

## Cheryl Paget's last article for Signals, with emails

Cheryl Paget's last article for Signals was emailed to me on 28 November 2021, just too late for inclusion in the January 2022 Signals. I wrote back, thanking her, agreeing with some points, challenging others, and she promptly sent back a response, and we left it at that – I took the hint about Laura Inglis Wilder, a work that I imagine will have to remain forever unfinished. Within weeks, she had died of cancer.

The article itself appeared in the May 2022 Signals; here it is again, for completeness, together with the short correspondence generated by its arrival.

*Peter Willis*

### **A Thoroughly Mischievous Person by Alan Kennedy – A Review by Cheryl Paget**

This book reminded me of when, as an English literature undergraduate interpreting a text, I would invariably choose a feminist, Freudian or occasionally a Marxist framework, or a combination of, because I thought they were *easy*. Whether they are or not is not for discussion here, but I did often emit a wry smile, for if I were writing a Freudian interpretation of *Swallows and Amazons* I may have taken some of the passages Alan Kennedy chose to highlight. However, what I was always told is that if you are going to write about an author you need to take your evidence from the text, and he does not refer to the Lakes texts nearly enough to make his point for my liking. Lots of juicy insights into the author – just not enough proof from his children's books.

The trouble with writing about a series of books, to my vexation, is knowing where to start and when to stop, and this book is a hop around the Lakes books, with a brief look at Ransome's early works (and, confusingly *We Didn't Mean...* and *Missee Lee*) without really clearly identifying why, or really proving the case. Lots of themes and ideas are liberally sprinkled throughout the book, which I would have liked to see as whole chapters. Also, I wish the book had a bibliography, as Kennedy clearly did a lot of research and I would like to do some follow up reading without having to trawl through the footnotes again.

My main disagreements with Kennedy's findings are:

I am not convinced Ransome was writing for or about his daughter or ex-wife. He clearly stated in the first edition who (by way of what) he was writing for, and Captain Flint is the uncle figure Ransome either took on, or imagined for himself with the Altouynan family. I would have liked a whole chapter on the missing father idea though, there is definitely something in the oedipal complex that needs a thorough exploration.

I don't believe he had a hang up about not being a "university man". Firstly, he chose to drop out of studying science at Yorkshire College to become a Bohemian, spending years writing and eating cheese and apples and drinking beer with other, mainly middle-class people who were anti-establishment. His few proper married years to Ivy may have made him feel he should be achieving more than his status, but again, he chose to run away, this time to Russia, where, as part of the close-knit masculine world of correspondents and diplomats he may have found

himself out of his depth, but he managed to worm his way into the company of Trotsky, Lenin and Radek, a position other journalists didn't achieve, and enabled him to be recruited by MI6, which must have made him feel pretty important. Also, returning after the war, with so many of the officer class wiped out, did it really matter by then whether you had a degree or not?

I don't think he was a modernist writer, mainly because he does not use the stream of consciousness narrative technique so prevalent in the work of other contemporary modernist authors. When I was researching my article on Ransome and Katherine Mansfield (Mixed Moss 2019) I spent a lot of time trying to establish a link between Ransome and the Bloomsbury set, and I just couldn't find it.

However, the book was more interesting for what it didn't say more than what it did. There were several themes and ideas coming out that were never properly explored and sprinkled like fairy dust throughout the book. What I really liked, and wanted more in-depth discussion based on the text, was the idea of coming second – I have never spotted that in the books and a whole chapter really drilling down into where it turns up, and why rather than it cropping up through his book would have been terrifically beneficial for future Ransome researchers. Spying in Pigeon Post was mentioned but not really explored – again, I would like more on this. Rescue as a theme is mentioned in chapter 9 without any evidence from the Lakes books, again, I'd like to see where this is in the books.

