4.
Winter Holiday: Enter the Callums

After the pirate fantasy of *Peter Duck*, Ransome returned to the real world of holiday adventure and, in many ways, *Winter Holiday* (1933) is *Swallowdale* on ice. This time Nancy has planned a trek to the North Pole across the ice, though frustratingly the Lake in the North refuses to freeze.

From the outset, the *Swallows and Amazons* novels proved popular in the United States, where they were published by Lippincott and promoted by the Junior Literary Guild. After the publication of *Peter Duck*, Helen Ferris of the Guild thought it to be probably 'the best of the lot' but she was aware that readers can become resistant to sameness and suggested that Ransome 'do something entirely different with a new set of youngsters'.[1] In the event he largely ignored her advice and *Winter Holiday* is not only set again on the Lake in the North with the usual cast of characters, but also reworks the already sketchy plot of *Swallowdale* for a frosty season.

The colonial theme remains. In *Swallowdale* the expedition to climb Kanchenjunga is delayed by the steely presence of the Great Aunt until the last few chapters; in *Winter Holiday* the expedition to the North Pole is put on hold because the weather is too warm, and then Nancy goes down with mumps. It only gets properly under way in Chapter 24 (of 29). Nevertheless, for all its familiarity, *Winter Holiday* has its own considerable strengths. It has an engaging *joie de vivre* which is appropriate to a winter's tale, with a pumpkin-faced Nancy controlling operations from her sick bed and Peggy making a sterling effort to

1. Letter from Helen Ferris, 29 October 1932, reproduced in Roger Wardale et al., eds, *The Best of Childhood* (Kendal: Amazon Publications, 2004), p. 85.

step into Nancy's very large pirate boots. But most striking is the way Ransome brings to life the tensions and resentments as two new holiday-makers, Dorothea and Dick Callum, edge their way uneasily into the *Swallows and Amazons* world.

The setting of *Winter Holiday* was inspired in part by Ransome's memory of the one time he had been tolerably happy at his preparatory school, Windermere Old College, when in the great frost of 1895 Windermere froze over and lessons were cancelled for a number of weeks. In his *Autobiography* he recalls his joy in skating, 'an activity,' he writes, 'in which I was not markedly worse than any of the other boys':

> After breakfast, day after day, provisions were piled on the big toboggan and we ran it from the Old College to the steep hill down into Bowness when we tallied on to ropes astern of it to hold it back and prevent it crashing into the hotel at the bottom. During those happy weeks we spent the whole day on the ice, leaving the steely lake only at dusk when fires were already burning and torches lit and our elders carried lanterns as they skated and shot about like fireflies.[1]

Such description is almost Wordsworthian in tone and perhaps even a conscious evocation of the well-known skating episode in the opening book of *The Prelude* (1805 and 1840). As with Wordsworth, such early encounters with nature were to shape both Ransome's life and his writing. Later, in the hard winter of 1929, Windermere froze again and Ransome and Evgenia were able to see the excitement at Bowness and walk together on the ice.

But Ransome found difficulty in fleshing out the trivial storyline. His first notes (written on 15 January 1933) get as far as Nancy's illness, the planned expedition to the North Pole, a night on the *Fram*, and a sail for the sledge, but then they stop. At the end of the month he drafted an opening for the novel: although it was quickly discarded, it was crucial in introducing two new characters, Elizabeth (quickly changed to Dorothea) and Dick Callum, who would add a new interest to the series and go some way towards allaying Helen Ferris's fears. He also decided that in *Winter Holiday* he would leave the children far more to their own devices. Mrs Walker is visiting her husband who is still aboard ship in Malta, Mr and Mrs Callum are on an archaeological dig in Egypt, and Captain Flint is on his travels abroad as well. So there are only the tolerant Mrs Blackett and kind-hearted Mrs Dixon

1. Arthur Ransome, *The Autobiography of Arthur Ransome*, ed. Rupert Hart-Davis (London: Jonathan Cape, 1976) p. 46.

to keep an eye on what is happening: the former contents herself with making sure Nancy is kept in isolation when she falls ill, and it is enough for the latter to see that everyone is well-fed. Captain Flint returns unexpectedly from his travels in Chapter 21 ('Captain Flint Comes Home') and helps Nancy to organise the final push to the North Pole, but he plays little part in the story.

