

Our Family's *Swallows and Amazons* Story

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*Where it all began ...*¹

Our family's *Swallows and Amazons* story began, fittingly, at Blackwell's Bookshop in Broad Street, Oxford. This was in July 2008 when I was co-teaching an 'Oxford Abroad' music course with fellow faculty and students from West Chester University of Pennsylvania. We were in residence at Lincoln College for ten days and, in off hours, students and faculty dispersed to the winds pursuing their interests. Mine was books. Specifically children's books. Reading to my children – Jack, then 8, and Lucy, then 4 – was already my great pleasure, and so I went into Blackwell's looking for more material.

I explained my situation to the clerk, who pointed to a stack of books on a table and asked: 'Have you tried *Swallows and Amazons*?'

'Swallows and *what*?' I asked.

Readers of *Mixed Moss* may find it hard to believe that anyone, even an American, should be ignorant of the Twelve. The truth of the matter is that the books simply are not well known here (though I subsequently learned that there is an American branch of the Arthur Ransome Society: where *have* I been?!). Less defensible is that an American *bibliophile*, especially one claiming an interest in children's books, should not know of them. Shame and mortification were yet for the future, however: at the moment, happily ignorant, I bent over the table and grew immediately absorbed. Roger zigzagging up and down the field at Holly Howe enchanted me instantly, and when I saw Ransome's delightful pen

¹ Blackwell's Bookshop and White Horse, Broad Street Oxford, September 1977 - Blackwell's - Wikipedia originally posted to Flickr by Rosewoman at <https://flickr.com/photos/45873442@N04/8440708464>.

and ink drawings of camping, sailing and exploring, I knew I had stumbled on something tremendous. The outdoors and love of the natural world are, with books, central to who I am, and here was everything I valued most brought together in a single package.

I bought the first book of the series and returned home to Pennsylvania. My son Jack and I started in on it almost immediately, and my wonder at the beauty of Ransome's story grew and grew the more we read. Jack was enthusiastic, too, and by Spring 2009 we were embarked on *Swallowdale*, enchanted by the well-ordered camp and secret cave, the hiking expedition and this mysterious figment of the imagination – or was it? – called Peter Duck. By Christmas, Peter's own book, *Peter Duck*, showed up in Jack's stocking, and we were off to the Caribbean, rooting against Black Jake and slyly enjoying Peter Duck's imperfect tolerance of the garrulous Walker clan. The nautical terminology and the window onto the sea-going life fascinated us too. Jack, turning 10, asked if he could have his next birthday party on a ship like the *Wild Cat*; while, for me, talk of boats and 'coming about' stirred memories of sailing at school that I had almost forgotten. With astonishing speed, I revived my old sailing enthusiasm, took to quoting Walker maxims ('Sail's the thing') and learned a new nature skill – that of watching for a fair breeze. General sail-talk seemed to bring like-minded sailors out of the woodwork, too, and I was soon borrowing my dentist's Sunfish for outings at the nearby State Park on the windiest days of the year (it's no fun if you don't capsize, you know).

By the time we reached *Winter Holiday*, which Jack got in lieu of a shipboard party at his March 2010 birthday, Lucy (now 6) was beginning to get in on the act. We actually waited until December to start the book, ostensibly because the story takes place in wintertime. But also because we – or, more precisely, I – wanted to savor the books. Their specialness was by this point all too clear, and it seemed important not to charge through them greedily but rather intersperse them with other tales and so cherish them all the more. Thus the first three books took turns with *Aesop's Fables*, *The BFG*, the usual Stevenson classics, *The Princess and the Goblin* and more, including flying visits with Andrew Lang's Fairy Books and Sherlock Holmes, the entire corpus of which took Jack and me four years to complete. (Though I told myself I wouldn't, I later reread most of Holmes to Lucy.)

