

## ***ADVENTURING WITH THE SWALLOWS AND ARTHUR RANSOME***

(c) Debra Rowe 2000

When I go for walks in the backwoods outside my house, my internal dialogue often goes something like, 'If I were a pioneer, I'd put my tent right under those trees and I wouldn't have far to go for water because that stream would have been clean.' I wear moccasins in the summer and try not to leave any footprints. In the winter I dream of snowshoes and log cabins and try identifying all the animal tracks I see. Thus, when I first met Titty Walker in Arthur Ransome's *Swallows and Amazons*, I hooked right into her fantasies of Robin Crusoe and tropical forests without even being aware of how closely I was identifying with her.

I never got to read Ransome stories of children on holiday in England's Lake District when I was a child, but I've been reading and rereading them greedily since discovering them recently. At first, I was in shock. These children, from roughly 13 years old to 7, (not including ship's baby!) have an incredible amount of freedom and opportunity to do really important things, like make their own campfires and actually sail boats all by themselves. Ransome's stories read as if it's not only perfectly natural for children to do these amazing things but that truly loving parents would make sure such opportunities exist.

I grew up in the Canadian province of Ontario, which has its share of beautiful lakes, forests and fields. But having come from a background where matches were hidden, campfires were the sole prerogative of my father, and sailing was just too foreign to be thought of, I was absolutely entranced by the *Swallows*. Envious, too, and in fact so taken with them that I asked a British friend of mine whether kids in England really do grow up

this way. I couldn't believe that someone could imagine such an idyllic and believable childhood without some help from reality along the way. I had thought perhaps with England being an island with an important naval history, that maybe this was a cultural thing. But the answer was no, not every British kid grows up learning to sail and to fish, to make their own suppers, to read maps and to generally survive on their own. It's pure Ransome magic.

Able seaman Titty Walker along with her elder sister, Mate Susan, and brother, Captain John, and younger brother, ship's boy Roger, and sister, ship's baby Bridget, make up the Swallows, named after their sailboat. They fall in with the Blackett girls, pirates Captain Nancy and Mate Peggy, and later on meet Dick, Dorothea, Tom, and the Death and Glories. They make war on each other, explore the islands and hillsides, race pigeons, send secret signals and above all, sail as brilliantly as adults, leaving no waggles in their wake. Titty is the one whose inspired imaginings keep them translating everyday things into the trappings of adventure. Lemonade is always grog, and sliced beef, pemmican. Any adults who happen to be around are natives, a large hilltop is the mountain Kanchenjunga, the north end of the lake is the North Pole and always, when out exploring, trees must be blazed to mark the trail.

I find myself, as Titty does, revelling in her solitude when she volunteers to stay behind alone, guarding their island, while the others sail off for a nighttime manoeuvre. I enjoy her imagining she is Robinson Crusoe and actually feel guilty but pleased as she rearranges the tent she shares with Susan to look as if only one person sleeps there. That's just the kind of thing I would have done, had I been in her place, but I probably would have been too afraid. Later, after her mother has unexpectedly visited, as a native might, and must return to her own camp, I'm crying as Titty bravely wrestles with her longing to leave the adventure, which now seems lonely and scary. Titty forlornly waves her mother goodbye, not even sharing the reasons why she must stay all alone on the darkening island. And her mother, seeing Titty thus caught between the romance of adventure and its unforeseen reality, does not break the spell. The mother offers her daughter ready escape. All Titty has to do is get in her mother's rowboat to be enfolded in warmth and security. But both respect that it's for Titty to choose her own path, forward into adventure and life, or back

into... childhood? Dull ennui? Death? It's a painful decision that we all must confront all the time. For me, it's extraordinarily moving to watch such an imaginative child take that brave step when she doesn't really have to. She's still young enough that no one would think less of her for choosing security. But she doesn't. And as Titty, sniffing, watches her mother row away across the lake, and as I am outright crying, I am fiercely proud of her. It's through Titty's eyes that Ransome's insights seem most sensitive. One adventure depends on the group's ability to find a source of water, so that they can have a real camp. They decide to try dowsing but of all them, the Swallows, John, Susan, Titty and Roger, and the Amazons, Nancy and Peggy, only Titty finds a response from the dowsing branch. And the alien feeling so scares her that she drops the branch and doesn't want to talk about it. The others respect both her fears, and her otherness, and agree amongst themselves not to pressure her. But they are all desperate to find water. Titty does her best to put the frightening episode aside but when she finds a clue that reminds her how keenly everyone is feeling and yet how careful they're being about her, she resolves to face her fears, alone. Once again, Ransome has uncovered very adult challenges, and as I am rooting for Titty to pick up the dowsing branch, I remember my own childhood experiences with a new respect. For surely every childhood is filled with similar choices; forward into fear or back into predictable safety. There is a natural impulse to take one's place in the world, in spite of, and perhaps even because of the risks. Remembering how stifled I felt while being zealously overprotected by my parents, Ransome's stories prod me into asking myself some serious questions. When so much good seems to come from doing what comes naturally, is there not more harm in playing it safe all the time?

