

Book review – Aboard the Bulger by Ann Scott-Moncrieff

Five children escape from an orphanage, walk to the coast, find a deserted boat and set sail.

But this is not Famous Five country. There is no patriarchal older brother, and the only girl in the group is a feisty, clever ten-year-old who doesn't take any nonsense from anyone (and no, she doesn't have a dog...)



The children escape. Image: CL Davidson

In Ann Scott-Moncrieff's *Aboard the Bulger*, Hannah, Edgar, William ('the Whelk' – so christened by Hannah because William is a poet who hates his name; 'it doesn't rhyme with anything!'), Pud and Plag sail around the Hebrides, meeting people, having adventures, and finally finding the right place for each of them to be.

The Bulger is a magical boat, beautifully fitted out and complete with instructions;

She began to read the notices for herself. They were simple

and polite. This one said PRESS PLEASE, that one PULL HERE, the next LIFT THIS HANDLE. THANK YOU. ...others were...BETTER NOT TOUCH...the one on the furnace door said PLEASE PUT PLENTY OF COAL IN HERE...

and a manual;

THE BULGER BOOK or How to Run this Ship

with sections on things like 'starting'. 'stopping' and 'signs and portents.' 'Appendix: Quaint Harbours and Quiet Waters.'

The Bulger is a character in herself.

After an exciting maiden voyage, she delivers the children to the Islands of Borg, where they meet the wonderful Mansie, a tall and initially terrifying isleman, destined to become a great friend. Where, they tentatively enquire, are the rest of the locals?

'They're sitting ahint locked doors and barricaded windows this very minute' explained the man. He brandished his sword. 'I'm the only wan among them who's fit to be called a man.'

For the Borgians are terrified of something on the neighbouring island of Cuddyreek. How the children face up to this monster and show it up for what it really is allows Scott-Moncrieff to include an exciting folk tale, another adventure, and a lesson in facing up to your fears.

Scott-Moncrieff's narrative flies along – she knows how to keep children, and indeed adults, turning the pages, and I think this would be an especially good book to read aloud.

For me though, the best thing about this book is the people. Each child (and every adult, from a wealthy old lady to a Highland Chieftain) is a rounded, interesting character. Sensitive, clever, slightly obsessive Edgar, always with his

head in a book, enterprising Pud and Plag, dreamy, imaginative William, who composes rhyming couplets exalting his own bravery, and most of all courageous, determined, sensible Hannah, who shares so many of the qualities that people saw in Ann Scott-Moncreiff herself. These are no cardboard cut-outs, but real personalities, each with their own strengths and vulnerabilities.



The MacGalloch. Image: CL Davidson

When, after more adventures, the children's voyage is eventually over (and it's concluded in suitably dramatic and surreal fashion – see the front cover illustration), each one finds what they were always looking for – the right person and the right place to be, the 'found family' (or at least, the found person, the soulmate) that each one needs.

Ann (originally Agnes) Shearer was born in Orkney, became a journalist (one of her tasks at *The Orcadian* was to be the first local ever to fly to Wick) and moved to London, where she met her future husband George Scott-Moncrieff. At the age of 20 she married him, and the couple then lived a happy but very impecunious life in the Scottish Highlands (and later in Midlothian and East Lothian), where both wrote – he became editor of *New Alliance* – and knew many of the writers and thinkers of the 'Scottish Renaissance', including James Fergusson, Hugh MacDiarmid and Marjorie and Eric Linklater.



Ann Scott-Moncreiff. (image: public domain.)

Although she died at the age of only 29 (her second son Gavin was then just one year old), Scott-Moncrieff had by then written three books, short stories, numerous articles, scripts and adaptations for the radio, all while caring for their young children. Both she and George had to keep writing, simply to put food on the table.

In 2015 Gavin Scott-Moncrieff was asked by the editor of *Frontiers*, the journal of the Orkney International Science Festival, to talk about his mother for one of the festival's One O'Clock Toasts. He concluded by quoting the poet Edwin Muir;

'She had a mind of great power and originality which was never put off by the intellectual craze of the hour, and she never took up a fashionable idea ... if she had lived she would have been one of our best writers.'

This new edition of *Aboard The Bulger* concludes with a touching biographical note by the Scott-Moncrieffs' daughter Lesley, which includes an extract from a letter Ann wrote to her old schoolfriend in Orkney;

'I'm a gey busy woman...Lass can you get tight on merely sitting up all night (to write a broadcast) or is this merely a reaction to BBC English?...Oh would I were in Marson kitchen wi' my feet on the range singing psalms, But that was another day. You mind?'

Aboard the Bulger (illustrated by CL Davidson). together with Ann Scott-Moncrieff's *Auntie Robbo* and a collection of short stories, *Firkin and the Grey Gangsters*, is published by [Scotland Street Press](#) and available from the Press's online bookstore.

