoming the *Observer’s* crime fiction reviewer. Every week between 19 February and 16 July, under the *nom de plume* of William Blunt, he provided the Sunday paper with a thousand-word review covering five or six, sometimes more, different novels. It added up to 21 articles, dealing with 123 titles.

The books covered were whatever was published in that period. Many – most, in fact – were by now-unrecognised writers. Some of these seem, from the reviews, as if they might be worth following up, but they and their authors have generally faded into utter obscurity. A few however have stood the test of time, including Raymond Chandler, with whose colourful Americanisms Mr Blunt indulges in some innocent fun. But it’s the title of the book under review that arrests the attention. It’s *The Big Sleep*. Could Ransome have been subliminally influenced to adapt it for his own forthcoming book?

Blunt/Ransome begins his first article by defining ‘the rules of the game’, which he considers akin to those of chess. ‘No problem is of satisfying beauty if it deviates by a hair’s breadth from certain rules ... there must be only one possible solution, the pieces must not make moves other than those they could make in the ordinary course of play, and no piece on the board may be an irrelevant idler. Those three rules can be applied to detective stories as well as to chess problems and neglect of any one of them by the writer amounts to cheating the reader.’

We’ll see in a moment how well Ransome applies these strictures in *The Big Six*, but he is understandably obliged to duck another of his own requirements. ‘Death is pretty nearly the only motive that in a detective story makes the reader feel that something is at stake to justify the hard brainwork that all these earnest folk put in while hunting for the criminal. No death, no detective story.’ In another review, he opens with the flat assertion: ‘A detective story without death is like a game of bridge played for love.’

So has he snookered – or to revert to his own chosen metaphor, checkmated – himself before he starts? A murder would be unthinkable in

any children's story, and especially in a Ransome book. In fact, Ransome avoids crime altogether as a plot engine in his other books, except for the one incidental instance of theft in *Swallows and Amazons*. But he has already redefined the role of death in a plot to suit his own purposes; it is, he says, a sufficient justification (and 'pretty nearly' the only one) for the efforts of the detective(s). And, in that letter to Margaret Renold, he has already supplied an alternative sufficient impulse for the Death and Glories: to clear their name of a false accusation – and one, moreover, which threatens their own ability to live their lives in the community and the surroundings which mean so much to them.

It's noteworthy, incidentally, how Ransome manages to introduce the familiar Broadland scenes and suggest how the experience of being under suspicion has subtly changed the relationship of the boys with these favourite places, creating an impediment to their enjoyment of their homelands.

Being young and naïve they can't believe, firstly, that the boats haven't come adrift by accident, then, once they acknowledge that it appears to be deliberate, that it is being done to implicate themselves.

But it takes an external intelligence to start joining up the dots. This is very much Dot's book. Her and Dick's entry onto the scene is withheld until Chapter IX, by which time the 'evidence' against the Death and Glories has piled up, with numerous boats cast off. Ransome has also introduced a neat red herring in the form of their unexplained wealth (the catching of the pike), though the question of its suspected source – the stolen shackles – doesn't emerge until Chapter XIII.

In other words, it's a very well-structured detective story, with the pressure on the innocent suspects continuing to increase as the detectives, led by Dorothea, begin to get to grips with their investigation.

The tide of suspicion, though, begins to turn in the boys' favour soon after the shackles incident is revealed. Dr Dudgeon's faith in them is beginning to waver.

*'My goodness Tom ... I used to think that Coot Club of yours was a very good thing, but I can't say I'm so sure about it today.'*

*'But they haven't done a single thing,' said Tom indignantly.*

*'Things keep happening where they are,' said his father.*

*'Suppose,' said Dorothea, 'someone else likes doing those things and always manages to do them when the Coots are there to get the blame.'*

*Dr Dudgeon looked at her gravely. 'Potter Heigham's a long way from Horning,' he said.*

*'Well, nothing else is going to happen where they are,' said Tom. 'They'll be all right at Ranworth.'*

*'If anything were to happen there,' said Dr Dudgeon, puffing at his pipe, 'I might begin to think there's something in Dorothea's brilliant theory.'*



*Scotland Yard*

Although it is the intelligence of the Ds that energises the investigation, there is a sense that they are still, to an extent, the outsiders they were when they first arrived in *Coot Club*, just as they were, too, when they first appeared in *Winter Holiday*. When Bill says ‘You’d never think that Dot got such a head on her,’ and Pete adds ‘And that Dick get things taped, don’t he?’ there is not only an element of surprise as well as admiration in those statements, but also, with the ‘that Dot’ and ‘that Dick’, an implication of distance both social and geographic. Those Ds – visitors, not locals – are, despite their acceptance in *Coot Club*, still more ‘foreigners’ than Coots, as well as being, like Tom himself, of a different social stratum to that of the boatbuilders’ sons. It doesn’t matter, but it is there, and Ransome is sensitive to it.

