Inscription and Intergenerational Connection in Arthur Ransome's Lakeland Novels

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Abstract

Jacqueline Rose's influential notion of the "impossibility" of children's literature rests on the claim that such works "frame" the child and place the adult "first". Although Ransome's writings undoubtedly contain instances of such divisions and hierarchies, this article argues that they also explore various kinds of communication and connection. In particular, the Lakeland novels which are the focus here—*Swallows and Amazons* (1930/2012), *Swallowdale* (1931/1968), *Winter Holiday* (1933/2013), *Pigeon Post* (1936/2013) and *The Picts and the Martyrs* (1943/1993)—make frequent mention of literary works but also display an intense interest in messages which are written on paper but also cut into surfaces such as wood and stone. These inscriptions challenge generational hierarchies in that they establish a means for different individuals to communicate the experience of being in the same place, albeit at different times. Yet as well as conveying the excitements of discovery and exploring the consolations which can follow recognitions of belatedness, this article also argues that Ransome's Lakeland novels acknowledge and seek to manage the losses experienced by each generation.

Keywords Arthur Ransome · Jacqueline Rose · Children's literature · Ideology · Textuality · Inscription · Intergenerational connection

In memory of Robert Beattie (1939–2015).

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The Writer's Hand

Early in Arthur Ransome's *Swallowdale*, having returned to Wild Cat Island the summer after the events recorded in *Swallows and Amazons*, Titty Walker is said to have "dipped her hands in the cool water of the harbour, just to show herself that she was really there" (Ransome, 1931/1968, p. 33). In his posthumously published autobiography, Ransome remembered childhood holidays on Coniston and "a private rite" performed by an "old stone harbour" on the shore: "I had to dip my hand in the water, as a greeting to the beloved lake or as a proof to myself that I had indeed come home" (1976, p. 26). This incident becomes the keynote moment in David Kerr's excellent (1998) documentary on Ransome. Between the publication of *Swallowdale* in 1931 and the autobiography in 1976 (as Kerr's contributors discuss in the documentary), Ransome produced an Author's Note to what was now a complete series of twelve novels. He again recalled childhood holidays on Coniston, and also mentioned his brother (Geoffrey) and his sisters (Cecily and Joyce). Each year, as Ransome wrote, "we used to run down to the lake, dip our hands in and wish, as if we had just seen the new moon".

It is widely known that the Author's Note to *Swallows and Amazons* (dated "19 May 1958") replaced an earlier dedication: "TO THE SIX FOR WHOM IT WAS WRITTEN IN EXCHANGE FOR A PAIR OF SLIPPERS." The slippers had in 1929 been a gift to Ransome from Tacqui, Susan, Mavis (known as "Titty"), Roger and Brigit Altounyan (the last of the "six" presumably being their mother, Dora Altounyan). The fact that Ransome uses four of the five names of the Altounyan children for four of the five Walker children suggests that his fictional creations were based on the actual family. Yet the Author's Note seems to erase this social connection and to replace it with an earlier and personal one. Hugh Brogan (one of the contributors to Kerr's documentary) suggests that Ransome's efforts, both in his Author's Note and autobiography, to conceal the part played by the Altounyans in the genesis of the "Swallows and Amazons" novels are those of "a child protecting his own private game" (1985, p. 429).

In *Swallowdale* and the Author's Note, the hand-dipper is accompanied. In his autobiography, however, Ransome is emphatically alone: this, as Brogan notes, is a "private game". Yet it would be unfair to suppose merely that this "game" is played by a writer attempting to achieve imaginative control through the memory of a solitary moment. These and other moments of connection in Ransome's work link past and present selves, but they potentially also have a social dimension involving communication between past and present generations. It is additionally significant that the contact between hand and water is not dissimilar to the act of writing, with the surface of the beloved lake here providing a surface for the most evanescent of inscriptions. In what follows I explore the ways in which the Lakeland novels establish connections by such moments of inscription. Yet the idea that these scenes establish a parity between child and adult, present and past, should not detract from an acknowledgment that Ransome's writing frequently illustrates and sometimes reinscribes social inequalities. Bob Dixon finds the world of Ransome's books to be "exclusively middle-class" (1977, p. 58) and

Nicholas Tucker writes of Ransome's "somewhat Tory vision" (1986, p. 192). Ian Wojcik-Andrews argues that Ransome creates a fictional world "in which the ideology of the middle-class family reigns supreme" and goes on to argue (perhaps less plausibly) that Ransome subjected this political formation to the alternative values of the "communitistic family" (Wojcik-Andrews, 1990, p. 13). The representation of other people and other lands in the "Swallows and Amazons" books is also marked by imperialist attitudes, although one critic suggests that these views are questioned by Ransome (see Bird, 2014, pp. 88, 100–104). In some ways, then, Ransome's project as an author does indeed involve acts of imaginative control in which others, often children, are (as one might say) "written out" or "written in". In such a context, more positive notions of connection become difficult (though not impossible) to sustain.

Framing the Child

The idea that Ransome is an "ideological" writer might be strengthened by turning to what is, for many, the most influential study of children's literature: Jacqueline Rose's *The Case of Peter Pan; Or, The Impossibility of Children's Fiction*. Rose's notion of the "impossibility" of children's fiction rests on a rejection of any idea that such fiction speaks *for* children. Instead, children's writing "draws in the child, it secures, places and frames the child" (1984/1992, p. 2). Here, "the adult comes first (author, maker, giver) and the child comes after (reader, product, receiver)" (pp. 1–2). For Rose, one sign that the adult "comes first" is that the figure of a child "is constantly set up as the site of a lost truth and/or moment in history" (p. 43). There can be little doubt that the aforementioned hand-dipping episodes situate Titty (and the young Ransome) as sites of a lost truth. In this sense, these episodes demonstrate what Rose in her Preface to the 1992 edition of *The Case of Peter Pan* says of the representation of childhood "innocence" in children's literature: rather than being "a property of childhood" it is a product of "adult desire" (p. xii).

