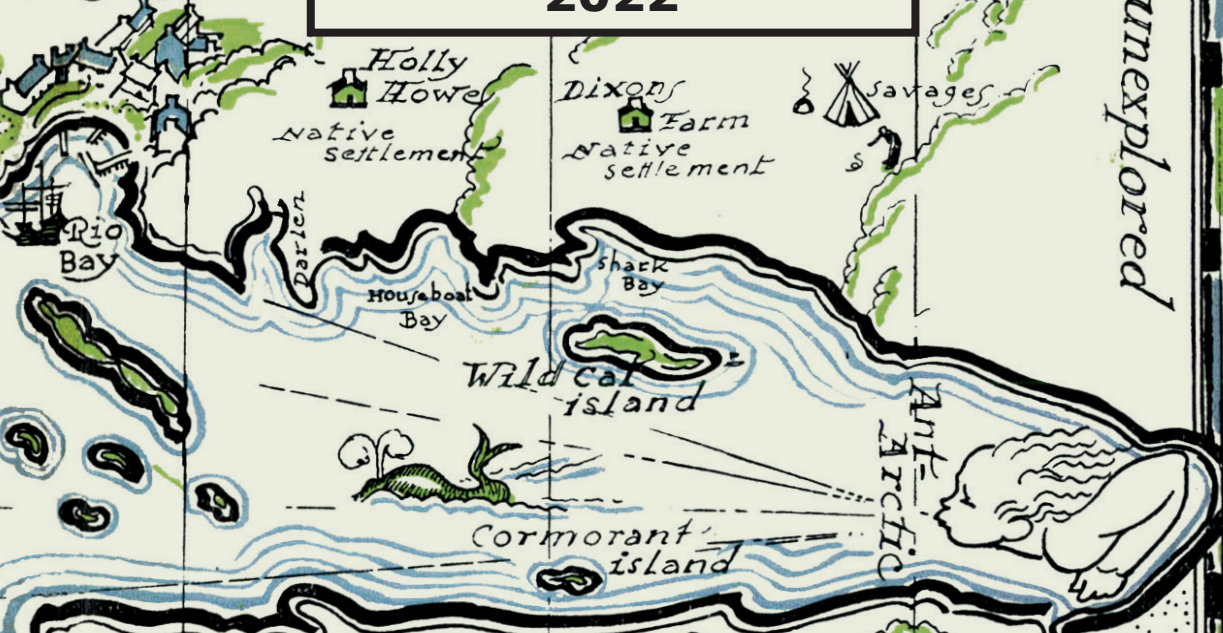


MIXED MOSS

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2022

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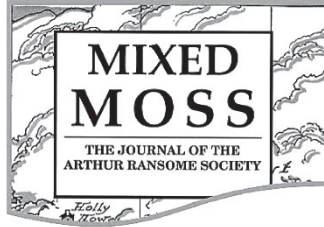
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HIGH HILLS

Swallows and Amazons

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OUT OF CAPTAIN FLINT'S TRUNK



After a long gestation, Arthur Ransome's *Peter Duck* was finally published in October 1932, so this year we celebrate its ninetieth birthday. In December 1930, after the appearance of *Swallows and Amazons*, Ransome asked the young Altounyans for ideas for his next book. Mavis (Able Seaman Titty) wrote, 'Make it with a treasure or something hidden somewhere – on an island of course so there will be something about boats in it,' while Susie (Mate Susan) said, 'Why not have a treasure on an island and after many adventures one or other of us finds it?' In fact Ransome had already had similar thoughts and had written the later-discarded opening of a pirate tale, but he quickly changed tack. Instead, in January 1931 he began work on what was to become *Swallowdale* – although confusingly *Peter Duck* had lodged in his mind and he introduces him in *Swallowdale* as Titty's imaginary friend.

Peter Duck, written mainly on a visit to the Altounyans in Aleppo early in 1932, is not many people's favourite among 'the twelve', but it is important nonetheless. First, it is a more ambitious novel than its predecessors and shows Ransome's developing skill and range as a writer of narrative fiction (on pages 14-17, Peter Willis focuses on metafiction in *Peter Duck*). From the moment that the Swallows arrive on the quayside with Polly screeching 'Pieces of Eight' at Black Jake, and with Gibber the monkey in tow, we

know we are in for something different. Like many pirate adventures of the time *Peter Duck* is influenced by R.L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, but here, by a deft sleight of hand, the piracy is in the present, the crew of *Wild Cat* (with the exception of Peter Duck) are characters we already know, *Swallow* is hanging in the davits, and the settings are real – the description of the voyage down channel, for me one of Ransome's finest pieces of writing, is exact in almost every detail. As for the adventure itself, we are never sure whether it really happens, or is a fantasy, or is the acting out of a story the characters have made up. At the end of the novel, the violence of the Viper's crew becomes real; the treasure, though worthless, seems solid enough, with pearl necklaces for each of Peter Duck's daughters; but *Wild Cat*, having crossed the oceans, returns to the empty berth at Lowestoft that it has only just left, and the children 'hurry back into ordinary life' (*PD*, p. 474). Perhaps the best clue is on the title page: 'Based on information supplied by the Swallows and Amazons ...'

Secondly, it is with *Peter Duck* that Ransome finally turned his back on professional illustrators and (with the help of Nancy and Roger in particular) produced his own drawings in which places and boats are portrayed accurately, but characters are usually blank canvases which leave the text and the reader to do the work. There may be some truth in Ransome's argument that Steven Spurrier's rejected illustrations for *Swallows and Amazons*, and Clifford Webb's illustrations for *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale*, were 'merely skilful exercises by accomplished technicians', but I tend to agree with Hugh Brogan that his ulterior motive was to make the books 'feel more entirely his own' (*The Life of Arthur Ransome*, p. 344).

Finally, it was the critical and popular success of *Peter Duck* that established Ransome as a major children's author and led to the sales which allowed him to go on. It was, as he says in his *Autobiography* (p. 390), 'the turn of the tide':

The turn of the tide had come just in time to save us and to justify Evgenia's courage in risking financial disaster. Presently the sales of the first two books caught up with those of *Peter Duck*, and I knew that I could afford to write another.

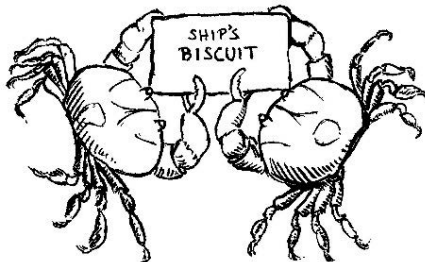
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Having come ashore and hung up my oilskins after a five-year trick at the helm of *Mixed Moss*, I find myself back in the Editor's chair – at least temporarily. I'm sure everyone will agree that Catherine Lamont produced an excellent volume in 2021, but working from the other side of the world wasn't easy and sadly she decided not to continue. Catherine brought fresh ideas and talent to *Mixed Moss* and she has our sincere thanks.

Taking over again mid-year has been something of a challenge, but Catherine had already made a start and, typically, Tars have rallied round to conjure up a spread of appetizing articles. I hope there's something here for everyone – though it always intrigues me that other people's favourites are rarely my own! Two *Peter Ducks* – the novel and the boat (which has recently turned seventy-five and has been beautifully restored) – are given proper attention, and among other tasty delights there are articles on Ransome's time in Russia, his landscapes, money in 'the twelve', and even the discovery of a possible lost portrait. There are also welcome contributions from overseas members and the results of the *Mixed Moss* poetry competition – both of which are Catherine's initiatives.

I am hugely grateful, as ever, to Paul Wilson for his proof-reading, to the Chairman for his support, and to the many old friends who have come forward to keep the ship afloat. However, *Mixed Moss* continues to need new writers if it is to thrive in the years to come. TARS' publications must be among the finest of any literary society in the country and they have to be kept that way. I'm sure there is a wealth of untapped potential among members, so please don't be backward in coming forward; and of course there's still a vacancy for an Editor as well!

Julian Lovelock



‘A PEWTER TEAPOT’: a Look at AR’s Lake Landscapes

Peter Hyland

The first two pages of *Swallows and Amazons* describe events which have become iconic: Roger tacking up the Holly Howe field towards his waiting mother, and then the ‘duffers’ telegram from Daddy. The third page contains a detailed view of Holly Howe and the terrain surrounding it, with the lake ‘winding away into the hills’, but even though it takes up almost the whole of the page I cannot remember this passage ever being celebrated at all. That, perhaps, is because at first sight it could be regarded as mere scene-setting – creating a backcloth against which the action is later going to take place.

On closer examination, the description is purely factual, and nothing is mentioned which cannot be seen. It starts with a path running down to the boathouse, then another path is reported running into the pinewoods – this path ‘soon faded away into nothing’. Not many authors would include such a negative detail, but Ransome does because that is what paths often do. He then slightly alters the viewpoint to bring in a wider view:

but . . . a fortnight before, the children had found their way . . . to the far end of the promontory. . . . From the top of it they had looked out over the broad sheet of water winding away among the low hills to the south and winding away into the hills high to the north, where they could not see so much of it.
(*SA*, p. 17)

So the children are now linked in to this expanding horizon, and the link is sealed when Titty is revealed as having named the promontory ‘Darien’. The paragraph ends by zooming back to Roger making his up-field ‘voyage’ to his mother, and the plot proceeds: ‘Would you like to take them the answer?’

This is much more than a backcloth. On this third page Ransome has succeeded in mapping the locality and involving the Walker children in it. Further landscape reminders are given throughout the book, often

prompted by a change of surroundings, the usual formula being: foreground view, opening out in stages to distant, e.g.:

Here and there was a field by the water’s edge, but mostly there were thick woods. Here and there among the trees were houses, but not many of them, and above the trees were the heather-covered slopes of the hills. (*SA*, p. 40, during *The Voyage to the Island*)

The plain language matches Ransome’s own drawings where, as a rule, water is depicted by wavy lines or even just white space, trees are hatched lumps, and fells are indicated by bare outlines. In the text the vocabulary is also kept simple: ‘field’, ‘trees’, ‘lake’, and ‘hills’, while geographical or geological terms (‘Skiddaw slate’, ‘gill’, ‘hanging valley’) never appear. In this first book the author does not even dare to use the local word ‘fell’ instead of ‘hill’.

Peter Hunt, in *Approaching Arthur Ransome*, stresses the ‘sense of place’ in *Swallows and Amazons* and describes the hills that ring the lake as ‘a secure boundary, rather like the hills that enclose the Thames valley in *The Wind in the Willows*’.¹ I would go further and suggest that the encircling mountains, the slopes and the lake and its islands are not just a boundary but become almost an extra character in the book, omnipresent and generally seen as benign: ‘But the big hills far up the lake helped to make him feel that the houseboat man did not matter’ (*SA*, p. 178).

However, a central principle in the Ransome ‘Lake’ books is that geographical surroundings are not to be taken for granted. There are occasions where the comforting sight of them is withheld:

. . . sailing in this blackness . . . there were no lights in Rio to help him. Everything was black. . . he was wondering what he should do when *Swallow* came near the islands off the Bay. (*SA*, pp. 239-40)

Nevertheless the lake topography does not desert John completely, and guidance is offered: ‘Trees. I can hear the wind in them. . . Down with the sail.’ It is important to note that any kindness or threat, or any other such human tendency, is to be inferred from the way the children react to the features of the landscape rather than from the author’s narrative, which is generally neutral in tone. Ransome does not go in for a ‘pathetic fallacy’ approach, where features would be described in words which reflect a

down-to-earth language with just an occasional simile, and avoids reaching for stock ‘feel-good’ phrases which can have a distancing effect.

There are dozens of children’s adventure stories by other authors set in attractive surroundings, but perhaps one will serve by way of comparison on this particular point – Malcolm Saville’s popular *Lone Pine* series set in the Shropshire hills. Saville describes the locale well, but tends to use phraseology such as ‘the murmur of the little brook which ran so cheerfully down through the heather’.² Here the brook obviously wants to be liked, but Ransome mostly avoids that sort of personification and simply reports what can be seen, e.g. ‘The stream came tumbling and twisting across the moorland’, and also what can be heard: ‘the noise of the water’ (*SD*, pp. 55-62). We know that the sight and sound of the stream is welcome because the children are excited to be alongside it and they see fish in it. Susan, impliedly, sees it as a guide: ‘Don’t go far from the stream’. Ransome himself has explained:

If you know a bit of country really well, it takes a very active part in the making of your book. You can count on it. It is always there and, somehow or other, life flows from it into your story.³

However, he does come near to the pathetic fallacy on one occasion, when describing Cormorant Island:

There was nothing on it but rocks and heather and two dead trees. One of the trees had fallen. The other was still standing. Many of its branches were broken and it had no leaves. But instead of leaves on the bare trees, there was something else. Three dark birds with long necks were perched on its branches. (*SA*, pp. 78-9)

Note the short staccato sentences. The island does not sound inviting, but the description is factual and there are no unnecessary sinister or grim adjectives. A similar technique is used for the islands around Rio at dawn, in a paragraph which is unusual because it stands isolated between two asterisks and describes scenic effects not seen by the Swallows because they are asleep. Here, therefore, the narrator is speaking directly to his readers, and many authors would take advantage of this and let rip – sunrise in the Lakes! But not Ransome, who simply lists the lightening colours rather as one might describe traffic lights changing:

The deep blue of the sky began to pale over the eastern hills. The islands clustered about Rio Bay became dark masses on a background no longer as dark as themselves. The colour of the water changed. It had been as black as the hills and the sky, and as these paled so did the lake. The dark islands were dull green and grey . . . (*SA*, p. 242)

Just when the paragraph is in danger of being unmemorable, Ransome throws in a simile which is both startling and homely: ‘. . . and the rippled water was the colour of a pewter teapot’. The teapot is introduced to illustrate the visual appearance of the water but a more comforting image could not be imagined (and we can be sure it is completely accurate). The waking children aboard *Swallow* are indeed safe now with the return of daylight, but a lesson has been learnt – the terrain may indeed be a friend but there are going to be times when it is alarmingly invisible, or is disrupted by weather or human activity.

The learning curve continues in *Swallowdale*, whose theme is summed up by Peter Hunt as ‘the integration of the children into the Lake Country’. The narrative does indeed support the idea that right from the start the children no longer wonder at the landscape but recognise it:

The little brown-sailed *Swallow* . . . was now beating across the open lake that stretched away to the south between wooded hills, with moorland showing above the trees and, in the distance, mountains showing above the moorland.

A whole year had gone by. August had come again. (*SD*, p. 18)

This is a classic Ransome description, smoothly linking time and place in down-to-earth language – the beauty does not need ‘talking up’. I read *Swallows and Amazons* before I had ever visited the English Lake District, and I must have been one of many people who on their first day in the Lakes kept thinking that it was exactly like Arthur Ransome said it was.

Two chapters later we first encounter Horseshoe Cove and are told not just where it is and how it got its name but also, importantly, what is around and behind it:

There were woods that came down to the water’s edge there, though a little farther south there were green fields. Some way behind the cove the woods climbed steeply up the hillside towards the heather and bracken of the fells.

Three or four tacks brought the *Swallow* to the entrance . . . (*SD*, p. 48)

We can now ‘place’ the Cove. This is also a good example of Ransome’s technique of ending a descriptive paragraph by switching abruptly from the

distant view to brisk foreground action or speech, as if to wake us from a pleasant reverie and get back to business. He uses this device frequently – for instance in the first view of Swallowdale itself. This is a plain-speaking masterpiece and is worth quoting in full:

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 of the lake.

‘It’s a lovely place for brigands,’ said the boy. (*SD*, pp. 63-4)

We have snapped straight from the distant hills to Roger’s thoughts, and in fact the whole picture is seen through the eyes of the child explorers. The observations are therefore set out simply but together have a heightened effect, creating a location which begs to be identified and has prompted countless explorative treks over lakeland fells by Ransome devotees seeking the ‘real’ Swallowdale. Here one can only echo the words of Gabriel Woolf: ‘The books authenticate their landscapes. What an achievement.’⁴

Possibly because the children in *Swallowdale* now see themselves as much more closely integrated into the landscape, Ransome allows one familiar and prominent feature to become personified – Kanchenjunga. Because of its size it has a constant background presence in the stories and is seen, at least by Titty, as a kind of guardian or father figure. When it becomes hidden from Titty and Roger on the moor, the beginning of their awareness of this is chilling in more ways than one:

Titty looked back towards Kanchenjunga. Kanchenjunga stood out clear in the sunshine . . . but the lower hills to the south had disappeared altogether. It was as if there was nothing beyond the moorland but the sky.

‘It’s not so hot now,’ said Roger.

. . . Titty looked back again to Kanchenjunga. . . . His head was somehow fading. (*SD*, p. 348)

Note ‘*His* head’. Although the children are fog-bound, Ransome is not deterred from detailing their surroundings and he provides a still-visible

‘micro-landscape’, written as if for an inquisitive child but in an unpatronising way:

This part of the moor was covered with short grass with patches of bracken and rocks and loose stones, and stones not quite so loose, bedded in the ground, with ants’ nests under them, if you lifted them. (*SD*, p. 350)

The third ‘Lake’ book, *Winter Holiday*, begins with a regulation mapping-out of the area in which the two new children, Dick and Dorothea, are staying, except that this time the ‘big hills’ have ‘snow-covered tops’. A few pages later, there is a vignette which follows the Ransome practice of flicking from a distant view to a sudden close-up. Looking for a place for an observatory, the Ds:

... followed a cart track up a steep little pasture, through another gate, and then to the left, up the fell, between patches of dead bracken and grey lumps of rock that thrust up here and there out of the short-cropped grass. ‘Not limestone,’ said Dick, picking up a bit and putting it in his pocket. (*WH*, p. 25)

So Dick’s integration into the landscape has been achieved already, and in a most physical way.

