

# Chapter Nine

## *In Houseboat Bay*

*Sunday 24<sup>th</sup> June – Thirty-fifth day of filming*

My diary entry for that day is not exactly revealing. As it was raining steadily in the Lake District, I was given a second day off. 'We had a quiet morning,' I wrote. I am sure I needed one. Legally we were meant to have two days off a week. This had not always been possible for me.

My mother must have been exhausted but she was on set, as was a newspaper journalist, so I can tell you exactly what happened. I can even tell you what the location caterers from Pinewood cooked that Sunday: melon, followed by roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, boiled or roast potatoes, peas and carrots, with apple crumble or tinned peaches served with custard or evaporated milk.

The crew were back on Derwentwater.

'The houseboat has been converted from a pleasure steamer,' wrote Michael McNay in the Features section of *The Guardian*. 'The whole of the superstructure fore faked up by props, the cabin aft converted into a retired colonist's sittingroom – African rug, flowery curtains, assegais on the walls, an ebony elephant with silver howdah and trappings, a walnut wireless cabinet, tall brass oil lamps, a pile of 78rpm records, a silver mounted cricket ball (presented to G. Gumbleton, 1899, for the highest individual score of the season), a chest, a writing desk and an ancient upright Imperial.'

'Ronald Fraser, alias Uncle Jim, is tapping away at a book,' Michael continues. 'Last minute panic: who can type out quickly a folio of copy to leave nonchalantly in the roller?'

The first scene was the one in which Uncle Jim is typing with the green parrot on his shoulder when a firework goes off on his cabin roof. I wonder if Arthur Ransome had ever been disturbed by anyone in such a way? He certainly used an Imperial typewriter.



Ronnie Fraser and Terry Smith beside *The Lady Derwentwater*.

‘By now, the houseboat has been moved and moored to the western shore just off a promontory that is being faked up as one end of Wild Cat Island.’ We think that this was Brandlehow Bay. The houseboat, like a movie star in her own right, was being played by *The Lady Derwentwater*, a fifty-six-foot motor launch, owned by the Keswick Launch Company since 1935.

‘The rain has stopped, the mist is lifting from the 1,500 foot ridge of Cat Bells. Fraser climbs gingerly aboard, awkward in co-respondent’s brown and white shoes, rosy make-up and moves into the aft cabin,’ McNay continues. He was describing the main scene to be shot that day. ‘John, alias Simon West, is in a rowing boat 15 feet away. . . . The problem this time is that the rowing boat has to remain anchored but look as though Simon is pulling steadily in towards the houseboat and the anchor rope has to remain hidden.’ This must have been so that *Swallow* could be lined up accurately and remain in focus for the camera.

‘Simon shows Claude Whatham how he’ll manage it. Quick rehearsal inside the cabin. Ronald Fraser on his knees by the chest folding a white pullover, catches sight of approaching boat, mimes angry surprise. Told not to jerk head so far back. Instead jerks eyebrows up. The cabin is no more than eight foot by ten and contains besides Fraser and the props, four men on a camera, one on lights, and the continuity girl.’

McNay had not included Claude, who I know would have squeezed

in, since these were the days before live monitors off the camera feed. Besides, he was skinny. Robin, the sound recordist, was bigger, but could have just planted a microphone on the desk.

The article goes on to describe the filming:

On the small aft deck Pilbrow is for the next few minutes going to be redundant. He is a mild, inoffensive looking man producing his first film. He is 40 . . . looks like your friendly local antiques dealer. He and Whatham are a good team: Whatham is slight, energetic and calm. He has time, even as a sequence is being set up, to ask the Press if they can see enough of what's going on from the cramped aft deck of the houseboat. It's a cheerful crew; [*the Director of Photography is*] watching clouds overhead with benign suspicion, taking light meter readings inside and outside the cabin every 30 seconds.

'Stand-by Simon.'

'Action,' said quietly into the cabin.

'ACTION,' across the lake to Simon. The clapperboard shows 461 take 1. Fraser folds the pullover, looks up, jerks eyebrows in angry surprise, camera swings round to follow Fraser's gaze through the window, Simon pulls on left oar, keeps the rope hidden.

'CUT.'

Pause.

'Stand by. Quiet everybody. Action. ACTION (461 take 2) . . . CUT.'

'Once more please. Stand by. Action. ACTION (461 take 3) . . . CUT.'

