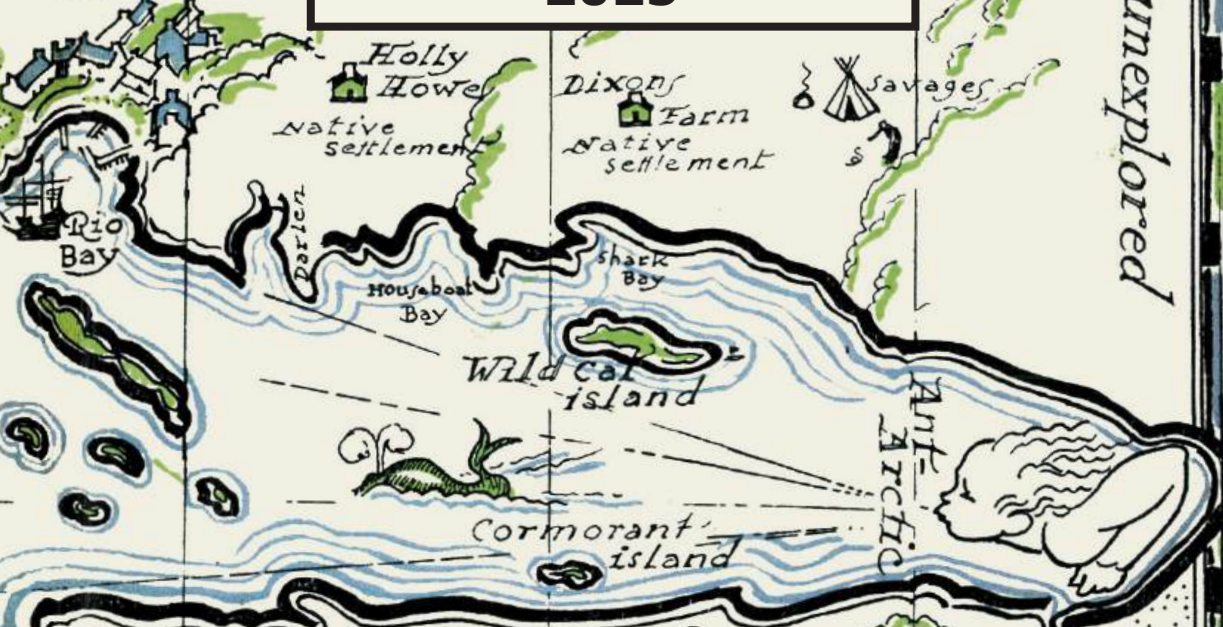


MIXED MOSS

THE JOURNAL OF THE
ARTHUR RANSOME SOCIETY
2025

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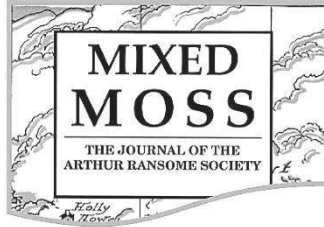
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OUT OF CAPTAIN FLINT'S TRUNK



One definition of an editor is, ‘a person who is in charge of and determines the final content of a newspaper, magazine, or multi-author book’. With *Mixed Moss* I prefer to feel it is the membership who determine the content of the journal, as without you there would be nothing to read. My editorial approach, apart from correcting errors and keeping articles to an appropriate length, is not to refuse any submission, as long as it has literary worth and its content is relevant to TARS. It is, after all, your journal and should reflect the views of all members. Some of this year’s articles raise potentially controversial views, so it’s highly possible that you may not agree with their content – we are, after all, all different; then why not write in and put another point of view? It would be good to be able to feature a few letters in *Mixed Moss*, or indeed an article responding with your own thoughts. So I’m keeping my fingers crossed for the 2026 edition.

My thanks go to all the contributors in this edition; it’s gratifying to see so many articles covering such a diverse range of topics. Perhaps star billing should go to Martin Beech, who from the other side of the Atlantic has researched the Leeds University archives to discover three previously unknown poems by Ransome, written during his short stay at Yorkshire College. You will be fascinated, I’m sure, to read of another claim for the real Swallowdale from member Chris Daniels. His research, arguments and photographs make for a very convincing claim, so your thoughts on this

would be welcome.

Members continue to dissect and explore the content of the 12 books, and so we are asked the question by Jill Goulder and Lesley Wareing, 'How Old was Sammy?'. Linda Phillips delves into *Winter Holiday* and the role of the D's, and John Thorn explores, 'Who were those Fair Spanish Ladies?' And from the TARS archives, material donated by Ted Alexander poses the question: which type of camera did Dick use?

TARS is a member of the Alliance of Literary Societies (ALS) and you may recall the society hosted their AGM weekend last year. Following on from this, Chris Birt contributed an article to their newsletter on 'Arthur Ransome and Russia', which is reproduced here. Another member of the ALS is the Children's Books History Society, and in 2024 they had a study day and conference on the Carnegie Medal at which Peter Hunt spoke about Ransome winning the first award for *Pigeon Post*. Peter is happy for us to reproduce his talk here.

Sailing was one of Ransome's great passions and Peter Willis has adapted an article he wrote for the ALS reminding us of the eventful west-to-east south-coast first voyage of *Nancy Blackett*. Complementing and contrasting this is Paul Brown's account of his and his wife's first major voyage in the reverse direction in their yacht *Arcturus*.

Following on from my article in last year's *Mixed Moss*, where I suggested Ransome's eyesight was not as poor as he would have us believe, this encouraged Andrew Harvey to pose the question 'Did Arthur Ransome have ASD?' Finally, Karen Babayan, a recipient of a Red Slipper Fund grant, turned her research on Ransome and the Altounyan family into a musical production *Swallows and Armenians: the Play* (available to view on YouTube) and this has been reviewed by Catherine Lamont. The script of the play is briefly reviewed in Bookshelf, along with Peter Hyland's assessment of Kirsty Nichol Findlay's Amazon Publication, *Novel Ransome*, and Sarah Samuel's review of the latest Carnegie medal winner, *Glasgow Boys*.

Hopefully there's plenty for you all to enjoy in this year's edition, but if you have any comments or would like to submit an article for next year, I'd be delighted to hear from you

Peter Wright

HOW OLD WAS SAMMY?

Jill Goulder and Lesley Wareing examine Ransome’s subtle adding of depth to major characters through the agency of minor ones.

Why is Sammy’s age important? Sammy Lewthwaite is of course the local constable who appears in *Swallows and Amazons* and *The Picts and the Martyrs* (and briefly in *Winter Holiday*). Well, as Mr Farland commented in *The Big Six*: ‘The value of evidence fluctuates with its context.’ As we shall see.

Ransome’s S&A (&D) books feature a large and varied cast of supporting characters – mainly adult, and commonly local residents. At one level these lesser characters operate as plot enablers (though a few – for example old Pa Swainson – are unashamedly for local colour). But many of them go deeper than that. What demonstrates Ransome’s delicate skill is how carefully written so many of them are. He gives us very little direct information about these characters beyond what is necessary to explain the action in which they are involved. However, we can infer a lot more about them from snippets scattered, apparently casually, throughout the narrative. Their (mainly implied) histories and standing in the *Swallows and Amazons* world are key to our appreciation of their interactions with the principal child characters, shedding crucial explanatory light on their personalities, actions and interactions.

So – sparked off by a discussion on Facebook about the confrontation in *Swallows and Amazons* between Nancy and Sammy – Jill had for some time been pondering his likely background and age. This article, jointly written with Lesley, is the consequence. It has been helpfully prefaced by Andrew Harvey’s piece in the 2024 *Mixed Moss* ‘AR and his anomalous adult ages’, with its detailed examination of the ages of Captain Flint and Molly Blackett.

So how old is Sammy? Is he a raw young lad, or a bumbling older chap? This isn’t an idle enquiry; our picture of Sammy, in *Swallows and Amazons* when he arrives on Wild Cat Island to investigate the firework incident on

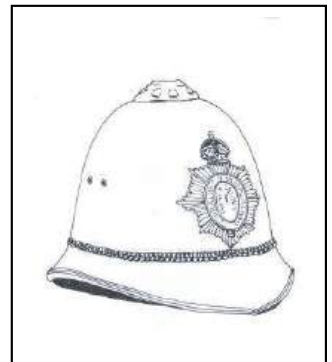
How old was Sammy?

the houseboat, and then in *The Picts and the Martyrs* after the Beckfoot burglary, affects how we view both the incidents and the other characters involved. If Sammy is middle-aged and a figure of authority, then Nancy's treatment of him in *Swallows and Amazons* makes her seem a bit of a brat: not only impertinent and disrespectful but also very unkind, given that Sammy is only trying to do his job. If the episode on Wild Cat Island is unpacked and re-examined, though, it tells a different story.

Who is Sammy? - Firstly, we need to put Sammy in context. He's a constable (he's been sent out in both cases by a sergeant);¹ his mother Mrs Lewthwaite is a near neighbour of the Blacketts and a former nurse of Molly² and then later of Nancy and Peggy³; and so whatever his age, he has been a neighbour and perhaps playmate of the Amazons since they were born. He might even (and we argue this) be not all that much older than the Amazons. So in this piece we find ourselves travelling along a long and winding road towards an assessment of him, including considerations of the age of several of the other adults. We're going to tackle this (with a useful table) later.

So where do we come across Sammy? After his appearance in *Swallows and Amazons*, he's mentioned briefly in *Winter Holiday* as being out testing the ice in Rio Bay, and as being sought by Uncle Jim when the Ds are found to be missing;⁴ then in *The Picts and the Martyrs* he is investigating the burglary and later deploying the GA's cloak at the scene of the GA's return. Looking at his *Swallows and Amazons* scene, Captain Flint has evidently reported the Swallows to the police after the firework episode, and Sammy's been sent along to take down the Swallows' particulars. He's thoroughly floored by Nancy, but as we'll see later this is not all that it seems.

In *The Picts and the Martyrs* Sammy's been sent along again about a burglary, but he is using his



*Cumberland and
Westmoreland
Constabulary helmet
1930s/40s⁵*

initiative by now and is as sharp as a tack about spotting faults in the GA's version of events; so he's matured in his role (or AR has developed his role) and we feel shows good promise as sergeant material; he's not a plodding, middle-aged failure. Finally, at the denouement of *The Picts and the Martyrs* his sergeant is the first to get the edge of the GA's sharp tongue, and then it's Sammy's turn. 'It would be useless to talk to your sergeant, but I regret that I am leaving too soon to have a few words with your mother.' It's difficult to imagine Mrs Barrable (or even the GA) saying that in *Coot Club* or *The Big Six* to Ransome's other village policemen, Constable Tedder, who is depicted in a wholly different manner from Sammy.

A Broads contrast: Mr Tedder - From his first appearance in *Coot Club*, Mr Tedder comes across as older than Sammy and as having more authority: "'What's all this?'" a deep voice asked, pausing between the words.' He is addressed as Mr Tedder, even as 'Officer'. He is married – his wife and wedding are mentioned twice.⁶ He is an experienced and knowledgeable vegetable gardener and seems to have been the village policemen in Horning for some time. In *The Big Six* he features more strongly and is portrayed as the archetypal village policemen so often found in detective fiction – 'the plodding policeman who is always looking in the wrong direction' as Julian Lovelock put it in his *Mixed Moss* 2024 article, 'But William ain't a bloodhound'. Tedder is neither very quick on the uptake nor particularly imaginative; he unquestioningly goes along with what seems to be the most obvious explanation of events. It is therefore not unreasonable to assume that the respect and deference afforded him within his local community is more due to his age and the length of time he has been the village bobby rather than to his acumen as a policeman. Sammy, however, is a different kettle of fish and we learn rather more about him, albeit in an oblique way.

The Lewthwaite family - Sammy's mother, Mrs Lewthwaite, lives in a cottage close to Beckfoot (perhaps an estate cottage) with her younger son Billy⁷ and probably Sammy too. There may also have been daughters, now

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married and gone. As with several local families mentioned in the books, the husband is not present.

In *The Picts and the Martyrs*, when the GA has disappeared, Cook sends the anxious Billy home. He says ‘Shall I say owt to Sammy if he’s at home?’⁸ Now this may refer more generally to the maternal home; but in *Winter Holiday*, after the snowstorm, Uncle Jim arrives at Beckfoot and asks Molly, ‘Is Sammy there? Slip along and tell him’.⁹ Later Nancy asks Cook ‘...where’s mother?’; Cook replies, ‘She’s gone along to Mrs. Lewthwaite’s’. It seems likely therefore that Sammy is living with his mother and rowing over to Rio for work: *The Picts and the Martyrs*, chapter XXIX, mentions ‘the sergeant of police from the other side of the lake’, and the police station is to this day up the hill from Bowness. The likely home living was not just because of Mrs Lewthwaite’s evident hold over her son; it was the norm at the time for sons in low-wage occupations of whatever age to live at home when convenient for work – bachelor digs were not for such as a rural police constable. We have little other indication of sons living with mothers, apart from Robin Tyson, but of course that’s different as they have a family farm to run. Is this a clue that Sammy is younger, rather than older and married and living in a police house? Perhaps, but there’s no certainty that his mother would have let go of him even if he were married.

While Mrs Lewthwaite was originally Molly Blackett’s nurse (see earlier), she’s not mentioned as Jim’s nurse, so perhaps Jim was older (see later). We can only speculate as to why Maria Turner took on the care of Jim and Molly¹⁰ - did their mother die? - but it seems likely that young Mrs Lewthwaite was drafted in to do the physical work of nursing little Molly. Girls went into service from as early as 12 in those days, but let’s call her 16 by the time of Molly’s birth (see table). By the time that Molly was c.8, Mrs



Windermere Police Station, up the road from Rio.¹¹

How old was Sammy?

Lewthwaite would probably have moved on to other posts, or to marry and have her own children. Later she returns as nurse to Nancy and Peggy (see above) – though we don't get an impression of any of the bonding affection that the Amazons have meanwhile built with Cooky. It's clear that Mrs Lewthwaite is a formidable woman; the threats to 'tell your mother' (Nancy in *Swallows and Amazons*, chapter XXIV) and 'have a few words with your mother' (the GA in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, chapter XXIX) is enough to make poor Sammy quail.

How can we judge Sammy's age? - Back to our first question. Sammy's mother's approximate age is important: how can we pin that down? Pivotal is young Molly's age when climbing the Matterhorn in 1901 – our one firm date. She could have been as young as, say, 8 (Roger's age when climbing Kanchenjunga in *Swallowdale* in 1931 with his older companions) or conceivably into her teens. As for her two companions, there's a hint, just after the discovery of the cache at the summit of Kanchenjunga: "I wonder how mother and Uncle Jim escaped from the great-aunt to come up here," said Peggy. "She was looking after them, you know." "Probably father rescued them," said Nancy.' That speaks strongly for Bob being older than Molly at least if not than Jim, and suggests a child-only expedition rather than a trio of young children accompanied by adults.

So the trio in 1901 might have been about the age of the Kanchenjunga expedition in 1931; there is a sense, in the S&As' exchanges, that they imagine this 30-year link. Some readers do affectionately imagine a slightly older age-group, with Molly and Bob as teenagers already with a romantic understanding; but how come they then waited 17 years for their first child to be born? Yes, World War I, but had they married and not had children for so long? Or if not, what would an adult Molly be doing for all those years before, in a house with the GA in charge and Jim off on his wanderings? As for Jim, Andrew Harvey's piece in his 2024 *Mixed Moss* piece plausibly pins down Jim's age in *Swallows and Amazons* as 45-50, so as around that of AR himself at the time of writing. He goes on to deduce that Molly was about 38 in *Swallows and Amazons*, so quite a few years younger.

How old was Sammy?

This accords beautifully with our parallel findings as in the accompanying table.

So, by 1901 Mrs Lewthwaite has moved on, either to marriage and children (see Sammy's age in I.a in the table below) or to other posts before settling down (as in I.b). These alternative scenarios would make Sammy between *c.*22 and 29 in *Swallows and Amazons* and 25-32 in *The Picts and the Martyrs*. Either way, definitely still a young man.

As for the Amazons, Roger Wardale¹¹ cites a note by AR to his publisher *c.*1943 giving the Amazons' ages at the time of *The Picts and the Martyrs* (1933, 3 years after *Swallows and Amazons* in 1930) as 15 and 14, so they were born in *c.*1918 and 1919.

Table: Estimated ages of key characters.

		M' horn				SA			PM
	1893	1901	1908	1918	1919	1930	1931	1932	1933
Mrs L.	16	24	31	41	42	53	54	55	56
Molly	0	8	15	25	26	37	38	39	40
Nancy				0	1	12	13	14	15
Peggy					0	11	12	13	14
Sammy I.a		0	7	17	18	29	30	31	32
Sammy I.b			0	10	11	22	23	24	25

This age range for Sammy means that he would have been *c.*10-17 when Nancy was born, and probably very much in and out of Beckfoot as a neighbour, son of the girls' nurse (and maybe rather crushed by his stern mother and anxious about minding his younger sibling(s)), and possibly even a playmate throughout the Amazons' young lives. It's likely that he joined the police at 16 as a cadet, with the young Amazons delightedly regarding him as their tame policeman. In these circumstances, Nancy would very surely not have regarded him as any sort of authority figure. It is

perfectly true that Nancy refers to him in *Swallows and Amazons* and *The Picts and the Martyrs* (twice)¹² as ‘old Sammy’, but in both cases the sense can simply be of affection or familiarity.

Nancy and Sammy on Wild Cat Island - And back again to the encounter in *Swallows and Amazons*. In chapter XXIV, when the Swallows are back on the island after the cutting-out expedition and expecting the Amazons, a very large policeman arrives by rowing-boat. They greet him politely, but he turns serious and immediately starts to ask them whether they’ve been near Capt. Flint’s houseboat. And then Nancy arrives and weighs in:

‘Sammy, I’m ashamed of you. If you don’t go away at once I’ll tell your mother.’

‘I’m sure I beg pardon, Miss Ruth,’ said the policeman, turning redder than ever. ‘I thought they’d know something about the burglary if anybody did, seeing that they’ve been at the houseboat before. I had no sort of idea they were friends of yours.’

‘Of course they are,’ said Captain Nancy, coming into the camp and dumping a bundle of tent poles. ‘They’ve never had anything to do with Uncle Jim’s houseboat. You go away back to Uncle Jim and tell him so. Or shall we take his boat and keep him prisoner?’ she added, turning to John.

‘No, don’t do that, Miss Ruth,’ said the policeman. ‘Not to-day. I’ve got to row right down to the foot of the lake.’

The key phrase in this exchange is ‘*Not to-day*’. This suggests that Sammy is well-accustomed to the Amazons’ comradely pranks such as commandeering his boat or capturing him, but he’s telling them that, while normally he falls in with such things, today he really is doing a grown-up job. And Sammy had clearly been misbriefed by Uncle Jim, who probably more or less told him that that loutish boy John had dunnit, and didn’t mention his disaffected nieces. Had he mentioned the latter, Sammy would (as later with the *Picts and Martyrs* burglary) immediately have suspected the truth of the matter, based on his long familiarity with the girls.

The Squashy Hat factor - Nancy's behaviour to Sammy in *Swallows and Amazons* has even been likened by some commentators to the GA's rude and insensitive treatment of senior figures in the community at the showdown near the end of *The Picts and the Martyrs*, and is employed to suggest that Nancy is out of the same mould as her GA. Squashy Hat (Timothy Stedding) is the biggest culprit in initiating the canard of Nancy being a copy of her great-aunt. However, we would argue that his comments say more about himself than about Nancy. His comments on this are all of course in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, where he is horrified to learn that Nancy has set up an elaborate Pictish arrangement and is convinced that the GA will rapidly discover all and that there'll be a disaster, probably impacting upon him and his vital work before Jim comes back. He's already in a state of awe and nervousness about Nancy's energy and power – 'The trouble with Nancy's velvet glove is that it's usually got a knuckleduster inside it... And if you see Nancy, tell her you know somebody who'd like to wring her neck.'¹³ Then later on when Nancy describes the burglary to Timothy, with the GA 'leaning out of the window and saying she was going to shoot', Timothy responds 'She's your aunt, you know'.¹⁴ Yes, fair enough, but crucially, Timothy is failing to recognise that whilst Nancy might well have inherited the GA's feistiness, she certainly did not inherit her great-aunt's cold and repressive nature. He's giving rein to his generic fear of strong females and erroneously conflating two very different individuals.

By the end of *The Picts and the Martyrs*, Timothy is indeed a bit windblown by Nancy's energetic activities, but he is being pretty unfair. 'Jim warned me to look out for squalls, and I ought never to have given that young woman a chance of raising them.' Dorothea is shocked at his negative view after how much Nancy has done to help Timothy – arranging burglaries etc: 'But don't you see? What she's been doing all the time is trying to keep Miss Turner happy and not to have any squalls at all.' Timothy completely ignores her and starts talking to Dick about the assaying. We can already see (bearing in mind that Dorothea is a proxy for AR in some guises) that AR is very much disapproving of Timothy's attitude to Nancy.

How old was Sammy?

There has been a suggestion or two (perhaps of the fan-fic type) of an attraction between Timothy and Nancy apparent in some passages in *The Picts and the Martyrs*. This is not the place to discuss our rebuttal of this idea, but some brief notes. Timothy's comments may be admiring – he may well be one of those chaps who are attracted to strong women while being terrified of them – but examination shows that they're in fact mainly voiced to the D.'s; and when he tries them on Nancy, she noticeably doesn't react at all. Nancy does learn to respect her uncle's colleague at the end of *The Picts and the Martyrs*, but any flirtatious element is purely one-sided.

