Bevis and Arthur Ransome's *Swallowdale*

Janice M. Lingley

By mutual confidence and mutual aid
Great deeds are done, and great discoveries made.
Alexander Pope[1]

. . . but the thing that appeals to us all, and charms us, and carries us out of ourselves, is the union of story and scenery. Then you get poetry and romance, and it need not be very ancient or momentous history to light up the landscape with 'the consecration and the poet's dream'.
W. G. Collingwood[2]

The children featured in Arthur Ransome's Swallows and Amazons stories, published in the years 1930 to 1947, are not only lively and intelligent characters who enjoy the outdoor world of landscape and water, wind and sail, they are also, implicitly and explicitly, children who are aware of, and exemplify the 'life' of literature. Allusions and references to works by well-known authors whose books may be read by, and/or are about children, are to a greater or lesser extent, a feature of all the stories in the series. The first three books, for example, *Swallows and Amazons* (1930), *Swallowdale* (1931) and *Peter Duck* (1932), arguably form a trilogy inspired by Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island* (1883).[3] Ransome cites these two source-books in a list of titles he compiled for children who had enjoyed his Swallows and Amazons stories, and who wished to read more books about sailing adventures.[4] Also included is the topographically based

[1] Cited by Ransome at the beginning of Chapter 4 of *Swallowdale,* which recounts the valley's discovery. The quotation is from *The Iliad of Homer* (London: Oxford University Press, 1927), Book 10, line 265.
[2] W. G. Collingwood, revised William Rollinson, *The Lake Counties* (London: Dent 1988; first published 1902), p.1. The quotation 'the consecration and the poet's dream' is from William Wordsworth's poem, 'Nature and the Poet', subtitled 'Suggested by a Picture of Peel Castle in a Storm Painted by Sir George Beaumont', line 16.
[3] See Janice Lingley, 'The Able-Seamen: Peter Duck and Titty Walker', *The Journal of The Arthur Ransome Society, Mixed Moss* (2007), pp.19-26.
[4] This list is reproduced in Christina Hardyment, *Arthur Ransome and Captain Flint's Trunk,* (London: Cape, 1984), p.220.

historical narrative, *Thorstein of the Mere, A Saga of the Northmen in Lakeland* (1885), by Ransome's mentor, the artist, writer and antiquary, William Gershom Collingwood (1854-1932). In his recommendation of Collingwood's story of the Old North, which is based on the area of the southern lakes – the location of Ransome's Swallows and Amazons series – Ransome states that Collingwood's story is not only one of his favourite books, but also a favourite of his literary creations, the Blackett and Walker families. Richard Jefferies' *Bevis, the Story of a Boy* (1885) – a pioneering presentation of an English rural landscape, realistically and perceptively observed as the scene of children's adventurous play – appears in Ransome's list without comment. However, Jefferies' novel appears also to have been a significant influence on Ransome's procedure, especially with regard to the seminal *Swallows and Amazons* and its sequel *Swallowdale.*

The similarity between these two books and Jefferies' *Bevis* is fundamental: the children featured enthusiastically sail during the summer on inland lakes and camp on islands. In their imaginative play they assume the identity of blue water sailors and explorers, and their 'worldwide' expeditions and adventures are recorded on maps. Both authors locate their stories in places which are geographically verifiable, and which have autobiographical significance. The stories are notable too for the exposition of skills which the children must learn and practise in order to come to terms with their physical environment. Common to both writers is the sympathetic humour, and charming naturalness with which they present their child characters.

Both Ransome and Jefferies were essentially countrymen, but they were men of different generations and their stories are set in times which are contemporary to each. Ransome was born two years after Jefferies died, and in the decades that separated their respective childhoods industrialisation became prevalent in its impact on traditional ways of life, and was to culminate, in Ransome's adult lifetime, with the ending of mercantile sail, the mechanisation of farming, and the advent of the motorised vehicle.

Richard Jefferies grew up on a Wiltshire farm; he loved the countryside of his boyhood and kept meticulous diaries of his observations as an amateur naturalist. His detailed references in *Bevis* to the plenitude of the English countryside in a pre-industrial era constitute almost in themselves an historical record of a rural landscape as yet unaffected by the encroachments of the modern world. No doubt Ransome, a keen angler and fishing writer, enjoyed the descriptions of fish and fishing – the teeming roach and two huge tench (Chapter 4), the enormous pike (Chapter 31) and Bevis' friend

Mark astutely angling for perch (Chapter 42), for example; and the numerous birds (Jefferies refers to more than fifty species), which were then present in abundance.

