

Swallows and Amazons

The ancient slide projector (about to be retired) added to the air of nostalgia as Doug Maas presented the illustrated tale entitled “Arthur, his Stories, and Me”. This lifetime passion had been sparked for him by a Christmas present more than 60 years ago: one of the *Swallows & Amazons* series of children’s novels by Arthur Ransome (1884-1967).

Arthur Ransome’s own life was dramatic. Born in Leeds, he spent long summer family holidays in the Lake District. He was educated at Rugby School, from where he went to the Yorkshire College (later Leeds University) to study applied science. But a chance discovery in the College library of a biography of William Morris became his ‘decisive moment’, and put him firmly on a writing career. He abandoned his studies and travelled to London to a job with a firm of publishers.

He began writing and living a bohemian life. When he could, he returned to the lakes and by chance met up with the Collingwoods who lived on the shores of Coniston and who became his second family. One of the daughters, Dora, married Ernest Altounyan. They had five children who – in some ways – later became the ‘Swallows’ in the books.

Arthur married (unwisely) Miss Ivy Walker, a descendent of the Pochins of Barkby Hall. Her demands were so great that after the birth of their daughter Tabitha, he felt he needed to escape. He had become interested in folk tales – the real ones, told by real peasant people as their means of communication. The best seemed to come from Russia and so he went there and learned the language from children’s reading books.

He spent seven years in Russia – during revolution and war – getting to know the political leaders and meeting Trotsky’s secretary, Evgenia, who later became his second wife. He was drawn into becoming a war correspondent. Eventually they had to escape and spent some years living in Estonia and Latvia, sailing the Baltic in several yachts including *Racundra* which was built to his own specification.

Back in England they found a house in the Lake District near Windermere. The Altounyan children visited and there were adventures on the lake but they had to return to Syria where their father was a doctor at the hospital in Aleppo. Arthur wrote his first book, *Swallows & Amazons*, about the children and their imagined adventures on the lake. He hoped they would enjoy reading it, back amongst the camels, sand and mosquitos.

He wrote more books in the series until there were those dozen classic novels for children. Thousands of enthusiasts around the world are fans and many belong to The Arthur Ransome Society. They explore the real and fictional locations in the Lakes and the East Coast as well as abroad. As members of local groups around the world, and as families, they encourage today’s youngsters to pursue Ransome-inspired outdoor activities.

Doug explained that his keen interest had been a major factor when he decided to become a volunteer at Stoneywell, discovering that those books had inspired the Gimson children and that a set of them was on display on a shelf in the cottage.

Mark Temple

More information at: <http://www.arthur-ransome.org.uk>