

Introduction:

‘The Romantic Transfiguration of Fact’

This is not so much a book about Arthur Ransome, whose life and complex character have been explored in every detail, but about his *Swallows and Amazons* novels (though the author and his work are more than usually intertwined). There are twelve books in all, written between 1930 and 1947: *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), *Swallowdale* (1931), *Peter Duck* (1932), *Winter Holiday* (1933), *Coot Club* (1934), *Pigeon Post* (1936), *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (1937), *Secret Water* (1939), *The Big Six* (1940), *Missee Lee* (1941), *The Picts and the Martyrs* (1943), and *Great Northern?* (1947). Fragments of a further novel with the working title *Swallows & Co.* started and abandoned after *The Picts and the Martyrs*, were discovered among some of Ransome's papers lent to the Lakeland Museum at Abbot Hall, Kendal. They were edited by Hugh Brogan and published as *Coots in the North* (1988).

It was, I think, in 1960 that I began reading the *Swallows and Amazons* novels – first in a hospital bed, and then curled each night in my bunk on the sort of boating holiday that Ransome's characters would have enjoyed. By then I knew Pin Mill and the River Orwell, which are the starting point for both *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* and *Secret Water*. Like Ransome's Swallows I had made the crossing, described so vividly in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, to Flushing (Vlissingen) in Holland. So I thought myself an adventurer too, and shared their nautical world and language, though in my case there were adults to keep us out of danger – or at least to take us out of danger when the sea turned rough or the old Atlantic paraffin engines of *Margaret Mary III*, the 1930s motor yacht on which we were able-seamen, broke down (which they frequently did).

Looking back, there was also another way in which I came close to sharing the world of the Swallows and Amazons. It was only fifteen years after the end of the Second World War and the British Empire was

in the death throes that Ransome had half foreseen and half lamented. The Sussex preparatory school which I attended (and which was a far happier place than Ransome's school, Windermere Old College) still seemed to be preparing us boys to administer the fast disappearing colonies. In Geography, half the world was coloured a fading red in our atlases; we collected stamps from Gold Coast, Tanganyika and Zanzibar, and from Rhodesia and Nyasaland; we were Baden-Powell's Scouts, when Scouting was still about serving God, Queen and Country. In History we learned of breath-taking victories at Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt; of Drake and Raleigh; of Nelson and Wellington; of Livingstone and Rhodes. Out of class, we revelled in victories against German and Japanese foes, vividly illustrated in tasteless comic books, which we re-enacted with armies of plastic *Airfix* soldiers. My father, who would have been a near contemporary of Ransome's Commander Walker, had evacuated troops from the beaches of Dunkirk before spending the war sweeping mines in the Indian Ocean. But whatever the triumph of the allied forces over Hitler's axis of evil, these were the dog days of *Great Britain*.

It was not long afterwards that the innocent but precarious era that Ransome so vividly evokes, and which I had at least partly experienced, was over. In 1965 I was one of a group of schoolboys – we were aged fifteen and sixteen – who ventured onto the Norfolk Broads for our own holiday, and explored for myself the rivers and villages that are the setting of *Coot Club* and *The Big Six*. By then the 1960s were swinging, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones were symptomatic of a new and exciting youth culture, and (according to Philip Larkin) sex, which largely passed the Swallows and Amazons by, had begun.¹ We were discovering girls and beer, and our exploits, though tame, were somewhat different from those of Ransome's Norfolk Coots.

It was more than forty years later – after a number of sailing holidays on the Norfolk Broads on board the *Perfect Lady* and *Leading Lady* yachts from Herbert Woods's yard at Potter Heigham – that I finally drove north to explore Windermere and Coniston Water. But I'm not sure that the delay mattered more than symbolically, because (unlike the wholly real Norfolk settings) Ransome's Lake is neither Windermere nor Coniston Water, nor even a simple mixing of the two, but an imaginative transformation of the Lake District landscape (Derwentwater is another particular source). Indeed, seeing Windermere's Blake Holme and Coniston's Peel Island was an anti-climax: Wild Cat Island is much larger and more exciting than its actual precursors.

1. Philip Larkin, 'Annus Mirabilis' (1967).

Beginnings

For many enthusiasts, Arthur Ransome has come to be the standard-bearer of a lost colonial world whose characters display fortitude, honesty, resourcefulness, leadership, and an endearing innocence; whose settings remind us of unspoilt landscapes, traditional skills, and an idyllic rural way of life. But Ransome is a far more complex figure, who never quite shook off the devastating loss of his father and the radicalism of his youth, and it is my argument that the *Swallows and Amazons* novels challenge as much as reinforce the pervading attitudes of his time.