Here is Jefferies in fine style describing the end of a summer's day:

> A broad cool shadow from the trees had fallen over the hatch, for the afternoon had gone on, and the sun was declining behind them over the western hills. A broad, cool shadow, whose edges were far away, so that they were in the midst of it. The thrushes sang in the ashes, for they knew that the quiet evening, with the dew they love, was near. A bullfinch came to the hawthorn hedge just above the hatch, looked in and out once or twice, and then stepped inside the spray near his nest. A yellow-hammer called from the top of a tree, and another answered him across the field. Afar in the mowing-grass the crake lifted his voice, for he talks more as the sun sinks.[5]

That Ransome was as sensitive to, and appreciative of, the natural world as Jefferies, and moreover could be just as articulate in expressing it, may be understood from descriptive passages in his fishing articles. In an essay entitled 'For Going Home', to quote one notable example, Ransome describes 'a half-hour of magic' involving a wintry sunset and the song of a robin. Here the reader encounters the man behind the mask of the professional children's author:

> The grayling stopped feeding the moment the sun sank in a clear sky behind the big hills to the west. There followed a half-hour of magic. A glow still rested on the eastern hills. The wind dropped. The pool where I was wading was like a sheet of tarnished but polished silver. The only noise was that of water, until a salmon plunged heavily and moved up, his back fin out of water, shattering the reflections of the hills. The ripples were washed away downstream, and the pool was smooth once more. It was very cold. And then suddenly a bird broke the silence with song from a solitary bare tree on the farther side of the river. The song was clear, sweet, and easy, a song of complete contentment. It was without a chorus, for no other bird was singing. For this reason it was more impressive than the general evensong of birds in early summer. It was, of course, a robin, expressing his opinion of the sunset and the day, which coincided with my own. I felt he sang for both of us, and took some little credit to myself for the feeling that we put into it.[6]

In both these passages the world of nature is understood to possess meritorious life independently of humankind and to have a vitality that

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[5] Richard Jefferies, *Bevis, the Story of a Boy* (London: Cape, 1958), p.45.
[6] In Jeremy Swift, *Arthur Ransome on Fishing* (London: Cape, 1994), p.171.

is equivalent to, if indeed it does not surpass, that of the human world. *Bevis* is remarkable for such passages and, in the chapter entitled 'Bevis' Zodiac' (33) especially, this understanding inspires in Jefferies a visionary writing style. His novel was originally intended for the understanding of the adult, and only subsequently became identified with the younger reader.

In his fishing essays, Ransome exhibits with wit and poise a mannered style which must rank him with the best of English literary prose writers. Communicating a thorough understanding of his subject, his genial good sense and humour is not unmixed with mordant criticism of practice which in his view compromises, as he expresses it, the 'rigour of the game'; nor does he refrain from trenchant comment on polluters of lakes and rivers, and agricultural methods which are unsympathetic to fish and wildlife. However, in his Swallows and Amazons stories, Ransome wrote not only ostensibly for the children's market, but for readers of a later, culturally different era to that of *Bevis,* and his style of writing is modified accordingly. It is not overtly literary, and for the most part pared of descriptive exegesis; in marked contrast to Jefferies, he adopts a strategically oblique and reticent approach to the theme of rurality.

The traditional children's game of pretended identity and role-playing provides both writers with a means of endowing identity with metaphorical meaning. Bevis' father farms a large manorial estate and Bevis' adventures are based within the rural area which has been his home environment since birth. He and his friend Mark 'discover' and 're-create' the 'Longpond' (Coate Water), mapping their expeditions and naming anew their discoveries. The lake is called the 'New Sea', and the tropical island on which they establish a Robinson Crusoe-type camp and build their own raft is called 'New Formosa', and 'The Magic Land'. Their assumed identity as shipwrecked sailors and savages enables the boys to keep their sojourn on the island a secret from the world of adults, and from their friends.