Great as these were, though, it was always with renewed anticipation that we picked up the next *Swallows and Amazons* novel, and *Winter Holiday* did not disappoint. 'It's the best of the lot, you know!' a fellow musicologist said to me sometime later in a college dorm room in Iowa, where loose talk at a British music conference had uncovered another comrade in arms. Lucy was listening in now, as noted, and the three of us thrilled to accounts of unexpected school holidays, ice sailing and rescue operations amidst blizzard conditions. Amazingly, *Coot Club*, *Pigeon Post* and *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* – now intermingling with *The Three Musketeers*, Eva Ibbotson and various *Little House on the Prairie* books – kept up the excitement.

'How does Ransome do it?' I kept on asking myself. 'How does he sustain the excitement and the *interest* from book to book?' One way, of course, is through variety in the form of the new characters constantly introduced (the D's, Tom Dudgeon, Jim Brading) and the refreshing remove of the action in some books to the Norfolk Broads. The more critical factor, I decided, is the sheer fertility of the author's imagination: the interaction and development of clearly outlined and distinct personalities; the ingeniousness of the plots (themselves wholly woven into and dependent on those personalities); above all, the narrative skill and masterful prose with which events are made to unfold. That the excitement itself often stems from the tensions created by Nature – the rising tide that unexpectedly releases the anchor and pushes the boat out to sea, the sudden fog or blizzard that inhibits the essential communication, the topography that separates the hurrying actors until they suddenly collide – speaks to

Ransome's larger point about our necessary subjection to forces greater than us. The sheer inexorability of those forces, and the absolute requirement that they be adapted to, turns these characters into something more than children, their innocent pursuits into something heroic and universal. Riding such waves as these, and with life lessons hanging in the balance, the three of us could hardly help feeling on the edge of our seats.

Or perhaps I should say the four of us. My wife, Mary, also listened in. How could she not, since we were reading at almost every possible moment? Not merely at bedtime or on the driveway waiting for the school bus in the morning, where I was likely to be alone with the kids; but also in the kitchen when they got home from school, in the playroom while they played with Legos or drew pictures (or, once, rode their toy tricycles about), in the car on the way to Meeting on Sundays and on long trips to visit family – spaces where Mary was also present. What she liked best about the books was that they present a world in which boys *and girls* are outdoors, enjoying nature in equal measure. This was how she was brought up, and indeed it was a shared love of mountains and lakes that helped bring us together as a couple. When we started raising a family, naturally we continued our (separate) childhood traditions of summer vacations in New England, annually climbing our own Kanchenjungas and renting a cabin on *our* own 'personal' lake. Like Ransome, we 'adored the place', dipping our hands in the water when we arrived and, with only slight exaggeration, departing 'half drowned in tears'. (From the 'Author's Note' that prefaces the books.) Needless to say, we read a number of the novels during these vacations, and the close parallels between Mirror Lake and the Lake District only added to their spell.

Still, it must be admitted that my own enthusiasm for the books sometimes outstripped my family's. An Anglophile and student of twentieth-century British music and culture who has climbed Scafell Peak and birded – though unfortunately not boated – on the Broads, I was *born* to read these books! (That's how I feel about it anyway.) But endless propagandizing can be hard to take, especially when it comes in the form of a parent sitting down unbidden in your midst while you're doing something else and who then commences to read aloud. I did this constantly, without a thought, and while it's fair to say I did so with *whatever* book we were on – reading aloud on a hike, *while actually walking*, is another effective delivery system, I discovered – my pressure campaign with *Swallows and Amazons* reached perhaps unacceptable levels. This was especially the case as the children got older. At one point, Mary pointed with some sternness to the psychological dangers of parental coercion, so that I learned to ask, half-politely, 'Do you mind?' before picking up where we left off. I even trained myself, though imperfectly, to mask my disappointment when Jack or Lucy said 'No', which they occasionally did. As if it wasn't already clear exactly *who* these books and these 'reading parties' were for, I received *The Big Six* in my stocking at Christmas 2012.

