

Arthur Ransome and the Bolshevik Revolution

Part one

By Dave Hyland
25 June 2011

Arthur Ransome is known today for the international best-selling series of children's adventure books, *Swallows and Amazons* that he wrote from 1930 to the late 1940s. But a recent reprint of the author's *Six Weeks in Russia 1919*, which includes *The Truth about Russia: Open Letter to the People of America*, is a reminder that Ransome produced his most important literary work some 15 years earlier, with his powerful eyewitness account of the unfolding of the Russian Revolution—the greatest event in world history.

Ransome was the only reporter allowed close access to the Bolshevik leadership in the tumultuous period immediately prior to the October 1917 Revolution, and in its aftermath when the workers' state faced enormously complex practical, political and military/diplomatic tasks. His trilogy, *The Truth about Russia*, *Six Weeks in Russia* and *Crisis in Russia*, covering the period 1915-21, has significant historical, political and literary interest.

Two books featuring Ransome have appeared in the last three years. The first of these, *The Last Englishman: The Double Life of Arthur Ransome*, written by Roland Chambers and published by Faber and Faber in 2009, was received favourably and went on to pick up the Biography Club's prize for Best First Biography.

The approving reviews ensured the book enjoyed reasonably high paperback sales figures. It not only had the support of almost every right wing newspaper and magazine in Britain, but boasted the endorsement of a recently retired head of Britain's MI6 intelligence service. A strap on the front cover reads, "Fascinating," Stella Rimington, *The Times*.

The book contains few new biographical details, drawing heavily on Hugh Brogan's earlier extensive but politically unsympathetic biography, *The Life of Arthur Ransome*, published by Jonathan Cape in 1984. In fact, Chambers distorts many of the biographical facts already known.

On page eight, he explains the type of book he set out to write:

"My own book was intended initially as a brief and colourful *exposé*, a sharp adjustment to the whitewash that hitherto has screened Ransome from anything approaching a candid assessment."

It is difficult to imagine a more opportunist approach to the writing of a biography. The author has already made up his mind about his subject and was going to undermine his character in any way he could by applying large amounts of mud to the "whitewash."

Possibly aware of how damaging such an admission is, he adds by way of a caveat, "But very quickly I realised that his life, as well as the age that he lived through, offered something much richer." (*The Last Englishman*, p. 8)

In reality, Chambers stuck to his original mandate of producing a supposed "exposé"; only the original notion of brevity gave way to a more extended exercise in character assassination.

Chambers paints Ransome as a deeply flawed personality: an ungrateful and whining son, feckless and unfaithful husband, distant father and generally disloyal character. And if this alone was not enough to prove that Ransome's writings on Russia are the work of a cynical, opportunist and untrustworthy individual, incapable of writing honestly and objectively about Russia, the coup de grace to his intellectual credibility is delivered in the form of an allegation that he was a double agent.

"Ransome's biography, in as far as it deals with his father, is a mixture of calculated humility, nostalgia and bitter reproach," writes Chambers. (*ibid.* p.18).

This is a slur against Ransome and a misreading of the complex relationship he had with his father.

Ransome was the quintessential upper middle class Englishman. He was born in the northern industrial town of Leeds in 1884, where his father was Professor of History at Yorkshire College (later Leeds University). Professor Cyril Ransome was a Liberal Unionist and Imperial Federalist and pioneered working men's education, founding a working men's club that was named after him. His son had a happy early childhood that included long summer holidays in the Lake District, which later provided the inspiration for his famous children's adventure books.

It's true that in his autobiography, Ransome described how, at his father's funeral, "I stood horrified at myself knowing with my very real sorrow, because I had liked and admired my father, was mixed a feeling of relief. This did not last." (*The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, Jonathan Cape, 1976, p. 52).

Of course, there would have been tension between father and son, as there is in all such relationships at one time or another. In that late Victorian period of bottled-up emotions and starched collars, this would have been doubly true. His father, who was an active physical man, expected his eldest son to be the same and when he wasn't, expressed his frustration.

He was similarly exacting in the academic arena and wanted his son to have a scientific career. Arthur studied chemistry at Rugby, the top public school immortalised by Thomas Hughes in his 1854 classic *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. Rugby trained and prepared the sons of professionals and well-to-do families for their role in administering the country and the Empire.

But Cyril was also responsible for encouraging his son's interest in literature, by giving him a copy of *Robinson Crusoe* to read when he was just four years old. He must have played a significant part in making Arthur's early life the Edwardian idyll and we know he thought about his father many times later in life. "He had been disappointed in me, but I have often thought what friends we could have been had he not died so

young,” Ransome wrote. (*ibid.* p. 51).

Arthur experienced a huge shock at his father’s sudden death when he was only 13. For the rest of his life, he felt him looking over his shoulder disapprovingly. That must have been a heavy burden for the young man to carry into adulthood. Nostalgia, yes, but there seems to be no “calculated humility” or “bitterness” here, only cherished memories and loving feelings towards a long-lamented father. For the young Ransome to express his momentary relief at the passing of an exacting parent was courageous and honest. And, as he explains, the feeling didn’t last.