There's a consensus that the third take was best. Ten minute break while the succeeding sequence is prepared: Fraser rushes out on deck and tells Simon to clear off. That too is filmed in triplicate. The time is 12.45. They started work at 6.30, began filming at 12.25 and they've got maybe 45 seconds in the can. Everybody seems pleased.

Ronald Fraser had a driver from Ambleside called David Stott. 'I had just finished my three years at college and was at a loose end before I started my working life.' He was nineteen. 'In the morning Ronnie was reasonably sober and for this reason the director Claude Whatham would try and get most of the shooting with Ronnie in the can before the lunch hour came around when I would be summoned to take him to the nearest hostelry. Ronnie would then order his own concoction 'The

Fraser'. I cannot for the life of me remember what it consisted of, but believe you me these disappeared at a rapid rate of knots down Captain Flint's throat. By the time the liquid lunch came to an end I would have to bundle him into the back of the car and deposit him back on set, much to the dismay of the producer.' Jean McGill, the Unit Nurse confirmed this. She was the one who had to try to sober him up. David remembered that, 'Afternoon shooting was often a disaster when Ronnie was involved and I'm sure he frightened the children from time to time.' He was more scared of the parrot.

'The first day that I had to collect the parrot the old lady who owned him travelled with him to the location on Derwent Water. However she soon became bored with all the hanging around and after that she entrusted me with the parrot. Now birds are not really my thing and I really did not like handling him. He would travel to the location in an old shopping bag with a zipper, where I would hand him over and he would be placed in his cage. This was all well and good, then came the day that was so wet they did not use him, but instead he stayed in the production office at the Kirkstone Foot Hotel where the crew were hanging out. I was told he was in the bathroom. I expected him to be in his travel bag, but no, he was sat on the edge of the bathtub looking at me. By this time he hated being put in the bag it took me all my time with a towel to catch him. Finally, after being scratched and bitten I got him home to his Mum, Mrs. Proctor. She lived in a cottage in one of the old yards in Kendal.'

David had much preferred driving Virginia McKenna. 'I was rather star struck,' he admitted. 'On one occasion I had to drive her from the farmhouse on Coniston to Grange railway station. She was telling me all about filming *Born Free* with the lions and I drove a bit slowly as I was enjoying her company. We arrived rather late and I had to throw her and her luggage onto the train just as it was leaving.'

### *Monday 25<sup>th</sup> June – Thirty-sixth day of filming*

Do all children dream of living on a houseboat? One with a cannon on deck? Going out for tea in Captain Flint's cabin was a highlight for us – a true celebration. It was such a lavish feast – I suppose it was prepared by Ian Whittaker and Bobby Props. We hadn't actually seen Captain Flint walk the plank at this point, but we could all imagine it. It was a pirate banquet, and one they had kept as a complete surprise for us. Suzanna recorded our mood: 'This was nice as we all could eat chocolate eclairs and ice-cream. Titty had a parrot on her shoulder.'

The green parrot was called Beauty. He had very sharp claws. If my eyes are watering in this scene it is because they were digging into my shoulder. Someone found a piece of foam rubber to slip under my blouse but it didn't do much good. He wasn't a very tame parrot and had to have a chain around one leg in case he took flight. I was rather worried he would twist my ear off but ploughed on with the dialogue. If this is convincing it was because I needed to get through my close-ups before I lost part of my face. Although this was a concern, I did rather want a parrot of my own – a tame one.

In real life, it was Arthur Ransome's sister Joyce who had had a green parrot. Arthur used the feathers to clean his pipe. I am often asked if Captain Flint's parrot really did speak. He could certainly talk. I remember something along the lines of, 'Who's a pretty boy, then?' delivered in a broad Lancashire accent. 'Pieces of Eight' was beyond his natural vocabulary and was dubbed on later, along with music from the accordion. Ronald Fraser couldn't actually play one. His driver, a local lad of nineteen called David Stott, arranged for him to have lessons in Ambleside with Mrs Dora Capstick. Having said that, all music from instruments played on screen is added later, so that the sound runs seamlessly no matter how the editor cuts the shots together. The accordion had been carefully muted by Terry Wells. He was also in charge of muting the parrot.

### *Tuesday 26<sup>th</sup> June – Thirty-seventh day of filming*

Suzanna recorded in her diary that Ronald Fraser 'was quite nice but v. fussy'. It seems to me that he loved three things – ladies, laughter and liquor. Although he had a small mouth, Ronnie's capacity for alcohol of almost any kind was legendary. Funnily enough this was the day that we all had a drink on set. The clapperboard or slate had snapped shut on the 500<sup>th</sup> shot of the movie and, in line with tradition, a bottle of champagne was cracked open. Somehow I managed to end up with the dregs. I thought them utterly delicious.

