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world in which he operated. This is a book written from inside Thring's world. But that world has gone, and we need to understand Thring from where we now are. Tozer, alas, does not really get us there.

Book reviews

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**239**

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**Swallows, Amazons and Coots: A Reading of Arthur Ransome**

*Julian Lovelock*

Lutterworth

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Arthur Ransome (1884-1967) is best known for his 12 novels in the *Swallows and Amazons* series aimed at a teenage audience in the 1930s and 1940s. His stories belonged to the “camping and tramping” adventures that Victor Watson (2000) has identified as providing a welcome alternative to the hundreds of school stories that were so popular.

In this reflective approach to *Swallows, Amazons and Coots*, Julian Lovelock argues for the stories’ significance for historians of childhood, and the insight that they offer into the relationship between children’s literature and its social and political context. For historians of education, the book provides a useful addition to our understanding the role that teenage fiction plays as informal education. We cannot of course know how readers internalised the adventures of a group of children in the English Lake District and Norfolk Broads, but we do know that the books have never been out of print, and have been the subject of film and television adaptations. There must be something about the independence to be gained from “mucking about in boats” that has appealed to generations of readers, most of whom probably had no experience themselves of the world created by Ransome.

A biographical study of Ransome underpins Lovelock’s analysis and Sophie Neville, President of the Arthur Ransome Society, notes in her foreword that Ransome’s lively writing reflects some of the imagery of the colonial world, “celebrates the threatened beauty of rural England and points to the unease of the 1930s that lies only just beneath the surface” (p. xi). Significantly for the historian, Neville recounts the number of individuals she has met who claim that the stories influenced their lives in making them more independent and keen on outdoor pursuits. At the beginning of the book, Lovelock sets out his own engagement with the stories as a young boy growing up in the 1960s, just as the imperial world evoked in Ransome’s fiction was giving way to a very different youth culture. Inevitably for those of us who work on fiction that we also enjoyed in our younger lives, the layering of reader interpretation becomes complex, yet at the same time perhaps has additional merit. The dark shadow of nostalgia is inevitable but having acknowledged this, the main chapters are devoid of the rose-coloured interpretation and Lovelock argues that the books can be read as a challenge to, as well as a reflection of, some of the contemporary attitudes of the English society.

The book begins with a brief biography of Ransome, taking him from his early unhappy schooling in the Lake District (North West England), to Rugby School and early work as an Office Boy at a London publisher. During holidays in the Lake District, he learned to sail and to gain intimate knowledge of the setting for his books. After a disastrous first marriage

that resulted in him travelling to work in Russia, he supported the Bolsheviks and married Evgenia Shelepina, Trotsky's Secretary. He was recruited by the British secret service and eventually Lovelock suggests he was "working as a low-level, rather open and harmless double agent" (p. 6). Eventually Evgenia and Ransome settled in Ambleside in the Lake District with Evgenia a very harsh critic of his stories. The poor northern climate generated a move to Suffolk, near to the Norfolk broads, which also enabled the couple to return to sailing at sea after the lakes of Cumbria. The charting of Ransome's geographical wandering confirms the accuracy of the narrative description. Highlighting his political allegiance enables Lovelock to interrogate the apparent tension between the middle-class, middle-England author of a much loved series of children's adventure stories and the Bolshevik sympathiser and journalist.

Lovelock draws on existing detailed biographical research, in addition to Ransome's own autobiography, and cites some letters that have already been published; the primary research in the book is the detailed analysis of the novels contextualised within published accounts of Ransome's life. This might be seen as a weakness of the book by some scholars but for historians of informal education, the detailed reading of the novels set against real events and real people is its strength. Lovelock challenges Paul Foot, Ransome's biographer, in claiming that although initially the books might appear conservative "there is also 'implied radicalism'" (p. 12) together with a clear recognition of the changing nature of girlhood and women's role.

The 12 main chapters in the book then develop Lovelock's argument through a detailed analysis of each adventure interspersed with Ransome's own line illustrations from the original stories. Although there is a careful explanation of plot and character, anyone not familiar with the stores might find themselves wondering who were Ransome's real acquaintances such as the Altounyans (Taqui, Susan, Mavis, nicknamed Titty, and Roger) who the youthful protagonists (John, Susan, Titty and Roger). Such overt borrowing of names suggests also a borrowing of contemporary children's attitudes and attributes. Taqui, in real life, a girl who became "John" in the stories apparently signed her letter to Ransome "Captain John", happily accepting her fictional persona. The independence of the children in the novels and their ability to set off in boats for adventures, fired by imagination, might offer some insight into how children coped with the very difficult political world of the 1940s. That does not explain the ongoing popularity of the novels and we might conclude that the adventures described in Ransome's books, so much of which is drawn from his experience and depicts actual places, that young readers found in them the tools to further develop their imagination and escape from their everyday lives.

The chapters are divided by useful subheadings, allowing the reader to navigate through the narrative details and Lovelock's analytical insight into each novel. Lovelock puts forward a strong case for Ransome's work to be recognised as more complex than hitherto and therefore more relevant for historians of childhood and informal education. In the end, his enthusiasm for his subject and his own obvious pleasure in the book does, at times, overshadow the strength of the analysis. As a less than enthusiastic reader of the series as a young teenager I recently picked up the copy of *Coot Club* off the bookshelf, and, armed with Lovelock's commentary, I have been persuaded of the value of Ransome's work for the insight he offers into the mid-twentieth century children's world.

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## Reference

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