

THE THIRTIES AND FORTIES TO A RANSOME READER

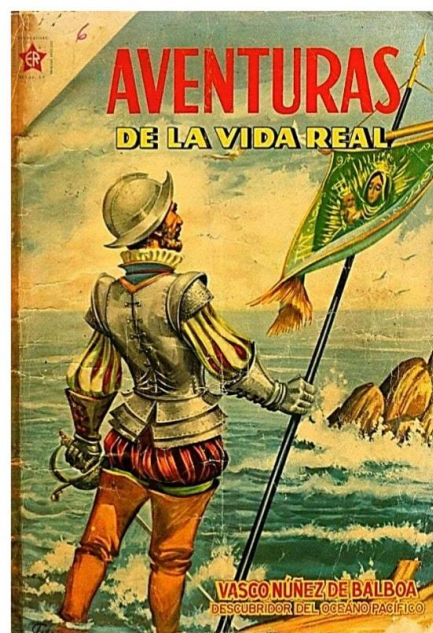
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What was going on in the 30s, when Ransome's books were being written and published? I was born in 1930, a year after the Wall Street Crash triggered the Great Depression. As a very young child, I was unaware of the reasons for my family's careful budgeting. But in the early 30s I heard of a carpenter who worked for neighboring householders who had died of malnutrition! Malnutrition? in Greenwich, Connecticut, one of the richest towns in the United States? My father was a lawyer; we never went hungry, but neither did we ever throw anything away. Recycling was a way of life, before ever hearing of a Climate Crisis. Although I was a girl, I was used to wearing my older brothers' outgrown shirts, slacks, coats and boots. And as for books ... there was always the library.

I was about nine years old when our local Children's Librarian introduced me to what became my favorite reading – the Arthur Ransome books. But I was put off by the title of the first book, 'Swallows and Amazons', and the rather lurid map (by Helene Carter) showing a barque in a lake and an octopus in a lagoon. I did not want to read a book about South America or travelling in Brazil, and that is what I assumed the topic of a book with 'Amazon' in its title would be. I returned the volume to its shelf and found instead some Paul Brown books about ponies. My mother at the urging of the librarian, checked out *Swallows and Amazons* anyway, and when we were home, suggested I read it, assuring me it was not about South America!

I began to read, and then was put off by the poem heading the first page, which started 'Or like stout Cortez, when with eagle eyes he stared at the Pacific' – when even I, at nine, knew that it was Balboa who had been the first European to set eyes on the Pacific Ocean, not Cortez. Of course it was Keats who wrote the poetry, but I did not know about him, and thought Ransome had made the mistake!

It was, of course, Balboa whose 'eagle eyes had stared at the Pacific,' as the cover of this book suggests¹



¹ Image downloaded from vasco-nuez-de-balboa-aventuras-de-la-vida-real-01-junio-1956-revista-completa-descubrimiento-del-ocano-pacifico-1-638.jpg (638×903) (slidesharecdn.com).

The Thirties and Forties to a Ransome Reader

Well, the next paragraphs were interesting, with Roger, tacking up the field like a sailboat – I knew what ‘tacks’ were, from my grandfather, who sailed his dory on Long Island Sound and let me hold the jibsheet while the vessel went round across the wind. But I got stuck again on the telegram with its English-isms. What was a ‘duffer’? I am like Susan – ‘What are duffers if not duffers?’ Also, the telegram came in a red envelope, and in my experience, telegrams always came in yellow envelopes.

‘Darien’ did not bother me – the next town over from my hometown of Greenwich was named Darien, a perfectly good name that I did not at the time associate with South America, although I now know it is a name for parts of the Isthmus of Panama. However, having tea got me stuck again. I only ever had tea when visiting my grandmother. To me, tea and coffee were both ‘adult’ drinks, while children had milk or juice. And I had never tasted marmalade.

I took the book back to my mother and said I could not make sense of it. I still was not sure whether these children were in South America or some other country. Luckily my mother solved the problem for me. She read aloud to me the first chapter, and told me it was set in England, and that was why some words and food were different.

Once I found it was not about South America, but about ordinary children who liked boats and camping and islands, I felt more at home. If I came across an odd expression, I just skipped over it, and read on myself, to find out what they were going to do next. Foreign countries were too exotic for my taste – I wanted to read about children like myself, those I had something in common with. And this I found with the Arthur Ransome books.

In fact, the next few years were going to be a bit too exotic in real life, while reading the Ransome series let me into a world of normal unthreatened childhood.

War began with Italy invading Ethiopia in 1935 and Japan invading China in 1937. Italy and Japan, who had been our allies in World War 1! I remember my brother criticizing our government for sending boatloads of scrap-iron to Japan, for making weapons. Germany invaded Poland, and Britain went to war in 1939. The U.S. stayed out until 1941, but Roosevelt supported Britain with Lend-Lease, sending arms and destroyers for her to defend herself.