The remark by Timothy seized upon by many commentators is in *The Picts and the Martyrs* chapter XXX following the GA's humiliation of Sammy (and threat about talking to his mother): 'I must say I did like the way she polished off the police and Colonel Jolys. If you ask me, I think your Great Aunt is remarkably like her Great Niece.' We suggest that this is unsound and unjust. Yes, Nancy and the GA both had courage and chutzpah, and yes, they both bossed other people around; but Nancy was innately kind, fair-minded, generous-hearted, willing to admit that she was wrong, and surprisingly sensitive when circumstances required it (e.g. John wrecking *Swallow*, Titty initially funking the water dowsing, Peggy's fear of thunder, fighting to protect her mother). The GA, on the other hand, acted in line with her conscience and duty, as she thought right and fit but seemed to give very little consideration or care to the impact on other people. In *The Picts and the Martyrs*, the GA mercilessly humiliates valued community members in public, whilst in *Swallowdale* Sammy is being playfully chided in front of a few children who are strangers to the area. As we have suggested in this piece, Nancy and Sammy have probably been neighbours and perhaps playmates all Nancy's life, and while the Amazons did doubtless pester him when they were young children there is a clear easiness and friendly bond. So Sammy's age is very important for how we readers see and comprehend Nancy. As Mr Farland implied, context is everything.

And we strongly reject the idea that AR would have presented such an idea – of Nancy and the GA being sisters under the skin – so unsubtly. As we say earlier, to us he's saying more about Timothy than about anyone else.

How old was Sammy?

And how would this hypothesis work if looked at the other way up? Cheryl Paget, in her 2015 *Mixed Moss* piece ‘Great Aunt Nancy or Not Welcome At All’, wonders whether Nancy might have become a bit of a Great Aunt herself in later years; but this fails in the face of any examination of Nancy’s warm and generous character – her sensitivity, her concern for the happiness of those in her care (look at the lengths to which she goes to enable Dick to achieve his desires of chemistry and sailing). And contributors to *Mixed Moss* and Ransome Facebook pages have suggested semi-jestingly before now that the GA had a wild youth but fell into a salutary disaster and determined not to let any young people in her care make even slightly the same mistakes. We personally can’t see this, hearing instead AR’s voice (once again, as when Dot tries to get Timothy to see Nancy’s side) in Dorothea’s sudden speculation about what the GA was like when young. ‘She gave it up. *The Great Aunt was one of those people who could never have been young at all.* She must have been a Great Aunt, and her sort of a Great Aunt, from the beginning of time.’¹⁵ (ed. italics = authors’ emphasis).

Ending up - What started out as a bit of fun speculation about Sammy’s age has revealed – as is so often the case with Ransome – *the vital role played by* all the little, casual and apparently incidental bits of information about minor characters. Ransome referred to his sub-plots as ‘scaffolding’,¹⁶ *and it’s these barely-noticed details* that lend the stories their robustness and complexity.

Of course, there is no absolute need to analyse any of these aspects because the books can be richly enjoyed without doing so. However, for anyone who is interested in Ransome’s craft as a writer, yet another level of appreciation can be enjoyed by unpacking the way Ransome engages and maintains his readers’ interest. In his introduction to *The Best of Childhood*,¹⁷ David Jones suggested that Ransome ‘tackled each book rather like a theatrical production’, first creating the set in a particular location and then creating a cast of major and minor characters appropriate to the setting he had chosen. With his careful yet subtle attention to detail, he created

How old was Sammy?

beautifully delineated characters – major and minor – who are believable and who behave realistically and consistently. He often does this through the way he describes interactions between them. A seemingly simple or casual conversation, delicately and economically written, can often reveal so much more than what is stated in the words on the page. Nancy and Sammy, Nancy and the GA, Squashy Hat's prejudices and influence – and AR under it all, directing us from behind the scenes as we read and re-read.

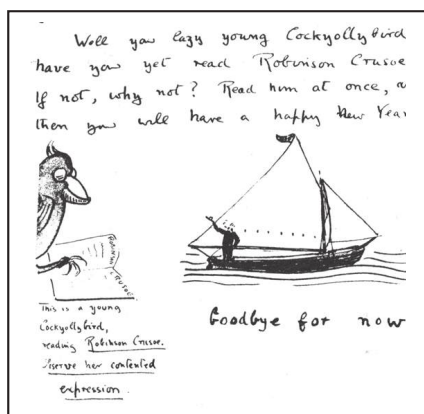
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ARTHUR RANSOME AND RUSSIA

Chris Birt summarises Arthur's many trips to Russia

In 1913 Arthur, who had hated the whole trial process, won his defence against a libel case relating to his Oscar Wilde biography,¹ which had been published the previous year. He was determined to get away from all that unpleasant legal stuff, to somewhere in Europe, not initially necessarily to Russia. However, early in 1913 he happened to come across some Russian fairy tales, in a London library, and he was so interested in these that he resolved to go to Russia to explore their origins further. At that time, he



*Part of a letter to Tabitha,
December 1918*

was also desperate to get away from his wife; he and Ivy were married in 1909, after a remarkably brief romance and engagement. They were completely unsuited to each other and the marriage was a disaster. But Arthur missed his wee daughter Tabitha very much as he went abroad, though he communicated with her (with illustrated letters) as best he could. Russia was then the only country in Europe to which entry was impossible without a passport; Ivy did not have one,

which was advantageous to Arthur (as a married woman, at that time she would have required her husband's permission to obtain a passport).

So in spring 1913 Arthur left for Russia, by sea via Denmark. At St Petersburg he was met by the Gellibrand family, old friends from his Chelsea days. They took him to their estate in Terioki, over the border in Finland (though of course in those Tsarist times Finland was no more than a province of Russia). There he set about learning Russian, teaching himself by studying children's reading primers. Arthur returned to the UK for a few months that next winter, but in April 1914 he was commissioned to write a

guidebook to St Petersburg; he returned to Russia immediately to work on this. He completed the guidebook in July 1914, but it was never published, owing to the outbreak of the First World War. After a brief return to the UK with the manuscript for his guidebook, he was back in Russia by 30th December 1914.

Now properly based in St Petersburg for the first time, he soon met Harold Williams, who knew all parts of imperial Russia, and who spoke Russian (and many other languages) very fluently.

Harold was married to Ariadne Tyrkova, who was one of the leaders of the Cadet Party; both of them became close friends with Arthur. Then in March 1915 Arthur met Hugh Walpole, the famous novelist, who was in St Petersburg working for the Russian Red Cross. That spring, Arthur was suffering severely from piles, and Harold and Ariadne Williams invited him

to rest and recuperate in their country house at Vergezha, beside the river Volkov; Arthur spent that early summer working on *Old Peter's Russian Tales*,² which was built around some of the Russian fairy tales he had picked up. However, he returned to St Petersburg for an operation on his piles on 9th August; anaesthesia was then in its very early days (the anaesthetics used then would nowadays be considered too toxic to be used for any anaesthesia); anyway, Arthur found the whole procedure very painful.

By this time, he had realised that the best way to support himself in wartime would be as a journalist war reporter. As it happened, the St Petersburg correspondent of the *Daily News* was severely ill, and from September 1915 Arthur was asked to carry on his work; later he was confirmed as the permanent correspondent of this newspaper. In that role he met many new people, including several British citizens working in Russia, including Sir George Buchanan, the UK Ambassador; Robert Bruce



*The hospital in St Petersburg
where Arthur received surgery*

Lockhart, the Consul General; Bernard Pares, the *Daily Telegraph* correspondent; Morgan Phillips Price, who with Harold Williams were both correspondents of the *Manchester Guardian*; and William Peters, a young economist from Aberdeen, who was working for the Russian Ministry of Trade and Industry.

Arthur visited the front three times in 1916, as well as going to Romania for a substantial visit there, supposedly to cover a major campaign, but this came to nothing. Early in that year he had rented a flat (his only semi-permanent residence in St Petersburg) in Glinka Street. By early 1917 he was already recognised as an expert war reporter. He was instrumental in setting up a news agency in St Petersburg designed to bring knowledge of the western front to the attention of Russians (to demonstrate that others were fighting the Germans as well as the Russians!). However, Bruce Lockhart insisted on appointing Hugh Walpole as the head of this news agency, but this was something that Walpole was not suited to, and the whole news agency soon folded.

As already a skilled war reporter, Arthur was in an ideal position to be an expert witness of the first revolution, in March 1917 – in fact he could watch much of the activity (and shooting!) from the windows of his flat. His reporting was authoritative but generally sympathetic to the revolution (he wrote ‘Russia ... stands as the greatest free nation in Europe’). Maybe



The lectern from which Lenin addressed the Petrograd Soviet in 1917

because of his sympathetic reports, he was the only Western reporter to be invited to attend the first meeting of the Petrograd Soviet; he attended this regularly and later the First All Russia Soviet. A little later in 1917 he reported the political crisis which followed the split between Miliukov of the Cadets and Kerensky. While Arthur was trying, by all means, to persuade

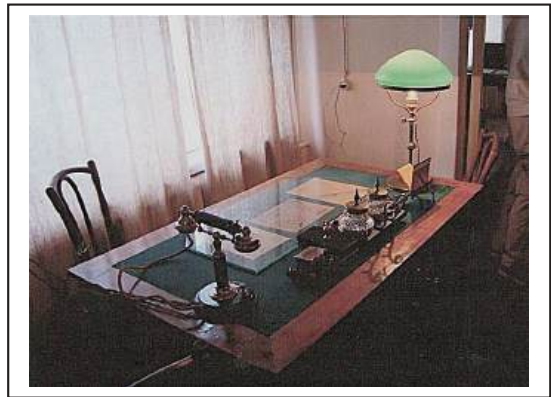
the UK Government to take more interest in Russia, and to show some sympathy for the revolution; on 20th May he reported on attempts to restore order in the army as the new Government was beginning to fall apart. On 19th June he heard Lenin speak in the Tauride Palace, at the First All Russia Soviet, stating that his party was ready to lead the nation. On 17th September he reported on an attempted right-wing coup, led by General Kornilov, which was rapidly defeated. On 9th October he returned to the UK, in a further vain attempt to explain Russia to the Government and in the UK generally.

Being in the UK at the time, Arthur missed the second 1917 revolution, so he returned to Russia via Stockholm on 9th December, arriving in St Petersburg just after Christmas. Immediately he went to the Foreign Ministry for news and was able to meet Trotsky, who explained his need for peace, saying that proper democracy could only really follow peace with Germany. Later in that same Ministry he met Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina, Trotsky's secretary (who arranged for the censor to approve his report), and shared a potato-based meal with her and her sister. After a whirlwind courtship Evgenia was to become his life-long partner (and eventually his wife in 1924, following Arthur's divorce from Ivy). Trotsky was to agree with Arthur that the western allies should attend the Brest-Litovsk peace talks – but they refused to do so.

In 1918 the struggle to get the UK to talk to Russia continued; in the press this became a battle between the *Daily News* and the *Manchester Guardian* (both favouring development of relationships) against *The Times*, which supported the Government's negative position. In January of 1918 he met Trotsky every day for discussions, and at this time became extremely friendly with Radek; Radek and his wife became close personal friends of Arthur and Genia (as Evgenia was now known). Around this time there was another attempted revolution which was easily repulsed, but which was accompanied by the murder of the recently appointed (since the peace treaty) German ambassador. For months there had been rivalry between the Constituent Assembly (the attempt at a parliament set up after the March revolution) and the growing authority of the soviets across Russia, and in

January 1918 the Constituent Assembly was dissolved. It was on 19th January that Genia suggested to Arthur that they should live together. However, by now the civil war had started and by the spring the ‘white’ army (made up mainly of some Russian bourgeoisie and aristocrats) was not far from Moscow; the revolutionary Government had moved there from St Petersburg early in 1918 on account of the civil war. Arthur was very concerned about Genia’s safety, as a known Bolshevik sympathiser, should the ‘whites’ reach Moscow; accordingly, in July they moved to Stockholm, Arthur first and Genia soon after. Arthur continued to report, as best he could, from Stockholm, just as the allied invasion via Murmansk and Archangel got under way. Then on 27th September he was recruited formerly as an agent “spy” by His Majesty’s Government. On 30th November Litvinov arrived in Stockholm in a vain attempt to make real contact with the UK Government; after this had clearly failed Arthur and Genia returned to Russia on 3rd February 1919. Arthur was able to attend the Third International which

was held in Russia, and which marked the separation of socialists from communists. During the next few weeks Arthur had several meetings with Lenin (playing chess with him) and with other Bolshevik leaders, and this provided the material for his *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*,³ which was published that June. At this



Lenin's desk

time, he was commissioned to write a history of the revolution. On return to the UK that spring Arthur was at first arrested as a Bolshevik sympathiser! However, this was soon resolved, and Clifford Sharp of MI6 was able to inform him of the terrible atrocities committed by the ‘whites’, which Arthur was able to report. That summer of 1919 was the peak of the successes of the ‘whites’, and Arthur described it as the most miserable of

his life, as he was so worried about Genia's safety in Moscow while he was so far away in the UK. So later that year he returned to Russia, via Newcastle, Bergen, Oslo (then called Christiania), and Tallinn (then called Reval). In Tallinn he met Mr A Piip, the Estonian Foreign Minister, who was seeking peace with Russia. He took Mr Piip's message to Moscow, crossing the front line while in some danger, and later returned to Tallinn with Genia (again crossing the front lines); Arthur attended to peace negotiations between Russia and Estonia in Tartu.

So from 1920 onwards, Arthur and Genia lived together, first in Estonia and later in Latvia, from where Arthur would make frequent visits to Russia, in support of his reporting; by now he was reporting for the *Manchester Guardian*. The owners of the *Daily News* had sacked its editor for his support for the Russian revolution, so Arthur lost his job too. However, C. P. Scott, the editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, offered him a post with the paper. That same year (1920), he returned to his flat in Glinka Street to find that it had been ransacked, with several items (including his notes for the history of the revolution) removed. It was after this visit that Arthur wrote *The Crisis in Russia*,⁴ as (he hoped) an education for the British Government. However, by now reporting did not take all of his time (the *Manchester Guardian* expected lengthy, thoughtful reports every few days, whereas the *Daily News* had expected daily short reports), so Arthur and Genia became interested in boats, buying at first *Slug* and then in March 1921 *Kittiwake*. However, Arthur soon found a serious boatbuilder, a Mr Eggers, who built *Racundra* for him and Genia. In 1920 Arthur had managed to get both *Aladdin*⁵ and *The Soldier and Death*⁶ (another Russian fairy tale) published; after their first cruise in her around the Baltic, Arthur wrote *Racundra's First Cruise*,⁷ which was published in 1923.

In December 1923 Arthur was back in Russia, in time to report on Lenin's funeral in January 1924; he wrote 'I had a curious feeling that I was present at the founding of a new religion'. Later that year, back in Estonia, following his divorce, Arthur and Genia were married in the British Embassy in Tallinn. They then at last returned together for the first time to the UK; they bought a delightful cottage (Low Ludderburn) in the southern

Lake District, not far from Windermere, the area Arthur had loved all his life. Nevertheless, the *Manchester Guardian* sent him several more times to Russia from there until 1928; he was also sent to report on events in both Egypt and China. However, in 1928 he bravely gave up his source of reliable income, to turn to book writing – *Swallows and Amazons* would soon appear, followed by eleven sequels, which together would make Arthur quite a rich man.



The small harbour in Riga, just off the river, in which Arthur and Genia kept Racundra

In 2016 a TARS party visited Latvia, Estonia and Russia, visiting many of the locations mentioned above. We saw where Arthur and Genia lived in Riga, and where they kept *Racundra* when in Latvia. We inspected the exterior of the building in Tallinn which had been the UK Embassy, where Arthur and Genia were married. In St Petersburg we could see from outside the flat in which

Arthur had lived, the Post Office (almost unchanged since his day) from where he sent his bulletins to the *Daily News*, and several palaces, including the Tauride (some of us stood at the lectern from which Lenin had spoken in 1917). We were shown the very basic quarters in which Lenin and his wife had lived in the Smolny Institute building (everything there had been maintained much as it was in 1918). The high point for most of us was the visit outside St Petersburg to the village of Vergezha, where Arthur rested with his bad piles in 1915, in the country house of Harold and Ariadne Williams. Several locals were really pleased to show us around; they were mainly very old people and the parents of one of them (who was well into her later 80s) had been servants to Harold and Ariadne in their house there before the revolution. This house had been destroyed by shelling in Second World War; the USSR army had been in Vergezha with the Germans

shelling them from across the river Volkov. However, the locals showed us where we could see some of the original foundations of the house, now mainly underground. The Vergezha visit was perfected by one of our party reading an extract from *Old Peter's Russian Tales* as we all stood beside the river Volkov, which itself is mentioned in that book. Sometimes the river gently lapped at our shoes as we listened.

.....

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1. *Oscar Wilde, a Critical Study* (Martin Seker, 1912).
2. *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (Jack, 1916).
3. *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919* (George Allen and Unwin, 1919).
4. *The Crisis in Russia* (George Allen and Unwin, 1921).
5. *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp* (Nisbet, 1919).
6. *The Soldier and Death* (Westminster Press, 1920).
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Photographs: author & Winifred Wilson

SWALLOWDALE?

Chris Daniels believes he has found the real Swallowdale

Fishing about for something to read a couple of years ago, I came across a battered childhood copy of *Swallowdale* on my shelves with pages falling out by the dozen – and decided to enjoy another reading of it. Like many of us, I'm sure, I found myself daydreaming, as I did years ago, as to whether it might just really be possible to follow the 'clues' in the book and discover the 'secret valley' in which the children set up their camp as explorers. It is, of course, well recognised that Arthur Ransome combined and adapted real locations to construct the landscapes of his Lake District stories, as evidenced by the oft-cited line from his contribution to the *Junior Bookshelf* magazine in 1937, '... there has to be a little pulling about of rivers and roads, but every single place in those books exists somewhere.'

Despite the relocations, most of the sites behind the Lake District stories are now reasonably well or fully established. However, I think it's fair to say that over the years the location for the valley of Swallowdale has become somewhat of a holy grail. There has been much discussion and several suggestions; some of the most mentioned being *Long Scars* on Blawith Fells, *Tilberthwaite Gill* to the north of Coniston village, and *Miterdale Head* in the Eskdale Fells. All have much merit, though no individual site has yet secured overall acceptance, owing either to questions of location or their alignment with the book's descriptions.

I imagine most searches for the valley (including my own) start on Blawith Fells near the south-west corner of Coniston Water. And for obvious reasons – it was in this corner of the lake that the Swallows sank their beloved boat in Horseshoe Cove. Then, guided by Titty and Roger, they followed a beck that led them to the valley that would become their secret camp; the central base for all the other happenings that unfold in the story.

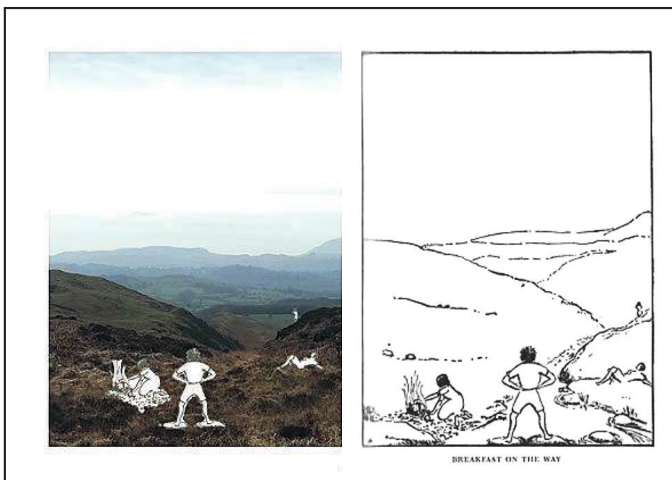
Yet, as other explorers before me have found, though geographically fitting, this area lacks a valley that aligns convincingly with the book's

descriptions. And after scouring maps and satellite images around Coniston Water, Windermere, and even Derwent Water, I reluctantly reached a common conclusion: that the valley is most likely a composite of familiar places AR knew, and does not exist in reality as a single location; and thus decided to put the search to bed.

But it continued to pester my thoughts! It seemed that there are just too many details in the story line for it not to be connected to a real-life location. So, I resolved to give it a last try; first considering the type of terrain necessary, before returning to the maps to identify where that is found in the vicinity of Coniston Water and Windermere. From this perspective, there was only one real candidate – back where we began: the moorland (which includes Blawith Fells) to the south-west corner of Coniston Water. Nowhere else adjoining either of the two lakes really has the right characteristics. So, I brought up a full satellite view of this area (not just lakeside, but the broader moorland) and, surprisingly, an interesting candidate presented itself; however, this time on the far side of the moorland, not adjacent to the lake. From maps and satellite views, I became convinced that this was a good contender. And my subsequent visits to this spot on six or seven occasions have only reinforced that impression.

Breakfast on the Way

In the course of my visits, I noticed that, even before reaching the little

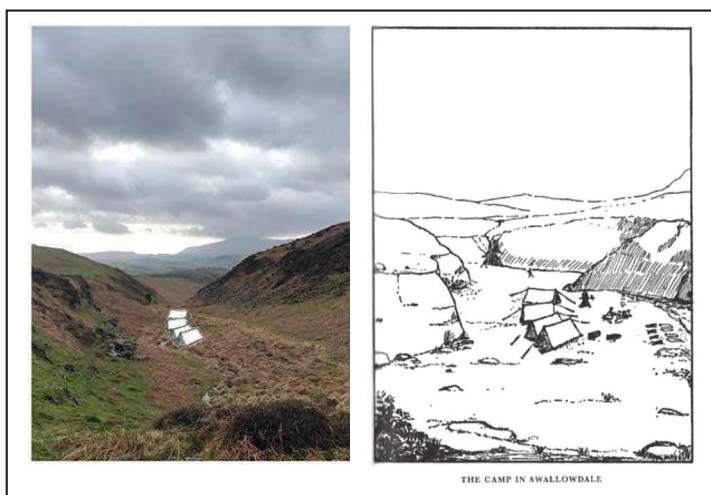


valley, the surrounding landscape shows some intriguing similarities to the descriptions in the book. A prime example is in relation to AR's 'Breakfast on the way' sketch (Chapter XII), depicting the point where the explorers stop for a break during

their decampment from Horseshoe Cove to Swallowdale. The only real variation to the sketch is the relative rise or fall of the landscape. In reality, the topography is dropping; but in AR's sketch the topography is depicted as rising, in order to follow the story line as the children climb up towards the valley. But that artistic change in perspective would make sense if AR had moved the valley from west of the moor to the east. Apart from that, each element seems to match with a lovely precision. The stream of the sketch is also present, running through the middle of the photo, but is small and hidden beneath the tussocky grass. And, excitingly, just a few hundred meters further on, we come to a small, hidden valley! ...