This seclusion, in combination with the youthful innocence of his child subjects, allows Jefferies to endow the idyllic pastoralism he describes with primordial meaning. The chapter entitled 'New Formosa – Sweet River Falls' (41), describes an expedition to the southern part of the lake, where Bevis and Mark have previously noticed a channel through the prolific growth of water plants that characterises the area. Exploring further, they discover a small open bay fed by a stream and a waterfall and surrounded by beech trees. It is an exceptionally beautiful location, and the two restlessly energetic 'savages', intent on sailing, hunting, and fishing, are, despite themselves, enchanted by

the discovery and the music of the water.

Ransome also takes up the notion of metaphorical identity, but develops it within the particular parameters he assumes for the Swallows and Amazons; children of a later and very different world to that in which Bevis moves and has his being. The title of 'savages' is conferred in *Swallows and Amazons* on the charcoal-burners, nominally because the children see them at night leaping around their fire; but the appellative also points to the fact that they are apparently the sole survivors of an ancient Lakeland tradition. The word's potential for irony and satire is also exploited in *Swallowdale*: motor horns are dubbed by Titty Walker 'trumpets of the savages', and 'tom-toms' are considered to denote the 'throbbing roar of a motor-cycle'.[7]

There is also a contrast between the books the children opt to take with them to their respective island camps. Bevis, a romantically conceived character, is equipped with his favourite book, the *Odyssey,* as well as *Don Quixote,* a collection of English ballads, a book of Shakespeare's poems and a rhymed translation of *Faust.* The Walker children's preference is for books of a rather more prosaically practical and mundane nature – seamanship, navigation and cookery. Titty's *Robinson Crusoe,* though fictional, purports to be a true autobiographical account of the survival of a shipwrecked and marooned mariner: 'It tells you just what to do on an island,' she says.[8]

In contrast with Bevis and Mark's carefully planned surrender of their boat, the Swallows' shipwreck, which occurs at the beginning of *Swallowdale,* is initially a most unwelcome experience, but one which becomes very positive. The little secluded valley, which able-seaman Titty and her younger brother, the ship's boy, discover high on the moorland on the other side of the lake to their island camp is, according to Titty, the most creatively imaginative of Ransome's child characters, a 'secret' place, 'the most secret valley that ever there was in the world,' she declares with particular emphasis.[9] Although Titty's notion of 'secrecy' is not explicitly defined, its meaning may be understood from the exposition that follows. Swallowdale, she tells her brother, is 'just the place for Peter Duck'; and Peter Duck is the eponymous and imaginary old-time seaman who features in the third book of the Series, a story which, it is claimed, the Swallows and Amazons 'made up' the previous winter; Titty 'had had a big share in his invention'. The little hidden valley of Swallowdale is thus

[7] Arthur Ransome, *Swallowdale* (London: Cape, 1961), p.57.
[8] Arthur Ransome, *Swallows and Amazons* (London: Cape, 1958), p.33.
[9] *Swallowdale*, p. 64.

associated with story-telling and the child-mediated world of the imagination.

Swallowdale may have been identified in Ransome's mind with the metaphysical valley featured in the story Bevis recounts to his friend Mark. 'The Story of the Other Side' (Chapter 39) concerns a traveller in a finite world who wishes there could never be an end to his journeys of exploration, and who is tired of always, sooner or later, coming to 'the other side'. After many such adventures the traveller learns of a narrow secret valley, which gives access through a magic door to a world of endless journeying. Leading from the door is a footpath, strewn with magical leaves, on which the secrets of life are recorded. Readers have been introduced to this notion earlier in the story, during the expedition around the lake, when Bevis tells Mark that everything around them has secrets: 'All the trees, and all the stones, and all the flowers.'[10]

Bevis, recounting the legend of 'The Other Side', is described 'as pouring out the story from his memory word for word, exactly as he had heard it, like water from a pitcher filled at the spring'.[11] When Bevis and Mark realise that their secret sojourn on New Formosa is inevitably coming to an end, Mark ruefully remarks, 'It seems to me we're getting near the hateful "Other Side"'.[12] The Able-Seaman of *Swallows and Amazons* would have sympathised, for she expresses similar sentiments. In her opinion, 'the thing that spoilt *Robinson Crusoe*' was that 'in the end he came home. There never ought to be an end.' [13]