Ransome was born in 1884, the son of Edith and Cyril; Cyril was a Professor of History and Modern Literature at the Yorkshire College (later Leeds University). He was followed into the world by his sisters and brother, Cecily, Geoffrey, and Joyce. His childhood was not an altogether happy one, though family holidays in the Lake District were always remembered with relish; these were spent at Swainson's farm in the village of Nibthwaite at the southern end of Coniston Water (the farm and its occupants feature in the Lake novels, though moved to a different location).

In 1893, at the age of nine, Ransome was enrolled at a boarding preparatory school, Windermere Old College. Cyril was trying to do his best for his son by educating him in the Lake District that he loved, but on the whole it was a disaster, and young Arthur was bullied and lonely. Cyril Ransome died of 'some sort of tuberculosis' in 1897 and it seems that, at least subconsciously, Ransome was haunted by him for the rest of his life; although they had never got on and Ransome was rarely able to fulfil his father's high expectations of him, he was always to dwell on what might have been. In his *Autobiography*, he reflects on his father's funeral: 'As the earth rattled on the lid of the coffin I stood horrified at myself, knowing that with my very real sorrow, because I had liked and admired my father, was a mixed feeling of relief.'¹

In the same year, Ransome entered Rugby School where he had a largely undistinguished career but at least seemed to make friends and enjoy life. It was here that his ambition to be a writer hardened, encouraged by his English teacher, the eminent classicist Dr W.H.D. Rouse. After leaving Rugby in 1901, he was persuaded by his mother to study science at the Yorkshire College where his father had worked, but, while he enjoyed the freedom and his time in the laboratory, he was not a scientist at heart. Inspired by J.W. Mackail's *Life of William*

1. Arthur Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Century Publishing, 1985), p. 52.

Morris (1899), he was soon approaching various family friends in the world of publishing to seek work and, although he was unsuccessful, a speculative approach to the London publisher Grant Richards brought him the offer of a job as an office boy. His mother caved in (believing that publishing, unlike writing, was at least a respectable and potentially profitable career) and Ransome accepted with alacrity.

During the next fifteen years, Ransome learned the trade of writing. After his job with Richards, he was employed as a ghost-writer on a series of sports books (although he knew nothing about sport) and also published *The ABC of Physical Culture* (1904); he reviewed books; he wrote books on nature for children (the language is excessively ornate, even for the period); he described his London life in *Bohemia in London* (1909). The latter, his first significant book, describes how he enjoyed acting the role of the young writer socialising with celebrities, a sort of artistic rite of passage. He wrote the laboured but insightful *A History of Storytelling* (1909) as well as critical studies of Edgar Allan Poe (1910) and Oscar Wilde (1912). The latter resulted in his being sued for libel by Lord Alfred Douglas; Ransome was fortunate to be represented by Sir George Lewis, a leading barrister of the time, and won the case after a sensationalised four-day trial. If he had not yet made his own name as a writer, he could still enjoy the writers' milieu and hope that some of their glitter would rub off on him.

During this period, Ransome spent whatever time he could camping in the Lake District. A chance meeting in 1903 with his father's friend W.G. Collingwood (secretary to John Ruskin) led to his being 'adopted' by the Collingwood family. They invited him to stay with them at their Lanehead home, giving him a room in which to work. The Collingwood children – Dora, Barbara, and Robin – taught him to sail (their dinghy was called *Swallow*). There was even the possibility that he might marry Barbara Collingwood and, later, Dora; both turned him down a little sadly, though Barbara was to remain a lifelong friend.

The next stage in Ransome's growing up was his continued quest for a wife. He now took to playing the part of the romantic hero, composing love letters which he sent indiscriminately to his female acquaintances: the result was a string of entanglements and at least two unsuitable engagements. But in 1909 he was flattered that his advances were returned by the beautiful Ivy Walker. He was naïve and she was, according to Ransome, manipulative; no doubt he was enchanted by the fact that 'she had an extraordinary power of surrounding the simplest act with an air of conspiratorial secrecy and excitement'.¹ Like

1. *Autobiography*, p. 133.

Ransome, Ivy was something of a fantasist; she too enjoyed being the centre of attention. However, in Ransome's eyes, she was unstable and even violent, and they were simply bad for each other. Ransome, now playing the part of victim, suggested that he went through with the wedding because it would have upset her too much to do otherwise, but the marriage was a disaster from the start. It was only the birth of their daughter, Tabitha, in 1910 that kept them together at all. But after his victory in the Wilde case, and an incident when Ivy dramatically smashed two table lamps after he muddled a servant's name, Ransome decided to escape. In June 1913 he left for Russia, ostensibly to write a guidebook to St Petersburg and to work on a collection of Russian folk-tales which was published in 1916 as *Old Peter's Russian Tales*. Tabitha, on whom he had doted, was afterwards brought up with only her mother's side of the marital story (almost certainly coloured by the fact that she had been left to bring up their daughter alone), and in spite of his sporadic efforts at reconciliation she was never to forgive him.