The task of ideology critique has been valuable, and Rose's work adds considerably to that approach. To leave it at that, however, would be to ignore Rose's central claim, which is that what I am calling "intergenerational connection" is, at least potentially, abusive. The adult "comes first" and the child "after", yet whilst for Rose there might be a "space in between", the adult always uses this space "to get at the child" (pp. 1–2). This position is most fully set out in Rose's third chapter, which draws its subtitle from the reference made by the psychoanalyst Sándor Ferenczi to the "confusion of tongues" that can ensue in situations of childhood sexual trauma. Here, according to Ferenczi, the child identifies in a damaging way with the aggressor or seducer. Ferenczi's point is partly a clinical one: the analyst should not reawaken traumatic identifications. In a way that I find puzzling, however, Rose sees abusive relationships between parents and children as the baseline situation in children's fiction. The "space in between" is one in which the adult only ever intends to "get at" the child although, for Rose, children's fiction ought to preserve "the certainty which should properly distinguish the narrating adult from the child" (p. 68).

When this distinction becomes undecidable, children's fiction "becomes not experiment [...] but *molestation*" (p. 70).

For Rose, it is in the spaces of literary representation as well as in those of actual social relationships that "proper" distinctions between adults and children must be maintained. When such boundaries become undecidable, we have a "case" in a legal sense; indeed, as Rose's conclusion affirms, "children's literature is the perpetration of a crime" (p. 137). Rose strongly insists that "[w]riters for children must know who they are" (p. 70). But this position troubles me. Why "must"? What of writers who do not know who they are or who write what they do precisely because they lack this knowledge? David Rudd has discussed Rose's suspicion of undecidability, suggesting that in Bakhtinian terms "the space in between" which a literary text makes available is "always dynamic, always subject to struggles over its signification" (2010, pp. 294–295). Similarly, the spaces of inscription in the Lakeland novels are rarely fixed or unilateral: on occasions they can provide companionship and comfort; elsewhere, they involve disappointment or even desolation.

Between Writer and Character

The hand-dipping episodes with which I began suggest that Arthur Ransome is linked to Titty Walker, and I will further explore that connection in due course. If we are looking at spaces "between" children and adults, however, it makes sense to start with Uncle Jim, the man whose houseboat home, as Roland Chambers has noted, positions him "halfway between the land of adults and the children's island" (2010, p. 352). As a ten-year-old child reading *Swallows and Amazons* for the first time, I quickly detected a connection between the walrus-moustached author whose photograph appeared on the back cover of my Puffin paperback and the portly figure who featured in Ransome's illustrations. In "CAPTAIN FLINT WALKS THE PLANK", for example (1930/2012, p. 417), Jim Turner is pictured (in the words of the text) "taking a long stride into thin air" in the moment which precedes the "colossal splash" sent up by his contact with the water (p. 415). But even before (in about 1970) I recognized the appearance of a "real" human being within a "story", Hugh Shelley had noted that Ransome's Uncle Jim is "a self-portrait" (1960, p. 19) and Marcus Crouch had suggested that Ransome pictured himself in "the irascible, kindly Captain Flint" (1962, p. 70). Ransome's literary references in this scene (to Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883) and to J. M. Barrie's 1904 play and 1911 novel) as well as its various points of contact (between solid and liquid, real novelist and fictional memoirist, picture and text) provide a particularly complex instance of inscription and one in which, contrary to Rose's insistence upon clear distinctions, we do not quite know who (or where) "Ransome" is.

More problematic even than Ransome's "appearance" within *Swallows and Amazons*, at least from the point of view of Rose, would be the instances in which the boundary between "Ransome" and his fictional children dissolves. With some chagrin, Ransome recalled in his autobiography that Cyril Ransome thought his son a "fibbertigibbet" (1976, p. 18) and Christina Hardyment plausibly suggests that John Walker is "the competent boy that Ransome wished he himself had been" (1984, p.

40). No such self-projection is apparent in Ransome's depiction of Susan Walker, although Hardyment suggests that the mate of the *Swallow* is partly modelled on Evgenia, Ransome's second wife (see p. 39). The character of Susan is a helpful example here, for a reliable indication that Ransome saw aspects of himself in his fictional characters is that these characters enjoy a separate existence. Susan never does anything on her own. Nor does Peggy; nor do any of the adults, with the exception of Uncle Jim. In *Swallows and Amazons*, by contrast, John rows on his own to collect milk, rows alone to Uncle Jim's houseboat and swims alone around the island. Roger Walker also enjoys an autonomous existence (Chapter 19 of *Pigeon Post* is entitled "Roger Alone"). Indeed, *Swallows and Amazons* begins with Roger running "to and fro, across the steep field that sloped up from the lake" (Ransome, 1930/2012, p. 1). In this scene, Roger is not just outside and on his own: he is also part of an imagined world in which he is "a tea-clipper, the *Cutty Sark*" (p. 1). Links between the author and his fictional ship's boy are still more evident elsewhere. In his autobiography, Ransome remembered having his shorts repaired after sliding down the "Knickerbockerbreaker" (1976, p. 27). Roger performs the same serge-gripping feat in Chapter 15 of *Swallowdale*.