The Valley

I first entered the secluded spot on a wet evening towards dusk at the tail end of Storm Kathleen in April 2024. I thought I knew where I was going from my map hunt, but it had proved



difficult to find, as it is remarkably well hidden within the landscape. On finally arriving on that damp and darkening evening, it seemed little more than a wet gully and I must say I was crestfallen. But, as the rain was soon to begin again, I selected a spot and quickly set to work erecting my small bivvy tent. Then, looking back down the valley as I did so, I became more interested. Diving into my tent as soon as it was erected, I rummaged in my pack for a copy of *Swallowdale*, flipped through the pages and held up AR's sketch. It seemed – to me at least – that I had actually placed my tent in the same location from which the sketch was penned! But seen in the light of day, how does this small valley and its location match with the book?

As mentioned, the site is over the brow of the moors from the lakeside, on Woodland Fell, as this more westerly portion of the common is named. It is 90 minutes' hike from the lake but, more interestingly, only $\frac{3}{4}$ mile downhill from Beacon Tarn – widely considered to be the inspiration for *Trout Tarn* of the book: 'Trout Tarn was nearly a mile beyond Swallowdale, high on top of the moor' (Chapter XV). And, in the same way as Titty and Roger did, the valley can be found by following a beck, which emanates from the valley with a waterfall at either end. But, being on the other side of the moor, this beck does not connect with the lake and runs off the moor to the west. However, it seems acceptably plausible that AR has simply flipped the beck and valley over 180° to connect with the Lake for the purposes of the story. Would this valley have been accessible to a young Arthur? Absolutely – being only a 15-minute walk from Beacon Tarn.

The location lies at the upper end of a narrowing beck gully named Hodge Wife Gill. The valley is too small to be specifically visible on an Ordnance Survey map, is remarkably tricky to find coming from Trout Tarn, and doesn't have any footpaths running through it. This may explain why (as far as I am aware) it hasn't been suggested precisely as a Swallowdale location previously; although please forgive me if I am wrong about that. Visually, the Hodge Wife Gill valley appears a lovely match for AR's sketch and also for much of the description in the text. The following passages from chapter IV, 'The able-seaman and the boy explore', all fit very nicely:

It was a little valley in the moorland, shut in by another waterfall at the head of it, not a hundred yards away, and by slopes of rock and heather that rose so steeply that when the explorers looked up they could see nothing but the sky above them. In there it was as if the blue mountains did not exist. The valley might have been hung in air, for all that they could see outside it, except when they turned round and looked back, from the top of the waterfall they had climbed, to the moorland, the woods and the hills on the other side
....'

(The Hodge Wife Gill valley is actually closer to 175 yds long; but I doubt that AR would have measured it exactly.)

[Titty and Roger] climbed up opposite sides of the valley and looked back at each other. They found they had only to go a few yards from the edge of it not to see that it was there. ...

Titty ... looked back down the valley and out through the V-shaped gap at the foot of it to the hills on the other side From this upper end of the valley she could not see the moor below the waterfall, or the woods through which they had climbed. She looked at the valley itself, and its steep sides, one of them, on the right, almost a precipice of rock, with heather growing in the cracks of it, and the other, on the left, not so steep, with grass on it, bracken and loose stones.

However, there are some differences between this valley and AR's sketch, mainly regarding the section nestled in the V at the valley-end. But I feel the differences can be justified and suggest it was necessary for AR to alter this middle-distance section in order to fit in with the book. In Hodge Wife Gill, the view looks down out of the valley. However, in the book (depending on the direction faced), the view in the distance would either be down over the lake or up towards the tarn. Hence, the change by which, I believe, AR has altered the view to depict (I hope no-one minds me saying) a rather dubious attempt at drawing the upper waterfall, and the stream continuing upwards towards trout tarn. This alteration includes moving the far-left horizon mountain in the sketch backwards from its actual position in the middle-ground.

The Cave and Knickerbockerbreaker Rocks

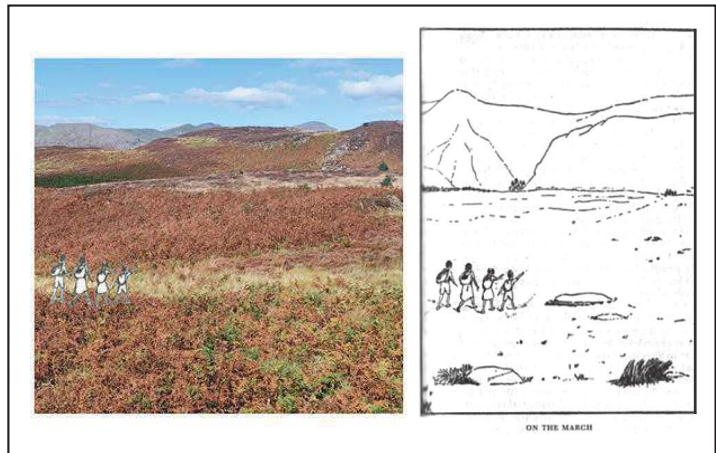
I know. I know. What of the cave? Well, unfortunately, it's nowhere to be found in this location. And believe me, I have looked. But maybe it is behind a gorse bush I haven't yet explored. And the Knickerbockerbreaker rocks? Sorry – not here either. But to be honest, although I hoped, I never really expected either of these to be here – although I am absolutely sure they exist somewhere.

The Watch Tower Rock and Kanchenjunga

We know that Swallowdale should be orientated roughly east–west because the children climb the northern side of the valley to get to the Watch Tower and from there see Kanchenjunga (or in reality Coniston Old Man, as it was confirmed to be by AR) almost exactly to the north. ‘The able-seaman and the boy ... followed the captain up the northern side of the valley. ... And beyond the moorland in the north and west they could see the big hills. ‘That one with the peak at one end of it is Kanchenjunga,’ said Titty.’ (Chapter XII).

And indeed, the Hodge Wife Gill valley is orientated in this way. The valley is all but invisible from outside the valley on either side, as it should be. Unfortunately, a large Watch Tower rock is not to be found here. But there is an obvious high point just outside the valley on the northern side, capped by a small rocky outcrop. And from here there is a panoramic view, including a view all the way to Coniston Old Man. The landscape definitely bears a strong resemblance to AR’s description of the moor and his sketch of the view.

The photograph (right) is taken from the small rocky outcrop and the highest peak in the background is Coniston Old Man (at which Titty and Roger are pointing!). The bearing to the mountain is almost



exactly due north. The distance to the summit of Coniston Old Man from Hodge Wife Gill is 4.5 miles (7 km) as the crow flies. As a hike, it would be approximately 7.5 miles (12 km) depending on the route taken. This would be a quite reasonable distance for the party to hike over the one-and-a-half days it took in the book. From other side of the moor on Blawith Fells (if

Swallowdale were located there) the compass bearing would be more like 350° (N by W). Could the following passage have been AR working out for himself which bearing it was best to use for the book? ‘Captain John once more looked carefully through the Amazons’ message. “ ‘About north’ is what they say, but really it’s north-north-west till we get to that rock.” ’ (Chapter XXIII). From the rocky outcrop, both the ‘Surprise attack’ (Chapter XVI) and the march to Coniston Old Man (Chapters XXIII – XXVII) seem quite possible. The moor here can also be followed to within a couple of hundred metres of Oxen House (often suggested as the site for Beckfoot): a hike of approximately 2 miles/3.5 km.

The Beck (*Strands Beck*)

Below the moor there doesn’t appear to be an arched bridge for Titty and Roger to paddle under. But directly before the start of the moor the beck does run tight alongside a small woodland of oak and hazel, although



lacking in the larch also mentioned in the book. And as the beck enters onto the moor, the similarities to the story become more noteworthy again, including in relation to

the distance. “How much farther is it to your valley?” asked the mate. ... “If you were to begin eating a doughnut now,” said Roger, “and ate it very slowly, it would be about done before you got there.” ’ (Chapter XI). From the edge of the moor to the Hodge Wife Gill valley is 0.6 miles (1 km): a good length of time to eat a doughnut slowly? Other descriptions in the text also seem to match: ‘Sometimes the bracken grew so high that they could hardly



see each other. Sometimes the sheep track wound down along the edge of the stream, turning this way and that around pale grey stones, and then climbed up again to twist its way among the tough clumps of purple heather.’ (Chapter IV).

The stream came tumbling and twisting across the moorland In its winter strength it had washed away the earth round great stones and carved a deep gully for itself, so that though they could see where it was they could not see the water except close to them.

Sometimes the bracken grew so high that they could hardly see each other. Sometimes the sheep track wound down along the edge of the stream, turning this way and that around pale grey stones, and then climbed up again to twist its way among the tough clumps of purple heather. (Chapter IV)

They hurried on along the sheep tracks that wound among the rocks and heather at the side of the stream, climbing steadily up the moor.... [Roger] kept stopping at every pool in the beck to see if there was a trout in it (Chapter XI)

At the upper end of Hodge Wife Gill, the beck narrows into a gorge and the valley is still hidden from view. The beck bifurcates at this point, the stream into the valley being the lesser of the two, but I guess either or both could have been the main inspiration for the first waterfall.



They hurried on until they stood below the waterfall. Above them the water poured down noisily from ledge to ledge of rock, and they could go no farther without climbing up the rocks beside the falling water or getting out of the long winding gully that the stream had carved for itself in the moor. (Chapter IV)

A few more paces uphill beside the waterfall and the valley opens up before



us:

There it was, just as [Titty] remembered it, with the other waterfall at the head of it, the steep banks of rock and bracken and heather shutting it in on either side, the broad flat floor of the valley

sheltered by those high, steep sides so that ... from outside the valley you could not see it was there unless you were looking down into it from its very edge. (Chapter XI)

A good place for a camp? Certainly! Although I have to say that the flat bottom to the valley is also somewhat of a watershed in wet weather. A much better place to camp (when not too covered by bracken in late summer) is the small bluff near the top end of the valley. However, I'm sure that a group of child-explorers arriving in a dry summer may well have elected to camp in the basin – and a small herd of children trampling around would soon have flattened out the tussocky grass sufficiently.

The problems with wet weather were mentioned in Chapter XIX: 'It rained heavily that night. ... In the morning they crawled out into a sodden world. ... the stream that flowed through Swallowdale was dark and coppery and had risen so much that it lapped the stones of Susan's

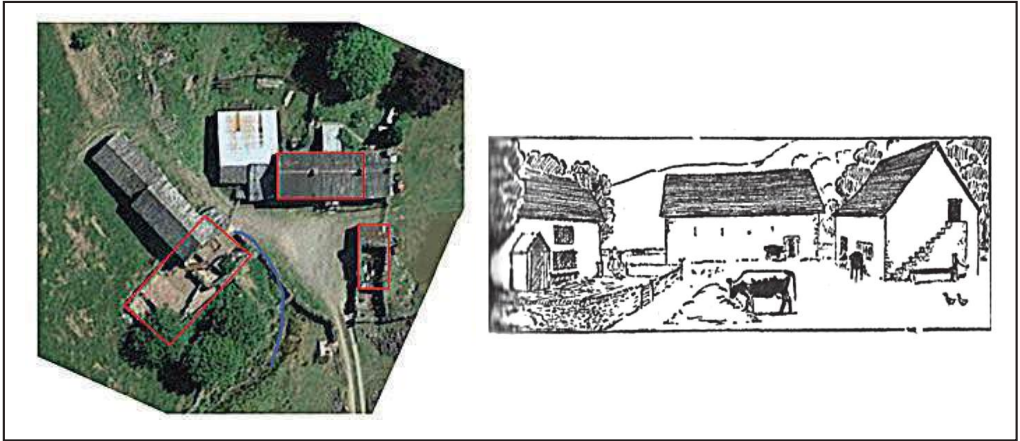
fireplace, and was within a yard or two of the tents.’ However, it is indicated in the book that when the children arrived the weather was initially very dry: ‘[Susan] had found a little bay of bright grey pebbles left dry by the stream during the hot weather. ... She found some of last year’s bracken, dry as tinder, to start her fire with, ...’ (Chapter XI)

The beck as it runs through the Hodge Wife Gill valley is perhaps disappointingly narrow – the larger branch of Strands Beck having turned right at the bifurcation – and there is no upper end pool. It is certainly big enough to gather water and to wash up, but the creation of a bathing pool would be a lot of work! Having said that, just below the entrance to the valley the beck opens up far more and presents numerous pools and opportunities for a bathing area with far less effort.

Swainson’s Farm

The farm and its friendly inhabitants feature significantly in the *Swallowdale* story and also come into *The Picts and the Martyrs*. When looking at Hodge Wife Gill valley, the nearest farm is Climb Stile Farm, which is found after following Strands Beck down the gill – around 25 minutes’ walk (¾ mile/ 1.25 km). Certainly not too far for some healthy children in need of milk – and perhaps darning. We know that in reality Swainson’s is the farm in which AR stayed as a child in High Nibthwaite, but it has always seemed more likely to me that this was (at least in part) the basis for Dixon’s Farm in *Swallows and Amazons*, rather than the farm in *Swallowdale*. I suggest that AR (keen to use the name somewhere) used the name of Swainson’s for Climb Stile Farm instead.

Admittedly, when actually seen, Climb Stile Farm perhaps does not immediately resemble AR’s sketch. However, a satellite view may tell a different story. It is my assumption that the now derelict building on the left was the original farmhouse. The building at the top of this view has a newer extension. And I believe the smaller building on the right has been rebuilt on the site of an earlier outbuilding. Seen in this light, the orientation of the buildings, as well as the stone wall and trees, appear to match surprisingly closely.



This assessment of the original buildings' positions is speculation at the moment. But it seems to me too coincidental that the nearest farm to this Swallowdale candidate should apparently have such a close match in the orientation and size of the buildings when compared with the sketch.

Final Thoughts

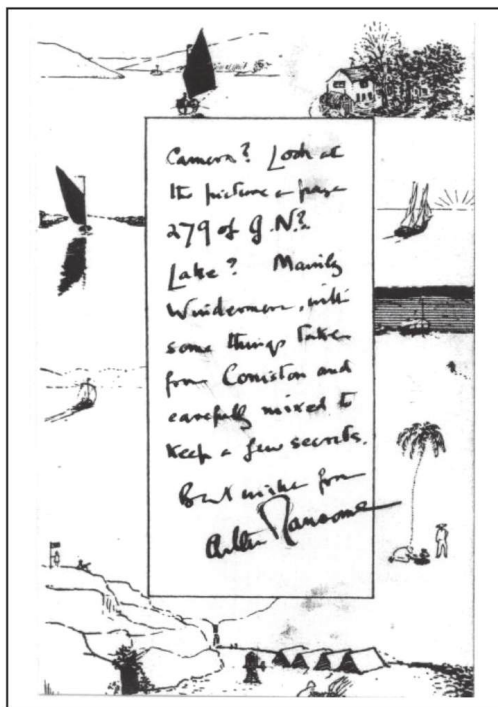
So, is this, after all these years, Swallowdale? For me, I have to say I actually believe it may well be! Although lacking the much desired cave, Knickerbockerbreaker, Watch Tower [p. 6] and initial beck-bridge, there are, in my opinion, just too many similarities in combination for it to be coincidence. Of course, many others have had their favourite candidates before, and I leave it for you and others to decide. The search, at least, has sparked my inner child-explorer and turned it into an adventure in itself and I look forward with interest to the discussion.

I have actually come to feel quite protective of the little Hodge Wife Gill valley. It does have an isolated feel and, if it is the 'Secret Valley', it would be lovely if it was again loved by children – and big children. I don't think AR would mind that too much. And, as he said in a well-known written response to location enquiries, 'The only way to keep a secret (your own and other people's) is never to answer a question. But you seem good at guessing. All the places in the books are to be found, but not quite as in the ordnance survey maps'.

FROM TARS ARCHIVES

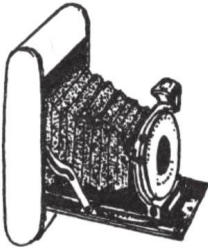
The Editor selects: Dick's camera?

In 1952, Ted Alexander wrote to Arthur Ransome asking him a couple of questions. One was what must have been a familiar request concerning the location of the Lake, but the other was much more specific – ‘What camera did Dick use?’ He thought that it was highly probable that Dick’s camera was modelled on one that Arthur may have owned during the period he was writing *The Big Six*. Ted had to wait 14 months for a reply, but when it came it was in the form of one of the familiar Ransome postcards. In AR’s usual brief style, it simply says, ‘Camera? Look at the picture on page 279 of G.N.? Lake? Mainly Windermere, with some things taken from Coniston and carefully mixed to keep a few secrets. Best wishes from Arthur Ransome.’



When Ted examined the picture, he thought the drawing was too imprecise to see a maker’s name or model number and thus he had no definitive answer. In Ted’s note in the archive, he states that Ransome must have owned a camera from quite early on and certainly had one during his time in Russia. He states it is quite possible that he wore out his first camera and upgraded to another model as time went on.

The ever-curious Ted decided to do some research and came up with a number of possibilities:



*AR's drawing in
Great Northern?*



*Cameras in the archive:
An Eastman Kodak No
1A Pocket camera.*

Ransome's drawing is probably illustrative, as well as other features shown, but the illustration more-or-less suggests either Kodak or Ensign as the maker. These were well known camera makers and their cameras were widely available at the time. However, as Ted says, 'A pity that Ransome in his reply to me did not just mention what he owned!'

Kodak made an early model, the Autographic Special No1, available during the period 1915-1926, although there had been earlier models. **Ensign** (British) made a folding model B from 1910 and a number of All-Distance Pocket cameras with variations.

Ernemann had a Bob model which looks possible.

Ica had the Halloh 505 during the period 1914-1926, which looks close.

Voigtlander also had a model from the 1930s.

None of these, however, is identical with Ransome's drawing although each one has some similarities with the camera depicted. Ted tells us it is worth noting that in the early days of cameras, the picture size of $2\frac{1}{4} \times 3\frac{1}{4}$ (the size Ransome used) was considered small, resulting in many folding cameras of the time having a larger film format or 'taking' plates. Ted believes the 'strut' layout in



*Cameras in the archive:
l-r: No 1 Pocket Kodak, Ensign Pocket
20, All Distance Pocket Ensign.*

WHO WERE THOSE FAIR SPANISH LADIES?

John Thorn explores the history behind the popular sea
shanty

The Song

Arthur Ransome was undoubtedly enthusiastic about nautical songs. We know that when he was given charge of the literary periodical *Temple Bar* in 1905, he was able to commission pieces on topics that interested him and this included inviting John Masefield to write an article on Chanties [*sic*] and Sea songs.

We don't know if Ransome was aware of all of Masefield's songs before the article, but we do know that he made reference to eight of them subsequently in the S&A books. *Farewell and Adieu to you Fair Spanish Ladies* was the song that Ransome referred to the most. It was sung by the Swallows as a farewell to the natives as they set sail for Wild Cat Island (ch. 3), whistled by Titty at the look-out place (ch. 17), and sung and played at the party after the battle of Houseboat Bay (ch. 27). Whistled by Roger in the charcoal-burners' camp (*Swallowdale*, ch. 34). It forms the epigraph to chapter 36 of *Peter Duck* and is sung as a chanty by the prospectors en route to High Topps in *Pigeon Post*, and by John (substituting 'Holland' for 'Scilly') as he waits for the Dutch pilot in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (ch. 20). It is also sung by Bridget, at Roger's prompting, as the waters rise in the middle of the Red Sea (*Secret Water*, ch. 26), and in an attempt to communicate by the caged Captain Flint and the Swallows and Amazons in *Missee Lee* (ch. 10).¹

Ransome used *Spanish Ladies* as the chapter heading for the final chapter of *Peter Duck* and quotes the first two verses and the chorus of the song. Quoting the second verse was a device to introduce us to how the crew of the *Wild Cat* tacked up the channel with the wind against them, sighting The

Who were those Fair Spanish Ladies?

Dodman, Rame Head, Start Point, Portland and Wight on their way. However, as Peter Dowden explains in his article *Spanish Ladies* in *TARS Dispatches: Spring 1995*, if Ransome had quoted the third verse, with the line ‘We hove our ship to, with the wind at south-west boys’, he would have seen that in the song they squared their mainsails to run up the Channel, rather than beating against a northeasterly like the *Wild Cat*. Peter Duck, if not Ransome himself, had rather misread the song.



Saturday Night at Sea – George Cruikshank

But what of the historical genesis of the song; who were those Spanish Ladies and why were the sailors bidding them farewell? The song is very well known, of course, and there are lots of variants even to the English version; and there are other variants from around the English-speaking nautical world, notably from America, Australia and Newfoundland. The folk song historian Roy Palmer writes that the oldest text he has seen is from the 1796 logbook of HMS *Nellie*.² The timing of the mention in the *Nellie*'s logbook suggests to Palmer that the song was created during the War of the First Coalition (1793–96), when the Royal Navy carried supplies to Spain to aid its resistance to revolutionary France. But it is likely that it gained in popularity during the later Peninsular War (1807–14) when British soldiers were transported throughout the Iberian Peninsula to assist rebels

fighting against the French. The first published 'Broadside' version of the song was published by John Pitt in 1820, soon after the end of the Peninsular War, and this version seems to be the basis of the texts that we know today.

