

# Sparkinson interviews Molly Blackett

Brian Hopton, with Jill Goulder



## Introduction

The latest excellent Amazon Publications volume, *Ransome Centre Stage*, describes a selection of the many dramatic productions put on over the years at TARS events, notably in Southern Region in the form of Brian Hopton's epic series of shows – written, produced and directed by him and performed by a stalwart team of temporary actors who responded to his call.

Among Brian's triumphs was The Sparkinson Show, with Southern Region's own Brian Sparkes (in a white tuxedo) interviewing a selection of our favourite Ransome characters in the format of the classic UK TV series hosted by Michael Parkinson. In 2004 'Sparkinson' had lined up as guests Jim Turner, Col. Jolys, Mrs Walker, Maria Turner and – as special guest star – the 22-gong Taicoon of the Three Islands, Missee Lee (played by me, in terrifying make-up and a revolver). In 2007 there was a re-run of the show; I was initially unsure whether I could attend, and Brian Hopton was delighted to secure the talented Hilary Weston for the part instead. At a late date my diary cleared, and Brian had an inspiration. He says 'Play-making is full of problems; Sparkinson was no exception. In this instance, two players for one part, the part of Missee Lee. The problem was solved by introducing a new part, that of Molly Blackett.'

Molly Blackett is an essential part of the Lake adventures, as quartermaster and enabler (and turner of blind eyes at times to the Amazons' goings-on), and Brian wanted her to tell her story. He says, 'It is a nice piece full of happiness and sadness, and it offers possible answers to some of the questions regarding the Blackett family, which have puzzled readers over the years.'

Brian Hopton's script for her did not make it into *Ransome Centre Stage*, so it's published here for *Mixed Moss* readers' enjoyment.

Jill Goulder, January 2022

## The Sparkinson Show 2007, 3<sup>rd</sup> guest: Mrs Molly Blackett

**Sparkinson:** Now we have met Mrs Walker and heard her version of events and something of her life. I described her as someone in the background, someone quite essential to the plan of things; but she was not the only one. The (one might say) long-suffering mother of James Turner's two nieces, another of those that provide essential support for any adventurers, pirate crew, prospectors etc., etc., is here tonight. I would like you to welcome our next guest, Mrs Blackett.

Mrs. Blackett, very nice to meet you.

**Mrs Blackett:** Oh! Please call me Molly – most people do.

**Sparkinson:** Very well... Molly. This whole saga is beginning to unravel, and I am very interested to hear your side of the story.

**Mrs Blackett:** Well as you know, I'm Ruth and Margaret's mother – but of course they're usually known as Nancy and Peggy. 'Peggy' is just a version of Margaret, of course, but since Ruth was quite a little girl, Jim has called her Nancy after some old sea-shanty. Jim always said that if she was an Amazon pirate she couldn't be Ruth because pirates are utterly ruthless. Jim has a sense of humour all of his own....

**Sparkinson:** Yes, I thought it must be something like that... but tell me about yourself to begin with.

**Mrs Blackett:** Well, I was born in Westmorland, quite near Keswick, but the family moved to Bowness-on-Windermere – Rio to the children – while I was quite young. Jim and I went to the school there, and that was when I first met my husband-to-be, Bob Blackett.

**Sparkinson:** And when was that?

**Mrs Blackett:** Well, goodness – that was in Victorian times, would you believe it! But up here in the Lakes we weren't as stiff and proper as you'd think: you know, these children of ours imagine that they're the first to do all the things that they get up to, but they'd be awfully surprised. You know, Jim, Bob and I climbed what the children call Kanchenjunga – we called it the Matterhorn then, as we were still excited about the real one having been climbed in Switzerland. And we camped on the island, and sailed and had so many adventures – the children imagine that we all sat quietly embroidering or something, I'm certain.

**Sparkinson:** And then you married, and Bob was killed in the great war?

**Mrs Blackett:** Yes – yes, he was – and the silly thing was that he didn't have to go. His family have a small engineering factory in Barrow-in-Furness. Bob had a reserved occupation, and his brothers were too young. It was awful sometimes – women would stop him in the street and demand to know why he wasn't out in France with their men. Well, he insisted on going – he was such an honourable man... He was killed at Hamel during the battle of Amiens, in the last few months of the war. His remains were never found. I was seventeen when we married, Bob was two years older; he never saw Peggy.