Yet there can be little doubt that Brogan is right to describe Titty Walker as Ransome's "most richly conceived character" (1985, p. 314). Titty "is" Ransome in a way the other children (with the exception, perhaps, of Dorothea Callum) are not. She (like Dorothea) is Ransome the romantic, the dreamer, the wish-maker; she is (as Hugh Shelley points out) the only Walker child to possess "a properly developed imagination and sensibility" (1960, p. 19). Titty is also—a not unconnected fact—Ransome the reader. The first chapter of *Swallows and Amazons* is called "The Peak in Darien" and has as its epigraph the lines from Keats about "stout Cortez" and the "wild surmise" felt by his men on first seeing the Pacific Ocean. This isn't simply an authorial intervention, however: having zigzagged his way up the field in the opening scene, Roger reveals that it was Titty who named "Darien"—the point of land from which the Walker children stare longingly at the island.

The allusion to "On First Looking into Chapman's Homer" (1816) is only the first of many literary references in *Swallows and Amazons*. When the Swallows first set out for the island, the ever-practical Susan takes with her a cookbook; the equally sensible John packs two nautical manuals. But the most revealing choice of holiday reading—*Robinson Crusoe* (1719)—is Titty's. It is characteristic not only of her—she has "read it all many times before" (1930/2012, p. 284)—but also of Ransome, who knew this book before the age of four and who in his autobiography expressed gratitude to his mother for encouraging a "habit of eager reading" which, even before secondary school, made him familiar with works by, among others, Scott and Shakespeare, Kingsley and Kipling, and Stevenson and Andersen (1976, p. 37). The reason Titty gives for her choice of reading—that *Robinson Crusoe* "tells you just what to do on an island"—is only superficially impractical (1930/2012, p. 27). Doubtless *Simple Cooking for Small Households* or *The Seaman's Handybook* might have more immediate value. For the expedition's keenest reader, however, *Robinson Crusoe* does indeed tell you "what to do": it enables Titty to transform adults into "natives"; it metamorphoses her own mother into Man Friday. The book opens a space in which the world can be imaginatively re-shaped (see Bird, p. 41),

and it is not just the external world which becomes amenable to this almost magical transformation. Titty longs “to be Robinson Crusoe” and is able to fulfil this wish to such an extent that she feels, as she sails away in the closing pages of the novel, that the island is hers “more than anyone’s” because—the key insight— “she had been alone on it” (pp. 243, 499).

Allusions to Keats and Defoe are merely the two earliest instances in which Titty Walker becomes the medium through which literary texts surface within the Lakeland novels. It is she who references Coleridge’s “The Rime of the Ancient Mariner” (1798/1817) in *Swallows and Amazons* (see 1930/2012, p. 477); she who quotes Macaulay’s “The Spanish Armada” (1832) in a pair of references which bookend *Swallowdale* (see 1931/1969, pp. 26, 325). In *Pigeon Post* it is also she who quotes that island urtext, Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (1610–1611), speculating that Timothy (a supposed armadillo) has perished at sea on his journey from Brazil and “[s]uffered a sea change” (1936/2013, p. 216). I have been exploring instances in which aspects of “Ransome” seem to be distributed among his fictional characters, and I have tried to show that this is especially the case with Titty. Such overlapping identities involve an undecidability which might trouble Jacqueline Rose, and one could well conclude that in Ransome’s work the adult comes first and the child after, that children do indeed figure as sites of lost truth, and that they are to this extent both placed and framed in just the ways which Rose objects to. I will return to the notion of a “space in between” but for the present want simply to observe that one might see Ransome’s children as written “through” rather than “out” or “in”. Although they are on occasions either excluded or placed by the text, they elsewhere become contact points between the story and texts at large. Moreover, these texts are not exclusively literary: they often take the form of inscriptions in which letters are written onto or cut into a variety of surfaces. Indeed, as we will see, even non-textual objects take on the qualities of an inscription.

Two Axes of Inscription

When they write, the intentions of Ransome’s children—though frequently inspired by tales of adventure—are generally practical. This is certainly true of the founding document of the Lakeland novels: the Ship’s Articles drafted by John Walker in the opening chapter of *Swallows and Amazons*. The legal or contractual status of this text is echoed in *Pigeon Post*, where the children stake their claim to the Gulch as joint members of the “Swallows, Amazons and D’s Mining Company” (1936/2013, p. 220). In each case, an entity—a ship’s crew, a mining company—is established by a performative linguistic act in which words on a page bring a social collective into being. Words also create things in the “treaty of offence and defence” signed by John Walker and Nancy Blackett in *Swallows and Amazons* (1930/2012, pp. 148–149) and still more so in the Black Spot destined for “Captain Flint (*alias* Uncle Jim)” (p. 378).

Both *Swallows and Amazons* and *Pigeon Post* begin with telegrams (respectively from Malta and Pernambuco). Both communications are enabling: the first gives the Walker children their father’s permission to camp on the island; the second

promises the return of Uncle Jim, perhaps to assist with the children's prospecting efforts. Yet both messages demand interpretation and might be misunderstood. "But what are duffers if not duffers?" asks a mystified Susan in *Swallows and Amazons* (1930/2012, p. 7). Of the telegram's reference to "Timothy" in *Pigeon Post*, Nancy is completely off the mark when she declares that "it must be an armadillo" (1936/2013, pp. 18–19). Ship's papers and telegrams; contracts and communications: these documents might either mark a fixed point (a declaration, an origin) or carry marks across an interval (a transmission, a destination). Along a second inscriptive axis, language might be used in transparent or opaque ways. The Ship's Articles offer both fixity and transparency; Jim Turner's telegram is characterized by mobility and opacity. Yet the two axes do not align consistently. *The Picts and the Martyrs* (1943) also begins with a telegram, but Great Aunt Maria's message (and in particular the letter which follows) is restrictive rather than permissive and clear rather than cryptic. In *Pigeon Post*, the axes also present in unexpected ways. The message of the matchbox dropped by Squashy Hat in the Gulch is painfully apparent to Ransome's children: it represents a counter-claim to that of their own mining company and, as such, seems fundamentally fixed and territorial. The matchbox offers proof, as Nancy puts it, that "He's been here" (p. 275). Yet this object is also mysterious. The legend "Phosphoros de Seguranca" is to John Walker "a bit like Latin" (p. 275). On at least one occasion, to take another example, mobility and transparency of meaning coexist: Titty's last message from High Topps is "FIRE HELP QUICK" (p. 340).

