Introduction

Arthur and Oscar

I first became aware there might be *another* Arthur Ransome – what's more, a mischievous one[1] – many years ago as an undergraduate student of English literature. Like all the best discoveries it was accidental. At the end of a seminar on Oscar Wilde's prose fiction, my tutor suggested I read Arthur Ransome's biography of the man. He must have noticed the startled look on my face because he added: 'Yes, that Arthur Ransome: T.S. Eliot thought it was rather a good book.'

In common with many another, I had been profoundly affected as a child by Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, although in some respects I was an atypical fan. Living in the midlands of England, about as far from deep water as geography permitted, boats held no particular fascination for me.[2] It was interesting to learn there was a magical world filled with cleats, thwarts, booms and centreboards. I even imagined I might one day go there, but I had only the vaguest inkling of what any of these strange words meant. No, the reason I took Ransome to heart had nothing to do with sailing, it was that he understood about play. My sort of play, that is. There was no stooping condescension about Arthur – here was an author happy to meet you at eye level and on your own terms.

He was writing, of course, for children in possession of independence unthinkable in present times. My immediate postwar generation suffered many privations but in one respect was enormously privileged. I recall apparently endless summer holidays (memory having improved the weather) in which I would set off early, armed only with a packet of sandwiches and be away from home until sunset. The elaborate and all-consuming activities of my little gang, while not exactly delinquent, were best kept from mother. If she was greatly concerned, my debt to her is that she never mentioned it.

My companion of those golden years was more often than not William Brown.[3] However, sometimes, and for more personal reasons, it would be one or another of John, Susan, Titty and Roger, who became my siblings in an alternative world. Arthur Ransome himself had a brother and two sisters, a family structure echoed in *Swallows and Amazons*; I had only two brothers to contend with. For a little boy with no girls about the house, Susan made a substitute sister more tolerable than Violet Elizabeth Bott.[4] As for Titty Walker, I recall the secret pleasure her name bequeathed: it was encouraging to think such engaging creatures existed.[5] Perhaps some day I might even meet one.

You understand now that startled look. What on earth had Arthur Ransome to do with Oscar Wilde? Even the conjunction seemed absurd. I was well aware that Wilde had also written for children, but here at least had been one child who would have found his artfully mannered prose unbearable (not that I had read any of it). I found the pleasure my tutor took in bracketing these two authors oddly challenging and I sought out the biography reconciled to learning more than I might want to know, that I was about to discover yet another fading Edwardian author with feet of clay. And, true enough, Ransome had been entangled in an ugly libel trial[6] over aspects of Wilde's homosexuality. My hero emerged untouched by any hint of erotic decadence but I had, nonetheless, made a significant discovery: twenty years before *Swallows and Amazons* there had indeed been another Arthur Ransome, living and working in Paris – a remarkable man, closer in spirit to Mallarmé[7] than to Frank Richards,[8] And not a centreboard in sight.

The degree to which Ransome had immersed himself in the French symbolist movement was astonishing. His biographer Hugh Brogan dismissed the attachment as a passing fancy but it was surely more than that. In fact, his work with poets like Remy de Gourmont and Yone Noguchi placed him at the very heart of the movement. Which raises a fascinating question: did this earnest activity have no influence at all on the children's books he was yet to write? It seems strange that that could be so, but it is a question no one seems to have posed. All his life Ransome was a devoted fisherman; should we have asked what might be lurking beneath the limpid surface of his innocent prose? Was he, in fact, some kind of symbolist and, if so, how could it be that we had never noticed? These are the questions which set me on the road towards writing this book, although not before many years had passed and not before I encountered a literary stimulus of an altogether different kind.

The Accidental Spy

I must bring you to 2009. By then my own early passion for English literature had long since morphed into the study of psychology. Perhaps it had not been so great a leap, given one definition of my discipline as 'the science of mental life'.[9] We are unlikely to understand the mind without knowing how language works; and what is literature if not an expression of mental life? 2009 was the year in which Roland Chambers published a biography of Ransome. I came to it as a psychologist, interest stirred by the thought that here might be yet another insight into Ransome's double nature.[10] But the story Chambers had to tell was far more startling than an account of the Paris literary scene at the turn of the nineteenth century.

During long periods of self-imposed 'exile' between 1913 and 1925 Arthur Ransome was an accidental witness to the unfolding revolution in Russia. He became fluent in the Russian language and his work as a journalist secured him extraordinary access to significant political figures, including Lenin, Trotsky and Radek. It also secured him a Russian wife. He made no secret of the fact he was broadly sympathetic to the aims of the revolution, as were virtually all left-leaning intellectuals at the time. His astute analyses of labyrinthine revolutionary politics were of obvious interest to the British government, then engaged in an apparently endless war in which Russia played a pivotal role. Chambers refuses to portray Ransome as some kind of reluctant amateur spy, albeit he would have been in good company.[11] On the contrary, he presents him as someone knowingly acting as an informant for the Bolsheviks, a calculating double agent, willing to betray his country.