At the end of February, Ransome wrote another, fuller 'Argument' for the novel, but it is still undeveloped: the calendar for the expedition has several days when nothing happens and there is little sense as to how it will all end. 'There is something fundamentally wrong with this story,' he despaired in his diary. 'I doubt if Dorothea and Dick fit this strange tale.'[1] At the beginning of March he wrote to his mother that 'The new book is much more difficult than any of the others; it is going to be a tough job all the way through'.[2] This struggle to establish a plot (which was to become an almost annual affair) was made worse by Ransome breaking his ankle in a fall (he claimed to have been distracted by a conversation with Dorothea) and by his stomach ulcer flaring up. But by the end of August, *Winter Holiday* was complete, even though he continued to have considerable misgivings (especially about the ending) and the illustrations troubled him.

Enter the Callums

'One at least of the two new characters you won't be able to help liking,'[3] declared Ransome to his mother, though a day later he was worrying that 'everybody will curse me for not letting the Swallows and Amazons be the principal characters'.[4] In fact, the Callums, who are staying for the first time at Dixon's farm and are strangers to both the countryside and to sailing, are not children to whom one immediately warms. They have the difficult task of winning acceptance from the reader as well as from the Swallows and Amazons. Dorothea, aged about eleven in *Winter Holiday*, is an aspiring author while Dick, a year younger, is more practical: a scientist, astronomer, ornithologist and

1. Diary entry for 28 January 1933, reproduced in *The Best of Childhood*, p. 85.
2. Letter to Edith Ransome, 3 March 1933, reproduced in Hugh Brogan, ed., *Signalling from Mars: The Letters of Arthur Ransome* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1997) p. 216.
3. Letter to Edith Ransome, 2 March 1933, reproduced in *Signalling from Mars*, p. 214.
4. Letter to Edith Ransome, 3 March 1933, reproduced in *Signalling from Mars*, p. 216.

budding engineer. Brogan suggests that the two characters represent two parts of Ransome's own make-up (the Callums' father is an academic, like Ransome's own father): the creative mind on the one hand and the practical, scientific mind on the other.[1]

Dorothea is a sensitive child, liked by the adults with whom she comes into contact, appreciative and without an ounce of malice in her body, but she is endlessly questioning herself and trying to make sense of the world by fixing it in the pages of a string of books that rarely get written; while life is frightening for its uncertainties, the plot of a novel, however sad, keeps everything under control. In *Winter Holiday*, Dorothea's changing stories are one of the main sources of amusement, not least because of their parody of the sickliest kind of melodrama, and because Dick, without meaning to, always succeeds in deflating her extravagant imagination. For example, when she is inspired by the old brown rowing boat hauled out above the landing-place at Dixon's Farm:

> 'They launched their trusty vessel, put out their oars, and rowed towards the mysterious island. No human foot had ever trod. . . .'
>
> 'Well, look,' said Dick. 'There's somebody coming now.'[2]

In later novels, Dorothea is sometimes used more specifically as a playful element of metafiction, an author of stories within stories into which the other characters are drawn, but in *Winter Holiday* her main role is to support and protect her younger brother.

In contrast, ten-year-old Dick, bespectacled and serious, is concerned only with things as they are. On their very first morning at the farm, Mrs Dixon counts the stairs out loud as she brings hot water for washing. When Dick hurries down to breakfast he automatically checks: '"There are twelve steps," said Dick, "she was quite right."'[3] In the same way, when he is trying to identify stars from the 'observatory' and asking Dorothea to read out their descriptions from his star book, where astronomy is strangely complemented by Tennyson's verse, he tells her to 'Skip the poetry'.[4] When the snow arrives and Dorothea immediately recalls snow-filled poems and stories, Dick prefers to examine the crystals under his microscope. But in spite of the differences, the bond

1. Hugh Brogan, *The Life of Arthur Ransome* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1985), p. 332.
2. Arthur Ransome, *Winter Holiday* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933). Red Fox edition (London: Random House, 1993), p. 4.
3. *WH*, p. 2.
4. *WH*, p. 15.

between them is as strong as it is unobtrusive. While the Swallows are bound by a hierarchical code and Peggy is dominated by her overbearing elder sister, Dorothea and Dick enjoy an often unspoken empathy. When they row for the first time their pride in themselves and each other needs no more than a look: 'They looked at each other . . . smiled faintly, but said never a word.'[1]