At one level, the fact that Ransome's messages and inscriptions display either fixity or mobility in form, and either transparency or opacity in meaning, is unsurprising, for these are features of everyday communication. The purpose of a contract is to provide a clear and stable point of reference (or one that can be accepted as such), whilst a message transmits meaning over distance but is often directed at a particular audience (hence the uses of opacity). These communicative dynamics are powerfully at work in *Swallowdale* when Nancy, concealed within the Beckfoot motor launch, fires an arrow onto the island. Like a telegram, the arrow bears an encoded message ("SHOW THE PARROT HIS FEATHERS") which stumps even Titty: "I don't see what it means" (1931/1968, p. 250). But meanings which are opaque on the surface become transparent within. Nancy's message only needs to be taken literally for, as Titty shortly recollects, the parrot likes to attack the feathers it has shed, and in doing so on this occasion splits the arrow to reveal an unencrypted message which is, as John puts it, "meant for all of us" (p. 256).

Two inscriptions, then, accompany the arrow on its flight from boat to shore: the first is wrapped around the shaft and written in a code legible only to the Walkers (open but closed); the second is concealed within and written in a way that could be understood by anybody (closed but open). That Ransome is testing these combinations is also evident in *Winter Holiday*, the novel which directly preceded *Pigeon Post*. In Chapter 14, confined to Beckfoot with the mumps, Nancy sends a parcel to the other children by way of the family doctor. The communication bears with it an external and unencoded message (open and open): "DON'T OPEN TILL HE'S GONE. HE KNOWS WHY" (1933/2013, p. 177). The parcel contains a tobacco tin which itself contains "a large brass key" attached to a luggage label with a one-word

message: "FRAM" (p. 178). The doctor could not understand this (enclosed and closed) message and has not in any case seen it. But for the children the codeword poses little difficulty: *Fram* was the name of the ship used by Fridtjof Nansen on his Arctic expedition of 1893; the key belongs to Jim Turner's houseboat. Roger tentatively explains why Nancy has placed the key in their possession: "So that we can get inside?" (p. 178).

Material Signs

Both *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale* make repeated references to printed or written texts. In *Winter Holiday* and *Pigeon Post*, Ransome's entire narrative depends upon a variety of communication systems. *Winter Holiday* features flag signals, semaphore messages and Morse code. The very title "*Pigeon Post*" names another system of communication. Ransome is often as much concerned with the physical appearance of a communication as with its contents. In *Swallows and Amazons*, the telegram in the opening chapter is printed on "a small piece of white paper" and enclosed in "a red envelope" (1930/2012, p. 2). When the Swallows land on the island at the start of *Swallowdale*, they discover a message from the Amazons ("a sheet of paper" with a message "written in red pencil") enclosed in an envelope with "TO THE SWALLOWS" written "in blue pencil" (1931/1968, p. 25). Yet the materiality of these marks is still more pronounced in another communication. In *Swallows and Amazons*, Nancy Blackett composes an ultimatum to her uncle. She writes this message in a conventional way (with pencil, on paper) but with such intensity that, as Ransome tells us: "Twice she broke the point of her pencil" (1930/2012, p. 373). This communication is accompanied by a further and more earthy mark made using "burnt wood" which is "smeared" onto the paper (p. 374).

Wood marks paper in a key scene of Ransome's first Lakeland novel, then, and aspects of the plot rely on the resources provided by the island, in which leading lights—wood marked by paint, and later by lanterns—facilitate access to the smaller of the two landing places. It is striking that Ransome compares this material sign to a written one: the two lights resemble "the stop called a colon" (p. 176). In *Pigeon Post*, stone provides the surface for the first of several marks made during Squashy Hat's geological investigations: "a round staring splash of white among the grey rocks" (1936/2013, p. 133). Most ingeniously but least plausibly, grass provides the surface for the message which Nancy, in *The Picts and the Martyrs*, writes on the Beckfoot lawn using a mowing machine: "NO GO" (1943/1993, p. 119).

For Ransome, the material dimension of inscription has important historical and local associations. As Slater Bob informs the children in *Pigeon Post*, slate is not just a roofing material: there are "slates for your schools and slate pencils too" (1936/2013, p. 39). The elderly miner adds that Lakeland workings also yield "graphite [...] for the wooden pencils" (p. 40). Whether the substance is slate or graphite, inscription is not limited to "active" and "human" signs made upon "passive" and "natural" substances, for the boundary which separates physical substances from human language is sometimes undecidable. In the pattered markings left by the Walker children in *Swallows and Amazons* and subsequently by Roger

in *Swallowdale*, substance and sign are one. Indeed, so thoroughly generalized is the inscriptive potential of the Lakeland landscape that “writing” seems occasionally present in Ransome’s references to the marks left by campfires or tents and, on the lake, to the wake of boats and smoke from steamers. In these examples, a “message” is received without having intentionally been sent. In *Winter Holiday*, semaphore messages provide an opposite case, for here the signaller deliberately makes their body “become” a letter. The existence of spaces in which the textual and the physical world overlap is evident even in quite ordinary contexts. In *Winter Holiday*, Jim Blackett’s warning against trespassers leads everybody to look at each other anxiously: it is, Ransome writes, “as if the whole air was full of question marks” (1933/2013, p. 269). When, in *Pigeon Post*, the children can see Nancy Blackett talking with her mother but not hear their conversation, signs are once again inscribed upon the air: “Fragments of talk, sentences, half sentences, single words, floated across the garden” (1936/2013, p. 50).