Five chapters later, snow has arrived overnight, as if it meant it, and the result is described, item by item:

Everything was holding its breath. The field stretching down to the lake was like a brilliant white counterpane without a crinkle in it. The yew trees close by the farm-house were laden with snow. The lower branches of the old fir were pressed right down to the ground by the weight of snow they were carrying. The island was a white island, except where the rocks rose straight up out of the still water. The snow seemed to have spread downwards from the tops of the hills until everything was covered. It lay like a slab of icing on a slice of cake along the stone wall of the garden. . . . And then there was this magical brightness in the air. (*WH*, p. 77)

The description is calm and meticulous but the author has allowed himself two similes: ‘white counterpane’ and ‘icing on a slice of cake’. These are homely everyday images which sharply illustrate the wintry scene without disrupting it. They just do their job without purporting to be ‘clever’, and they surely reflect the fact that the view is seen by Dorothea, a town-dweller, who ‘has never seen anything like this’. The word ‘magical’ is

startling here, as magic of any sort is not countenanced in Ransome’s world. Again, this is probably a non-literal reflection of Dorothea’s amazement, but it has to be admitted that the sudden appearance of this rare ‘forbidden’ word does put a sparkle on the paragraph.

Before moving on to Ransome’s greatest landscape triumph, a brief note about *The Picts and the Martyrs*. This is a novel mainly about seclusion, so that distant views are few and far between and when they are mentioned it is usually to evoke memories:

Some where behind the nearer hills to the south of the great peak lay High Topps where they had been prospectors, found copper, and ended by fighting a fell fire. (*PM*, p. 21)

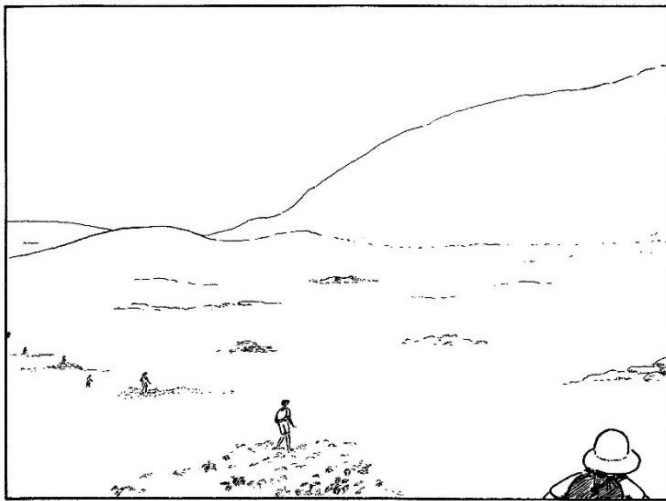
It is understandable that the thoughts of Dick and Dorothea on seeing again the lake and hills turn immediately to the remarkable events featured in *Pigeon Post*. This book is acknowledged to be one of Ransome’s best, yet it is almost completely land-based. All eight of the children are featured and become closely involved with the fell country, both visually and physically, to the extent that once again it could be thought to be an actual participant in the adventure. Pushing this concept even further, one could suggest that the surrounding terrain is sufficiently benign to allow the children to find water and ‘gold’, provided they devote a fair bit of thought and energy to the search, but it certainly will not tolerate a carelessly dropped lit-cigarette or an unsafe and unfenced tunnel, and reacts quite viciously.

I suspect that Ransome would have found this interpretation much too fanciful. After all, the plot is based on science, with the aid of calm and accurate descriptions of what the prospectors could see around them and of the consequences of their actions. Once again, though, technical terms (‘gosson’, ‘vein’) are avoided and only appear at the end of the book when Squashy Hat is speaking. And as always, there are some longer ‘set-piece’ landscape passages. The first glimpse of High Topps is one of these, and shows Ransome at his best, fluently painting a picture with unpretentious wording. Nancy has taken the prospectors up to the edge of the plateau and asks what they think of it:

Titty at first could hardly speak. That last run to the rock after the long climb from the valley had left her altogether out of breath. Spots swam before her

eyes, but in spite of them she knew she was looking at a Klondyke, an Alaska, better than anything she had dreamed when they were talking of the goldfields in the camp at Beckfoot. Over there rose the great mass of Kanchenjunga. A huge arm stretched down from him towards the valley they had left, hiding all the Beckfoot country and the hills towards the head of the lake. A range of hills swept away to the south from the peak they had climbed the year before. Half circled by the hills there lay a wide plateau, broken with gullies, scarred with ridges of rock that rose out of a sea of heather and bracken, and close-cropped sun-dried grass. Away to the left the plateau sloped down and was crossed by a ribbon of white road. Behind the prospectors were Tyson’s wood, and the deep valley of the Amazon out of which they had climbed. (PP, p. 91)

That first sentence – ‘Titty at first could hardly speak’ – is like a brief preparatory roll of the drums. The mention of ‘Titty’ means that we are about to see something through the eyes of the most receptive and well-read of the children and it is going to be serious. For a start, at the age of ten she has read about Klondyke and remembers the name. Then there is Kanchenjunga, once again referred to as ‘him’ and here presented as a sort of presiding god with his retinue of hills and his (beautifully ambivalent) ‘huge arm’ stretching down. The summit climb in the previous year is recalled, placing the scene in time. The eye progresses, for a change, from distance to foreground and the ‘sea of heather’, a fittingly marine metaphor.



Combing the Topps

Finally, there is the ‘deep valley . . . out of which they had climbed’, an expression almost worthy of John Bunyan, but it neatly rounds off the picture. And one might note that there is far more information given in this verbal sketch than there is in the author’s drawing ‘Combing the Topps’ (*PP*, p. 111) which shows almost no detail at all.

However, there is one earlier Kanchenjunga moment which in my view is the finest descriptive passage in all of the twelve books. The prospectors are camped in the Beckfoot garden just before the adventure starts. We go from daylight to dark to flame to everything, in a beautifully constructed yet simple paragraph:

The sun had gone down over the shoulder of Kanchenjunga, and the fiery sunset had dimmed and cooled to a pale green light behind the hills. A starry darkness closed down over the valley of the Amazon, and the silent little river, and the cluster of white tents on the lawn. The camp-fire among the bushes made the night seem darker than it was. They sat round it and talked, seeing each other’s faces by the light of the flames. Bushes and tree trunks about them flickered into sight and out again as the flames leapt up or died.

Everything seemed possible. (*PP*, p. 29)

As usual in Ransome’s landscapes, the last sentence is a surprise, but this one makes you catch your breath and sends the described experience soaring into universality. The prospectors, and the child readers of this book, and even some adult readers, do not yet know how life will pan out. Their future years stretch away beyond Kanchenjunga. So much is expressed in three words. As Victor Watson wrote, ‘Ransome combines intensity with economy’.⁵

¹ Peter Hunt, *Approaching Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1992), p. 90.

² Malcolm Saville, *The Secret of Grey Walls* (London: Newnes, 1947), Ch. III.

Geoffrey Trease, in his *Bannermere* series written in the late 1940s and featuring children who were at day school, was nevertheless writing in the shadow of Ransome. His lake landscape is imaginary but typical, and he too uses factual language and domestic images, e.g. ‘a white mass of flurried water, like boiling soap-suds’. *No Boats on Bannermere* (London: Heinemann, 1949), p. 17.

³ Quoted by Peter Hunt, *Approaching Arthur Ransome*, p. 15.

⁴ Gabriel Woolf, quoted in Kirsty Nichol Findlay, ‘Reading Ransome Overseas’, *Mixed Moss* 2021, p. 95.

⁵ Victor Watson, *Reading Series Fiction* (London: RoutledgeFalmer, 2000), p. 55.

AR AND METAFICTION

On *Peter Duck*'s ninetieth birthday, Peter Willis asks whether it is, in fact, a metafiction.

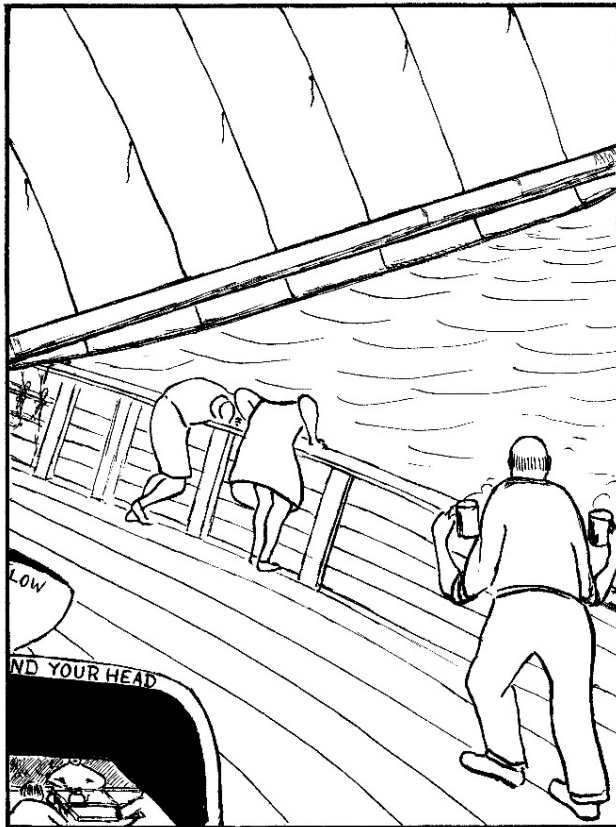
Certainly Arthur Ransome never set out to write a metafictional novel – simply because the term did not enter use until the 1970s. However (as Julian Lovelock notes in *Swallows, Amazons and Coots*), Ransome's *The History of Storytelling* shows he had a sophisticated understanding of narrative techniques. While he generally elected for a plain-vanilla style for his children's books, many of the more playful characteristics of the genre turn up in *Peter Duck*. Metafiction is a fairly slippery concept – Lovelock defines it as 'a novel which is aware of and utilises its own status as fiction; a teasing literary intrigue shared between author, characters and reader'.¹

One of the simplest hallmarks of metafiction is the 'story-within-a-story' format, also known as the 'frame novel', although it's not always a reliable indicator (*Old Peter's Russian Tales* are 'frame stories', but nobody would ever accuse them of being metafictional). Ransome originally adopted this format for *Peter Duck* – its original basis was that the Swallows and the Amazons make up the story between themselves while spending part of the Christmas holidays following the summer of *Swallows and Amazons* aboard a wherry on the Norfolk Broads, owned by an old seaman called, yes, Peter Duck. Indeed, he wrote a couple of draft chapters setting up this scenario (they can be read in *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk* by Christina Hardyment – frankly, they are not all that wonderful).²

But then Ransome decided to jettison them, and that's where things get really interesting. Or complicated. We plunge straight into the story, set in, to all intents and purposes, present-day (i.e. 1930s) Lowestoft. But there in the harbour is a real old-fashioned eighteenth- or nineteenth-century pirate ship with a classic villainous pirate captain. At once the illusion of the summer-holiday could-have-happened ambience of *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale* is shattered.

The similarities to the story in *Swallows and Amazons* are still there, but now projected onto a larger scale: there's the island, though bigger, more tropical and further away; the lake has turned into the blue-water Atlantic ocean; and their ship is now the *Wild Cat*, though *Swallow* – but not *Amazon* – is brought along, both as a talisman and for practical purposes as ship's boat. There's the buried treasure-chest, now containing something more exotic than Captain Flint's typewriter; and the thunderstorm, by now a convenient tornado. There's even the pirate on his ship, retired in *Swallows and Amazons*, but very villainously active in *Peter Duck*.

But it's as if, in discarding the picture-frame of 'their own story', Ransome allowed himself the liberty to take the tale along very different paths than Nancy's idea of a 'properly gorgeous story', full of exaggerations that were to be 'some fun for us'.



Nancy and Titty Sharing their Misery

In fact, in this metafictional hall of mirrors, much that was fantasised about in *Swallows and Amazons* becomes all too real. People, even Nancy, get seasick. The potentially ‘properly gorgeous’ treasure is revealed as three virtually worthless pearls. And her cosy, romanticised illusions of pirates are challenged – brought up sharply against real, evil ruthlessness and very nasty, dangerous violence, albeit visited not on the Walkers and Blacketts themselves, but on the unfortunate Bill, who seems to have been invented for the purpose and seems more capable of taking care of himself than these somewhat coddled middle-class children.

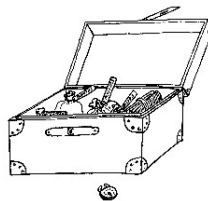
As for being a rip-roaring adventure, half the time Ransome seems bent on slowing the action to a crawl ... and then filling the space with something altogether more magical. The down-Channel passage, with John’s dawn trick at the wheel is, to my mind, one of his finest pieces of writing, equalled only by the ‘Good little ship’ soliloquy in *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, which it somehow presages. (Nobody would accuse *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea* of being a metafictional fantasy, but there is a strange sense of déjà vu about John’s admission to himself that he is happy. And then there’s Titty’s remark in Chapter 10: “Three hoots,” she said. “Sailing vessel with the wind aft. Remember *Peter Duck*.”’ And yes, she speaks, apparently, in italics, clearly meaning the book title, just as if the book really was a part of their collective history.)

And then there’s Peter Duck himself. He is the idealisation of cautious, knowledgeable seamanship, reining back Captain Flint’s relatively naïve enthusiasms (as symbolised by the seaside spades he buys in Cowes). It’s Ransome, not the children in the wherry, who brings him into the story and names it after him. This is Ransome’s chance to immortalise his old friend and reliable crewman, Captain Sehmel, the ‘ancient mariner’ of their *Racundra* days and, like Mr Duck, a ‘graduate’ of the great clipper ship *Thermopylae*. Peter Duck’s role in ‘his’ book is to provide the adventure with a touchstone and a sheet-anchor, as possibly Sehmel did on *Racundra* for Arthur and Evgenia – an assurance that nothing can really go wrong. No wonder Titty gives him his own cave in the almost equally complex *Swallowdale* (which ‘happens’ *after* the winter wherry holiday ‘happened’, or didn’t).

With all these complexities, forced lulls and contra-tensions, it's a wonder to me that *Peter Duck* was so rapturously received on publication and provided Ransome with the sales breakthrough that *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale* had failed to achieve. But it did, and it continues to fascinate at least some of us.

And what of *Missee Lee*? Naturally the book is often paired with *Peter Duck* as a fantasy tale, again with the *Wild Cat*, now at the ninety-ninth port of their world cruise. But without Mr Duck himself, the book is also without any of the paraphernalia of metafiction. The loss of *Wild Cat* at the start of the book does suggest a parallel with *Swallowdale*, as does the imprisonment of the entire crew by a fierce, powerful female adult. Other than that, though, it is a plain, if fantastically improbable tall tale, simply and straightforwardly told.

Some Ransome fans also like to lump in *Great Northern* with the other two to make up a trio of fantasies. They seize on the fact that a shot is fired, the suggestion that the *Sea Bear* could be a surrogate for the burnt-out *Wild Cat*, and the breeding habits of the divers which indicate that the children ought to have been at school, not swanning around the Hebridean islands. I just can't see it. The *Sea Bear* seems to me as real and solid as the *Goblin* (well, very nearly!), the location a reasonable extension of the Lakes, the Broads, the North Sea, the Walton Backwaters of the other perfectly realistic stories, and the story itself a well-handled and fitting finale to the series as a whole. The one thing that has always worried me is Dick's camera. Just how good were his shots of the divers at that distance? No wonder he longed for a telephoto lens!



¹ Julian Lovelock, *Swallows, Amazons and Coots: a Reading of Arthur Ransome* (Cambridge: Lutterworth, 2016), p. 52.

² Christina Hardyment, *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk*, 2nd ed. (London: Frances Lincoln, 2006), pp. 162-75.

SWALLOW DOWN UNDER

Backdrop to a Mary Walker Backstory

Catherine Lamont

In 1878, eighteen-year-old Mary Boulton (Arthur Ransome's youngest half-aunt) first stepped onto Australian soil, accompanied by two older sisters who were returning to Australia for the first time in eighteen years. Mary, Annie and Bertha (Bertie) were the daughters of Ransome's grandfather, Edward Baker Boulton (EBB) and his first, Australian-born, wife, also called Mary. Could their stories (or that of their oldest sister, Millie, who first left Australia when she was eight, or a brother who returned when he was sixteen) have been the source of inspiration for the stories that Ransome had 'Mother' tell of her Australian childhood in *Swallows and Amazons*?



Melbourne in the late nineteenth century (image from Wikimedia Commons)

Mary Walker is one of the most important adult characters in Ransome's Swallows and Amazons books. In contrast to her husband, 'Mother' (who only becomes Mary in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*) is far more physically involved in the action and referred to more frequently, and we learn much more about her and her background than we do about 'Daddy', Ted. Mary also has the unusual distinction of having a dual national identity, having spent some of her childhood in Australia. Yet research into – or informed speculation about – Mary Walker's background (particularly the Australian connection) is comparatively thin, at least as far as *Mixed Moss* is concerned. (The index shows John Edwards's article about an Australian Captain Flint who may have been partly modelled on EBB. There are four articles on Ted Walker; none specifically on Mary.)

To reconstruct the most plausible backstory, it would help to know the stories that Ransome actually heard – not only in his childhood, but throughout most of his young adult life – from his own flesh and blood. He himself shares some of these stories in his *Autobiography*, but the real treasure trove is the eleven Boulton letters (mostly written to Ransome's mother, Edith, between 1882 and 1894) in the Brotherton Collection.

These letters show that, despite being separated by half a planet for all but three months since Edith was twelve, EBB was a very involved father. He writes in 1883, shortly before returning to England (in time for Arthur's birth), 'you can hardly tell how much I have missed your sympathy in our beloved art or how much this [time apart] ... has cost me'. Edith's earlier childhood may also have been filled with tales from 'down under' – tales that were so inspiring that both Rachel (his second wife) and Ransome's parents considered emigrating there. It was a dream that EBB rightly anticipated would quickly turn to dust after Rachel's first and only known (year-long) visit in 1890.

The letters convey a very vivid impression of Australian life, containing phrases that are strangely familiar. Some of them arrived during Ransome's childhood and would have been read aloud to him, particularly the one sent from SS *Corromandel*, February 1890, on the way back to Australia:

... tell Arthur that we have seen no whale because they do not grow in the Mediterranean but we have seen a good many sea pigs otherwise called porpoises.

EBB himself visited frequently with Arthur until his last voyage in 1893. There were visits from uncles (from New Zealand, too) and stories told by a grandmother who lived for another sixteen years. Stories of Australia may well have jostled for equal place amongst the more English folk tales Arthur recalls his mother telling or reading to him and younger siblings.