The tragedy pushed him even closer to his mother. Chambers portrays Ransome as a frustrating burden to his mother. Like most mothers, she wanted what was best for her son. But this did not always chime with his ambitions to be a literary artist. Despite this and the various differences that came up from time to time, theirs was an extremely close, loving relationship; one sustained through the exchange of letters dating from the time when Ransome was a boarder at Windermere, then in Rugby, London and Russia, and then afterwards from wherever he was in the world, until his mother’s death in 1944. Fully 400 letters were found in Ransome’s desk when he died in 1967 and many of them are included in the collection chosen by Hugh Brogan for his book consisting entirely of Ransome’s correspondence, *Signalling from Mars* (Jonathan Cape, 1997).

Although he was reasonably happy with chemistry, it was great literature that really set the young man’s imagination racing. The writings of William Morris had a strong impact, but his favourite author was the 18th century radical painter, pamphleteer and parliamentary journalist William Hazlitt. When Ransome was writing his autobiography decades later, he looked back lovingly to the time he discovered Hazlitt’s work:

“Hazlitt’s ‘Table Talk’, had never been out of my pocket except when I was reading it, or at night when, as a sort of magic rite, I kept it by my bedside and, after reading, put my spectacles on it to keep watch over it, and in a sense to go on reading it while I slept”. (Ransome, 1976, p. 67).

Ransome broke from the future that had been mapped out for him by others, and left college without qualifications to join a publisher as an office boy. It wasn’t too long before he began producing translations and a wide range of articles on literature for magazines. In 1909 he married and, although happy at first, the union began to deteriorate rather rapidly. Ransome couldn’t deal with his wife’s emotional mood swings and extravagant behaviour and started to believe he had made a mistake.

Chambers attempts to paint Ransome as a philandering husband by claiming he had had a lover while married to Ivy. But as Brogan explains, Ransome had asked for a divorce in 1912 for “the sake of his sanity and his art”, and Ivy had become Ivan Campbell’s mistress. It was only because of his daughter Tabitha that Ransome allowed the marriage to flounder on: “Arthur’s marriage dragged on in substance until 1917, and in form until 1924”, where-as their solicitor, Sir George Lewis, claimed that effectively the marriage had ended by 1914 and after one particularly hysterical outburst told Ivy, “You have shown me exactly why it is advisable that he and you should separate”. (Brogan, 1984, p. 91).

Chambers also claims that Ransome ignored his daughter and basically abandoned her. This again is a far more complex issue than he presents. In a letter to his mother, June 30 1913, Ransome wrote, “My dear mother, when I think of Ivy’s deliberate efforts to separate me from my own family, the censorship of my letters, and all the rest, I am surprised that I am still sane...” (*ibid.* p. 92).

This was just before he left in the first of their separations. “When Ivy discovered that he really had escaped she had a violent fit of hysterics, clawing and biting the dining-room curtains and screaming with tears of laughter, watched by her horrified daughter”. (*ibid.* p. 93).

Tragically for Ransome, the tactics Ivy used to attempt to separate mother and son were also employed over the years to keep Ransome estranged from his own daughter.

In blackening Ransome’s moral character, Chambers hopes it will help

undermine him in the eyes of the reader and call into question his ability to have written objectively or selflessly about Russia and its revolution.

It is as he moves on to Ransome’s role in the Russian Revolution itself that Chambers really warms to his central theme; that Ransome’s attitude towards the revolution was driven purely by subjective feelings of personal inadequacy and simmering resentment. This is used to underline his main assertion that the Bolshevik revolution had no objective basis and was nothing more than, as he refers to throughout the book, a clever “putsch by Lenin.”

He writes, “But the very things that drew Ransome into the bourgeois fold also gave rise to mixed feelings. No doubt he had a strong emotional attachment to his class, but he also had good reasons to resent it, not least because he judged himself, often very painfully, by its standards. His father, he knew, had been disappointed in him. He had failed at Rugby, and after a brief spell in Leeds had abandoned formal education altogether. As a young author struggling to be noticed, no amount of reading and literary criticism had made up for the fact that the Oxbridge crowd made him feel ignorant and gauche. In Russia, he had been passed over for the top job at the Anglo-Russian Bureau, taken to task by Hugh Walpole, and scoffed at back in London by Lord Crawford, who would now, he fervently hoped, be eating his hat.” (Chambers, p. 137).

The implication that Ransome had been a miserable youth and was now a malignant figure seeking revenge is entirely false. The very opposite was the case. Ransome was received warmly by a layer of the intelligentsia in London and felt very much at ease among writers and poets such as Edward Thomas, Laurence Binyon and G. K. Chesterton, resulting in his first book, *Bohemia in London*, that was published in 1909.

Ransome was to explain, “In Chelsea I fell among friends and was extremely happy... I owed a great deal to Yoshio Markino, for taking me to the house of Miss Pamela Coleman Smith in the Boltons. She was an artist who had been discovered in Jamaica (or perhaps on a visit to America) by Ellen Terry, who had brought her to England. She had a weekly ‘evenings’ in her studio and I was soon one of the fortunate ones with a permanent invitation. There were always actors and actresses these evenings, and sometimes Ellen Terry herself would illumine the whole room just by being there. Here I met for the first time W. B. Yeats...” (Ransome, 1976, p. 87).

As for the claim that he was passed over for the top job at the Anglo-Russian Bureau, this reflected favourably on him. It meant he wasn’t completely trusted to toe the Foreign Office and Secret Service line.

To be continued

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