At the start of the First World War, Ransome was appointed as the St Petersburg correspondent of the radical *Daily News* after the incumbent fell ill, and so his ambition to be a creative writer was put on hold and he began a career as a political journalist: 'Some day or other,' he wrote to his mother, 'regardless of the advantages of a settled income, I shall fling my typewriter over the moon, and catch it with a joyful yell on the other side, and spend three years in pouring out novels – at least romances – in collaboration with Joyce [his sister], and a mass of fairy stories in collaboration with myself.'¹ Soon he was reporting on more than the war; he predicted and witnessed the Revolution in 1917 and the downfall of Tsar Nicholas, and became notorious for his public championing of the Bolshevik cause. He made friends with Karl Radek, the Bolshevik propagandist, who saw how he could be used to advantage and introduced him to the Bolshevik hierarchy. Thus he was able to associate easily with Lenin and Trotsky, and he enjoyed a passionate relationship with Trotsky's secretary, Evgenia Shelepina, whom he was to marry in 1924 after Ivy finally agreed to a divorce. Not surprisingly, there were rumours that Ransome, whose involvement with the Bolsheviks flew in the face of British policy, was in some ways a turncoat and may have been passing secrets to his Bolshevik friends. There is no evidence that he ever revealed anything that threatened British security, although there is no doubt that he advised the Cheka

1. Letter to Edith Ransome, 26 February 1917, reproduced in Hugh Brogan, ed., *Signalling from Mars: Letters of Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997), pp. 41–42. Joyce (Lupton) was also to write children's books.

on British foreign policy, or that in 1918 he smuggled three million roubles out of Russia to Sweden to fund the Bolshevik cause abroad and in 1919 smuggled out a further two million roubles together with diamonds and pearls (possibly as part of a deal which allowed Evgenia to leave the country). When in the same year he returned to England for a brief visit, he was arrested and interrogated by Basil Thomson, Head of Special Branch, but (so his story goes) the interview petered out into an enthusiastic discussion about fishing.¹

In fact, while these events were in train, Ransome had been recruited by the British secret service and was operating as agent S.76, advising the British on Bolshevik policy. A report to MI5 on 17 March 1919 asserts:

His association with the Bolsheviks was begun, and has been continued throughout, at the direct request of responsible British Authorities. He was first asked to get into the closest possible touch with them by Mr Lindley when he was Chargé d'Affaires.²

In *SIX: A History of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service*, Michael Smith claims that Evgenia Shelepina fed Ransome information which was then passed to Ernest Boyce, the head of the British secret service in Russia, and that it was she who was the important player.³ When later in 1919 the *Daily News* decided to withdraw Ransome from Sweden (where he was now living with Evgenia, Moscow having become too dangerous), the War Office, represented by the theatre impresario and literary critic Harley Granville-Barker, intervened, agreeing to take over payment of the couple's expenses. The authorities were then so successful in organising a public denunciation of Ransome for his political views that it became possible for him and Evgenia to return to Moscow until May 1920, when he again became worried that they were under suspicion and they moved to Estonia.

Thus it appears that Ransome was working as a low-level, rather open and harmless double agent, and he was no doubt enjoying the part and its disguises. His accounts of revolutionary Russia (*On Behalf of Russia*, 1918; *Six Weeks in Russia in 1919*, 1919; and *The Crisis in Russia*, 1921), at first glance paeans to the Bolsheviks, are still worth reading and capture the exhilarating atmosphere of the time. *On Behalf of*

1. *Autobiography*, p. 267.

2. National Archive, released March 2005. Quoted in Michael Smith, *SIX: A History of Britain's Secret Intelligence Service, Part 1: Murder and Mayhem* (London: Biteback, 2010), p. 266.