The War

The Peninsular War was started in July 1807 when Napoleon Bonaparte travelled through his (at that time) ally Spain to invade Portugal. Portugal, Britain's oldest ally, had refused Napoleon's demand to declare war on Britain, to close its ports to British ships, to cease all trade with Britain, and to seize all British citizens and sequester their goods. However, there was growing social unrest amongst the Spanish populace. France clearly had more sinister intentions towards Spain and, when Napoleon ejected the existing monarch to declare his brother Joseph as the new king, the Spanish resisted. In August 1808, 15,000 British troops landed in Portugal under the command of Lieutenant-General Sir Arthur Wellesley (to become the Duke of Wellington in 1814). By the end of the war in 1814 there were 70,000 troops in the peninsular and there had been 35,630 dead and 32,429 wounded.

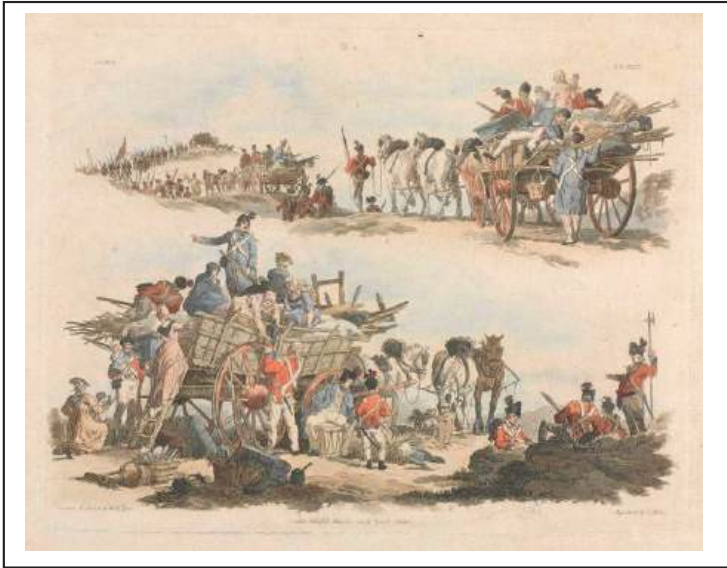
The Women

Women: the wives of the rank and file, the officers' ladies, the girl friends of both and the prostitutes, travelled and suffered with their menfolk, sharing in their Regiments' duties, glories and hardships. They followed their partners for many reasons; for love, for protection, for adventure and, perhaps most importantly, to escape poverty and destitution.

All officers were allowed to take their wives with them to Spain (although most, sensibly, decided to stay safely at home). However, in 1800 a Standing Order had been issued to the British Army: 'Except on occasions when circumstances may render it necessary for troops to embark entirely without women, His Royal Highness permits women, being the lawful wives of soldiers, to embark in the proportion of 6 to 100 men'. This measure was taken in order to restrict the number of women following the army, and

Who were those Fair Spanish Ladies?

was, in theory, militarily sensible. Large numbers of women and children slowed down and strained the supply of many European armies in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and British generals were determined to avoid this fate.



Camp Scenes 1803 – William Pyne

Although the legislation of 1800 did much to keep the number of women following the army down, problems still arose. Once the soldiers realised that they were to stay in Spain and Portugal for some time, they began to take foreign women as their companions. The arrival of red-coated foreign soldiers was welcomed by the young Spanish and Portuguese women, as many young Spaniards had been killed in the wars with France. Many women chose to follow their British lovers, and there was little the army could do to stop them. They received no payment or provisions, unlike the officially recognized female contingent, who received one-half of a soldier's rations, and any children they bore, one-quarter. In addition, the women could supplement their incomes by finding extra work, often sewing and washing, or by foraging and trading. It was often the woman's job to bargain with the local folk for small luxuries such as fresh meat, tobacco and wine. For men who did not want a long-term relationship there was

always an opportunity for company. Prostitution was widespread, and both the rank and file and, particularly the officers, partook.

It was practices like these, in addition to the women's effect on discipline and supply costs that concerned Wellington greatly. He said, 'It is well known that in all armies the women are at least as bad, if not worse, than the men as plunderers, and exception of the ladies from punishment would have encouraged plunder'. He agreed with Napoleoan when he said, 'Women when they are bad are worse than men and more ready to commit crimes', and 'Women are always much better or much worse than men'. Wellington decided that the foreign wives of his soldiers would not accompany their partners home on conclusion of the war in 1814. These women, who had proudly followed the British army, were left stranded in penury when their men were killed in battle and many more when the British left the peninsula.³

The Romanticisation of the Song

So, how did such a tragic tale of misogyny and abandonment by a pitiless Wellington turn into a jolly 'shanty' about ranting and roaring up the channel, so beloved in the British popular canon that it became a standard played at the Proms every year as part of Sir Henry J. Wood's 1905 composition *Fantasia on British Sea Songs*?

Before the Napoleonic wars Britain's army was only about 40,000 strong and often depended upon foreign mercenaries when fighting abroad, but Napoleon's military strength and the national fear of invasion brought about a massive expansion of British military resources. Thus, at its peak towards the end of the Napoleonic period, the regular army consisted of 250,000 men and the strength of the Royal Navy had increased from 16,000 to 140,000 men. Also, the attitude of the British public towards the military changed significantly. The men who were once described by Wellington as 'the scum of the earth' became re-imagined as heroic, fighting for their country but also fighting to free Europe from the tyranny of the French. Furthermore, Britain had become a much more literate society; men were able to write home from the war, newspapers published the men's letters

and sent war correspondents to report directly on the conflict. Awareness of the nature and importance of what Britain was doing in Spain was strong. It was also imbued with a degree of romanticism, and romanticism was a central theme in the arts at this period. Dashing soldiers played important roles in Jane Austen's novels of 1811 and 1813, published at the height of the war; even if George Wickham was a cad and an absolute bounder in one, Colonel Brandon saved the day in the other!

The British attitude to Spain itself also changed because of the war. Previously awareness of Spain amongst the British public, if there was any at all, suggested it was a backward country, populated by peasants and run by weak and despotic monarchs. The word 'Spanish' was associated negatively in the public eye solely with the words 'Armada'; and 'Inquisition'. But this changed after the events of the 3rd May 1808. Napoleon had pressurised the monarchy into abdication and installed his brother, Joseph, on the Spanish throne instead. On 2nd May the citizens of Madrid rebelled against the French and their uprising was savagely put down by French cavalry. The following day, hundreds of Spaniards were taken out and shot (immortalised in Goya's famous painting, *The third of May 1808*). Similar reprisals occurred in other cities and continued for days. Bloody spontaneous fighting known as 'guerilla' (little war) broke out in much of Spain against both the French and the Spanish government, which had accepted Joseph as the new monarch. For observers in Britain the ordinary Spaniards became romanticised; no longer a simple backward *peasantry* but now a *people* fighting to free themselves from occupation and despotism to proclaim their liberty!⁴ Notwithstanding that the primary interest for Wellington's arrival later in August was the British national interest, it could not but help that suddenly there was a British popular interest in Spain and all things Spanish. Spain had become a romantic cause.

Conclusion

Perhaps there is no conclusive answer to the question why did such a tragedy become the basis for such a jolly song? One would imagine that many servicemen would be glad to be going home after the horrors of war.

Who were those Fair Spanish Ladies?

Some may have been returning to wives at home following common-law arrangements and passing relationships in Spain that they were happy to leave behind. On the other hand, I understand that many men deserted to remain with their Spanish women rather than be shipped 'home', but my research has not been able to put a figure on that assertion.

Certainly leaving a loved one is a common theme in folk songs old and new. In *The Leaving of Liverpool* and *Leave her Johnny Leave Her*, for example, the sailor singers are, maybe, a bit sad to leave but agree to go without putting up much of a fight. Even Bob Dylan manages to bring leaving a lover and romantic Spain together in his song *Boots of Spanish Leather*. But *Farewell and Adieu to you Fair Spanish Ladies* must chronicle a degree of social injustice and disgrace, so lightly dismissed, that is unsurpassed in folk music. Perhaps, psychologically, all they could do was turn their guilt over the tragedy into a barnstormer of a song.

Ironically, the circumstances for many of the men who returned home fared no better than those of the ladies they left behind. Following the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 the Secretary at War, Viscount Palmerston, had ordered a massive reduction in size of the peacetime British Army and Royal Navy, resulting in thousands of ex-servicemen being discharged without occupation or accommodation. Their discharge was made more difficult by the effects of the Industrial Revolution, the implementation of the Corn Laws, and the Enclosure Acts of 1773 onwards; these caused thousands of people to be forced off the land. Destitute people gravitated to the expanding urban areas in the hope of finding employment. Cities in England, especially London, Birmingham and Liverpool, became saturated with people living rough on the streets or in makeshift camps. The demographics of these groups included large numbers of soldiers and sailors who had been discharged.⁵ Ten years after the end of the Peninsular War the 1824 Vagrancy Act was enacted to deal with the increasing numbers of homeless and penniless urban poor in England and Wales, basically making it illegal to be homeless. This was followed in 1834 by the new Poor Law which made any poverty relief dependent upon entering a

Who were those Fair Spanish Ladies?

workhouse. I wonder how many of the men who found themselves in a workhouse wished they hadn't bid adieu to their Spanish lady after all?

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NOT EXACTLY ‘YACHTING’: RANSOME, NANCY, THE FAMOUS GALE AND ITS AFTERMATH

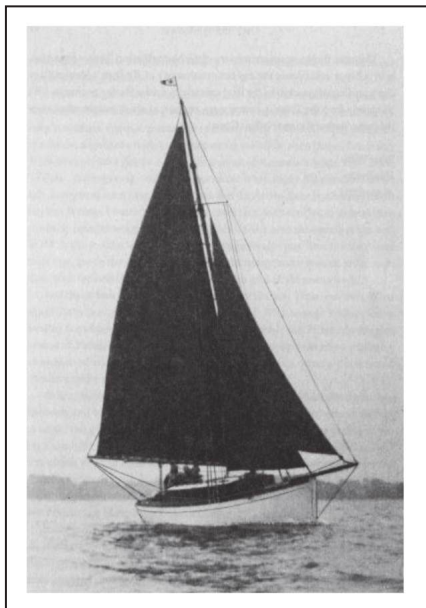
**Peter Willis describes Ransome’s momentous first voyage
in *Nancy Blackett***

Arthur Ransome liked to set his stories in locations he knew and loved. By 1935 (90 years ago, as it happens) he had been settled in Low Ludderburn for 10 years, had written *Swallows and Amazons* and two other Lakes-based books. For sailing, he had *Swallow* and Windermere, as well as the odd hire yacht on the Broads – which had given him the setting for *Coot Club*. But he was hankering after doing some proper sea-sailing such as he’d enjoyed in the Baltic with *Racundra*, over a decade earlier.

He persuaded his wife Evgenia that they should move to the East Coast. They discovered the Shotley peninsula in Suffolk, between the rivers Orwell and Stour, and fell in love with Pin Mill. At that time, he was just finishing the proof-correcting and illustrations for *Pigeon Post*, his sixth book, and worrying that he was running out of ideas. He had no idea where his next plot was going to come from, but his main concern at that stage was to start the offshore sailing which had inspired the move, and that meant finding a boat. The boat he eventually bought was to solve both these problems, as well as providing the role-model for the *Goblin*.

A yacht-broker friend from the Cruising Association, one W. Mc. Meek, located one that he thought might suit in Poole Harbour, and on Sunday 8th September he took Arthur down to see her. She was a Hillyard 7-tonner, 28ft 6in long, about five years old, with four berths, cutter-rigged with a good long bowsprit and at that stage named *Electron*. Ransome bought her on the spot, for £525, declared *Electron* ‘a horrible name’ and

Not exactly 'yachting': Ransome, *Nancy*, the famous gale and its aftermath



Nancy Blackett 1935

promptly rechristened her *Nancy Blackett* – ‘But for Nancy, I would never have been able to buy her,’ he said.

By 13th September he had re-registered her under her new name, and found a young crewman, Peter Tisbury, ‘strong enough to do the heavy work of pulling and hauling, and young enough not to want to take a share in the navigation to which, after 10 years away from the sea I was most eagerly looking forward,’ – and was ready to sail her back to the Orwell.

The delivery voyage, which immediately ran

into a full gale, turned out to be a great deal more eventful and exciting than someone who had done no offshore sailing for a decade or more might have wished.

‘We started out from Poole on Sept 14, just as the famous gale began,’ he wrote in a letter. ‘We got to Yarmouth, Isle of Wight, where we learnt that the lifeboat had been warned to be ready by the coastguards at the Needles who had observed our approach Sunday we lay quiet in Yarmouth. Monday we bussed into Cowes to get a storm jib made as we had none. That night ... came the climax of the gale, of which you no doubt read in the newspapers. In Yarmouth two boats were flung on the breakwater, seven or eight sunk, one man was drowned and the lifeboat was out three times during the night *inside the harbour*. We spent the

FIERCE GALE IN ENGLAND

4 Dead ; Many Hurt

SHIP WRECKED

LONDON, September 18.
A fierce gale raged over the English Channel and southern England yesterday, and caused at least four deaths, two from drowning at sea and two by injury from falling objects.

The dead include the captain of the cargo steamer *Brompton Manor* (1935 tons), who was washed overboard. The ship had to be towed to Portsmouth.

The steamer *Mary Kingsley*, which got into difficulties off Selly Island during the night, was able to make for Falmouth. The lifeboat at Barry (Wales) rescued the crew of the French schooner *Coeland* (117 tons) which was unable to make Swansea owing to the gale. The crew were taken off by the lifeboat just before the schooner drifted on to rocks.

According to a Marseilles message the British steamer *Crackahot* (2279 tons) was in distress 50 miles west of Ushant.

A cross-channel air liner, at an altitude of 1000 feet, had its windscreen clouded with salt which had been flung up in spray.

A considerable number of persons were injured through the collapsing of roofs and ceilings, while fallen trees caused several accidents and interrupted both road and rail transport services.

Wireless aerial masts at the Heston aerodrome were destroyed. In eight towns telephone communication was cut off completely, and altogether 15,000 lines were put out of order throughout the country.

Much damage was done to property

The Courier-Mail,
Brisbane, Australia
19th Sept. 1935

Not exactly 'yachting': Ransome, *Nancy*, the famous gale and its aftermath

whole night fighting off a huge motor cruiser which had moored alongside us Poor *Nancy* survived, bruised a great deal but not seriously damaged

In an alternative version of the tale, from a draft of the unpublished later part of his autobiography, he wrote:

In some ways I could hardly have chosen a worse, and in others, I could hardly have chosen a better introduction to sailing on the coasts of England I nearly lost the boat on the first day, mistakenly meeting all the force of the ebb out by the Needles and, in the wild weather, as nearly as possible being swept on the Shingles. However, we evaded them, found our way through by Hurst Castle and came to Yarmouth I knew by that time that I had got a very good boat.

Or, as he put it in his log:

Consider the boat pretty good and the engine a real beauty. But I must say I hope the next passage will be more like 'yachting'.

After popping up to London for a couple of days, to sign the lease on his new home at Broke Farm in Levington, Ransome returned, had the dinghy repaired (for 5 shillings) and moved *Nancy* to Haslar Creek in Portsmouth Harbour, where his cousin Godfrey Ransome, who was in the Navy, visited the new boat. They sailed again on the 23rd, pausing at Newhaven for a nap, then on again, 'carrying full sail and smoking along' ... 'cleared Beachy Head, passed by the Royal Sovereign Light Vessel and were presently going like a train past Dungeness, reaching Dover at 10 minutes past two in the afternoon, very wet and very cold and glad to get hot baths and a real dinner at the Lord Warden. Again the gales blew up'

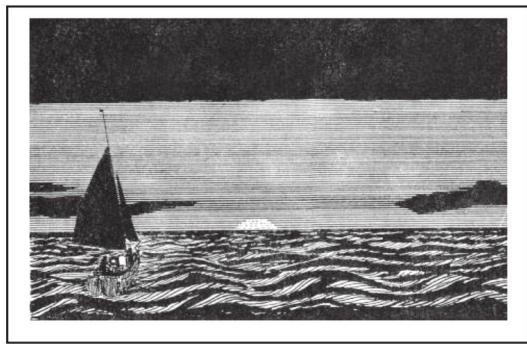
After a day in Dover, they left for Ramsgate, 'with a promise, not kept, of easy weather'. They decided to skip Ramsgate, and carried on, under trysail and in rain and wind. The boat's electrics failed, and Ransome describes them as 'Bucketing along in the dark, and able to see the compass only by occasional flashes of the torch.'

In his letter to the Gnosspelius family, dated '1 October, c/o the Butt & Oyster, Pin Mill, Ipswich', he also mentions how, on 'that last wild night ...

Not exactly ‘yachting’: Ransome, *Nancy*, the famous gale and its aftermath

the miserable navigation lights ... blew out always the moment we showed them. I used a red Woolworth Bakelite plate with a strong torch behind it, to frighten off the Flushing Harwich steamer !!!’.

He sums up: ‘So here she is, and after ten years with none, I’ve had a little ‘yachting’. It made me feel horribly old but, in a way, very young and inexperienced.’ In those last few words, we can sense the seeds of the theme of *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea* already forming in his mind. For Ransome, possibly to his surprise (he remarks, ‘It’s much more difficult than Baltic cruising’), sailing in tidal waters was a new level of experience, as it was to be for the young crew of the *Goblin* – his last big-boat sailing, in *Racundra*, had been on the virtually tideless Baltic.



The whole experience: the wild night, the sheer shock of being solely responsible for something new and unfamiliar which is threatening to get out of control, even the Woolworth plate incident, was to pour itself into the plot of *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, which

Ransome started writing just a few weeks later. It is a book about mastering elemental forces, about using lessons learnt, knowledge gained and skills acquired to cope with an extreme situation involving real danger.

It is about being tested, and triumphing. For the young Swallows, it is about moving from the comparatively safe confines of their beloved lake to the real world of tidal oceans, lee shores, large, threatening ships and the uncertainties of entering a foreign port. In short, it’s about growing up.

Not exactly 'yachting': Ransome, *Nancy*, the famous gale and its aftermath

A postscript: The 'horrible name' *Electron* did survive in one place: soon after bringing *Nancy* into Pin Mill, Ransome joined the recently formed Pin Mill Sailing Cub – celebrating its 90th anniversary this year. But in the membership records, the entry for 'Mr Ransome of Levington' has his boat listed as *Electron*. One can only assume it took Arthur some time to have the *Nancy Blackett* name painted on, or a board made, and the club secretary had ascertained the name simply by going to look at the boat herself.



Nancy Blackett 2025

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A SAILING ODYSSEY

Paul Brown recounts his adventurous first sailing trip around the south coast in his new boat *Arcturus*

We [Paul and his wife Petra] have been sailing for a number of years now, in the UK and also the Mediterranean (Med.), having taken our previous boat there in 2012. From then onwards, we spent many a happy season sailing in various Med. quarters. In 2023, we decided to call it a day there and sold that boat to a Frenchman from the Camargue. At the same time, we sold another smaller wooden boat, which had been kept on the river Dart for day sails in the summer, to a keen sailor from southern Ireland near Baltimore. This was with the intention of replacing these with a desired and well researched northern climes' sailing boat, suitable for our needs – a Fisher Ketch, with a solid wheelhouse. A nice example had been seen first on the River Dart, a Fisher 25 called *Elinor* – we had always marvelled at her lines. It had been designed on inspiration, we learnt, from Hebridean fishing boats.

We were keen to find a solid wheel house for a number of reasons. Our Med. boat, a centre-cockpit Beneteau, had a bespoke canvas canopy made to keep out the elements; this keeping us warmer in off-season sailing, and cooler when shading us from the sun in warmer times. Sadly, the downside, during storms, which were frequent even in port, was that damage risk was high and we often endured much time and hassle having to get this repaired – hence the solid wheelhouse. Additionally, this also offered a very minor useful addition, a windscreen wiper. For our previous Med. arrangement, we always had to go out on deck to use a shower scraper to remove the obscuring screen moisture – a minor aspect, but important.

In November 2023, we completed the sale on our Fisher 30 Ketch, *Arcturus of Wight*, purchased at Titchmarsh marina, in the Walton backwaters, Walton on the Naze. This was the culmination of quite a search, which had us looking at versions in Portland marina, Torquay

marina, Port Hamble, Guernsey, Greenock and Gdansk. This one suited us



most of all as it had what we needed: heating, bow thruster, new engine, new rigging, new sails, and it had been nicely finished off by the previous owner. The downside was that this was about 5 hours' drive away from where we live in the Blackdown Hills.

As we had previously sailed in the South Hams, and kept our small summer wooden sailing boat (a wooden Finesse 21 folk boat) on a buoy on the river Dart, a buoy for this would have been an option. However, for this boat, we decided quickly this would not be suitable, in spite of being cheaper. We wanted a pontoon for easy access, for works, shore power, and ease of getting to our boat. The Dart would have been 1½ hours away, whereas the marina we landed on, at Torquay, proved just less than an hour away. Torquay is also very nice indeed; perhaps not as bucolic and quaint as the beautiful Dart, but it provides us with similarities to many of the ports we had experienced in the Med. It compares with it favourably, so we can see why it is called the English Riviera. Soon after we purchased *Arcturus*, we managed to negotiate with MDL in Torquay (a specialist provider and operator of marinas) a berthing commencing in April 2024, giving us access to the whole MDL network, including Woolverstone on the Orwell, near Pin Mill and not far from Titchmarsh.

Upon purchase completion, *Arcturus* was put on the hard at Titchmarsh, courtesy of the previous owner, the chandler there – a very kind offer and arrangement. She stayed there over the winter, with visits from us from time to time to arrange and do works in preparation for a launch on 25th March 2024. After the launch, we stayed there on a pontoon for about a week; then we took her through the Walton backwaters and out to sea, via

approaches to Harwich and Felixstowe, to enter the Orwell. The waters of the Walton area need to be handled with some care, particularly the tidal aspects, but we managed quite well, and were lucky with the weather. The same with the Harwich/Felixstowe traffic on a Saturday, which was quite light. Arriving at



Woolverstone was delightful, in nice sunny weather: a lovely spot.