Travelling Messages

Ransome’s interest in texts, messages and inscriptions is not just a “theme”, for it informs the underlying structures of the Lakeland novels. In Chapter 13 of *Swallows and Amazons*, John and Susan promise the charcoal burners they will convey to the Blackett children a message intended for Jim Turner (“put a good padlock on that houseboat of his”) (1930/2012, p. 194). John is unable to deliver this message in Chapter 15 and it only reaches Nancy and Peggy in Chapter 22. By this stage, it is too late: the houseboat has been robbed. The message to Uncle Jim doesn’t take the form of a communication (a furiously inscribed one, as we have seen) until Chapter 25 and is not acknowledged by him until Chapter 26. But the architectural quality which I have attributed to inscription in Ransome’s work does not only apply to this thirteen-chapter interval between the issuing and receipt of a communication. For the message of the charcoal burners—addressed by adults to another adult, with two sets of children as intermediaries—is transformed by its delivery. The original spoken form of the message (“You tell them to tell their Uncle Jim that Young Billy, that’s me, sent him word [...]”) is converted into writing (“have you got a pencil and a bit of paper [...]?”) by Nancy (pp. 194, 373). Yet the arc of this communication remains incomplete, for the story cannot end until what has been stolen from the houseboat has been recovered.

The plotline of *Swallows and Amazons* dramatizes this recovery, cementing a moral message (‘HONESTY IS THE BEST POLICY’) in letters pencilled on a wooden fish which Uncle Jim attaches to the pipe dropped by one of the burglars (p. 448). Yet this moment (an open message which achieves “closure”) scarcely smoothes the ripples of significance which Ransome’s text has created. The assumption of the charcoal burners’ message—that Jim Turner’s houseboat contains objects of financial value—is correct, but it is only objects of doubtful monetary worth (a typewriter, some diaries, and “a huge bundle of typewritten paper”) that are stolen (p. 445). Young Billy might be associated with an oral culture—the purpose of his speech is to prompt two further speech acts—but his job and that of his father is to

produce materials used for inscription. He is also, albeit inadvertently, the custodian of written texts, and of *Mixed Moss* in particular. Uncle Jim's composition of this text (in *Swallows and Amazons* he is first shown "sitting writing") makes possible the overall narrative of *Swallows and Amazons* and its recovery concludes that narrative (1930/2012, p. 37). *Mixed Moss* is present at the start and end of the story, then; it is *the* book within the book. The challenge of representing an object of such structural significance is considerable, and Ransome's approach is effective in its economy. The contents of *Mixed Moss*—the "inside" of this text-within-a-text—are conveyed only by means of an "outside": an "iron-bound" box "entirely covered with labels" (p. 440).

There were labels showing "P. and O. First Cabin". There were labels of the Bibby Line, of the Dollar Line, of the Nippon Yusen Kaisha. There was a label with palm trees and camels and a river from some hotel in Upper Egypt. There were labels showing the blue bays and white houses of Mediterranean sea-ports. There was a label saying, "Wanted on the Voyage". There were labels with queer writing on them, and no English writing at all except the word Peking. There was a label of the Chinese Eastern Railway. There were labels of hotels in San Francisco, Buenos Aires, London, Rangoon, Colombo, Melbourne, Hong Kong, New York, Moscow and Khartoum. Some of them were pasted over others. Some were scratched and torn. But each one delighted the able-seaman and the boy." (pp. 440–441)

It would not be difficult to find this passage problematic. Ransome's paean to global travel might be said to privilege experiences which are the preserve of an elite social fraction who curate their travels in the form of vivid images of geographical features, flora and fauna, and built structures. The labels show no actual people; they are devoid of historical particularity. Jim Turner's trunk is a mobile monument to the imperial imagination. Yet Ransome's concluding emphasis in the foregoing passage is on delight. Titty and Roger are perhaps intrigued by images of the places they have read about in books. Perhaps, too, these signs of travel gratify their imaginative appetite for adult freedom of movement. For the reader, if not for Titty and Roger, however, there may be sadness as well as delight. These labels are snapshots from the life of "J. T.", the owner of the initials displayed upon the lid of the trunk (p. 441). And the pun on "life" shortly becomes explicit, for, as Uncle Jim tells Titty, "I've put all the best of my life into this book" (p. 446). Hence the gift of a parrot in a cage, which comes, inevitably, with a label—a "big white" one which reads: "*From Captain Flint to the able-seaman who saved his Life*" (p. 458). Although it is useful to see James Turner's trunk as an expression of the "imperial imagination", then, more personal meanings are at work. The loss and recovery narrative of *Swallows and Amazons* involves proliferating messages and texts which on occasions make the boundaries between life and Life—substance and sign—undecidable. In the end, however, Titty's discovery restores the Life but not the life: these "scratched and torn" labels are all that is left of experiences which belong to the past. It is touched on lightly, but we see something of this note of sadness even in the lives of Ransome's children. In the last of the Lakeland series, every aspect of the Lakeland landscape has begun to remind the children "of the adventures of the past" (1943/1993, p. 23).