A reminder of the most relevant references in ‘the twelve’ may be helpful at this point (see *Signals* for more detail). Mary spent some time on both a sheep station and Sydney Harbour. On the sheep station, she had a pony when she was a *little* girl. Her father caught ‘little brown bears’ that licked honey from her fingers. There was a great drought where many sheep died, and ‘the blackfellows in the Australian bush ... found water by magic’. She often fell asleep on horseback riding home from dances as an older girl. She camped in the bush in ‘a tent like that and it ripped to ribbons, and was blown clean away’. She spent time on Sydney Harbour (where she learned to sail and capsized her cousin’s dinghy), and the smell of tar reminded her of ships in Australian harbours (probably Melbourne and Sydney). She spoke of snakes, fishing for brown trout in both Australia and New Zealand, and camping. But Ransome never tells us where Mary was born ...

Edward Baker Boulton married his first wife, Mary Atkinson (born in NSW to Irish sheep-farming parents who then lived in Parramatta), in 1850, fourteen years after he first arrived in Sydney. A successful landowner, artist and sheep farmer (who had jointly purchased with his brothers 227,000 acres of land in the Wellington Valley, 200 km west of Sydney, in the area bushranger Captain Morgan roamed), they could afford a honeymoon trip to the United Kingdom (with Mary’s entire family), and to visit the Great Exhibition while they were there. Emily (Millie) was born first, on 26 January 1851 (Australia Day). A baby brother, Oswald, was also aboard *Anglesea*, the ship returning them to Sydney at the end of 1852, where they lived on the shores of Sydney Harbour (e.g. Lindesay, pictured opposite). EBB’s brother, Philip, migrated to New Zealand in 1853, which may explain why Mary Walker knew about the trout there.



Lindesay (image from Wikimedia)

Before they returned to the UK in 1859, the Boultons had acquired four more children and part of ‘Bergen-op-Zoom’ (BoZ), the sheep station bordering Walcha Cemetery, where EBB and two of his children (Annie and Nithsdale (Niz)) are buried. Mary had also acquired a young teenage friend, Blanche Mitchell, whose diaries record Mary’s experiences of the harbour:

Went with Mrs Boulton ... down to the Circular Wharf ... rowed to the Waterview Dry Dock ... Fished off Point Piper in a boat with six children inside, two nurses and five grown up people. A pretty crush, but we caught a great number of fish ... at the pier, Manly ... we amused ourselves by riding about on donkeys.

Did any of the children visit the sheep station or learn to sail there before the family returned to the UK in 1859? Alas, there is no record of the family travelling to BoZ, although Mary’s own farming background may have prepared her sufficiently for what would have been a rather difficult 500 km journey for a family. (While there was a steamer from Sydney to Newcastle or Port Macquarie, there was no railway line for any part of the journey until 1857, and that was only 30 km long.)

As their only cousins would have either been in Ireland or New Zealand, it is unlikely that a cousin would have taught the children to sail. However, EBB spent time with *his* cousin, Dr William Palmer, who travelled out to Australia in the same year. Given EBB’s love of boats (reported by Arthur and evidenced by the number of sailing boats in EBB’s paintings, even on

inland waterways), it is possible that EBB was the person who capsized his cousin's dinghy on Sydney Harbour. We shall probably never know.

And then they returned to England. Blanche records a very different journey:

When the vessel sailed she [Mrs Boulton] was in great distress, disliking the vessel, captain, mate and men. And well she might for the vessel was an old leaky thing all down on one side, her cabin small and low, the cuddy uncomfortable, with the steward's pantry just under the poop stairs, so dangerous for the children! ... Rumours, too, were afloat that the pumps would not work ... Poor Mrs. B. we left crying on the bed.

Not only were the conditions on the boat unkind, Mary was also pregnant. Unsurprisingly, she died in her mother's home in Ireland at Christmas time. Her daughter's birth date was not recorded, but it seems likely that Mary Boulton (senior) died of complications in giving birth to her namesake.

Edward soon found a stepmother for the 'Seven Little Australians': Rachel Gwynn. The first of ten 'English' children arrived in 1862, a little more than two years after Mary's death: this was Edith, the mother of Arthur Ransome. EBB began returning the 'Australian' children to the country of their mother's birth to manage the property in 1874. None of his children was in Australia between the ages of eight and sixteen; however, Millie was in Australia as **a little girl**. And there can be little doubt where Ransome got his pictures of Australian life and so-called bears from. Rachel writes home to Arthur's mother (and aunts) in 1890:

Nothing to be seen but dead, dying or scrubby trees, the grass long & brown, a mountain mist passing over, the wind howling among the trees & to add to the dreary effect, the carcasses of the poor sheep who had 'lain them down & died' lying close by! ... 'tell the children [Arthur and all] Grannie saw **a dear little brown-grey bear** climbing a dead tree till it easily reached the top where it seated itself between the branches and looked just like a piece of the tree itself.'

Edward writes in 1894:

I don't think I have written a letter to you since I arrived here ... just now the thunder is growling like a bear with a sore head. ... The truth is that we are getting more deeply indebted & the sheep not much better. It would have horrified you to see the number of carcasses in the paddocks after shearing & footparing. **They simply could not support themselves & laid down &**

died – how many I cannot say – but where we have lost hundreds our neighbours have lost thousands – one of them has lost all but a few & he had at one time more than we. It will require good generalship & great economy to weather this continuance of bad seasons & that we must pare most closely there is little doubt. ... Your loving & **ancient P. F.** [precursor to A.P.?)



Bergen-op-Zoom Sheep Station in drought, 2019 (Photo by Catherine Lamont)

There is no mention of a dance from which anyone may have ‘[ridden] home ... often [falling] asleep on horseback’ (*We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, Ch. 2). However, EBB writes home to Edith in 1890 that Millie gave a skating party at the rink in Walcha.



Sketch of Bergen-op-Zoom, by Edward Baker Boulton (from Mixed Moss 1999)

The homestead, a modest three-bedroom dwelling, was about 4 km from Walcha Post Office. Although the only horses mentioned in the letters relate to driving to other places in the district, there is a story of a girl (Nora Linton) riding home on horseback from a dance in the second of Mary Grant Bruce's 'Billabong' books, which were published between 1910 and 1942, and were very popular in England. Did Ransome read them, perhaps? We know he read at least one Australian novel (*Robbery Under Arms* by Robert Boldrewood) 'because my maternal grandfather, though, unfortunately, not a bushranger, had spent much of his life on the very ranges where Starlight and the Morgans did their desperate deeds' (*Autobiography*, Ch. 4). Did he read more widely of ... 'that romantic shadowy Australia, from which ['aunts and uncles'] appeared now and then bringing strange gifts, and into which, after farewell visits, equally exciting, from time to time they vanished' (as he wrote in Chapter 1)? One of these uncles was Edith's (full) younger brother, Herbert, who accompanied his father on his last voyage home and was a co-executor, along with George and one John Johnston, of his father's will.

Returning to the Swallows ... three TARS articles are going to be useful here. Paul Flint suggests in 'Commander E.H.R. Walker and the Royal Navy of the Time' (*Mixed Moss* 2000, Vol. 3, No. 7) that, for Ted Walker to have reached the rank of Captain by 1932, he could not have been born after 1893. Paul gives 1889 (the year E.H.R. Altounyan was born) as a likely birth year. David Carter in 'The Service Career of Commander Walker' (*Mixed Moss* 1999, Vol. 1) speculates that Ted saw service 'as one of the small band of officers lent to the Royal Australian Navy' just before the war. Peter Wright (in 'Chairman's Report', *Signals*, May-August 2021) draws attention to Mary's comment about sleeping in tents with Ted when they were young. This implies that they knew each other in childhood/early adolescence and were of a similar age. For John to have been twelve in 1929, his parents must have married by 1916. When, where and how did they meet?

Using the Boulton girls' story as a guide, I am going to suggest that Mary 'X' is born, as Millie Boulton and I were, in London, but thirty-nine years

later – in 1890. When she is two, she travels with her ‘Australian’ parents to a sheep station not unlike BoZ (in fact, why not BoZ?), which is now suffering from the effects of the Federation Drought mentioned in Rachel’s letter. The family is now able to travel most of the way by rail (just as I travelled, aged four, to Armidale, where EBB probably did his banking, in 1968). The ‘Xs’ return to the UK in about 1898, where they meet Ted on holidays. Young Ted and Mary go camping with friends in the Lake District before he joins the Navy at age thirteen in 1902-3. Mary returns to Australia with her father and younger siblings as a competent and motherly young teenager in 1905 to complete her Australian childhood, staying (like Mary Boulton) at Redleaf House in Double Bay, before travelling to BoZ. Perhaps she meets Irene Pritchard, the first woman known to have won a sailing competition on Sydney Harbour in her dinghy, *Zephyr*, in 1898.



Redleaf House, Mary Boulton’s first stop in Australia, in Double Bay

Mary witnesses the 1911-1915 drought in her early twenties and attends dances from which she rides home on horseback, sometimes falling asleep. As David Carter suggests, she meets Ted in Melbourne when his ship arrives in 1913, but not by chance. Their continued correspondence has led to a proposal, as did the correspondence of Ransome’s own parents. Mary is

collecting Ted for his own wedding – not unlike the one of the real Mary described by Ransome’s grandparents, who attended it at BoZ in 1890, which both Edward and Rachel describe in their letters home:

It all passed off very cheerily and Niz drove them off amid a shower of rice to Walcha Road Station for Sydney where they have arrived having taken up their quarters at the Hotel Metropole & where they stay for a week & then proceed to Coolringdon the residence of her old friends the Ryries [EBB]

The marriage took place in the drawing room – a Sutherland table with both flaps down, & covered with a plush cloth & on which stood a prayer book and 2 vases of white flowers, but so placed that Mr Mowbray could stand behind it, and in front, two cushions for Donald & Mary – we all stood around ... Father brought Mary, dressed in a pretty, plain dress of cream silk, with hat & feather to match, a pretty bunch of white flowers at her throat, & a lovely bouquet. ... my ‘get-up’ was much approved of! [RB]

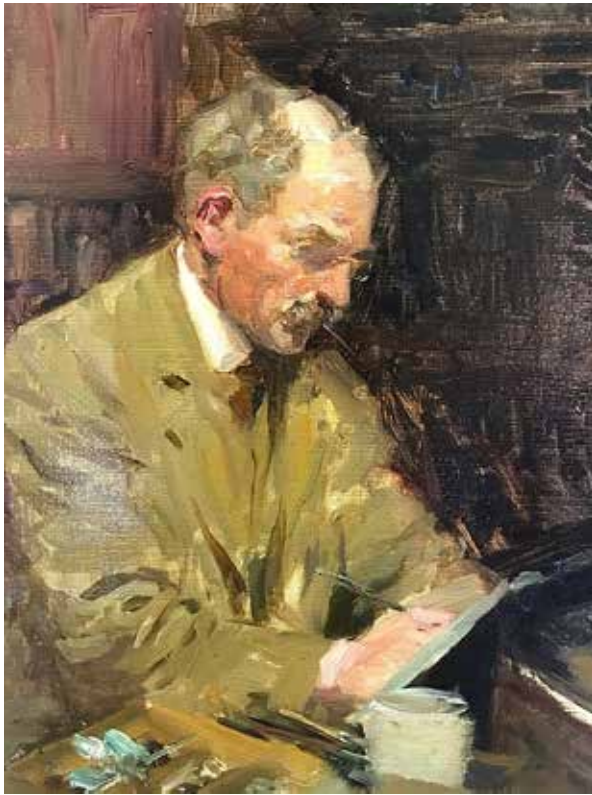
There are many ways that the newly-weds could have travelled home to England before the war broke out in 1914. Dorothy Ryrie (Mary’s daughter) wrote in a 1976 letter to the Walcha and District Historical Society that her own brothers stayed in Devonshire during the War with the Boulton siblings who had returned to England, and Mary Grant Bruce (the ‘Billabong’ author) returned to England on a troop ship with her British Army husband when he was recalled for duty during their honeymoon. David Carter suggests that Ted and Mary travelled home to England on the same ship as royalty, the *Medina*, in 1914. Why not? And the rest (apart from a major war and a few naval postings before Malta), as they say is ... [hi]story.

If you’d like to know more, see articles and a tour guide in Signals, The Outlaw and MM’s Online Supplement. Particular thanks for permission to reproduce passages from the Boulton letters and Blanche Mitchell diaries cited in John Edwards’s Edward Baker Boulton: Australia’s Forgotten Artist and Margaret Ratcliffe’s Amazon Publication, Genetic Building Blocks, which also contains a letter from Ransome’s father re. emigrating to Australia; to Ted Alexander and Geraint Lewis for setting me off on and supporting me in this ‘wild Black Swan’ chase; and to TARS for agreeing to cover my research costs through the Red Slipper Fund.

A PORTRAIT COMES TO LIGHT

Arthur Ransome at the Langham Sketching Club,
London

Sophie Neville



*A portrait, believed to be of Arthur Ransome
and attributed to Cyrus Cuneo (1879-1916)*

An unsigned portrait of a balding, moustached gentleman, has come to light that is believed to be a sketch of Arthur Ransome. He is depicted working at a desk in front of dark bookcases, wearing gold pince-nez

spectacles, a stiff white collar and sandy-coloured jacket. You can see a hint of a pipe in his mouth that is exactly like those featured in a number of photographs of the author.

In 2021, Rosebery's Auctions in London listed this 45.5 cm x 30 cm oil-on-board painting in their catalogue as 'a portrait of the artist' Cyrus Cuneo RA, the distinguished illustrator and figurist. But it can't be: Cuneo was dark, clean-shaven and heavy shouldered, having been a professional boxer. When this was pointed out, Rosebery's replied that it was, 'just a self-portrait of an artist at the Langham'. The setting is backed up by a label on the reverse.

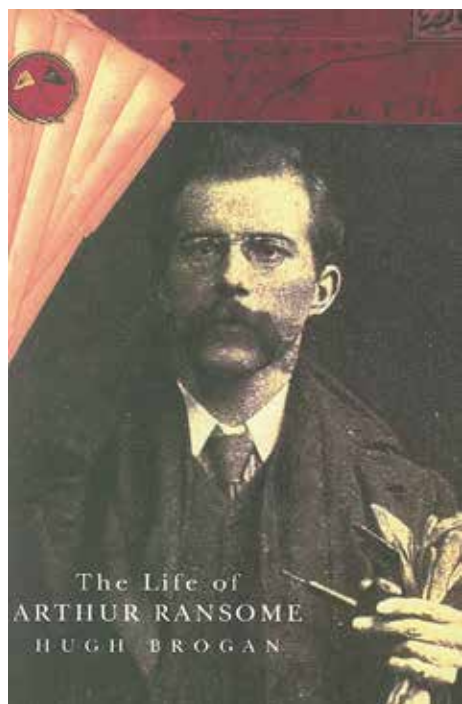
The Langham Sketching Club was originally set up in 1829 at a stable yard in Gray's Inn Lane since 'there was a need for a society where professional men could develop life drawing, improve work standards and meet in the company of like-minded artists'.¹



The Langham Sketching Club at about the time Ransome was a member

Margaret Ratcliffe of TARS says that 'Arthur Ransome was introduced to the Langham Club by Fred Taylor, the illustrator of *Bohemia in London*,' published

in September 1907, so it is likely that Ransome came into contact with Cyrus Cuneo around that time. I checked this reference to the Langham Club in Ransome's *Bohemia in London*:



Another famous artists' club is the Langham Sketch Club, whose rooms are close behind the Queen's Hall. Artists meet there regularly, and draw and make pictures all in a room together, with a time limit set for the performance. At intervals they exhibit the harvest of their evenings on the walls. They also have merry parties, for men only, when the doors are opened by fantastical figures, and scratch entertainments go on all the time, and there are songs and jovial recitations. Nights are as merry as any, and the rooms are full of celebrated men, and men about to be celebrated for the club does not tolerate bunglers.'²

However, it seems unlikely that the portrait was painted in 1907 as Ransome still had a full head of dark hair, as seen (above) in the photograph that Tabitha gave Hugh Brogan for the cover of his biography. It shows Ransome in 1907, aged about twenty-three, with his pince-nez glasses and pipe.

The artist Steven Spurrier (1878-1961), who drew the iconic map of Ransome's 'Great Lake in the North' for the dust jacket of the first editions of *Swallows and Amazons*, joined the Langham Club in 1906. He captured the informal atmosphere in charcoal or ink and wash, sketching groups sitting at different levels, on an assortment of furniture, as they drew. Some are balding and moustached pipe-smoking gentlemen, but no one seems to be

using mirrors to work on self-portraits. Did Ransome ever meet Spurrier at the club? He loathed his illustrations commissioned by Jonathan Cape and, apart from the map, they were never used. Clifford Webb took on the challenge before Ransome produced his own line drawings and maps for *Peter Duck*, as if they had been drawn by his characters themselves.

Cyrus Cuneo, who originated from America, studied in Paris under Whistler, joined the Langham Sketch Club in about 1903 and became Chairman in 1908. His son, the noted painter Terence Cuneo, was born in 1907. Cyrus died of blood poisoning in July 1916 after being scratched by a hatpin at a dance, but his wife and biographer, Nellie Tenison Cuneo, described ‘some gay, mad times’ with fellow members who included the equine artist Alfred Munnings. Being female, Nellie could not be a member but she illustrated a large number of books, including *The Girl Crusoes* by Mrs Herbert Strang (right).

Carole Cuneo, Terence Cuneo’s daughter and the current President of the *Cuneo Society*, recognised the portrait immediately. ‘Yes, definitely by Cyrus, from the Langham Sketch Club, and definitely of Arthur Ransome.’ Carole’s grandmother Nellie had claimed, ‘Some of these (portraits) were sold to sitters, who included Arthur Ransome’, but one can only presume that he did not buy this one.



Carole first knew the picture in the 1950s. It hung on the wall of her father’s studio at Ember Lane in East Molesey, London, until after his death in 1996, when she inherited it. Carole clearly remembers her father saying it was a portrait of Arthur Ransome. She sold it, with other paintings, to Sim

A Portrait Comes to Light

Fine Art in about 2011. It was sold again before turning up at Rosebery's auction, when the current editor of the *Cuneo Society Journal* purchased it for £480, just under the estimated price. Carole has provided him with a written statement to record the painting's provenance. In 2021, the owner contacted me to find out about other portraits of Ransome and invited me to see the framed painting at his house.



