

Foreword

How many of us have grown up under the strident crossed flags of the Swallows and the Amazons? How many children have gazed at line drawings that rarely show faces and yet immerse them in a world they can map out for themselves as they let their imaginations run free?

Arthur Ransome's well-loved series of classic books about the Swallows, Amazons and Coots, along with a few Eels, have graced the shelves of bookshops since the 1930s. As a child, my father looked forward to the publication of each new hardback almost every Christmas. Oh, that he had kept those first editions! Instead he bought Puffin paperbacks for me. I devoured them all, ever-eager to go camping and explore wild places, imagining myself sometimes as Susan, sometimes as Nancy or Peggy. Ransome literally taught me to sail a small boat and camp effectively, just as he taught so many others. He wrote as if he himself were living the adventures, which of course he was. The only thing he failed to describe was the reality of outdoor temperatures. It seems he was quite impervious to the cold.

Although I never saw myself as a competent able-seaman, I was fortunate enough to play Titty Walker in the 1974 feature film of *Swallows and Amazons*, with Virginia McKenna as 'the best of all natives'. Since the Blu-ray has been re-mastered for cinemas, I can still be seen rowing *Amazon* across Derwentwater as a shivering twelve-year-old, wearing no more than a cotton dress, grey cardigan and an enormous pair of navy blue gym knickers. I clearly remember filming this sequence, since the director, the cinematographer and a sizeable 35mm Panavision camera were also in the dinghy. As children, living out the drama in the Lake District, collecting firewood, making paterans and catching perch, we became intimately involved in the story and developed a meaningful association with the imaginary landscape carefully pieced together over seven weeks of filming.

Ten years later, I was able to work on the BBC television serial of *Coot Club* and *The Big Six*, made entirely on location in East Anglia under the generic title of *Swallows and Amazons Forever!* I was given

the task of finding a boy to play Tom Dudgeon and children with Norfolk accents to play the Death and Glories, together with the baddies, George Owdon, Ralph Strakey and Rodley's sons. We spent three months filming on the Norfolk Broads, calling out, 'Coots Forever! And Ever!' with Rosemary Leach who played Mrs Barrable, Patrick Troughton in the guise of Harry Bangate, the Eel Man, and Julian Fellowes, who led the Hullabaloes across Breydon Water with a narrow moustache flickering in menace on his upper lip.

It wasn't until another thirty years passed, when I was asked by members of The Arthur Ransome Society how the books were adapted for the screen, that I read these stories more deeply and began to research into Ransome's life. I discovered glimpses of his own history in the characters – Captain Flint, junketing about overseas; Captain John, responsible for his three younger siblings; Dick, the boy with round glasses who loved bird-watching; and his sister, the lyrical author Dorothea. The Swallows were originally based on the children of Ransome's old friends, the Altounyans (though he was later hotly to deny it): Taqui, Susie, Titty, Roger and Brigit, whom he met when they came to visit their grandparents in 1928 and stayed at Holly Howe, the real Bank Ground Farm, above Coniston Water.

Of course, not all Ransome's characters are human. The yacht *Nancy Blackett*, bought with 'Spanish gold', as he was wont to call publisher's royalties, was used as his model for *Goblin* in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* and *Secret Water*. You can sail her across the North Sea today. *SL Esperance* and *SL Gondola*, his models for Captain Flint's houseboat, can still be found in Cumbria. Indeed, you can take a trip down Coniston Water on the National Trust's replica of the *Gondola*, just as the Ransome family did when they spent summer holidays on a farm beneath knickerbockerbreaker rocks at Nibthwaite. Keep a sharp lookout for Secret Harbour at the southern end of Peel Island. You might even spot a cormorant. 'They've got india rubber necks.'

It is wonderful now to have Julian Lovelock's *Swallows, Amazons and Coots*, a new full-length critical study that provides further background to Ransome's well-loved tales, as a travelling companion. In it, we learn how Ransome agonised over his plots 'in the cider press', despite the tyranny of stomach ulcers and his demanding Russian wife. We find out how Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina, the girl he whisked away from Trotsky's office in Petrograd and the dangers of the Bolshevik revolution, became his harshest critic and yet made useful, if not brilliant, suggestions. Although she proved an edifying editor, her comments were harsh enough to have me weeping with laughter. We learn that Susie Altounyan thought it was Evgenia who best represented Mate Susan, willing to go

anywhere and cook anything, but not without insecurities when it came to strangers appearing in the Lake District. Her bad-tempered potatoes are the give-away. And, in many ways Ransome's writing did depend on Evgenia, who took care of meals and practicalities as the couple endlessly moved house despite Jonathan Cape's deadlines. David Wood experienced her firm hand on his neck as he crafted the screenplay to the 1974 *Swallows and Amazons* film. 'Susan wouldn't say that,' Evgenia told him emphatically, although David managed to find the page in the novel that proved her wrong.