Ransome’s role for them, pretty much whenever they appear, is partly to need to be taught things, like sailing, but balanced by their ability to introduce new ideas to help along the plots. Mostly these come from Dick and are scientific, but here it is Dot’s novelistic imagination, and her apparent passion for the same sort of detective stories Ransome likes, that come to the fore. It is she who is well up in the conventions of the genre, and who turns the Coot Club shed into Scotland Yard.

It’s also Dorothea who knows all about the Big Five. This name was in fact newspaper shorthand for the Detective Chief Superintendents in charge of the four London Districts in the Metropolitan Police Force, plus their colleague in charge of HQ CID (Branch C1) in Scotland Yard.

Though quite why her semi-explanation of this appears on the book’s title page rather than within the story itself is a little mystery of its own. Maybe the answer has to do with the war. Ransome’s publishers advised ‘avoid the war at all costs’ as a source of subject matter and he no doubt agreed, having recognised already that a wartime plot would wreck the sense of the timeless fictional universe that he was creating. However, Cape, the publisher, was keen on *The Death and Glories* as a title, which Ransome considered too warlike. Other suggestions included *Hot Water*, *Not Us*, *Coots in Trouble* and even *Who the Mischief*. It wasn’t until the second draft was nearly, or perhaps even totally completed in July that *The Big Six* seems to have emerged as a proposal. Possibly it was only later on that Ransome realised he hadn’t included the relevant piece of dialogue in the actual text.

So even though Harkstead Hall reverberated nightly to air-raids, and Arthur had fulminated about the folly of evacuating London children to

this particular part of the countryside, *The Big Six* remained set safely in the autumn of 1933, six years earlier.

Nevertheless, while re-reading it for this article, one exchange fairly leapt off the page at me.

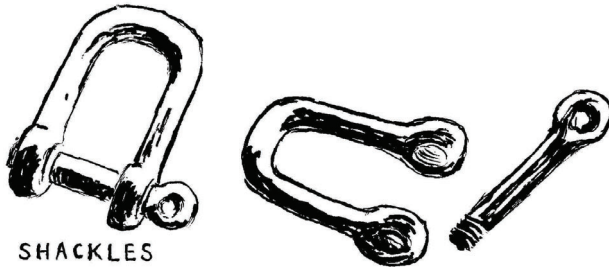
*'They'll have to emigrate,' said Dorothea.*

*'What's that?' asked Bill.*

*'It's what the pilgrims did when they were persecuted.'*

Persecution and emigration. Not four miles from Harkstead Hall, and indeed from the Ransomes' previous home at Levington, just across waters Arthur had sailed in *Nancy Blackett*, and conjured up in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, lies the Harwich continental ferry terminal, which for most of 1939 had been the principal point of entry to the UK for the Kindertransport programme. Some 10,000 Jewish children, many perhaps very like Dick and Dot, in neat hats and coats with small suitcases, rescued from Nazi Germany, passed through it. It's something Ransome cannot have been unaware of, and his evocation of the ease with which a community can be turned against some of its members may well have had contemporary inspiration.

Roger Wardale always claimed *The Big Six* as his favourite of 'The Twelve', somewhat to many people's surprise. However, humorous and dramatic, and with its strong sense of place, it's a deft and subtle work that more than deserves this approbation.