Like the Walkers in *Swallows and Amazons*, the Callums drink in the newness of their surroundings, though they see the same space through different eyes and their delight is not compromised by imperial ambitions. Used only to the roar of London traffic, they wake up to noises of the farmyard which are 'strange' and 'different'. When they take the path down to the lake shore, 'everything was new to them';[2] and when they discover the hilltop barn, which will become Dick's observatory and their signalling station, 'for the first time they saw the great ring of hills above the head of the lake'.[3] On the fourth day, it is as if they are also seeing snow for the first time: for Dorothea, 'There was a new world'.[4] At any rate, snow on the fells has a different effect from snow in the town, clothing the countryside in a sparkling white blanket:

> At home, in the town, Dorothea had seen snow more than once, where it lay for a few hours in the streets, growing grimier from the smoke, until it was swept into dirty heaps along the gutters. She had never seen anything like this.[5]

Soon, Dick is to see buzzards that until now he has only seen in a book.

But in this new winter playground, Dorothea and Dick realise that six children are there already and this spoils things for them. For Dorothea, what was the excitement of discovery turns into a sense of being left out when they discover that other children are there already and she and Dick are not included in whatever game they are playing. Later, she remembers 'a lonely morning'.[6] She becomes sulky when Dick discovers the farmhouse where he thinks the children are staying, and although she tries to change the subject their presence eats away at her. 'Perhaps we wouldn't like them if we knew them,' she says.[7]

1. *WH*, p. 94.
2. *WH*, p. 3.
3. *WH*, p. 11.
4. *WH*, p. 69.
5. *WH*, p. 70.
6. *WH*, p. 174.
7. *WH*, p. 13.

