

Arthur Ransome and the Bolshevik Revolution

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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.

By the time he left for Russia in 1913, Ransome was already an up-and-coming literary critic with many essays behind him and three published books. The second and third, on Edgar Allan Poe and Oscar Wilde, were being translated into French and Russian.

According to one biographer, his book on Poe "received better reviews than its author thought it deserved" (Brogan, 1984, p. 69).

His own modest claim for the book was, "It had at least considered theories and his self-conscious technique in writing stories... it had also, for the first time, given a detailed account of the strange position, almost that of a French writer, that Poe had won in France" (*ibid*).

Ransome had something original to say and he wanted his next book to be on Hazlitt, but his publishers, Methuen, didn't believe this was a commercial proposition. Instead, his next book was a critical essay on the work of Oscar Wilde.

As soon as it was published in 1913, Ransome was drawn into controversy—first over objections from friends of Wilde's wife to its depiction of her. Then he was sued for libel by Lord Alfred Douglas, Wilde's former lover. The reading out in court of sections of Wilde's *De Profundis*, his devastating exposure of the younger man's character, totally destroyed Douglas's case.

But even though he had won, Ransome still insisted the publishers remove the offending passages from his book. Though the book once again received warm support from reviewers, the whole matter left him bruised and with a deep dislike of public controversy and publicity. It was also to accentuate his health problems. He was due to write a fourth work, on Robert Louis Stevenson, but it never happened.

The Wilde libel case was cathartic in bringing matters to a head with Ivy. In his own words, Ransome "escaped" to St Petersburg, where he was able to continue his work translating Russian children's tales, developing his conversational Russian and concentrating on his favourite pastime, fishing.

Ransome returned to Russia twice more to complete *Old Russian Tales*, *The Elixir of Life* and a commission to write a travel guide to Moscow. For over two months he enjoyed visiting the city's beautiful buildings and being reunited with old friends and meeting new ones.

Among these were the Tyrkov family, the head of which, Arkady Vladimirovich Tyrkov, was the brother-in-law of one of Ransome's friends in London. As a young student in 1881, he was one of a group of revolutionaries that planned and carried out the assassination of Alexander II. Arrested and sent to Siberia where he had married, Arkady was released after 20 years and returned home.

Experiences like these helped make Ransome a Russophile and must have played their part in developing his sympathetic attitude towards Russia.

In August 1914, this pleasant interlude was interrupted by the eruption of the First World War. Amongst the millions that were to die a horrible death were Ransome's brother, Geoffrey, and one of his best friends, Thomas Edwards, prominent among the "war poets." Mass strikes took place as workers faced unemployment after the armistice in 1918. These would have also shaped Ransome's attitude to the developments in Russia and it was probably a major factor behind his determined drive to understand the genesis of the world's first workers' state.

Chambers tries to play down the fact that Ransome had already become a seriously respected literary figure when the war broke out. Unable to enlist because of various physical ailments, Ransome had been looking for something to do to help the British war effort. In 1915 the Petrograd correspondent for the *Daily News* fell ill with locomotor ataxia, (the inability to control one's body movements). After filling in for him for a while, Ransome was asked to take the job permanently when it became clear the reporter would be unable to return. He agreed on the basis he could return home at least once a year (Ransome, 1976, p. 185).

He had never been a journalist, but a novelist, essayist and prodigious letter writer. But he could now understand and speak Russian, had contacts in the country from previous research work for his books, and cousins high up in the British civil service. It must have been something of a coup for the *Daily News* and exciting for its readers to have the famous author of *Wilde* as its Russian correspondent.

There is little doubt that when he finally left England and headed for St. Petersburg in October 1915, Ransome had every intention of doing his best in the "national interest." The great problem for the Whitehall mandarins and the British secret service was that he was also determined to report absolutely honestly on all the events he witnessed.

Ransome was in Russia for an extended period, between 1914 and 1918, during which time he witnessed Russia suffer a number of military setbacks, the fall of the Romanov monarchy, the February revolution of 1917 and the growing opposition to Prime Minister Alexander Kerensky and the Provisional Government, a government of which he too became critical. He was back in Britain at the time of the Bolshevik-led October revolution, but returned as soon as he could to St. Petersburg, now Petrograd, on December 25, 1917.