We spent about 4 weeks at Woolverstone, with some back-and-forth car trips home, with preparations for our big trip around the coast. Towards the end of April, instead of using our car for the 5-hour drive, on a Friday afternoon, we took the train from Taunton to Paddington, then to Liverpool Street, and from there to Ipswich, to a pre-arranged taxi. We managed to arrive at *Arcturus* by 8 pm, with some Tesco online shopping waiting for us at the MDL office. *In situ*, we started to prepare for the trip. MDL recommended a very good artisan who managed to sort out some important plumbing issues to the heads for us.

Whilst at Woolverstone, we enjoyed visits, by car and on foot, to Pin Mill, especially the Butt and Oyster – a lovely hostelry – checked out the boatyard and Alma cottage – altogether enchanting and all haunts of AR. Additionally, we also enjoyed a couple of nice meals at the Royal Harwich Yacht Club. There were so many AR recollections in the area, from viewing *Nancy Blackett* at Woolverstone, a lovely traditional boat, to the Arthur Ransome Way in Walton-on-the-Naze, and numerous plaques and historical reminders. We were very glad we bought our boat, but not only this: we also got to know that area better. We discovered Aldeburgh, alas not Southwold, and even did a continental trip from Harwich to Hook of Holland, never done before, with an overnight cabin – a comfortable trip.

Having not navigated across the Thames estuary before, we gathered advice widely: from old salts in Titchmarsh, those at Woolverstone, from a member of the Fisher Association and various pilot books we had acquired. The planning for this had to be quite a lot more extensive than we had been used to for our Med. cruising, where tidal streams and such were not an issue. My Yachtmaster training thankfully kicked in: prepare, prepare and double prepare.



Once finding a suitable weather and tide window, the following week, early in the morning, about 6 am, we got ready to set off. We had checked the tides at both ends of the envisaged 12-hour trip from Woolverstone to Ramsgate, also the

various channels and gatts to use. The trip did take 12 hours, and we arrived into Ramsgate just before dusk. It was a lumpy trip at times, with waves about 1 m high occasionally, but an interesting one with some sailing, but mostly motoring, and at least dry. Passing along one of the channels, the Black Deep, with wind turbines on the port side, we encountered occasional large freight, but otherwise it was mostly quiet. We took one piece of advice, taking Foulers gatt through the wind turbine array to get into the main Thames stretch towards North Foreland. This cut out some extra mileage, saving time, it was also an interesting experience. Crossing over to North Foreland, we again encountered occasional freight traffic, obviously giving it wide berths. This last stretch was quite pleasurable, as the most difficult was behind us. Approaching Ramsgate proved straightforward, even entering not as challenging as the pilot books suggested, with its fast cross currents. Ramsgate became a delightful experience, a pleasant marina,

decent facilities, an attractive front, where we managed to have some good meals out and a nice visit to Ramsgate YC. After 2 days, the weather allowed us to head on to Dover. Starting quite foggy, this cleared as we approached Dover. It was lovely to see the white cliffs as we approached.



We had, of course, to handle the wait at the busy eastern entrance until given the all clear. After entry, we navigated and followed the given course along the inside of the outer mole to the new marina there. We had visited Dover with our Med. boat in 2012, and had an impression of

Granville then. This new marina was of a different scale and quality; we were extremely impressed. We also noted that there were many continental visitors there, who seemed as impressed as we were, some also having been with us at Ramsgate. The weather on arriving was very nice and sunny, almost the first smacks of summer, but inevitably quickly deteriorated, so we had to stay there for 3 days, which was no hardship. We had a nice meal out, a visit to the yacht club there, also visited in 2012, and to the local chandlery. We were getting to know our boat and its needs.

Listening to the radio on VHF, it was interesting to hear the traffic reports, and also the various maritime news, from very large tanker and freight ships, to frequent weather reports and so on. The border force was quite evident at both ports. Once the weather cleared, we set off to Eastbourne, all planned with the help of tidal stream atlases and pilot books. We took particular care to avoid the gunnery ranges, and arrived in Eastbourne in mid-afternoon, close to low water. There was quite a lot of waiting and traffic, so we had to raft up in the lock, a jolly affair with a lot

of banter. We had stayed in Eastbourne in 2012 with our Med. boat, *Odyssey of Truro*, so we remembered it. That night we had a delicious pizza at a nice local restaurant.

The following day, we set off to Brighton, which proved a nice short trip, which we managed in a morning. With lovely vistas of the Seven Sisters. Brighton marina was interesting; it has a shallow entrance, so needs some care.

Once berthed up, we could see another boat that had not got this right, and had dried out on the



mud and had tipped over a bit. We stayed here for two nights, which proved uneventful. Stepping away from the marina complex, the whole area seemed to be heaving with humanity, so we decided not to go into central Brighton; rather a pity, as it had been some years since we had visited.

We used our time to carefully plan the next stage to Port Hamble. Some different views were given, with some advocating using a shorter and closer to shore route. Looking at this one, it appeared to have some greater risk, and the pilot books advised it was for those who knew those waters really well. We decided to take the safer route, skirting the wind turbines, past Owers, where we had to arrive at the right tide, which we did, then head to the Solent. All went well, and we headed to the Bramble Bank, where we managed to cross with enough water to enter the main channel of the Itchen; then quickly into the Hamble and we were berthed up by late afternoon. It is a lovely MDL spot, which we highly recommend. That evening, we managed to have a very nice bite there at the marina restaurant. We stayed there for two nights, and managed to get a local marine electrician to come out and repair and test our fuel gauge sender, and also repair a calorifier controller: excellent swift service.

A sailing odyssey

On departure, we filled up at the fuel pontoon, then had a very nice trip, from [the?] Hamble, with Royal Boating Club sailing yachts entering the Solent, where we parted company on our way to Lymington. We made this in good time by early afternoon, managing to dodge the Isle of White ferry, and berthed up with plenty of time to explore: a lovely marina and spot. We checked out the marina, the town and the chandleries, and had a lovely traditional pub meal that evening.

We had planned to spend a couple of nights there but, checking the weather, we could see it was forecast to become worse in the next few days. Seeing this, and also wanting to get our boat into its new home, Torquay



MDL marina, we decided to do an overnight trip to get into Torquay by daylight. Had we taken the shorter route close to Portland Bill, at the right tide, we would have been getting into our new berth in Torquay at midnight. Additionally, had we taken the closer Bill route, this would have required us being very conscious of the Lulworth gunnery range. The timings did not seem to suit, so we decided to leave the Needles, head south, to a point where we could passage about 10 miles south of the Bill, then head

straight to Torquay and Torbay. The passage was a little bumpy 10 miles south of the Bill, but not as bumpy as parts of the Thames; I estimated the wave height to be about 0.7-0.8 m. Until midnight, we took it in light turns, and managed to witness amazing Aurora Borealis off the Bill. These looked like four red-orange, purple light shafts from the coast into the sky. At first, we did not know what these were, but then surmised it must be something like the Aurora Borealis, which we confirmed later.

Crossing Lyme Bay was interesting, our AIS showing many active fishing boats, so we had to keep our wits about us on our watches. We took turns to have a quick nap, but for most part we were together. We had done quite a few night passages before, in the UK, the Bay of Biscay and also in the Med., these being useful and needed for certain passages. We pressed on, the dawn came and the outline of the coast appeared. As we approached Torbay, the sun came out, the sheen of the coast sparkled, the red rocks glistened and we experienced déjà vu, and a feeling as if we were approaching a Med. coast again, so familiar to us. Dolphins jumped at our bow, so welcoming, and something we had also experienced often in the Med. and in Start Bay off Dartmouth. All in all, it was a very happy morning, and we were safely berthed up by 9.15 am. With all going so smoothly, we managed to sort out all we needed to do with the marina and our boat by late morning, so decided to get ready to take the train home. This we did from Torquay station to Paignton, where we changed for Tiverton, arriving early afternoon, and then took a taxi home. Hence, by mid-afternoon, we were home, back *in situ*, 2 weeks and 1 day after departing for Taunton railway station. We took a deep sigh of relief that all went so well: a very enjoyable experience indeed.

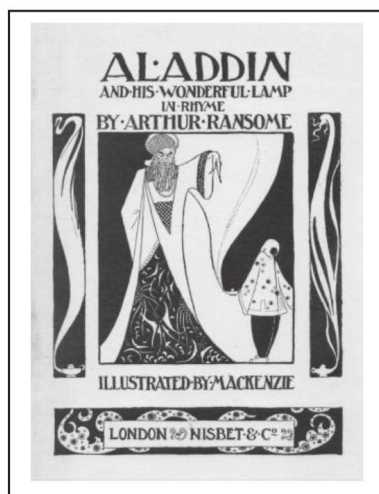
A.M.R. THE POET, AND THE DISCOVERY OF THREE EARLY POEMS

**Martin Beech takes an in depth look at Ransome's poetry
and uncovers some new gems**

In the summer of 1903, the then 19-year-old Arthur Ransome took a long-anticipated holiday to the Lake District. He describes in his autobiography that on the train journey northward he had within his pocket a book of poetry by Keats, and in his knapsack a copy of J. B. Mayor's *English Prosody*. His aims were clear; he had an empty notebook and his intention was to fill it with poetic verse. It was this desire to work on his poetry that resulted in an important, life-altering meeting. Ransome explains that, while in search of his poetic muse, he had settled down upon a large, flat-topped rock, in the middle of a roaring beck, below Coniston Old Man. A passing stranger, seeing Ransome lying on top of the rock, worried that the prone figure might be in trouble. The stranger was W. G. Collingwood. On being asked if any assistance was needed, Ransome replied that all was well, and that he was simply 'writing poetry'.¹ Fortunately, Collingwood saw this as a perfectly normal preoccupation for a young man to be engaged upon, and the two men soon became friends – indeed, they became life-long friends. In the years that followed this serendipitous meeting, the entire Collingwood family was to encourage Ransome in all of his writing efforts. For all his youthful enthusiasms concerning the reading and writing of poetry, however, very little of Ransome's verse has ever appeared in print. Indeed, all the verse that is generally known is in the form of snippets of rhymes, disjointed verse, and amusing doggerel found in letters and various ephemera.

The only extended body of verse that Ransome published was *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp in Rhyme*. Completed in 1914, this richly illustrated book (the artwork being by Thomas Mackenzie) was eventually published in 1919 and, while it is a solid, lyrical and enjoyable piece of work, it cannot claim to be an original story, nor high poetry. Peter

Hunt accurately describes Ransome's *Aladdin* as being, 'at best workmanlike'.² Writing to Barbara Collingwood on 22 December 1914, however, Ransome commented, 'it's a lark, being a poet, and a *paid* poet at that'.³ In a second letter to Dora Collingwood, dated 12 January 1915, Ransome further ventured, presumably tongue-in-cheek, that his *Aladdin* could, 'be used as an object lesson for young poets',⁴ to which he added the advice, that to



succeeded as a poet one needed to, 'work hard, and learn the rhyming dictionary by heart'. Ransome was appropriately proud of his *Aladdin*, and, like his anthology *The Book of Friendship* (published in 1909), he dedicated it to his poet friend Lascelles Abercrombie. Ransome writes:

*You are a poet. I my nose
Grind at the humbler wheel of prose.
But now and then I make a stanza ...
What's that you say? It does not scan, Sir?
What then? I may be Sancho Panza,
But let not you on Rosinante
Despise my donkey's crude andante.
Yours be the visions, yours be the fame
I have my pleasure all the same;
And although it be not high poesy,
Lascelles, its good enough for me.⁵*

Similar to his other known verse, Ransome's dedication is composed of simple, lyrical rhymes, and is perfused with a gentle humour. For all this,

Ransome is prepared to include a few literary references within his lines. Sancho Panza is the dry-witted squire in Cervantes's *Don Quixote*, and Rosinante is Don Quixote's horse. The use of the word 'andante' provides a reference to the musical term for moderately slow or, at a walking pace. Here, Ransome is (correctly) acknowledging Abercrombie as the superior poet, and he is perhaps reflecting upon the lines that he had written a few years earlier, 'if Don Quixote is among the clouds, Sancho Panza sits firmly upon his donkey'.⁶

That Ransome enjoyed, read copiously, and appreciated poetry is evident in his two anthology publications, *The Book of Friendship* (1909) and *The Book of Love* (1910), with both books being rich in carefully selected poetic verse. Poetry even found its way into the *Swallows and Amazons* series of books, through either chapter headings, or by direct character statements. Indeed, the recital of poetry was an important plot-line device in *Swallowdale* (1931). In this latter case, it is the Great Aunt who requires Nancy and Peggy, in school ma'am fashion, to learn, and then recite poetic verse. Towards the conclusion of the story, however, Captain Flint saves the day, and the carefully laid plans of the Amazons, by suggesting to the Great Aunt that her nieces might be tasked with learning *Casabianca* (as written by Felicia Hemans in 1826), a poem that he knew they had already studied at school. This poem actually concerns the death of a young cabin boy, who refuses to abandon his post aboard a burning ship without a direct order from his father (Commander of the French Fleet), who, in fact, had already been killed. It is a poem of loyalty and courage in the face of adversity. The choice of *Casabianca* is interesting for a number of reasons and, although it was a very popular poem in its day, Ransome possibly chose it as a point of personal reflection with respect to the complicated relationship that he had with his father,⁷ and with respect to the precarious living, as a new and hopeful writer of children's fiction, to which he had then committed himself to.

Ransome was still a pupil at Rugby when his first published poem saw print. This poem concerned the death of Queen Victoria, and it appeared in the 26 January 1901 issue of the *Rugby News and District Observer* newspaper.

Written on the very day of the Queen's death, the poem is entitled *The Passing*, and reads:

*Hark! The Bells. Ah, what can it mean?
There has flashed a swift message to say
That she; our beloved England's queen
Has passed away softly to-day*

*For sixty-four years has this land
And others been ruled by the sway
Of the sceptre She held in her hand
Who passed away softly to-day*

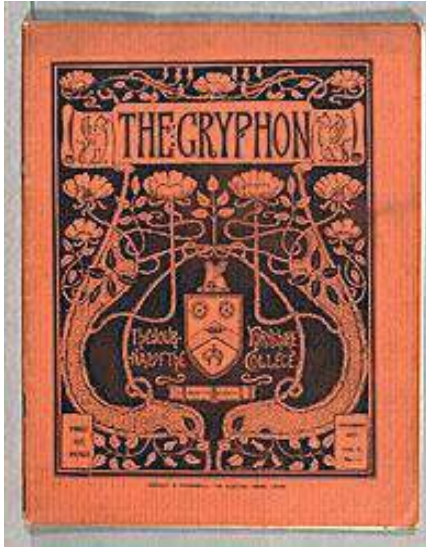
*She has gone. Alas we are left
To what end we can never say,
The Nation is weeping bereft,
She has passed away softly to-day*

Tuesday, Jan.22. 1901

A.M.R.

For a 17-year-old youth this is a competent, somewhat maudlin, but genuine and heart-felt offering. Ransome recalled the circumstances surrounding its publication within his autobiography, noting that he, 'had a warm feeling for her [Queen Victoria]', and that it was a, 'local printer, who worked it into the local paper and paid me half-a-crown.'⁸ He also recalled his embarrassment when a group of fellow school boys began to sing his poem to the tune of *We'll all go a-hunting today*, below his study window. In what seems to be an unnecessarily self-deprecating manner, Ransome summarized *The Passing* as being, 'a dreadful piece of earnest doggerel'.

Importantly, for what follows below, it should be noted that Ransome signed *The Passing* with his initials 'A.M.R' (for Arthur Mitchell Ransome). Furthermore, and again writing in his autobiography, Ransome indicates that, at about the same time (circa 1901), 'a Leeds weekly magazine the very name of which I forget printed some small rubbish that I wrote'.⁹ Taking this biographical information to heart, I have been able to track down these latter contributions to *The Gryphon* – the Journal of the Yorkshire College of



Science. This monthly (not weekly) journal, produced and edited by the student union, was first published in December 1887 and, within its ranks,¹⁰ there are three poems accredited to A.M.R. Two of these poems appeared in the autumn term of 1901, and one during the spring term of 1902: this time-frame being exactly that in which Ransome attended the College. Indeed, no A.M.R. contributions are found before the November 1901 issue of

The Gryphon, and nor are there any after the February 1902 issue.

The first poem appears in the November 1901 (vol. 5, no. 1) issue of *The Gryphon*, and is titled, *A Freshman's Effusion*.

*A Freshman am I,
And I do not deny
That it is most inordinate cheek,
To attempt to compose
Something better than prose
Before I have been here a week
But I happened to look
In a certain red book
Composed by the swells of the College,
And I happened to read
That there seems to be need
For some Freshman to show off their knowledge.
I don't mean to boast,
For I haven't a ghost
Of truly poetical feeling.
It is for the sake
Of some people that make
Their lunch at the "col." I'm appealing.*

*For when dinner is done,
Which is just about one,
And lectures are not until two,
Is there anything wrong
In a club for Ping-Pong,
I am sure it would please not a few.*

A.M.R.

As a piece of humorous verse, in a whimsical style reminiscent of Lewis Carroll, *A Fresher's' Effusion* works well although, with respect to its conclusion, there is no indication that Ransome specifically favoured Ping-Pong as a game to play (but see later for an alternative interpretation of this gaming reference). The reference to 'the swells', and the 'red book' is a nod towards the students putting *The Gryphon* together, and to the fact that the journal had a red (or at least reddish) cover.

The second A.M.R poem appeared in the December 1901 (vol. 5, no. 2) issue of *The Gryphon*, and is set according to the metre of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's *The Song of Hiawatha* (written in 1855). Here, however, the problem is that of *Physical Chairs: The New Song of Hiawatha*.

*To the Phys. Lab. As he wended,
Scientific Hiawatha,
Hiawatha stuffed with Physics,
Like a goose with sage and onions,
Chanced to think upon a damsel,
Turned and ran to speak his feelings,
Missed his chance and lost his seating,
Lost his four-legged one-topped Phys. Chair.
Hiawatha as he hunted,
Hunted for a seat to sleep on,
As with scientific mind he
Sought to find the Prism's angle,
Sought to work the mighty balance,
Toying with a Mohr's balance,
Saw a hapless first-year Freshman
Leave his seat a while unguarded
When he wished for words of wisdom*

*From the demonstrator A-ll-n.
Here's a chance, thought Hiawatha,
Let me now retrieve mine honour,
Let me steal the four-legged wood thing,
 Quadruped of priceless value.
Thro' the lab. He softly wended,
Reached his goal and seized the seating,
 Clasped it to his joyful bosom,
 Put it down and sat upon it.
But the hapless Fresher happened
 To have set a wily hall mark
On the Phys. Lab.'s four-legged seating.
For this mark then sought he swiftly,
Sought he swiftly, yea, and quietly,
 Found the guilty Hiawatha.
Then with much and rising passion
 He denounced that wily stealer,
Stealer of a four-legged Phys. Chair
Told his mind unto the Phys. Labs.,
 Raised his voice, abused the parties
That provided the Phys. Lab. Seatings,
 Prayed the gods to send down curses
 Till the Physical Almightyes
 Deign to give a decent number
 Of the quadrupedal seatings.*

A.M.R.

This poem is a pure joy to read, and it is full of vigour, humour, and intelligence. The scene is set against the struggles of a hapless science student attempting to conduct an experiment in a physics laboratory (measuring angles, and working scales). One truly feels that this poem is reflective of a real-life event in Ransome's college life. The verse focuses on the very practical problem of finding a chair to sit upon – indeed, Ransome is the 'hapless Freshman'. There is a long history of using Longfellow's Hiawatha metre as a template for developing humorous stories. Lewis Carroll used it in his 1883 poem *Hiawatha's Photographing*. Likewise, J. R. R. Tolkien used its form twice in 1911, in his poems *The New Lemminkainen*,

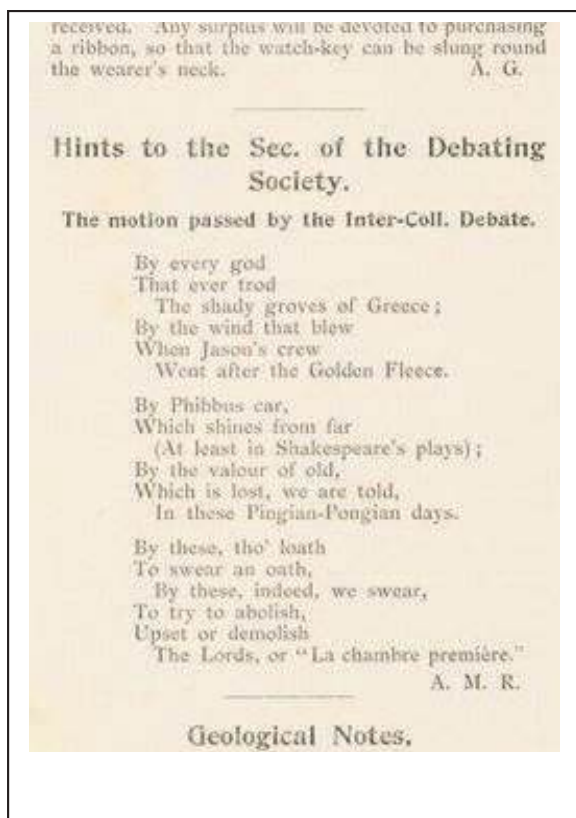
and *Lemminkainen Goeth to the Ford of Oxen*, written in celebration of his going up to Oxford.¹¹ Indeed, Longfellow adapted the trochaic tetrameter that is used in *The Song of Hiawatha* from the classic Finnish work *Kalevala* as compiled by Elias Lönnrot in 1835.