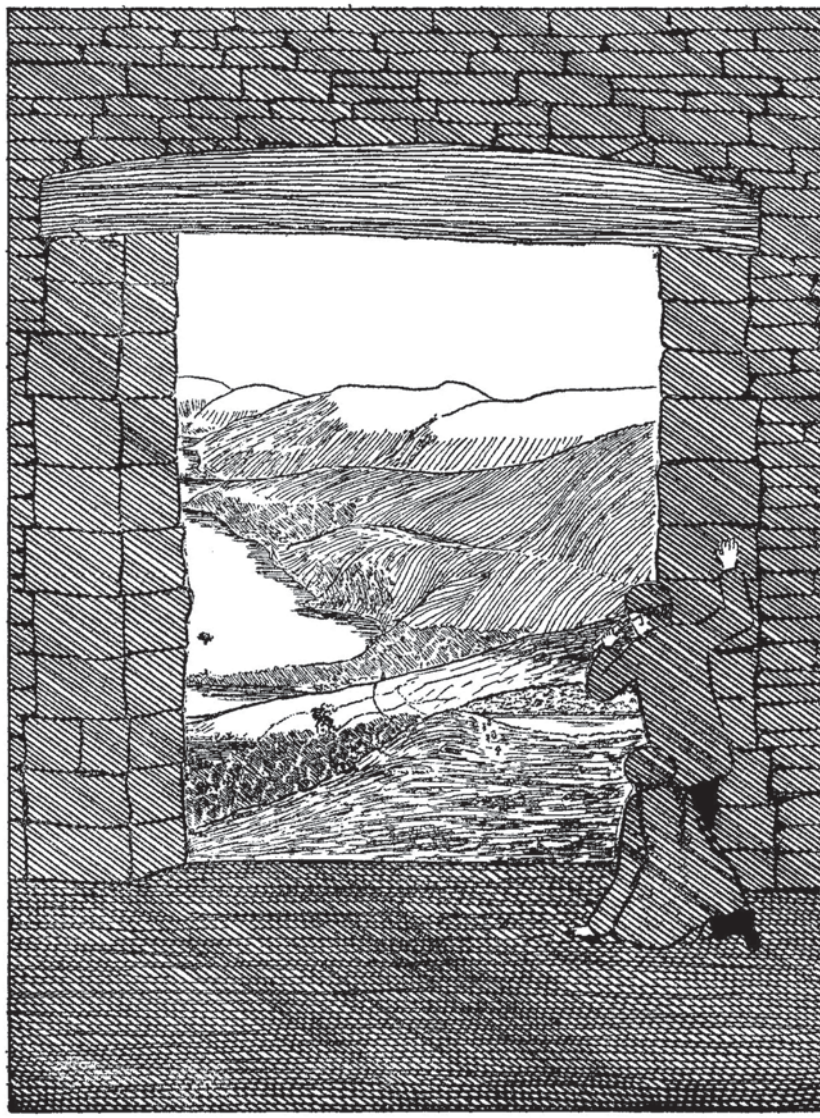
Strangers

Thus it is that the opening chapter of *Winter Holiday* is entitled 'Strangers' and Dorothea begins writing *The Outcasts*, a story that 'nobody would be able to read without tears'.[1] But while Dorothea feels that the other children exist in 'a different world', the more down-to-earth Dick invents his own game that might just bring them all together. Even if they are on another planet, it is worth signalling to them to see if there is a response. It is like 'signalling to Mars', and after a time signals are sent back by the aliens; ironically, from the Callums' point of view, it is the other children, not themselves, who are the interlopers.

Signalling is to become an important device in the novel, with the setting up of a signalling system between Dick's observatory at Dixon's farm and Holly Howe where the Swallows are again staying. The system was inspired by the one set up between Ransome at Low Ludderburn and his friend Colonel Kelsall at Barkbooth on the other side of the valley so that, without the luxury of telephones, they could plan their fishing expeditions (without the fish knowing what awaited them). There are diagrams of the hoisted shapes, the 'private code', semaphore, and another page from Dick's pocket book which mixes chemical formulae, his mother's birthday, and identification of planets. It is the stuff of those Schoolboys' Pocket Books beloved by generations of preparatory school boys. From the outset, signalling allows the established explorers to communicate with their new acquaintances and (symbolically) brings them together. Later it becomes crucial to the plot when Nancy semaphores instructions from her bedroom window and sends a coded message to the *Fram*, and when, at the novel's climax, there is the crucial and mistaken message: 'Flag on Beckfoot – Start for Pole'.[2] Today's readers, brought up with mobile phones, will wonder what it is all about.

The morning after contact has been established, the Swallows and Amazons meet up and Dorothea and Dick are at least drawn onto the fringes of Nancy's polar expedition. They have, it seems, led a solitary existence up to now, depending on each other for company. The previous day they were 'alone as usual', but now they are swept up by this lively band of sailors and explorers – or nearly. Susan, it seems, has reservations about the newcomers. She mocks them for using a newspaper to light a fire, and while they chatter happily with Titty and Roger, Dorothea overhears the always generous Nancy arguing for their inclusion. It must be Susan who asks the catty question:

1. *WH*, p. 9.
2. *WH*, p. 66.



4. The Martians in Sight

The morning after contact has been established the Swallows and Amazons meet up and Dorothea and Dick are at least drawn onto the fringes of Nancy's polar expedition.

'But what's *she* going to do?'
'We'll soon know if they're any good.'[1]

The Swallows, of course, are visitors to the Lake themselves, and no doubt feel similar to Dorothea: the Lake, and the friendship with the Amazons, is their preserve, and now it is threatened. Indeed, it is arguable that the Callums have a more substantial link with the Lake than the Swallows in that Mrs Dixon had long ago been Mrs Callum's nurse ('The very spit of your mother', she says to Dorothea).[2] More seriously for the Swallows, Ransome not only appears intent on removing them as the focus of the novel, but also finds a more jealous and selfish side to their previously untarnished natures.

When the Callums are invited to the Igloo, the old hut that has become the base camp for the expedition, Nancy insists that it is 'visitors first', but Dorothea and Dick are 'pushed aside' by the others; and when they go to fetch water from the waterfall Dorothea is desperate to be of use. As they make their way home that evening, it is Nancy, confident in her leadership, who suggests that Dorothea and Dick leave their mugs in the Igloo, as they will be part of the 'all' who will return tomorrow. Instead of having to invent yet another story as a refuge from life itself, Dorothea realises that they are now actually living in a story (though, alerted by *Peter Duck*, she should perhaps be told that really she is living in a story within a story).

