

# Arthur Ransome's Two Crises of Conscience during WWII

## Introduction

*We Didn't Mean To Go to Sea* is dedicated to Mrs Henry Clay. Why? Who was Henry Clay? What was Arthur's relationship to him?

Iconic harbours and ports have the happy property of bringing together like-minded individuals. So it was at Pin Mill on the River Orwell in Suffolk, where on Arthur and Evgenia's arrival in 1935 at Broke Farm he soon made the acquaintance of many well-known sailing families. These included the Busks sailing *Lapwing*, (which became the "missionary ship" in *Secret Water*); the Haigs, who lived near the Ransomes (fig. 1 shows them at a "pirates" party with Arthur and Evgenia at Broke Farm), and sailed *Catalina*; and significantly for this article, the Clay family (Henry and Gladys, Gabriel, Jim, Helen and John) sailing their *Firefly*.

Arthur had met Henry Clay (Fig. 2) when they were both correspondents for the *Manchester Guardian*, Henry Clay writing on economics. Henry became Professor of Political Economy and Social Economics at the University of Manchester and succeeded Harold Butler in 1944 as Warden of Nuffield College Oxford. Between 1930 and 1944 he worked as economic adviser to the Bank of England, work for which he was knighted in 1946. His wife, Gladys, the dedicatee, sadly died of cancer during the course of the correspondence with Arthur. One of his sons, Jim, has been suggested as the model for Jim Brading in WDMTGTS.

Equally happily for this author, sailing *Ragged Robin*

*III* (aka *Lottie Blossom I*) from Woodbridge led to the making of many friendships, including with one of Henry's grandsons, namely Peter Clay. This led to the loan of two files of correspondence (the Clays had cleared out from a loft) of Sir Henry's correspondence in the war years neatly bound by his Bank of England secretary. In the files were previously unpublished letters from Arthur (eg Fig.3). Would I be interested? So began a fascinating discovery of two episodes in Arthur's life in 1940 and 1941 that throw light both on his integrity and his concern for the well-being of the nation during World War II. The letters in the files are complemented by copies of replies from Sir Henry I obtained from the Brotherton Library by download through their Internet service. In what follows, letters in the Clay collection are labelled (Cl), those in the Brotherton, (Br).

## 1) The first crisis

### How to maximise Arthur's American earnings for the sake of the British war effort?

The story begins on June 8, 1940 with Arthur writing from *Harkstead Hall* in Suffolk, while working on *The Big Six*.

Embossed Address:

Harkstead Hall, Near Ipswich, Suffolk

June 8.1940. (Cl)

Dear Clay,



Fig. 1: The Haigs with Evgenia and Arthur at a "pirates" party in Broke Farm, 1935.

From left to right: Haig's daughter, Father, Arthur, Evgenia, Son and Mother.

***Wanted: Expert Opinion.***

Macmillans, my Yank publishers, send me cheques in dollars, drawn on New York banks. These my English bank changes at official rate, the Exchequer getting the difference. That is all right.

***Now then. Lippincotts, my other Yank publishers, send me their accounts in dollars but pay them in pounds, their cheques being drawn on a Yank Bank in England. They convert the dollars they owe me into pounds at the official rate. Am I right in suspecting that the difference goes into the pocket of the Yank Bank instead of into that of our worthy Chancellor ?***

I have raised the question over one particular cheque. Here are the details. Lippincott sends me from America an account showing that he owes me 183 dollars and 73 cents. At the same time Lippincott 's London Office sends in in payment of this a cheque for £45.9.6. drawn on Guaranty Trust Company of New York, Bush House, Aldwych, London. This, of course, is what I should have got by selling a dollar cheque for 183 dollars etc. The question that arises is this: who is getting the difference between the two rates? Is it the Yanks or is it, as it should be, the Chancellor. How do we know that the Guaranty Trust Co of New York buys its pounds at the official instead of at the natural rate of exchange?

***What ought I to do? Ought I to refuse to be paid in pounds and to demand to be paid in dollars so as to make sure that the difference approximately 25% goes to the right place?***

***An official ruling on this point would be most gratefully received, ..... if possible one that I could quote...though that is not essential. Of course this particular cheque is a small one, but the amount to which the principle applies, i.e. say dollar earnings in general is something like 2,400 dollars a year, and I should hate to feel that the Yanks are working the exchange to their own advantage instead of to that of the poor old Chancellor.***

I wonder if you were at the Club dinner, I had meant to come, but I went and tore a leg muscle last Sunday and had duodenum trouble during the week, so that I was altogether too hobbly to show up. I may come up for the day toward the end of the week if I get a good lot of work done first, I am one third of the way through the second draft of my beastly book, No, I take back the word "beastly". It has a few cheerful spots in it, and I am getting some fun out of it in spite of the difficulty of concentration.

