ALSo...

The Journal of the Alliance of Literary Societies

Volume 17 – 2023

‘BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS’: ADVENTURES BY LAND, SEA, AIR AND IMAGINATION

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‘BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS’: Adventures by Land, Sea, Air and Imagination

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EDITORIAL

The theme for this year's issue of *ALSo* is "'BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS": adventures by land, sea, air and imagination'. We wanted to hear from any ALS members who could write on authors (not specifically those writers represented by their societies) who had written on real-life and imaginative adventures which may have influenced their literary work.

Although there were only six submissions this year, the interpretation of the brief turned out to be refreshingly varied. Those writers featured include Casanova, C. L. Dodgson, Arthur Ransome (twice, with articles from the Arthur Ransome Society and the Nancy Blackett Trust), John Moore and Geoffrey Grigson.

Next year's theme is 'Writers in the News'. It is similar to one we've had before. Instead of 'When authors attack', we want to receive articles about writers who have been journalists, or who have been in the news because of their commitment to, or passion for, various issues. They may or may not be full-time writers, but we want to hear about any appearances they might have made in newspapers, government reports, Parliament, trade unions, business, science, or indeed anything not directly related to their literary careers.

For instance, Charles Lamb, Anthony Trollope, Matthew Arnold, and Philip Larkin received the bulk of their income from non-literary sources, so perhaps these and other writers in similar posts were involved in promoting certain causes that most admirers of their literary work are unaware of. Perhaps some writers, such as Tobias Smollett, Oliver Goldsmith, Thomas Beddoes, Samuel Warren, and Dannie Abse, who trained as medical professionals, voiced their opinions on clinical issues. Other writers with strong political views — left or right — may have made their feelings known through the press. The scope is endless. Writers are human beings with feelings. Some expressed these feelings exclusively through their work, while others used their literary fame to publicise causes close to their heart.

Articles, which must only relate to **non-living** writers, should ideally be between 1,000 and 1,500 words in length. Please send submissions to me at R.Healey709@btinternet.com by 1 May.

R. M. Healey

CASANOVA'S FLIGHT FROM THE LEAD PRISON

Simon Keeton

Why was Casanova arrested in the first place? Well, as is usual in these cases, he had made himself unpopular with powerful people and in some cases he was possibly the target of envy. Some said he was the head of a new religion, others said he was an atheist or a Freemason, yet others that their daughters had been seduced. He also had debts but his big mistake was to upset a friend of a member of the Inquisition, Antonio Condulmer, who made it known that Casanova was a disturber of public order. Then many other examples would be fabricated to add weight to the charge of *Enemy of the State* by the Tribunal. Some of his books were seized and declared to be works of magic. Nevertheless, it was convenient for State Inquisitors to get involved rather than the Church. Casanova received letters warning him to leave Venice, some anonymous and others from people he should have trusted. However, he scorned all warnings and felt that to flee would be to declare his guilt. But dark clouds were gathering around him.

Just as his house was being ransacked, he was visiting his patron, Senator Bragadin, who also told him to leave, adding that they would find him guilty of charges he could not imagine. The old man was afraid they would not meet again. This came to pass but not for the reasons he expected. The Chief of Police was Messer Grande, who had orders to capture his protegé, dead or alive.

So, on the night of the same day, 25 July, they come for him. He is told to get dressed and accompany them. Casanova, being Casanova, shaves and dresses as if he were going to a wedding. Some 30 archers are there to detain him if necessary (one for every year of his life?). Despite his bravado, we are told he urinates to excess from the shock. Young ladies would later feel he could have omitted this detail but he only laughs.

He is taken by gondola to the house of Messer Grande, along the Palace River to the Bridge of Sighs, which leads through to the prisons where he is handed over to the Guardian of the Leads. He is placed in an attic cell too low to fully stand up. There is no furniture, only a receptacle serving as a toilet and a shelf to put his silk cape, suit and Spanish embroidered hat with a white plume. His anger and the hard floor prevent him from sleeping.

The jailer, called Lorenzo, asks him what he wants to eat but Casanova is caught unprepared. It is a long time before he returns and, by then, the prisoner has decided: rice, soup, cooked meat, roast, water, bread and wine. He will require furniture also, so Casanova writes a list but books, ink, razor and mirrors are all prohibited. However, he is allowed two pious books, which make him ill since he is averse to religious dogma. At first he is pleased to be alone but eventually the solitude begins to grate on him. He asks for the *Leiden Gazette* and newspapers but they are also refused until Signore Bragadin uses his influence.

Casanova runs out of money and is awarded 50 soldi a day by the Tribunal. The heat in the cell is tremendous in the summer and he suffers from ill health. He still thinks they will have to release him soon because he is innocent. But he eventually realises they have no need to talk to a delinquent and tell him the length of his sentence. His consent is not necessary. But his world is unstable. The huge beam in his cell is shaken by the famous Lisbon earthquake of that year. In that, he sees a symbol of his own liberty.