Throughout, the British Foreign Office was desperate to know what was happening in Russia and how this would affect its war plans.

However, Ransome's newspaper articles and his official reports became increasingly sympathetic towards the aims of the Soviet revolution and he was to establish a close personal friendship with several among the Bolshevik leadership, particularly, Karl Radek and Vatslav Vorovsky. It was while going to interview Leon Trotsky, co-leader with Vladimir Lenin of the Russian Revolution and leader of the Red Army, that Ransome met Trotsky's secretary, Evgenia Shelepina. An Estonian and former Menshevik, Shelepina became Ransome's wife in 1924 and remained his companion until his death at the age of 83.

Ransome had reported on the arrest of eleven members of the central Petrograd committee of mobilised industry on February 12, 1917, accused

of belonging to revolutionary parties. It was as a result of this that he was to receive a pass to attend a meeting of the Soviet of Soldiers and Workers Deputies on March 19.

He was to write later, "Chance had brought me into the Soviet of Soldiers' and Workers' Deputies long before other correspondents had thought that body worth observing. From the first day they met it was obvious that the Soviets held what power there was, and that the Duma was an impotent survival. The story of 1917 is the story of the demonstration of that all-important fact" (Ransome, 1976, p. 217).

It is hardly surprising that a little while after this incident, when he was back in England, Ransome was called into the Foreign Office by Secretary Arthur Balfour, and asked to supply them with whatever information he could glean. He was not a paid spy, but he was asked to keep in touch through MI5. Hoping to ensure he could get back into the country, they gave him a diplomatic bag for delivery in Stockholm.

A few days later he was given a letter while in London by F. Rothstein, a Russian revolutionary working as a translator in the Home Office, recommending him as "the only correspondent who informed the English public of events in Russia honestly" (Brogan, 1984, p. 148).

Ransome had started out as a willing instrument of British imperialist policy in Russia, charged with finding out the Bolshevik leaders' plans. He was soon to become a great admirer of the revolutionary struggle of the Russian working class and the intellectual vigour of its leadership.

He employed all his literary skills in trying to explain to his readers, and himself, what was happening before his astonished eyes. His articles defending the Bolsheviks not only appeared in the *Daily News* in Britain, but newspapers around the world, including the *New York Times*. As a result, he was threatened by the British authorities with being thrown in jail for Bolshevik sympathies and repeatedly had to fight against its censorship. On one occasion there was even a call in parliament for him to be arrested as a traitor under the Defence of the Realm Act.

Despite this, in the summer of 1918, he wrote *The Truth about Russia*, which refuted all the lies being spread by imperialist agents claiming the Bolsheviks had been paid by the German imperialists to sabotage Kerensky's Provisional Government. He had earlier declared a "fanaticism to find truth and write about it whatever it brings me." He wrote *The Truth about Russia* in close collaboration with Radek. In this work, he would have believed he was following in Hazlitt's footsteps.

The work was written at a critical time. Anti-Bolshevik feeling in the US had been encouraged by Edgar Sisson, head of the American propaganda unit, and a spy. Films and forged letters were used to falsely claim that the Bolsheviks received funds directly from Berlin.

Written under the pressure of a tight 36-hour deadline and difficult personal conditions, the work was sent to America via a supporter, Colonel Robins, for distribution. At this time, Ransome's articles were well known to Americans and it sought to remind them of their own revolutionary history. The fact that both the author and distributor were bourgeois liberals in outlook and politics meant their words could make a broader appeal and carried even greater resonance and authority.

It was published in July 1918 by the *New Republic* at three cents a copy. In September, it was issued in Russia with a preface by Radek describing Ransome as a man who ordinarily took no interest in politics, but who on this occasion had been moved to protest by his "warm heart", his lack of "bourgeois prejudices", and most importantly, "his love for the masses."