The idea was Lucy's. By this point, Jack (now 12) was asserting his independence by paying intermittent attention to the books; he had his own reading agenda, besides, with huge tomes by Robert Jordan and J.K. Rowling (yes, *Harry Potter*) to get through, and a brief but intense flirtation with Biggles to overcome. My mistake with him was discovering *Swallows and Amazons* too late. But Lucy was six when she started listening in on *Winter Holiday*, and by the time we finished *Pigeon Post* she was asking to go back and read the first three books – something her very reluctant father somehow found it in himself to do. Naturally, I marveled at the books all over again as we read them in quick succession, for once (*rereading* doesn't count as gluttony). Indeed, my single favorite moment of the entire journey was probably reexperiencing with Lucy the end of Book 1 of *Peter Duck*, where the *Wild Cat* gives the *Viper* the slip. This was at Mary's parents' house where, removing ourselves to the kitchen during a family gathering, Lucy and I reveled in Uncle Jim's inspired ruse of feinting towards Funchal Harbor (Madeira)

before swerving under cover of the falling night towards open ocean and safety. The escape is so satisfying, the writing so vivid, the canvas so 'global' – in my mind's eye I could see the entire Atlantic basin as if from outer space – that it borders on the transcendental. There was also an unsuspected third listener in the room whose appreciation of the passage doubtless intensified my own. 'Wow!' my sister-in-law Catherine said. 'That's good writing.' Catherine would know, as a professional writer and experienced sailor herself. More on her later: she comes into this story too.

So I was reading the books principally to Lucy now. Of course, she was reading on her own, too – *Harry Potter*, Rick Riordan, the *Oz* series, etc. – but she still delighted in the books as much as Jack had, approaching me to read and even dropping other activities she enjoyed, like playing the piano, when things simply got too exciting. She was as happy as I was the morning the bus never came, and we ended up reading *Secret Water* on the driveway for a whole extra hour (I *believe* it wasn't just because she got to miss some school). During our family trip to England in 2013, she was equally eager to examine the *Swallows and Amazons* editions at Foyle's, and later again at a Waterstone's, where we judged the illustrations critically (Ransome's own remain the best) and looked for our favorite passages. In Oxford, I showed everybody Blackwell's, where it all began, and where the clerk – noble profession! – drew our attention to Masefield's wonderfully strange *Box of Delights* that we later much enjoyed. Lucy also engaged with the books creatively. Like Titty, she pronounced herself an 'A.B.' ('Able-Bodied Seaman') when she went sailing with me. On another occasion, she mischievously affixed the label 'A.P.' ('Aged Parent') to Mary's and my water bottles as we readied for a hike. But then, projecting the books onto our own lives was a family affair. For a time, every annoyingly noisy and overboisterous person was for us – even the kindly Mary – a 'Hullabaloo,' while the weeds in Mirror Lake shallows did indeed seem to resemble 'octopuses' that were best avoided. Roger (my favorite character) is forever identified, in my mind, with a neighborhood boy who simply looked the part. And to this day, Jack and Lucy know that real scholarship goes on at Cambridge, not Oxford, and that one goes to the latter only to enjoy a good breakfast.

The fact that Jack, like Lucy, continued to absorb these central truths, some of them imparted by the later books, goes to show that he had not entirely disappeared from the scene. He likewise sailed with me (also occasionally with his friends); and of course we continued reading other books together (*Frankenstein* and *Billy Budd* were memorable, and *he* actually read J.K. Jerome's sublimely stupid *Three Men in a Boat* out loud *to me* when I was ill). In the case of *Swallows and Amazons*, he, like Mary, listened in when he happened to be in the room or when it got exciting. When Dick 'sprung the trap' and caught George Owdon red-handed with his flash camera in *The Big Six*, Jack was there. (That night he could be seen lying in bed next to Lucy and me as we finished the book. A day or two later, I reread the last few chapters to Mary, who had been away.) When Missee Lee unexpectedly and dramatically emerged on deck to steer the *Shining Moon* through the dangerous narrows – another favorite moment – he was there, too. And generally speaking, this was the pattern for the last few books: Lucy hearing every word, Mary a good bit, with Jack catching the exciting bits. Mary thought *Picts and Martyrs*, which we read at Mirror Lake in summer 2013, 'slightly less adventurous,' but Lucy and I disagreed and loved it as much as ever. (Though this *is* when she told me *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea* was her 'favorite'.) My journal entry after that holiday reads: 'Only one more *S&A* to go – I'll be sad when it's over.' That may be why we waited an entire year before undertaking *Great Northern?*, also at Mirror Lake. I'm sorry to say that this last encounter was somewhat anti-climactic, as the knowing end of any wonderful and protracted undertaking is bound to be. The book certainly had its moments, though, and we enjoyed reading it on hikes and at our usual haunts in town, *our* Rio, notably at the marina and at the low bridge, where I never tire of looking down on the boats as they pass. My journal entry – 'Last *S&A*. Boo Hoo!' – says it all.