Ransome on Crime: The William Blunt Reviews, *with an introduction by Tim Johns, is in the TARS Library, with a small selection of the books reviewed.*

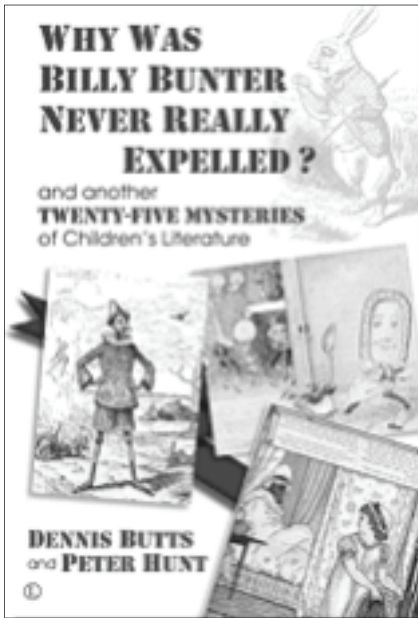
## MIXED MOSS 2021

Please send your articles to the Editor, Catherine Lamont, at [mixedmoss@arthur-ransome.org.uk](mailto:mixedmoss@arthur-ransome.org.uk) – by 30 April 2021.



# BOOKSHELF

**Dennis Butts and Peter Hunt,**  
*Why was Billy Bunter Never Really Expelled?* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2019). ISBN: 978-0718895440.



Peter Hunt is a great supporter of TARS and his *Approaching Arthur Ransome* (1992) shed a new light on the Swallows and Amazons series just as Hugh Brogan did for the author in *The Life of Arthur Ransome* (1985). *Why Was Billy Bunter Never Really Expelled?*, written jointly with Dennis Butts, is a sequel to their *How did Long John Silver Lose*

*his Leg?* (2014) and in twenty-six short chapters tackles another set of puzzles thrown up by children's literature.

Some of the chapters relate to particular novels and if, like me, a number of them have not been read since childhood, your memories are likely to be stirred and you will be trying to get your mind round problems you never knew existed. Here I particularly enjoyed 'Charles Kingsley: Christian Socialist, Evangelical Storyteller, or Sexual Sadist?', which sent me back to read *The Water-Babies* again and to discover the author's obsession with punishment and how spiteful Mrs Bedonebyasyoudid actually is. In another questioning of Christian evangelism, 'Why does C.S. Lewis Annoy so many People?', Philip Pullman finds the Narnia series 'dodgy and unpleasant', taking for granted 'things like racism, misogyny and a profound cultural conservatism that is utterly unexamined', though Rowan Williams, formerly Archbishop of Canterbury, makes a strong argument in Lewis's

defence. Another favourite was ‘Whose Side Was Henty really on in the American Civil War?’, which discovers the unexpected ambivalence of Henty’s *With Lee in Virginia*, reflecting the ambivalence in Victorian England over the issue of slavery in America.

On a lighter note, I was delighted to find out – in ‘Biggles: Tough Guy or Romantic Hero’ – that the flying ace who was so much part of my childhood had a softer side and in *Biggles Looks Back* rescues the only love of his life, Marie Janis, a German spy, and sets her up in a cottage in Hampshire. Not surprisingly, I missed the story about the passionate love affair which was included in *The Camels are Coming* (1932), and by the time the pair are reunited (in 1962) my interest in Biggles had waned and I had moved on to other things.

Arthur Ransome is not forgotten, though I suspect that many Tars will take issue with the suggestion (in ‘What Makes a Children’s Classic?’) that ‘his books, by some quirk, survived’. The final chapter – ‘A Mystery Solved: How Adults Read Children’s Books’, written by Peter Hunt – centres on the *Swallows and Amazons* series. In fact

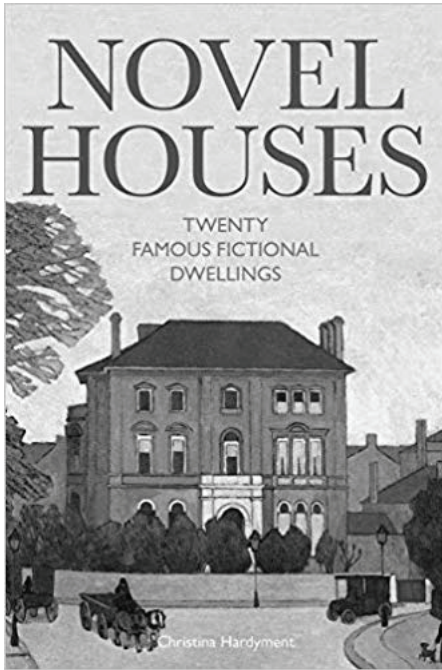
an earlier version of this chapter appeared in *Mixed Moss*, 2016 under the title ‘The Big Five’.