Titty is not the only character facing these challenges. John and Susan find themselves looking after each other, and keeping Titty and Roger as unaware of the frightening situation as they can, in one particularly exciting adventure. In *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, the four are accidentally set adrift in a fully-prepared sailboat and, through their own skills, make an almost unbelievable voyage across the North Sea, at night and in a storm, to land safely in Holland. The normally placid Susan, who makes the best campfires and always has an eye on the clock, this time, is both seasick and racked with crippling guilt for things that were not her fault. She knows what the right thing to do is, return home

immediately. But this time, it's impossible for her to control the situation.

In the other stories, there's a sense that the adventuring is allowed only as long as Susan is able to be a surrogate mother, making sure everyone eats regularly and gets to bed on time. When things get a little too risky, as when Roger goes missing after spraining his ankle, or when the Swallows end up sailing at night, there's the sense that Susan will be the one to call a halt to the adventuring, that she is the one closest to the natives, the adults, and when she thinks things have gone too far, then something really must be done. Even Captain Flint, the adventurous uncle of Nancy and Peggy, bows to the unstated but accepted authority of Susan. It's up to her to decide if she's satisfied with the stores on board the Wild Cat to make the prolonged journey everyone is hoping for in Peter Duck. Now, in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*, for the first time, some of Susan's inner turmoil becomes external. She goes native, even a bit hysterical, with wanting to turn the ship around. Then she gets seasick. Finally, in the depths of her personal despair, she comes to recognize that they're in a situation she cannot control. She cannot choose to stop the game. Susan is forced to put aside her fears that her parents will blame her, and to recognize that their safety depends on John, and his abilities to judge the weather and sail the boat. It's no game. Susan must trust and support John for their very survival. Again, Ransome has portrayed a very adult experience but set firmly within the rules of the world of the Swallows.

John, the elder brother who seems destined to follow in his father's nautical shoes, also faces these pivotal, adult conflicts. When the boat sinks in a cove, even though everyone made it ashore with no calamities, John channels all his guilt, fear and rage into retrieving the vessel, practically single-handedly. All his intense endeavours to understand ships and the principles of sailing enable him to make the voyage to Holland safely. It's in John's character, though, that I most notice the British custom of keeping a stiff upper lip. He regards Susan's seasickness with compassion but refuses to meet her eyes, believing she'll keep her dignity if he pretends not to notice how close to tears she is. He calls her "poor, old Susan" and you can feel he cares, but he waits stoically for her to regain her composure. No hugs or direct acknowledgement of her distress; just respectful understanding and supportive presence. That seems a very British, cultural thing.

At the end of that astonishing voyage, the Swallows meet up with their father who's been travelling to meet them. I was half-fearful the father would punish them in some way, for having taken such extraordinary risks. And I was half expecting a noisy, joyful reunion. But what actually happens is that the father treats them with polite respect and encourages the children to be as calmly pleasant as he is. I grumbled, thinking I would certainly want a huge hug from a parent if I'd just come through a terrifying adventure like that. But as I watched the father take the role of a crewman on the return voyage, thus making sure John would still be captain of his ship, and as I read of John getting a lump in his throat as he could read the pride in his father's voice without his father actually saying anything directly, I began to wonder about my own expectations. In my vision, the adventure would have ended when a parent arrived to take control, and that in some way negates the achievement of the children. Mr. Walker's outwardly calm acceptance of his children's astounding accomplishment actually supports and validates it. He offers the comfort and security of his presence but doesn't rob the children of the authority they earned through their own talents. If he'd welcomed them with big hugs and wet kisses, it would have implied his surprise that they had achieved something he wasn't sure they could. Behaving as if children sail the North Sea alone all the time actually reinforces the Swallows' belief in themselves and increases their confidence for future endeavours. But I do wish there could be more room for some solid, physical affection in these English tales.

