

Roderick Welch: The Breeze Drops After Sunset

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Wednesday August 9, 1988. A small dark blue Mirror Class dinghy with two children and an adult on board slips away from the three boathouses at the foot of the field behind Lucy Batty's farmhouse [Bank Ground Farm] on the north-eastern bank of Coniston. The ship, African Wayfarer, was a borrowed one. The voyage to Peel Island took us just over two hours, and beating down against the prevailing southwesterly wind we made it in twenty-one tacks.

Our captain Guy (then 12) had learned his craft on the Bristol Channel and refined it on the River Blackwater in Essex; Russell (14) was mate, and I was Able Seaman, though not very able. On arriving at the southern end of the island, which I had watched for many hours over the years, envious of the 'seals' that covered it in summer, we elected to take the boat into the harbour rather than the tiny landing place on the eastern shore. There we removed rudder, tiller and mast, and paddled across to the cove on the mainland that faced the landing place. Here we had a rendezvous with 'the ship's brat' – or 'Queen Elizabeth' – my wife, Jackie, who can't swim and wasn't at all sure about making the short crossing even with a life jacket on. She had driven down the eastern bank of Coniston in the family Sierra with thermos flask and picnic. Interestingly, our meeting place on the mainland looked very like the island landing place illustrated on page 31 of Swallowdale.

We paddled to the island, pulling the nose of the Mirror well up onto the tiny shingle beach before scrambling up over the rocks into the centre of the island. Peel island is much smaller than Ransome's Wild Cat Island, and is broken into long strips. The western coast including the harbour rises gently from the lake in the south to a cliff at the lookout point some 15 feet above the water. As one steps out of a boat in the harbour, there is a vertical cliff some 12 or 14 feet high immediately to the right. I could imagine Titty hiding on the top, watching the Amazons land during that night of high adventure in the first book. This cliff forms a 'spine' down the length of the island and divides a small flat area on the western shore, separate from the main central area of the island to the east.

This central area is more of a long elongated 'bowl' between the rocky spine and the eastern shore, bare of grass but with sufficient trees to hang a tent to two between them.

When John swims round the island, he sees steep cliffs down both east and west shore. In fact, the west shore is accessible along its length to the water's edge, whilst the eastern side is high, smooth rocks sloping down at 45° into

the lake, reminiscent of a great ship listing in the water, too steep to walk down comfortably, but a great 'knickerbockerbreaker'.

Much of the island is covered with bluebells in spring and whilst the central camp site is bare, there is not too much erosion, considering the number of feet that clamber over the island in a year. There are many trees: oak, ash and birch cover the island, but there are few of the bushes that Titty had to force her way through.

There are signs of several camp fires in the central area and on our visit a tree had obviously come down in the great gales of October '87, its main trunk still lying there.

Eventually we all congregated at the top end of the island for our Pemmican sandwiches, crisps, apples, Hobnobs and coffee. As the sun began to sink behind the western hills I noticed the breeze was dropping as Nancy said it always did after sunset. The light was going fast and another Mirror dinghy was making slow progress up the Lake past Oxen House – it was time to go.

We returned my wife to the mainland to drive back to Holly Howe, whilst we re-rigged the ship and paddled out from the harbour.

Once clear of the island it was soon apparent there was not a breath of wind to fill our red sails, a scrap of paper dropped overboard took a long time to drift astern. There was nothing for it, down came the sails and out came the 'engines' or rather one very short damaged dinghy oar and one Canadian canoe paddle – and no rowlocks!

So it was dig in and paddle the three miles back up the lake. It was still a warm evening and when we were near Ransome's house, The Heald (which is best seen from the water), a voice 'Halloed' us – 'Are you all right?' 'Yes', we shouted. Go and put the kettle on," called the tea-loving Mate. 'I could do with something a little stronger,' I countered.

We paddled slowly on, and after some two hours, with the light almost gone, we heaved the Mirror onto her launching trailer in the reeds by the Battys' boathouse.

It was a slightly ignominious end to an idyllic evening but at least we didn't leave the boat and go home by car!

Photo: Peel Island from Blawith Fells