3. Smith, *SIX*, pp. 257-72.

Russia in particular, written in collaboration with Karl Radek, was an open letter canvassing support from the American people by appealing to their own revolutionary history and instincts. On the surface, at least, Ransome saw the Bolshevik revolution against the Tsar as a people's justifiable overthrowing of tyrannical oppression. He went as far as apparently accepting Bolshevik atrocities as a necessary evil, remaining on the British government's list of suspected Bolshevik activists until 1937, but this is unlikely to have been his real opinion and a later MI5 file note is probably right: 'S.76 is not a Bolshevik. His interest in, association with various Bolshevik leaders has always been literary rather than political. He has, I think, no special political views.'¹

For another five years, Ransome and Evgenia were based in the Baltic (first in Reval, Estonia; then in Riga, Latvia), where Ransome continued to work as a journalist, now for the *Manchester Guardian*. Political tensions eased and he made regular trips back to Moscow. They both enjoyed sailing a series of boats: *The Slug*, *Kittiwake*, and *Racundra*. *Kittiwake* was a small 16-foot dinghy, to which Ransome added a tiny cabin, and perhaps there is something of her in *Coot Club's Death and Glory*. *Racundra* was built in Riga and the story of her maiden voyage is told in Ransome's yachting classic, *Racundra's First Cruise* (1923); the escapist world it describes is part reality, part fiction, and foreshadows the utopia of the children's novels. It was only in 1924, with the British government's grudging recognition of the Russian Revolutionary government, that Ransome claimed that he had at last been vindicated and that 'his war was over'. He and Evgenia, now his new wife, sailed for England in November 1924 and settled at Low Ludderburn, a cottage near Ambleside in the Lake District.

Ransome and Evgenia were devoted to each other, but it was never an easy marriage. Evgenia had a domineering personality and seems to have taken or influenced most of the decisions that affected their married life, not always to her husband's benefit, and in old age Ransome was frightened of her. She was invariably an unkind (though sometimes accurate) critic of his books. This uncomfortable personal life (when taken with the disaster of his first marriage and his sad estrangement from his daughter) was a likely factor in his seeking solace in seemingly escapist stories.

Ransome continued to write for the *Manchester Guardian*. He was sent to report on elections in Egypt and to investigate the extent of Russian

1. National Archive, released March, 2005. Quoted in David Pallister, 'Still our enigma, our Petrograd correspondent', in theguardian.co.uk, 1 March, 2005.

influence in China (commissions which he accepted reluctantly); the unsuccessful *The Chinese Puzzle* (1927) was to be his final political book. In February 1928, he made his last visit to Moscow in order to cover the exile of Trotsky. He also wrote a regular column on fishing, later collected and published as *Rod and Line* (1929). But, now in his mid-forties, he was feeling increasingly trapped on the treadmill of journalism and worried that his original desire to write novels was still being shouldered out.

In 1915 Dora Collingwood had married her long-time suitor, Ernest Altounyan. They lived in Syria, but every few years they returned with their young family to holiday in the Lake District. It was thus that in 1928 Ernest spent the summer teaching their children to sail on Coniston Water in the dinghies *Swallow* and *Mavis*, with Ransome as an enthusiastic spectator. When the time came for the Altounyans to return to Syria, the children gave Ransome a pair of scarlet slippers as a birthday present. The following year Ransome began to turn the inspiration of that summer, and the experiences of his own childhood summers, into *Swallows and Amazons*, which was originally dedicated to 'THE FOUR FOR WHOM IT WAS WRITTEN IN EXCHANGE FOR A PAIR OF SLIPPERS' (for some reason the youngest of the five Altounyan children, Brigit, was left out). Later the number was increased to SIX, to include their parents. Sadly, Ransome was soon to fall out with the Altounyans and in his *Autobiography* he ignores the part they played in the conception of the *Swallows and Amazons* novels.

In 1929, the *Manchester Guardian's* editor, C.P. Scott, offered Ransome a large salary to become the resident correspondent in Berlin. After discussing the matter with Evgenia, who hated the idea of being uprooted from the garden she was creating at Low Ludderburn, he rejected the offer (which would have meant financial security), resigned from the *Guardian* and started work on *Swallows and Amazons*. He had served a long apprenticeship as a writer. The discipline of writing dispatches had shorn his prose of its early excesses and it was now a model of clarity, ideal for a children's novelist. However, he had become so accustomed to writing short articles that constructing a full-length novel was to prove difficult for him. His mind was filled with episodes and characters, but organising them into a fictional narrative was usually a struggle.