At first I was somewhat disappointed that the array of quirky questions posed in *Why Was Billy Bunter Never Really Expelled?* were often left unanswered, but it quickly becomes apparent that the main point of the book is not to solve mysteries but to provoke debate in a gently humorous way. It does this admirably, and in doing so provides the historical background and the insights which allow that debate to take place.

*Julian Lovelock*

**Christina Hardyment, *Novel Houses* (Oxford: Bodleian Library, 2019). ISBN: 978-1851244805.**

Christina Hardyment is, of course, well known to Tars – as a Vice-President of our Society, one of Ransome’s Literary Executors, and author of *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint’s Trunk* and *The World of Arthur Ransome*. Although Hardyment’s most recent work, *Novel Houses*, is nothing to do with Ransome, it will appeal to those whose literary interests spread further than *Swallows and Amazons* and children’s literature in general.



In *Novel Houses*, Hardyment investigates the role played by the houses, great and small, that are at the centre of twenty well-known novels. These are arranged chronologically, starting with Horace Walpole’s outlandish gothic novel *The Castle of Otranto* and ending with J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series (and the fantastic and equally gothic Hogwarts). Along the way Hardyment visits some very different places – for example, Wuthering Heights, Bleak House, Uncle Tom’s Cabin, Cold Comfort Farm, Brideshead and *Rebecca’s* Manderley.

I am normally a little suspicious of literary geography, which can become reductive when the links are pushed too far. Even when writers start with inspiration from real life, it is their job to transform the raw material of people and places into fictions which may be quite unrecognisable. However *Novel Houses* is about so much more than this and Hardyment is alert to the danger: ‘But though literary geography is great fun ... this is not primarily a book about matching fictions to places. It is an enquiry into what it is that made my twenty authors interest themselves in “literary architecture”, creating from a combination of experience and their own imaginations dwellings that expressed what they wanted to say.’

Thus, using the original houses (where they exist) as a starting-point, Hardyment shows how they become an important part of the structure of the novels in which they feature, and then goes on to offer original and perceptive analysis that sheds new light on the work in question. All this is achieved with a lightness of touch that makes her criticism both accessible and enjoyable for ‘the common reader’ – putting the

convolutions of much recent academic criticism to shame. More than this, Hardyment argues for the continuing importance in all our lives of ‘a nurturing and supporting home’ and how (writing of Harry Potter) ‘upbringing in such a home is a potent weapon in the ceaseless battle between good and evil’.

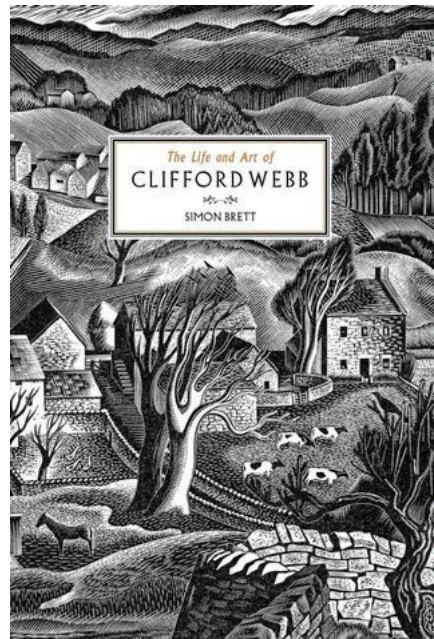
*Novel Houses* is an outstanding book. It is beautifully produced by the Bodleian Library, which has been able to furnish the lavish illustrations from its own collection. A useful ‘Gazetteer’ tells of the original houses as they are now, noting which are open to the public.

*Julian Lovelock*

**Simon Brett, *The Life and Art of Clifford Webb* (Dorchester: Little Toller Books, 2019). ISBN: 978-1908213662.**

To most Tars, Clifford Webb will be remembered as the artist who was asked by Jonathan Cape to illustrate the first edition of *Swallowdale* and provide further drawings for the reprint of *Swallows and Amazons* in 1931. What may not be known is that for over 45 years Webb was one of the country’s most respected illustrators and wood engravers

whose name and artwork deserves to rank alongside the likes of Eric Ravilious and John Nash. This beautiful soft-back art book, running to 240 pages and lavishly illustrated, will do much to re-establish his reputation. Although the black and white and colour print illustrations are the main focus of the book, Simon Brett also describes the fascinating, complex and often secretive life of Webb and guides us through his work and techniques.