After Dorothea and Dick have left, Ransome returns to the complex business of negotiating friendships. The Swallows and Amazons hold a Council to decide if the Callums should in fact become part of the expedition; and in spite of their ignorance of adventuring, even Susan admits it would be unkind to leave them out. It is hardly a ringing endorsement.

However, it is the skating on the frozen tarn in Chapter 5 ('Skating and the Alphabet') that goes some way towards settling things. Nancy and Peggy can get along in a clumsy sort of way; John and Susan have done a little skating at school; for Titty and Roger it is the first time. But Dorothea and Dick, with little else to do, have spent every day of the holidays practising at the indoor rink at home and are naturals. Like Ransome at the Old College, they win some respect: how can a polar team do without them?

1. *WH*, p. 40.
2. *WH*, p. 162.

Snow

'Softly, at first, as if it hardly meant it, the snow began to fall': the delicacy of the sentence displays Ransome's ability to create atmosphere in the simplest of ways. 'Softly' evokes not only the quietness – even the secrecy – of falling snow, but also its softness as, later, it will lie on the ground, while 'as if it hardly meant it' describes those first flakes drifting inconsequentially and deceptively from the sky – but it does mean it, and soon the landscape will be altered. It is with the coming of the snow that everything begins to change: 'Dorothea could almost feel Nancy stirring things up and filling the air with adventure.'[1]

The Igloo, until now no more than a derelict stone hut with a corrugated roof, becomes a 'real igloo in which any Eskimo would be pleased to live'.[2] As they eat the hotpot that Susan and Peggy have made, Mrs Blackett, aware of the underlying tensions, arrives to invite Dorothea and Dick to the Eskimo settlement at Beckfoot on the following day. We have met her briefly in *Swallowdale* when her liberal parenting is so criticised by the Great Aunt that she is reduced to tears, leaving the more conventional Mrs Walker, who always defers to her husband, to observe that her carefree approach 'certainly works with yours'.[3] Here Mrs Blackett is a homely figure, short and plump and warm, and, apart from her clear voice, quite unlike her elder daughter. But, an explorer in her youth, she is still game enough, perching on the bench by the fire as the others tuck into their lunch and uttering an endearing 'squeak' when she is taken home on a sledge at the end of the day. However, as well as drawing Dorothea and Dick further into the team of explorers, the point of her appearance is to renew the theme of circularity. She remembers the climbing of the Matterhorn – now Kanchenjunga – celebrated in *Swallowdale*, and how as a child, in the same frozen landscape, she and her friends also had hotpot for lunch. But her hotpot, sent down from Beckfoot, had been left on the ice while they skated and, leaving a clean hole, had sunk to the bottom of the lake.

The snow means that the Lake is going to freeze, making possible a trip to the North Pole across the ice, but the school holidays are coming to an end and the explorers will all be gone before the expedition can set off. Dorothea wishes that it wasn't all going to end so soon. But

1. *WH*, p. 72.
2. *WH*, p. 73.
3. Arthur Ransome, *Swallowdale* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1931). Red Fox edition (London: Random House, 1993), p. 494.

the next day, when they arrive at Beckfoot, she senses that somehow they are not wanted after all. Captain Nancy, leader of the expedition, has gone down with the mumps. There is no point in going ahead with anything now.

But far from being downcast, it is Nancy who realises that mumps is the best thing that could have happened. Each one of them will be in quarantine for at least a month and so will not be allowed to return to school when term starts. Their extended holiday means that when the lake freezes they will be together after all. Although Nancy is now unable to join in the fun, she can still direct operations in spite of her comically bandaged face, and, not surprisingly, she will embellish their polar game with ever new ideas.

The Cragfast Sheep

Some days later, after the clandestine visit to Beckfoot when Nancy is able to semaphore from her bedroom window, the explorers are on their way back from a training run across 'Greenland' that Nancy has ordered. Dick, looking for a buzzard's nest high on a rock face, spots a cragfast sheep trapped on a ledge and too weak to move. While the three older children – who are taking their turn as 'dogs' hauling the supply sledge – battle on, unaware of what is happening behind them, the four younger members of the party go off to help. As Susan remembers, it is reminiscent of the episode in *Swallowdale* when Titty and Roger choose to walk home by themselves and the fog closes in. It is fraught with equal danger.