Scenes of Priority

For the time being, however, Titty's discovery of "treasure" in *Swallows and Amazons* represents her triumphant emergence as an explorer in her own right. "We've found it, we've found it, we've found it": this exclamation marks a signature experience in the Lakeland novels (p. 440). In *Winter Holiday*, Dorothea exclaims: "We've done it! We've done it!" when, at the outset of the novel, she and her brother establish flashlight contact between their observatory and Holly Howe (1933/2013, p. 37). Sometimes, however, the pleasure of being first is doomed to disappointment. In *Pigeon Post*, Titty's first view of High Topps is like "looking at a Klondyke, an Alaska" (1936/2013, p. 91). Yet not all of the children are seeing this place "for the first time": John and Susan were here "the day before", Peggy and Nancy "long ago" (p. 96). *Someone has been here before*: this unsettling experience has its primal scene in *Robinson Crusoe*. And readers of the Lakeland novels do not need to wait until *Pigeon Post* to see Ransome's children recognizing their own belatedness. Even before John has drafted the Ship's Articles at the start of *Swallows and Amazons*, Titty is preoccupied with thoughts of "footprints in the sand" (1930/2012, p. 10). Indeed, of all the Lakeland novels, it is perhaps the first—*Swallows and Amazons*—which places most emphasis on the experience of not being first. On their first visit to the island, Roger notices that "[s]omeone's had a fire here before" (p. 47). On first crossing the island to its southern end, John becomes aware "that someone had been that way before" (p. 51). This suspicion is confirmed by the discovery of the leading lights which demonstrate, as Titty notes, that "somebody knows even about the harbour" (p. 58).

Responding to Victor Watson's (2000) assessment of the importance of discovery in the "Swallows and Amazons" novels, Andrew McInnes has convincingly demonstrated that "the discovery of one's own belatedness" in *Swallows and Amazons* involves both "pleasures" and "pains" (2016, p. 281). Either way, Ransome's children must in McInnes's view "learn to cope with coming second" (p. 282). A relatively pleasurable compensatory strategy is in evidence when, in a scene which shortly precedes the one I have been discussing, the crew of the *Swallow* is left bobbing in the wake of a motorboat. They are able to restore the fantasy of priority simply by imagining that they are sailing upon a "desolate ocean" (p. 40). On occasions, however, Ransome shows that this fantasy is not always useful. In *Pigeon Post*, Slater Bob informs Ransome's children that it is "nigh sixty year" since he worked in a Lakeland copper mine (1936/2013, p. 40). He tells a story of "a young Government chap" who found gold on the Fells "before the war begun" but "never come back" because (as Dorothea infers) "he was killed" (pp. 42, 44, 45). That story, as it subsequently appears, has a still more distant origin. As a boy, Jim Turner heard stories about a prospector who perished in the Boer War, "and before that it was the Zulu or the Crimean" or even "some young fellow" who had "to go off to fight Napoleon" (p. 362). When Roger enters an old working at a critical point in the novel, he wants "to begin discovering things for himself" (p. 202). But moments before he finds "shining

specks of yellow” in a lump of quartz (copper, as it turns out, not gold), Roger is also aware that this place has been worked “[h]undreds of years ago” (pp. 210, 202). The implication is that this historical awareness in part makes possible his imminent discovery.

“He really has found it”: Titty celebrates Roger’s find in phrasing which is familiar from *Swallows and Amazons* (1936/2013, p. 212). But others have found it too, and elsewhere in *Pigeon Post*, Ransome invokes not just the historical past but also a familial one in which adults were children just as the Swallows and Amazons are now. When Mrs Blackett was Molly Turner, she too visited the charcoal burners and Slater Bob (see 1930/2012, p. 193; 1936/2013, p. 29). It is *Swallowdale*, the second novel in the Lakeland series, which provides the fullest vision of the strategies which Ransome’s children employ in order to reach an accommodation with the marks left by their elders. One cannot always be first, but one can establish an intergenerational connection. In Chapter 4 of *Swallowdale*, whilst exploring the area around Horseshoe Cove, Titty and Roger discover “the most secret valley that ever there was”, a place which Titty immediately associates with her imagined companion Peter Duck (1931/1968, p. 60). Titty then notices “a dark hole in the wall of grey rock”, crying out with such urgency that Roger comes running (p. 63). Ransome seems to have felt that this moment struck the keynote of the book, for his illustration of this scene, to which he gave the pregnant title “DISCOVERY”, is included not in this chapter but instead faces the title page of *Swallowdale*.

The discovery of the cave in *Swallowdale* offers the reader an intensely realized vision of “inside” in a story which one might expect to be located “outside”. That this is not just a literal interior but an imaginative one is demonstrated by Titty’s response when it emerges that Uncle Jim already knows about the valley and the cave. Her face falls, and Ransome suggests that she has been compelled to ask herself a question: “Had all the discoveries in the world been made already?” (p. 164). Apparently so: “[t]hirty years ago”, young Jim Turner made his own discovery, naming the cave after Ben Gunn, Stevenson’s maroon in *Treasure Island* (p. 164). Uncle Jim shows the Walker children the “big sprawling letters” which he carved into the rock three decades previously, and at this point Titty promises to “put Peter Duck’s name there too” (p. 175). We only see this text later, when, visiting the camp in *Swallowdale*, Mrs Walker notices something picked out in torchlight. Ransome renders the inscription in the text:

BEN GUNN	}	PARTNERS
PETER DUCK	}	

(p. 201). This diagram has both the legalistic quality of John Walker’s Ship’s Articles and the magical quality of the hand-dipping moment in *Swallowdale*. “PARTNERS”: past and present are here brought into contact. Titty’s inscription reaches beyond both the moment of discovery and the recognition. But whilst intergenerational connection has been established, it can exist only in the spatial realm of inscription (Life) and not in the temporal dimension of existence (life). This is the

source of that feeling of desolation which I mentioned earlier: the letters on the wall conjure up a connection, but this magic operates better in the cave than in the wider world. Such at least seems to be the case in *Swallowdale*'s quiet climax, during which the Walker and Blackett children climb the mountain they know as "Kanchenjunga". Having reached the cairn on the summit, they can see "blue water stretching on and on" (1931/1968, p. 325). To the north lie the Scottish hills; to the west, the Isle of Man. Beyond the Isle of Man must be Ireland; beyond Ireland, America. "And if we still went on?"—Roger puts the question (p. 325). Then there would be the Pacific, China and Asia. Then Europe and the North Sea. In the end, John says, gazing eastwards, "we'd be coming up the other side of those hills" (p. 326). "Then"—Roger spells it out— "we'd have gone all round the world" (p. 326). Indeed, but in doing so the children would, as McInnes notes, have come second (see 2016, p. 291). The children have not circumnavigated the globe. However, as John points out, "Daddy's done it" and, as Peggy adds, "So has Uncle Jim" (1931/1968, p. 326).

Before the children descend the mountain, Nancy uses a "stump of a pencil" to leave a record of their achievement:

"Aug. 11. 1931.

We climbed Kanchenjunga" (p. 329).

Together with a new halfpenny, this inscription is placed in "a small round brass box" which Roger discovers in the cairn. This container is decorated with "the head of an old lady" and carries the legend: "QUEEN OF ENGLAND EMPRESS OF INDIA DIAMOND JUBILEE 1897" (p. 327). As with the scene in the cave, a connection is made between the present ("Aug. 11. 1931") and the past ("DIAMOND JUBILEE 1897"). The intergenerational nature of this historical connection is made explicit in the contents of the box: an old farthing and a message "written in black pencil":

August the 2nd. 1901.

We climbed the Matterhorn.

Molly Turner.

J. Turner.

Bob Blackett.

(p. 328). "We climbed the Matterhorn"; "We climbed Kanchenjunga": these inscriptions might well be seen as examples of the "integration" theme which Peter Hunt discerns in *Swallowdale* (1992, p. 102). For Hunt, the scene in the cave establishes "family and fictional continuity" whilst in the Kanchenjunga scene, "past and present, family and landscape, literature and imagination are joined together" (p. 102). There is undoubtedly family continuity here, for we know that "J. Turner"

survived as Jim Turner and that Molly Turner became Mrs Blackett. Yet this moment of connection becomes one of loss when Susan Walker asks an obvious but penetrating question: "Who is Bob Blackett?" (p. 328). Nancy's reply silences the conversation for a minute: "He was father" (p. 328).

Visions of Perpetuity

Nancy's words tell us that Bob Blackett married Molly Turner and is now dead, but they also imply a sequence of actions (the news of the death, arrangements for the funeral) and effects (a mother widowed before her middle years, children mourning a father they never really knew). But this is not "integration", as Hunt suggests; it is desolation. Connections can be lost as well as gained; partnerships can be formed and broken. "He was father": neither the Swallows nor the Amazons mention this moment again, and nobody else will know what happened that August afternoon. The journey from excited discovery to the disappointment of belatedness and on to the consolation of connection ends, inevitably, with the fact of mortality. But the Lakeland novels do not labour this melancholy truth, and Andrew McInnes rightly argues that the pains and pleasures of belatedness belong to a pragmatic narrative in which Ransome's children "learn to cope" (2016, p. 293). Yet there is a rather different fantasy with which Ransome's characters (and Ransome himself) must also learn to cope: we might perhaps call it "coming second—for ever". It first emerges in Titty's evocation of what life will hold once Captain Flint has walked the plank: "we'll take his treasure and buy a big ship, and live in her for ever and ever and sail all over the world" (p. 159). That vision is partially realized in *Peter Duck* (1932), *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* (1937), and *Missee Lee* (1941). This dream of persistence is too powerful not to return. When Susan has first been able to keep the campfire burning all night, Titty hopes to "keep it alight for ever and ever" (p. 213). When, in *Swallowdale*, Titty's suggestion that the newly discovered valley should be named after the *Swallow* is accepted, she expresses the wish that this will be its name "For ever and ever" (1931/1968, p. 154). Yet this hope of permanence is quietly put in its place in the novel's closing pages. "[N]ow we've got it for ever and ever": for Roger, ownership of Wild Cat Island is the prize for the Swallows' victory in the boat race (p. 440). But, as Captain Flint points out, "for ever" only lasts "[u]ntil you have to go away" (p. 440).

We can console ourselves, as the troubled John Walker does at one point, with the idea that the Lakeland hills will be "there for ever", or as Titty does when, at the end of *Swallows and Amazons*, she reflects that the charcoal burners will "still be here when we're gone" (1930/2012, pp. 226, 497). But all things must end: when they dry, wet pebbles stop shining and "could not be counted as pearls any more" (p. 98). Camping holidays will come to an end, leaving "pale, unhealthy patches" where tents had once been pitched (p. 490). The fantasy of permanence is laid to rest with quiet finality when, in the final chapter of *Swallows and Amazons*, Titty asserts that the Walkers will return to the lake each year "[f]or ever and ever" (p. 486). As Mrs Dixon responds: "Aye [...] we all think that when we're young" (p. 486).