Webb came from a humble working-class background, had a distinguished World War I in which he was wounded several times, and upon discharge

continued his studies at Westminster School of Art. He married Ella Monckton, an artist and writer of some note, and together they collaborated on some of his early books. This work, which often concentrated on animal illustrations, led to one historian stating Webb was, 'The outstanding picture-book artist of the 1930s'. In World War II Webb was asked to become the petrol controller for North West England, necessitating a move to Newcastle, where he met and fell in love with Phyllis Barnes, someone he was to share another secretive life with until his death in 1972. He led a somewhat liberal, even bohemian life, living with his wife and children in Surrey for most of the year but decamping every summer to Herefordshire to live with Phyllis.

Trained by such heavyweights as Walter Sickert and Eric Gill, Webb soon developed a style of his own, based on abstraction and modernism. His bold mark making and confidence led to him being invited to teach at the Birmingham School of Art and in later years at St Martin's School of Art, where he tutored the author. Although an expert in wood engraving, in the 1950s and 60s he

became a pioneer of colour-relief printmaking. The book, with over 250 beautiful illustrations gives ample examples of his work.

Over 45 years Webb illustrated 47 books, with animal pictures and rural and urban landscapes to the fore, but he is possibly best remembered for eight books for the ground-breaking Golden Cockerel Press, in which he illustrated classical subjects such as Julius Caesar's Commentaries, the Crusades, The Amazons and a short story of H.G. Wells, *The Country of the Blind*.

Simon Brett's book gives ample coverage to illustrating *Swallowdale* and *Swallows and Amazons*, as these were his first real commissions. The relationship between Ransome and Webb was not the easiest and Brett relates this with some humour. Webb had two visits to Cumbria to see the locations, landscapes and boats, but after his first visit Ransome wrote, 'CW left. Thank goodness. The dullest, decadent, coxcomb ever in this place ... but he can draw well'. In total Webb made 28 full-page drawings for *Swallows and Amazons* and 30 for *Swallowdale*. Although Ransome praised Webb's illustrations in a letter he sent to him, privately he was



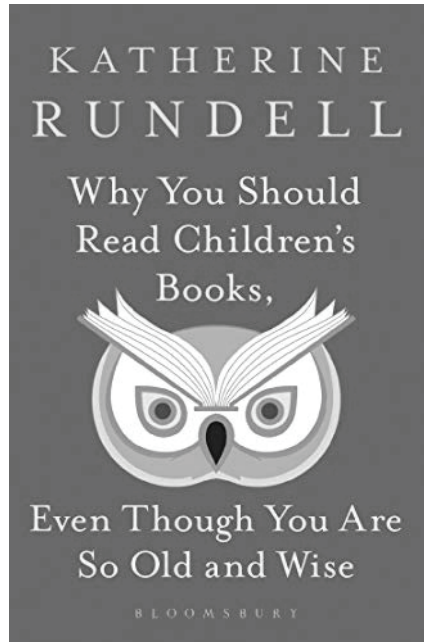
scathing and corresponded with Dora Altounyan telling her how bad they were. Ransome's opinion is of course grossly unfair to Webb's artistic qualities, and many of us love and admire his illustrations. Dora too didn't wholly share Ransome's view and perceptively replied, 'the things that the illustrations fall short on are the things that nobody knows except US. The secret japes, and details that your general public doesn't know anything about.'

As we know, Ransome was simply too close to his subject matter and his characters and too fastidious about detail to accept anyone else's idea of how the book should be illustrated. Brett points out that a prickly Ransome kept demanding changes, with obsessional concern for detail, but despite Webb being meticulous in responding to these, ultimately 'Clifford decided he could no longer work with him, and Ransome did his own illustrations from then on, which was what he had always wanted.'

If you love Webb's illustrations in the Ransome books, or have half an eye for style and design, you'll love this sumptuously produced book.

*Peter Wright*

**Katherine Rundell, *Why You Should Read Children's Books, Even Though You Are So Old and Wise* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019). ISBN: 978-1526610072.**



This delightful 63-page volume is written by an Oxford don who spent much of her childhood climbing trees in Zimbabwe. It is a very readable justification for the growing number of adults who buy or borrow children's books to read for themselves. Rundell's main argument is that while not all children's books meet the criteria for good literature (and she certainly doesn't think that adults should *only* read children's fiction),

the books that *do* are good for *both* children and adults at particular times in their lives.