When directly addressing the reader as narrator, Ransome's writing style in the Swallows and Amazons series is not generally remarkable for its use of metaphor, but when Titty and Roger return to Horseshoe Cove to tell the others about their discovery of Swallowdale, they too are described as 'pouring out their story'. This particular expression recurs in the fourth book of the series *Winter Holiday* (Chapter 4). Here it is twice used - once with specific reference to Swallowdale – to describe the unified movement of the children about the lakeside, in groups which include the newly befriended town children, Dick, an astronomer, and Dorothea, who writes stories. The metaphor is further developed by simile. Dorothea is described as feeling 'as if she had tumbled into a river and was being swept away in a strong current.' She is subsequently stated to be 'for once, inventing no stories. She

[10] *Bevis*, p.62.
[11] *Bevis*, p.385.
[12] *Bevis*, p.470.
[13] *Swallows and Amazons*, p. 200.

was living in one'.[14]

Swallowdale's topography appears to be based on an area west of Coniston well known to Ransome, Beacon Fell, and thus has some reality in fact.[15] On a literal level, the little hidden valley, and its counterpart on the lake shore, Horseshoe Cove, are attendant on *Swallow's* repair and restoration, and fortuitously provide a location which allows the continuance of the children's holiday. The cave within Swallowdale is of course explicitly identified with *Treasure Island,* but as source-books, Stevenson's tale and Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* do not achieve their fullest expression until the third book of the series *Peter Duck.*

Swallowdale's more general significance may reside in the exceptional nature of its topography. Looking towards its head, the little valley might have been 'hung in air' for all that can be seen beyond it; all that can be viewed in this direction is the sky overhead. It is only when looking *back* in the direction the children have climbed, that its location in the world of the lake and the surrounding hills can be descried and apprehended. Ransome's implicit metaphorical allusion to Jefferies, through the conception of the little hidden valley, is at once both literary and retrospective. In an influential essay published in 1919, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent', T. S. Eliot wrote of the importance of the historical sense of literature's past achievements to a writer. Eliot concludes this essay by saying that the creative writer 'is not likely to know what is to be done unless he lives in what is not merely the present, but the present moment of the past, unless he is conscious not of what is dead, but of what is already living.'[16] It would appear that, for Ransome, *Bevis* was a novel that was 'already living', and that he drew particular inspiration from its vitality of feeling and expression. *Swallowdale* may be regarded as a fusion of ideas, informed by an empathy with the idyllic area of countryside that was the scene of Richard Jefferies' childhood, and which is so memorably described in *Bevis, the Story of a Boy.*

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[14] Arthur Ransome, *Winter Holiday* (London: Cape, 1933), p.60.
[15] Roger Wardale, *Arthur Ransome, Master Storyteller* (Ilkley: Great Northern Books, 2010), p.55.
[16] T. S. Eliot, *Selected Essays* (London: Faber, 1932), pp.13-22.

