

THE TRAIL OF PETER DUCK

As a boy, growing up in Essex in the 1930's, the first complete book I ever read was Arthur Ransome's *Swallowdale*, and from that moment I was hooked on *Swallows and Amazons* – as I am to this day. I was given two or three of the books as birthday and Christmas presents but, due to moving around at the start of the War, when my father was building airfields in Staffordshire and Oxfordshire, I lost them, all except the definitive book, *Swallows and Amazons* which I read and re-read over the years.

When my wife and I retired from Essex to Dolton in 1993 I decided to collect the other 11 books in the series. I didn't want the modern paperback editions but the old hardbacks, preferably with the delightful illustrations drawn by Arthur Ransome himself on the covers. Over the next few years I searched second-hand bookshops wherever we happened to be in the country, from Scotland to Sussex and Wales to Winchester. It took eight years but I located the last one I needed, *Missee Lee*, in Torrington Pannier Market – and a first edition, at that.

So one evening I settled down to read what I consider to be the second book in the series, *Peter Duck* (although it wasn't written in that order). I particularly remember buying that copy, in the bookshop in Bear Street, Barnstaple, about five years previously. I had gone into the shop one morning, as I had for several years, and asked "Anything by Arthur Ransome?" and the shopkeeper had pointed to a shelf and said "A couple came in yesterday. You'd better take a look now because they won't be there for long." One, *Coot Club*, I already had but the other *Peter Duck*, was one I needed. Apart from checking that it had all the pages and was in reasonable condition, I hadn't looked at it from that day to this.

Now I opened the front cover – and felt the hairs on the back of my neck stand up and prickle. There, on the first page, was written *This book belongs to Alfred Reeve, 22, Eaton Drive, Collier Row, Romford, Essex*. It was the very book I had been given on my 13th birthday and which had gone missing over 50 years before. Where it had been all that time and how it had turned up on the very morning I had gone into the shop I will never know. Truth truly is stranger than fiction.

Fred Reeve