In his late work *Six Weeks in Russia*, Ransome wrote, "I should have liked to explain what was the appeal of the revolution to men like Colonel Robins and myself, both of us men far removed in origin and upbringing from the revolutionary and socialist movements in our own countries. Of course, no one who was able, as we were able, to watch the men of the revolution at close quarters could believe for a moment that they were the mere paid agents of the very power which more than all the others represented the stronghold they had set out to destroy. We had the

knowledge of the injustice being done to these men to urge us in their defence. But there was more in it than that. There was a feeling, from which we could never escape, of the creative effort of the revolution.

“There was the thing that distinguishes the creative from other artists, the living, vivifying expression of something hitherto hidden in the consciousness of humanity. If this book were to be an accurate record of my own impressions, all drudgery, gossip, quarrels, arguments, events and experiences it contains would have to be set against a background of the extraordinary vitality which obstinately persists in Moscow, even in these dark days of discomfort, disillusion, pestilence, starvation and unwanted war” (*Six Weeks in Russia*, 1919, reprinted 2010, pp. 57-8).

From a Marxist standpoint, what Ransome correctly identified as the “creative effort” unleashed in Russia that was “hitherto hidden in the consciousness of humanity” was made possible by the scientific consciousness generated amongst the most advanced sections of workers through the Bolshevik party. The emergence of a proletariat, conscious of itself as a class in and for itself, is what lay behind “the extraordinary vitality” that “obstinately persists in Moscow.”

A proletarian socialist revolution had never been carried out before and Russia was a backward country encompassing a sixth of the earth’s surface. Ransome chose to leave out what he believed were secondary issues to concentrate on critical questions such as how to overcome the scarcity of steel needed to build railway tracks so that food could be brought into Moscow, or, when there is such a shortage of paper, how best to ensure the spirit of the revolution is nourished by supplying the necessary reading matter. This meant not only overtly revolutionary publications, but also the great bourgeois classics.

Ransome must have looked a somewhat incongruous figure dashing around Moscow making notes everywhere about everything: this somewhat eccentric-looking Englishman, over six feet tall in a coat down to his ankles, with a long red walrus moustache, pince-nez glasses on the end of his nose, a Red Army fur hat upon his head, often seen driving a sledge.

Although he would never completely overcome his scepticism towards a victory for the revolution, he saw Russia as a heroic first experiment in what was to be an extended historical battle. Ransome chided his fellow Englishmen for not travelling to Russia in order to examine it more closely:

“I love the real England, but I hate, more than I hate anything on earth (except cowardice in looking at the truth), the intellectual sloth, the gross mental indolence that prevents the English from making an effort of imagination and realising how shameful will be their position in history when the tale of this last year in the biography of democracy comes to be written... Shameful foolish and tragic beyond tears, for the toll will be paid in English blood. English lads will die, not one or two, hundreds of thousands, because their elders listen to men who think little things, and tell them little things, which are so terribly easy to repeat” (*Six Weeks*, p. 28).

Ransome attended a meeting of the Moscow Soviet and listened to Bolsheviks Maxim Litvinov and Lev Kamenev discuss together the international situation and issues needing to be addressed within Russia. After the meeting Ransome spoke to a Mr. Kuni, who told him he was President of the Chinese Soviet. As there were around a thousand Chinese in Moscow, they had the right to representation in the government of the city. Kuni also informed Ransome that there were between two and three thousand Chinese serving in the Red Army.

Ransome went from one commissar to another and conducted brief interviews with Lenin, as well as Trotsky, now leader of the Red Army. He vividly describes the joyous and unrestrained scenes that welcomed the announcement of the founding of the Third (Communist) International, in March 1919.

He thought *Six Weeks* might prove “too dull”, but he needn’t have

worried. It is fascinating as a record of that tumultuous period in history and how working-class men and women, against all odds, set about defending their revolution.

