

**The Ideal of Manliness: The Legacy of Thring's Uppingham**

*Malcolm Tozer*

Sunnyrest Books

Truro

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A long-time Master at Uppingham and educational authority in other roles, Malcolm Tozer has long idealised and lauded Thring's influence on the Uppingham School. He does so not without reason, for Thring took charge of a small and failing school, imbued it with an ethos of Christian manliness, and took it to a position as one of England's leading public schools in the second half of the nineteenth century. It has maintained its position ever since.

Tozer explains how all this took place. He shows how Thring's imbibing of romantic authors such as Walter Scott, his experiences at Eton, his Christian conviction and other influences shaped his thinking and his educational ideology. Thring then took a school that was in such dire straits that he had licence to innovate and experiment, gave it the trappings of the late nineteenth-century public school system, and anchored it to his convictions about the education of the mind, body and soul.

If Tozer's aim in writing this book was to ensure that Thring received his dues as an educational pioneer, he has, however, fallen short of the mark. Hagiography is a self-defeating enterprise, and there are enough curious statements and omissions throughout this study to cast doubt on Tozer's ability to present a well-rounded and fair vision of Thring. If Thring was such an admirable character, why did he marry the woman his brother was desperately in love with, after meeting her when he had been sent to persuade him of the ill-advised nature of the match? Why is there almost no account of unsuccessful innovations? Why is there no criticism of some of Thring's Spartan excesses and needless discomfort that this subjected his charges to? And how can it be said that "Thring's own education in manliness was now complete" (p. 117) when the man was only 32?

Thring, Tozer is at pains to reiterate, advocated "true manliness" – all else was corruption of a pure ideal. The constant idealisation of Thring and his beliefs and methods is closely mirrored and reinforced by Tozer's condemnation of all that came after. As the Victorian age gave way to the Edwardian, the mid-nineteenth century to the late nineteenth and early twentieth, Tozer's ideal world, inside and outside of the public school, gave way to something altogether more crass. Christian manliness was usurped by athletic and militarised hyper-masculinity, the old ideal of the gentleman was corrupted by the nouveau-rich, and Thring's Uppingham was bastardised, if not fatally, by his more athletically and militarily minded successors.

Remarkably, Tozer also condemns the years of hyper-athleticism for encouraging homosexual practices and attributes this to decline of the mid-nineteenth-century emphasis on morality. Even laying aside the illiberal condemnation of homosexuality implicit in his remarks, it defies any common sense to suggest that there was not illicit sexual activity in the public schools before hyper-athleticism, including during Thring's era. And in as much as boys are involved, "homosexuality" is hardly an appropriate term – sexual assault and paedophilia might be more to the point.

Similarly, Tozer laments the tragedies of imperialism – not for the evils and injustices that they inflicted on colonised peoples, but for the fact that it brought the great powers into conflict. He is likewise blind to or at least silent on the questions of privilege, conformity, cruelty to children and anything else that might undermine Thring or the

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

*Julian Lovelock*

Lutterworth

Cambridge

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xiv+227pp.

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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