

PETER DUCK - OTHER PEOPLE'S DREAMS

An essay written for the Aldeburgh Festival Programme June 2000

By Julia Jones

“The desire to build a house,” wrote Arthur Ransome in 1923, “is the tired wish of a man content thence forward with a single anchorage. The desire to build a boat is the desire of youth, unwilling yet to accept the idea of a single resting place.” Ransome was nearing 40 when he wrote these words. It would be seven more years until the publication of *Swallows and Amazons* finally brought him the literary recognition for which he had been working since the publication of his first volume when he was 20 years old.

Certainly there had been little resembling secure anchorage for him in the ten years preceding 1923. In 1913 he left London in the wake of Lord Alfred Douglas’s libel action against him after the publication of his book on Oscar Wilde. His defence, conducted flamboyantly by F.E. Smith, was successful but his then marriage was not. One impromptu visit to Russia was followed by a second and a third until he was established there as the *Daily News* Russian Correspondent, living mainly in Petrograd and reporting the Bolshevik Revolution, sympathetically, in 1917.

Towards the end of that year he fell in love with Trotsky’s secretary, Evgenia Shelepina. Writing to his mother he described her and her sister as “huge young women, Bolsheviks, tall as Grenadiers, who prefer pistols to powder puffs and swords to parasols.” In 1918 he had to flee from Moscow to Stockholm to escape internment as an alien when the Allied forces landed at Archangel. Early in the following year he and Evgenia were expelled back again to Moscow from Sweden as Bolsheviks.

During a brief visit to England in 1919, “the Red journalist” was met with great suspicion by Special Branch and little goodwill from his estranged wife. Threats from the White Russian forces necessitated the rescue of Evgenia, who had remained in Moscow. After that they moved to Estonia and Latvia, from where Ransome reported events for the *Manchester Guardian*, fished, studied fairy tales and Baltic history and took up sailing again. He bought a couple of small boats but neither was quite what he wanted. He began to dream and then to plan...

“The desire to build a boat is one of those that cannot be resisted. It begins as a little cloud on a serene horizon. It ends by covering the whole sky so that you can think of nothing else. You must build to regain your freedom. And always you

comfort yourself that yours will be the perfect boat, the boat you may search the harbours of the world for and not find.”

This, however, is not the story of *Racundra*, the boat Ransome built then in the Baltic. This is the story of a boat built a quarter of a century later in Suffolk, after another war, when Arthur Ransome was in his sixties yet as far as ever from finding either the perfect vessel or the final anchorage. This is the story of *Peter Duck*.

Peter Duck was built at Pin Mill on the River Orwell in 1946. Ransome and Evgenia had moved to live at Levington, on the opposite bank of the river, in 1935, just two years after the publication of E Arnot Robertson's *Ordinary Families* – a book which I've always assumed that Ransome must have read as it contains a most evocative picture of the Pin Mill sailing community in the 1920s, sufficient to lure any restless romantic away from the Lakes and the Broads to the salt tang and mudflats of the east coast.

Ransome's first Suffolk boat was the *Nancy Blackett*, which he himself renamed after a favourite character, “feeling but for Nancy I would never have been able to buy her”. *Nancy* appears as “Goblin” in his two Suffolk novels, *We Didn't Mean To Go To Sea* and *Secret Water*. Then the desire to build came on again, resulting in *Selina King*, launched at the time of the Munich crisis and “comfortable to live in but a bit of a handful to sail”. Ransome suffered increasingly from hernia trouble and by 1945 (back in the Lakes again) reported that he was “giving up my big ship on doctor's orders and am hoping to replace her by a much smaller, easier to run vessel ... a sort of marine bath-chair for my old age.” This too was to be built by Harry King at Pin Mill but with a new and prestigious designer, Jack Laurent Giles.

In a letter of November 1945, replying to some of Ransome's many detailed queries about blocks and scantlings and the processes used in sail tanning, Laurent Giles concluded: “I have begun to think of the little ship as *Peter Duck*, which is probably very unfair to him and very naughty of me, but I think it fits.” A week or so later Ransome wrote to a fishing friend about his plans “to catch eels when at *anchor in the new boat which the designer, without consulting me, has christened Peter Duck*. She will be PD among friends. A comic little boat with two masts so as to keep each single sail small and light to handle.”

The character who gave his name to this comic little boat had first come to the attention of *Swallows and Amazons* readers “sitting on a bollard on the north quay of Lowestoft Inner Harbour, smoking his pipe and looking down on a little green two-

masted schooner that was tied up there while making ready for sea.” The schooner was the fictional “Wild Cat”, a converted Baltic trader which in Ransome’s book, *Peter Duck*, was to take the children, their uncle and the old Lowestoft seaman on “a treasure hunt in the Caribees”.

Peter Duck was the third in the *Swallows* series and Ransome’s first big sales success. Reviews were also good although the *Time and Tide* reviewer, Lorna Lewis, found herself in trouble with fans for seeming to compare it unfavourably with *Treasure Island*. Three children protested to the magazine, “We have all read *Treasure Island* and like it but we do not feel that it can be compared with this book. The adventures in *Peter Duck* might happen to any boy or girl nowadays whereas *Treasure Island* is not so real to us. We feel that we are with the children in Mr Ransome’s books and that we know them as friends.”