Sophie Neville, past President of TARS, with the portrait

The *Cuneo Society* knows that sometime in early 1914 Cyrus Cuneo gave up doing the two-hour sketches at the Langham Sketch Club and started painting quick portraits of fellow members at work. The editor of their journal says, 'The board this portrait is painted on is the type Cyrus used, and the colour palette is his, as is the brush stroke, impasto and technique.'

There are a number of similarities with the portrait of Ransome, so well-known to Tars, that was painted by Dora Collingwood in Aleppo in early

A Portrait Comes to Light

1932 when Ransome was aged about forty-eight: the sitter is wearing exactly the same kind of jacket and has hair of the same colour, though with a shorter cut.



Detail from portrait

It is possible that the portrait was executed in the autumn of 1915 when Ransome was aged thirty-one. Although Margaret Ratcliffe found no mention of either the Langham Club or Cyrus Cuneo in Ransome's surviving diaries from 1909 to 1916, he did visit central London in September and October of 1915, before he left for Stockholm and Petrograd. Sadly, no records of membership or attendance can be gained from the club as most of their records were destroyed by incendiary bombing when their building was hit during the Blitz.

Clearly there is more investigation to be done, but if this is a hitherto unknown portrait of Arthur Ransome, it is an important discovery.

¹ 'Cyrus' Ransome' by David Bennett, *Cuneo Society Journal*, Vol. 5, No. 2.

² Arthur Ransome, *Bobemia in London* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1907); reprinted by Amazon Publications, 2002, p. 81.

CELEBRATING *PETER DUCK*

Julia Jones



Peter Duck, formerly AR's yacht, has been in the Jones family for many years

My mother had a particularly strong feeling for Arthur Ransome's third novel, *Peter Duck*, which celebrates its ninetieth birthday this year. She often spoke about the scene when Captain Flint is crashing

desperately across the island after the hurricane. He is responsible for all those children and has no idea what has happened to them. He cannot help but imagine the worst. What will he say to their mothers? My mother felt that this was a place where the author was truly identified with his character. It was the single scene she mentioned most often when we talked about that book.

Her perception is interesting because in fact Ransome conveys Captain Flint's feeling of overwhelming anxiety and responsibility very deftly. The reader does not cross the island with him in words, only in imagination – as my mother did. He is seen only at the beginning and end of what must have been a terrible journey.

As the hurricane hits the island, Captain Flint, Peter Duck and Bill take *Wild Cat* out to sea. The diggers are at Duckhaven. Well before it is sensible to return Captain Flint hurries back, splitting jib and topsails in the process. Bill overhears him muttering to himself, 'Hang it all, it isn't even as if they are my own,' and realises that he is talking 'not of sails but of children'. Otherwise, his feelings are evident only in his actions. He stands in silence, looking grimly at the changed shape of the island. As soon as he can launch *Wild Cat's* dinghy he rows 'like a madman' for the landing place and plunges out of sight among the trees.

Readers don't see Captain Flint again until he emerges scratched and wounded – and dangerously slow on the uptake. Adults – like my mother – will immediately understand what an appalling emotional journey he has endured, battling through the fallen trees while not knowing what has happened to the children for whom he's responsible. I wonder how many child readers will pause to consider this. John and Nancy focus only on getting him away from Black Jake's crew. They are impatient with him as he repeatedly asks for reassurance about their safety.

Then a rifle shot shatters the dinghy lantern.

'Now do you see?'

Captain Flint did see – yet even at this moment he is emotional and protective; they are clear-headed and effective. I shall always be grateful to my mother for her insight into this moment in the book. It renews my admiration for AR's skill at conveying without saying. It's a prime example

of what one might call the ‘blank canvas’ aspect of his technique which allows readers space to project their own level of experience and understanding. It explains why these books can be read as a child and read again with subtle differences as an adult.

My mother, June, would have admitted that she was something of a worrier, even as we three children had all reached adulthood. She once told me, only half-jokingly, that it was when she wasn’t aware of anything in our lives that she needed to worry about, that she really began to worry. Because that meant there must be something so terrible that one of us hadn’t been able to tell her!

With an attitude like that you might assume that we had a cotton-wool-wrapped upbringing. Nothing could be further from the truth. She was almost pathologically hands-off. I remember once, as an adult, complaining about how I’d hated taking the bus to school. We lived in Woodbridge and school, from age seven to eleven, was eight miles away in Ipswich. I needed to get myself out of the house and walk the half-mile or so along Bredfield Street and up Angel Lane to the Market Hill in time to catch the double-decker 234. But if I missed it, then it was a run, all the way down Church Street, with my satchel bumping my back, to reach the main Post Office in time for the single-decker 231. I might have those numbers slightly the wrong way round but the experience and anxiety remain vivid – and that’s all of sixty years ago. It was a public bus but there were other girls on board who intimidated me, and I was ashamed of that.

On the final walk home at the end of the day in winter, when Bredfield Street was dark and empty, I would run from streetlamp to streetlamp, welcoming their small pools of light. I’m sixty-eight now and when I sing the Christmas carol ‘O Little Town of Bethlehem’ – about those ‘dark streets’ – it’s the lamp posts that shine in my mind as ‘the hopes and fears of all the years’ helping me get safely home. No doubt it was character-building – and there were the occasional days when I had enough money to stop at the corner shop for a delectably tacky Tunnock’s Caramel Wafer. Aged eleven, I was given the choice of local grammar school or boarding. I had only a single question. ‘Will I have to catch a bus if I go to the grammar school?’ When the answer was yes, I unhesitatingly opted to board.

Years later, when I tried to tell my mother about this, she looked surprised. ‘I sometimes wondered how you got to school,’ she said, somewhat vaguely.

Generally, having a hands-off mother is a very good thing and when we were children, first on the Hillyard-designed *Barnacle Goose* and then *Peter Duck* (Ransome’s former yacht, not the book) both parents gave us responsibility and didn’t fuss. There were a few rules: always ‘bottoms first’ descending the companionway; ‘mind the boom’ when we were going about or running; ‘one hand for yourself, one hand for the ship’ and that constant niggling question implanted in our heads, ‘Is it seamanlike?’ But not the ‘Don’t ... Don’t ... Don’t’ that I sometimes hear from anxious modern parents. We didn’t have to wear lifejackets unless we were going to sea.



Julia Jones, aged four, learning to row

There was a moment last summer when I was helping my son Bertie bring his newly acquired *Jupiter* back to Woodbridge from the South Coast. *Jupiter*'s problem was an extremely unreliable outboard and there was a difficult moment when we were trying to get out of a tight pontoon space in Brighton marina with the wind blowing us back on. It wasn't going

especially well and a chubby lad who'd been watching from a nearby yacht came across to offer help. Instantly his father was onto him, telling him to get back on board their own boat immediately. 'They don't want you getting in the way here!' he said. Then he turned to me. 'Sorry about that,' he said. 'He's only eleven and he thinks he can be helpful when he can't.' I'm glad to be able to report that I refrained from telling his father what I thought of him, and merely thanked the son directly and profusely for his lovely attitude and very welcome offer, before returning to grapple with *Jupiter* and the breeze. I don't care if that father was trying to protect his child; all he did was humiliate and disempower him.

Peter Duck, the character, is not emotionally involved with the crew of *Wild Cat* in the same way as Captain Flint. He treats them with respect and equality and his teaching is by example. Peter Duck is the epitome of the seaman-like virtues. Throughout the book you can compare his attitude and actions with the volatile, flawed and eminently human Captain Flint. Peter Duck wouldn't have split those sails, turning for home too soon. I feel sure he'd have got back to the island equally effectively and the sails would have been ready for use later when the schooner is being pursued by the *Viper*.

Racundra buffs, who know that Peter Duck was modelled on the old Baltic seaman Carl Hermann Sehmel, the 'Ancient Mariner', will perhaps be glad that AR is showing a greater respect in the later book. Titty explicitly recognises that Peter Duck is a source of safety: 'Anything might happen to Peter Duck and he would always come out all right.' For me as a child (and an adult too) that translates into *Peter Duck* the boat, which, incidentally, has just celebrated her seventy-fifth birthday. Our family knows that 'the dear old *Duck*' will see us through – as long as we treat her properly and attend to her messages. In the same way that safety can be instilled into a child through an understanding of what it is to be 'seaman-like', so it can also be built into a boat through good design. When I first went with my grandchildren onto a modern charter boat that heeled like a saucer in the slightest breeze and had narrow sloping decks of slippery moulded plastic, I understood why they had to be strapped on board with no chance to scamper and have fun. Her double-duvet-width aft cabin was little compensation.

Celebrating *Peter Duck*

However, *Peter Duck* is built of wood and this, as an organic material, can be subject to the stress of ageing and attack by the elements. She was seventy-five last year and it was time for a survey. A few things were troubling me and, as fellow wooden boat-owners will know, the method of construction means that elements are as interdependent as a human body (yer toe bone's connected to yer footbone, yer footbone's connected to yer heel bone – etc.). Once Adrian Overbury, the surveyor, began investigating my areas of concern, other structural mid-life problems soon became apparent.



Matt Lis, manager of the Woodbridge Boatyard, with Peter Duck

I'm going to fast-forward here from the early spring of 2021, when Adrian presented his findings, to March 2022 when *Peter Duck* returned to the Deben, and Matt Lis, manager of the Woodbridge Boatyard, compiled this report:

*

In April 2021, writes Matt Lis, following International-One-Design *Falcon's* departure from the larger of the workshops at Woodbridge Boatyard, *Peter Duck* rolled in to commence a major refit that would take most of a year to complete.

Peter Duck, referred to by the yard and her owner as *PD*, is a long-term resident of the River Deben and has wintered in Woodbridge since her arrival in 1957 – apart from some years spent in St Petersburg. Whilst her maintenance is usually carried out by her devoted custodian, author Julia Jones, this time around more serious and extensive works were required.



Carlins and deck beams replaced in sawn oak

PD was found to have an area of rot under her main mast tabernacle and around her cabin front which was undermining her structural integrity. As a result, two of *PD's* forward deck beams, sections of her beam shelves, part of her cabin front, her tabernacle pads, a section of her foredeck and side decks, and the forward part of her port and starboard carlins needed to be replaced. In the case of her port carlin, where rot was also prevalent further aft, the decision was made to replace its full

length. With beams and carlins replaced in sawn oak, the deck was reinstated with ply on larch and glassed to match the rest of the decks.

Spars were all stripped back to bare and sanded fair, their metal fittings cleaned or replaced where required and sent for galvanizing along with *PD*'s new stanchions and pulpit. With her spars varnished again, they were re-dressed with new wiring and new standing and running rigging from the team at TS Rigging, Maldon.



Masts – stripped back to bare and sanded fair – are lowered into place

Since her 1946 construction at Harry King's yard in nearby Pin Mill, *PD*'s layout and arrangement has remained largely

unchanged, apart from the construction of two additional berths for family use, replacement of the overstuffed backs to the saloon berths and a raising of the bulwarks to allow water to run off the deck more easily. A few additional practical changes were made this time around. For example, *PD*'s mizzen horse has always been fastened to a short, separate piece of timber atop her transom, rather than to her transom itself. This resulted in repeated problems as it caused unwanted movement and encouraged the ingress of water into the aft deck. Now an extended bronze horse, securely fastened, and a rebuilt aft deck should have resolved the issues.

Whilst replacing a section of bridge deck and her mizzen tabernacle, *PD*'s cockpit layout has also been subtly tweaked, improving engine access, drainage, stowage and allowing for a new water tank to be fitted.



Paul Batey, shipwright, remodelling the cockpit

Peter Duck's hull was largely left alone during this body of work, requiring only some raking and caulking on her starboard side, a butt-block refastening and a heel repair. Nevertheless, it

re-emerged looking transformed as new paintwork above and below her waterline shines below new bulwarks, freshly painted decks, varnished cabin sides and new rig.



King Isenia, finisher, painting the new bulwarks

PD has not seen such extensive works since 1999 when, upon her return from being left in the ice in St Petersburg, Julia and her husband Francis When had already employed the help of Woodbridge Boatyard, then still Everson & Sons (under the ownership of Frank Knights), to bring her back to a seaworthy state. With her latest body of work complete, *Peter Duck* is ready to cruise her home waters for decades to come and to venture further afield when opportunities arise.

*

For me the process initially felt a little like booking into surgery for a grommet removal, then finding one needed a liver transplant and two new legs. It wasn't just emotionally traumatic, there was the practical aspect – how was such work to be paid for? In the immediate post-war period when *PD* was built, good-quality materials were hard to come by, but labour was

still relatively cheap. In 2021 this sort of work would need highly skilled craftsmanship – rare and valuable. I felt panic.

Within a fortnight my mother, June, had come to our rescue. It was six years since she'd last been aboard *Peter Duck* on the river. That was in the summer of 2015 when she was ninety-one and I was still able to shove her up the ladder from the dinghy as I hope my children will eventually shove me. She'd been able to visit the boat in the yard that winter but, as her dementia worsened, she began to find it too distressing to see *PD* out of the water. That summer we had to move her into nursing care away from Woodbridge where she almost broke my heart with her repeated question: 'Where's the river, Jul? What have you done with the river?'



June Jones, a sprightly ninety-one, aboard Peter Duck

In 2018 she'd died, and I printed our favourite passage from the novel on her funeral service sheet. I'd often read it to Mum when she was alive but couldn't have read it that day without crying: 'He thought of the noise of the wind in the shrouds, and the glow of the lamp on a moving compass card, and tall masts swaying across the stars at night. And he wished he could go to sea once more and make another voyage before it was too late.'

In the early spring of 2021, as I worried how to pay for the restoration work, my youngest brother got in touch with surprising news. Carrying out

his duties as Mum's executor he had discovered a Trust fund. Where we had all assumed that everything had gone on the nursing home fees, we were wrong and there were legacies.

I knew at once where mine was going. Mum's feeling for the fabric of *PD* was deep and empathetic. She would tick me off if she thought I was straining her by lifting things on board when she was on hard standing. She loved nothing more than to be quiet in the cabin, listening to the sound of the water against the hull. On her last trip down river, when her eyesight and her mind were playing tricks, her body-memory took over and she still knew exactly where the handholds were.



At last! Peter Duck returns to the River Deben, March 2022.

So, thank you Mum. The photo that we put on your service sheet shows you climbing up the ladder to the Everson's jetty in about 1947. I hope you will like this one of *PD* settling gratefully back into the river at the end of March 2022. As far as I'm concerned, she's a compound of all those people who have worked on her, been inspired by her, financed her and loved her. She is also herself.

More *Peter Duck* Memories



A young Julia Jones enjoying life on Peter Duck – a family boat



Peter Duck laid up in the Woodbridge saltings, winter 1957-58

More *Peter Duck* Memories



June and Julia Jones – reading together below decks in Peter Duck



Peter Duck staying out into December off the Everson's jetty, Woodbridge

READING RANSOME DURING THE WAR

Maida Barton Follini

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In fact, the next few years were going to be somewhat ‘exotic’ in real life, while reading the Swallows and Amazons series let me into a world of normal unthreatened childhood; for of course, at about the same time as I began reading the books, Europe was going to war ...

Even though the United States had not entered the war officially, our school sponsored refugees from Europe – whole families or unaccompanied children who lived on campus for several months until other homes were found for them. Our school, Edgewood, was a co-ed,

boarding and day school, whose headmistress, Miss Langley, was a disciple of John Dewey, the founder of Progressive Education. The refugee parents were given temporary teaching duties to earn their board and room. I remember Madame Balinski, a Polish woman who taught us French, in 4th grade, and her son, Michel – a spindle-shanked little boy who was initially confused by having fled first to England and then by ocean liner to America. Elizabeth Goldwater also came from England – a child with beautiful long blond hair and a parcel of dirty stories she had heard on the boat and repeated to us. Gustav von Wedellsborg-Wedell told us he was a baron in his country, Denmark. But his ambition was to be a cowboy in Texas. Mr Lustgarten from Austria became our music teacher and his daughter Eleanor our orchestra's first-violinist. We saw tears running down our teacher's cheeks when we sang a song to the tune of 'Humoresque', which reminded him of his lost homeland.

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



Maida (back row, far right) with her family on Ram Island, Penobscot Bay, 2015.

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

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

The books I enjoyed most during the war years, the Ransome books, helped me and others to see that life could still be normal, even though tragic events were happening. It was a pleasure to enter and explore that world of normal childhood, perhaps enhanced by the writer, who, like a *deus ex machina*, controlled the conflicts, the challenges, and adventures so they would not be too much for his seven- to fifteen-year-old characters to handle. It was good to have Ransome’s world during the ’40s – affirming that life could be a place where refugees did not turn up with numbers tattooed on their arms or memories of being forced to watch beheadings in a Manilla town square. The Swallows and Amazon books are a picture of children growing up in peaceful times, which for me was a relief from the war’s horror and loss.

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

family. It was not until the 1960s – two decades after the Japanese surrender – that my family resumed its holidays on our Maine Island camp.



The hut on Ram Island – now repaired after two decades of neglect

During the war, searchers for valuable lead for the war effort had climbed the cabin roofs and detached the lead flashing from the chimneys. With leaky roofs, the logs, roofs and floors had rotted. Well, who cared? Most of the family had survived. We had tents. Once again we could enjoy the clean air, swim in the icy, salt sea, watch the ospreys and eagles build nests and raise their young. A war certainly puts things in perspective.

Maida's full article, which includes a very moving and vivid picture of the world into which the first American editions of Ransome's book fell as they rolled off the press, is reproduced in the Online Supplement.

THE ALL THINGS RANSOME ASSOCIATION

TarBoard and the *All Things Ransome* website

There are many organisations that have an interest in Arthur Ransome and one of 'TARS' aims in recent years has been to foster better relationships between them. Here Dave Thewlis explains the backstory of the *TarBoard* and *All Things Ransome* websites.

The All Things Ransome Association is a not-for-profit association registered under the law of California. The Association manages the *All Things Ransome* digital repository of Ransome-related material and the *TarBoard* discussion board. Today, the management of these resources is quite independent of The Arthur Ransome Society (TARS), but this was not always the case.