But, of course, as all *Swallows and Amazons* enthusiasts know, *Great Northern?* isn't quite the end. Even so, we didn't engage with the unfinished *Coots in the North* for a while. It took us five months to get through the entire *The Count of Monte Cristo* (a thrilling read which Lucy matter-of-factly placed 'below' *Swallows and Amazons*) and further delay occurred when a regrettable fit of parsimony seized me over a pricey copy discovered in a second-hand bookshop. Our local library finally delivered the book in March 2017. It's a shame Ransome didn't live to complete it as the story – the stowaways in the lorry, particularly – offered up the usual ingenuity, and we can be sure he would have come up with a convincing denouement. As it was, Lucy and I enjoyed the other stories assembled by Hugh Brogan, the editor, that revealed aspects of the author we didn't know.

Nor did it end with *Coots in the North*. My proselytizing outside the immediate family began early. I told everyone I knew, and even those I didn't, about the books. Wide canvassing uncovered like-minded enthusiasts in all kinds of places – among professional colleagues (the musicologist in Iowa, as noted), complete strangers (the father of one of Lucy's school friends), mild acquaintances (the younger brother of a childhood chum), even among close friends I had known for years. The birder who showed me the Broads was one (Rachel took me there *before* I knew the books). My dear mentor of many years, the English musicologist and librarian Oliver Neighbour, was another. 'Tim' loved the books when he was young – he was of the age to read them as they came out, for a time at least – and it meant so much to me to forge with him this added, special bond. When he met my family in London in 2013, we shared *Swallows and Amazons* stories all around; at parting, he expressed mock regret that our travel plans were taking us to Oxford, not 'Cambridge'.

My efforts also made for new converts. I gave presentations and readings at our Quaker Meeting, as part of the 'adult education' program. For *Coot Club*, I showed slides of the River Bure and read the passage where Tom casts off the Hullabaloo and takes refuge on the *Teasel* with the redoubtable Mrs. Barrable. Her 'Mind my paint!', delivered with hardened eye, is possibly my favorite line in all the books. The frantic effort to prevent the *Goblin* from running out with the tide was the subject of my second talk, on *We Didn't Mean to Go to Sea*. One Friend who was there told me that the vividness of Ransome's prose made him literally *see* the chain flying out of the locker and *feel* John's panic to stop it. Another Friend started in on the books directly afterwards: she eventually read four of them and we had such fun talking about them together (*Swallowdale* was her favorite). By this point, I was regularly giving the books to friends and colleagues as gifts. Many of them – notably the sailors! – read and enjoyed them, but not all. Some with children tried, but reading them aloud just didn't take off. Probably they didn't try hard enough: a little parental coercion might have helped. Though I *was* quite astonished when another friend – an outdoorsman, Anglophile and author of children's books no less – told me he put down the first book, finding it not to be 'his cup of tea'. I now communicate with him through a mask of civility. (I jest, a little.) The truth of the matter is that it's personal. The books become part of you and the desire to stir in others what you feel yourself is fraught with dangers and potential disappointments. Better to keep expectations well tamped down or, perhaps, not even to have tried.