Please give my kindest regards to your wife.

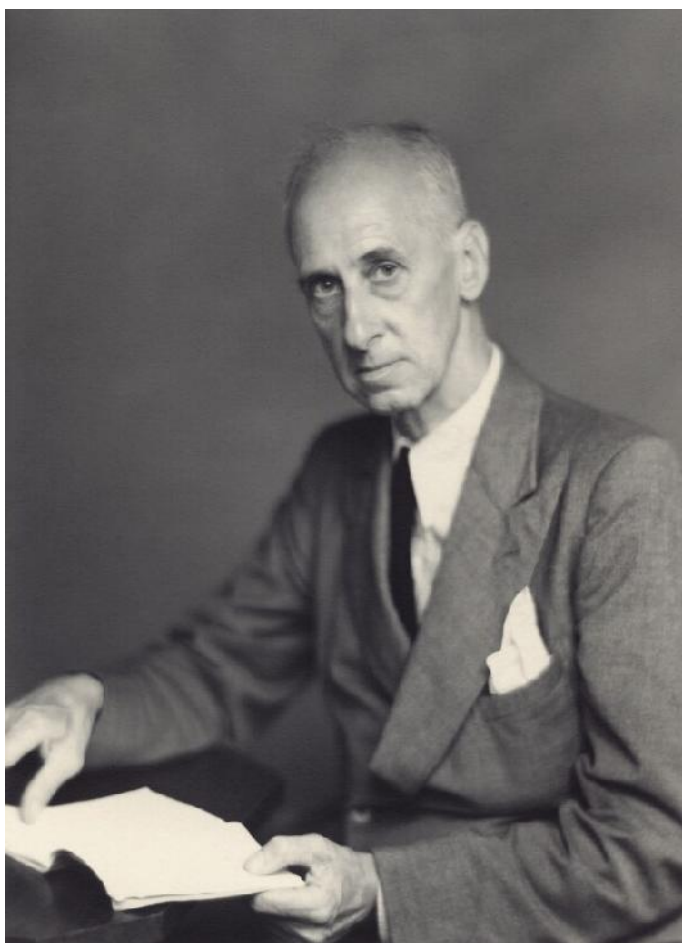
Yours ever,

Arthur Ransome

Clay researched this from the Head of Exchange Administration at the Bank of England and received a handwritten reply on 11<sup>th</sup> June including the splendid quotation in Henry's reply to Arthur on the same day:-

*Bank of England*

*11 th June 1940. (Br)*



Gladys Clay.

From a family drawing.

Fig. 2 Sir Henry Clay.

From the National Portrait Collection, with permission.

Dear Ransome,

***For one moment I hoped that I should be in a position to warn you that we should be able to clap you into prison if you accepted payment from your American publishers in sterling, but I am sorry to say the Law does not give us the opportunity. If, having dollars due to you in America, you instructed the paying agent in America to remit them in sterling, we could prosecute. But the mere receipt, of sterling is not punishable.*** The reason for the distinction is simply that it would be administratively difficult to enforce a regulation covering all sorts of odds and ends of payments from foreign countries to this country; a regulation has just been promulgated requiring exporters to collect payment in dollars, because exports are easy to identify and follow up through the machinery of customs. In a strict legal sense, therefore, we could not insist on your requiring Lippincotts to do what Macmillans do, i.e., send you a cheque in dollars; in a patriotic sense, however, it is almost an obligation on you to try to make Lippincotts do so.

As for your question "Who gets the difference"; if you sold your dollar cheques in the New York free market (which would be illegal) you would get the benefit. If Lippincotts buy their sterling in the free market at the free rate and then remit to you at the official rate they would get the benefit; but I hardly think a reputable firm would stoop to such meanness. If you receive dollars and turn them into an English bank,

then the Government gets them at the official rate which is the cheapest rate for dollars, so that the Government gets the benefit. **The conclusion seems to be that you should ask Lippincotts to send you dollar cheques. I add a comment from the Head of the Exchange Administration which should make you proud of yourself -**

**"Authors, I fear, as a class, are grave offenders in this respect. Conscience apparently does not make cowards of them all, and royalties are going awry in great quantities. This seems to be due to their paying not too little attention to money matters (as one might have expected) but too much. We are all the more glad to find a friend in that enemy camp."**

P.T.O.