TarBoard was created by Ian Edmondson in April 1996 as an Arthur Ransome discussion forum and a month later was linked to the arthur-ransome.org website. This had been launched by Peter Dowden and Dave Thewlis as a successor to *Signalling to Mars*, 'The Official Electronic Newsletter' of TARS. Tim Johns of Birmingham University started collecting Ransome related articles and criticism for *The Arthur Ransome Literary Pages* from 1997. The *Literary Pages* were an integral part of the arthur-ransome.org website and a precursor to the present day *All Things Ransome* service.

Edmondson and Johns were pioneers in their field. In the 90s, it was very rare for www-based services to be used for literary appreciation or criticism. A number of other digitally enthusiastic TARS members played a role in the history of both *Tarboard* and *All Things Ransome*. Among these were members of the team who had developed *Signalling to Mars*, Doug Faunt, George Lang and Dave Thewlis.

As time went by arthur-ransome.org became the de facto TARS website. However, the linkage between *Literary Pages* and TARS became severed when, sometime around 2006, the decision was made not to include them on a new TARS website.

The demise of the *Literary Pages* was mourned by many serious Ransome researchers. Tim Johns was unavailable, so Dave Thewlis and Woll Newall began looking at the practicality of running the service on an independent server. Woll investigated the IT implications while Dave commenced discussions with TARS and the Arthur Ransome Literary Executors to ensure that the new service started off on the right foot. Andrew Goltz pressed that a new legal entity should be established so that the future of the restored *Literary Pages* – today part of the *All Things Ransome* website – should be independent of any one individual and, in due course, The All Things Ransome Association was registered in California for this purpose in March 2009.

While all this was happening, Ian Edmondson declared that he no longer wished to be responsible for *TarBoard*, but Adam Quinan acted as an unofficial cheerleader for efforts to preserve or re-establish it.

At a historic meeting in the Red Lion, the unofficial Ealing Studios pub in London, it was agreed to strengthen the *All Things Ransome* team by recruiting Owen Roberts, a life-long Ransome enthusiast and chartered accountant, and that the new management team should also take *TarBoard* under its wing.

Ian Edmondson agreed to extend his stewardship of *TarBoard* in order to give time for a new server to be set up. Woll Newall worked heroically to meet the deadline and *TarBoard* started operations in its new home in California in November 2008.

Today both *TarBoard* and *All Things Ransome* continue to serve the Ransome community: they can be found at **www.tarboard.net** and **www.allthingsransome.net**. *All Things Ransome*, in particular, has gone from strength to strength and is recognised as a useful resource by AR researchers all around the world.

RANSOME, RADEK AND 'BEAUTIFUL UNTRUE THINGS'

Alan Kennedy

The quotation in the title is from Oscar Wilde; its relevance to these two men is something we shall come to. First, I must take you back to 1914, a good many years before Arthur Ransome could lay claim to any kind of reputation as a children's author. Fleeing from a collapsing marriage, he had more or less abandoned his wife and infant daughter, and fetched up, far from home, in Petrograd (as it then was called), eking out a rather uncertain life as a newspaper correspondent and finding himself drawn ever deeper into the Bolshevik revolution unfolding inexorably about him. Indeed, as Roland Chambers revealed (to understandably shocked Ransome fans), what Arthur got up to at that time gave a new meaning to the term 'literary agent'.¹

Certainly there were spies a-plenty abroad in Petrograd, but gentlemen amateurs in the main. The Spymasters of the time saw in Ransome someone typical of most progressive writers of the age – the kind of unthinking lefty the Bolsheviks ate for breakfast. The fact that he ended up a fully fledged fellow traveller – indeed, became a very significant political figure – came about more by luck than judgement. It is invariably a mistake to infer intent when accident will do perfectly well: *judgement* was never Arthur's strong suit.²

If it comes as a shock to discover the author of *Swallows and Amazons* passing to British Intelligence such Bolshevik secrets as came his way, the fact he also ensured that snippets of secret British political gossip reached Vladimir Lenin only serves to make matters worse. Nonetheless, when I came to write a 'psycho-biography' of my childhood hero, I found it impossible to see him as any kind of calculating double agent.³ There was

little deliberation (in the John Le Carré sense) about Ransome's 'espionage'. The villain of Erskine Childers' *The Riddle of the Sands* taught his generation that high on the list of things a gentleman simply does not do is *face both ways*. It was a lesson he hardly needed: steeped in the virtuous ethos of the English Public School, he emerged as one of those (fortunate) men who seem never quite to grow up. His work as a war correspondent filled countless columns with purple political prose, all too often leaving the reader excited, but none the wiser. In the end we accept him at the evaluation he set on himself: not the double-dealing spy, more the teller of tales; a man happier with fiction than with truth, indeed, someone whose relationship with truth was never very secure. And there is a reason for this – which brings me to Vice-Commissar Radek.

If we are to believe the engaging story in his autobiography, Arthur Ransome first encountered Karl Radek by accident. On a return journey from Stockholm to Petrograd in 1918, his baggage, which had been sent on separately, was searched at the personal command of the Vice-Commissar, who demanded to meet the eccentric who travelled with 'a Shakespeare, a folding chess-board and chessmen, and a mixed collection of books on elementary navigation, fishing, chess and folklore.'²⁴ Whatever the truth of the matter (and, as we shall see, more plausible interpretations are possible), it is certainly the case that the two men became friends, sharing accommodation and eventually collaborating in the production (for an English-speaking audience) of the first of numerous *beautiful untrue things* – thinly disguised works of Bolshevik propaganda.

The versions of Karl Radek we meet through biographies of Ransome present him as an almost comic character, waving his outsize revolver and orchestrating revolution with an impish grin. This is certainly too kind – it does not demand too much research to arrive at a more sober conclusion. In fact, the more one looks, the more impossible Ransome's relationship with this 'Bolshevik Puck' (to borrow Ronald Chambers's phrase) appears. One cannot *befriend* one of the more sinister characters of an undeniably sinister century. Along with fellow-Pole, Felix Dzerzhinsky (Director of the feared State Security Service, the *Cheka*), Radek was one of the architects of the 'Red Terror,' set in train the very year (1918) he first met Ransome. An

enthusiastic supporter of Lenin's infamous 'hanging order',⁵ he defined his purpose in life as the extermination of enemies of the revolution, pitting class against class, extracting the last rouble, the last fur coat, the last pearl necklace from a tormented and terrified *bourgeoisie*.⁶ Following the October revolution, he watched as numberless thousands, arbitrarily deprived of the means to live, perished of cold and misery, accepting mass starvation as the means to a noble end. It is difficult to look kindly on a man who watched, unmoved, as babies were sold for meat on the streets of Petrograd.

Notwithstanding a veneer of personal charm, Karl Radek was something of a monster. What on earth had he in common with the author of sedate works of literary criticism (*Oscar Wilde: a Critical Study*) or whimsies such as *The Child's Book of the Seasons*, *The Things in our Garden* or *Pond and Stream*? How could someone aptly described as the 'jeering cynic of the revolution's rationale'⁷ find common cause with the unprepossessing author of *Old Peter's Russian Tales*, a book written to bring Russian fairy stories to an audience of English children? Did ever two such different beings come together to share their daily lives?

A possible answer to this paradox may be found among the conspiratorial plans hatched during Lenin's years of exile in Switzerland. When Lenin left Zurich railway station on 13 April 1917, accompanying him for the fateful journey through Germany, Sweden and Finland was his indispensable press agent, Karl Radek; and piled high in the compartment were samples of the world's newspapers. The Bolshevik revolution had been long in the planning. Not even its authors imagined success was likely but the battle would be played out, not with tanks, but with words. In this regard, the war correspondent of the *Daily News*, a key member of the Petrograd News Agency, a journalist whose despatches were syndicated throughout the world, emerged as an inevitable focus of attention.⁸

The journalist in question was among the ecstatic crowd that greeted the arrival of the 'sealed train' three days later at Finland Station, Petrograd. Ransome could not have met Radek on that occasion (he had already left the train), but their meeting – which I believe was far from accidental – had already been contrived; and it is not all that difficult to guess who, exactly, did the contriving.

Among those of Lenin's entourage left behind in Zurich (for want of a German transit visa) had been Willi Munzenberg, the 'Red Millionaire', a man with an unerring ability to recruit unwitting allies from the ranks of writers, artists, musicians and intellectuals to the cause of communist revolution. Publisher,⁹ cinema magnate, intellectual fixer and high priest of political propaganda, Munzenberg's short life was dedicated to recruiting spies (including Kim Philby), forging links among the intelligentsia of several continents, and using mass rallies to purchase celebrity approval for the Bolshevik dream throughout the United States and Australia. Arthur Ransome's naive enthusiasm for the rights of 'the toiling and exploited persons'¹⁰ would not have escaped his attention. Ransome was, indeed, almost an ideal recruit for membership of what Munzenberg termed his 'clubs of innocents'.

Variouly described as 'romantic' (Hugh Brogan), 'clever, yet childish' (Lola Kinel), and 'quixotic' (Bruce Lockhart), Ransome himself would have not disputed the charge of naïveté. The first-person narrator (surely Ransome's alter ego) of his gothic mystery *The Elixir of Life*, written in 1915, shortly after arriving in Petrograd, is no match for the diabolical John Killigrew:¹¹ 'I become in an instant his very humble disciple ... [He] gave me a profound mistrust of my own knowledge ... He suddenly introduced me to a new world of thought ... At the universities [*sic*] my instructors had treated me as an inferior and I had felt their equal, Killigrew treated me as an equal and I grovelled before his mind.' Highly intelligent and extraordinarily well-read, his lack of formal university education rankled with Ransome all his life. It also played a part in a number of 'asymmetric' intellectual associations in which he played second fiddle (in turn) to the poets Remy de Gourmont and Edward Thomas, the author W.G. Collingwood and his son, the philosopher Robin Collingwood, and the novelist Hugh Walpole.¹² In 1918 Radek would be added to the list, providing the context in which this close associate of Leon Trotsky set out to cement a decidedly one-sided friendship with his most significant journalistic contact, Arthur Ransome.

Possessed of an almost obsessive interest in lying, Radek was convinced 'that everything important, really important, was based on falsehood. As a

result, falsehood became for him a kind of truth.¹³ This is more than just a clever turn of phrase: it is exactly the kind of Wildean contradiction that appealed to Ransome. People committed to a Utopia (among whom you may certainly count Karl Radek) tend to see present horrors as no more than a temporary misrepresentation of their hopes, an ugly parody of some deeper truth, best ignored. The Bolshevik dream – like hope itself – could be sustained against any number of present miseries, even indefinitely, if the lies which supported it were morally or, as Oscar Wilde put it, *artistically*, superior to reality. After all, 'the telling of beautiful untrue things [is] the proper aim of Art'.¹⁴

It may seem perverse, but Radek would have had no difficulty persuading Ransome to this position. The cleavage between art and reality is something that came to define his novels for children. Ransome's gift to literature derived from his insight that children largely inhabit invented worlds and from his extraordinary skill in allowing readers to reimagine these as descriptions of a plausible reality. The spell cast by that curious pastoral idyll, *Swallows and Amazons*, has nothing to do with an account of reality (indeed, little of consequence happens); rather, it stems from our intuition that these magical children are acting their parts in a different, yet morally superior, world.

Ransome strongly endorsed¹⁵ the celebrated essay in which Oscar Wilde lamented the decay of lying: 'Art takes life as part of her rough material, recreates it, and refashions it in fresh forms, is absolutely indifferent to fact, invents, imagines, dreams, and keeps between herself and reality the impenetrable barrier of beautiful style, of decorative or ideal treatment.'¹⁶ Neither Arthur Ransome nor Karl Radek – in utterly different contexts – thought that reality should get the upper hand; both feared that, should it do so, something far more significant would be driven into the wilderness.¹⁷

There is a tailpiece to this story. In 1939, as yet another war approached, a secretive Political Warfare Executive was established in the United Kingdom to orchestrate a programme of national propaganda. Karl Radek would have approved of its definition which pointed to similarities with the task novelists and tellers of tales face in constructing believable fictions. A secret army of celebrated authors was recruited at the outbreak of war

(although it did not include, so far as we know, Arthur Ransome) to prosecute Britain's propaganda war: 'The people must feel that they are being told the truth. Distrust breeds fear much more than knowledge of reverses ... The people should be told that this is a civilians' war, or a People's War, and therefore they are to be taken into the government's confidence as never before ... What is truth? We must adopt a pragmatic definition. It is what it is believed to be the truth. The government would be wise therefore to tell the truth and, if a sufficient emergency arises, to tell one big, thumping lie that will then be believed.'¹⁸

The art of lying did not protect Karl Radek. He died in 1939, beaten to death in his prison cell on the orders of Stalin's chief of Soviet security. For all his consummate skill in conspiratorial politics, Willi Munzenberg could not escape a similar fate. His body was found by hunters in woods in the south of France in 1940. He had been garrotted.

And what of Arthur Ransome? By 1939 the bulk of the Swallows novels had been written; against all the odds, this peculiarly English utopia has come easily to outlast Bolshevism. 'Innocence', it seems, can serve as both shield and defence. The denouement of *The Elixir of Life* proved strangely prophetic. Smashing to the ground the glass phial that offered him a Faustian bargain, the narrator hero brings his new spouse (on horseback) to Bigland in the Lake District, to live out their days in an 'old house at the foot of the fells'.

Many Tars will be familiar with Alan Kennedy's fascinating A Thoroughly Mischievous Person: the Other Arthur Ransome (Lutterworth Press, 2021) which suggests that, in the Lake novels in particular, Ransome creates a 'form of hidden autobiography'.

¹ Roland Chambers, *The Last Englishman: the Double Life of Arthur Ransome* (London: Faber and Faber, 2009).

² As late as October 1938, Ransome was still clinging 'to the illusion that some reasonable bargain could be struck with Hitler that would preserve the peace', writing to his mother that Chamberlain was 'putting right the worst of the errors'

committed in Versailles. In Hugh Brogan, *Signalling from Mars* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), p. 257.

³ Alan Kennedy, *A Most Mischievous Person: the Other Arthur Ransome* (Cambridge: Lutterworth Press, 2021).

⁴ *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, ed. Rupert Hart Davis (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 227.

⁵ Issued on August 11, 1918: 'We need to set an example ... hang without fail – and do it so that the public sees – at least 100 notorious kulaks, the rich, and the bloodsuckers. Publish their names. Take away all of their grain.'

⁶ In October 1919, as a *quid pro quo* for free passage from Moscow, Ransome's second wife, Evgenia Shelepina, agreed to smuggle a packet of 'confiscated' pearl necklaces to Stockholm 'for the use of the People's Commissariat of Foreign Affairs'.

⁷ Stephen Koch, *Double Lives: Stalin, Willi Munzenberg and the Seduction of the Intellectuals* (London: Harper Collins, 1994), p. 7.

⁸ 'Karl Radek's secret directives now in the Moscow Archives explicitly order his people to make use of the *Manchester Guardian* as a leading press outlet in the [propaganda] campaign.' Ibid, p. 121. Ransome succeeded Philips Price as Russian correspondent for the *Manchester Guardian* in 1918.

⁹ Munzenberg founded the publishing house *Editions du Carrefour* in Paris.

¹⁰ The phrase is found in the Declaration founding the Soviet State.

¹¹ The name (along with the idea for Ransome's tale) seems to have been borrowed from a short story by Nathaniel Hawthorne.

¹² 'The only excuse for those early books is that they were written (and unfortunately published) at a time when I should have been a university student ...' *The Autobiography*, p. 101.

¹³ *Double Lives*, p.134.

¹⁴ Oscar Wilde, *The Decay of Lying – an Observation*, In *Intentions* (London: Methuen & Co., 1891), p. 49. The essay takes the form of a short dialogue between two characters.

¹⁵ In *Oscar Wilde: a Critical Study* (London: Martin Secker, 1912), Ransome cites Wilde's essay no less than nine times, declaring it 'of the first importance to the student of Wilde's theory of art' (p. 107).

¹⁶ *The Decay of Lying*, p. 11.

¹⁷ The real-world 'reality' of characters and locations became a persistent theme of Ransome literary criticism.

¹⁸ *The Emergency Powers Act, 1939*. See www.spartacus-educational.com.

OUR FAMILY'S SWALLOWS AND AMAZONS STORY

Julian Onderdonk



*Where it all began ... Blackwell's Bookshop, Oxford*¹

Our family's Swallows and Amazons story began, fittingly, at Blackwell's Bookshop in Broad Street, Oxford. This was in July 2008 when I was co-teaching an 'Oxford Abroad' music course with fellow faculty and students from West Chester University of Pennsylvania. We were in residence at Lincoln College for ten days and, in off hours, students and faculty dispersed to the winds pursuing their interests. Mine was books: specifically children's books. Reading to my children – Jack, then eight, and Lucy, then four – was already my great pleasure, and so I went into Blackwell's looking for more material.

I explained my situation to the clerk, who pointed to a stack of books on a table and asked: 'Have you tried *Swallows and Amazons*?'

'Swallows and *what*?' I asked.

Readers of *Mixed Moss* may find it hard to believe that anyone, even an American, should be ignorant of 'the twelve'. The truth of the matter is that the books simply are not well known in the USA (though I subsequently learned that there is an American branch of TARS: where *have* I been?). Less defensible is that an American *bibliophile*, especially one with an interest in children's books, should not know of them. Shame and mortification were yet for the future, however: at the moment, happily ignorant, I bent over the table and grew immediately absorbed. Roger zigzagging up and down the field at Holly Howe enchanted me instantly and, when I saw Ransome's delightful pen and ink drawings of camping, sailing and exploring, I knew I had stumbled on something tremendous. The outdoors and love of the natural world are, with books, central to who I am, and here was everything I valued most brought together in a single package.

I bought the first book of the series and returned home to Pennsylvania. My son Jack and I started in on it almost immediately, and my wonder at the beauty of Ransome's story grew and grew the more we read. Jack was enthusiastic, too, and by spring 2009 we were embarked on *Swallowdale*, enchanted by the well-ordered camp and secret cave, the hiking expedition and this mysterious figment of the imagination – or was it? – called Peter Duck. By Christmas, Peter's own book, *Peter Duck*, showed up in Jack's stocking, and we were off to the Caribbean, rooting against Black Jake and slyly enjoying Peter Duck's imperfect tolerance of the garrulous Walker clan. The nautical terminology and the window onto the sea-going life fascinated us too. Jack, turning ten, asked if he could have his next birthday party on a ship like the *Wild Cat*, while, for me, talk of boats and 'coming about' stirred memories of sailing at school that I had almost forgotten. With astonishing speed, I revived my old sailing enthusiasm, took to quoting Walker maxims ('Sail's the thing') and learned a new nature skill – that of watching for a fair breeze. General sail-talk seemed to bring like-minded sailors out of the woodwork, too, and I was soon borrowing my dentist's 'Sunfish' for outings at the nearby State Park on the windiest days of the year (it's no fun if you don't capsize, you know).