He is allowed a walk once a day in the loft outside his cell. Apart from reading archives of sordid cases from several hundred years before, he salvages a piece of polished black marble and a large bolt, using the former to file the latter into a point. This spontoon, as he calls it, will serve him as a tool for his escape. He hides it in the straw which fills the bottom of his armchair and invents an elaborate pretext that sweeping his room is bad for his health. He also makes a lamp with objects he wangles out of Lorenzo.

He has a visit from a Jesuit priest who tells him he will only get out on the day of his Patron Saint. It should be St James (from Giacomo). 'Do you pray to God?' he asks him. 'Everyday', replies Casanova, not without a grain of truth. He also has cellmates who come and go. After the third cellmate has gone, two or three weeks after Easter, he sets to work with his lamp and his spontoon to dig a hole into the top layer of wood of the floor under his bed. After the fourth cellmate has left, the work continues and he plans his escape for 27 August.

Unfortunately, on the 25th, the jailer comes and tells him the good news that he is being moved to a better cell! Casanova asks to remain. He thinks he is being punished by God but, at least, his armchair containing the spontoon is removed to the new cell. There is admittedly a fuss when they find the hole. Lorenzo comes and demands he hand over the tools he used. Casanova says that, if it is reported, he will say Lorenzo gave them to him. But he is punished for a few days with bad food and everything in his cell is continuously checked. Except for the ceiling.

Lorenzo, who cannot read and has a chip on his shoulder, says there are other clever people imprisoned there. So Casanova, who has let the nail of the little finger of his right hand grow in order to clean his ears, now uses it as a nib to write to his neighbour in the next cell, with messages hidden in the books they lend to each other. His neighbour, Balbi, who has a cellmate, is a monk. He knows about the foiled escape attempt and sends Casanova writing materials in secret so they can communicate more easily. Casanova tries to explain a new idea to get out, but the cellmate gives many reasons why it will not work. While Balbi is persuaded to follow Casanova's orders, he is characterised by a certain reluctance almost up to the end of the drama. Our man, now under suspicion, sends him his large bolt, which is longer than the Bible in which he places it, but hides it all under a bowl of hot buttered macaroni in a ludicrous and yet ingenious ploy. Balbi, meanwhile, covers the walls of his cell in images of the saints in order to hide the hole that he makes in his ceiling. Obviously, the work drags on and this time it is interrupted by yet another outsider, Soradaci, being brought into Casanova's room. He cannot be trusted but he is gullible, being told for his sins that an angel will appear from above, bringing scissors!

As a personal insurance, Casanova carries out an esoteric investigation using a text by Ariosto, locating a line which says *Tra il fin d'ottubre e el capo di novembre;* in other words, the night of 31 October is good for the escape. Besides, the Inquisition will be on holiday and the jailer will be drunk! Casanova writes a letter for them to say that, since they did not ask his consent to arrest him, he does not seek their consent to escape.

Fortunately, only Balbi and Casanova have the courage to undertake the escape, but Soradaci will cut their beards before they leave. They have their sheets tied up, ready to use as ropes in time-honoured tradition. Our man borrows money from Balbi's cellmate, who only lends him two sequins (a Venetian gold coin worth just over nine shillings).

The two of them get into the loft and Casanova, who is improvising by this stage, pushes one of the lead strips up off the decaying roof and they climb out. Then he goes on alone to reconnoitre for a long time and sees around him the domes of the Ducal Palace. They have to wait for the moon to go behind a cloud. Finally, he finds a skylight far enough away from the prison system. He lets his companion down with the sheets they brought with them but there is nowhere to tie anything for himself. Then, miraculously, he finds a ladder which he

uses to let himself down into the room below, by which time he is exhausted and rests for three hours. Next, they go through a series of doors until they reach one that leads to the Royal Staircase, but it is locked and they are stopped in their tracks. But he changes his clothes, which are torn and bloodied...and they wait.

Eventually, Casanova is seen at the window by two people who go to inform the keyholder. Through a crack in the door, he sees the man coming up. As the door opens, he remains cool-headed and leaves without a word, with Balbi close behind him. They go down the staircase and out across the piazetta. They get in the first gondola they see and get to Mestre where Balbi promptly goes missing. Casanova, unwilling to abandon him at this stage, finds him in a bar talking to a waitress, in a remarkable role reversal...

They take a coach for the border and Casanova suggests they split up, but Balbi, who now does not want to leave him, has to be persuaded. Casanova will take the longest way round to reach the border of the Venetian Republic. They will meet later, he says. He needed a collaborator to break out of the Leads but, once he is alone, he is confident that his escape will succeed. That day is All Soul's Day, which, of course, includes his own saint!

Taken from his History of My Flight from the Lead Prisons of the Venetian Republic (*Prague 1788)*, *an episode published independently after being honed around the dinner tables of Europe, but which forms part of* The History of My Life.