I did not get to the Club dinner. I had to waste the evening on a visitor from Manchester who wanted to talk business, If you are coming up to the next meeting I wish you would let me know; but the news is so depressing these days that I feel my face is too long to exhibit in company. I am very sorry to hear of your physical troubles. If you do decide to come up, and have a free evening, let me know and we might dine together in London or out at Kenley, whichever you prefer.

With kind regards to your wife,

Yours sincerely,

Henry Clay

Arthur Ransome, Esq.

Arthur writes on June 14<sup>th</sup> (again from Harkstead Hall) to thank Clay for the advice (Fig.3):-

Embossed address: Harkstead Hall, Near Ipswich, Suffolk

June 14.1940 (Cl).

Dear Clay,

**Very many thanks.**

**I have been talking to Lippincotts who explain that their business in London earns lots of pounds which lie in their bank and that they use these pounds in paying such accounts as their Philadelphia business owes in England. They almost with pathos ask me to accept this particular cheque and they will instruct**

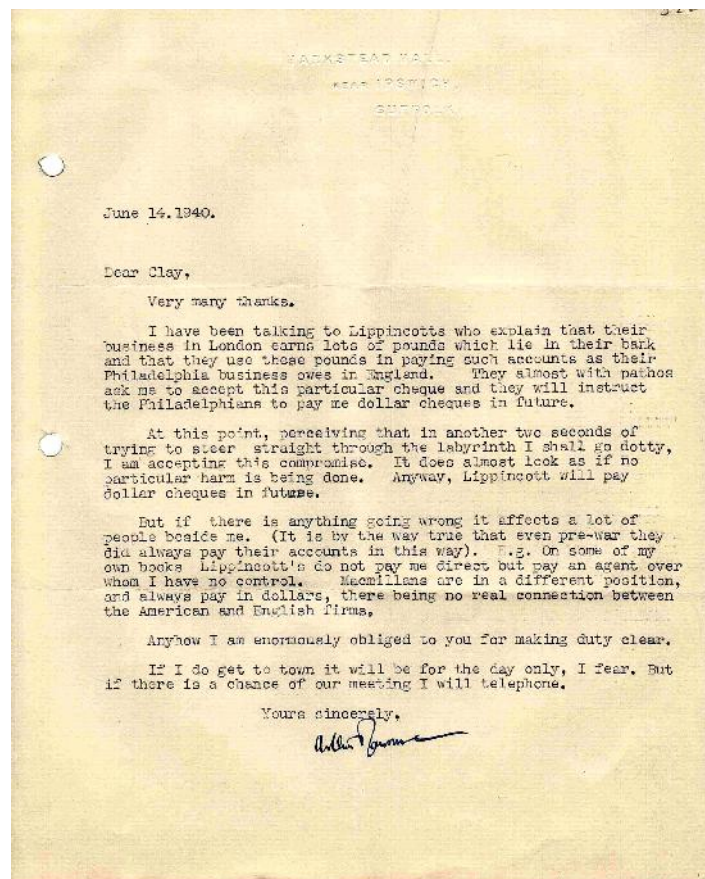


Fig. 3: Copy of Arthur's letter of June 14th 1940 to Henry Clay, found in the 1940 volume of Clay's Bank of England correspondence.

***the Philadelphians to pay me dollar cheques in future.***

***At this point, perceiving that in another two seconds of trying to steer straight through the labyrinth I shall go dotty, I am accepting this compromise. It does almost look as if no particular harm is being done. Anyway, Lippincott will pay dollar cheques in future.***

But if there is anything going wrong it affects a lot of people beside me. (It is by the way true that even pre-war they did always pay their accounts in this way). E.g. On some of my own books Lippincott's do not pay me direct but pay an agent over whom I have no control. Macmillans are in a different position, and always pay in dollars, there being no real connection between the American and English firms.

***Anyhow I am enormously obliged to you for making duty clear.***

If I do get to town it will be for the day only, I fear. But if there is a chance of our meeting I will telephone.

Yours sincerely,

Arthur Ransome.