The third poem, and the last attributed to A.M.R., was published in the February 1902 (vol. 5, no. 3) issue of *The Gryphon*. This poem is entitled, *The Motion Passed by the Inter-Coll. Debate*.

*By every god
That ever trod
The shady groves of Greece;
By the wind that blew
When Janson's crew
Went after the Golden Fleece.*

*By Phibbus car,
Which shines from far
(At least in Shakespeare's plays);
By the valour of old,
Which is lost, we are told,
In these Pingian-Pongian days.*

*By these, tho' loath
To swear an oath,
By these, indeed, we swear,
To try to abolish,
Upset or demolish The Lords, or
"La chambre première."*



A.M.R.

The Gryphon, p. 53, February 1902

The Inter-Collegiate debate referenced in the poem's title was that conducted by the debating societies from Yorkshire College and Owens College, on Friday evening, 24th January 1902. Owens College was founded in 1851, and became the University of Manchester in 1904. Indeed, its

history mirrors that of the Yorkshire College of Science, which was founded in 1894, and became the University of Leeds in 1904. The motion that the two societies debated concerned the ‘abolition of the House of Lords, no second chamber being necessary’. Indeed, it was argued that the House of Lords was, ‘obstructive only to Liberal, and not to Conservative measures. Thus, it hampered true legislation’. The motion for abolition was carried handsomely by 48 votes for, to 24 against. That Ransome would support the call to abolish the House of Lords is certainly to be expected, given both his later sympathetic reporting on the Bolshevik cause, and as a back-reaction to his father’s strong conservative views. There are additional points that resonate with Ransome in this third poem. Certainly, Ransome would have known about Greek history and the classic Greek sagas, from his time at Rugby. Indeed, he would have been as familiar with the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts, and their search for the Golden Fleece, as he was with the exploits of Jim Hawkins and Long John Silver in Stevenson’s *Treasure Island*. Furthermore, the Golden Fleece, is generally taken to be a symbol of authority and kingship, and this, for Ransome, would have resonated with his early childhood angst, and the repressive relationship that he had with his domineering father. Furthermore, Ransome’s father, Cyril, who had been a Professor at Yorkshire College, had published, in 1898, a textbook based upon a series of public lectures delivered at Leeds, entitled *Short Studies of Shakespear’s Plots*. The car of Phibbus is a reference to the chariot of the Sun god Phoebus, who encircles the sky each day, and is adapted from a line in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* (Act I, scene II): ‘And Phibbus’ car shall shine from afar, and make and mar the foolish fates’. In the lines following this, Ransome then gives us the expression ‘Pingian-Pongian days’, which, in this context, is more than a simple reference to the game of table tennis. Indeed, Ping-Pong, since the time of its invention in the 1880s, was associated with the after-dinner parlour games of the well-to-do, and the Victorian upper-classes. Accordingly, the phrase is being used in a sense applicable to the staunch conservatism typically espoused by the wealthy and landed gentry.

It cannot be said that Ransome was a writer of great poetry. He did, however, write competent verse and fine doggerel, and he successfully published a lyrical adaptation of *Aladdin*. His poetry and verse, as such, is invariably light, often humorous, largely derivative in format, and only occasionally reflective. These are not criticisms, however, since there is no evidence to suggest that Ransome had any strong pretensions towards achieving poetic renown. Rather, his poetry is a reflection of personal pleasures, humour and friendship, and is never derogatory or evoking of barbs intended to deeply sting. For all this, it was probably more out of exasperation than any real sense of intention that Ransome (when 60 years of age) wrote to his mother, at year's end, on 31 December 1944, complaining about his inability to complete his latest (indeed, last) *Swallows and Amazons* novel, *Great Northern?*, concluding that it is, 'high time I retired and took to writing sonnets,'¹² This end-of-letter quip suggests that the poetic muse, or at least the poetic ideal, was still with Ransome, even, as in later life, he struggled with his prose writing.

While all biographical sources indicate that Ransome had a lifelong interest in reading poetry, he showed little enthusiasm for publishing and/or preserving the incidental verse that he did write. In the case of the three poems preserved in *The Gryphon*, however, we begin to capture some sense of Ransome's early knowledge of poetic form, and some idea of his enthusiasm for writing, and wordplay. Indeed, the poems presented in *The Gryphon* were written at a time when Ransome was pivoting away from a somewhat forced career in the applied sciences, and moving towards his cherished ideal of living as a writer. When he left Yorkshire College in the spring of 1902, Ransome furthered his literary desires by accepting a job, as a low-paid office-boy, at the London publishing house of Grant Richards. It was then the case, however, that if Ransome was going to become a successful writer, and make a living through his chosen craft, then he would need to write in those areas, and upon those topics that would sell, and this, despite any youthful dreams and ambitions, did not include the writing of poetry.

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- ⁴ *Signalling from Mars: the letters of Arthur Ransome*, (ibid.), p. 19.
- ⁵ *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp in Rhyme*, Arthur Ransome, Nisbet & Co., 1919.
- ⁶ *A History of Story-telling: studies in the development of narrative*, Arthur Ransome, T. C. & E. C. Jack, 1909, p. 97.
- ⁷ For further information see *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, Hugh Brogan, Jonathan Cape, 1984. and *A Thoroughly Mischievous Person – the other Arthur Ransome*, Alan Kennedy, Lutterworth Press, 2021.
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- ¹¹ *The Collected Poems of J. R. R. Tolkien*: vol. I, Christina Scull and W. Hammond (eds), Harper Collins, 2024, pp. 38-53.
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DID ARTHUR RANSOME HAVE ASD?

Andrew Harvey* ponders on whether some of AR's characteristics would now classify him as being on the autism spectrum

Right from when I was in my teens, and first read an article about Arthur Ransome as a man rather than knowing him only as the shadowy author behind the books I so loved, his personality has intrigued me. There was something ... well ... different about him. For example, immediately after the childhood incident of the big spike under the table, he said he always wanted to write. His brain seemed to have absorbed scenarios, events, people, and assorted odd isolated items of fact – seemingly already knowing that that they would, one day, be useful in that writing.

... we were playing ships under and on a big dining-room table which had underneath it, in the middle, a heavy iron screw pointing downwards. ... I started up, and that big screw ... made a most horrible dent in the top of my skull, altered its shape and so, in one moment, changed my character for life. I crawled out, much shaken; and that very afternoon wrote my first book, about a desert island, in a little blue notebook with a blue cover. I have been writing ever since.¹

Once out of my teens, married and raising a family, I read the books less often, with the result that my questions about the writer faded down ... but I still remember how much AR knew about all kinds of different things, and how he could explain them simply, at a level a child could absorb. Indeed, when my own children needed answers to general knowledge questions set as primary school homework, rather than simply telling them, my response was often to select a volume from the row of well worn, green-covered books on my shelf, find the right place and tell them to read the next page or two!

Did Arthur Ransome have ASD?

When my children were older, and leisure time began to return, I started to occasionally re-read the twelve again – and at around the same time, purely by coincidence, I began to understand a little bit more of the concept of autism. It was then that I had the first vague inklings that there might in some way be a connection between my enjoyment of the books, my feelings about the author, and that condition of autism (commonly now referred to as ASD - of ‘high functioning autism’ or ‘Asperger’s Syndrome’ as it was then called ... and as it was termed when I was informed that I probably had it too.

So what then is ASD? (Well, it’s not an acronym for **A**ctually **S**omeone **D**ifferent, though I think it could well be.) ASD stands for **A**utistic **S**pectrum **D**isorder. But why, and particularly in the current context, do I even think of connecting this with Arthur Ransome? I do so quite simply because, to me, he also shows many distinctive ASD symptoms.

So did he actually have it, long before it was identified or described. Is there enough in his own writings and in the books written about him, to indicate that he did? Personally, I think there is easily enough to show that had he been alive today, he would most probably have been diagnosed in childhood as having ASD. Like me, he was lonely in, and greatly disliked being, at conventional schools, and left such institutions as soon as he could. (I also left school before I needed to, having never returned after taking my ‘O’ Levels, not even to be given the results.)

I had not heard the word autism being used back then of course, and when I did first hear it, I had no idea what it meant. I now realise however that undiagnosed ASD was one of my major reasons for getting out of school, even though that meant starting work. At school, I didn’t fit in – and had rarely done so since I was 7 or 8. Like Ransome, I was bullied. Sports were a concept that I personally failed to understand, and were (as far as I could see) a total waste of time. My theory that AR had ASD is therefore, at least in part, based on fellow-feeling.

But to return to the topic: what actually is ASD? What is Autistic Spectrum Disorder? Well, it’s not a disease. It’s not an illness. It’s nothing that can be ‘cured’. The term ASD is more a description of how you are,

and how you function. It's about the way your brain is wired about being 'neurodiverse', as it is currently termed. It's what makes you yourself as against someone else – just the same as having red hair does, or blue eyes, left-handedness, a squint or a stammer. It's a 'syndrome', i.e. *a concurrence of symptoms, a characteristic pattern or group of actions, feelings, observed happenings etc, characteristic of a particular problem or condition.*²

The term ASD is now used in place of the former 'autism' description, so I am informed, because modern thinking is that autism is not something you either have or don't have, but rather that it shows itself on a scale: it is a spectrum or continuum, something that runs, as it were, from black to white or from 0 to 100. And, therefore, it's logical that any such measure, designed to cover the entire range of human variation, must by its very nature include all of those variations. That being so, everyone who has ever lived must therefore fit into the ASD spectrum somewhere. Most people, of course, are not seen as being autistic – but that is simply because they are well down at the low end of the range, the end I would think most people consider to be ordinary or 'normal' – the acceptable end.

My opinion is that AR was somewhere on the other side of whatever mid-point you care to use: that, particularly at certain stages in his life, he exhibited signs of being on the 'less normal' part of the scale. If he had been at secondary school 20 years ago then he would probably have been described as 'high-functioning autistic' – meaning he was only slightly unusual. He was just a little different, not all that peculiar really: he had become by learned experience, able to hide or disguise most of his 'odd' attributes, and so to seem 'almost normal' under most circumstances. He was, to use the current term, 'masking' rather successfully. Reading through the various accounts, from *The Life of Arthur Ransome*,³ *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, via *The Last Englishman*⁴ to *Bohemia in London*,⁵ etc. I think he became more and more adept at hiding his 'unusualness'. By the time he was living in Russia and writing articles about the Revolution there, I would say he had become so good at building an acceptable persona that most people would never have suspected the childhood experiences disguised

behind it. That's why, I would imagine, very few people consider him to have had ASD.

But as I started to dabble in writing myself, and as I read his books again, several times over, deliberately studying them rather than just enjoying the tale, my understanding grew and my thoughts on the man himself began to change. I recognised aspects of his life and works that I'd not previously noticed, and my suspicions increased. There were, at that time, three main reasons why I felt this way:

- First and foremost – the incredibly accurate and sensitive way in which he portrays Dick Callum's undoubtedly autistic ways, with all his good points and the difficulties he faced – together, though to a lesser degree, with many of Titty's personal attributes too.
- Secondly – the way he sought solitude in his own life, be that moments by the stream while returning to school, the felt need for space to write, to sail, to hike or go fishing, or just wanting to be alone with his thoughts in the wilds of the Lakes.
- And thirdly – the way that, as a child, he so completely threw himself into whatever new concept filled his mind, often following it into realms of excess – be it setting up his schoolboy business manufacturing paper spills, building a huge museum of artefacts etc, or breeding caterpillars or Belgian hares to sell.

But then, when I read through the 2024 issue of *Mixed Moss*, I found something new and most unexpected that added further weight to my theory, which set me off trying to work out my thoughts and opinions in this (I hope) somewhat more logical way. It was Peter Wright's article 'Ransome pulls the wool over our eyes' that got me thinking. In it, Peter very carefully and comprehensively de-bunks the notion of AR having particularly poor eyesight, creating (to me) a need to look for other reasons for his educational struggles and comprehensive lack of sporting ability.

If AR had been at school today, I think his teachers would have picked up that his mind was 'wired differently' and sent him off to see an expert, who most probably would have diagnosed him as 'being on the autism spectrum', or even 'having special educational needs'. This would hopefully

have resulted in him receiving several hours of individual assistance, with personal help and guidance in whatever areas he was deemed as being needy. Living when he did, of course, this never happened. Instead, like so many 'odd' people over the years, he was left to flounder on his own, lonely, misunderstood and unsupported, regarded as a disappointment by his parents, having to try and deal with a puzzling, incomprehensible world, and learning to successfully hide his real but unconventional thoughts and reactions very firmly away.

The term autism, used to describe 'clever misfits' and 'awkward geniuses', is relatively modern. According to the National Autistic Society,⁶ Leo Kanner first described the classic autistic syndrome in 1943, when it became known as 'Kanner Syndrome'. The terms used have changed many times over the years, different aspects becoming known as a 'Triad of impairments', 'Asperger (or Asperger's) Syndrome', 'High-functioning autism', and now the situation where all variants have been brought together under the umbrella term of the 'Autistic Syndrome Disorder', ASD.

However, in 1884, when AR was born, the word autism had probably never been coined and, as far as I am aware, the concept it represents was neither understood nor accepted within the education or medical systems. The syndrome was never allowed for in general society when analysing those peculiar people who did not fit the accepted norm. In just the same way as left-handed people were once seen as being in need of retraining (or even punishment) for their peculiar ways,⁷ so anyone showing Autistic traits was regarded as being stupid, deliberately awkward, wilful, backward etc. – or just simply wrong.

This, of course, was a great injustice, as so often those with ASD are highly intelligent, and in a few instances are recognised as being a genius. Indeed, a quick Google search for 'Autistic genius' brings up names such as Albert Einstein, Michelangelo, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Sir Isaac Newton, Bill Gates etc.

People with ASD, however, can often tend to be awkward, prickly and unsociable⁸ – and hence potentially loners. Their differences mean that they

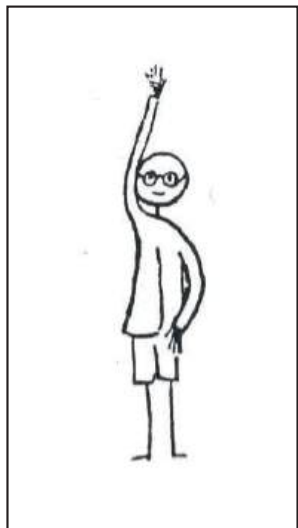
stand out from the mass, and so can easily be picked on or bullied, finding it hard to relate to people, or retaliate effectively toward bullying behaviour. They find it difficult to blend into the crowd or to make friends, though the few friends they do gain often become really good ones, resulting in understanding and long-lasting relationship.

From *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome* and *The Life of Arthur Ransome* it is clear that AR did make such friends, but mainly with people he met before starting mainstream schooling, or with those he knew after he had left the world of education and started work. He was, however, bullied at school and in those formative years received little understanding or support from his teachers or at home, though once he found his feet in London's Bohemia, and slipped into the niche world of publishing, he was at last able to settle down and become a multi-faceted polygonal peg enjoying the fit of an equally multi-faceted and delightfully suitable polygonal hole – and under such circumstances, most people's ASD symptoms tend to greatly diminish.

In Peter Wright's article he illustrated how AR found sports very hard to cope with, and subsequently hid his inabilities behind the smokescreen of poor eyesight. But an inability to cope with sport is one of the common symptoms of ASD – whether that be from poor physical coordination, lack of ability to fit into a team, or simply not understanding the intention or point of sport at all. AR seemed to regard most organised games as unnecessary, finding a long walk in the open country to be a vastly superior way of occupying time or maintaining fitness. Yes, he swam, and played rugby for a short time, but otherwise he shunned most games played with a ball on a field, and hated being forced into a boxing ring.

Another fairly frequent symptom of ASD is that people prefer to learn in their own way – often absorbing facts from books rather than lectures, or simply working things out by trial and error. AR taught himself to swim, alone in the swimming baths. He devoured books throughout his life, he learned how to pen his wonderful prose the hard way, by reading other people's output, and then writing and writing and writing, often, I believe, long into the small hours.

In the 1930s and '40s, when AR was writing his most famous books, I doubt if anyone had ever set out to describe the assorted symptoms exhibited by those with ASD – but yet somehow, without any suitable or



accepted text to crib from, he managed to create Dick Callum. When it came to listing the navigation buoys and marks around the East and South coast of England, he extracted the information from the *Channel Pilot*. When he needed to describe the chemistry of producing pure gold (even if it was copper) from the raw ore, he had his two terms studying science at Yorkshire College to draw on, as well as *Phillips on Metals*. When he wanted to set a book in China, a country he had already visited, he still quizzed people to be sure of getting his facts right. When he wanted to know how the *Goblin* might behave in crossing the

North Sea to the Netherlands, he actually sailed himself there in *Nancy Blackett* to find out exactly what it was like. But when he wanted to create a character like Dick, where was there for him to go? From where could he gain the needed information? Dick is a consistent, rounded, and absolutely believable character, who wonderfully and sympathetically exhibits so many ASD symptoms. But where did he come from?

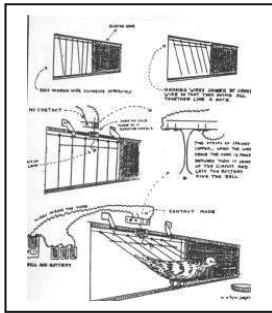
If AR knew any young lads with a similar temperament, I haven't found reference to them in Brogan's *The Life of Arthur Ransome* or Ransome's *Autobiography*. We all know that the Altounyan family were used at least in part as the basis for the Walkers. It is, I think, generally accepted that the Amazons may well be based on a blend of Taqui Altounyan and the Collingwood sisters, while the Eels were probably more of his own invention, only slightly based on real children, and so rather 'flatter' as literary characters. But how could anyone, writing 10 years before the syndrome was even recognised, create such an accurate and believable ASD character as Dick without something to work from? There was no

Did Arthur Ransome have ASD?

recognised medical or psychological model available then, nor anything like it.

I personally believe therefore that Dick is a portrayal of certain aspects of AR's own attitudes and attributes – and that ASD is very much one of them. Dick would become utterly immersed in the details of whatever currently occupied his mind – classic ASD. He sometimes needed to be shouted at to pull him out of that happy immersion – often ASD again. He found it difficult to ‘read’

people and so sometimes made horrendous mistakes about them. He was on many occasions utterly task focused. He read widely around any new subject, educating himself on gold mining and how to sail *Scarab*. He could seem like a dreamer with his head in the clouds, and could even appear to be utterly impractical – but when a crag-fast sheep had to be dealt with, or there was a need to transfer food between



two boats firmly aground on the mudflats of Breydon Water, or there was an urgent requirement to make pigeons ring loud bells, he almost instantly came up with a sound and workable solution. He could be dreadfully clumsy; he could be so engrossed in something that he forgot to eat. He always seemed happy in his own company, doing his own thing, ploughing his own furrow and following his own path – just as Arthur Ransome had done.

I know these symptoms. I recognise them in myself, as well as in my grandfather, my father, my daughters and all too many of my grandchildren. But it is only my two youngest grandchildren, still at school and college now, who have been assessed and given an official diagnosis of ASD, and

so are receiving help for it. Back so long ago AR had no chance of such assistance. But look what he created from his own difficulties! Look at what we can now still enjoy – so long after his death.

John, it is said, very probably represents the boy he had wished he had been himself, and probably would have been with a caring father and without ASD. Captain Flint may well illustrate the person he wished his father had been, crossed with many of his own adult traits. Dick, however, I think, was the side of his complex character that he had learned to hide, not wanting to let others see such socially unacceptable traits in his own life, and who he may even have come to terms with through writing his books. So in closing – if Arthur Ransome did indeed have ASD, then long live ASD!

***Please note:** Andrew states: ‘I have absolutely no medical or psychological qualifications, and therefore all the ideas or concepts expressed in this article are nothing more than my own personal and therefore totally unqualified opinions. I am not trying to make any factual statements, but more asking some serious questions. Please feel completely free to disagree with any or all of my suggestions.

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References

- ¹ *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, Hugh Brogan (London: Jonathan Cape, 1984), p. 11.
- ² Chambers Concise Dictionary, 1993 edition.
- ³ *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976) (reprinted by the Arthur Ransome Trust).
- ⁴ *The Last Englishman*, Roland Chambers (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).
- ⁵ *Signalling from Mars*, ed. Hugh Brogan (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997).
- ⁶ see www.autism.org.uk
- ⁷ see www.1900s.org.uk/school-discipline.htm - particularly the Stan Clark article.
- ⁸ see www.nhs.uk/conditions/autism/signs/adults

[Please note in that in Andrew’s first draft, where he has made statements about either Ransome’s life and characteristics, or in the 12 *Swallows and Amazons* books, over 30 specific page references were highlighted. For brevity, ease of reading and in the knowledge that many Tars are familiar with the books; these have been omitted. However, should you like to see a full list of these references, this can be provided by contacting the editor via email: peterwright180@btinternet.com]

ON *WINTER HOLIDAY*

Linda Phillips explores *Winter Holiday* and the introduction of two new characters – Dick and Dorothea

Arthur Ransome (AR) delights and frustrates readers in equal measure. Each book in the *Swallows & Amazons* series is fresh and unpredictable. *Winter Holiday*, the fourth in the series, was the first book set in the winter holidays. Coming to the book for the first time, a keen reader could be forgiven for expecting some adventures for the Swallows and Amazons: on the lake, on the island or the houseboat, sailing, skating, a war again maybe. But no, AR disappoints keen readers, at first, by introducing two new characters, Dick and Dorothea.

This is the only book commencing with new characters. It didn't need them. The tale could have been told quite adequately with just the Swallows and Amazons, probably with John acting out the role given to Dick. Was AR afraid of becoming typeset, of only being able to write of the Swallows and Amazons? Perhaps he wanted to prove he could write other child characters successfully. Or it would have been possible for the story to be about Dick and Dorothea only, with no Swallows or Amazons in it at all. But they did get introduced, and for the opening third of the book, there is a change of emphasis, seeing the Swallows and Amazons through the eyes of Dick and Dot.