LEWIS CARROLL'S ADVENTURES IN RUSSIA, AND WHAT HE FOUND THERE; OR, ALICE IN VOLGALAND

Mark Davies

'We have decided on Moscow! Ambitious for one who has never yet left England,' wrote Charles Dodgson (1832–1898) in his diary on 11 July 1867 [1]. The Oxford don had just received his passport. The very next evening he was in Dover, preparing to cross the Channel with his long-standing Oxford friend, Revd Henry Parry Liddon (1820–1890).

Both men kept journals. Liddon, whose objective was to explore the prospects of a reunification of the Eastern and Western churches, tended to be fairly matter-of-fact. As one might expect from the author of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Dodgson's observations were rather more observational, whimsical, and humorous. Whereas his diaries of the previous decade give us an invaluable insight into the creation of his world-famous tale, on this trip it is as a wide-eyed, touristic debutant that his comments are so revealing. The people, the food, the languages, the customs, and the architecture: all are depicted with perception and enthusiasm, often enlivened by his fondness for the absurd. To give just one example, in respect of the room service at their Königsberg (Kaliningrad) hotel: 'we enjoy one unusual privilege – we may ring our bells as much and as often as we like: no measures are taken to stop the noise'.

Travelling by train, the two men reached St Petersburg via Brussels, Cologne, and Berlin on 27 July. Dodgson was instantly enthralled, calling the city 'one full of wonder and novelty'. At the Admiralty Platz (today's Senate Square), the benign serpent coiled round the rear feet of a statue of Peter the Great's horse prompted Dodgson to observe that had this been Berlin, 'Peter would no doubt have been actively engaged in killing the monster'. He was drawing a wry comparison with an earlier observation about the predilection in that city for statues of 'a colossal figure of a man killing, about to kill or having killed…a beast…which makes some parts of Berlin look like a fossil slaughter house'.

On 2 August the two men reached Moscow. Dodgson's initial impression on arrival was of 'bulging gilded domes, in which you see as in a looking-glass distorted pictures of the city'. Is this comment significant? He was already contemplating 'a floating idea of writing a sort of sequel to Alice'. His working title became 'Behind the Looking-Glass and what Alice saw there', and it was Liddon who suggested the name which was finally adopted in 1871, that is, *Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There.* In view of the sequel's chess-game theme, it may also be worth noting that Dodgson took with him a travelling chess set which came in useful on some of the longer train journeys.

A few days later, on 6 August 1867, the two men continued to the most easterly point they reached on their trip, Nizhny Novgorod, some 250 miles from Moscow. The culture shock for Dodgson, whose only previous experience of *in situ* foreign tongues and customs had been no farther away than Wales, must have been enormous: Nizhny, on the River Volga, had hosted a 'world's fair' for centuries. In a letter to his sister, Louisa, Dodgson wrote, 'the whole place swarms with Greeks, Jews, Armenians, Persians, Chinamen, etc., besides the native Russians'. To this list Liddon added Circassians, Tartars, and Cossacks. [2]

Finding themselves unexpectedly obliged to spend the night in Nizhny proved to be a bonus. They had been delayed when a collapsed railway bridge had necessitated a change of trains, entailing 'a trudge of about a mile in pelting rain', but 'all the novelties of the day were thrown into the shade by our adventures at sunset,' Dodgson wrote of his first ever experience of a muezzin's call, emanating from the Tartar Mosque. 'It was the strangest, wildest thing you can

imagine – ringing through the air over our heads' with 'an indescribably sad and ghost-like effect'. [3]

Yet, however inspirational and unfamiliar Nizhny had been, the most puzzling encounter of the two men's whole trip was not with any of the array of individuals that they encountered from a range of exotic backgrounds and cultures, but, back in Moscow, with a married couple with whom both men were already very familiar: Thomas and Martha Combe of Oxford. Combe was the Superintendent of Oxford University Press, and the man responsible for printing the first edition of *Alice* (a lithographical failure about which, and for much more about the writing and production of the books, I might perhaps direct readers to my newly revised edition of *Alice in Waterland*). Why 'puzzling'? Well, because the meeting was recorded in both men's journals in one matter-of-fact sentence, with no further explanation, as if they had simply bumped into each other at the house of an Oxford friend.

Dodgson spent his final evening in Moscow entranced by the vision of the Kremlin in 'a flood of cold clear moonlight, bringing out the pure white of the walls and towers, and the glittering points of light on the gilded domes, in a way that sunlight could never do'.

The journey home took Dodgson and Liddon again via St Petersburg. This time they visited the Cronstadt dockyard and arsenal. There they 'got a very good general idea of the… resources disposable in case of war'. The enormous dockyard was under construction, and the walls made of solid blocks of granite with 'hundreds of workmen swarming from end to end of the great hollow' inspired Dodgson to compare it with 'what the scene must have been during the building of the Pyramids'. The two men took the opportunity to row around the harbour – perhaps rekindling some memories of the boat trips that they had enjoyed together the previous decade in the altogether different setting of the Thames in Oxford – the setting indeed which inspired much of the content of *Wonderland*.