I did the scenes done yesterday because of our background – sky. We went back and did more school work. We had lunch. Simon was given a super fishing rod by Claude. We filmed after lunch. We carried on with the scene.

*Titty:* Really?

*Captain Flint:* Really.

*Titty:* Oh thank you so much.



Celebrating with Claude, Ronnie and Denis.

(Captain Flint speaks)

*Titty:* Won't you be lonely?

(Others speak)

*Titty:* He's not so very old.

We went back to school again. In the tea break I caught a perch. We did some more filming and we danced around the room singing. After that we had a false fight with Captain Flint for the press.

The fishing rod was such an excitement. Simon was very generous and let us all catch fish with it. Arthur Ransome would have been proud of him. Suzanna added another story:

Everyone was celebrating today as it was the 500<sup>th</sup> take. Also it was Mick the painter's birthday and a beautiful cake was made. All the unit stood around and sang happy birthday and at the end this lovely cake was thrown all over him – it was v. funny!

Suzanna refers to the 500<sup>th</sup> take, but she was mistaken. We rarely took more than three takes of each shot. It was the 500<sup>th</sup> slate.

In this scene, after we started to clap and sing 'What shall we do with the drunken sailor?' Claude shouted:

‘Go round!’

Not once, but twice. If you listen very carefully you can just hear him the second time.

He wanted us to dance around the room. I knew this but couldn’t move much with the parrot, so went up and down. Kit was absolutely boiling in her red bobble hat and no one else could move much for fear of knocking into the furniture. It was left to Suzanna to dance about – a tricky thing to do without seeming self-conscious. All in all, we needed a glass of champagne by the end of that particular afternoon.

### *Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> June – Thirty-eighth day of filming*

‘It was quite a nice day weather-wise,’ Suzanna wrote, but obviously not the solid sunshine needed for the big scenes yet to be shot out on the lakes. However, David Blagden, the sailing director, was already back with us in order to appear as Sammy the Policeman, a part he played beautifully. He looked rather distant and confused at the campsite on Wild Cat Island. He was so desolate about having had his hair cut short that he took off his helmet during the scene to prove that he had been shorn.

We were excited that David was on the set, in costume. He’d always been behind the camera before. But he made a very serious policeman and didn’t let the persona of his character fall while he was in uniform.



Gareth Tandy, Suzanna’s stand-in and Claude (in Mum’s hat), with the 35mm Panavision camera and crew.

What works best in the film is the edit. ‘No more trouble of any kind; Virginia McKenna insists – and the shot cuts to the boots of a policeman arriving in camp. It looks as if this was one sequence – but the section where the content of Uncle Jim’s book was discussed, while we sipped tea, had been shot a week previously when Ronald Fraser first arrived in the Lake District.

It was a long day. The secret that made itself apparent occurred in the short scene when John declares ‘a dead calm’ as he looks over the mirror-like lake, before deciding to visit the charcoal burners. Out on the rocks it became embarrassingly clear that I had grown taller than my elder brother. A box was provided for Simon to stand on so that I looked shorter when I ran into shot. Even though it was fairly complicated, the shot was recorded in one take. Everyone was amazed that we moved on so quickly. We needed to.

I have a copy of the Daily Progress Report for 27<sup>th</sup> June. It states that Kit, Lesley, Zanna and Sten arrived on location at 9.00am and left at 4.30pm. This was not true. The unit was dismissed at 6.50pm, which was probably when we left. Simon and I weren’t mentioned. If Mum called this ‘cooking the books’ they were now roasted. Under additional remarks, Neville typed:

1. Dark weather a.m. caused original call for EXT. HOUSEBOAT to be changed to the above.
2. Slight delay on arrival at island due to vandalism during our absence, which meant certain rigging etc. had to be replaced.
3. Location catering 26<sup>th</sup> – 68 people; 27<sup>th</sup> – 69 people

His preoccupation was that, since the bad weather had caused delays, we still had an awful lot to film. The report states that we were five days overschedule with only three remaining days. Four scenes had been shot that day. We still had fifty-one to shoot.

### *Thursday 28<sup>th</sup> June – Thirty-ninth day of filming*

If you ever see a cormorant you must sing out: ‘They’ve got India-rubber necks!’ Then, if you are on a long journey, you can add: ‘Cormorants. We must be near the coast of China. The Chinese have cormorants. They train them to catch fish for them. Daddy sent me a picture.’