In *Coot Club*, AR took the next step and omitted the Swallows and Amazons entirely. Perhaps *Winter Holiday* was preparation for AR to write books that did indeed have Dick and Dorothea as the main characters, with no Swallows or Amazons at all, leading to *Coot Club*, *The Big Six*, and *The Picts and the Martyrs*.

1895

AR was motivated to write *Winter Holiday* by the hard winter of 1928/29, when the lakes had frozen over and Arthur and Evgenia skated on

Windermere. But most of the book carries memories of the previous time the lakes froze over, when AR was around 11 years of age. ‘Not what it was in ’95,’ says Mrs Dixon, referring to the winter of 1894/95. How much of the story is based on AR’s own memories of 1894/95? The book could have been set back then. Surprisingly little had changed. Many of the things described in it rang true for that earlier time and Dick can easily be seen as the personification of 11-year-old AR. That was his age when he experienced the Great Frost of 1894/95: the lakes had frozen over, and his personal memories colour this book.

By 1894 the erroneous idea of canals on Mars had taken hold, created by a race of Martians with whom we might be able to communicate. Telescopes, astronomy, and Mars fascinated many a young boy of that time and AR carried those memories forward into Dick’s interests. The *Fram* was used by Nansen in his 1893/96 Arctic expedition. AR had met Nansen and was greatly impressed by him. Railway lines were operational in the Lakes from 1847. It’s hardly surprising, then, that *Winter Holiday* reads like a tale from 1895. Given AR’s boyhood experiences, he must have been keen to weave them into a story.

He also reaches back to his childhood in *Coot Club*, when Mrs Barrable was telling the D.’s, ‘what the Broads had been like in the wild old days of 40 years ago’. In *Pigeon Post* the children hear ‘the blast of a coach horn ... that used to echo up and down these valleys thirty years ago’. *Winter Holiday* was set in 1932 but why then, rather than 1895? Some things were attributable to 1932. Telephones were in use, though neither the Dixons nor the Jacksons had them. Beckfoot did, as Mrs Blackett telephoned the doctor from there. But when Captain Flint wanted to check if the D.’s had skated to Beckfoot, he had to skate there instead of telephoning. There were cars. Flashlights were relatively new, with standardized batteries such as the D Cell introduced in 1924, the latest technology for eager young boys, while the equivalent of torches in 1894/5 were typically kerosene lamps. Put another way, if we said the book was set in 1895, it could seem to be the case, apart from flashlights, phones and cars. The significant difference is that the Swallows and Amazons were included in the story. Since their

time was already set in the early 1930s, the story had to be set in the winter of 1929 or after.

Callum backstory

Starting a book with two completely new characters is a bold move; making them the main characters even more so. Here are children whose parents are elsewhere. Part of the appeal of Ransome's books lies in nostalgia for the lost world of the 1930s when children were let loose from parental supervision and left to play as they wished. Both around 11 years old, Dick might have been a reflection of the boyhood AR, cast in an absent-minded professor role, yet clever and scientific when he needs to be. Dick is strong and capable, and, like Nancy, lives 'in the real world', which we learn of when he starts 'signalling to Mars'. Dorothea, his sister, plays a mother role to Dick, her day always defined by whatever Dick is doing. A frustrated novel-writer, she is insecure and needy. AR sets out considerable detail of the Callums backstory. Maybe he already had in mind using them as main characters in other books. Arguably, Dick became the character most loved by AR.

The Callums live in London, which is confirmed in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, 'rejoicing that they had been allowed to go north at once instead of having to waste the first fortnight of the holidays sweltering in London'. We also learn, in passing, that the D.'s did not travel to the Lakes alone as Mrs Dixon travelled down to London to collect them. When asked about the school health certificates Mrs Dixon says, 'I have them, Mrs Callum, poor lamb, she gave them to me just as we were catching that train, and you know what it is, Mrs Blackett, catching trains in towns.' Professor Callum is an archaeologist, a university professor ('as soon as Mr Callum could get away from correcting examination papers', *Pigeon Post*). Mrs Callum accompanies her husband on digs. 'With Mrs Callum away with the Professor, digging up bones and rubbish heaps, poor lambs'; 'father and mother have gone to Egypt, to dig up remains', says Dorothea. In *Coot Club* we learn that 'Mrs. Barrable, long ago, had been Mrs Callum's school-mistress'.

Dick and Dorothea are staying with the Dixons. We learn that Mrs Dixon ‘nursed their mother through mumps thirty year ago’, which would place it not long after 1895, when Dorothea’s mother had two dolls, pretending they too had mumps, and having to run around with poultices for the dolls: ‘Mother’s often told us about those two dolls,’ said Dorothea. So, their mother had talked to Dick and Dot about her childhood memories. Mrs Dixon describes Dorothea as ‘The very spit of your mother’.

Dick

Dick presents as a quiet lad, a loner, focusing on whatever one thing is on his mind, studious. He had ‘brought with him a telescope, a microscope and a book about astronomy’. Whereas Dorothea feels lonely at seeing the S&As on the Island for the first time, Dick is indifferent: ‘We can’t help not having a boat. Let’s go and find a really good place for an observatory.’ It is Dick who later rescues the sheep, learns to sail the ice-sledge, semaphore and morse code. Dick is established as living in ‘the real world’, key to being accepted by the S&As.



Having to explain why they signalled to Holly Howe the previous night, we get this exchange:

‘We were just signalling to Mars,’ said Dick, who found that, after all, it was for him to explain.

‘To Mars?’ said the bigger boy.

‘Not to us?’ said the smallest girl. ‘Was it all a mistake?’

‘No, no,’ said Dorothea. ‘We wanted you to answer. It was Dick’s idea to be signalling to Mars. You see, we didn’t know you.’

‘Giminy,’ broke in the larger red-cap. ‘It was a jolly good idea.’

Dick and Dorothea are able to slip in and out of the ‘real world’, away from the actual world occupied by the ‘natives’, though one native, Mr Dixon, features prominently, befriending Dick.

‘In real life’. This is a phrase we see Nancy using again in *Pigeon Post* where she is anxious to move the camp from Beckfoot, up to the moors. School, parents, ‘white frocks and all the rest of it’ as Nancy describes it. These are all left behind as they leave the native world and enter the ‘real world’.

Dick’s scientific approach re-emerges in *Coot Club*. Dorothea, trying to get his attention away from bird watching, says ‘Scientific way. Relay. First you, then me.’ ‘It was the word “scientific” that persuaded him.’ ‘Dick’s mind could be counted on to work fast as soon as it was interested. The difficulty was to get it interested when it happened to be thinking about something else.’ Needing a new battery for the *Teasel*, it was Dick who ‘spent happy minutes carefully connecting up the wires’.

Dorothea

Dorothea, of all the characters, is hardest to define and seems surplus to requirements. AR uses her in a ‘reliable narrator’ role, used by the author to explain events. She plays an adult role, mothering Dick, like Susan does for the Swallows. She is the most ‘girly’ of the characters. In *Coot Club*, she is comfortable with Mrs Barrable. At one point Mrs Barrable says ‘we women will do the washing up’; and it sounds perfectly natural and appropriate. She is insecure and a bit jealous of those children, reflecting that she has no friends that we learn of. She hadn’t expected to make friends with them, but before she knew it, they rushed headlong into the group.

Dick seems to be accepted easily by the group. ‘An astronomer might be quite useful.’ But what role is Dorothea to play? She overhears, ‘But what’s *she* going to do?’, ‘We’ll soon know if they’re any good.’ Oh dear, ‘what’s *she* going to do?’. Dorothea must have felt useless and a spare part, compared with this able and competent group who seemed afraid of nothing. What were the chances of her and Dick getting dropped by these children? Dick approaches the collecting of water at the igloo in a practical manner, earning a ‘good man’ from John, while the ‘can we?’ of Dorothea, asking if

they are permitted to help, betrays her lack of confidence and worry of rejection in saying that, really, they are not part of this group, and can't do anything without permission.

It is when they see Dick and Dorothea as accomplished skaters, on the tarn, that they are finally accepted. 'They're letting us be part of it,' said Dorothea, 'because of your skating. Nancy's just said so.' 'Part of what?' said Dick. Dorothea, with low self-esteem, needs this continuing reassurance and is excited when she receives it. But Dick is simply enjoying skating! The concept of Dorothea as a writer is integral to her character throughout all the books in the series in which she appears though, sadly, she never manages to complete so much as a chapter, never mind a book.

The Natives

Unusually, the natives play a significant part in the story. Captain Flint was already accepted, but AR includes the Dixons, and to a lesser extent, the Jacksons, giving a backstory to both. After rescuing the crag-fast sheep, Dick strikes up a friendship with Mr Dixon. "I've never seen him take to anyone like that," said Mrs Dixon'. In their own way, Dick and Mr Dixon are both taciturn and reclusive males. Maybe this is why they get on, as they understand each other. The spark was the rescue of the sheep by Dick, by which Mr Dixon, and his farmhand Silas, were impressed and touched. A single sheep was very valuable in 1931. Mr Dixon builds a sledge for the D.'s, along with a mast and sail, which enables them to sail for the Pole. Mrs Dixon is in the kitchen, baking away, always good for a chat, and 'did not seem in the least surprised' that the two D.'s had returned with six others.

We learn of the Dixons having a milk-cart, to go shopping in. Presumably they had enough milk to do daily milk deliveries to Rio and surrounding areas. Back then, milk was delivered daily to most houses, it only being in this century that the supermarket has taken over as the source of milk.

Winter Holiday opens with them hearing noises including 'the mooing of cows and the regular trilling of the milk spirting into a bucket', so the farm was a mixed sheep and milking cow farm. The Jacksons had at least one

cow, so maybe their farm was also a mixed farm. ‘A cow stirred in the shippen’, a shed for livestock, as they crept out to go to the *Fram* at night.’

Issues

Given the number of characters (two of them completely new) and the change of season and activities (from previous books), AR had his work cut out to keep juggling all the balls in the air. Not surprisingly, there are some issues. When they all first met, John was leading the party, so it could be thought that the two eldest boys, John and Dick, would have held the initial conversation. But John says nothing. Nancy takes over, addressing Dorothea. Why didn’t they set up the signals, square and triangle, at Beckfoot also? They could be seen with Dicks’ telescope. The Amazons were sleeping at Beckfoot so signals would be useful. In the mix-up over the start for the Pole, in the absence of being able to telephone, a signal could have been sent to Nancy.

The holidays needed extending, to avoid them going back to school too early, allowing for the lake to freeze over and the race to the North Pole to happen, which AR achieved by giving Nancy mumps. But this didn’t need the removal of Nancy. The same outcome could be achieved if any of the others came down with mumps. Remove a minor character (with apologies to Susan, Titty and Roger) with mumps, and they are all in quarantine. Sleeping on the *Fram*: why did they not ask the permission of the Jacksons, and the Dixons, or at least let them know they would be sleeping elsewhere? Had either family found the children missing the next morning, they would be worried and it doesn’t seem fair on them. Maybe the real fear was that permission would not be given, and they so wanted to report success to Nancy.

In the end, it was pressure from Peggy that won them over, Peggy who would have to report back to Nancy. But Susan had a great excuse to get out of it. She could have, surely would have, insisted the right thing to do was to tell the Jacksons and ask their permission, in the knowledge that permission would likely not be given. Then the blame for not sleeping on

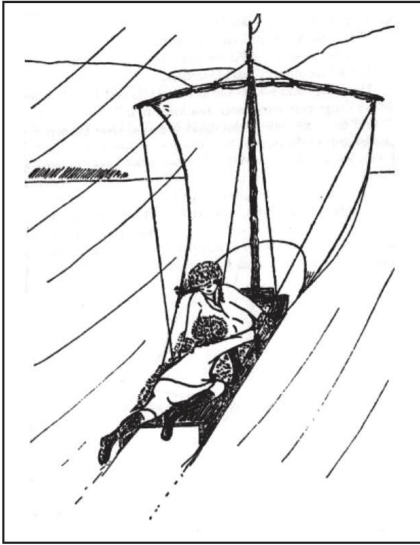
the *Fram* would be attributed to the natives. However, that's not how AR wrote it.

In setting off for the Pole, Dick fails to meet up with the others before starting. Dick looks at Beckfoot and, through his telescope, sees a large scarlet flag. 'He knew at once what her signal meant, but pulled out his pocket-book, to see it in writing. And there it was, at the bottom of the page: "Flag at Beckfoot=Start for Pole." "Start for the Pole. To-day. Now.'" For the first time in the story, Dick panics, thinking the others must have set off straight away. Wouldn't the others wait for them somewhere so they can all set off together? So why did Dick think the others would set off without him and Dorothea? AR tries to give the readers a plausible reason. "They'll wait for us," said Dorothy. "Why should they?" said Dick. "Last time they were talking about it they said we'd be going in separate parties.'" Dick's scientific mind lets him down here, and Dorothea is no better. Surely it was obvious they would all meet up first?

The D.'s did look at the *Fram* to see if anyone was there, but missed seeing the others. Again, a major failure on their part. The signal, which Dick assumed to be unchanged, was to meet at the *Fram*. Surely, what they should have done is go to the *Fram*, to be sure no-one was there and, if not, to wait a while in case the others rolled up. In fact, the others were there already, but their sledges were on the other side of the *Fram* so they weren't visible yet. They did think of checking at Jackson's Farm, but were given an ambiguous message, "Nay, you're late for them," said Mrs Jackson. "They were off in a rare hurry to-day. They went up the field after breakfast and came down talking of Miss Nancy signalling from Beckfoot. She's got a flag up there, they said. They just packed their things and were off in such a hurry as never was." Well, that could be interpreted as meaning the Swallows had already set off for the Pole, so perhaps we can't be too hard on the D.'s.

The sun is still out when the D.'s set off for the Pole. Later, the snow storm, a blizzard, hits and the D.'s cannot see where they are going, but they know the southerly wind is blowing them towards the North Pole. A southerly wind? Captain Flint confirms this, saying 'It must be coming

down pretty hard at the foot of the lake already' and we know the foot of the lake is to the south.



Since when are snow storms driven by a southerly wind? Surely snow is only brought by northerly winds or, at least, winds in a northerly quadrant? AR would know this, so perhaps it is just artistic licence, or we assume a freak low-pressure system, since a northerly wind would have prevented anyone reaching the North Pole. It was risky for AR to write of the D.'s blindly sledging north. Their sledge crashed at the edge of the lake. Luckily for them, they had arrived in the exact spot of the North Pole.

So much could have gone wrong. While the account is exciting, it was somewhat reckless of AR to write it this way. What could have gone wrong? Dick nearly fell off of the sledge. This would have left Dorothea on her own, on the sledge. Would she have managed? Dick could have followed her, with the wind at his back, looking for the trail of the sledge runners. Dick nearly lost his glasses. Would they be lost if so? Falling off the sledge, getting lost, having an accident. Was there a frostbite risk? They could have steered into the river, which might not have frozen over, and fallen into the icy water and drowned.

How lucky to hit on the right spot to find the North Pole! They only had to be twenty or more steps in either direction to be lost, wandering aimlessly in the snow, chilled to the bone. However, none of these things happened.

AR resolved nearly all of these issues by explaining the odd things that happened (apart from them not putting up triangles and squares at Beckfoot, though he does say that Nancy and Peggy will be rowing across to Holly Howe every day).

The ending

In the final chapter, we sense the end of the story coming. Maybe AR was keen to get it finished by this point, something most authors can relate to! Whatever, everyone rolls up at the North Pole, safely. The D.'s get told off but, after explaining the mix-up, Nancy has the best, and almost the last, words, 'This is miles better than anything we planned, sailing to the Pole in a gale of wind and a snowstorm.' The book finishes with Captain Flint saying 'Look here, Susan, you'd better let me deal with that chicken.' This almost finishes in the middle of a conversation. Did AR intend to write more?

Lesley Wareing pointed out to me that in a letter to his publisher, reproduced in *The Best of Childhood* (an Amazon Publication), Ransome had cut 12 pages from the end of that chapter. He had originally carried the story on with Mrs Blackett going back to Dixons Farm with the Callums, and had the book finish with them all going back to school together. AR wrote, 'But that was much worse, and I am quite sure the very short ending is much better.' Contrast this with the ending of *Coot Club* where AR adds a Postscript, 'But those who like to be quite sure about everything may want to know a little more ...', whereas in *Winter Holiday* we are left to guess at endings. So, AR had written more. The extra 12 pages he wrote must have seemed bland for him to rip them up. Was he too tired of writing to try a second draft, or was the publisher's clock ticking? We could imagine a better ending. After all, Nancy is finally fit and healthy and she would have wanted to get involved in more activities before they returned to school. But, as always, AR has the final word, and it is chicken! So, he resolves everything at the end by bringing everyone back together in the safety of the North Pole. He was manipulating multiple strands throughout the book and weaved them all together so that nothing was left unravelled.

ARTHUR RANSOME'S *PIGEON POST*

A talk Peter Hunt gave to the Children's Book History Society

'The Carnegie Medal got off to a good start with a book which has style, meaning and pace, and which was firmly based on sound social and aesthetic values', Marcus Crouch wrote in his guide to Carnegie Medal Winners.¹ *Pigeon Post* he conceded, 'if not Arthur Ransome's best book, was rich in the qualities which distinguished all his work'. Despite winning the medal for not his best work – my own vote would be for *The Picts and the Martyrs* which was published in 1943, a year in which the Carnegie committee declined to give the award – and despite the fact that it didn't get into the 70th anniversary top ten. *Pigeon Post* remains in print (unlike a majority of its 20th-century successors).

It seems to me not only to be a book that is still alive, and has been very influential, but one which deserves its reputation because of Ransome's sheer craftsmanship. Most of the 1,400 or so children's books published in the UK in 1936 have disappeared from history's gaze; three of the most famous were not native produce: *The Story of Ferdinand*, *Heidi Grows Up*, and *Caddie Woodlawn* (*Wurzel Gummidge* is still intermittently with us). In that year (but not again until 1954) the Carnegie committee 'commended' two other books, one of which has survived – Noel Streatfeild's *Ballet Shoes*, and one which has not – Howard Spring's *Sampson's Circus*. Spring was a bestseller (think *Fame is the Spur*) – but the disappearance of his other two children's books, *Darkie and Co*, and *Tumbledown Dick: All People and No Plot*, perhaps a lesson in the ephemerality of literary taste and reputation.

Ransome's books, however, have assumed a significant status and place in children's book history. He is commonly credited with inventing the holiday story, depicting realistic (or at least naturalistic) children who are semi-independent of adults, and whose adventures are practical and probable; in

a direct line from Richard Jefferies' *Bevis*. He is in the tradition of Kipling and Nesbit in his unambiguous mode of address. and, within the constraints of his time, notably liberal in his views on gender and class. He is a leading figure in the (ironically essentially right-wing) fiction of 'Camping and tramping' (see *the* authority on this, Hazel Sheeky Bird).² His influence – which coincided with a ruralist, nostalgic zeitgeist – was certainly maintained into the 1960s. Notable examples – often series, and often featuring twins (even Ransome wasn't impervious to this curious quirk – there must be a PhD lurking there – in *Coot Club* and *Secret Water*) are M. E. Atkinson's 'Lockett' books, beginning with *August Adventure* (1936); the famous example of the novel written by two young Ransome fans, *The Far-Distant Oxus* (1937) and its two sequels; and Garry Hogg's 'Explorers' sequence – with the all-important useful uncle – such as *Explorers Awheel* (1938) in which the children innocently picnic on (some part of) the Cerne Abbey giant. Then there is Enid Blyton's first novel, a magnificently blatant mash-up of Ransome, Burnett and Ballantyne, *The Secret Island* (1938); there are sailing series: Aubrey de Selincourt's *Family Afloat* (1940) and its successors, Peter Dawlish's 'Dauntless' novels, starting with *Dauntless Finds her Crew* (1947) and Gilbert Hackforh Jones's 10-volume spin off from a radio series, beginning with *The Green Sailors* (1951). The Lake District was used as a setting for Geoffrey Trease's 'Bannermere' series, e.g. *No Boats on Bannermere* (1949), and Marjorie Lloyd's *Fell Farm Holiday* (1951) – more twins – and its sequels.

Pigeon Post itself was the sixth novel of a series that had begun in 1930 with *Swallows and Amazons*, and the fourth to be set in a version of the Lake District. (Ransome said in his old age that, when he travelled around the real Lake District, it seemed as if some giant hand had been shifting the scenery around.) Like Beatrix Potter's 'Peter Rabbit' series, Ransome's books have become part of the iconography (and marketing strategy) of the area – a development that, I suspect, neither author would have cared much for. A good deal of enthusiastic time has been spent on trying to identify the 'original' places depicted in the books. I can recommend – among several – Roger Wardale's *Arthur Ransome and the World of the Swallows and*

Amazons (Skipton: Great Northern Books, 2000); and there is a devoted army of members of the Arthur Ransome Society (TARS). The first Arthur Ransome society was founded in Japan³ – Ransome was extensively translated (see Robert M. Thompson's *Ransome's Foreign Legion* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2009). The series features Ransome's detailed maps (those in *Pigeon Post*, it must be admitted, are far from the best) and his quirky illustrations are not Ransome's own, but Margery Gill's for the German edition of *Swallows and Amazons* and Mary Shepard's for the American edition of *Pigeon Post*).

But for all this fame and influence, it is Ransome's technical skills as a storyteller that I would particularly like to champion. He knew what he was talking about: he had, as a young hack, written *A History of Storytelling* (1909), and he knew a good deal about the folk-tale – witness *Old Peter's Russian Tales* (which should be called 'Russian and Ukrainian Tales') which is still in print (or on Kindle). Thus, he applied his knowledge of fairy-tale structures to his own books – perhaps most notably in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, in which the first third of the book provides the children with the tools and knowledge to survive the next two-thirds.