Dick, the most unlikely hero, takes the initiative: as Dorothea says, when he comes out of his dreams he can be 'more practical than anyone else'.[1] Telling the others to go along the top of the ridge so that they can hold him on a safety rope, he edges along the icy ledge, reasoning to himself (as few ten-year-olds would) that:

> It isn't really harder than sitting on a chair. Scientifically speaking. The only thing that matters is to keep your Centre of Gravity on the right side of the ledge. . . . It'll be perfectly easy.[2]

Ransome builds the tension over five pages as Dick moves precariously towards the sheep. The climax comes when he has to transfer the safety rope to the helpless animal so that it can be lowered into the gully. None of the others can help him now: 'This was something to be

1. *WH*, p. 139.
2. *WH*, p. 140.

settled between him and himself.'[1] Realising that something is amiss, the sledge party returns and John is there to receive the lowered sheep. His acknowledgement of Dick's heroism is characteristically unspoken: 'John said nothing about Dick's knot, but simply untied it, and, when Peggy had taken the sheep, made a new bowline loop at the end of the rope.'[2] Almost without our noticing, Dorothea and Dick, the Callums, become the 'D.'s'. When they return to Dixon's farm, Mr Dixon, whose sheep it is, comments simply: 'there's not many lads would go along that ledge.'[3] That night Mr Dixon and Silas build Dorothea and Dick their own sledge as reward, with the subsequent visit to the blacksmith's forge to craft the sledge's runners allowing the novel the opportunity to celebrate another rural skill.

Not only does the rescuing of the cragfast sheep help to cement Dick's acceptance by the Swallows (except, perhaps by Susan), but it is also the beginning of the strong bond which builds between Dick, the middle-class town boy, and the hitherto silent Mr Dixon whose life is restricted to the farm and the Lake, but who is steeped in kindness and not without imagination. In his own way, Mr Dixon becomes as keen on the expedition to the North Pole as anyone. One day he provides Dick with goose grease for their boots; on another he gives them furs. When Dick decides that the sledge will need a sail to keep up with the others, Mr Dixon finds a larch pole for the mast. He pores over the sketches Dick has made of Nansen's sledge, and between them they plan how the mast will be fixed. Mrs Dixon has never seen her husband like this. The children may not be competing in a race to the 'Pole', but 'he didn't see why the explorers settled at Jackson's should do any better than those lodging with himself'.[4]

Nansen and the *Fram*

Nancy's most gorgeous idea comes when she learns that Captain Flint's houseboat is trapped in the ice and she sends the cabin key to the explorers with the single word 'Fram' attached. *Fram* was the ship in which Fridtjof Nansen, the Norwegian explorer, attempted unsuccessfully to reach the North Pole in 1893-1896 by using the East–West current to drift with the pack ice towards the Pole and then to Greenland and Spitzbergen (both feature in *Winter Holiday*, but as

1. *WH*, p. 146.
2. *WH*, p. 152.
3. *WH*, p. 158.
4. *WH*, p. 164.

training grounds). In his *Autobiography*, Ransome numbers Nansen as one of his heroes and tells of several conversations with him in Latvia in 1921. Nansen recounts his Arctic experiences in *The First Crossing of Greenland* (1890) and *Farthest North* (1898), which are conveniently nestling on the shelves of the houseboat. With Captain Flint away, it is Nancy's plan that the houseboat should become the *Fram* of their own polar expedition, and after some misgivings the explorers leave the Igloo behind and make the ship their base. As well as the further excitements which it affords, the foregrounding of the *Fram* serves as a metaphor to link the children's expedition with the colonial quests and conquests of the Victorian and Edwardian eras.

Days on the *Fram* pass quickly enough as ice encroaches further across the Lake. Dorothea is asked to tell stories, though she always gets it wrong when she tells stories of the sea and brings upon herself an uproar of corrections. Dressing up becomes part of the game: Mr Dixon lets Dorothea and Dick help themselves to sheepskins which are spread on the *Fram*'s bunks and floor to give a more Arctic effect and Silas, the farmhand, provides rabbit skins which are sewn into suitable hats and mittens. On one of the expeditions to the far North they leave a message in a bottle under a cairn of stones, just as in *Swallowdale* they left a message at Kanchenjunga's summit. In Nansen's books they discover pictures of sledges under sail; John finds the remainder of *Swallow*'s broken mast from *Swallowdale* and steps it on the Beckfoot sledge – with catastrophic results when they attempt to come about. Dick's briefest of dispatches to Nancy sums it all up; the *Fram* is ten thousand times better than the Igloo:

Fram : Igloo : : 10,000 : 1[1]

Then, via the doctor who is engaged by his patient as an unwilling messenger, Nancy sends a cryptic picture. It takes the explorers some time to decode the back-to-front semaphore message – 'Who is sleeping in the *Fram*?' – and more time to understand that the question is in fact an instruction: the explorers should be spending their nights afloat as well as their days.[2] Three things happen as a result: first – and uncharacteristically for children who are so morally upright – John, Susan and Peggy agree that without telling the Jacksons, Titty, or Roger, they will decamp secretly from Holly Howe by night. But once on board, John and Susan have second thoughts. What would their mother say? How could they leave the younger ones alone? Without

1. *WH*, p. 202.
2. *WH*, p. 222.

even waiting for the kettle to boil, they start back to Holly Howe, only to meet Titty and Roger who have discovered their absence. It is the first time that we have seen John and Susan abandon their siblings; perhaps the tight-knit family and the childhood idyll are coming to an end.

Secondly, and not wanting to let Nancy down, Peggy suggests the next morning that Dorothea and Dick should sleep on the *Fram* instead. This, it seems, is real acceptance. 'You're part of the expedition. Nancy said so,' says Peggy. Dorothea 'had never hoped for such an honour'.[1] But John and Susan, somehow feeling usurped, are hardly enthusiastic at the prospect. Susan says unkindly: 'Look here, Dorothea. . . . But how are you going to manage about the Primus?'[2] And when Titty and Roger ask to stay with the D.'s, her frustration and resentment is clear: 'No, you can't. . . . It's because of you that we can't either.'[3] Nancy, though, is astonished and delighted at the outcome. Dorothea and Dick are not just townies to be let into the game out of politeness. There is more to them after all:

> But those two town children from Dixon's Farm, sleeping in the houseboat by themselves. Good for the D.'s. She had not thought they had it in them. Well done, Dick and Dorothea![4]

Thirdly, and before Dorothea and Dick have had time to have tea by themselves on the *Fram*, Captain Flint returns to his houseboat, lured by the weather and the prospect of skating on the Lake. It leads to a sparkling comic encounter with Dorothea and Dick who are settling themselves in for their night aboard (Dorothea is convinced Captain Flint is a Dutchman with a case full of tulip bulbs and she is already planning a new story of *Skates and Tulips*). From here on Captain Flint is in league with Nancy in planning the final assault on the 'North Pole', leading some critics to complain that his 'native' interference detracts from the child-centred game.

It is Nancy hoisting a flag at Beckfoot to announce the end of her illness that begins one of the most dramatic episodes of all the *Swallows and Amazons* novels. Dick's meticulous notes, made nearly a month before and forgotten by Nancy, show that the flag is a signal to 'Start for Pole'. Believing that they have somehow been left behind, Dorothea and Dick hurriedly load up their sledge and skate off on their journey northwards.

1. *WH*, p. 249.
2. *WH*, p. 251.
3. *WH*, p. 251.
4. *WH*, p. 262.

They hardly notice the blizzard rushing up behind them, hardly notice the crowds of merrymakers turning and leaving the ice. Or if they do notice, they do not understand the danger that awaits. In fact, Dick is delighted that there will now be a wind and hoists sail on the sledge; they scramble aboard and race towards their goal. There are moments here that prefigure the storm in *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*: 'Dick clung on, blind but happy.' Dorothea 'knew that she was afraid' and, as Susan will do that summer in *Goblin*, shakes Dick's shoulder: '"Let's stop!" she cried. "Now! At once!"'[1] But Dick is adamant: 'We can't go back. . . . We can't help coming somewhere if we go on.'[2] Then the sledge capsizes and the mast breaks. Roping himself to Dorothea and the sledge, Dick disappears into the storm to search for civilisation and safety, and glimpses a house through the gloom. It turns out to be no more than a summer house shut up for the winter, but by happy chance they have managed to sail to the top of the Lake and this is the 'Pole' itself. Their relief is tempered by the realisation that the others haven't arrived. Dorothea wants even more to go back, but Dick knows it would make matters worse. Life, Dorothea realises, isn't as easy as fiction: 'It was not like one of her own stories, in which it was easy to twist things another way or go back a page or two and start again if anything had gone badly.'[3] It is a nice irony that life here is itself a fiction and Dorothea is in the safe hands of the author.