Dodgson's return to England was by overnight ferry from Calais. His final journal entry was on 14 September 1867. He was understandably a little sentimental after two months away, when able to discern 'the lights of Dover, as they slowly broadened on the horizon, as if the old land were opening its arms to receive its homeward bound children…till the faint white line behind them…was visible at last in the grey twilight as the white cliffs of old England'.

All the indications are that Charles Dodgson had had an enjoyable and enlightening European adventure – yet he never again set foot outside Great Britain. He did, however, embark on a different journey soon after, one of the imagination, in beginning work on the sequel to *Wonderland* which would send his heroine on her own travels across the chess board on the other side of her looking-glass.

Notes

[1] All quotations from Dodgson's diary are taken from volume five *Lewis Carroll's Diaries*, edited by Edward Wakeling (The Lewis Carroll Society, 1999).

[2] *Russian Journal of Henry Parry Liddon* edited by Morton N. Cohen (The Lewis Carroll Society of North America, 1979).

[3] Letter to his sister Louisa dated 7 August 1867, cited in *Lewis Carroll's Diaries.*

NOT EXACTLY 'YACHTING': BRINGING NANCY BACK

Peter Willis

He'd not actually done any 'proper yachting' for over ten years. For much of that time he'd been living in the Lake District, where the sailing was in dinghies. In fact he'd written a book about it: *Swallows and Amazons*, which had done very well and led to an annual follow-up. It proved to be a new career, supplanting his period reporting on the Russian Revolution. He'd hired the odd yacht on the Norfolk Broads, and that had led to another book, *Coot Club*. But what Arthur Ransome wanted now was to get back to sea-sailing, as he'd done in the Baltic in *Racundra*, back in the early 1920s, in a proper yacht with a cabin and bunks, and reefing-points on the sails and a compass and charts, and navigation lights for night-sailing.

He and his Russian wife Evgenia decided to move to Suffolk in search of it. This was in 1935, when Arthur was working on *Pigeon Post*, his fifth book, and, as ever, was worrying about where the plot for the next one would come from. They rented a house on the River Orwell, a little way inland from Harwich Harbour, and just down the river from the very yachty village of Pin Mill. Now all Arthur needed was the yacht itself. A sailing friend told him about a yacht for sale in Poole Harbour, 28ft, four berths, cutter-rigged with a good long bowsprit, called *Electron.*

Arthur loved the boat and bought her on the spot, but hated the name, which he promptly changed to *Nancy Blackett*, after the reckless, rumbustious, piratical heroine of *Swallows and Amazons* and its successors. He hired a young crewman, 'strong enough to do the heavy work of pulling and hauling, and young enough not to want to take a share in the navigation to which, after 10 years away from the sea I was most eagerly looking forward,' – and they set about sailing her back to the Orwell, a couple of hundred sea-miles which would give him a good chance to get to know her.

The delivery voyage, which soon ran into a full gale, proved a great deal more eventful and exciting than someone who had done no offshore sailing for a decade or more might have wished.

They started out from Poole on 14 September – 'just as the famous gale began,' as he wrote later in a letter – but at that stage still a fresh south-westerly breeze. By the time they'd covered the 20 miles or so to Yarmouth, Isle of Wight, they were surprised to learn that the lifeboat had been warned by the coastguards at the Needles to be ready to come out to meet them. The gale was rising and over the next few days the normally cosy harbour of Yarmouth became a scene of chaos, with boats sunk, and the lifeboat launched, when the crew could reach it, to rescue sailors *inside* the harbour. One man was drowned. *Nancy*, moored between two posts, had another boat – a large motor-cruiser – tied up alongside her. At the climax of the gale Ransome and his young crewman spent the night on deck using bunk mattresses to fend it off. 'Poor *Nancy* survived, bruised a great deal but not seriously damaged,' wrote Arthur. The dinghy, however, he described as 'smashed and sunk'.

It was a week (during which the dinghy was repaired, for five shillings) before they were able to continue their passage to Pin Mill. Again they set off in fair weather but by the time they were approaching Dover another 'buster', as Ransome called them, had blown up. 'We were carrying full sail and smoking along…Wind rather more than we wanted and we should have reefed, but she seemed to swing along so easily that we could not bring ourselves to stop her.'

On reflection, though, he felt he'd inflicted on 'poor old *Nancy*' about as much as she could chew.

A day in Dover to recover, then on again, 'with a promise, not kept, of easy weather'. *Nancy*'s electrics failed, leaving them 'bucketing along in the dark' and checking the compass by torchlight. The 'miserable' oil-lamp navigation lights kept blowing out too. 'I used a red bakelite Woolworth plate with a strong torch behind it to frighten off the Flushing-Harwich steamer.'