In November of 1940, Clay writes to Arthur about the disruption of the bombing to both their lives and the first mention of the illness of Clay's wife, Gladys:-

Hurst Lodge - Hayes Lane - Kenley - Surrey

23. 11. 40 (Br)

Dear Ransome,

***I hope your removal from Suffolk is voluntary and not forced on you by a bomb or by such discomfort at Harkstead that you had to move. Suffolk lost some of its attractions when sailing became impossible and the Lake District must be one of the quietest remaining places - though Ernest Simon told me there had been two bombs on Helvellyn. I confess I don't know how you could write anywhere east or south of London - too much air traffic.***

We are half way towards moving. We have had a small house opened in a village near Banbury, Kings Sutton, and are moving there in a fortnight. We shall keep on here until the end of March when my lease ends; Kings Sutton is too far for a daily journey to London. We have been very lucky here - one big attack on our local aerodrome in August, and occasional bombs three or four nights, but nothing near enough to break a window. I hope you have been equally fortunate. But Gladys has been unwell for the last six months, and she has not much chance of getting right unless she can get some real rest. The family are all well - Gabe captain in the RAOC, Jim a private with RA, Helen head girl of her school and running it with a little assistance from the staff, and John in his last term at his preparatory school and still growing.

Can you tell me the name of the young member of the R C C whose engagement was announced at one of the dinners to a girl who was there. They were both in RAF uniform, and he was doing some special work in the Air Ministry on wireless. Gabe wants to get in touch with him because he has a youngster in his workshop

who is worth a better job and is very good on wireless.

***I should think the prospects of one unhappy continent must puzzle you and your wife with all your knowledge of these countries. Remember us to her.***

Yours

Henry

***Will your new book be out for Christmas. Trouble if not.***

(Hand-written to Arthur & Evgenia now located at the *Heald* in Cumbria.)

## 2) The second crisis

### Should Arthur give up his writing for children and work in a munitions factory?

The story begins on March 19, 1941 with Arthur writing from the *Heald*, while working on *Missie Lee*:-

March 19.1941. (Cl)

Dear Clay,

***Sorry to bother you, but I want an authoritative pronouncement on a mixed question of conscience and public finance.***

***(1) How does the Lease and Lend Bill affect the need of keeping up export trade to earn American dollars? Does it mean that it is no longer important?***

***(2) Is the amount of 3800 to 3000 dollars earned annually by me in America too small to count when considered as export trade? One man's export trade, of course***

***Dependent on the answers to the first two questions: Can I consider my job of writing books worth while in the present circumstances, or ought I to chuck it up and look round for such more essential job (munitions ?) as a man of my age can do?***

*I hope the whole Clay family is in good form.*

*We have had a go of influenza but are out of it now, more or less, and I am, as usual, mucking along with the usual struggles, through the usual half-time morass of one of my usual books.*

*If ever you do wander north and come within range of us, we should love to see you and have a crack.*

***But in the meantime let me have, on that personal worry, a Pronouncement. More authoritative than the B.of E.'s I could hardly get. And, in a mist of doubt, I really do want to know.***

Yours ever,

Arthur Ransome

Henry wrote back next day from Kenley in Surrey, with a delightful confirmation of the value of the S&A books to wartime readers, and his own perceptive comments on the Foreign Office and the civil service:-

*Hurst Lodge - Hayes Lane - Kenley - Surrey*

*20. 3. 41 (Br)*

Dear Ransome,

*I can lay my hands on my heart and assure you that 2000 or \$3,000 does count still, and can add my (rather jaundiced) opinion that you would be much luckier than most people if you found a war job in which you could give half as much effective help. This assurance may seem strange in view of the Lease and Lend Act; but while I am sure that it is Roosevelt's wish to do everything in his political power to help us - and that his administration supported him - when it comes down to wartime negotiation the Americans seem to think it their duty to drive as hard a bargain as they can which means taking the shirt off our backs before we'd touch a dollars worth of stuff under Lease And Lend eg this sale of American viscose. We ought nevertheless once we begin to draw on Lease And Lend to have a small balance in our favour with U S A.; but we need dollars to pay Canada, on whom we are drawing proportionately much more heavily than on USA and who cannot give us unlimited credit because they are heavily drawn on their account with USA; and we need dollars to pay neutrals who will no longer accept sterling.*

*My jaundiced opinion of your prospects of alternative work is from my own experience.* With Stamp and H D Henderson I was trying to help the government to look at its economic problems as a whole; but between the politicians who didn't want to face awkward facts, and the civil servants who thought our work ought to be reserved for civil servants who wanted promotion and orders, we were squeezed out. Result: I am back whole time in the Bank on dull routine work. Of course you might be more fortunate. *If I thought the foreign office would employ you on propaganda for Eastern Europe, I would gladly forgo the dollars; but you are disqualified from such employment by an intimate knowledge of the subject matter.*