Nevertheless, the old desire keeps bubbling up. In July 2019, I left two copies of *Swallows and Amazons* on the mantlepiece of the cabin on Mirror Lake, one each for Mary's two brothers and their families. Now that they have small children, Paul and Danny return annually to the lake where they grew up – at this point, we take turns renting the cabin – and it seemed worth a shot. After all, Danny's wife Catherine had overheard and liked *Peter Duck*, and as someone who spent six weeks in college cruising the Caribbean on a sailing yacht and who knows good nautical writing when she sees it (Patrick O'Brien is a favorite author), she seemed possibly susceptible. Indeed, earlier that summer, when her Maryland

church choir coincidentally had a week's residency at Norwich Cathedral, Catherine actually took *Coot Club* with her and bicycled around the Norfolk countryside, taking some of the same routes as Tom and the D's and going near the villages mentioned in the story. Sometime later, she and Danny started reading the books to their children, Riley and John, followed in summer 2020 by Paul and Jenny reading to *their* children, Emily and Sam. How delightful it's been to discuss characters and plots with all of them over the past year or more! Titty is the universal favorite, the one who 'really develops' as Danny puts it, while Emily and Paul think Ransome is at his best 'when nothing happens', as in *Swallowdale*. They especially love the poetic attention to everyday things. Like ours, the two families have instinctively intertwined the books with many others – Jeanne Birdsall, Eva Ibbotson again, *Harry Potter* – and are taking their time about it. (Riley, in particular, likes having them reread to her.) Both are currently somewhere in the middle of the series. And, wonderful to relate, Catherine and Danny recently lent their copy of the first book to friends with children who live down the street. *Swallows and Amazons* Forever!

Over the years, I've encountered objections to the books on the grounds of what today we might call 'white privilege'. For some readers, these visibly upper-middle-class children, with their globe-trotting uncles, formidable great aunts, and Empire-sustaining fathers, who enjoy endless summer holidays and who befriend (or in the case of George Owdon, bedevil) their working-class neighbors, are a little hard to take. The world they inhabit was undoubtedly different from today's, and I can understand those who blanch at John's dress rehearsals of Edwardian manliness or Susan's preoccupation with domestic order. I admit that my intense Anglophilia, and the fact that my own scholarship focuses on this very period and class of people, preserves me from getting hung up on any of this, even the damaging ethnic stereotypes of *Missee Lee*. Perhaps, lacking this background (or maybe just an outsized enthusiasm for adventures set amidst mountains, lakes and rivers), the friends and families I complain about who didn't take to the books *were* bothered by these things: it might even be *why* they put them down. I have to acknowledge the logic of their objections, and I do. Still, I reject the inverse conclusion, that the Walker and Blackett children be *denied* their outdoor experiences simply because of their social background. Affluence undoubtedly facilitates their adventures, but it's not like they have a monopoly on them. Indeed, one of the points of the books, I think, is that it's their exposure to the farmers, fishermen, charcoal burners and river rats – in short, the people who *really* know the outdoor life – that strengthens them as individuals by granting them an unusual understanding into the lives of others. It's true that Ransome, in drawing on childhood memories, has to some extent nostalgized these figures. But it does not follow from this that he has patronized them. The genuine admiration and respect he feels for them as people and individuals, possessed of specialized knowledge and decisive skills uniquely consequential to a rural way of life, is unmistakable.

For, in the end, that's what I love most about these books: their focus on the outdoor life as essential to our being. That and Ransome's unerringly skillful writing – storytelling so masterful that it 'artlessly' frames this fundamental theme for our steady contemplation. The result, of course, is that we end up loving the natural world more than ever, so that the cycle gloriously perpetuates itself. Surely, this is one reason why the books continue to live today, admitting of multiple rereadings by old fans while constantly attracting new admirers. But as my family discovered, the excellence of the storytelling is also key for another reason: that it effortlessly invites reading aloud. What better way to spend delightful hours together in a shared experience – one that itself can bond you together for life! – while also handing down a message of the first importance to the next generation? For all these reasons and more, I consider the day in 2008 that I walked into Blackwell's a lucky day, and the years-long reading of *Swallows and Amazons* to my wife and children that followed one of the great events of my life.