In an alternative version of the tale, from a draft of the unpublished later part of his autobiography, he wrote: 'In some ways I could hardly have chosen a worse, and in others, I could hardly have chosen a better introduction to sailing on the coasts of England…I nearly lost the boat on the first day, mistakenly meeting all the force of the ebb out by the Needles and, in the wild weather, as nearly as possible being swept on the Shingles. However, we evaded them, found our way through by Hurst Castle and came to Yarmouth…I knew by that time that I had got a very good boat.'

He summed up the experience in a letter thus: 'So here she is, and after ten years with none, I've had a little "yachting". It made me feel horribly old, but in a way very young and inexperienced.'

Three months later, in January 1936, he wrote to his publisher: 'Spirits here are rising at last. During the last four days I have seen, grabbed, clutched and pinioned a really gorgeous idea for another book…this new idea is the best since Swallows and Amazons… eight words in its entirely memorable and inevitable title…' It was of course, *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, in which four very young and (fairly) inexperienced children sail a boat called the *Goblin*, exactly like *Nancy Blackett*, across the North Sea, meeting a storm – and improvising a red starboard navigation light, when they meet the Flushing-Harwich steamer.

ARTHUR RANSOME'S LIFE OF ADVENTURE, 1884–1967: 'BETTER DROWNED THAN DUFFERS'

Winifred Wilson

A life of adventure may not have been what Professor Cyril Ransome had in mind for his firstborn, but in taking him to the top of Coniston Old Man on his back as a baby, and later in tossing him overboard into the lake to see if an infant human would instinctively swim as an infant frog does, he perhaps made it, if not inevitable, then a distinct possibility. The failed swimming lesson goaded the young Arthur to go off to the baths in Leeds and teach himself. Did a lingering memory of these early experiences inspire the most famous telegram in children's literature decades later? For of course it occurs in the first pages of *Swallows and Amazons*, published in 1930, and continues IF NOT DUFFERS WONT DROWN. I suspect that Arthur believed it to be his own father's attitude to bringing up children.

What he *was* able to do before he was four years old was to read whole books such as *Robinson Crusoe*, which was very much encouraged at home, and to write his own first 'book' at the age of eight.

Surviving boarding school at Windermere, followed by Rugby, where Dr W. H. D. Rouse not only spotted his short-sightedness, but also encouraged his potential as a writer, to the horror of his recently widowed mother, Arthur, being persuaded of his duty to her and his three siblings to earn a living, enrolled at the Yorkshire College in Leeds (later the University) to study chemistry. Now began his first real adventure, for in his second term he came across the two-volume *Life of William Morris*, by J. W. Mackail (1899), read them in a night – and left academia for good, heading for London.

Starting as an office boy in a small publisher's office, and spending his small salary on books, he began to educate himself, and to publish whatever he was asked to write, whether he knew anything about the subject or not. The first book with his name attached (by A. *M.* Ransome, the only time he used his middle initial) was, ironically the *A.B.C. of physical culture*, 1904, priced at 1/- and today offered online for £5,000.

From such modest beginnings, he learned the art of writing, meeting a wide range of writers and artists, including Edward Thomas, Laurence Binyon (a distant cousin), Cecil Chesterton and the Dymock poets, and immersed himself in Bohemian culture, publishing his first 'proper' book, *Bohemia in London* in 1907.

Chapter XIV of the *Autobiography* is headed 'Disasters', and includes not only the failure and absconding of his publisher, but also meeting and marrying his first wife. Worse was to follow, when his *Oscar Wilde: a critical biography* was published in 1913, and he was sued for libel by Lord Alfred Douglas. The case was eventually dismissed, but after a year of calamities, Ransome took off for Russia, to escape the publicity – and his wife. The ostensible purpose was to learn the Russian language in order to be able to read Russian folk tales in the original, and make his own versions of them for an English-speaking audience. This resulted in the publication in 1916 of *Old Peter's Russian Tales*, never out of print to this day, but also to the

biggest adventure of his life, becoming a newspaper correspondent in time of war and revolution.

This brings us back to the quotation chosen by the ALS to exemplify ‘adventure’ in the life of our authors, for it was in response to a request to write telegrams on behalf of the sick correspondent of the *Daily News*, in the early days of the First World War, that Arthur learned the art of compiling them. There is a difference, however, between writing a telegram from a Naval officer on board ship, giving his children permission to go sailing and camping on a lake in the north of England, and condensing the latest news from a country at war to be expanded by someone else into a report in a major newspaper in a different country altogether. Contrary to his father’s opinion, and despite his failure to win a scholarship to Rugby, Arthur was, after all, a quick learner when really interested in the subject. On arrival in Russia he set about teaching himself the language using children’s primers, through which he progressed ‘as it were a year each week, so that, starting as a child of five learning to read for the first time, I was, at the end of a month or so, a rather backward child of ten.’ At that time, of course, all he wanted to be able to do was to ‘read the Russian collections of folktales.’ But by the end of the war, he was one of the few foreign correspondents to be invited to attend major conferences of the Bolsheviks, not because of his political views, but because he was fluent in the language, and able to understand with ease what each speaker was saying in a crowded room.