*Seriously, I hope you will not give up your literary work except for a serious alternative. If you could find something which served as an outlet for your energy and special experience you should take it up; but even then I hope you could continue your books.*

*I think your books have an intrinsic claim to consideration. Your last was read aloud to Helen and John and then read separately by them. Then Jim took it off to his camp, and finally Gabriel wrote to ask for it. My next-door neighbour said they read your books aloud all last autumn when they took the children into the shelter.*

My wife is still far from well - able to get up but unable to do more. I get down for weekends but have not had a chance of doing more than assist with tidying up the garden. As for the family, Gabriel is a captain in Army Ordnance running a big workshop in Acton where most of the Londoner anti-aircraft batteries are serviced end repaired. He would be happy, if he had not just suffered a heavy blow - his wife had her first baby last Saturday, got over it splendidly and then the baby collapsed through weak heart. Jim threw up his job as an alleged statistical expert in the Ministry of Supply last August and tried to get into the Navy as an ordinary rating. They turned him down on his left arm which looks funny (he had a bone

taken out when he was seven) but has never handicapped him. The army representative at the recruiting office told him to enlist in the artillery (Surrey and Signal Section) and he would get him another medical to put him in Grade 1. He has been on Salisbury Plain for six months now and when last heard of was hopeful of being recommended for a commission and sent to an O C T U. Helen is trying this week for a music scholarship at Lady Margaret Hall. John is in his first term at Eton. I had him down for Westminster because it is the only good day school in reach. But Westminster has ceased to be a day school, and I had the offer of a place at Eton. I thought the advantages of a room to himself and a tutor - for a boy like John - compensated for certain disadvantages in Eton, and I think I was right. He seems very happy.

I wish I could get away to see you. I don't mind the air-raids so much; but the black out and the abnormal appearance of things rather get on my nerves. Still I have no excuse for a holiday yet awhile. Is there any chance of you getting up here. I should love a talk if there were.

**Remember me to your wife. I suppose she does not find the world so abnormal as I do.**

Yours

Henry Clay

Arthur writes back in thanks on the 24<sup>th</sup> March 1941 from the Heald:-

The Heald, Coniston, Lancashire.

March 24.1941. (Cl)

Dear Clay,

**Right. And, privately, I am much relieved. I haven't got many more years in which to write my blessed books and I am and always have been absolutely unable to do two jobs at the same time. I.e. if I did take on anything else it would mean complete stoppage for the books.**

**BUT, you must now be an angel and write me once again your assurance that my earning American dollars is "effective help" and ought not to be interrupted, in spite of the Lease and Lend Bill, and you must write that letter on the most official bit of paper you can spare, so that I can, if necessary, flourish it in the face of halfwits who may want to commandeer my cottage. Probably it won't be necessary, but it might. And I can't very well flourish your letter as it is because of all the stuff in it which is only for your eyes and mine. Halfwits there are about in plenty, but long experience in difficult times outside England has taught me that halfwits will instanter at the sight of anything on official paper. .... .Did I ever tell you how I used an angry letter demanding the return of a book, sent me by Hagberg Wright (who had a fine signature) on London Library notepaper (which had a fine crest) to get myself admitted in Russia into any forbidden place into which I had a mind to go. From what I can see, halfwits in England are very little different from halfwits anywhere else. And that I do want to be left alone (handwritten in).**



Next. Your letter was written on Hurst Lodge notepaper. What does that mean? I thought you had already moved somewhere else. I do hope it does not mean that the move has been held up by Mrs. Clay's illness.

Next. John and Eton. I think John is in luck. Judging from quite a number of boys I know who have been lately at Eton, I think it seems a much more civilised and sensible school than any other... ..none of the freakishness of some of the new ones, and apparently a most satisfactory understanding that there are other aims in education than those of standardisation. Each one of the boys I am thinking of was extremely happy there. Each one was different from every other one. And, astounding to me after knowing Rugby in the old days, each one has the same toleration and respect for the tastes and personalities of other boys quite different from himself. I think John is in luck and I am very glad for your sake and for his.

**About the F.O. and propaganda. The only propaganda that would be of any use, they cannot possibly use because of the tangle of commitments in which we are already involved.**

Gosh, I do wish you could turn up for yarn. But, I think there is more than a chance that I shall be in London some time next month.