By the time we reached *Winter Holiday*, which Jack got in lieu of a shipboard party on his March 2010 birthday, Lucy (now six) was beginning

to get in on the act. We actually waited until December to start the book, ostensibly because the story takes place in wintertime, but also because we – or, more precisely, I – wanted to savour the books. Their specialness was by this point all too clear, and it seemed important not to charge through them greedily but rather intersperse them with other tales and so cherish them all the more. Thus the first three books took turns with *Aesop's Fables*, *The BFG*, the usual Stevenson classics, *The Princess and the Goblin* and more, including flying visits to Andrew Lang's Fairy Books and Sherlock Holmes.

Great as these were, though, it was always with renewed anticipation that we picked up the next *Swallows and Amazons* novel, and *Winter Holiday* did not disappoint. 'It's the best of the lot, you know!' a fellow musicologist said to me sometime later in a college dorm room in Iowa, where loose talk at a British music conference had uncovered another comrade in arms. Lucy was listening in now, as noted, and the three of us thrilled to accounts of unexpected school holidays, ice sailing and rescue operations amidst blizzard conditions. Amazingly, *Coot Club*, *Pigeon Post* and *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* – now intermingling with *The Three Musketeers*, Eva Ibbotson and various *Little House on the Prairie* books – kept up the excitement.

'How does Ransome do it?' I kept on asking myself. 'How does he sustain the excitement and the *interest* from book to book?' One way, of course, is through variety in the form of the new characters constantly introduced (the Ds, Tom Dudgeon, Jim Brading) and the refreshing remove of the action in some of the books to the Norfolk Broads. The more critical factor, I decided, is the sheer fertility of the author's imagination: the interaction and development of clearly outlined and distinct personalities; the ingenuity of the plots (themselves wholly woven into and dependent on those personalities); above all, the narrative skill and masterful prose with which events are made to unfold. That the excitement itself often stems from the tensions created by nature – the rising tide that unexpectedly releases the anchor and pushes the boat out to sea, the sudden fog or blizzard that inhibits the essential communication, the topography that separates the hurrying actors until they suddenly collide – speaks to Ransome's larger point about our necessary subjection to forces greater than us. The sheer inexorability of those forces, and the absolute

requirement that they be adapted to, turns these characters into something more than children, their innocent pursuits into something heroic and universal. Riding such waves as these, and with life lessons hanging in the balance, the three of us could hardly help feeling on the edge of our seats.

Or perhaps I should say the four of us. My wife Mary, Lucy and Jack's mother, also listened in. How could she not, since we were reading at almost every possible moment? Not merely at bedtime or on the driveway waiting for the school bus in the morning, where I was likely to be alone with the kids; but also in the kitchen when they got home from school, in the playroom while they played with Lego or drew pictures (or, once, rode their toy tricycles about), in the car on the way to Meeting on Sundays and on long trips to visit family – spaces where Mary was also present. What she liked best about the books was that they present a world in which boys *and girls* are outdoors, enjoying nature in equal measure. This was how she was brought up, and indeed it was a shared love of mountains and lakes that helped bring us together as a couple. When we started raising a family, naturally we continued our (separate) childhood traditions of summer vacations in New England, annually climbing our own Kanchenjungas and renting a cabin on *our* own 'personal' lake. Like Ransome, we 'adored the place', dipping our hands in the water when we arrived and, with only slight exaggeration, departing 'half drowned in tears'. Needless to say, we read a number of the novels during these vacations, and the close parallels between Mirror Lake and the Lake District only added to their spell.

Still, it must be admitted that my own enthusiasm for the books sometimes outstripped my family's. An Anglophile and student of twentieth-century British music and culture, who has climbed Scafell Peak and birded – though unfortunately not boated – on the Broads, I felt I was *born* to read these books! But endless propagandising can be hard to take, especially when it comes in the form of a parent sitting down unbidden in your midst while you're doing something else and who then commences to read aloud. I did this constantly, without a thought, and while it's fair to say I did so with *whatever* book we were on – reading aloud on a hike, *while actually walking*, is another effective delivery system, I discovered – my pressure campaign with *Swallows and Amazons* reached perhaps unacceptable

levels. This was especially the case as the children got older. At one point, Mary pointed with some sternness to the psychological dangers of parental coercion, so that I learned to ask, half-politely, 'Do you mind?' before picking up where we left off. I even trained myself to mask my disappointment when Jack or Lucy said 'No', which they occasionally did. As if it wasn't already clear exactly *who* these books and these 'reading parties' were for, I received *The Big Six* in my stocking at Christmas 2012.

The idea was Lucy's. By this point, Jack (now twelve) was asserting his independence by paying intermittent attention to the books; he had his own reading agenda, besides, with huge tomes by Robert Jordan and J.K. Rowling (yes, *Harry Potter*) to get through, and a brief but intense flirtation with Biggles to overcome. My mistake with him was discovering *Swallows and Amazons* too late. But Lucy was six when she started listening in on *Winter Holiday* and by the time we finished *Pigeon Post* she was asking to go back and read the first three books – something her very reluctant father somehow found it in himself to do. Naturally, I marvelled at the books all over again as we read them in quick succession, for once (*re-reading* doesn't count as gluttony). Indeed, my single favourite moment of the entire journey was probably re-experiencing with Lucy the end of Book 1 of *Peter Duck*, where the *Wild Cat* gives the *Viper* the slip. This was at Mary's parents' house where, removing ourselves to the kitchen during a family gathering, Lucy and I revelled in Uncle Jim's inspired ruse of feinting towards Funchal Harbour (Madeira) before swerving under cover of the falling night towards open ocean and safety. The escape is so satisfying, the writing so vivid, the canvas so 'global' – in my mind's eye I could see the entire Atlantic basin as if from outer space – that it borders on the transcendental. There was also an unsuspected third listener in the room whose appreciation of the passage doubtless intensified my own. 'Wow!' my sister-in-law Catherine said. 'That's good writing.' Catherine would know, as a professional writer and experienced sailor herself. More on her later: she comes into this story too.

So I was reading the books principally to Lucy now. Of course, she was reading on her own, too, but she still delighted in the books as much as Jack had, approaching me to read and even dropping other activities she enjoyed

when things simply got too exciting. She was as happy as I was the morning the bus never came, and we ended up reading *Secret Water* on the driveway for a whole extra hour (I *believe* it wasn't just because she got to miss some school). During our family trip to England in 2013, she was equally eager to examine the *Swallows and Amazons* editions at Foyles, and later again at a Waterstones, where we judged the illustrations critically (Ransome's own remain the best) and looked for our favourite passages. In Oxford, I showed everybody Blackwell's, where it all began, and where the clerk – noble profession! – drew our attention to Masfield's wonderfully strange *Box of Delights* that we later much enjoyed. Lucy also engaged with the books creatively. Like Titty, she pronounced herself an 'A.B.' ('Able-Bodied Seaman') when she went sailing with me. On another occasion, she mischievously affixed the label 'A.P.' ('Aged Parent') to Mary's and my water bottles as we readied for a hike. But then, projecting the books onto our own lives was a family affair. For a time, every annoyingly noisy and over-boisterous person was for us – even the kindly Mary – a 'Hullabaloo,' while the weeds in Mirror Lake shallows did seem to resemble 'octopuses' that were best avoided. Roger (my favourite character) is forever identified, in my mind, with a neighbourhood boy who simply looked the part. And to this day, Jack and Lucy know that real scholarship goes on at Cambridge, not Oxford, and that one goes to the latter only to enjoy a good breakfast.

The fact that Jack, like Lucy, continued to absorb these central truths, some of them imparted by the later books, goes to show that he had not entirely disappeared from the scene. He likewise sailed with me (also occasionally with his friends); and of course we continued reading other books together (*Frankenstein* and *Billy Budd* were memorable, and *he* actually read J.K. Jerome's sublimely stupid *Three Men in a Boat* out loud *to me* when I was ill). In the case of *Swallows and Amazons*, he, like Mary, listened in when he happened to be in the room or when it got exciting. When Dick 'sprung the trap' and caught George Owdon red-handed with his flash camera in *The Big Six*, Jack was there (that night he could be seen lying in bed next to Lucy and me as we finished the book). When Missee Lee unexpectedly and dramatically emerged on deck to steer the *Shining Moon* through the dangerous narrows – another favourite moment – he was there, too. And

generally speaking, this was the pattern for the last few books: Lucy hearing every word, Mary a good bit, with Jack catching the exciting bits. Mary thought *The Picts and the Martyrs*, which we read at Mirror Lake in summer 2013, 'slightly less adventurous', but Lucy and I disagreed and loved it as much as ever. (Although this *is* when she told me *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* was her 'favourite'.) My journal entry after that holiday reads: 'Only one more *S&A* to go – I'll be sad when it's over.' That may be why we waited an entire year before undertaking *Great Northern?*, also at Mirror Lake. I'm sorry to say this last encounter was somewhat anti-climactic, as the knowing end of any wonderful and protracted undertaking is bound to be. The book certainly had its moments, though, and we enjoyed reading it on hikes and at our usual haunts in town, *our* Rio, notably at the marina and at the low bridge, where I never tire of looking down on the boats as they pass.

But, of course, as all *Swallows and Amazons* enthusiasts know, *Great Northern?* isn't quite the end. Even so, we didn't engage with the unfinished *Coots in the North* for a while. It took us five months to get through the entire *The Count of Monte Cristo* (a thrilling read which Lucy matter-of-factly placed 'below' *Swallows and Amazons*) and further delay occurred when a regrettable fit of parsimony seized me over a pricey copy discovered in a second-hand bookshop. Our local library finally delivered the book in March 2017. It's a shame Ransome didn't live to complete it as the story – the stowaways in the lorry, particularly – offered up the usual ingenuity, and we can be sure he would have come up with a convincing denouement. As it was, Lucy and I enjoyed the other stories assembled by Hugh Brogan, the editor, which revealed aspects of the author we didn't know.

Nor did it end with *Coots in the North*. My proselytising outside the immediate family began early. I told everyone I knew, and even those I didn't, about the books. Wide canvassing uncovered like-minded enthusiasts in all kinds of places – among professional colleagues (the musicologist in Iowa, as noted), complete strangers (the father of one of Lucy's school friends), mild acquaintances (the younger brother of a childhood chum), even among close friends I had known for years. The birder who showed me the Broads was one (Rachel took me there *before* I knew the books). My dear mentor of many years, the English musicologist and librarian Oliver

Neighbour, was another. 'Tim' loved the books when he was young – he was of the age to read them as they came out, for a time at least – and it meant so much to me to forge with him this added, special bond. When he met my family in London in 2013, we shared *Swallows and Amazons* stories all around; at parting, he expressed mock regret that our travel plans were taking us to Oxford, not 'Cambridge'.

My efforts also made for new converts. I gave presentations and readings at our Quaker Meeting as part of the 'adult education' program. For *Coot Club*, I showed slides of the River Bure and read the passage where Tom casts off the Hullabaloo and takes refuge on the *Teasel* with the redoubtable Mrs Barrable. Her 'Mind my paint!', delivered with hardened eye, is possibly my favourite line in all the books. The frantic effort to prevent the *Goblin* from running out with the tide was the subject of my second talk, on *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*. One Friend who was there told me that the vividness of Ransome's prose made him literally *see* the chain flying out of the locker and *feel* John's panic to stop it. Another Friend started on the books directly afterwards: she eventually read four of them and we had such fun talking about them together (*Swallowdale* was her favourite). By this point, I was regularly giving the books to friends and colleagues as gifts. Many of them – notably the sailors! – read and enjoyed them, but not all. Some with children tried, but reading them aloud just didn't take off. Probably they didn't try hard enough: a little parental coercion might have helped. Though I *was* quite astonished when another friend – an outdoorsman, Anglophile and author of children's books no less – told me he put down the first book, finding it not to be 'his cup of tea'. I now communicate with him through a mask of civility. (I jest, a little.) The truth of the matter is that it's personal. The books become part of you and the desire to stir in others what you feel yourself is fraught with dangers and disappointments. Better to keep expectations well tamped down or, perhaps, not even to have tried.

Nevertheless, the old desire keeps bubbling up. In July 2019, I left two copies of *Swallows and Amazons* on the mantelpiece of the cabin on Mirror Lake, one each for Mary's two brothers and their families. Now that they have small children, Paul and Danny return annually to the lake where they

grew up – at this point, we take turns renting the cabin – and it seemed worth a shot. After all, Danny's wife Catherine had overheard and liked *Peter Duck*, and as someone who spent six weeks in college cruising the Caribbean on a sailing yacht and who knows good nautical writing when she sees it (Patrick O'Brien is a favorite author), she seemed possibly susceptible. Indeed, earlier that summer, when her Maryland church choir coincidentally had a week's residency at Norwich Cathedral, Catherine actually took *Coot Club* with her and bicycled around the Norfolk countryside, taking some of the same routes as Tom and the Ds and going near the villages mentioned in the story. Sometime later, she and Danny started reading the books to their children, Riley and John, followed in summer 2020 by Paul and Jenny reading to *their* children, Emily and Sam. How delightful it's been to discuss characters and plots with all of them over the past year or more! Titty is the universal favourite, the one who 'really develops' as Danny puts it, while Emily and Paul think Ransome is at his best 'when nothing happens', as in *Swallowdale*. They especially love the poetic attention to everyday things. Like ours, the two families have instinctively intertwined the books with many others – Jeanne Birdsall, Eva Ibbotson again, *Harry Potter* – and are taking their time about it. Both are currently somewhere in the middle of the series. And, wonderful to relate, Catherine and Danny recently lent their copy of the first book to friends with children who live down the street. *Swallows and Amazons* Forever!

Over the years, I've encountered objections to the books on the grounds of what today we might call 'white privilege'. For some readers, these visibly upper-middle-class children, with their globe-trotting uncles, formidable great aunts, and Empire-sustaining fathers, who enjoy endless summer holidays and who befriend (or in the case of George Owdon, bedevil) their working-class neighbors, are a little hard to take. The world they inhabit was undoubtedly different from today's, and I can understand those who blanch at John's dress rehearsals of Edwardian manliness or Susan's preoccupation with domestic order. I admit that my intense Anglophilia, and the fact that my own scholarship focuses on this very period and class of people, preserves me from getting hung up on any of this, even the damaging ethnic stereotypes of *Missee Lee*. Perhaps, lacking this background (or maybe just

an outsized enthusiasm for adventures set amidst mountains, lakes and rivers), the friends and families I complain about who didn't take to the books *were* bothered by these things: it might even be *why* they put them down. I have to acknowledge the logic of their objections, and I do. Still, I reject the inverse conclusion, that the Walker and Blackett children be *denied* their outdoor experiences simply because of their social background. Affluence undoubtedly facilitates their adventures, but it's not as if they have a monopoly on them. One of the points of the books, I think, is that it's their exposure to the farmers, fishermen, charcoal burners and river rats – in short, the people who *really* know the outdoor life – that strengthens them as individuals by granting them an unusual understanding into the lives of others. It's true that Ransome, in drawing on childhood memories, has to some extent nostalgised these figures. But it does not follow that he has patronised them. The genuine admiration and respect he feels for them as people and individuals, possessed of specialized knowledge and decisive skills uniquely consequential to a rural way of life, is unmistakable.

For, in the end, that's what I love most about these books: their focus on the outdoor life as essential to our being. That and Ransome's unerringly skilful writing – storytelling so masterful that it 'artlessly' frames this fundamental theme for our steady contemplation. The result, of course, is that we end up loving the natural world more than ever, so that the cycle gloriously perpetuates itself. Surely, this is one reason why the books continue to live today, admitting of multiple re-readings by old fans while constantly attracting new admirers. But as my family discovered, the excellence of the storytelling effortlessly invites reading aloud. What better way to spend delightful hours together in a shared experience – one that itself can bond you together for life! – while also handing down a message of the first importance to the next generation? For all these reasons and more, I consider the day in 2008 that I walked into Blackwell's a lucky day, and the years-long reading of *Swallows and Amazons* to my wife and children that followed one of the great events of my life.

¹ Photograph originally posted to Flickr by Rosewoman at <https://flickr.com/photos/45873442@N04/8440708464>.

MONEY IN ‘THE TWELVE’

Andrew Jones



In the ninety years since the *Swallows and Amazons* books were written, money – its denomination, value, and how we use and access it – has changed significantly. I’ve been a coin collector since about the time I first read the books, am not long retired after thirty-plus years working in banking and thought it would be interesting to explore some of the ways things have changed over the intervening years, along with some aspects more obvious to earlier readers than to many of us today, where the passage of time may have dulled the impact of the storytelling.

‘Gold or copper, it’s all the same if you have enough. Two hundred and forty pennies make a pound.’ (*Pigeon Post*)

In 1971 Britain’s currency changed from being denominated in pounds, shillings and pence (£ s d) to pounds and new pence (£ p); from 12 pennies

in a shilling and 20 shillings in a pound, to 100 pence in a pound. Coins that had been in daily use for centuries were confined to history – farthings, halfpennies, pennies, threepences, and half-crowns. Others continued with new values: the florin (two-shillings) became 10p, the shilling ('bob') 5p and the sixpence ('tanner') had a brief continuance as 2½p. Thus there are all these denominations mentioned in the books now completely foreign to the modern reader: the 'farthing with the head of Queen Victoria on it' that the Swallows and Amazons found in the cache atop Kanchenjunga/Matterhorn in *Swallowdale*; the 'half a crown to each of them' Daddy gives the Swallows for getting their life-saving certificates in *Secret Water*; or the 'thirty bob and a tanner' that the Death and Glories got for that pike taken to the Roaring Donkey in *The Big Six*.

It can easily be argued that this now outdated nomenclature doesn't necessarily get in the way of a reader's comprehension of the story. The characters' reactions give a sense of value by context and the now unaccustomed names reinforce the idea that theirs is another world. (J.K. Rowling invented a whole new currency with its own unique and unwieldy coins for her Harry Potter series for that very reason.) However, the changing value of money over the intervening years can be more of a challenge and, on occasions, may dilute the intended impact of some scenes.