But while *Swallows, Amazons and Coots* offers a brief introduction to Ransome's life and times, showing how these are often the starting-point for his writing, it warns against 'biographical reductionism'. Instead it focuses on the themes woven through the *Swallows and Amazons* novels, looking at how his characters develop as well as revealing the complexities that lie beneath Ransome's simple but sparkling prose. It highlights the 'explorers' and 'savages' imagery of a colonial world, celebrates the threatened beauty of rural England and points to the unease of the 1930s that lies only just beneath the surface. It questions the role of women in an ingrained patriarchal culture while highlighting the class divisions which would be challenged when the Second World War was over.

I was, in fact, re-reading *Peter Duck* when the manuscript of *Swallows, Amazons and Coots* arrived in the post and I immediately discovered a fresh perspective on Ransome's treasure island fantasy. It started life as a pirate story told by the Swallows and Amazons when they are holed up on a winter cruise on the Norfolk Broads – a story in which they make themselves the main characters. But in the story, an old sea-dog spins his own yarn in which the children are somehow also caught up as they sail with him to the Caribbees, fight with real pirates and discover hidden pearls. 'It is,' says Julian Lovelock, 'a story within a story; a metafictional delight.'

As I read *Swallows, Amazons and Coots*, my eyes grew accustomed to looking towards distant horizons, my understanding developed and I walked forward in anticipation. It occurred to me some time ago that Ransome must have thought the Lakeland rush-bearing festivals made Bowness seem like Rio, but I had not taken in other obvious references to South America: stout Cortez on the Peak in Darien, the anticipated armadillo, the River Plate and the Spanish Main, not forgetting Cape Horn and the Magellan Straits in *Secret Water*. I've been inspired to think more critically about the novels, about the people, the places and their origin.

Recently I stepped into a carriage of the steam locomotive that takes a new film adaptation of *Swallows and Amazons* into the next

generation of children's lives and wondered what the future will hold. Thankfully Ransome's wilderness is still there to be found and with it, freedom. Bobby McCulloch, who plays Roger in the movie, said, 'I really want to sail to an island with my brothers and survive without my parents, just like the Swallows.' One of the other young actors said, 'Sailing on the lake, sleeping under the stars, who wouldn't want that?'¹ We just have to make our own decisions and take the practical steps to embark on voyages of exploration and discovery. It's not out of reach.

As President of The Arthur Ransome Society, I come across people everywhere who not only admire Ransome but readily tell me how his stories have influenced their lives. They always strike me as having become remarkably good decision-makers who delight in their own tales of outdoor life and nautical accomplishments. How many sailors do you know who happen to be called Roger? I've met a number who admit to being given certain books at an impressionable age that gave them direction and encouragement to last a lifetime. My own list is endless. During the pirate feast aboard Captain Flint's houseboat Titty declared she would like to go to Africa and see forests full of parrots. And some years later I did just that. I found myself drawing a number of charts in Botswana as Meyer's parrots swooped down from the palm trees. I cooked on camp fires, slept in a tent and travelled by dug-out canoe. The most serendipitous occurrence was that, along with the girls playing the Amazons, I learnt how to shoot with a bow and arrow under the gaze of Old Man Coniston. As a result, I went on to play an archery champion in another movie and ended up meeting my husband at a longbow tournament. Our arrows should be fletched with green parrots' feathers, only I fear we'd never find them in the grass.

I'm sure that Arthur Ransome enthusiasts and students of children's literature will enjoy and appreciate *Swallows, Amazons and Coots*. It's the first book devoted wholly to a critical reading of the twelve *Swallows and Amazons* novels that introduce the young to adventure and bring solace to adult readers. Without in any way detracting from the magic of Ransome's well-loved stories, it offers new insights into his skill as a writer – a skill that led him to be awarded the first Carnegie Medal in 1936, an honorary Doctor of Letters in 1951 and a CBE in 1953 as his books were translated and enjoyed all over the world. I wish *Swallows, Amazons and Coots* 'God speed', and all the success it deserves.

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President of The Arthur Ransome Society

1. Melissa Brobby, 'Swallows and Amazons Cast Q&As', *Visit England*, 5 July 2016: <https://www.visitengland.com/blog/july-2016/quotes-cast-swallows-and-amazons>.