I was a little disappointed that there were no academic references or list of books that Rundell thought met her criteria, although some quotes and books are mentioned. At the same time, I appreciated seeing an academic break free of the conventional ‘third person’ pseudo-objective writing usually found in literary articles and books.

The first half of the book explains the ‘hunger’ of the child to read (and particularly to be read to or be told fairy tales), the history of writing for children, and the way the sanitisation of modern fairy tales, for example, fails to meet this hunger. Rundell then explores the elements of ‘politics’, imagination and hope as critical ingredients of ‘good’ fiction. Finally, she explains the ‘galvanic kick of children’s books’ to help adults navigate difficult times. They are not, however, ‘a hiding place, they are a seeking place’ because ‘what helped were the old narratives, told for the benefit of children and adults and anyone who would listen’.

Rundell is clearly annoyed with critics and general readers who

look down their noses when she says she writes children’s fiction. Children, being more discerning and in touch with their feelings, may actually be more critical readers than adults and therefore *more* difficult to write for.

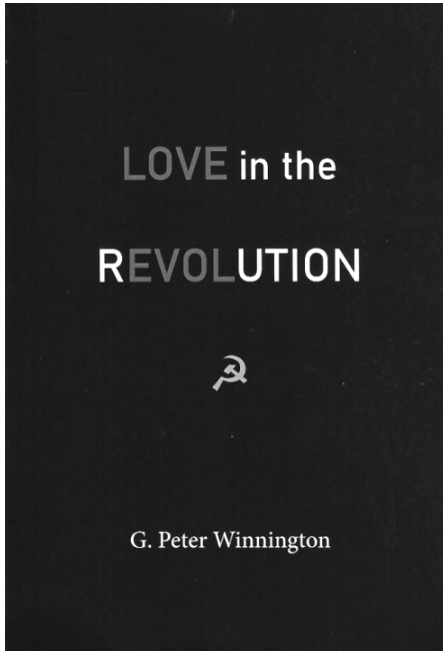
Of course, I had to check out Rundell’s own books to see how well she practises what she preaches. My fussy 13-year-old’s absorption in *The Explorer* (and my own, which led me to finish it secretly before we’d finished reading it together) says it all. Adults reading children’s books such as *Swallows and Amazons* might just save the world (particularly at this time) and, for just £5 for the hard-back, it’s not a bad investment in the future.

*Catherine Lamont*

**G. Peter Winnington, *Love in the Revolution: True Stories of Russians and Anglo-Saxons* (Letterworth Press, 2020). ISBN 978-2970130710.**

For those who have developed an interest in the history of the Russian Revolution through Arthur Ransome, this new book will be an entertaining read. His name comes into seven of the nine chapters, perhaps a surprising number given that, as far as we

know, he only had one love affair with a Russian, which resulted in his marriage to Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina, but of course he knew many of the people concerned.



Of the seven love stories told, six involve Russian women, and one a Russian man, and their stories are as varied as their backgrounds and characters. All have involved a great deal of research, and the author has given us clear expositions of often very complicated stories, not least of which is that of Evgenia and Arthur, the subjects of chapter 5.

Of the sources referred to in *Love in the Revolution*, TARS Library has copies of eleven titles as well

as Ted Alexander and Tatiana Verizhnikova's *Ransome in Russia*, with the text of Evgenia's story, as told to Arthur, in chapter VIII.

The chapter headings can be intriguing – who are ‘Lola, A.K. and D.’, for example? If you have read *Under Five Eagles*, you will know that its author is Lola Kinel, and ‘A.K.’ was what she called Arthur, after the Russian-style name on his visiting card. As Winnington points out, hers is really the only description we have of Ransome during his time in Russia. ‘D.’ was the staff member at the British Embassy with whom Lola fell in love – *not*, I hasten to add, with Arthur, although she did meet ‘D.’ through Ransome.

Nor did Moura Budberg count Arthur among her many conquests, who included Robert Bruce Lockhart, H.G. Wells and Maxim Gorky, as described in chapter 6, ‘Moura and her Many Lovers’. The Library has two books about Moura Budberg, quoted by Winnington. ‘Tamara and Benjie’ will be familiar to readers of their books, *Theatre Street* by Tamara Karsavina, the dancer, and *Silken Dalliance* by H.J. Bruce (‘Benjie’), another Embassy worker.