If you ever get lost, or the journey is a very long one, you can say: ‘Here we are, intrepid explorers making the first ever voyage into uncharted waters. What mysteries will they hold for us? What dark secrets will be revealed?’



Sten with Ronnie Fraser.

They were most complicated speeches to deliver afloat, ones I had to learn. In the end the second part was heard OOV – out of vision. I could have read the lines. But then they wouldn't have stayed in my head forever.

If, on your journey, you happen to see a man sitting in a chair writing notes, you score high and can say, 'What's that man doing? He's probably a retired pirate working on his devilish crimes.' I'm a bit hesitant about that one, because my Aunt Hermione really was approached by pirates when she was sailing round the world. The *Daily Mail* published her diary chronicling the adventure: a double-page spread with photographs, no less. Rather sadly they ran the headline 'Intrepid Pensioners'. What a swizz. She should have lied about her age and said she was twenty-seven instead of sixty. Well, perhaps fifty-seven, as they took quite large photos. At least she was intrepid.

The scene behind the camera that day on Derwentwater was rather different from the scene in front of it:

My first scene was setting anchor and hearing the robbers. After this I did some school work, while the next scene was set up. The next scene was sailing past Darien on the voyage to the island. We sang 'Adieu and Farewell'.

This was a mistake. I should have sung 'Farewell and Adieu'. 'On this shot we were going along on the pontoon when we went aground. There was an awful jolt and Cedric (camera assistant) went overboard.'

Although I was chilly, it was a glorious sunny day when shots were taken for the montage of our voyage to the island that captured the excitement of sailing with a fair wind. It was as if Peter Pan and Wendy were flying off to Neverland with John and Michael, spying Captain Hook on the way. We achieved a huge amount, even if Cedric fell in. Some of the boatmen and crew were wearing life-jackets, others were not – including my mother. *Swallow* is a safe little boat – her keel ensured we didn't capsize if we happened to jibe, and we never fell in. The pontoon was rather more dangerous, being a raft with no gunwale or railing. Anyone could have misjudged their step and plopped overboard. Fortunately, we were not stifled by Health and Safety legislation in those days.

I'm sure that we had already recorded the first two scenes of the day when I was in *Amazon*, setting the anchor and later hearing the robbers. I expect Claude needed to re-shoot for technical reasons. Day-for-Night filming was tricky, as was keeping shots on the water horizontal with only a spirit-level for a guide.

I have some of my mother's 8mm ciné footage showing us at around this stage in the filming. It shows us waiting around on the shores of Derwentwater one minute and rushing off across the lake in motor boats the next, no doubt to finish filming before Claude lost the light. You see the pontoon and a safety boat towing *Swallow*, me snapping bossily at Roger to get a move on, which was unforgivable even though I was four years older than him and irritated to distraction. Another shot shows David Blagden splicing rope and *Swallow* rigged and ready to sail while mallard ducklings shuffle about at the water's edge. The weather looks idyllic. It was quite different the next day.

### *Friday 29<sup>th</sup> June – Fortieth day of filming*

The rain poured down.

Ambleside was covered in cloud, the Lake District dark and dismal. We were way behind schedule, Lesley was ill in bed, and we had run out of 'rain cover'.

There was one sequence left that could be recorded in dull weather. Today was the day Claude shot the haunting scenes of Octopus Lagoon. After finishing our school work, Kit and I sat watching the filming from the sloping field above a beautiful but rather smelly lily pond.

The location chosen was on private property above Skelwith Fold Caravan Park. The Arthur Ransome expert Roger Wardale cites Octopus

Lagoon as originally being Allan Tarn, a short distance up the River Crake at the southern end of Coniston Water, near High Nibthwaite. You need a shallow-bottomed boat to get there. This is the place Ransome had in mind. He went there with his brother and sisters as a child, when they spent their summer holidays staying at Swainson's Farm nearby. His father enjoyed the fishing.

The lily pond we used was in a high-sided dip, which made it appropriately dark and gloomy. It was also more accessible for the film crew and captured the conundrum faced by Captain John, while he was stuck in the waterlilies as night drew in.