In 1935 the Ransomes decided to leave Low Ludderburn. Although they could have enlarged and improved the property, the lack of sanitation and a mains water supply, as well as the damp Lake District

atmosphere which was affecting Evgenia's health, were insuperable problems. More significantly, they were missing the thrill they had experienced sailing *Racundra* at sea. Thus they headed for the Suffolk coast, a popular yachting centre and close to the Norfolk Broads where they had enjoyed sailing holidays since 1931. They rented Broke Farm, on the north side of the River Orwell opposite the yachting village of Pin Mill, and bought the *Nancy Blackett*, which, as *Goblin*, was to feature in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* and *Secret Water*. For Ransome, the *Nancy Blackett* was the best ship he ever had, but Evgenia found her too cramped, and so she was sold and a new yacht, the *Selina King*, was built at Harry King's yard at Pin Mill and launched in September 1938. After an enjoyable season of sailing in 1939, Ransome made a very stormy passage to Lowestoft where she was laid up in a boat-shed on Oulton Broad for the duration of the war; he was never to sail her again. In that same year the Ransomes moved to Harkstead Hall on the Shotley Peninsula, on the south side of the Orwell. It was a solid red-brick farmhouse with a garden that Evgenia loved, so it should have made a perfect home, but the outbreak of war meant that it could have been commandeered at any time and the frequent air-raids made sleep difficult. As a result, in October 1940 they moved back to the Lake District and to The Heald, a seventeen-acre estate on the banks of Coniston Water (Heald Wood features in the episode of Roger's night with the charcoal burners in *Swallowdale*). In Suffolk Ransome had written the East Anglian novels *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, *Secret Water*, and *The Big Six*; at The Heald he wrote his last three novels, *Missee Lee*, *The Picts and the Martyrs*, and *Great Northern?* (which he was to complete in London).

Evgenia found The Heald cramped and isolated, and in 1945, with the war in Europe over, the Ransomes were on the move again. Failing to find a suitable house in Suffolk, they settled on a flat in London's Marylebone. Ransome finished *Great Northern?*, his last significant book, in 1947. Then the noise of urban life and the lure of the Lakes proved too much and in 1948 the Ransomes bought the near derelict Lowick Hall, just south of Coniston. Much as they loved the house, the project was beyond them and two years later they were back in London beside the Thames at Putney. They continued to move between London (the sensible choice) and the Lake District (where their heart lay) until Ransome's death. They rented, then bought, Hill Top Cottage in Haverthwaite. After *Selina King*, Ransome bought and sailed three further yachts, coming ashore for the last time in 1954 after an especially rough channel crossing.

In spite of Ransome's failing health, there was a return to the Lake District in November 1963, but this last port of call for the Ransomes was as impractical as it was inevitable. After a fall which led to a failed operation on his back, Ransome was soon confined to a wheelchair and they simply could not cope. With senility closing in on him, he was moved to the Cheadle Royal Hospital, Manchester, where he died in June 1967. He is buried in the churchyard at Rusland, near the lakes of both Coniston and Windermere. Evgenia died in 1975 and is buried beside him.

This brief account of Ransome's life has deliberately focused on the areas that help us to contextualise the *Swallows and Amazons* novels: his difficult relationship with and early loss of his father; his unhappiness at school; his troubled marriages; his years as a journalist which shaped his lucid prose and his idiosyncratic creative process; his love and intimate knowledge of both the Lake District and East Anglia, which provide the settings for all but three of his novels. For those wanting to delve further into Ransome's life, there are three major biographies. Hugh Brogan's authoritative *The Life of Arthur Ransome* (1984) is a well-researched and largely sympathetic portrait. Roland Chambers's more recent and controversial *The Last Englishman* (2009) concentrates wholly on Ransome's years in Russia and Eastern Europe, examining the myths that have grown up around him, but in the end failing to establish where his political sympathies lay. Most enthralling, though less detailed, is Christina Hardyment's *The World of Arthur Ransome* (2012), a beautifully written and illustrated book that is a mine of information. There are also Ransome's *Autobiography* (1976) and his letters, but their author is sometimes an unreliable witness and they have to be read with caution.

Playing Politics

For the reader, however, it is Ransome's politics which remain the most problematic element of his life, and in particular the apparent disjunction between the Ransome of 1913 to 1924 and the Ransome of post-1929, the Ransome of the novels. As well as the Bolshevik insider, there is the resolutely middle-class writer of what can seem to be resolutely middle-class and often imperialist tales.