There is an amusing piece in Ransome’s autobiography that tells us what Lenin himself felt about the work:

“I had a talk with Lenin, who told me that he had been inclined to disapprove of my ‘Six Weeks’ until he heard from Radek, who was in the Moabit prison in Berlin and had praised it for just the personalities that Lenin had thought unnecessary, saying that it was the first thing written that had shown the Bolsheviks as human beings, and that it had brought them alive and talking into his cell. None-the-less, though the book was translated into a dozen different languages it was not until 1924, that it was translated into Russian and published with an introduction by Radek himself. We had no copyright convention with Russia, but the State Publishing House presented me with the *Complete Works of Lenin* in lieu of royalties. (This was not quite so funny, nor so practical, as the state payment of Chaliapin for singing in the opera. They gave him a sack of flour)” (Ransome, 1976, p. 279).

It is possible that Lenin was concerned in case *Six Weeks* caused some friction or jealousy within the Bolshevik party. It is noticeable that the name Stalin doesn’t appear anywhere.

Roland Chambers (in his book *The Last Englishman*) quotes liberally from Arthur Ransome’s *Six Weeks*, but only in order to immediately undermine what Ransome had written. For instance, he quotes Ransome’s moving statement on the revolution:

“These men, who have made the Soviet government in Russia, if they must fail, will fail with clean shields and clean hearts, having striven for an ideal which will live beyond them. Even if they fail, they will nonetheless have written a page in history more daring than any other which I can remember in the history of humanity. They are writing it amid the slinging of mud from all the meaner spirits, in their country, in yours and in my own. But when the thing is over, and their enemies have triumphed, the mud will vanish like black magic at noon, and that page will be as white as the snows of Russia, and the writing on it as bright as a gold domes I used to see glittering in the sun when I looked from my window in Petrograd”. (Chambers, 2009, p. 220).

But Chambers follows the fine ideals expressed in this passage with the cynical aside:

“Ransome abandoned his dark, chilly room at the Elite Hotel and moved into a luxurious apartment which he shared with Evgenia, Iraida and the Radeks. As an example of the methods by which the Bolsheviks removed ‘the conditions of parasitism, privilege and exploitation’ in Russia, the passage makes illuminating reading.” (ibid, p. 221).

This attempt to make it appear that not only Ransome, but also the Bolshevik leaders already enjoyed bureaucratic privileges is another lie. The whole of Russia was blockaded, resulting in extremely low rations with everybody receiving the same portions, a bowl of soup and a piece of meat each.

This paragraph from the end of the book is Chambers’ desperately weak last attempt to prove that Ransome was motivated primarily by personal ambition that led him to become a double agent:

“There was also Ransome’s long standing commitment to the Anglo-Russian friendship, which he had defended ever since the Tsar first declared war on Germany. But his most powerful motive for ingratiating himself with the Cheka [the Soviet security service] was almost certainly personal advancement, a straightforward self-interest, which Ransome never owned to, but which explains his dealings with the British and Soviet intelligence services far more comprehensively than any other. As an agent of MI6, his recruitment had benefited nobody as materially as himself, while his admiration for the Bolsheviks was measured against no consistent ideal.” (ibid, p. 308).

Chambers can only offer the following to support his claim that

Ransome was a double-agent: “papers declassified in 2005 prove Ransome worked for the British Secret Intelligence Service and that he was suspected at the highest level of working for the Bolsheviks.”

But Ransome himself was very open about the fact he sympathised and worked for the Bolsheviks—not as a double agent, but as an intermediary between the British and Russian governments and enthusiastic publicist for what he saw as a new experimental and progressive state system. Chambers fails to present a shred of any real evidence to the contrary. Chambers is always asserting, but never delivering.

On the very last page of his book, he states that “in recent years historians have benefited from the work of Professor Christopher Andrew, and two former high-ranking FSB [Russian Federal Security Service] officers, Oleg Gordievsky and Vaslai Mitrokhin. The resulting books, *KGB, The Inside Story* and the *Sword and Shield*, afford the most comprehensive histories of Soviet intelligence yet published, with Ransome emerging as one of [Felix] Dzerzhinsky’s [head of the Cheka] earliest inside sources on British foreign policy. In a letter to me, Professor Andrew warned against overestimating Ransome’s impact on Anglo Soviet affairs as an informant of the Cheka (he had no sensitive secrets to betray) but emphasised how unusual his position had been. ‘It is difficult to think of any British writer who has ever been acquainted with quite so much of the leadership of the major, hostile intelligence agency, including Dzerzhinsky, two deputies and the first resident in London (Nicholas Klishko).’ (ibid, p. 369).