Still, it's through Titty's eyes that I really feel what it's like being a child again, with an island to explore or an enemy to face. My own dreams and longings, both of my childhood and present day, intertwine with Titty's so intimately that I feel her successes are mine. I feel like shouting to the world, "You see what I can do!" each time she triumphs. I was thrilled to have this fictional soul mate and I gobbled up every tale Ransome wrote, even the unfinished bits gathered together and published as *Coots of the North*. But having exhausted his output on the Swallows, I kept on looking for more, not just hoping to find a story I hadn't read, but also searching for more inspiration. And that's where I got into big trouble.

I discovered Ransome had drawn heavily from reality and I rushed ahead with my research, convinced I would find traces of what had so inspired me in his fiction.

At first, things seemed promising. Ransome had based the Swallows on real children that he knew, and the locations were thinly disguised parts of the Lake District in northwestern England, as well as Suffolk in the southeast. Ransome himself had started off as a journalist, covering the Russian Revolution for the London Daily Mail, and later the Manchester Guardian. He'd felt unable to win his father's approval before his death when Arthur was 13. When his mother seemed rather remote, the young Arthur turned to a neighbouring couple, the Collingwoods, for the emotional support he couldn't get at home. The Collingwoods had four children, and Arthur remained close friends with them all, even after his marriage proposals were turned down by two of the sisters. One of them, Dora Collingwood, married Armenian physician Ernest Altounyan, and it was their children who later became the models for the Swallows.

Arthur's first marriage with Ivy Constance Walker was rocky. They had a daughter, Tabitha, but when she was just three, Arthur went off to Russia and thereafter did whatever he could to stay away. Arthur and Ivy eventually divorced in bitter, drawn-out proceedings, but he found long-lasting happiness with his second wife, Evgenia Petrovna Shelepina, formerly secretary to the Russian leader, Leon Trotsky.

Arthur loved to sail and to fish and to write. He was not a very good father and he and Tabitha remained estranged for the rest of their lives. After the publication of *Swallows and Amazons* in 1930 and its growing popularity, he was able to quit journalism and devote himself to his lifelong dream of writing fiction.

So far so good. But now I turned to the Internet to see if I could track down what had happened to the original Altounyan children in the last 70 years.

Ship's baby, Brigit Altounyan, had just died in February 1999, a happy grandmother and founding president of The Arthur Ransome Society (TARS). There actually was no John. The eldest Altounyan child was a girl, Barbara, known as Taqui. Ransome had preferred a more even balance of sexes so he'd invented John but gave some of Taqui's characteristics to him, as well as to Nancy Blackett. Taqui Altounyan is 83 now, an author, lecturer and grandmother as well. Ship's boy Roger, who was an engineer in the books, grew up to be a physician like his real life father. Roger Altounyan suffered from severe asthma, as did Brigit and Titty, and he was instrumental in formulating the asthma

medication Intal before his death in 1987. I found the story of the real life Titty, however, almost unbearable.

As a child, Mavis Altounyan demanded to be known by the nickname Titty because of her love of the folk tale Titty Mouse and Tatty Mouse. The real life Titty had written frequently to Arthur with suggestions and drawings for the adventures of the Swallows, which all the Altounyan children loved. She grew up a promising artist, gifted in portraiture and skilled in abstracts. Mavis married an Armenian refugee and of their three children, one daughter had Down's Syndrome and died at age 29. Mavis never overcame the lack of self-confidence she felt about her artwork. She was very self-critical and just gave away her paintings. She resisted being identified with Titty, lost her love of sailing and began to dislike the Lake District, even though she and her family made it their permanent home. She died in July of 1998, at 78 years old.

Overwhelmed, I logged off. I had been excited, thinking that the last 70 years, in combination with the Internet, could tell me the stories Ransome hadn't been able to... what had happened to the Swallows when they grew up. And I didn't like it. Now, when I went back to read of Titty dreaming of palm trees or creating a voodoo wax image of the feared Great Aunt, I kept hearing in my head, "But she grows up so sadly, and so unhappy with her life." For the rest of the characters, it wasn't so bad. The adventuring spirit of the fictional Roger seemed to carry on in the real life Roger, who had tested more than 600 concoctions on himself before he discovered Intal. I didn't find out that much about Susan, other than that she married. Brigit was only a baby and since Taqui was both John and Nancy and neither, her life's story didn't have much of an impact on me.

But poor, old Titty.