Both Bob's family and mine were very supportive and helped us through those dark days. The irony was that the factory was making munitions for the war effort! I'm what they call a 'sleeping partner'; Bob's brothers run the factory now, but I inherited Bob's share. That allowed me to buy Beckfoot – that's our house on the banks of the lake – and to put the girls through school, although I rather feared it might be a waste of time as far as Ruth – I mean Nancy – was concerned. She's too much like her uncle in that respect.

**Sparkinson:** Your house is quite large, I believe; how do you cope?

**Mrs Blackett:** Oh, yes, we have Mrs Braithwaite who cooks and cleans for us, and Billy Lewthwaite – one of our old nurse's sons – the other son's a policeman; he does the garden and odd jobs, and he

drives the car more often than not. I *can* drive, but I'm told that I don't drive very well! I put it down to growing up with a carriage and horses – there were no cars in our time, of course.

It must sound as if I have plenty of time on my hands, which really I don't at all. When I'm not being quartermaster for expeditions or worrying what my two are up to, I'm Chairman of the local history society, which is a very busy one – we have lots of events and open days and so on. And I'm on the Parish Council, which takes up a lot of my time.

Then there's Jim sometimes acting as if he's ten years old; I never know when he'll come barging in with his 'Hello Molls, what's for tea?' Always off here and there to make his fortune – though he was very good to me when I had pneumonia after 'flu one year, and he took me off on a wonderful Scandinavian cruise to convalesce. Oh – yes, I remember, my aunt turned up at Beckfoot while I was away and Dick and Dorothea were supposed to be staying – dear me – yes, that was quite an affair.... Anyway, the funny thing about Jim is that although he never made good abroad, his very antics and adventures have now brought him fame and fortune through his book, which you were discussing earlier.

**Sparkinson:** You mentioned earlier your childhood adventures; in what way are they similar to that of your girls and their friends?

**Mrs Blackett:** Well, I must say it makes me so happy to see that children can still have wholesome, harmless adventures using their own resources as we did – some young people lead very different lives now. I suppose their North Pole adventure brought back memories in particular. The lake froze over when *we* were young, and we had a lot of fun skating, having ice-parties and so on, but I must admit that the children exceeded our adventures pretty comprehensively. Young Dick and Dorothea managed to toboggan right up the lake in the dark in a blizzard, and Nancy was supposed to be convalescing from mumps and set off all by herself to find them – such a bad girl! Bob would have been *so* proud of her.

Then as for camping on the island, Jim and I had such happy memories of adventures there, so it was perfect to have my girls and the Walker children camping there too. Oh, and there was that very difficult time when my aunt was visiting – she's been very good to me, but perhaps it's time for her to let go sometimes; anyway, my girls couldn't camp because Aunt Maria wanted them at the house, and the Walkers unfortunately damaged their boat, so there they all were fretting to be on the island.

So Jim and I and Mary Walker hatched a lovely plot: as soon as Aunt Maria had gone and the Walkers' *Swallow* was mended, we secretly set up their tents and so on, on the island all ready for them, so that they wouldn't need to waste a moment of the holiday. They were so astonished! It was such fun.

**Sparkinson:** You mentioned prospecting; did they really find copper?

**Mrs Blackett:** Oh yes! That old rascal Slater Bob is still working it. Fancy! Jim went halfway round the world looking for gold and there was – well, not gold, but good metal on his doorstep all the time. Yes, Nancy started it all, as usual, chasing off after Slater Bob's tale of gold on High Topps; there was no stopping her after that. I shall never forget till my dying day the day that the Fell caught fire and they sent a carrier pigeon back with a message for help. Thank goodness Jim had just returned from South America; he telephoned Tommy Jolys and we all rushed up to High Topps in the nick of time to save Atkinson's and Tyson's farms and to count the children. He's a sterling chap, Tommy Jolys, a bit set in his ways but a good man to have around.

Oh, and we also met Jim's friend Timothy Stedding then for the first time. We still laugh about that: Jim sent a message to the effect that he was sending 'Timothy' home, and the children were convinced it was an armadillo and built it a hutch to live in. Timothy still goes red when we pull his leg about it.

**Sparkinson:** Well, Molly, I think our time is up. As you know, Colonel Jolys is on next and I am sure he will tell us all about fell fires. It has been extremely interesting listening to you. You must tell me more later.

Ladies and gentlemen, your applause please for Mrs Molly Blackett.