This passage actually serves to undermine Chambers’ case, rather than to confirm it. Ransome’s was a completely unique case that had arisen out of an extraordinary set of unprecedented circumstances: The first stage in the breakdown of world imperialism that signified a new epoch of wars and revolutions had begun.

Ransome had explained his position in print many times. “Not one of my Bolshevik friends, and I had many, ever tried to convert me to Bolshevism. It was clear enough for them to know that I hope to write a history of the revolution and was collecting material for that purpose. There was no pretence on either-side; I did indeed want to write such a history. I felt that it was almost a miracle I should without effort have found myself so placed. And I should have indeed settled down to write such a history if the Bolshevik secret police in Petrograd had not been as ignorant as our own, and taken the heart out of me by destroying the immense store of material I had collected.” (Ransome, 1985, pp. 259-60)

Rather than “personal advancement”, Ransome’s life in Russia was very difficult and dangerous. He suffered from severe haemorrhoids that threatened his life on more than one occasion, and were obviously made worse by the poor social and medical conditions. He was continuously dodging bullets and bombs as he kept close to the action and reported the news.

Chambers, however, is incapable of understanding the profound impact that something like a proletarian revolution can have on a man of Ransome’s upper middle class background, or for that matter anybody doing anything other than for straightforward self-interest. But it is conveyed very well by Ransome’s report for the *Daily News*, January 28, 1918, to cite just one example. This was during the peace negotiations at Brest-Litovsk, which were intended by the Bolsheviks as a holding operation until such time as the German working class intervened by overthrowing their own ruling class.

Ransome sets out the scene of Trotsky explaining the necessity of the policy to the Third All-Russian Congress of Soviets:

“My position was immediately behind and above the praesidium, looking down on Trotsky’s muscular shoulders and great head and the occasional gestures of his curiously small hands. Beyond him was that sea of men, soldiers in green and grey shirts, workers in collarless shirts, or jerseys, others dressed very much like British workmen, peasants in belted redshirts and high top boots, all picked men, not elected for this assembly

alone but proved and tested in the local Soviets that had chosen them as delegates. And as I watched that amazing crowd, that filled the huge hall and packed the galleries, following point by point, Trotsky’s exposition of the international and inter-class situation and the policy of the revolution I felt I would willingly give the rest of my life if it could be divided into minutes and given to men in England and France so that those of little faith who say that the Russian Revolution is discredited could share for one minute each that wonderful experience”. (Brogan, 1984, pp. 172-173).

Chamber’s is even contrived in his choice of title, when claiming that Ransome’s correspondence for the *Daily News* never mentioned the other expatriates in the city at the time, as “if he were the last Englishmen in Moscow, as though all the other Englishmen had gone home for the holidays, leaving him alone.”

It was hardly beholden on Ransome to mention other journalists in his column as they held diametrically opposing views to him, and most were involved in plotting espionage against the Bolshevik government. The historical record confirms that Ransome was the only English non-Bolshevik trusted by the Bolshevik leadership.

Brogan, for example, explains, “On 14th January, in London, [British diplomat Bruce] Lockhart, had given a lecture on Russian affairs, defending the Government’s policy. Somebody brought-up Arthur’s views: Lockhart replied that as Ransome had been out of Russia for six months he had no right to speak of the conditions there. A lady in the audience (it was Mrs Maurice Macmillan, the mother of Daniel and Harold) protested strongly at this, and the meeting broke-up in confusion. Providently, the *Morning Post* carried a full report, which reached Stockholm. Litvinov, who was by now a firm friend (he had found Arthur’s *Daily News* reports invaluable during his imprisonment in Brixton), used the article to make the point to Moscow that only if Arthur was admitted to Russia could he maintain his usefulness as a corrective to the interventionists. The argument was accepted; and so on 30 January 1919 Arthur was one of the party which left Stockholm by sea to Finland; from which in turn they crossed into Russia on 3 February. (Brogan, 1984, p. 230).

