

# CHAPTERS FROM STORYTELLING HISTORY

## A HISTORY OF STORY-TELLING by Arthur Ransome (1909)

*Last July Sue and I went on holiday to the Lake District. We did some interesting things but not what we had hoped to do—walking on the hills, picnicking by the lakes and lazy, cheap things like that. No, the weather was so bad that we visited galleries and houses and spent a fortune on admissions and guide books. In the end, knowing that the rest of the country was basking in record temperatures with no rain, we cut the holiday short and came home for a couple of nice, sunny days in the garden!*

*One of the places we visited was Blackwell, a restored Arts & Crafts house near Bowness. It's a lovely house and well worth a visit. On the book shelves there I spotted a book called 'A History of Story-telling' by Arthur Ransome. When I got home I looked it up and found that the whole book is available on line. Although it's mainly about written storytelling it's worth a look. Here's a bit from the beginning:*



### PART I: ORIGINS

**S**TORY-TELLING has nowadays only a shamefaced story-telling existence outside books. We leave the art to the books, [to the professional] artist, perhaps because he has brought it to such perfection that we do not care to expose our amateur bunglings. If a man has a story to tell after dinner he carefully puts it into slang, or tells it with jerk and gesture in as few words as possible; it is as if he were to hold up a little placard deprecating the idea that he is telling a story at all. The only tales in which we allow ourselves much detail of colouring and back-ground are those in which public opinion has prohibited professional competition. We tell improper stories as competently as ever. But, for the other tales, we set them out concisely, almost curtly, refusing any attempt to imitate the fuller, richer treatment of literature. Our tales are mere plots. We allow ourselves scarcely two sentences of dialogue to clinch them at the finish. We give them no framework. We are shy, except perhaps before a single intimate friend, of trying in a spoken story to reproduce the effect of moonlight in the trees, the flickering firelight on the faces in a tavern, or whatever else of delicacy and embroidery we should be glad to use in writing.

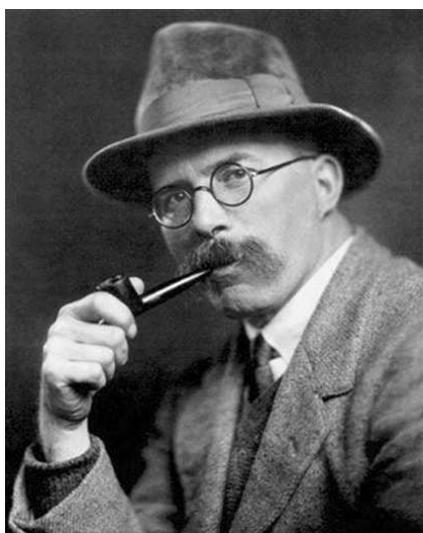
But in the beginning story-telling was not an affair of pen and ink. It began with the Warning Examples naturally told by a mother to her children, and with the Embroidered Exploits told by a boaster to his wife or friends. The early woman would persuade her child from the fire with a tale of how just such another as he had touched the yellow dancer, and had had his hair burned and his eyelashes singed so that he could not look in the face of the sun. Enjoying the narrative, she would give it realistic and credible touches, and so make something more of it than the dull lie of utility. The early man, fresh from an encounter with some beast of the woods, would not be so little of an artist as to tell the actual facts; how he heard a noise, the creaking of boughs and crackling in the undergrowth, and

ran. No; he would describe the monster, sketch his panic moments, the short, fierce struggle, his stratagem, and his escape. In these two primitive tales, and their combination in varying proportions, are the germs of all the others. There is no story written to-day which cannot trace its pedigree to those two primitive types of narrative, generated by the vanity of man and the exigencies of his life. At first there would be no professional story-tellers. But it would not be long before, by the camp fire, in the desert tents, and in the huts at night, wherever simple men were together relating the experiences of vigorous days, there would be found some one whose adventures were always the pleasantest to hear, whose deeds were the most marvellous, whose realistic details the most varied. Probably it would also be found that this same man could also give the neatest point to the tales of wisdom that were the children of the Warning Example. Men would begin to quote his stories, and gradually the discrepancy between his life and the life that he lived as he recounted it to his nightly audiences would grow too great to be ignored. His adventures would become too tremendous for himself, and, to save his modesty and preserve his credit, he would father them upon some dead chief, a strong man who had done things that others had not, and, being dead, was unable to contradict with his stone axe his too enthusiastic biographer. Such a man, like many a modern story-teller, would likely use his hold over the imagination of his fellows to become the medicine man of his tribe, the depository of their traditions, their sage as well as their entertainer.

He would create gods besides rebuilding men, and while his people were sheltering in the huts and listening atremble to the dying rolls of the thunder, would describe how his hero, the dead chief of long ago, was even now wrestling with the Thunder God and getting his knee upon that mighty throat. In the beginning man was a very little thing in the face of a stupendous Universe. Story-telling raised him higher and higher until at last heaven and earth were hidden by the gigantic figure of a man. In the Arthur legend, in the legend of Charlemagne, in the Sagas, we can watch men becoming heroes, and heroes super-natural. Then story-telling, having done so much, was to set to work in the opposite direction, and we shall see the figures of men gradually shrinking into their true proportions through each successive phase of the art, until, now that we have examples of all stages permanently before us, we manufacture gods, heroes, men, and creatures less than men, with almost equal profusion...



Above: This holiday snap sums up our week! Somewhere in the background is Windermere!



Download the book or read it on line at the following address:  
<http://archive.org/details/historyofstoryteooransuoft/>

*Arthur Ransome was the great uncle of Hugh Lupton. Some of you may have seen Hugh's piece 'The Homing Stone' about Ransome's travels to Russia. I don't now whether he mentions the storytelling book as part of it...?*