We heard of France betraying their ally, Britain, surrendering to the Germans and letting them attack the British army that had come to France’s aid. We heard about Dunkirk and the little boats of volunteers from the coasts of England who sailed and motored across to rescue as many of the British army as they could while under German fire. I wonder now if the (fictional) Swallows and Amazons would have taken part in this.

From 1939 until the end of 1941, our school sponsored refugees from Europe – whole families or unaccompanied children who lived on campus for several months, until other homes were found for them. Our school, Edgewood, was a co-ed, boarding and day school, whose headmistress, Miss Langley, was a disciple of John Dewey, the founder of Progressive Education. The refugee parents were given temporary teaching duties to earn their board and room. I remember Madame Balinski, a Polish woman who taught us French, in 4th grade, and her little son, Michel – a spindle-shanked little boy who was initially confused by having fled, first to England, and then by ocean liner to America. Elizabeth Goldwater also came from England – a child with beautiful long blond hair and a parcel of dirty stories she had heard on the boat and repeated to us. Gustav von Wedellsborg Wedell told us he was a baron in his country, Denmark. But his ambition was to be a cowboy in Texas. Mr Lustgarten from Austria became our music teacher, and his daughter Eleanor our orchestra’s first violinist. We saw tears running down

The Thirties and Forties to a Ransome Reader

our teacher's cheeks when we sang lyrics about his lost Austrian homeland which were set to the music of Dvořák's 'Humoresque'.

In August 1941, my family travelled to Maine, as usual, to spend two weeks camping on our family island in Penobscot Bay. Like the Swallows in the book I had been reading, we were on an island, using boats to get anywhere. We had motor boats, mostly dinghies with outboards, one somewhat larger with an inboard engine. When we left our beautiful spruce-covered island, we did not know that it would be decades before we returned.



Our island, Ram Island, in Penobscot Bay, c. 1930s

December 7, 1941 – a Sunday – the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. We listened to continuous news on the radio. My grandmother telephoned in fear of being bombed. My father reassured his mother – no bombs could reach Connecticut. Next day in school, all classes were gathered in the largest meeting-room to hear President Roosevelt's speech to Congress urging them to declare war against Japan. When we broke up, small boys ran about outside, pretending they were airplanes and bombing the Japanese. What a contrast with Ransome's Roger playing the role of a peaceful clipper-ship!

No longer could refugees safely leave Europe for America. One of our teachers relayed to us the true story of the doomed English evacuee children singing 'Roll Out the Barrel' while the brave orchestra played on the deck as the torpedoed liner sunk under the waves. In the lower grades, we packed small cardboard boxes with necessities like toothbrushes, combs, a cake of soap and handkerchiefs, which the Red Cross would deliver to Refugee Camps. Male teachers and some of the older students joined the military. The whole school turned out to create a Victory Garden which grew vegetables for the dormitory dinners. I dug a Victory Garden at home, with the help of my father and brothers, who removed huge boulders from New England's rocky soil. My mother put up beans and tomatoes, enough to last us the winter.

My mother became an Air Raid Warden. She and other volunteers took a course about the Wardens' duties. At the end, a test was given, and the highest marked volunteer would be chosen as District Commander. My mother got the highest marks, but a Home Defence Commission member told her that they wanted a man as commander. As she told me this, I had a bitter taste of how far from equal America

was. My mother and grandmother had marched for the vote successfully, but still were not equal. However, my mother became commander of a smaller Precinct within the district. She made a careful map showing every road and house and watercourse in our rural area. The watercourses were included so that the wardens would know where to find water to put out fires caused by incendiary bombs. Fortunately Germany could not send bombers as far as New England, so no bombs fell here, but the Japanese sent bombs via unmanned balloons which fell at a few points in the western US.

My brother and I would take our bikes and go out in the early evening to make sure the neighbors were applying the dim-out. Every family had to put up blankets or dark curtains over their windows so the light wouldn't shine out and make a glow along the Connecticut coast. This was to prevent U.S. Navy and Merchant Ships from being silhouetted against a glow of light along the shore, which would make them easy marks for German U-Boats.

My oldest brother was drafted. Because he was a college student, he was sent to a special program at Cornell University to learn Chinese and Japanese, to get ready for an invasion of Japan which was planned for the autumn of 1945. The war rolled on. We did not take holiday trips, as gas rationing left only enough coupons for daily necessities like shopping or travelling to school. The town put up large cages made of chicken-wire, and residents were asked to throw in their old aluminum pots and pans to be collected for airplane manufacture. If a pan leaked or was dented, we enjoyed throwing them in these bins.

We put up a huge map on our living room wall and marked the advance of the Germans east into the Central European countries and Russia – and finally their retreat, village by village, from Russia.

D-Day came at last on June 6, 1944. With terrible casualties, the Allied forces were pinned on the beaches for days before they managed to climb up the cliffs and chase the Germans from their machine-gun nests.