Meanwhile, the 'Council' has met as planned in the *Fram*, with no one understanding why the D.'s have set off a day early. But the perils are obvious and what is now the Relief Expedition sets off in pursuit. Susan, who underneath is still resentful of Dorothea and Dick and scornful of the urban life that they represent, cannot contain her anger:

> 'If only they had any sense,' said Susan. 'But they haven't got any, not that sort. People oughtn't to be allowed to be brought up in towns.'[4]

John, too, though sympathetic, fears for the lost D.'s:

> He thought of Dorothea, a little town girl, not tough like themselves, out all day in that blinding storm. He thought of Dick, who was full of good ideas but was nearly always thinking of the wrong one.[5]

1. *WH*, p. 343.
2. *WH*, p. 344.
3. *WH*, p. 378.
4. *WH*, p. 362.
5. *WH*, p. 367.

Fortunately, Ransome, like Dorothea, knows that in fiction it is easy to put things right if anything is going badly, and one by one the cast gathers at the North Pole: Nancy, who has seen Dick's Morse code signalling with the lantern; the Relief Expedition, who at first silently blame Dorothea and Dick for all the trouble, and 'have very little to say to the D.'s',[1] but after Nancy explains and recounts their epic voyage through the blizzard seem finally to accept that 'Dick was more than a mere astronomer';[2] and Captain Flint, who, having picked up Nancy's scribbled North Pole message and raced round standing down the search parties he has sent out, has arrived with Mrs Blackett while the children are sunk in exhausted sleep. It is all 'dreadful but splendid', thinks Dorothea.[3] Then as she begins to turn the night's excitements into yet another gruesome story within a story, she is brought back to reality by Mrs Blackett reminding them of school and asking for two lumps of sugar in her tea. Everything has worked out after all.

Those who complain about Captain Flint's involvement with Nancy in these final chapters probably miss the point. It may be that he is not being wholly truthful when he claims to have been 'nothing but a beast of burden' organising the welcoming supplies at the North Pole, but if he has tried to curb Nancy's wilder ambitions, the Swallows, Amazons and D.'s have nevertheless contrived to escape from what might have been a dull 'native' game. Susan, already a 'native' in spite of her young age, worries that they may all be too tired to do things properly on the following day, but Nancy joyously puts her right:

> 'That's the best of it. Now you're here there's no need to do it again. We've done it. We've all of us done it. This is miles better than anything we planned. . . . Sailing to the Pole in a gale of wind and a snow-storm.'[4]

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In spite of its tenuous plot, *Winter Holiday* is arguably the most accomplished of Ransome's Lake novels. After the pirate games of *Swallows and Amazons* and *Swallowdale*, and the darker pirate fantasy of *Peter Duck*, the polar expedition offers a welcome new direction. The crisp winter setting is evoked by the lightest of touches in a multitude of finely judged descriptions. There is a rich seam of humour mined

1. *WH*, p. 385.
2. *WH*, p. 386.
3. *WH*, p. 394.
4. *WH*, p. 386.

from Nancy's joyful manipulation of the whole proceedings, and from Peggy's not always successful attempts to shiver her timbers and barbecue billygoats when for the only time in the series she is allowed to step just a little out from the shadow of her irrepressible sister. The characters of Mr and Mrs Dixon are sketched in more firmly, while the Swallows – eighteen months older than when we first met them – do not quite enjoy the too-good-to-be-true cohesion that we have seen before. The introduction of Dorothea and Dick is skilfully handled: neither as wild as the Amazons, nor as upright and self-confident as the Swallows, they depend heavily on each other but are forced to look outwards and earn the respect and friendship of their peers and of the series reader. Susan in particular doesn't make it easy for them, and the tensions which the novel explores reveal all the members of the cast as rounder and more complex figures than we have seen before. For me, though, Dick and Dorothea's hurtling through the blizzard, scared and courageous, is one of the high points of the series, only surpassed by Titty's dowsing (in *Pigeon Post*) and the Swallows' unforgettable battle with the North Sea storm the following summer.