Terry Needham, Neville Thompson and Graham Ford were responsible for the film schedule, putting together the whole logistical jigsaw puzzle posed by factors such as the availability of leading actors and locations with the movement of vehicles and boats, including the massive camera pontoon. It was Graham, the production manager, who took the stress of problems caused by wet weather. I guess that he also took on the responsibilities of managing the locations, negotiating with owners and the Lake District National Park, something that authors such as Arthur Ransome would not have had to face. Although young, Graham was pretty experienced. He had previously worked as an assistant director on such classic films as *Steptoe and Son* and had been the unit manager on *The Devils* with Neville Thompson.



Terry Needham, Neville Thompson and Graham Ford on a sunnier day.

The following day was a scheduled 'Unit Day Off' but I expect that Graham was trying to work out how we could possibly record the huge number of scenes that remained. Claude was desperately behind schedule and yet, like the Swallows in the waterlilies, he was thwarted whichever way he turned.

Ronnie had not been on set that day but I heard he had been enjoying his time in town. Peter Walker, who now lives in Kendal, told me that he literally bumped into him in a pub. 'In 1973 I worked for Post Office Telecommunications (now BT) as a local maintenance engineer and had been given the job of repairing a fault on the payphone in the White Lion Hotel in the centre of Ambleside. As I pushed open the door to the bar it slipped out of my hand. The handle caught a customer in the back who happened to be taking delivery of a large drink. I apologised, but he said, 'No damage done, my boy, haven't spilt a drop!' I said I was referring to his back, 'Don't worry,' he insisted, 'being stabbed in the back is normal in my line of business!' It was Ronnie, through and through.

'He was a total lush,' one of his friends claimed, 'but charming, funny and scandalous. His fund of acting stories was endless. I'm surprised he made it through *Swallows and Amazons*.' Claude must have been slightly worried whether or not he would.

'You children persuaded me to go out to dinner with Ronnie Fraser!' Jean McGill told me forty-three years after the event. 'Why I went, I haven't the foggiest. He was a rough character - very coarse. I used to have to drive him to the local hotel in the mornings and order champagne to sober him up.'

'How would champagne have helped to sober him?'

'I don't know. He told me it would.'

'I think he'd been divorced for a while.'

'I wouldn't have married him in the first place,' Jean assured me.

### *Saturday 30<sup>th</sup> June – Fame in the Express*

After breakfast we went to the newsagent and bought an *Express* in which was a big photograph of Ronnie Fraser, one of us, and an article about Ronnie.

The secret was out: 'The ice tinkles quite merrily as a counterpoint to his anecdotes which are many, outrageous, and largely unrepeatable.' Ice in a tall glass, accompanied by a large amount of vodka and 'a kiss of lime'. While we had been busy filming on the stinky lily pond, the 'joker's joker' had been languishing in the bar of the unit hotel saying

that ‘he was a lousy lover but loved to practise’. Oh, deary me. Worse was to come. ‘Baby, you’ve got to be a bit dotty’ to be an actor, he said. At least we were described as ‘very bright and very active.’

‘Mr Ronald Fraser,’ wrote Geoffrey Mather, ‘that distinguished actor of stage, screen and cocktail bar, possessor of an accent all fruity with well-modulated vowels, is dressed in what appears to be cricket gear [*his costume*]. . . . He is not, he says, a great drinker. He sometimes pretends to be one. The lure of a bar, such as it is, concerns the interplay of personality and anecdote. Close friends can, he says, find this need in him irritating.’

Luckily, we were not around to add comment on this. David Blagden had previously had a small part playing a prison officer in the movie *Kidnapped*, which was being shown at the local cinema that afternoon. ‘Mummy and Jane took us to see it.’ The film starred Michael Caine, Trevor Howard and Lawrence Douglas, with Jack Hawkins, Donald Pleasence and Gordon Jackson, but sadly not Ronald Fraser. He was still in the bar.

Suzanna Hamilton’s perspective on the day was written confidently in purple crayon: ‘We had to have medicals as our licenses were going to run overtime.’

Sten referred to this as going to ‘the docters for a examination.’ I was fine – ‘I had put on 5lbs.’ Luckily the insurance company didn’t want to test Ronnie, in spite of caustic suggestions published that day in the national press:

And you know what Mr Fraser has to do now to pursue his career? He has to go in that water – SPLASH. Pushed in by those bright and vigorous kids. It hardly seems fair to do that to such a splendid gentleman. Especially one who had his fill of water when the violins went . . . BOING.

Did the insurance brokers miss this on purpose?

What no one could deny was that our medical tests were a sign that the movie was under the weather and over-stressed, with nothing much anyone could do about it but keep going. We still had to capture the houseboat – and make that splendid gentleman walk the plank.