It is arguable that the constant is the naïvety of Ransome's character, which showed itself in his penchant for sensation and melodrama. Robert Bruce Lockhart describes him as 'a sentimentalist, who could always be relied on to champion the under-dog . . . an incorrigible

romanticist who could spin a fairy-tale out of 'nothing'.¹ Whether in 'bohemia' or in Russia, it was as much the thrill of the life and the events that drove Ransome as it was the ideals behind them. He loved the anarchy and adventure; he loved the daring, excitement and ambition of the Russian revolution – whatever side he was on – and he loved being in the spotlight. It was mainly the romance of the revolution that was important to him, not whether it succeeded or failed. As he wrote in *On Behalf of Russia*:

These men who have made the Soviet government in Russia, if they must fail, will fail with clean shields and clean hearts, having striven for an ideal which will live beyond them. Even if they fail, they will none the less have written a page of history more daring than any other which I can remember in the history of humanity.²

Above all, it massaged Ransome's ego – always a fragile one, whatever the outward appearance – to be at the centre of a world-important event and to be fêted by its principle players. Paul Foot concurs with this argument, suggesting in his introduction to Ransome's writings on Russia that it was not that Ransome had no interest in politics, but that he had no serious ideological commitment.³ Ransome himself admits to an 'ineradicable tendency to disagree with any majority wherever I happened to be'.⁴ We do not know if anything more than Ransome's original ambition to be a novelist rather than a journalist caused him to retire from the political arena. Certainly he gives no other explanation, though Foot suggests that his silence on Russia after 1924 may have been partly to protect Evgenia's family and partly because of his eventual disgust at Stalin's crimes against his people. Yet retire he did. So Foot writes:

Even the most pedantic Ransome addict would be hard pressed to find in any of these children's books a single word about politics. The subject simply doesn't arise. There is nothing even of the implied radicalism of that other great children's story-writer, whom Arthur Ransome much admired, E. Nesbit. The children's

-
1. Robert Bruce Lockhart, *Memoirs of a British Agent* (London: Putnam, 1932), pp. 266-67.
 2. Arthur Ransome, *On Behalf of Russia* (1918), in Arthur Ransome, *Arthur Ransome in Revolutionary Russia*, with Introductory Essay by Paul Foot (London: Redwords, 1992), p. 51.
 3. *Arthur Ransome in Revolutionary Russia*, p. 11.
 4. *Autobiography*, p. 23.

world in Ransome's books is, quite deliberately, hived off from the adult world outside. Though all the famous books were written in times of slump, war or post-war reconstruction, there is hardly a whisper of any of this in any of them.¹

But although it is true that Ransome's novels make no explicit statement about politics and they are an escape from 'the adult world outside', I think Foot misses an important element. On a superficial reading of the *Swallows and Amazons* novels, Ransome seems to reveal himself not as apolitical but as conservative. Back in England he was saddened by the threat to the old colonial way of life, with all its traditional values. Thus, as well as an escape, his fictional world epitomises (though sometimes with more than a hint of irony) Britain as it had been and as he wanted it to remain; buffeted by events, yet always surviving through the strong personal morality of his characters.

However, I believe there is another twist, because balanced against Ransome's love of the colonial way of life, and the hierarchical and patriarchal society it implies, are his championing of the Bolsheviks and the Russian poor in their struggle against autocracy; his championing in the novels of ordinary, rural people; his championing of piracy and savagery; his discussion of the nature of girlhood and by implication the changing place of women in society. So within the apparently conservative society of *Swallows and Amazons*, I think there is in fact also the 'implied radicalism' that Foot denies – a deliberate challenging of the distinctions between naval seamen and pirates, between explorers and savages, between male and female.

It is not that Ransome ignored (as Foot suggests) the troubled times in which he lived. He had, after all, witnessed first-hand not only the exhilaration of the Russian revolution but also its depressing aftermath. In January 1918 he had suffered the loss of his brother, Geoffrey, in the trenches of the Great War. He had seen the unrest in North Africa in 1924–1925 and the dangers brewing in the Far East in 1926–1927. Rather, he created – for himself and for his readers – a fictional world, both as a refuge and as a symbol, which is at once secure and free; where the conservative and the radical are held in tension; where, whatever the troubles, things turn out right in the end. But of course it was a world that was collapsing. By the time Ransome wrote his last novel, there had been another global conflict and things had changed irrevocably.

1. *Arthur Ransome in Revolutionary Russia*, p. 9.

‘The Romantic Transfiguration of Fact’

Imagine for a moment the excitement on the lawn of Holly Howe, the Walkers’ holiday home in the Lake District, as the Swallows and Amazons (which is what the Walker and Blackett children respectively name themselves, after the dinghies which they sail) explore a dressing up box. Urged on by Titty, who has been reading Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), the Swallows dress up as explorers. The Amazons, always less conventional and more daring, become pirates. Their friends, the Callums, join in, though for the moment they are somewhat overawed and excluded. Later they will all delve deeper among the costumes, and in wild flights of imagination will climb Kanchenjunga, visit the ‘Caribbees’ on a treasure voyage, join Arctic expeditions, survey ‘Secret Water’, sail the China Seas, become Picts and martyrs, and foil villains in the Hebrides. Mrs Walker, who normally thinks it best to leave her children to play by themselves, is persuaded to become Queen Elizabeth, then Man Friday (though Commander Walker is away, playing another part and wearing his own naval dress). The children’s games are usually either of imperial exploits or of families (‘Mothers and Fathers’, though they would not admit it). Ransome, who always likes to be the centre of attention, is directing operations. He dresses up as a bohemian writer, as a spy, and even as some of his own characters: Captain Flint; John and Titty Walker; Dorothea and Dick Callum.