Whatever you think of the adventures Ransome experienced in crossing borders in and out of Russia in the midst of conflict, on foot, by train and across the North Sea, or travelling by train to the front-line in Romania, swotting up on the language *en route*, not to mention, much later, in the midst of the Boxer Rebellion in China – please take no notice of claims that he was a spy. What spy would write so openly in his own national press, sending his reports from the midst of, not only a world war, but also a major revolution, knowing that the censors on both sides would read them? What spy would publish books describing in detail the thinking of the major leaders of a post-revolutionary state, encouraging leaders in the West to at least talk to those leaders? Everyone knew Ransome; he did not try to hide his identity on either side of the North Sea. And what secrets could he possibly have had to share from either side? It was not in his personality to scheme or pretend, and his enquiring mind was always occupied in digging for the truth in every situation.

The biggest adventure was still some years off for, back at home, when C. P. Scott, editor of the *Manchester Guardian*, for which he had not only reported from overseas but had also been writing columns and leaders since returning, offered him a permanent job ‘on the corridor’, he and his second wife Evgenia took the momentous decision to rely on his original and only ambition to write ‘books for brats’. He left the paper and began to write *Swallows and Amazons*, and the rest is history.

Note

All quotations, apart from the telegram from *Swallows and Amazons*, are from *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, edited, with prologue and epilogue, by Rupert Hart-Davis, and published by Jonathan Cape in 1976.

WHEN JOHN MOORE WAS BLOWN UP: AS REPORTED IN HIS LETTER TO A FRIEND

John Moore (contributed by Valerie Haworth)

My dear Mike,[1]

I am writing to tell you with smug satisfaction that I am still alive after being machine-gunned and subsequently blown up by the unkind Hun. My satisfaction must not be too smug because the same thing will almost certainly happen again today.

All last week was pretty uncomfortable and I landed on one aerodrome in order to keep clear of a dog-fight just two minutes before it was bombed; so that I got that raid as well as two of our own. But these were nothing to what happened on Sunday when the old Hun caught us on the hop and sixty Junkers 87's and 88's came down on us without warning out of a blue sky.[2] Never believe anybody who tells you he isn't afraid of dive-bombing. No such man exists. It is the most appalling thing in the world. It is the ultimate horror.

As soon as I saw the Junkers I began to run to my Action Station; but I was caught in the open and the bloody things seemed to chase me with their guns and bullets spattered all round. At this stage I was fearfully angry, and I can understand in a way the very foolish action of a Lieut. Com. whom I saw emptying his revolver at them. He got off three rounds before a lot of nasty dark patches appeared in his face.

I next lay down and watched bullets sputtering all round, and then the blast of a 500 kilo bomb picked me up, removed most of my clothes, and chucked me through the door of a Hangar. I lay there, listening to more bombs dropping, until I realised that all the machines in the Hangar were on fire. So I got out of there and sprinted twenty yards to a little shallow trench where I lay in the most awful helpless terror while huge bits of Ford Aerodrome whizzed about the sky and occasionally landed on my bottom. I saw the oddest thing each time I dared peep up : a big transport vehicle flying, an aeroplane wing doing flick-rolls, a complete corrugated iron roof sailing along as easily as a Magic Carpet : and a man blown off his bicycle and doing a couple of stall turns while his bicycle did a couple of loops.

Well, after what seemed a very long time, but was actually about five minutes, everything went quiet except for a great roaring noise like Niagara Falls. So I got up and saw 4000 gallons of petrol burning like fury. The next three hours were pretty hectic. The first job was collecting up casualties; and then we were fighting fires, trying to shift ammunition or save aeroplanes, and so on until we were dead beat. Our water main had a direct hit, our electricity was gone, all our telephone wires were down, Sick Bay demolished, the Armoury on fire and all the ammunition exploding. It was just bloody awful; and yet in the middle of all this mess there was comedy and courage to relieve it. Somebody had hung 'UNSERVICEABLE' on a burned out aeroplane; somebody had scribbled 'CLOSED FOR STOCKTAKING' on the empty shell of the parachute store. What men our Englishmen are. Then there was our young Doctor, a bit white about the gills, driving a car with four flat tyres up and down like a tank over craters and pumping morphia into chaps who were dying.

There was the Captain, everywhere at once and so completely calm that nobody knew he had three bullets in his arm. There were the civilian A.P.S. chaps, some of them badly burned, but

still carrying on; and there were the heroic Wrens who had never seen a dead man before, but who didn't turn a hair and made tea in the midst of it all.

I was never so proud of my Service and Squadron as next morning when, punctually to time, we put twenty machines in the air, rising like Phoenix from the fire, not one of them with less than a score of bullet holes in it.