Perhaps the chapter I enjoyed

most was that headed ‘Ivy and Maxim’. Ivy was the daughter of an Austrian linguist at Cambridge University and an English mother, and met Maxim Litvinov when he was in exile in Britain. I found the tale of their many adventures in Russian politics riveting. Maxim was the only Bolshevik leader to survive the purges of Stalin, and Ivy was also a survivor, who later became an author and translator.

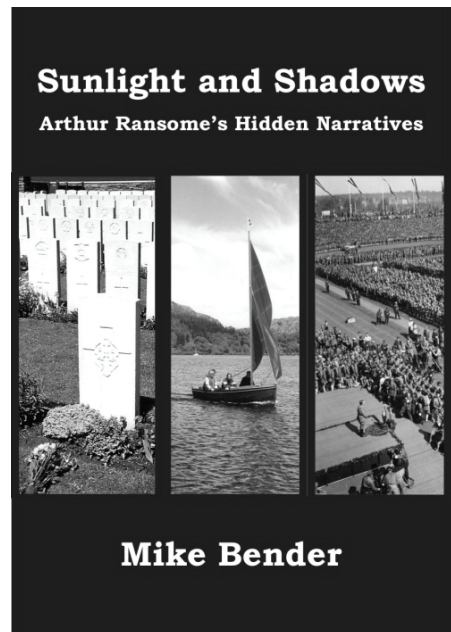
The text is well illustrated with portraits of several of the subjects. The only quibble I have is with the method of having the relevant sources at the end of each chapter, followed by the references, and errors have crept in. Apart from that, it is a book I would return to, and a valuable source of information for anyone interested in the people caught up in the Russian Revolution.

*Winifred Wilson*

**Mike Bender, *Sunlight and Shadows: Arthur Ransome’s Hidden Narratives* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2020).**

The author is a retired psychologist with a post-retirement PhD in English Literature, and an experienced yachtsman. So he’s well-qualified to analyse Arthur Ransome,

introduced on the first page as ‘a complex, insecure individual’. His thesis is that ‘great novels come from the unconscious’ and therefore that ‘an author of any depth will, across the body of their work, explore a small number of themes and it is these underlying themes that give their works their tensions and dynamic’. They will reflect personal problems that the author cannot resolve: ‘It is this chronic psychic tension that leads to the great novel.’



In Ransome’s case these problems mostly revolve around the relationship he had as a child with his father, who notoriously withheld affection and approval,

leading to feelings of inadequacy, compounded by actual inadequacy due to undiagnosed near-sightedness exacerbated by bullying at school.

So Ransome had to go through life bearing the stigma of dufferishness, argues Bender, and was unable to prevent it infecting his writing. Bender's prime exhibit in support of this is what he calls 'The Undermining of Captain John' of the Swallows, to which he devotes two entire chapters. In brief, his argument goes that John is portrayed as a duffer because he didn't do a lot of things he ought to have done in getting the *Goblin* safely across to Holland.

The demonstration of this is a finely-detailed piece of writing, but the conclusion, that this is somehow Ransome unloading his own subconscious insecurities onto the unfortunate John, deserves to be challenged. For a start, this is John working at and beyond the edge of his experience, growing up as he goes. An alternative narrative, a textbook passage by John, would have been both dull and unconvincing. And what, after all is the hero for, but to shoulder the decisions, make the mistakes and then learn from and rectify them? If Father's

words of praise, 'You'll be a seaman yet, my son', seem lukewarm to Bender, it's only because they are the simple and objective truth. And we can assume that John will not mind, for he has already experienced the moment of triumph he permits himself, having scrambled back on deck after being washed overboard, and the 'serious kind of joy' of knowing that he had done his very best.

So does John get dragged down to join his author in failure, or does Ransome achieve a sort of liberation (the 'settling of accounts with his father' that Brogan claims) through John's ultimate success?