I firmly agree that Ransome was trying to tell us something in his books, other than the story he was telling, and I think he was using the stories, narrative technique and devices from folk and fairy tales (see my article in *Furthest South* 2021 Vol.23 No.3), so I was very interested in Kennedy's interpretation. I am not sure about Ransome using classical mythology however, but more work needs to be done in this area, and so a Freudian interpretation (of fairy tale elements) is inevitable – sorry to those who find this distasteful. Kennedy has made a good start in this direction.

Therefore, I quite agree with his statement that “Magical children acting in a mundane setting – that was to become his [Ransome's] own distinctive gift to children's literature.” (Pg 37)

I just wish this book drilled down much more deeply into the Lakes books to prove the point.

Email from PW, 29 November 2021:

Hi Cheryl

What a nice thing to switch on my phone and find to read while enjoying a first cup of tea in bed on a Sunday morning!

I love your intellect, which is what makes disagreeing with you, or having you disagree with me such a pleasure...

I do agree about Tabitha - she's there, of course, in his life, or more accurately her absence is there in his life, and one could see the real Titty, with the whole adoption thing, as a surrogate Tabitha. But just because Titty in the books is the sensitive one, the most fully realised one and

probably the nicest one, doesn't mean that Tabitha had any of those characteristics in great measure. Though he could probably beat himself up about how estrangement from her father could have warped her character...

The 'Lakes' seems to be a shorthand for the Swallows with/without the Amazons, therefore including WD and SW but excluding the two Broads books, which I've often thought were of a different, and possibly younger-audience type. Even, dare one say it, a bit more Blytonish..

I think the 'university man' theme does have a lot to support it. The 'fairy-merchant' remark alone is a real giveaway. As for Russia, yes he did do extraordinary work - which was regarded with deep suspicion by the British establishment. And it appears he was passed over for a position he was possibly better qualified for than the man who got it.

And it's always easy to magnify to yourself your failures and belittle your own achievements. And even if there was a postwar shortage of officer-class people I daresay most of the old snobberies were maintained. All of which feeds into the 'coming second' theme, does it not?

That's probably enough argy-bargy to be going on with.

There's certainly a place for you in Signals, though you just missed the boat with this issue. Was busy locking-it down for the printers yesterday and today. Nice to have something in the bag for next time - and you're free to tinker with it as you choose.

I'm wondering whether to bring in Kennedy himself - would you like to take up some of these arguments directly with him? It's a pity he's not able to be at the literary Weekend. Or you for that matter

I'm very up for a Propp analysis of PD though. 90th year and all that. I dug out something I wrote for its 80th year for Marine Quarterly which I might think about recycling...

I'm also wondering where and when you did your Eng Lit degree, and what, if any, use you made of it in 'grown-up' life?

All the best as ever  
Peter

And a reply from Cheryl, 7 December 2021

Hi Peter

If we follow Kennedy's logic then it's his absence from Tabitha's life that is the problem... mirroring his father's absence from his own. I don't think he was that deep a man to consider her feelings. He was passionate about some things but equally capable of being either very naive or willing blind to others, such as the horrors of the Russian Revolution which he must have known about, yet still felt able to paint the leaders as real people... possibly a view that was needed but not perhaps balanced.

I'm too lazy to look it up, did Bix Six precede Blyton or did she copy Ransome? [Both, perhaps. *Big Six* 1940, first Famous Five book, 1942 - PW]

I am so interested in the coming second theme. If Ransome had left leaning political views (in different circumstances I would be starting my PhD this year on this very subject) then it wouldn't matter to him being a university man as he would have egalitarian views born from his Bohemian days. I think he was a "leftie" long before he went to Russia and I was intending to show that.

I'm still grinding on with Laura Ingalls Wilder so I can't take on any more writing, I am allowing myself to be distracted as it is.

I did my BA at what was the University of Central England in Birmingham, then an MA in Literature for Children at Warwick. Through TARS I have been able to write and research Ransome, but since coming to NZ I have got involved in other activities which has enabled me to research other subjects within vintage children's literature, and I am beginning to be known as an authority on the subject in NZ. I have met a lot of others passionate about the subject and I have had a lot of interesting conversations along the way!

Very best wishes for the upcoming season,

Cheryl