We know that Lockhart, a friend of Ransome’s, led an Anglo-French espionage team that was plotting against the revolution—planning to bribe Russian soldiers in preparation for the overthrow of the Bolshevik government and the setting-up of a military dictatorship. This group was exposed and did not include Ransome in its conspiracy because they couldn’t be sure he wouldn’t tell the Bolshevik leaders.

One is entitled to ask why Chambers is prepared to go to such lengths to denigrate Ransome?

The dissolution of the Soviet Union and the restoration of capitalism in the early 1990s led to a period of triumphalism for the bourgeoisie internationally. They insisted that it proved the Bolshevik revolution had no basis in the objective material world, but had simply been, in an assertion repeated by Chambers, a putsch carried out by Lenin. This was used to claim that liberal democracy represented the highest stage of man’s social order and “The end of history”.

This bold claim is now being shown to be the myth that it always was. World capitalism has been shaken to its very core and for the last three years has staggered around like a man with a catastrophic drinking problem. It has already affected the lives of millions, if not billions, of workers and youth throughout the world, which in turn is creating a new generation that want to know more about the history of revolutionary politics. They are seeking out writings on the Russian Revolution and its Bolshevik leadership and this will bring many at some point to the eye-witness accounts of Arthur Ransome.

In response a new clique of historical falsifiers is being encouraged, with the single aim of assaulting objective historical truth.

It was in order to challenge this deeply right-wing political phenomenon

that the International Committee of the Fourth International launched its campaign in defence of Historical Truth. To this end, David North, chairman of the *World Socialist Web Site*, gave his important public lecture in Oxford University on May 4, 2010 entitled “Political biography and the historical lie: An examination of Robert Service’s *Trotsky*”.

In it North exposed the method and politics that lay behind Robert Service’s attempted personal and political denigration of the great Bolshevik leader.

Chambers’ book should be placed in the same category of political biography as that produced by Service. It forms part of an assault on the Russian revolution by forces deeply hostile to the international working class and Marxist revolutionary politics.

Ransome’s reputation deserves defending. The forces that promoted Chambers’ book in their newspaper columns and voted for it to become Best First Time Biography of the Year represent the same cynical, well-heeled social forces that have promoted Service.

They have made their money over the last 25 years through their role in the super-exploitation of the international working class, which takes place at various levels—from the privatisation of public facilities through to the cutting of wages and mass unemployment. Now, under mounting signs of revolutionary upheavals throughout the world, they feel the floor moving beneath their feet. They are terrified and hate the working class, along with all those figures ever associated with revolutionary struggle. This includes Ransome, who, while never a communist, made available to the outside world an honest account of the struggles of the Russian proletariat.

Ransome never retracted the part he played in explaining their revolution, or his admiration of the Bolshevik leaders. Decades later, he was to write of *Six Weeks* and the subsequent silencing—by murder or repression—of almost all the revolutionary leaders of October 1917:

“To look back on that journey now is, for me, to fill the room with ghosts. But I am glad I wrote that little book and I think it will remain of interest, as would, if we had it, the book of any Englishmen who in 1789 been able to meet and talk of what they were doing with Robespierre, Danton, Marat, and Desmoulins. In the eyes of history the names of Lenin, Bukharin, Trotsky and Radek will surely rank with these.” (Ransome, 1976, p. 265)

With his writings on the Russian Revolution, Ransome reached his literary peak. He must have felt life had been preparing him as the recorder of this one great historic event. He later visited China and Egypt as a political news reporter, but his heart was no longer in it. After the usurpation of the Soviet state by the Stalinist bureaucracy, Ransome turned once again to writing children’s adventure stories, with the *Swallows and Amazons* series. He never returned to Russia again. His children’s books made him a famous and rich man. Nevertheless, the workers’ movement internationally continues to owe him a debt of gratitude for the critical role he played on behalf of the Bolsheviks.



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