The book, a *succès de scandale*, precipitated the inevitable deluge of denial[12] and, on close examination, the heart of the case against this particular *other* Arthur Ransome does indeed seem surprisingly frail. Christina Hardyment, Ransome's literary executor, was unconvinced:

> The double agent thing [was] more of a selling point as it makes him rather glamorous, but I don't think there's much truth in it. I don't think in any way he was 'helping' the enemy. I don't think it would have crossed his mind that anything he did was a threat to Britain.[13]

The biographer Hugh Brogan was even more vehement, speaking shortly before he died: 'Ransome was an honourable and talented Englishman who found himself caught in this extraordinary drama

and did his very best to come through it intact.'[14] There is weight to be attached to that word 'Englishman' and we shall come to it. For the moment, suffice it to say these claims and counterclaims piqued my interest as a psychologist, not for their particular merits but for their nature – the peculiar satisfaction gained from unmasking secret vice.[15] Jon Henley will serve as example. In his *Guardian* review of Chambers' book, *schadenfreude* leaks from every word.[16] All those years you thought you knew Arthur Ransome, he seems to gloat. You thought he deserved your infantile attachment. Well he didn't – not this secretive double-dealing spy with a foot in both camps.

Which brings me back to my motives for writing this book. Certainly not to arbitrate on details of personal history: those who might plausibly have done that are all long dead.[17] Equally, not to offer yet another biography: there are already many of those. The questions I wish to explore are more psychological than literary. This complicated, secretive man deliberately set out to baffle those who sought to make sense of his life. He very largely succeeded, with the consequence that critics and biographers alike recoil in exasperated frustration. How else to respond to someone who invariably gives the impression he is holding something back? Someone always willing to turn truth into a joke (or 'jape', as he would put it)? Someone mischievously willing to lie if it suited him?

I claim that, in seeking to make sense of Ransome's life, we may well have been looking in the wrong place. Although he went to some lengths to disguise it, at least one account finds its unlikely expression in his fiction. Indulge me for a moment in *what if?* What if, far from being some passing fancy, Ransome's early commitment to symbolism endured and came to flower in stories for children which owe more to fairy tale than to the concerns of his contemporaries? Idyllic holiday romances that paradoxically arrive replete with allusion to unmerited censure, loss and abandonment. Powerful autobiographical themes can be glimpsed throughout Ransome's fiction, albeit always slightly out of reach, fading like the pearls the Swallows left to dry on the margin of their lake: complex allusions secured by narrative means that owe more to poetry than to prose. They cannot be accidental – they were too hard-won.

The Lake

One thing remains by way of introduction. I must account for the focus of this book on the series of five novels Ransome set in the Lake District of England[18] (and my decision to exclude consideration of the novels, *Coot Club* and *The Big Six*). I could offer a literary justification – the

Lake novels certainly share a poetic narrative style, inviting the reader to find allusions well beyond the printed page. Robert Davies has made a persuasive case along these lines.[19] But this is to avoid a deeper truth offered by Ransome himself. Whatever the Lake novels have in common, it is obviously something profoundly personal to the author, reaching back into his childhood but also allowing a resolution to conflicts that cast deep shadows over his adult life. He offers an enigmatic account in his autobiography, referring to a private rite, 'the solemn secret touching of the lake', performed each time he arrived at its shore:

> Without letting the others know what I was doing, I had to dip my hand in the water, as a greeting to the beloved lake or as proof to myself that I had indeed come home. In later years, even as an old man, I have laughed at myself, resolved not to do it, and every time have done it again.[20]

Of course, there is a paradox here. Apart from *Swallows and Amazons*, Ransome permitted the characters in these five novels very little interaction with this 'sacred' lake and virtually none with the island home that it surrounds. This book is an attempt to explain why; it involves a long journey, one which begins with the first voyage of the *Swallow* when 'everything had grown smaller except the lake, and that had never seemed so large before'.[21]

Notes to Introduction

1. The phrase 'a thoroughly mischievous person' of my title appears in manuscript on the cover of Arthur Ransome's file in the MI5e archives (KV 2/1903, MI5e, IP No. 294084).
2. An exception was a large and elaborately rigged model yacht my father presented to his three boys (Stuart, Alan and Ian) as a Christmas present. She proved difficult to sail in public, given he had used the initial letters of our names to christen her *Stalin*.
3. William Brown, the schoolboy hero of the *Just William* series of short stories by Richmal Crompton. As successive books were published (over a period of almost 50 years) the fact that the principal characters remained the same age, albeit in contemporary settings, provided the author with a source of ironic commentary on English class divisions.