Readers of *Racundra’s First Voyage* (1923) might similarly have wondered whether they were already acquainted with *Peter Duck’s* eponymous hero. A crew of three had shipped aboard that book: Ransome himself as “Master and Owner”, wondering rhetorically whether life could offer “any prouder title or description”; Evgenia, not yet legally Mrs Ransome, but with high status as “the Cook” and a third member of the crew who Ransome dubbed the “Ancient Mariner”. This was Captain Karl Hermann Sehmel, an old Baltic rigger who had been “a seaman in the Thermopoylae, which he called the Demopoly, and had raced in her against the Kutuzak, in which odd Russianised name I recognised the Cutty Sark.” As had the Lowestoft wherryman Peter Duck. “He thought of the noise of the wind in the shrouds, and the glow of the lamp on a moving compass card, and tall masts swaying across the stars at night. And he wished he could go to sea once more and make another voyage before it was too late.”

The construction of the marine bath-chair was a process far removed from the romantic assertion of continued youth and adventurousness that had suffused the building of *Racundra*. Before *Peter Duck* even completed her trials Ransome sold her back to the designers in a fit of pique, then repented and repurchased her again one month later at a loss of £300.

Turning another man’s dream into planking and bunks, winches and rigging, is fraught with unchartable hazards. In the period when Peter Duck was making her transition from measured drawing to working vessel, the Ransomes were living in London (“HELL,W1”, as he put it). His health was poor, he was worried about money

and *Great Northern?*, the last of all his Swallows books, was proving extraordinarily difficult to write. Postwar shortages were an added frustration. “The designer wants to put a 12 H.P. Diesel (marine) in her but in these grim times it seems impossible to find such a thing. So we shall have to be content with a Stuart Turner Petrol engine (8 H.P.)”

Beside the deprivation and suffering of post-war Europe, the sacrifice of 4 horsepower on a yacht may not seem to matter much. But I must admit some sympathy with Ransome’s disappointment over that engine. From 1957 onwards I was a child on *Peter Duck* and have my own vivid memories of the moments of extreme tension and narrowly averted crisis that were precipitated by the unreliability of that particular little donkey.

“What little donkey?” asked Titty.

“Sailorman’s name for the engine,” said Peter Duck. “Engines and donkeys is all one. One day they’ll pull and another day they won’t, do what you will with them.”

Within a minute of casting-off on Ransome’s first outing in April 1947 in his latest attempt at the perfect boat - “the boat for which you could search all the harbours of the world” - the engine died and he found himself drifting helplessly through the crowded anchorage at Burnham-on-Crouch. All summer long the electric starter failed regularly (as it continued to do throughout its malign career) so Ransome had to crank it. The anchor chain jammed on its winch so he had to haul it hand over hand or find himself dragging briskly backwards past Felixstowe Dock in an unscheduled re-enactment of his own classic story *We Didn’t Mean To Go To Sea*.

None of this was much good for an elderly gentleman’s ruptures – or his temper. The cabin leaked like “a showerbath”, he hit his head on the beams and fell off his bunk in the night. His diary records that by November of that first year he and Evgenia were having tea aboard *Peter Duck*, “planning a new version”.

In fact what they did was move house, back to the Lakes for another couple of years, then down again to London. *Peter Duck* was sold and in 1951 the quest was renewed as Ransome commissioned the building of a boat to be named, by Evgenia this time, after the P G Wodehouse character Lottie Blossom. While he was waiting for *Lottie*, Ransome met my father, George Jones, and chartered my parents’ boat *Barnacle Goose* for a month’s sailing round the Deben and the Walton Backwaters. Six years later, when I was three years old and bursting out of the pushchair in which

I'd had to be strapped for safety in *Barnacle Goose*, my parents became the owners of Peter Duck.

Rejected as a bath chair, *Peter Duck* found a vocation as a gloriously old-fashioned perambulator. My mother and I still agree that there's something about the shape of her hull that is both beautiful and immensely reassuring. When coming aboard after any amount of absence we used to find ourselves having to fight the desire to snuggle down immediately in our respective berths and allow the stresses of the world (or family life) to be rocked away. Among the most pleasurable moments of my childhood were the times when the day's sailing was done and all five of us were settled down below. The varnished cabin would glow in the light of the oil lamps and hours spent by my brothers and myself polishing brass would momentarily seem worthwhile. Even squabbling stopped as one or other parent read aloud some tale of nautical fantasy such as C.S.Forester's *Hornblower* series - or *Peter Duck* itself.

Evgenia Ransome once refused to allow PD's photograph to be taken as she found the boat "ridiculous". Ransome's word "comic" can't be simply be sluiced away in a tide of sentiment. But even as they were rejecting her and beginning to plan their next attempt at perfection, both Ransomes continued to agree "that the hull of the boat is excellent".