'Penny whistle ... At least it cost more than a penny.' (*We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*)

Simply converting the 'old' money to 'new' is relatively straightforward, but knowing that half-a-crown (2/6) = 12½p, a shilling (1s or 1/-) = 5p, sixpence (6d) = 2½p, or threepence (3d) = 1¼p might hinder comprehension of the actual values being described. (Even more so for that farthing left in the cache atop Kanchenjunga, which would be just over 1/10p!)

Accurate calculation of what historical sums would be worth in today's money is difficult as there is more than one way of calculating the change in value over the years: price inflation, wage inflation or changes in average wage levels can all be used with quite different results. For simplicity I'll use the Bank of England's 'Inflation Calculator' from the Monetary Policy

section of their website here, which reveals that between 1931 and 2021 prices rose by a factor of just over 72 (i.e. on average, something costing £1 in 1931 would cost £72.48 in 2021).

On this basis: John's five-shilling birthday money mentioned at the start of *Swallows and Amazons* equates to just over £18 today; the threepence for Pete's tooth in *The Big Six* would be just over 90p (but note his father's comment, 'I'll be going short of beer', when he hands over the additional threepence – 3d would buy half-a-pint of beer back then, amply demonstrating that calculations of the changing value of money are by no means uniform!); and the half crown that he earned catching bait would be about £9. None of these is particularly startling, but how about the 'thirty shillings and sixpence' the Death and Glories netted for the pike? That would be over £110 today (and the landlord's 'best part of a fiver' to have it set up in a display case over £360). Perhaps the most dramatic is Dick's encounter with the bird man on the Pterodactyl in *Great Northern?* Jemmerling initially offers Dick £1 to reveal the whereabouts of the birds, which would be £72 today (his usual tariff of 'ten shillings for showing him where he can find the nest of a Golden Eagle' being about £36), then £5 to John – £362 now, and a cheque for £50 to Captain Flint – £3,624, rising to £100 – £7,248! All of which gives greater understanding of Susan and Nancy's observation that 'offering all that money' 'only showed Uncle Jim how important it was' and made him 'see red'.

(There's an interesting anomaly in the text here: when Jemmerling initially tries to buy the information from Dick he takes out his pocket-book and says 'Here's a sovereign for you', but when he goes out on deck and meets John we're told that 'he still had the pound note in his hand. He took four others from his pocket-book and held the five out to John.' Although gold sovereigns were still legal tender at this time, they had largely disappeared from circulation on the outbreak of war in 1914, and once Britain finally quit the Gold Standard in 1931 were worth significantly more than their face value of £1 and very unlikely to be carried, let alone proffered in payment.)

In *Swallowdale* there's just a hint of the effects of inflation prior to the story: the previous generation had left a farthing (1/4d) in the cache tin and,

although Nancy wishes they had a current farthing, it's Roger's 'new halfpenny' that is added. It could just be coincidence but, according to the Bank of England's calculator, a farthing in 1901 would have had about the spending power of a halfpenny in 1931. (And don't we wish that Roger had had a penny in his pocket instead? Think of all the fun we could have had over the years referring to the 'Swallows and Amazons up Kanchenjunga with a penny-farthing' – Roger would have loved it.)



A farthing and halfpenny as left in the Kanchenjunga cache

'Susan's got the expedition purse.' (*Secret Water*)

Recently we've become used to accessing our money using plastic cards or on smartphones, and it's not so long ago that it was commonplace to pay by cheque when out shopping, but both are recent phenomena. Before the 1960s, ordinary working people were unlikely to hold a bank account other than a savings account at the Post Office or one of the regional savings banks. Well-to-do families like the Walkers, Blacketts and Dudgeons would probably have held a current account with a chequebook (how else would Mrs Walker draw additional cash when at Holly Howe than by having an arrangement to cash a cheque locally? – after all, back then the nearest cash machine was a good 280 miles and 46 years away.) Even so the use of cheques to pay for purchases would be exceptional and tend to be limited to larger transactions, as they came at a cost with 2d stamp duty (tax) paid for each one – about 60p in today's money. We can notice that Mr Jemmerling is the only character to mention writing a cheque and there it is almost certainly intended as an indication of his conspicuous wealth.

For most people in this period, money meant cash most of the time, and that cash was mostly in coin (although ten-shilling and pound notes were in general circulation they were comparatively high value and a rare sight for most – a ten-shilling note would be the equivalent of about £36 today). The boys might carry their money in their pockets: 'Jim [Brading] emptied his trouser pockets' to see how much he had before going ashore to get petrol, and John 'felt the half-crown in his trouser pocket' as he worried about paying the pilot in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*; Pete's father dug 'in his trouser pocket' for the extra threepence for the tooth and Bill kept 'pulling his ten-shilling note from his pocket to make sure it was there' in *The Big Six*; and Dick was conscious of Squashy Hat's presence in the chemist's shop by the way that 'money was being nervously jingled in a pocket' in *Pigeon Post*. For all the others we have numerous references to purses: Dorothea's 'in the pocket of her coat with a sixpence in it and a few coppers' in *Winter Holiday*; 'the ship's purse' passed to Tom by the Admiral to go and get provisions at Breydon in *Coot Club*; Titty's purse that she's digging into to get something to give to the porter after they've released the pigeon at the start of *Pigeon Post*; Titty and Susan emptying their purses to see how much they've got to pay the pilot in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*; and Mrs Dudgeon saying 'you'll find my purse in my bag' when she sends the Coots to the shops in *The Big Six*.

'There it is. Money to spend and well earned.' (*The Big Six*)

The children have varying attitudes to money throughout the books as befits their individual characters.

Roger is labelled a 'money-grubbing little brute' by his brother for his money-making idea of giving mumps to those who want time off school in *Winter Holiday*, has 'got two shillings and sevenpence' 'at home' when the funds are being pooled aboard *Goblin*, and is the one who identifies that they'd been charged 'a penny less than at home' for a pint of milk in *Secret Water*.

Titty seems to manage her money well and has saved 'two pounds and seventeen shillings in the Savings Bank' and not found it necessary to cash

the 'half-crown postal order that had been sent her by her godmother to buy a new drawing book' in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*.

Susan seems to be left to deal with all matters of domestic economy, is entrusted with the 'expedition purse' in *Secret Water*, is frequently dealing with the household/camp/shipboard accounts, getting in provisions, insisting 'the fo'c'sle feeds itself' in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, and 'blues' 'a birthday present on a mincing machine' in *Pigeon Post*.

John's attitude to money is possibly the most adult. He's 'had to get next month's pocket money in advance when he was buying his new knife', according to Roger in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (but still has a 'half-crown in his trouser pocket' as he stands on deck), and he understands the value of money – replacing the lost anchor will cost 'pounds and pounds. And chain costs a lot too'.

Nancy's blithe 'stop it out of our pocket money' for the broken crockery in *Pigeon Post* and 'it'll be on the telephone account. Mother won't mind' for the additional threepence on the telegram replying to the Great Aunt in *The Picts and the Martyrs* suggest a slightly more cavalier attitude than shown by any of the others (or is that just Nancy being Nancy?).

All the members of the Coot Club seem to have a co-operative attitude to their money. Individuals are reimbursed expenses (bus fares and telephone calls) from 'Coot Club funds, of course' and they don't care to pay for another three minutes on the telephone 'when it could be spent on ropes and other really useful things'. In *The Big Six* Tom is prepared to own up and pay for the broken glass in the 'dentist's window' (although Mr Jonnatt was 'very decent' and said 'there was no need to pay'), and although the Death and Glory boys had 'to get to the staithe before the shop shut' ('such is the effect of having a pocket full of money'), they are quite happy to share their bounty with Tom when Joe misunderstands his questions about their windfall or to pay all the solicitor's fee when the matter is raised by Dot. However, in *Secret Water* we find the Mastodon and Eels not bothering with money too much; they're more used to swopping flint arrowheads for stores and don't have 'a penny among us' when the cowman offers to sell them a drink of milk.

'Six and eightpence is a solicitor's fee' (*The Big Six*)

And what about the solicitor's fee in *The Big Six*: why isn't it in guineas? According to a late Victorian book on legal customs:

The Lawyers's Fee of Six-and-Eightpence was fixed at the time when money was reckoned by pounds, marks, and nobles, instead of pounds shillings, and pence. A mark was a silver coin, value thirteen and fourpence, but a noble, though worth only six-and-eightpence, or the third of a pound, was composed of the noble metal, gold.

Thus, when Dorothea 'asked the Admiral about lawyer's fees' the information she received would be old fashioned even then, although Mr Farland did concede that 'six and eightpence is a solicitor's fee. You are quite right.'



Mr Farland 'smoothed out the postal order ... and piled on it the two pennies, the two-shilling piece, the shilling and the three sixpences.'

Which brings me to one final conundrum to leave you with: the Death and Glories got 'thirty shillings and sixpence' for the 'world's Whopper', conveniently calculated as thirty and a half pounds at 'a shilling a pound for any fish over twenty pounds'. 'That's ten and twopence apiece' and a very convenient piece of arithmetic. But how about that six-and-eightpence that had to be split between the Coots with it being 'arranged that the six detectives should contribute *equal shares*'. How do you split six-and-

Money in ‘the Twelve’

eightpence equally among six? For those struggling with pre-decimal mental arithmetic and not having an abacus to hand, it works out at exactly one shilling, one penny, one and a third farthing each. There was such a thing as a third farthing coin (but it was only minted for use in Malta, and probably didn’t continue in use there much after the First World War) and there’s no mention of farthings let alone fractions of farthings amongst the money presented to Mr Farland. Equally, there’s no mention of any difficulty in putting the money together, and they were in a hurry too. So, how do *you* think they solved the problem; who contributed what? And, in the best traditions of quiz setting, ‘answers on a postcard please’!



What a sixth of six-and-eightpence might have looked like.

This article was originally intended to be a short ‘cameo’ talk at the 2022 Literary Weekend in Oxford until Covid struck and Andrew Jones was unable to attend, so we are delighted to include it in Mixed Moss.

MIXED MOSS POETRY COMPETITION, 2021-22

Catherine Lamont, its organiser, presents the results

Ransome and Poetry

As we were reminded in 2019, when TARS ran a poetry competition for Juniors, Ransome's literary adventures extended to writing poetry, mostly small verses for friends or family. His first known published poem, 'The Passing' (about the death of Queen Victoria, which he described as 'doggerel') and a book-length poem, *Aladdin and his Wonderful Lamp*, were published in 1920. He frequently talked and walked with poets, particularly the Dymock Poets, of whom Lascelles Abercrombie, the grandfather of one of our judges, was a member. He also wrote *about* poetry, and 'The Poetry of Yone Noguchi' (from *Portraits and Speculations*, published in 1913) may well have inspired some of the entries we received for the competition.

The Competition

The Juniors' competition was so successful that it was decided to run an open-age competition in *Mixed Moss*. There were three sections:

- (1) Structured poem up to 24 lines long (11 poems)
- (2) Humorous poem up to 24 lines long (8 poems)
- (3) Open – any other poem up to 52 lines long (15 poems)

Prizes would be books from TARS Stall to the value of £25, and the judges were to consider relevance to Ransome and a TARS audience, as well as merit. An Editor's Prize was held in reserve for the unexpected.

The three judges – my thanks to all of them – were Karen Babayan (author/creator of *Swallows and Armenians*), Jeff Cooper (grandson of Lascelles Abercrombie and occasional speaker at Literary Weekends) and Julian Lovelock (author of *Swallows, Amazons and Coots* and former editor of *Mixed Moss* for many years). The names of the twelve poets were removed from the entries, so judging of the twenty-nine entries was 'blind'.

The Unexpected

There were some unexpected challenges. How, for example, do you compare a single Haiku with a collection of limericks, a sea shanty or unstructured verse? In the event, our fears were unfounded: each judge was asked to mark each poem out of 100 irrespective of its form. Even with this variety it was still possible to reach a consensus on the winners.

The next challenge related to the breadth of Ransome's work. Many Tars are 'experts' on 'the twelve', but less familiar with his other writings, making it difficult to judge a poem's relevance. Here the opening paragraph of Ransome's article on Yone Noguchi put us right: self-reflective poems and poems on butterflies were a better fit than we had first thought.

So-shi, a Chinese philosopher, dreamed that he was a butterfly, and, in the moment of waking, asked himself: 'Are you So-shi who has dreamed that he was a butterfly, or are you a butterfly who is dreaming that he is So-shi?' That question is continually repeated in the works of Yone Noguchi ... Noguchi is for ever in doubt of his own existence.

Finally, one high-scoring 'collection' (including a 'found Haiku' about softly falling snow) was submitted by someone who did not seem to be a Tar and so was nearly disqualified. The name 'Jack Blake' should, of course, have rung a louder alarm bell (a relative of Black Jake, perhaps?).

To sum up all the challenges, with apologies to Gilbert and Sullivan:

'Misse Lee's got them on a List'

As some day it may happen that a black spot must be giv'n
I've got a little list – I've got a little list
Of poets who'd offend a Misse Lee in lit'ry heav'n
And who never would be missed – who never would be missed!
There's the poetry that doesn't seem to be about AR;
The poet called Jack Blake (so doesn't seem to be a Tar!);
The poet who in writing one could take the prize for two;
The one on 's not', the multi-'pomes' put judges in a stew.

And that singular anomaly – the semi-plagiarist –
They'd none of 'em be missed – they'd none of 'em be missed!

The Winners

Section 1 - Structured Verse up to 24 lines long

Most of the shorter structured poems were either about the Swallows and Amazons child characters or nature; two were about Ransome himself. One poem was a clear winner on both merit and relevance to the theme though, as one judge and the poet pointed out, some of the credit must go to Keats.

WINNER (and Highly Commended as a Humorous Poem):

Colin Pritchard: 'On First Looking into Ransome's Stories'

with apologies to John Keats

Much have I travell'd in the land of lakes,
Looming hills, moorland fells and tumbling becks.
Observed intrepid walkers on their treks
With compass, maps and Kendal's minty cake.
While I in Ransome's footsteps undertake
To match the real with what his map suggests
Would be the land if, by earthquake wrecked,
'Twere shaped afresh by tectonic plates.
It is the stage on which his tale is set,
On which the story's told of where and when.
Revealed, the captain and his young quartet,
An isle discovered beyond their ken,
Staring, one with another, minds afret,
Silent, upon a peak in Darien.

HIGHLY COMMENDED:

John Fletcher: 'Haiku: On Great Aunts and Nieces'

Great Aunts have their way;
Defeat is unknown.
Great nieces are much the same.

Section 2 – Humorous Poems

The humorous poems were perhaps the most enjoyable to read and most difficult to assess, since everyone's sense of humour is different and the relevance to 'TARS' audience needed to be considered as well. As two of the contenders were already winners in other sections – **Colin Pritchard's 'On First Looking into Ransome's Stories'** (Structured) and **Esme Blue's 'Butterflies in a Crowd'** (Editor's Prize, below) – the prize was awarded to a duo of poems by the same entrant which the judges also rated highly:

JOINT WINNER:

Naomi Kaye Honova: 'Columbus Would've Fairly Hogged it'

The modest bean that plays a part
(well, a large one) in R. Walker's heart,
The cocoa bean, transformed to glory
An integral part of young Roger's story.
How else would Titty know so well
her brother had been in that dell?
The giveaway wrapper, but of course,
the sweet brown milky telltale source.
And when the Porter cried his name
(dear me, that man was most to blame!)
our small young hero swallowed whole
that bit of chocolate (stings the soul).
And what of chocolate in a shape,
say, circles, or a knight in cape?
False, false, my friends, for Rog declares
that chocolate **MUST** be eaten in squares.
Pemmican? Meh. Cooked rabbit? Nay.
Give Roger chocolate: ensure a good day!

AND JOINT WINNER: Naomi Kaye Honova: 'The Ladies' Limericks' (see Online Supplement)

Section 3 – Open

This category included every other type of poem. Topics included a visit to a Ransome museum/boat, scenes from ‘the twelve’, artistry, a number of introspective poems, and the many facets of our beloved polymath’s life.

WINNER:

John Lanyon: ‘A Pipe with Arthur Ransome’

You strike a match
play it over the Navy Cut
draw in the sweet mixture
as you steer *Racundra* through the dark
as you wait for a bite
as your pen hovers over the pages’ waves
Great Aunt Maria does not approve
You bend lines one to the next
your fingers are cold
but you know better than to cut the rope
Rain is pouring down your oilskins
You splice the loose ends together
the tale grows
the float goes under
Susan brings you tea, marmalade, bunloaf
You make fast to a bollard
The page flaps its wings and flies.

HIGHLY COMMENDED: Poems by the Blue family (see below); ‘A Dozen of Haiku’ by Jack Blake/Peter Willis (printed on page 96); and ‘Esperance’ by John Fletcher and ‘The Swallows’ by Maida Follini (see Online Supplement).

The Editor's Prize

The poems exploring the themes mentioned in AR's article on Noguchi's poetry all came from the same family (three of whom are Juniors). We therefore decided to award the Editor's prize to the entire Blue family – for educating us about a less well-known aspect of AR's work, as well as writing some outstanding poems. 'The Root is Us' (Julian) was also deemed the best poem overall; 'Butterflies in a Crowd' (Esme) was Highly Commended as a Humorous Poem; and 'Crow Haikus' (Martha) and 'Woodcut' (Aurora) were also Highly Commended 'open' poems. Inspirational.

WINNER: THE BLUE FAMILY

Julian Blue: 'The Root is Us'

If I had a choice, I would choose a voice
inapprehensive of forgetfulness;
for I have faltered at every distraction,
away from the moors, uttering nothing
but silence to others.