And in a shed in Tom Dudgeon’s garden, a group of Norfolk children, also joined by the Callums, engage in the same play. Here Dorothea, the aspiring novelist, takes charge, and in her fertile imagination her friends become outlaws and detectives, though the stolid Tom is reluctant to take part. The younger children are also somewhat sceptical. They prefer to remain in the real world – as pirates aboard the *Death and Glory*, and river inspectors, and salvage men. Ransome is here as well, pulling the strings, disguised as ‘Admiral’ Barrable, or the anonymous skipper of the *Cachalot*, and sharing his enthusiasms of sailing and fishing, ornithology and photography.

Ransome describes the method of his novels as ‘the romantic transfiguration of fact’: in other words, the transforming of the ordinariness of the real world into romantic adventures through the imagination and specifically through the playing of imaginative (though deadly serious) games.¹ In an important essay, Jerry Phillips

1. Letter to Helen Ferris, 18 March 1937, reproduced in Roger Wardale et al., eds, *The Best of Childhood* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2004), p. 184.

and Ian Wojcik-Andrews offer further insight into the nature of such games, and thus into the nature of the *Swallows and Amazons*:

Play is a politics – it inculcates gender, class, ethnicity, and their attendant codes of social behaviour. . . . In the sense that *Swallows and Amazons* mimics or repeats the colonialist topos of adventure (the notion of discovery, the notion of proprietorial settlement, and the notion of utopia) in a familiar domestic setting, the book is concerned with representing a politics of play.¹

In the two Norfolk Broads novels, the games are, in fact, somewhat different to those on the lake, mimicking in particular the struggle against the urban values of the ‘Hullaballoos’ and the injustices meted out by bullies and tyrants. It is only in the first of the Suffolk novels, *We Didn’t Mean to Go to Sea*, that the children are swept out into a stormy North Sea and are forced briefly to confront reality.

It is widely acknowledged that Arthur Ransome is one of the most influential children’s writers of the twentieth century. In particular, he is credited with changing the direction of children’s fiction from the school story, which had been fashionable in the early years of the century, to the holiday story. Victor Watson writes (in *Reading Series Fiction*):

Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons* was a move in a new direction – out of school and into the holidays – and it led eventually, alongside the many series of schoolgirl stories, to an astonishing growth in camping and tramping adventure stories.²

However, this is only partly true. Percy Westerman, for example, wrote fourteen novels about holiday adventures with the Boy Scouts, beginning with *Sea Scouts of the Petrel* (1914), and including *A Mystery of the Broads* (1930); in all, Westerman wrote more than 150 novels for boys. In similar vein were the Girl Guide novels of Dorothy Osborn Hann (from 1921) and Frances Nash (from 1922). But the point about Ransome’s novels is that his child characters are normally free from adult authority (though adults are never far away), and wholly liberated from the sort of imposed rules, regulations, and godliness that characterise the Scout and Guide movements. Thus Juliet Dusinberre is nearer the mark when she reminds us that Ransome’s children ‘owe

-
1. Jerry Phillips and Ian Wojcik-Andrews, ‘History and the Politics of Play in T.S. Eliot’s “The Burial of the Dead” and Arthur Ransome’s *Swallows and Amazons*’, in *The Lion and the Unicorn* 14.1 (1990), pp. 54–55.
 2. Victor Watson, *Reading Series Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge Falmer, 2000), p. 76.

their literary ancestry and freedom to Mark Twain's *The Adventures of Tom Sawyer* (1876), to Richard Jefferies's *Bevis* (1882), and above all to R. L. Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883).¹ Dusinberre goes on to place them in 'a tradition of dispensing with parents which began with Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* (1865) and reached its apotheosis in Kenneth Grahame's *The Golden Age* (1895).²