I am now in the position of possessing absolutely nothing except a dirty shirt, a pair of torn trousers, and some overalls I salvaged from the Stores. My cabin had a direct hit from an anti-personnel bomb. We are living a funny sort of life with no lights, precious little water, few clothes, and no baths or lavatories. But bit by bit we are getting things going again. The great consolation is that we seem to be smacking them down as fast as they come over.

But Michael, if ever, if ever you look into the sky and see a hell of a lot of aeroplanes suddenly go into line astern, and if you see the Leader stall turn towards you, don't try to run, don't do anything except lie flat and try to forget you've got a big bottom : and if you eventually rise up again without all your flesh twitching on your bones in sheer physical terror, you're a braver man than I am, Gunga Din!

Notes

[1]John's great friend Michael Daunt. A fellow pilot, he became famous as Test Pilot for the Gloster Meteor, the RAF's first jet.

[2]At the time of the air-raid John was stationed at Ford, Yapton, in West Sussex. Research by Chris Ferne of the John Moore Society elicited the information: 'Fleet Air Arm training units primarily employed Ford into World War Two but their base suffered extremely heavy damage and loss of life following a ferocious attack by Junkers Ju 87s on August 18 1940.' This is the only recorded serious attack on that base and involved the same type of aircraft that John mentioned – and 12 August was a Sunday.

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BY TRAIN TO SALZBURG: A JOURNEY DURING THE PHONEY WAR

R. M. Healey

Late in 1938 the poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson was at a crossroads in his previously secure and comfortable life. Just two years earlier his career as a journalist seemed assured. He had been the well-paid Literary Editor of the *Morning Post*, had published a few books, was the founding editor of the highly regarded poetry magazine, *New Verse*, had had articles published in magazines and was looking forward to a possible career as a broadcaster for the BBC. He had a wife and child and lived comfortably in a beautiful garden flat in a house in Keats Grove, Hampstead. Here he had thrown parties for some of the best-known poets and painters of the time. Then disaster struck. The *Morning Post* closed down and was amalgamated with the *Daily Telegraph*. Grigson, a Socialist among the Tories of the *Post*, had no intention of accepting a place in another Tory newspaper, and had left to take his chances working with publishers. But his income had dropped and in November 1936 he was obliged to leave trendy Keats Grove and sublet his flat to a fellow poet, Louis MacNeice. He found a new home on the obscure outer reaches of Hampstead at North End, not far from the Bull and Bush. Then there was terrible news. In October 1937 his American wife, Frances, from whom he had been partially estranged, had died horribly from TB at the age of 32, leaving Grigson with savage recriminations and a toddler to care for.

Earlier in 1937 he had met a young Austrian woman, Bertschy Kunert, the daughter of a major from Salzburg, while on holiday on the Dalmatian coast, when his wife was ill in London. Not long afterwards (his memoir is not explicit on this) he became engaged to her and while in 1938 talk of war in Germany was everywhere in the papers and on radio, he decided to rescue her from a dangerous and uncertain future by bringing her back to England. In this he may have been influenced by the decision of Auden, his hero, to marry Erika Mann and remove her from Germany. So it was that Grigson bought a ticket from Thomas Cook's near his old place of work in Holborn and found himself at Harwich bound for Germany via the ferry to Holland. The account of his journey across a part of Europe preparing for hostilities is a suspenseful evocation of fear mixed with anticipation.

After travelling on the train over the German border, Grigson conversed with two female passengers – an Austrian and a German – who were living in England but were bound for their native countries. The Austrian believed there would be no war; the German feared that she would not get back to her husband in London in time. Grigson shared their nervousness:

> …I was wrapped in my numbness in the dark, hemmed all round with a night which was palpably different and ominous...The…numbness was soaked with an apprehension I refused to examine or define, and by which I refused to let myself be led to conclusions, or concrete possibilities. I had a common superstition that if one formulates an event to come, an unpleasant event, like losing a job, it simply would not come. I allowed no scope to this magic.

Looking out of the train window he saw a 'great revolving beam' sweeping across the sky. He convinces himself that it is not a searchlight, but all the same it seems to be a portent of war, a 'sign of power and malice'. And yet, travelling through northern Germany, there were few signs of a war to come 'tonight or tomorrow, or the next day'. Nor was the man he spoke to at the German frontier station convinced that England would provoke war by going to aid of

Czechoslovakia. And yet…he spies French barges hurrying home. They were fleeing from Germany, while he was deliberately travelling towards it.

On the train Grigson's first encounter with an SS officer with a 'Ribbentrop face' unnerves him. On the square of a small town he spies an obvious searchlight unit. And yet, despite all these manifestations he refuses to be intimidated, even by the possibility of war being declared at the next station. Later, he recalls his uneasiness in a poem, 'Oh, in the Hollow Station':

> Oh, in the hollow station, just at dark,
>
> The voice of moving men, and all
>
> The melancholy uneasiness of going,
>
> Arrivals in an alien dark:
>
> And staying here I hold
>
> The sharp edged ticket in the dark, and watch
>
> The wave off a round-eyed yellow lamp
>
> And stare
>
> At the young mother holding by the wall
>
> Her heavy and clear-headed child.