In the same spirit, *Pigeon Post* has a remarkable opening chapter, by the end of which the reader knows the 'back story' of the series, all the principal characters, and the key elements of the plot. Roger and Titty, two characters from *Swallows and Amazons*, are travelling to the Lake District: at the branch-line station ('Strickland Junction,' or Oxenholme) they are given a pigeon to 'let fly'. Roger's key character-marker (chocolate) is introduced in the second sentence. From their conversation with a local farmer's wife, Mrs Newby, we learn about the ways of homing pigeons, who the children are, and about two of the previous holidays; and about the drought and the danger of fell fires caused by careless tourists. Before we get to Chapter 2, we have met (in passing) Colonel Jolys of the volunteer fire-fighters, and established the running joke about Timothy (no spoilers here!) which is only explained on page 371 – and why the pigeons are called Homer, Sophocles and Sappho. It is a lesson not only in blending a book into a series but in establishing what would now be called the narrative art of the novel.

Similarly, at the end of the book, Ransome provides us with a masterclass in split narrative (a trick repeated to even better effect in *The Picts and the Martyrs*). When the fells catch fire (not really a spoiler – see chapter 1) some of his characters are in a mine, some at a campsite, and some back at the home base, and the reader is persuaded to keep three simultaneous action sequences in mind.

I have to admit to some personal bias here. The Ransome books were an essential part of my childhood. We spent many years of holidays in the Lake District, with our 1935 Riley Kestrel, and parking our caravan first beside Ullswater and later at White Cross Bay on Windermere (something Ransome would undoubtedly have frowned upon) – and the five Ransome Lake District novels exactly fitted the shelf above my bunk.

Whatever I liked about Ransome then, it seems to me now that one of the especial features of the books is Ransome's depiction of local characters – so unlike, as Nick Tucker remarked to me after my talk, the embarrassing caricatures perpetrated by his imitators. (The Wherrymen in *Coot Club*, and the chapter 'The Great Aunt Goes to See for Herself' in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, deserve special mention.) *Pigeon Post* provides an excellent example – Mrs Tyson, the redoubtable farmer of the upper Amazon valley (there is no Mr Tyson, but she has a grown-up son, Robin). She has reluctantly allowed the children to camp at the top of her wood – bowing to Nancy's mother, Mrs Blackett, who is, whatever Ransome said about the essential equality of Lake District people, her social superior. When the fell catches fire, Mrs Tyson jumps to a very understandable conclusion (which as a child), I found quite upsetting as the children in the book do):

'You've done it this time, Miss Nancy. And nowt to stop it. I should have sent you packing yesterday.' ... 'Ye may fight it here along the rock, but when it comes to Greenbanks ye'll not hold it. Eh, Mrs Blackett, I didn't think it of them. ... Never again. Never again ...'²⁴

But the children have sent a message by pigeon (the normally unreliable Sappho) to their home base, and from there Colonel Jolys and his fire fighters are summoned by telephone. They arrive in time to beat out the fire. And, for me, even as an adult, Mrs Tyson's recantation packs an enormous emotional punch.

Mrs Tyson came straight up to [them]

'Well, 'she said. 'I was wrong that time, thinking you'd set the fell afire. I should have seen that if you'd done it, 'twould have been the wood to burn first. But you mun forgive me. When fire's afoot a body can't think. And if you'd not been here with they pigeons, we'd have had our farms burnt, and the hay in t' fields and all, before anybody could have gotten word. So I thank you and yon pigeon of yours most of all. Eh, Mrs Blackett, they're welcome to camp where they like and when they like and how they like and as long as they like. Now then, Robin. Nowt to stare at. We've cows to milk, fire or no fire. And late it is and all.' And Mrs Tyson and Robin and the farm-hand went down in to the wood.

'So that's all right,' said Mrs Blackett.⁵

I could go on about Ransome's incidental delights: Eric Linklater (Carnegie Winner 1944) said Ransome 'makes a tale of adventure a handbook to adventure' and so I still believe that I could dowse, or make pigeons ring a bell, or use a blowpipe, or sail come to that, but I'd rather let Ransome have (almost) the last word. Whatever else *Pigeon Post* may be, it is genuinely a Children's Book.

In 1937 he wrote in a letter to the editor of *The Junior Bookshelf* (Vol. 1, Issue 4) which is reprinted in Crouch's *Chosen for Children*: 'I do not know how to write books for children and have the gravest doubts as to whether anybody should try to do such a thing. To write a book *for* children seems to me a sure way of writing what is called a "juvenile," a horrid, artificial thing, a

patronising thing, a thing that betrays in every line that author and intended victims are miles apart, and that the author is enjoying not the stuff of his books but a looking-glass picture of himself or herself “being so good with children” ... a most unpleasant spectacle for anyone who happens to look over your shoulder ...

The secret ... You just indulge the pleasure of your heart. You write not *for* children but for yourself, and if, by good fortune children enjoy what you enjoy why then you are a writer of children's books ... No special credit to you, but simply thumping good luck.’ (p. 6)

And it is good luck that we have *Pigeon Post*, and that the Carnegie judges, from the very start, displayed such good judgement!

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5. *Ibid.* p. 375.

SWALLOWS AND ARMENIANS, KAREN BABAYAN'S MUSICAL PLAY

Reviewed by Catherine Lamont

Arthur Ransome – like that houseboat man – was a man of strong emotions and convictions, and unlike his alter ego, was not as quick to apologise or forgive as he might have been. (Well, he was ill and in pain for most of his later life.) Who would know that the ‘fun’ and loving gesture of giving the names of his friends, the Altounyans, to the characters in books that had not even been published would have such dire consequences on their wellbeing and relationship once the books had become famous? Exploring those consequences is the brave theme of Karen Babayan’s musical theatre production, *Swallows and Armenians*, which I watched on video in Australia.

Having read most of the material on Ransome available to either the general public or TARS members, I recognised many of the scenes, including some direct quotes from correspondence, that mark this very emotional journey of close friendship through deep antagonism to wistful acceptance and celebration of Ransome’s legacy for all children. I saw the production as an attempt to bring some balance to the ongoing debate around Ransome’s relationship with the Altounyan family, particularly to Titty, the girl he and Evgenia proposed to adopt. The adoption argument becomes the climax of the play.

The tale starts and ends in Coniston in 1978, and is primarily told from the perspective of Mavis Guzelian (whose memorable nickname, Titty, probably caused her the greatest trouble). The story is told through a series of flashbacks, songs and dances, firstly to Coniston in 1928, through various fun and stressful episodes in Aleppo (when the Ransomes visited while Arthur worked on *Peter Duck*), at school and finally a commentary on the

autobiography which so shocked the surviving family by its misrepresentation of their relationship.

One aspect I particularly appreciated was the foregrounding of Ransome's musicality. Little appears to have been written previously about Ransome's fondness of music (or maybe I just haven't paid attention to it), even though music features so largely in both his novels and his autobiographical writing. I am reminded that some musicals have been written about the books, and Benjamin Britten so loved Ransome's work he explored the possibility of composing a children's opera based on *Swallows and Amazons* or the east coast books. So I see the musical setting as another way to 'balance the books'.

As far as the acting was concerned, I appreciated the talent of actors who could not only sing and dance but play musical instruments while doing so. I wrote to Karen: 'Well, you have done the Ransome-Altounyan story, and the actors have done you a great credit. I love that Ernest looks quite like the original. I have to confess I found the experience somewhat "dark" and disturbing, which is as it should be.'

I did find the doubling-up of some characters disconcerting (three of the actors play three roles each). Dora was played by the same actress who played Ada and Taqui. Perhaps this made the stability and character of the three characters who did not change (Arthur, Ernest and Titty) and Ernest's darker colouring all the more compelling. Curiously, Evgenia never appears. I wondered whether these choices were artistic or economic. Roger's exuberance seemed a little excessive to me, but then I am comparing him with the fictional, very English, Roger, and I wondered if that was truer to life. This discomfort is perhaps useful for those interested in an author who wrote that the purpose of Art was to make people more conscious of life (*Art for Life's Sake* in 1912). He also wrote a 90-page allegory (*The Blue Treacle: the Story of an Escape*) of how artists might escape what he called the 'unconscious flux' (like 3-year-old Tabitha has to escape the Blue Treacle). I assume he means something like 'mindless reactivity', as opposed to taking more conscious charge of our destiny.

Because of my current studies (on digital storytelling and grief memoir), I particularly appreciated the question raised by Mavis about the ethics of using real people's names or characters. Mavis reports towards the beginning of the play that she struggled at her British school because she couldn't tell whether she was liked for herself or for being 'able-seaman Titty Walker'.

He used my name. If it had been any ordinary name, I could have pretended it was any old Joan or Mary. But it was my own special nickname. And a silly one, too. I was too polite to tell Uncle Arthur how I felt. ... close family friend. I never stopped loving him but I lost my trust in him. I don't trust people who write books on the whole, especially not when they write about real people.

Yet the Altounyans' initial response was in appreciation and praise of the gesture and verisimilitude.

Towards the end of the play, mirroring life, Mavis observes that 'He never could have imagined when he wrote the book and used our names that it would become a classic. And then he'd have to write another, and then another. Urged on by his publisher and his readers, using those same children again and again until by the end he probably felt like strangling them.'

With the music, I found the overall mood quite sombre – another variation on the theme of shadows being part of the sunlight in the story of this very human author. Yet the ending is quite positive, with a song about the 'Swallows' and a reminder, in the last six minutes of 'the adventures we had' and Titty saying, 'I'm still grateful for the memories, for the stories and the books. They belong to all of us'. And as she says before the final curtain, 'Swallows and Am Swallows and Armenians forever!'

And the Editor adds:

Karen Babayan's musical play *Swallows and Armenians* was performed in July at the Chelsea Theatre, London, and Leeds University to critical acclaim. For those unable to attend, here are some photos from the performance. You can, however, still see the production, as it was recorded and is available on YouTube (search: Swallows and Armenians). Research for the play was supported by TARS through a Red Slipper Fund grant. For further information about the play, cast and background, you may like to visit Karen Babayan's website: www.karenbabayan.com



Photos reproduced with the kind permission of: Asadour Guzelian – stills, and Karen Morley Chesworth – live performance.

BOOKSHELF

Margaret MacDonald, *The Glasgow Boys*, Faber and Faber, 2025, ISBN 9780571382972



The Carnegie Medal winner for 2025, is a truthful and hopeful book exploring the lives of two boys emerging

from the care system and growing into the young adults they deserve to be. With the help of friends new and rediscovered, they learn that family is something a person can create around themselves if they are open to allowing relationships to develop.

Margaret McDonald, the youngest ever winner of the Carnegie Medal, has created a story of great sensitivity. The two boys, damaged by the adults they should have been able to trust the most and taken into the care system, only really discovered ‘care’ when they found each other. But life is rarely straightforward if you believe that you can only ever rely on yourself and

they become separated by circumstance and actions of self-defence. Three years on and both are beginning a new chapter: Banjo, 17, in foster care, new home, new carers, new school, new place; and Finlay, setting out alone, aged 18, into university but with no further support from the care system and no other help until his pride or confidence lets him ask. The book is written in alternating chapters so that the reader slips along between them, getting to know each, discovering their characters and reactions until about half-way through, when their connection to each other is slowly revealed and their inter-dependence explained. From here it is a story of how their new lives and new relationships and friendships help them to navigate away from the care system and into a more ‘usual’ society, whilst acknowledging the way that their childhood experiences shaped them.

McDonald has used many of her own life experiences to bring an authenticity to all of the characters: her Crohn’s disease and the surgery she herself went

through; her consequent dependence on pain-relief drugs, and her career experience in the NHS and casual jobs she did to keep herself going whilst studying for a degree and writing this book. These two characters felt more deeply explored and integral to the main ideas of the story whereas others are very thinly portrayed.

Language and voice are used effectively to enhance the understanding of the differences between characters, with Banjo's Glaswegian dialect being a source of conflict and Finlay's lack of knowledge of Polish (his mother's language) adding to his regret at the loss of her – although Polish food brings him comfort. Both struggle to find language at their most distressed moments but in very different ways, and both learn about effective communication, particularly of a non-verbal type.

As an adult reading the book, especially one who has a duty of care over children, I did wish for a single adult who knew how to approach the boys, to discover their inner selves and the reason

for their behaviour. Instead, they gave punishment, care or dismissal with a general side-portion of sympathy but no depth. Whether as an authorial belief in the incompetence of adults or as a literary device, it did allow all of the empathy to be shown by the group of younger characters who surround the boys, and provide them the most patience and guidance.

Whilst the young supporting characters are, perhaps, a little too perfect in their patience and understanding ways, this allows the story to be told smoothly and for lessons in conflict management to be learnt. The conflict itself is portrayed with spitting anger and physical pain in Banjo's case, and deeply hurt feelings leading to complete withdrawal in Finlay's.

For some readers, it may be that the way these boys behave, rejecting offered care, looking for a fight to justify their self-loathing, the frustration, fear and anger bottled up until it explodes, or the assumption that there is no-one who would understand or help, may be difficult to

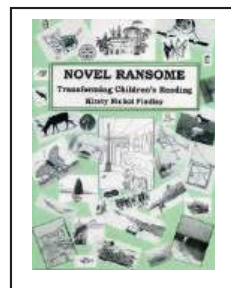
comprehend. For me, it was, admittedly, both difficult to read and highly realistic. Books are teachers, and while a young person may be learning how others differ from themselves or are glad to see themselves represented, as a teacher I am reminded that listening and really making strong, non-judgemental relationships are key.

For all that the backgrounds of these two boys are bleak, McDonald has written their characters with a great deal of courage and hope. Both grow to trust new friends and colleagues, often taken by surprise in the way that others can like them, even love them simply for being who they are. They also grow to realise that they are capable of loving and that they don't have to be the person they thought they were. This book is to be highly recommended for anyone 13 up (it comes with a content warning on the publication page – the Carnegie Medal is as much for young adults now as a children's book award but that's for a different conversation). It is a detailed evocation of the lives of

care leavers, still only 18, still carrying the trauma of earlier lives with very little support (emotional or financial) available. The subject is dealt with sensitively but honestly, ultimately leading to hope for a secure and loving future. Just be warned, if you're like me, you'll need a lot of tissues handy while reading it!

Sarah Samuel

Kirsty Nichol Findlay, *Novel Ransome*, Amazon Publications, 2025, ISBN 9780952131373



In October 2024 BBC Radio 4 broadcast a much praised series of talks on children's

fiction, given by the acclaimed writer Katherine Rundell, in which just about every recognised UK author of books for children was mentioned – except Arthur Ransome. Alas, this was far from being the first time on which such an omission has occurred, a historical neglect which has prompted Kirsty Nichol Findlay to plead for proper recognition of

AR's skills in her new book *Novel Ransome*. Kirsty is a Cambridge scholar with long experience of writing and talking about Ransome, often in a TARS context, and she will be a familiar figure to many members. In the very first paragraph of *Novel Ransome* Kirsty describes Ransome's absence from the gallery of great English novelists as 'a very great mistake'. She asks 'do we find him on any list of the best novelists of the 20th century? We don't. Then why not?' The rest of the book, in the author's own words, 'is an attempt to tease this out', her task being 'to sift through some aspects of Ransome's genius'. This is done more or less chronologically. The first two chapters (termed 'Sections' in this book) sketch out the historical and literary background to the writing of *Swallows and Amazons*, and explain why SA was and is unique. The achievement of writing SA is then assessed in detail. How is it, the author asks, that despite not having studied at Oxford or Cambridge like his friends Ransome 'knew all about

contemporary literary theory and developments'? Kirsty explains how, and recalls AR's article 'Kinetic and Potential Speech' written in 1911 about the function of words in combination, a pointer to his eventual 'sense of appropriateness in style'.

The style AR went on to choose was avant-garde. There is no 'observing adult' or older child-narrator. The reader's closeness to the characters is maintained by careful control of point of view – everything is immediate. This technique, quite new for the time, is here carefully explained.

This is followed by an examination of detailed features in the books which have long puzzled many of us: for instance, AR's use of epigraphs at the head of chapters in SA, and their gradual disappearance. Our attention is drawn to the constant use in all the books of the 'simple past' tense in the reported dialogue rather than the 'historic present', and the use of the verb 'said', as in 'said Roger' rather than 'exclaimed' or other variants – this convention 'allows us into

the scene just fractionally after the moment of utterance'. A whole Section is devoted to Ransome's use of adjectives, and in particular 'deictic' adjectives (a term new to this reviewer). The size and positioning of the illustrations are examined, and AR's 'preoccupation with point of view'.

Perceptive comments are made with regard to wider topics, including quest ('that high subject of traditional story'), narrative closure and the awareness of time. All three of these are vital components of *Pigeon Post*, a complex novel which is well dissected here.

In the penultimate Section, the various and necessary qualities of a novel are considered at length with regard to the last 'Lake' book, *The Picts and the Martyrs*. Slightly surprisingly, Kirsty regards PM as a 'comedy', perhaps in the sense of a Restoration comedy of manners. 'The tone is comedy', she writes, 'The pace is breathless. Discovery is always imminent'. Kirsty has fun with the closing dialogue between Nancy and Timothy, but

ends her analysis with AR's intimate description of Dick, alone, bailing out his own boat, *Scarab* – a 'timeless moment of truth'.

The tone of *Novel Ransome* is lively and almost conversational, probably due to the content being reprocessed from, as Kirsty admits, 'talks to the Arthur Ransome Society and others over many years'. The discursive tone is heightened by frequent questioning, e.g. 'What, exactly, was he doing?' 'What was new?' 'Why not?'. Not everyone will be comfortable with this, but the questions are very much part of the author's open talkative style – they do get answered and are not merely rhetorical. Due to this looser style and the way the themes have been assembled, the topics do overlap on occasion, with one or two repetitions, and some of the Section headings are rather arbitrary. No matter: these are minor grumbles. The text of *Novel Ransome* is like a fast-flowing beck – you follow it hither and thither eagerly and with pleasure. The overall attitude to AR and his creations is refreshingly direct,

and straightforward and text-based. The characters and plots are accepted as AR wrote them, free from psychoanalytical or fashionably ‘colonialist’ interpretations.

Best of all, brief but telling insights can be found gleaming amongst the text like Titty’s pearls. These make it abundantly clear that the author ‘gets’ Ransome. Here is how she sums up one of the more dramatic moments in *Swallowdale*:

What a writer Ransome is.

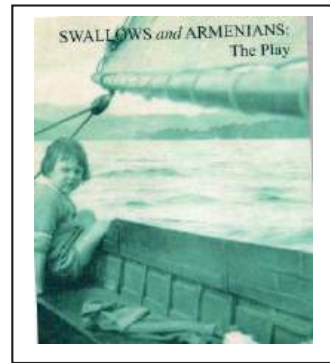
There is no speculation. There is no commentary. On top of Kanchenjunga they are in a moment in a world of time and we are in that moment too. The moment belongs to us.

As always with Amazon Publications *Novel Ransome* is well designed and produced and – three million cheers – it has an index. This book is important. It pinpoints Ransome’s craft more accurately and fully than any of its worthy predecessors, and is a resounding counterblast to those who have ignored his craftsmanship. TARS members

should arm themselves by having it on their shelf.

Peter Hyland

Karen Babayan, *Swallows and Armenians: the Play*, Wild Pansy Press, 2025, ISBN 9781900687959



This play (see review by Catherine Lamont) explores the relationship between Ransome and the Altounyan family. In *Swallows and Amazons*, the Walkers are portrayed as a typically British family, yet much of the inspiration for the children’s characters came from an Anglo-Armenia family who lived in Syria. The play outlines the events of the summer of 1928, AR’s trip to Aleppo, the fallout over the schooling of the children and request to adopt Titty, and the effect all this had on the Altounyans, particularly Titty.

Babayan has done extensive research (in part using a Red Slipper Fund grant) accessing letters, diaries and material held by the Brotherton Library, the Collingwood Family, TARS archives, Literary Trustees and through conversations with the Altounyan and Guzelian families. The result is a convincing, entertaining and thought-provoking script which sheds new light on our understanding not just of what really happened and its consequences, but also on how we should view mixed nationalities and identities. A copy of the play may be borrowed from TARS Library.

Peter Wright

WANTED - Contributions to *Mixed Moss* 2026

Mixed Moss depends upon contributions from members and, having been in production since 1990, you might think there is little left to say or discover. Nothing could be further from the truth as this edition's contributions prove. Many of you may be relatively new to TARS or have not previously written for *Mixed Moss*, but your contributions and letters would be welcomed. Do you have a favourite book? Why not write about it and tell us why. Do you have observations on Ransome or his acquaintances? – we'd like to hear them. Perhaps you disagree with a view you have read in this edition, e.g. the new Swallowdale? – here's your chance to respond and perhaps start a debate. The future success of *Mixed Moss* depends upon your contributions; please do keep them coming in.

The deadline for 2026 is **1st June 2026**, but please contact the editor once you have an article in mind to avoid disappointment.

Please email your ideas to mixedmoss@arthur-ransome.org or to peterwright180@btinternet.com

***Mixed Moss* Indexes**

The Indexes for *Mixed Moss* from its first issue in 1990 (Vol. 1, No. 1) to the current 2025 issue (published in Dec.2025) are now complete and are available on the TARS website (arthur-ransome.org) as pdfs, now that the Members' pages are accessible again: search under: **Publications/Mixed Moss**
The indexes comprise: Volumes Index – 41 issues, including two issues per year – 'Summer and Winter' – in 1997-2000 and 2003, covering 48 pages – some volumes required more than one page; **Author Index** – 53 pages, and **Subject Index** – 105 pages. In all, 206 pages.

The Volumes and Author Indexes include Notes to amplify the Titles, also appended, often abbreviated, to the Titles in the Subject Index. The intention is to update the indexes each year when the new issue is published. Please send any errors and omissions for amendment at the next update to: paulwilson204@hotmail.co.uk

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HOUSE

NATIVE
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