Ransome was followed and sometimes imitated by the many writers who concerned themselves with what children get up to out of school. There were, for example, his schoolgirl protégées, Katharine Hull and Pamela Whitlock (*The Far Distant Oxus*, 1937, and its successors); there was Aubrey de Selincourt (like Ransome, a former pupil of Rugby School), with a series of family sailing stories, including *Three Green Bottles* (1941) and *Family Afloat* (1944); there was David Severn, in particular his tales of 'Crusoe' Robinson (1942-1946) and the Warner family (1947-1952); there was Enid Blyton churning out the adventures of the Famous Five (from 1942) and the Secret Seven (from 1949); and, later in the twentieth century, Marjorie Lloyd's *Fell Farm* novels (from 1951) returned for their subjects to camping adventures in the Lake District. But what singles out Ransome from all these authors is his ability to create a world of childhood escape which is so close to reality that it is utterly believable. Hugh Brogan writes:

The essence of the child, he [Ransome] held, is its imagination, the way in which, left to itself and not withered by obtuse or manipulative adults, 'it adopts any material at hand, and weaves for itself a web of imaginative life', building the world again into a splendid pageantry; and all without ever (or hardly ever) blurring its sense of the actual.³

Two exceptions to such 'sense of the actual' are *Peter Duck* and *Missee Lee*, which are both fantasies, but still made almost credible by the realism within the fantasies. For example, in *Peter Duck*, as the *Wild Cat* is pursued down channel by the evil pirate Black Jake, every navigation mark, every landfall, every change of tide and weather, is entirely accurate – not surprisingly, since Ransome wrote with the standard mariners' guide, the *Channel Pilot*, beside him.

*

-
1. Juliet Dusinberre, *Alice to the Lighthouse* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1987; revised edition 1999), p. 90.
 2. Dusinberre, p. 90.
 3. Hugh Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), pp. 313-14.

Although in actual time the twelve *Swallows and Amazons* novels were written over a seventeen-year span, in the internal time of *Swallows and Amazons* the period only lasted from summer 1930 to summer 1934 (six novels, from *Winter Holiday* to *The Big Six*, are squeezed into 1932 alone).¹ This fictional chronology means that the characters age comparatively little during the series and are never allowed to enter adolescence. However, contrary to what some critics argue, they do learn from their experiences and change, and Chapters 8 and 9 will consider how *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* and *Secret Water* in particular are about the difficult business of growing up. It also means that the first readers of Ransome's early novels would have outstripped their heroes and heroines and become adults by the time the final novels were written.

More significantly, it means that by the time Ransome drew the *Swallows and Amazons* series to a close in 1947, Britain had lived through the Second World War and the way of life that he depicts, and that in the stories resists the symbolic storms beating against it, had already disappeared. But this did not stop the novels from continuing to enjoy huge popularity well into the 1950s and even beyond: they enabled children in the immediate aftermath of the war to escape from the austerity that resulted from the struggle, just as earlier readers had escaped from the unease of the 1930s or from their own wartime privations, and adult readers could look back nostalgically to the way things had once been. However, the cultural upheaval of the 1960s led to a new social inclusiveness in children's literature, a willingness to confront adolescent emotions more directly, and a usually frenetic pace more in tune with modern life. In the twenty-first century, the experiences of children in an increasingly urban, technological and consumer-orientated era, who are far more sexually aware than previous generations, may have too few points of contact with Ransome's characters to empathise wholly with them. So to be properly appreciated today, the *Swallows and Amazons* novels must, I think, be read as products of their era; not as dead period pieces, but as exciting and relevant adventures which propound a strong personal morality and a love of nature and outdoor life, turning to advantage their setting in an increasingly distant past.

1. Probably. See Chapter 12 for a discussion of the date of *Great Northern?*, the final novel in the series. The treaty in *Swallows and Amazons* is actually signed in summer 1929, so arguably the setting of subsequent novels should shift a year earlier, but *Swallowdale*, the next summer, is set in 1931 and a later note from Ransome gives 1930 as the start of the series.

This reading of Ransome's novels will concentrate on both the means by which Ransome transfigures fact – how he transfigures his own experience and memories into the worlds of the Swallows, Amazons, and Coots – and how the children, in turn, transfigure those worlds into something different again through the playing of games. It will also show how the novels, through their symbolism, tell other, deeper stories. Thus it will investigate the language through which Ransome creates his other world, just as different as Carroll's Wonderland or Lewis's Narnia, but far more believable and so far more accessible. It will show how the novels are nevertheless bound up with Ransome's life and times, especially the loss of his father, and how he was something of a 'last romantic', conscious that the countryside which he so lovingly describes, and the innocence of his characters, were under mortal threat. Above all, it will argue that the novels reflect the dying British Empire and its values whilst recognising its precariousness and its absurdities in a changing world. If you listen hard, you will hear amid the escape, exuberance and adventure an elegiac note, as childhood, Empire and the rural idyll all come to an end.