This is a book that's bound to start arguments, which is why it could be the most important book on Ransome published in the last decade or so. Bender seems to expect such a response, even to seek it. He lays out his ideas clearly and invites us to see if we agree with him. Sometimes I emphatically do – on survivor guilt following the First World War, in which AR's brother Geoffrey was killed, on fatherless families in the inter-war years. Less so on the slightly whacky notion that the inclusion of country skills –



skinning a rabbit, guddling trout and so on – is a blueprint for guerrilla survival in the event of a future German invasion. But on the subjects of AR's relationship with Evgenia and his capacity for self-deception over the Altounyans he is disturbingly and depressingly sound.

The main part of the book is cogently argued, and engagingly easy to read, with pleasant touches of humour. Bender's sources include John Berry's illuminating *Discovering Swallows & Ransomes*, and oft-overlooked transcripts from the TARS Literary Weekends. The result is a portrait that goes a long way to making sense of Ransome's many puzzling inconsistencies.

The last two chapters, however, have a distinctively different feel, more like notes towards a different, though related book. Their subject is the Ransome Legacy – its preservation and its projection into the future (which is already here). And it has great relevance to Tars who are good at the first (probably too good) but not so good at – indeed resistant to – the second.

The style here is more discursive, even rambling at times, but the message is clear:

Ransome's appeal is chiefly to a diminishing number of elderly readers whose main interest is in preserving and revisiting their own childhood pleasure in the stories. However, for a writer's works to remain important, it is necessary for him to remain part of what Bender calls 'the cultural air' – discussed, written about, translated into other media, regarded as relevant. In short, alive.

It's more than a little ironic that Bender's book is here published as a subscription edition, as he identifies that as part of the problem. It permits only a limited form of publication which does not show up on internet searches – a problem which meant Bender had previously overlooked this 'treasure trove' in earlier researches. He throws in a number of ideas for exploration – some more promising than others – and even some possible film treatments. And he ends with a rallying-cry: 'Ransome's legacy is fascinating ... but his reputation is in the balance. He could slip into two lines of the few books on children's literature ... or he can be part of current debates and concerns.' We'd do well to heed it.

*Peter Willis*

# AN T-EILEAN SGITHEANACH (ISLE OF SKYE)

**Martha Blue (age 13)**

blue Skye gathers blue sea, yet remains itself  
whose outer world of widest skies and wider sea-scapes  
are arcs and sweeps of fragmented stone and sapphire waters  
whose moors are as much home to curlew and lapwing as to machair grass  
whose cliffs and bluffs are territory to butter-tinted gannet, melancholy-grey gugas,  
dappled fulmars, blackest storm petrels and brilliant-white-jet-black sea eagles  
whose cry above red-dearg hues of Bealach na Sgairde slopes is so vertical that soil cannot grip  
  
salt-spattered beaches and wind-ploughed trees are proof of harshest fragilities,  
Quiraing, Storr, Prison, Needle – Pleistocene bastions of Triassic sediment and Mafic sills –  
stone sharp enough to pierce skies and blacker-than-night oceanic squalls,  
and fluorescent with slime and wet and moss in patches  
against basaltic boulders crumbling into twisted, fantastic stone sculptures  
  
Skye, Eilean of extremes – mountainous Cuillins – colossal monoliths and pillars  
beyond Bla Bheinn, the blue mountain, offering glazed and hazed glimpses  
of the Outer Hebrides, where Hirta is grinding away into the surf-salted sea,  
and microcosmic sheep and bones and stones  
whose final-stepping stone is Stac an Armin, cruach, warrior stac,  
fighting the sea in matchless futile rage  
  
Ramasraig – raven’s bay, Annishadder – eagle’s place,  
shelters for birds from storms, sea-bound remnants of the air,  
once wedged into broken crofts that remain in petrified ruin  
like the shattered families, left blank, cleared  
through precipice and storms of isolation to cling to their unmapped spirits  
  
villages are now where tourists sleep, and land is farms for cattle and sheep –  
industrialised Skye, an island bridged between sea and scape  
no longer Camus Tianavaig – bay of refuge –  
but more car parks, laybys, caravan parks, quarries and helter-skelter roads to scar the land  
where continuous past becomes continuous present

**Congratulations to Martha Blue, a junior member of TARS and an editor of *The Outlaw*, whose poem was the overall winner of the 10-13 years category of the The Solstice Prize for Young Writers 2019 run by Writing East Midlands.**



Great Mountain

HIGH HILLS

unexplored

ARCTIC

RIVER AMAZON

BOAT HOUSE

NATIVE SETTLEMENT

OCTOPUS LAGOON