The boat's shape is not entirely unlike a duck's; a low-slung, buoyant, undercarriage which tapers to an elegant and sturdy bow, like the long neck of a swimming bird as she slips efficiently through the water. In his letters to Ransome, Laurent Giles was adamant that "she will go together sweetly and easily". He issued dire warnings to the builders that he would not have "our precious lines mucked about with", adding sternly "we positively do not allow any loft-faining whatsoever".

Whatever perversion that might have been, I'm glad Harry King didn't do it. *Peter Duck's* functionality is the essential element of her beauty. She was designed as an easy-to-handle, east coast boat and succeeds as such. From the view point of a child this means she can be run up a sloping beach on the flood tide so one can leap ashore immediately with shrimping net and bucket while adults are still furling sails, laying out kedges and doing all those time-consuming, shipshapey things. As an adult you can watch your dear ones scamper merrily away while sitting comfortably in your cockpit, muttering "if not duffers, won't drown" and agreeing that the sun is now certainly over the yardarm. When *Peter Duck* takes the ground she does her best to

nestle squatly into the mud instead of lying at the crazy angles of her sleeker sisters. And because she has a relatively shallow draught one can, with care, come up the Alde as far as Snape. I remember as a teenager drinking my very first gin with my father in “The Plough and Sail” to celebrate just such a successful exploration.

Peter Duck stayed with us for 27 years. Through all the vicissitudes of family dysfunctionality she remained a single thing we all agreed we loved. Towards the end of my father’s life I took my own two small boys and slightly fractious baby daughter to visit Dad on the boat. For reasons which I’ve now forgotten it could have been tense and difficult. But as soon as that baby was put down for a moment on the foredeck she fell blissfully and soundly asleep in the sun. The boys played with the dinghy in the shallow water and a treasureably happy day ensued.

My father died. My mother and youngest brother tried to keep the boat but *Peter Duck’s* fabric seemed to be coming apart materially almost as ours was emotionally. She needed money and expert repair so she was sold. The new owner kept her only a couple of seasons and she was sold again.

This could have been the beginning of a sad story of decline, Old Faithful in a pauper’s grave. For a wooden boat the end might come as one of those blackened, infinitely melancholy hulks that project their last few timbers from the saltings at low tide. For myself I didn’t really want to think about what might have happened to her. It was ten years before I found out.

In 1987 *Peter Duck* was bought by Greg and Ann Palmer. For their first few seasons they potted around the swatchways and saltings of the Essex and Suffolk coasts with their son in very much the way that we had done. Then they met the Russian shipwright Vladimir Martous and were gripped by a boat-building project on a more ambitious scale than Ransome at his most visionary could ever have conceived. They left their home in Harwich and sailed *Peter Duck* not once but twice to Russia to work with Martous and the young people of St Petersburg in the recreation of the *Shtandart*, Peter the Great’s Baltic flagship. *Shtandart* built in 1703 was the “first born” of the Russian navy, constructed using the skills that Peter himself had learned at the Royal Dockyards in Deptford.

On their first trip, in 1993, the Palmers reached Racundra’s birthplace, Latvia, but were unable to enter Russia itself as the ship’s papers were not properly stamped. They sailed back through the Friesian Islands, reliving *Riddle of the Sands*, and set out again in the following year. From 1995 they and *Peter Duck* made their home in St

Petersburg until Greg's untimely death in 1997. Once again it seemed as if *Peter Duck* might rot amongst the marshes, this time thousands of miles from the coast for which she'd been designed. She is built predominately of larch, a light, somewhat volatile wood: the ice penetrated her garboards, her seams began to open.

Ann Palmer found an English skipper, collected a crew of three young Russian volunteers and dispatched *Peter Duck* home to England in the summer of 1998. I and my partner, the *Guardian* journalist Francis Wheen, had spent our holiday that summer in Woodbridge with our two small children. A week or so later we received a phone call from a Woodbridge friend, Christine Knights. "*Peter Duck* came up the river last night. She's back in the Ferry Dock now. And up for sale."

Before the three young Russians left on board had brewed their first pot of strong black tea that morning we were at the quayside with my youngest brother Ned, hardly able to contain our emotion at seeing her again – so familiar, so weathered, and with the courtesy flags of seven nations in her locker. When eventually we had finished exclaiming and explaining and listening to the story of their voyage, we asked the Russians what we could do for them. After six weeks at sea I think I might have wanted a bath, a big meal, change of clothes, fleshpots. They asked if we would take them to the ship burial site at Sutton Hoo.

Francis then was writing his biography of Karl Marx. As if to prove that seafarers are not the last romantics, he decided that he would spend his earnings from the finished book in buying back *Peter Duck* – and, with her, much of my lost childhood. And then, not quite rebuilding, but restoring her so that our two boys could be the next generation to sail the creeks and backwaters of the east coast aboard the boat conceived by a left-wing *Guardian* journalist who wrote the stuff of children's dreams.

Footnote: The Shtandart is due to visit Harwich on August 15th 2000 as part of her maiden voyage from St Petersburg. We hope Peter Duck will join her there.