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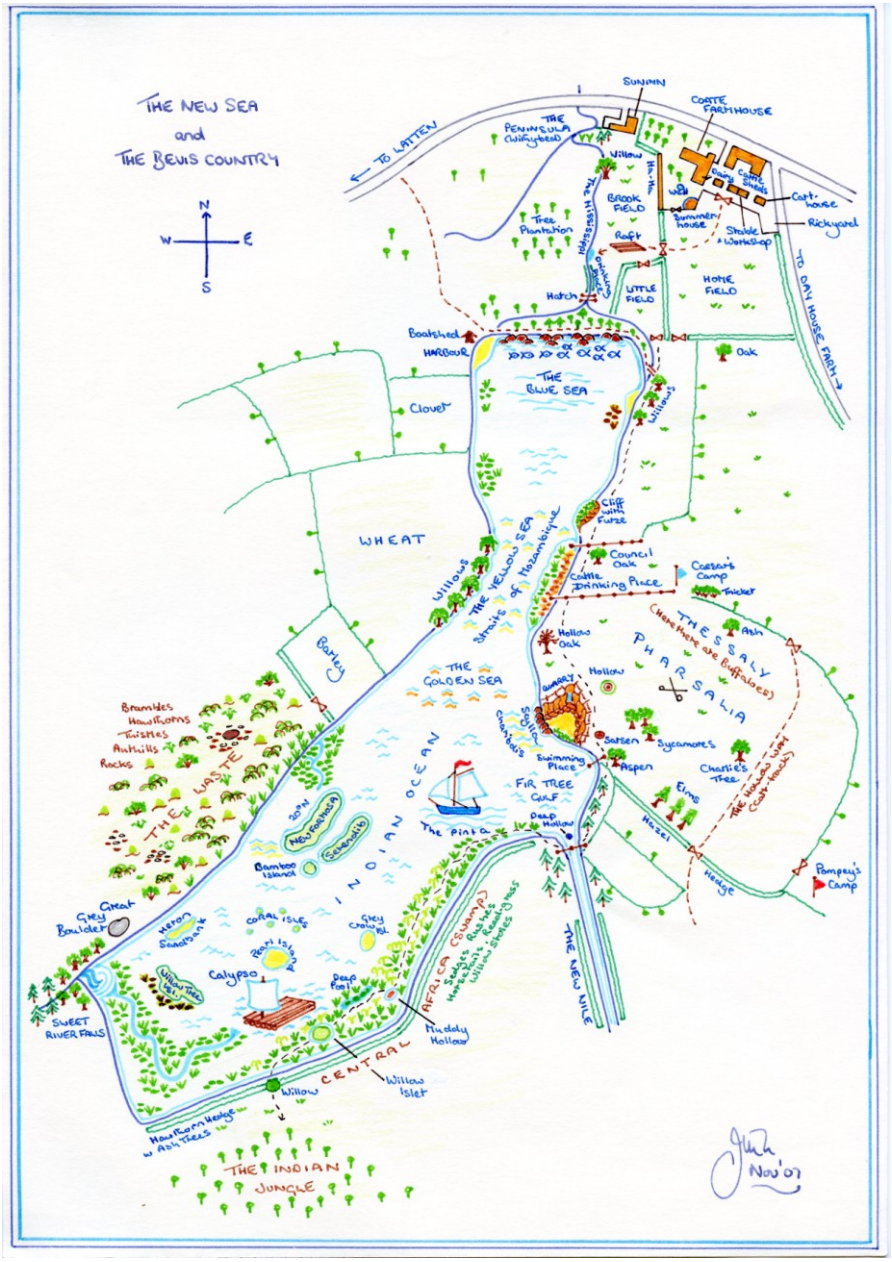
THE NEW SEA
and
THE BEANS COUNTRY
N
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TO LATTEN
SUNNAN
CORTE FARMHOUSE
THE PENINSULA (unfinished)
Willow
Hedge
BROOK FIELD
Summer house
Cart-house
Rickyard
Stable & Workshop
TO DAY HOUSE FARM
Tree Plantation
Hedge
Ditch
Ditch
Raft
LITTLE FIELD
HOME FIELD
Hatch
Boatshed
HARBOUR
THE BLUE SEA
Oak
Clover
Willows
WHEAT
Cliff with Furze
Council Oak
Cattle Drinking Place
Caesar's Camp
Thicket
THESSALY
(Here there be Buffaloes)
PHARSALIA
Ash
Hollow Oak
Hollow
Barley
THE GOLDEN SEA
Straits of Mozambique
Willows
THE YELLOW SEA
Sandy Beach
Sandy Beach
Swimming Place
Sycamores
Aspen
Charlie's Tree
Elms
Hazel
Hedge
Pompey's Camp
THE HILLS WITH (Cork Woods)
FIR TREE GULF
Deep Hollow
The Pinta
INDIAN OCEAN
Brambles
Hawthorns
Thistles
Anthills
Rocks
THE WASTE
Grey Boulder
Great
Heron Sandbank
Coral Isle
Grey Coral
Pearl Island
Bamboo Island
Calypso
Deep Pool
Deep Pool
Muddy Hollow
Willow Islet
AFRICA (Swamps)
Sedges
Rushes
Water Plants
Reeds
Willow Shrubs
THE NEW VILE
SWEET RIVER FALLS
Willow CENTRAL
Hawthorn Hedge w Ash-trees
THE INDIAN JUNGLE
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