The Twilight Zone

There is “for all of us”, as Eric Hobsbawm writes in *The Age of Empire* “a twilight zone between history and memory; between the past as a generalized record [...] and the past as a remembered part of [...] one’s own life” (1989, p. 3). For Hobsbawm, the “twilight zone” is “by far the hardest part of history for historians, or for anyone else, to grasp” (p. 3). In *Swallowdale*, Titty Walker makes a start: returning to the lake, she is filled with memories of the year before and experiences a “feeling of being two people at once in a jumble of two different times” (1931/1968, p. 19). Ben Gunn and Peter Duck; 1901 and 1931: in Ransome’s Lakeland novels, inscription marks out the “twilight zone” and collectively constitutes his intergenerational version of what Jacqueline Rose refers to as the “space in between” (1984/1992, pp. 1–2). Whilst these spaces in Ransome’s writings can seem to make children secondary by writing them “out” or “in”, I have tried throughout this article to show the ways in which those spaces also behave in more dynamic and plural ways. It is not a case of arguing, contrary to Rose, that the space in between is necessarily or inherently positive—a moment in which a loss of distinction between the adult and the child enables a more collaborative or egalitarian vision. That is one possibility, and I do not want to lose sight of it. But at the same time, acts of contact or connection can have a compensatory or reparatory application: the hand dipped in the lake marks a joyful return, sure enough, but it also concludes an interval characterized by absence. To say that one is here—now—and to use an inscription to mark that fact is also and by implication to recognize that this was not always the case and that it will not be so for ever more. Ransome started *Swallows and Amazons* in March 1929: “night after night”, as he recalled in his autobiography, he would take the manuscript to his room “so that I could reach out and lay my hand on it in the dark” (1976, p. 344). Hugh Brogan rightly sees this as “a piece of magic like dipping that same hand in Coniston” (1985, p. 304).

That Ransome’s lived experience was frequently one of discontinuity there can be little doubt, and there is (as one might expect) a strong sense of fellow feeling when, in *Swallowdale*, he describes Titty in “a jumble of two different times” (1931/1968, p. 19). The year of writing *Swallows and Amazons* was for Ransome a “year of crisis, a hinge year [...] joining and dividing two quite different lives” (1976, p. 330). And this is no isolated moment. Ransome’s autobiography is an excellent case study of the jarring experience of modernity for an English public schoolboy, with Queen Victoria’s death in 1901 an important reference point. Ransome recalled having written “a dreadful piece of earnest doggerel” on this event while at Rugby School, and that scrap from the twilight zone survives in the Kanchenjunga episode and also in the idea that Bridget, the latest addition to the Walker family, resembles “the pictures of Queen Victoria in old age” (1930/2012, p. 8).

Yet although the passing of the old queen marked an epochal moment, Ransome added in his autobiography that “the sudden lurch forward in history that jerked us from the age that remembered the Duke of Wellington into the modern world” also dated in his mind from the Jameson Raid (1895–1896), the lifting of the Siege of Mafeking (1900) and, perhaps most tellingly, “the sight of two Rugby masters

standing in the steps of the school gateway and looking together at an early copy of the *Daily Mail*" (1896). That "lurch" saw Ransome following two careers, first as a journalist and then as an author of children's books. He married two women of two nationalities. His past and present selves sometimes doubled up, for Ransome was, in the words of Rupert Hart-Davis, both "the man of letters and the schoolboy" (1976, p. 10). Roland Chambers, Ransome's most recent biographer, picks up this theme in still more specific ways, describing Ransome as "a bohemian and a conservative, a champion of self-determination and an imperialist", by turns a proponent of "insular nationalism" and of "seagoing internationalism" (2010, pp. 8, 315). Chambers also argues that "a great deal of circumstantial evidence" supports the view that Ransome was "a double agent" (2010, p. 349).

For Ransome himself, it was sometimes a case of multiplicity rather than of doubleness. "It seems to me", as he wrote at the end of his autobiography, "that I have [...] lived not one life but snatches from a dozen different lives" (1976, p. 347). Even in death (he is buried at Rusland Church, midway between Coniston and Windermere) Ransome placed himself betwixt and between. He was for this reason a perceptive explorer of that space which for Hobsbawm "stretches from the point where living family tradition or memories begin [...] to the end of infancy" (1989, p. 3). In his autobiography, Ransome would recall not only Victoria's Diamond Jubilee but also the Golden Jubilee of 1887 when, as a three-year-old boy, he had been patted on the head by a man born in 1798, a man who recollected Trafalgar and had himself "spoken with persons who could remember the Highlanders coming into England in 1745" (1976, p. 15). This generational recession is also seen in *Pigeon Post*, with the "young Government chap" who found gold on the fells but was killed in the First World War being preceded in local legend by figures who died in the Boer, Crimean or Napoleonic wars (1936/2013, p. 42). According to Roland Chambers, Ransome "never mentioned" the death of his brother Geoffrey whilst serving in the 23rd Yorkshire Regiment at Achiet-le-Petit in January 1918, either "in his letters or even his diary" (2010, p. 16). Yet it is possible that Ransome obliquely referenced this event in the Lakeland novels. Geoffrey Ransome's fate is shared by the lost prospector of *Pigeon Post*. The Kanchenjunga episode in *Swallowdale* also takes us deep into the twilight zone. "He was father": Peggy Blackett is twelve years old in August 1931, and could therefore have been conceived in 1918 (1931/1968, p. 328). That "small round brass box" (p. 327) might perhaps be seen as a memorial to the brother that Ransome lost, more than a decade before he started to write *Swallows and Amazons* (p. 327).

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