All is change and disturbance;
what a marvel to forget such marvellous sights
that have met my blue-grey eyes,
for I have treated them with less
than contempt in keeping this paradise to myself.
Often, I've pushed aside those access gates that
creaked on rusting hinges with the noise of a long,
drawn-out honk of an old goose
fending off an intruder, where
before me, grasses galore, grasslands of
gooseberry- and grasshopper-greens – tormentils, heath milkworts
were the common bent;
where sedges with several-spikeleted flowerets met tussocks
of hare's tails and tufts of cottons; where masses of mosses
in darker hues and other uncultivated greens in

the freshening early lights awakened darkened depths of ancient waters,
refreshing near-stilled airs, there,
all centripetal and inward-drawing,
below purple-pinked heathers, honey-scented,
short-lived, sources of food
for nectar collectors, degenerating between
ever-greening leaves,
as here, the blues above were
drawn into sulphur-yellows of bog asphodels.
All of this moor: this wet-nurse.
Nothing desolate nor drab here,
nothing forsaken nor barren, not bleak,
not dead, not lone nor bare, but vibrant in
haloes of greens and yellows –
in flowers of sunrise-brilliance,
crucifers and celandines, broom and buttercup,
hottest, seething yolks of dazzling intensities –
molten-bright – all pulse here:
an overflowing, centrifugal explosion of
glittering first- and last-lights;
an oasis; a manna to the weary, to the dreary and to the dreamy both.
And on a rumour of wind, Kirkos, circus-bird, sky-dancer,
whose piercing eyes improvise its own demise,
circles above the moor, hungry, untroubled,
unlike I.

Martha Blue: 'Crow Haikus'

still state, rainy days,
shadows of summer, silver
twilit moon-ravens

waltz;

snowdrop snow-clocks count
frosted days by my teardrops,
drop endless dew-drips

frozen

silhouette-hewn trees,
midwinter skeletons, hide
black clots of bleak crows

sniggering

whose explorations
set shaded rainbows deep in
winter's faint starlight

searching

for red fox, spill of
slinking rust of slipped mishap,
blur of furred form

– furtive –

this spool of black crows
uncoils in black feathered thread,
hoar-frost-fringed white-scapes

watch

still-breaths cloud me,
as crimson-bled sunsets quit
skies, leaving brown frowns,

peace

explodes cluttered crows,
winter's silhouette recedes,
Earth's backbone stretches

Aurora Blue: 'Wood Cut'

A cold wind slices through the red, iced gloved layer,
as though slowly peeling away the skin above from the flesh beneath,
the wood cutter's hand grasping a cut block of oak;
his frozen hair is swept back
as he trudges home, back through the cutting,
having collected enough specimens for his next design,
with white-green lichen and wet, dark green moss clinging on to the oak:
he sees a lone gathering of snowdrops;
he stoops to finger the white, snowlike petals;
he has his idea, a thought of a wooden meeting of snowdrops.
Wind-shaken, he muffles his nose with a thick sleeve,
protecting breaths from a cold sharpness which cuts into his face then,
chipping onwards, the woodman, arms filled,
tugs on his hood-cover and pulls it onto his chilled head,
shivers, shaking powdered snow from his overcoat
falling into small piles of snowdropped petals;
a short choke reddens his pale cheeks where
he stops to gasp and grasp the wood: he feels its age,
its wet darkness, its contours
like the winds that rise, driving him on, in spite of himself.
At dusk in his work shop he lights a beeswax candle,
sparking a sun yet unborn into a flicker of light,
reflecting shadows and twisting silhouettes
onto shape-shifting walls which turn in complicated, delirious forms,
of ever-growing snowdrops,
momentary yet everlasting to a mind full of God.
The face of the woodcutter slips into these grey complications,
silently watching the drips that drop into the new-cut mould:
branches stop swinging in the outside world where
it is near-night as the wind drops: it is done with.
Inside his workshop the wood carver smiles:
'Never should these winds be silenced,' are his last thoughts.

Esme Blue: 'Butterflies in a Crowd'

Oh and did you know that while I was watching the bog-frogs and tadpoles a woman came and stood next to me, such a painted lady she was, red admiral lipstick and summer blue dress with brimstone yellow shoes and, yes – would you believe it – adonis-blue hair! Well, later on, whilst I stood studying the jaguars, I noticed a meadow-brown smudge on one of their ears – but nobody else I asked could make it out at all!

At Tropical Fishland there was a swallowtail-like specimen and a grayling pecking at the glass wall – and that's not all – that painted lady reminded me not to forget the small white that was sat right on the top of my hat! – Really? I asked.

Really, she answered, adding that the tortoiseshell-patterned jacket I was wearing made me stand out in the crowd.

Well, I never!

WITH THANKS TO ALL THE ENTRANTS: Jack Blake, 'A Dozen of Haiku'; Aurora Blue, 'A Splash of Ransome', 'A Writer's Eyes and Ears', 'I'll have as much as you give me, and more' and 'Woodcut'; Esme Blue, 'Winter Horses', 'Butterflies in a Crowd', 'The Heart of Light' and 'Taiyo Tori'; Julian Blue, 'S NOT', 'The Root is Us', 'Hare', and 'BE(E)²'; Martha Blue, 'Crow Haikus', 'Autumn Steal', 'Painting in Words' and 'Kestrel'; Bob Cuming, 'John's Hidden Depths' and 'Arthur's phone call to Bank Ground Farm'; John Fletcher, 'Unnamed Limerick' – George Owdon, 'Esperance' and 'Unnamed Haiku' – on Great Aunts and Nieces; Maida Follini, 'The Swallows'; Naomi Kaye Honova, 'Columbus Would've Fairly Hogged It', 'The Ladies' Limericks' and 'The Price of Tea in China'; John Lanyon, 'A Pipe with Arthur Ransome'; Colin Pritchard, 'On First Looking into Ransome's Stories'; Jackie Snowman, 'Sea Shanty'.

All poems have been reproduced in the Online Supplement.

Letter – Swinging the Wartime Lamp

MANY who read Arthur Ransome's novels speculate privately as to what happened to his characters. With war on the horizon and such a varied and talented cast, the possibilities are almost endless. These are, however, personal to each reader's imagination. In the land of fiction, no one set of ideas is more or less valid than those of another person, although some suggestions are more intriguing and ingenious than others.

John Fletcher's contribution, 'What Happened Next', in the 2021 edition of *Mixed Moss* is certainly inventive and enjoyable if, in places, slightly frustrating. Enjoyable because John's suggestions trigger new lines of thought, but frustrating because, in order to be plausible, the details need to be accurate. For Nancy to reach the rank of Chief Officer – equivalent to the rank of Commander in the Royal Navy – within one year of joining the WRNS would have required regal (if not divine) intervention, even in wartime. Her code-breaking skills surprised me, and probably her, but she is imaginative and impulsive, rather than analytical, and in Ransome's novels deferred to Dick when it came to 'stinks'.

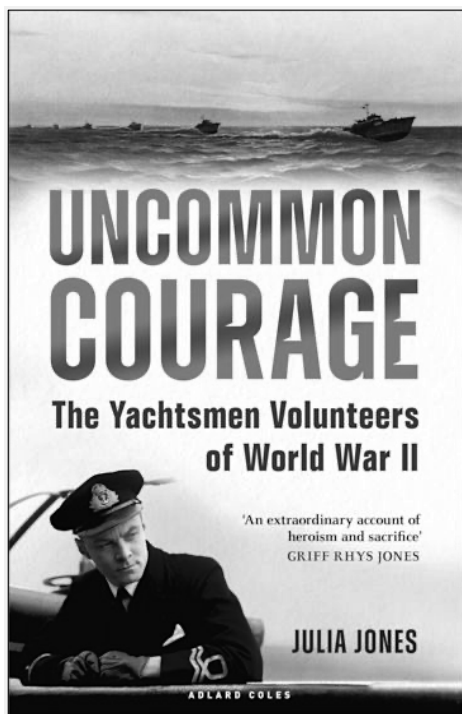
Dick's scientific approach could certainly have been useful to the Special Operations Executive (SOE) when devising technological solutions, but the SOE was not, as stated by John Fletcher, a forerunner of the Special Air Service or the Special Boat Service. In their earliest forms these were conceived by Army officers. The SAS had its genesis in North Africa as David Stirling's L Detachment Special Air Service Brigade, and SBS-style operations were conceived originally by Roger Courtney as a specialist Army unit. As small-boat operations evolved, they fell eventually under the control of the Royal Marines. Lack of liaison between SOE and Combined Operations jeopardised Operation Frankton in December 1942, when Royal Marines, who became known as the 'Cockleshell Heroes', used folding kayaks to attack shipping in Bordeaux. It was the Royal Marines Boom Patrol Detachment that morphed into the SBS.

Perhaps it is nit-picking to point out these errors in what, after all, is light-hearted conjecture, but Ransome was a stickler for accuracy.

Paul Flint, Cumbria

BOOKSHELF

Julia Jones, *Uncommon Courage: the yachtsmen volunteers of World War Two* (London: Adlard Coles, 2022). ISBN: 978-1-4729-8710-5.



MOST Tars will know Julia Jones as the owner (with her husband, Francis Wheen) of *Peter Duck*, the ‘marine bath chair’ originally built for Arthur Ransome which has just enjoyed her seventy-fifth birthday. More than that, Julia is the author of the *Strong Winds* novels set on the East Coast.

Julia’s latest book, *Uncommon Courage*, is an account of the RNVSR, the Royal Navy Volunteer Supplementary Reserve: 2000 yachtsmen who offered their varied experience and skill in the service of their country in World War II. Now that the last of the RNVSR veterans are ‘crossing the bar’, it is timely to have this record of their achievements and sacrifice. Most of them chose to keep their stories to themselves.

In fact Julia was inspired to write *Uncommon Courage* when she discovered her late father’s papers in the attic. He had never told her about his time in the RNVSR. I feel a particular affinity here: my father also served in the RNVSR, and he rarely talked about his experiences. It is only now that I have become properly aware of his heroism minesweeping in the North Sea and evacuating troops from Dunkirk, although much of what he did still remains a mystery.

Given its title, I half expected *Uncommon Courage* to be mainly a collection of stories of

outstanding bravery, but it is more detailed and wide-ranging. The opening chapters cover the setting up of the Royal Navy Volunteer Reserve itself in 1903 and there is much about the World War I exploits of Erskine Childers (author of the yachting classic *The Riddle of the Sands*). Those who sailed in his wake seem to have shared his shrugging off of danger. The RNVSR was set up in 1936 as storm clouds began to gather over Europe.

Members of the RNVSR were drawn from all areas of civilian life, with day-jobs usually far removed from the sea. Some would remain as shore-bound administrators, but most would fetch up commanding smaller vessels, or in submarines, or as deck officers on larger ships in the fleet – although at the outbreak of war an overworked (or incompetent) Admiralty managed to appoint RNVSR officers to roles where their talents were totally wasted.

Uncommon Courage gives an insight into the often perilous missions they undertook: minesweeping and minelaying, espionage, escorting convoys, sea battles and

D-Day landings, to name just a few. Not surprisingly their background could put them on collision course with a Navy which back then was hierarchical and snobbish, and whose high command was frequently out of touch. Many paid with their lives.

Inevitably, since it is only recently that Julia embarked on the project, she has had to rely heavily on published and unpublished writing. So familiar names sometimes and interestingly steal the show, such as novelists Margery Allingham, Ian Fleming, Nicholas Monsarrat and Nevil Shute; Maurice Griffiths, editor, *Yachting Monthly*; Ludovic Kennedy, journalist and broadcaster; and Sir Peter Scott, wildlife artist.

It is, I think, a shame that *Uncommon Courage* lacks the photographs that would bring the characters and their ships even more vividly to life: there must be myriad prints which lie hidden in albums and will soon be lost. However, this book remains an important contribution to naval history and a fitting tribute to its yachtsmen heroes.

Julian Lovelock

Alan Hakim (ed.), *Ransome Centre Stage – Selected Dramatic Works* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2021).



AMAZON Publications' book for 2021 was a compilation of scripts and lyrics devised mostly by members of TARS about the life and work of Arthur Ransome. Comprising six sections, the book presents selections by Brian Hopton, Kirstie Taylor, Robin Anderson, Kirsty Nichol Findlay and Duncan Hall, Jan Allen, and a guest appearance from Evgenia Ransome.

Readers will enjoy skits with the young Arthur trying to write

poetry in front of the Collingwoods, the Sparkinson interviews (guests on the show include James Turner, Lt Col. Jolys DSO, Miss Maria Turner and international guest, Miss Lee, from somewhere off the coast of China), a friendly chat between Evgenia and AR from a room in the Smolny Institute in Petrograd, a night in Bohemia with the Ananse spider woman and Alan Hakim in Japanese traditional dress, a full dramatisation of *Winter Holiday*, radio plays as performed by AusTARS, and a finale from Evgenia Ransome as she attempts to force the BBC back on track towards AR's original writings for its 1962 production of *Swallows and Amazons*.

Ransome Centre Stage will be a trip down memory lane for those Tars who were involved in the original performances and a great historical record for those who came later. The book is illustrated with selected photographs. Some theatrical posters and theatre programmes are also included, but the print on these is very small and reading glasses will be required.

The book production is everything we have come to expect from Amazon Publications. I failed to subscribe this year (more fool me), but those who did were obviously very generous to the extent that the book could be bound in hardcover. The generosity may perhaps be attributed to several new subscribers noted in the list, namely Mr H. Bangate, Mrs Barrable and Lt Col. Jolys DSO,

amongst others!

Congratulations to all who contributed works to this volume and to the editor, Alan Hakim, who is taking this book as his swansong from Amazon Publications after sixteen years of service.

Nancy M. Endersby-Harshman

(With many thanks to the editors of *Furthest South*, in which this review first appeared.)

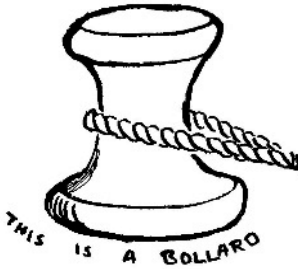
While cruising the Ashby Canal in Leicestershire, the Editor came across this narrowboat moored at Market Bosworth. As well as the striking name, there was intricate Swallows and Amazons signwriting on the bow. The owner wasn't a Ransome enthusiast – but apparently the (anonymous) previous owner was – perhaps someone knows of the boat's history?



MM ONLINE SUPPLEMENT

<http://members.arthur-ransome.org/mixed-moss-online-supplement/>

IN 2021 the editor, Catherine Lamont, received an unprecedented number of interesting articles that did not fit in the printed *Mixed Moss* and so created an online supplement (MMOS) to publish the extra material (and more), including:



- more complete biographies of our contributors
- articles that were too similar in theme to (or by the same author as) a current/recent *Mixed Moss* article
- articles that have been published elsewhere in TARS (marked*)
- articles that were too large/late for the current edition

NEW FOR 2022

Out of Captain Flint's Trunkette editorial by Catherine Lamont

On Eclipses and Signalling to Mars by Maida Follini

Sparkinson Interviews: Molly Blackett by Brian Hopton with Jill Goulder*

Complete set of Poems entered for the *Mixed Moss* Poetry Competition

The Lakes in 1905 by Linda Phillips

Mary Walker Collection / Supplement:

Tour Guide Down Under by Catherine Lamont

An Australian Captain Flint by John Edwards*

Commander E.H.R. Walker and the Royal Navy of the Time by Paul Flint*

The Service Career of Commander Walker by David Carter*

2021

The Thirties and Forties to a Ransome Reader by Maida Barton Follini

Where Folktales Began by Stephen Sykes

These People are Furious about Something by Garry Wood

Contributor Biographies

Letter and Bookshelf

Out of Captain Flint's Trunkette editorial by Catherine Lamont

* * *

Cheryl Paget

Tars will have learned already of the passing of Cheryl Paget, a much loved and respected Tar from New Zealand. There have been moving tributes in both *Furthest South* and *Signals*, but we should also record Cheryl's involvement in *Mixed Moss*. As well as numerous book reviews, she has given us these insightful articles about Arthur Ransome, his milieu and his work:

- 2020 **Arthur Ransome and Katherine Mansfield**
- 2019 **Ashley Gibson: From Bohemia to Outward Bound**
- 2015 **Great Aunt Nancy or Not welcome at all**

The Missing Statuette

In *Mixed Moss* 2021, Ted Alexander wrote of the missing 'AR Statuette'. In the same issue, Stephen Sykes wrote of Hill Top, Arthur Ransome's former home at Haverthwaite, which he and his wife currently own. Now Stephen reports that he was able to buy the statuette at auction – so it now resides in a very appropriate place.

MIXED MOSS POETRY COMPETITION

The One that Nearly Got Away

A Dozen of Haiku

(including a perfect 'found' one)

Island animosity,
Alliance, lost chest.
And then comes the feast

Mary Swainson, churning
her white magic in the
cool of the dairy

Counting lights 'like chickens'
'Begging your pardon sir,
The first thing's the ship'

'Softly at first, as
though it hardly meant it, the
snow began to fall'

The punt under water,
the Outlaw in the reeds.
A face at the glass

Hazel twig and hedgehog
Chemistry and bellows
Fire and flight

Knight on Sailing is
hailed from the flooded cabin
And the ship steadies

Mud, shining mud and
twisting rivulets keeping
the water's secrets

Tooth, shackles, bicycle
tyre. Camera flash,
the plot develops

Golden flash of new varnish
Skinning the rabbit
'No Go' in the grass

Hic liber meus
Hockeystick and marmalade
Then, Taicoons. 'Chop heads'

'Special birds'... and two
alone in the boat in the
centre of the lake

Jack Blake (Peter Willis)

WANTED

From September 2022

Editor of *Mixed Moss*

starting with the 2023 edition

The post involves soliciting contributions, careful editing, and the formatting of the journal ready for printing. The main qualities required are an interest in all things Ransome, an eye for detail, and occasional diplomacy.

If this is an opportunity that you'd relish, please contact Marc Grimston, Chairman of the Publications Committee, at marcgrimston@gmail.com

and

Contributors to *Mixed Moss*

for the 2023 edition

As always, your articles and letters are welcome – especially from the new generation of Tars who have not previously written for *Mixed Moss*. (2023 will be the centenary of *Racundra's First Cruise*, the 90th birthday of *Winter Holiday* and the 80th birthday of *The Picts and the Martyrs*, so these may be of particular interest.)

The deadline is 30 April 2023, but please contact the Editor as soon as possible with your ideas to avoid duplication and disappointment.

Please email your suggestions and 'Word' documents to:

mixedmoss@arthur-ransome.org

Great
Mountains

HIGH HILLS

unexplored

ARCTIC

AMAZON



BOAT
HOUSE

NATIVE
SETTLEMENT

OCTOPUS
LAGOON