Our map now showed the Allied line moving from the English Channel coast across France and the Low Countries, stopped temporarily by the Battle of the Ardennes Forest, when the Germans counter-attacked. But at last our overwhelming forces defeated the Germans, Hitler committed suicide in his bunker, and the European Campaign was over. But the war continued in the Pacific for another year. American soldiers had been sent to defend Australia, as the Australian Army had been sent to Europe to support the British military. Now the GIs² fought, island by island across the Pacific, towards Japan.

My cousin Ben was wounded at Okinawa, but when he recovered in August 1945, he was ordered back across the US to California ready to be shipped out to the war again. On arriving in California, he learned the atom bomb had been dropped on Hiroshima. He never had to ship out. My oldest brother was in the Signal Corps, preparing to be dropped behind Japanese lines during the invasion of Japan, to signal to the invasion ships. He was travelling back to his unit in Missouri after embarkation leave, in August 1945, when upon leaving his YMCA room *en route*, he found the newspaper headlines reading 'Atom Bomb dropped on Japan; War soon to end'. It took 9 days and a second bomb to bring the Japanese to surrender, so there would be no invasion. Finally the war was over. My brother and cousin both were saved.

² GI - for Government Issue. All the equipment the U.S. soldiers had was marked 'Government Issue' - weapons, clothing, bedding, everything — so the soldiers called themselves 'Government Issue' (GIs also).



Maida in her Victory Garden

Many prisoners in Hong Kong and Japan were released and we attended news reels showing General Wainwright and his men walking in a victory parade along Fifth Avenue, still looking like human skeletons after their horrific ordeal as prisoners.

Now once again I could go sailing with my grandfather on Long Island Sound.



My grandfather (Fred R. Hoisington) in his dory, c. 1930s

As I crewed for my grandfather in his sloop-rigged 23-foot dory, I dreamt of sailing a boat of my own – inspired by the Ransome series. But four years of war – even while safe in America – had sobered our whole family.

The Thirties and Forties to a Ransome Reader

Some of the effects of the War led to benefits. The returning veterans had earned a government-supported university education through the GI Bill of Rights. With the GI Bill help, my brother Allen returned to his interrupted education at Harvard and received his BA. When I began college in 1948, there were still barracks in open spaces at Harvard to house the returning veterans and their wives and children. For the first time, people of all economic classes who had served in the military found university open to them, and many veterans became the first people in their families to gain a higher education.

My brother David was drafted after the war, and his Harvard courses in physics and engineering led him to be assigned to the White Sands Rocket Proving Ground in New Mexico. Here he tracked with radar the flights of captured German V-2 Rockets in the US rocket research program. This experience in turn led to his career as one of the chief researchers in radar in the US.

But most effects of the war were not so positive. One cousin, a Navy officer, was sent to Hiroshima after the war to report on the damage. The US Military did not seem to appreciate the effects of radiation – no protective garb was offered. Jim died of cancer a few years later, leaving a wife and two school-age children.

Strangely, in spite of the horror wreaked on the world, the peace brought examples of reconciliation. A classmate of mine at Edgewood had lived under Japanese occupation in Manilla all during the war. As children, he and his brother had been forced to attend executions in the public square of Filipinos who had resisted the Japanese – executions by beheadings. Yet after the war my classmate became an artist, and he told me he particularly liked everything about Japanese art and culture. I stared at him in amazement. He explained ‘Except war, of course!’ A neighbor of mine, Sue, attended Reed College, a progressive liberal arts college in Portland Oregon, where she met a Japanese student who had survived the war. As a teenager living outside of Hiroshima, he had had to go into the destroyed city to find his father and had carried his father’s body on his back out of the city, so the father could be given a dignified burial. Yet this Japanese youth had chosen to go to college in America. He and Sue eventually married, the firmest reconciliation between former enemies possible.

The books I enjoyed most during the war years, the Ransome books, helped me, and others, to hold a picture of what normal life could be, even though tragic events were happening. It was a pleasure to enter that stable world, perhaps enhanced by the writer who, like a *deus ex machina*, controlled the conflicts, the challenges, and adventures so they would not be too much for his seven-to-fifteen-year-old characters to handle. It was good to have Ransome’s pre-war world – a world that affirmed that life could be a place where survivors from Europe did not turn up with numbers tattooed on their arms, and Filipino children did not have memories of beheadings in a Manilla town square. The Swallows and Amazon books are a picture of children growing up in peaceful times. For me, to enter the world Ransome described was a relief from the world of war’s horror and loss.

It was not till two decades later, in the 1960s, that my family resumed its holidays on our Maine Island camp. During the war, searchers for valuable metals for the war effort had climbed the cabin roofs and detached the lead flashing from the chimneys. With leaky roofs, the logs, roofs and floors had rotted. Well, who cared? Most of the family had survived. We had tents. Later we repaired one of the cabins. Once again, we could enjoy the clean air, swim in the icy salt sea, watch the ospreys and eagles build nests and raise their young! A war puts things in perspective.

The Thirties and Forties to a Ransome Reader



Our cabin in the 1960s, after the roof had been repaired



Our family in 2018 on our family island (Ram Island) in Penobscot Bay



Me in 2015