This unease continues as Grigson and the Austrian girl discuss the reasons for his rescue mission. He admits that he is unsure whether he will be met at Salzburg station. He has never encountered the family and wonders if his fiancée will be there to meet him. As it turns out, she is not there, but the rest of the family is. They take him to their flat where they ply him with rum. They then explain why the daughter was not among them. She is in Vienna, held up by the postponement of trains across Austria due to a movement of troops. He is taken to a hotel where, left alone again, his unease returns:

> the sense of the dream, the fabrication, and the play with a cast of one come back – and came back mixed with guilt, for I began to think about my child in a London where trenches were being dug, where it was raining, and the shabby and the well-to-do were lining up for gas-masks…

At three o'clock in the morning he wonders whether the war had begun already, but he falls asleep. This fear is confirmed when at about twenty-to-five he is woken by an urgent knock on the door. He gets up and is confronted by two men. They come in — one in uniform and the other in civilian clothes though sporting a swastika. They look threatening, but his fears are allayed when the man in uniform asks politely for his papers. The pair seemed benign enough, but:

> All the same this was Germany or German territory. It was between four and five a.m. and these two were Nazis. I felt naked in pyjamas. The uniform and the boots in which it ended, and the cap and the holster — they made me feel very much more so as I crossed the room to the suitcase in which I had locked my passport…

The uniformed man asks questions and Grigson is concerned by the implication of these. In the end the uniformed figure wishes him good night and the two men leave. Grigson is left alone again to wonder why they had appeared at that particular time. In the morning he rises and goes into the centre of Salzburg. He is greeted by a street in which flags bearing swastikas

are hung out from every upper window. Wherever he looked ‘flags, flags, more flags, till the houses seemed only something accidentally attached to them. War?’ He sees people scrambling for newspapers that are being sold in the streets. Was this an announcement of war? No. It turns out that the meeting between Chamberlain and Hitler had seemingly brought peace. ‘My war had deserted me’, he declares.

Waiting for his fiancée at Vienna station, thoughts of war being declared, followed inevitably by his arrest and detention in Germany continue to occupy his imagination. Perhaps internment would make his life more ‘interesting’, he muses; he might devote himself to learning German ‘properly’ and reading philosophy. On the other hand, an internment camp might not be so pleasant.

He saw the sign for Dachau on a destination board. Later he wrote that it was as if for a suburban train, ‘as a sign might indicate “Cheam” or “Sutton” at Charing Cross’.

Eventually his fiancée arrives to meet him and the couple go off to explore the sights of Vienna. Their journey back to England was uneventful and they were married in Hampstead a week later.

Notes

Extracts are from Geoffrey Grigson, *The Crest on the Silver* (Cresset Press 1950), pp.194-207.

‘Oh, in the hollow station’ (*Collected Poems,* Phoenix House 1963) p.77.

Permission to quote from these two publications has been granted by David Higham Associates, London.

NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

Mark Davies is a member of the ALS committee and of the Lewis Carroll Society. He is an independent Oxford guide (see www.oxfordwaterwalks.co.uk) and the author of *Alice in Waterland.*

Valerie Haworth is the recently retired editor of the Journal of the John Moore Society and is currently a member of the Henry Williamson Society, the Richard Jefferies Society, the Friends of the Dymock Poets and the Followers of Rupert (i.e. Rupert Bear). She enjoys producing occasional articles for them – all of which are done slowly (she strongly dislikes using a computer) – and writing letters – and is an incurable biblioholic.

R. M. Healey, who is co-editing this edition of *ALSo*, is a founding member of the ALS. Like the subject of this article, he is a journalist and is currently working on a critical biography of Grigson.

Simon Keeton, once a member of the Gipsy Lore society, is currently a member of the George Borrow Society. After doing a French and German degree in Wales as a young man, he later did postgraduate Latin American studies at Liverpool University.

Although generally best known as a novelist, country writer, conservationist-ahead-of-his-time and broadcaster, **John C. Moore** became an accomplished pilot and as Lieut.-Commander John Moore RNVR had an eventful wartime career.

In 1996 **Peter Willis** decided to try and raise funds to buy and preserve Arthur Ransome's yacht *Nancy Blackett* (the original of the *Goblin* in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*), which had been recently restored from a near-total wreck. The result was the Nancy Blackett Trust, still active, with about 400 members, many of them original contributors. He has also written a book, *Good Little Ship*, which details the story, and literary significance of *Nancy Blackett*.

Winifred Wilson was, until recently, Librarian of the Arthur Ransome Society. She still enjoys reading and researching anything related to Ransome's life and works, and writing for the society's journals.