I mourned. And I feared for my own dreams as I thought about Mavis's disappointments. But I got angry with myself too. Arthur Ransome was not writing biography. He wrote fiction. And some curious facts stuck in my brain. When *Swallows and Amazons* was reissued in 1958, Ransome suppressed the original dedication, which had been to the Altounyan children. Instead, he wrote that he, alone, had responsibility for the characters. With the increasing success of the books, and the passage of time, it must have been growing more and more clear to Ransome that the children of the books were his

imaginary people, with lives quite separate from that of their original inspirations. The author recognized, therefore, the freedom of his inventions and took steps to point that out to people like me, who were looking to prove his imaginary world existed in some real way. By this time, tourists were scouring the Lake District, identifying Windermere and Coniston and deciphering the exact locations of Rio and the North Pole. Ransome would have been experiencing the push of people trying to reduce his art to what sculptors refer to disdainfully as 'modelled from life', when instead of freely shaping an arm from clay, for example, a cast is made of a live person's arm. "Where's the art in that?" the true artist might ask. And having always agreed with the sculptor, I now found myself red-faced, looking at my own attempts to discredit the writer I admired, and prove he cast from life. Another curious fact. One of the Ransome tales I most enjoy, *The Picts and the Martyrs*, almost didn't get published because Ransome's wife, Evgenia, hated it. The story of the citified Dick and Dorothea, who must keep hidden from Nancy and Peggy's Great Aunt while camping in an abandoned woodcutter's hut nearby, has a breathless finale that always has me laughing out loud. I couldn't imagine what had so distressed Evgenia, who had been incredibly supportive of all his other books, until someone suggested that perhaps the Great Aunt was a portrait of Evgenia herself. Now, it's quite believable that Evgenia's fierce temper and strongly held opinions found their way into the vivid portraiture of the Great Aunt. But here, I'm quite comfortable shouting out, "But this is fiction! It's not meant to be a mirror!" Luckily, Ransome's mother's wholehearted approval gave Arthur the encouragement he needed to send the manuscript to his publisher. But Evgenia never wanted to hear the book mentioned again, after Arthur overrode her convictions that the book was dead, too grown-up for children and too childish for grown-ups, and that he would be ashamed to have his name associated with it.

I am appalled to think how close the world came to not having this story. And yet, my eagerness to find a real world that mirrors Ransome's has something in common with Evgenia's reaction to seeing traces of the real world in his texts. The clear-eyed portrayal of someone who had long betrayed her own potential for joy and creativity may have hit Evgenia in a particularly sensitive place. From the ferocity of her attack, I am tempted to say the reality of the Great Aunt is Evgenia, and therefore, the reality of Evgenia is that



magic key that I'm looking for. You think, by analyzing the circumstances around an artist's work, that you can get close to what art is, and how it's created. You think you may be able to finally perceive that actual, mysterious moment of creation. So I look at Evgenia's angry reaction and think aha, Great Aunt equals Evgenia. Voilà, the Great Aunt explained. But it's a facile and ultimately useless reduction of a fictional personality that has a lot to say about stifled energies. More than once, the other characters point out the similarities between the tumultuous Nancy and her willful Great Aunt, making me wonder not just about frustrated dreams but also about creative energy. And as Ransome freely goes back and forth between the exuberant and contagious imagination of Nancy and the deadening discipline of the Great Aunt, I find believing the Great Aunt is Evgenia is just too limiting and I, too, want to go back and forth, experiencing the characters as Ransome draws them. The fact is that Arthur Ransome was creating something special, something unique. His writing about children has a depth of understanding, promise and hope that I think is both precious and rare. He rides the line between reality and fantasy in a way that an adult can participate with the joy of a child. There's no heavy suspension of disbelief required. Anyone could find themselves sitting on a lovely boat, ready for an afternoon's pleasure cruise, when the captain suddenly decides he has to nip out to the port for an extra bit of gasoline. And when that captain is unwittingly involved in a car accident and doesn't make it back to the ship, and when a fog rolls in, and the ship slips its anchor, what's not to believe? By such simple, reasonable events, Ransome weaves you into adventures filled with joys and challenges that are universal, even though so particular to the Swallows. And the measure of the art is the utter believability of it all. If one stops to think whether there really exists parents who would deposit their brood on a campsite with an incomplete map and compass and leave them there for a week, well, maybe Children's Aid might have something to say about that. But within the context of Ransome's world, you know the parents have made sure there are neighbouring farmers checking on them and that the children themselves are capable, and dearly want to be allowed to map their own wild frontier. And besides, it's fun! Where else could you share the excitement of being an ancient, hidden Briton known as a Pict, or a Robinson Crusoe or a South American native? And as I wander through my woods, wondering how I'd manage without hydro or computers

if I were living in a tent, I'll think again of Titty, dreaming of being alone on her desert island. I'll take heart again from her energetic blazing of trails, I'll weep with her waving goodbye to her mother, and I'll be forever thankful that Arthur Ransome was loosed from the confines of his own reality long enough to write.

\*\*\*