Good luck to you and all the other Fireflies,

Arthur Ransome

("Fireflies" is a reference to the Clay youngsters sailing in their Father's yacht *Firefly*)

Henry consults with the head of Exchange control at the Bank of England and assures Arthur:-

28th March 41. (Carbon copy: Cl)

My dear Ransome,

I have consulted my colleague, the head of the Exchange Control in the Bank, and have his authority to say that he agrees with the view I expressed before - **that the dollars you earn by writing books with a sale in America is an effective form of help to the War effort, and that the passing of the Lease and Lend Act does not alter this.** We still need dollars so badly - to cover imports we must make from U.S.A. which do not come under Lease and Lend, to help towards an enormous deficit in relation to Canada, and to pay for imports from neutral countries which will not accept sterling- **that your contribution, even though small in relation to the total amount required, is substantial in relation to the contribution any one individual can make. It has a special value since it is made without using up any imported raw material or any skilled manual labour. I think it unlikely you would be lucky enough to find national work of greater importance.**

Yours sincerely,

(Sd.) HENRY CLAY

Arthur Ransome, Esq.

Arthur writes on March 31<sup>st</sup> to thank Clay for his "official letter" from the *Heald*; the "rum and difficult book" is Missee Lee:--

March 31. 1941 (Cl)

My Dear Clay,

**Many thanks for the official chit, which is a magnificent production far better than anything I could have hoped for.**

I shall take you at your word about a bed unless I find I have to combine business and time saving and stop at my publishers. As soon as I know I will write when I am coming, or wire. The name, I think, after careful committee work on your handwriting is Dormanhurst. I shall take it as such unless corrected.

**Fortified by you, I'm getting on with the job... but gosh! It is a rum and difficult book.** I look forward to the break of coming to town and still more to talk.

Yours ever,

AR

Clay follows up all the above with the verdict of his children – and that of the daughter of one of the executive directors of the Bank of England - on Arthur's latest book, presumably Misse Lee, plus the sad news of the death of Gladys Clay:-

5 Jan. 42 (Br) Handwritten.

Dear Ransome,

**We all appreciated your Christmas card, and I am to acquire prestige - and share a little reflected glory on our executive directors of the Bank - by showing it and its two predecessors to the daughter of the directors who speaks a dialect intelligible only to people who have read your books. I gather that the latest is rather above the average (so that your talk about exhausting inspiration in misty years is rot.) I have not got hold of it yet, but the four children are very pleased with it. Gabe and Jim are clamouring for it and it has gone to Dulford camp near Salisbury where Jim is instructing recruits with RA.**

I am lucky to have both boys in this country still. Gabe is becoming an expert in all sorts of instruments used by anti-aircraft batteries and the army won't let him do anything else.

Helen started life at Oxford this last term and enjoyed every minute. John is happy at Eton, looking forward to next summer when he will cease to be a junior and become entitled to join the sailing club. We got a lot of fun out of a folding canoe which we rigged with standing lug and fores'l and lee boards on the Oxford Canal.

**It has been a sad time for us because, as you may not have heard, I lost Gladys in September. It was cancer, inoperable, and she had been in pain for over a year. She refused any drug, retained perfect self control, and conducted the house and carried on her extensive correspondence till the day she died.**

All good wishes for the New Year to both of you

Yours

Henry Clay

Many years later, both Henry and Arthur have moved. Arthur and Evgenia to 9 Weymouth Street, London, and Sir Henry as Warden of Nuffield College, Oxford.

Arthur has congratulated Henry on his election to the Wardenship of the College and Knighthood. Clay replies:-

*From the Warden*  
NUFFIELD COLLEGE  
17 Banbury Road Oxford

18. vi. 46 (Br)

My Dear Ransome,

Thank you so much for your congratulations. My pleasure in the event is enormously increased by finding that my friends are pleased.

***I was disappointed to miss you the other day but I was compensated by a talk with your wife. I can't quite see you permanently resident in London. You mustn't relapse into highbrow literary criticism - though I could forgive a partial reversion to political correspondence.***

*I promised to give myself another chance - with notice. It may be a little delayed since I have a chance to go to America in the Long Vacation at someone else's expense.*

*My respects to your wife*

Yours

Henry Clay

Arthur Ransome Esquire,

9 Weymouth Street,

W1

## **Acknowledgements**

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**To The Ransome Archives in the Brotherton Library of the University of Leeds for copies of the letters from Henry Clay.**

**To Stan Baston of the Waldringfield History Group Photographic Archive for Fig. 1**

**To the National Portrait Gallery Collection for Fig. 2, with permission.**