4. A spoiled little girl, reluctantly admitted by William to his gang.
5. 'One of the nicest children to be found within the covers of any book' – the anonymous reviewer of the *Swallows* series, writing for *The Times Literary Supplement* in June 1950.
6. In 1910 the publisher Martin Secker commissioned Ransome to write a critical study of Oscar Wilde. Ransome was encouraged in the venture by Robert Ross, Wilde's former lover and literary executor. He was almost certainly unaware that Ross had ulterior motives, intending to settle scores with Lord Alfred Douglas, whose own almost public affair with Wilde had been his undoing. *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* was published in 1912. Although it contained little biographical detail, and only very glancing references to homosexuality, Douglas sued both publisher and author for libel. Ransome (who was far more interested in Wilde's narrative technique than what he terms his 'malady of the brain') found himself the unwitting proxy weapon in a legal battle to the death between Ross and Douglas (the pair had come to blows over Wilde's coffin at his burial). It was a case Ransome was bound to win once he secured permission to have the unabridged version of *De Profundis*, Wilde's final bitter letter to his lover, read in open court. Ransome was supported by many significant figures (including Edward Thomas, Robin Collingwood and Bernard Shaw) but as an outsider was left feeling humiliated.
7. Arthur Symons, *The Symbolist Movement in Literature* (London: William Heinemann, 1899), describes the French symbolist poet Stephane Mallarmé as 'one of those who love literature too much to write it'. Mallarmé was influenced by Baudelaire's poetry, using imagery and suggested atmosphere in his own work, stripping words of their conventional meaning. Ransome knew Mallarmé's translations of the poetry and prose of Edgar Allan Poe, using them to illustrate the difficulty that narrative *potential* poses for translation: 'we are on very quaggy ground, since words and their haloes of suggested meaning are the very stuff of poetry' Arthur Ransome, *Edgar Allan Poe: A Critical Study*, (London: Martin Secker, 1910), p. 135.
8. Frank Richards (real name, Charles Hamilton) was the author of a series of stories about a fat schoolboy. Billy Bunter of Greyfriars School made his first appearance in 1908 in the weekly comic for boys, *The Magnet*.
9. A definition first suggested by William James in his *Principles of Psychology* (New York: Holt, 1890) and given a new lease of life by George Millar in the influential book, *Psychology: The Science of Mental Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1962).
10. Roland Chambers, *The Last Englishman: The Double Life of Arthur Ransome* (London: Faber & Faber, 2009).
11. 'Literary spies' of Ransome's generation included Hugh Walpole, Erskine Childers, Compton MacKenzie, Somerset Maugham, Graham Greene and Ian Fleming (the list is far from complete).
12. 'Arthur Ransome's family deny double agent claims', *The Daily Telegraph*, 15 August 2009.
13. Ibid.
14. *Mixed Moss* (the journal of the Arthur Ransome Society) (Kendal: The Arthur Ransome Society, 2020), p. 54.
15. 'Such sections of the public as took pleasure in [Wilde's disgrace] thought Wilde a peculiarly arrogant coxcomb, a disconcerting and polished reply to the

Victorian tradition of muscular manhood in which they had long been secure. They were ready to rejoice in his discomfiture, and their hostility to Wilde spread swiftly and gave a quality of triumph to the delight of all classes as soon as he was arrested.' Arthur Ransome, *Oscar Wilde: A Critical Study* (London: Methuen & Co., 1912), p.170. The motivation that surely prompted my tutor's teasing reference to Ransome.

16. 'We know Arthur Ransome, don't we? Balding, bespectacled, moustache like the proverbial walrus. Wrote a much-loved if now somewhat dated series of children's classics in the 1930s and 40s in which unusually articulate children with names such as Titty and Roger engage in wholesome outdoor activities such as sailing, camping, eating pemmican and obliging the odd pirate to walk the plank, celebrating in the process the uncomplicated moral values that made Britain Great.' Jon Henley, 'Review of *The Last Englishman: The Double Life of Arthur Ransome* by Roland Chambers', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2009.
17. Ransome's first wife, Ivy Walker, died in 1939; his Russian second wife, *Evgenia* Petrovna Shelepina, died in 1975; his only daughter, Tabitha, died in 1991.
18. *Swallows and Amazons* (1930); *Swallowdale* (1931); *Winter Holiday* (1933); *Pigeon Post* (1936); and *The Picts and the Martyrs* (1943).
19. Robert Davies, 'Compare and Contrast: – the Broads and Lake Novels', *Mixed Moss* (Kendal: The Arthur Ransome Society, 2017), p. 37.
20. Arthur Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, Prologue and Epilogue by Rupert Hart-Davis (ed.) (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976), p. 26.
21. *Swallows and Amazons*, p. 36.