

The Littlest Ship
ANDREW JOYNES

It was a sparkling, blowsy, kiss-me-quick day beside the seaside. The flotilla of Little Ships was coming back to Ramsgate from their anniversary visit to Dunkirk. There was an air of excitement among the crowds lining the harbour wall as the first of the veteran boats was spotted far out on the sunlit water.

A woman in eighteenth-century costume stood beside the lighthouse. She reminded me of Gillray's cartoon of Emma Hamilton: of generous proportions, wearing a flimsy muslin dress with red, white and blue ribbons sewn into the hem, and sporting a wide bonnet with the same patriotic colours across the turned-up brim. As each of the boats came through the harbour entrance, she braced herself like an athlete preparing to throw the hammer, and then swung an enormous football rattle round in front of her. Delighted by the staccato noise, the crews in the Little Ships laughed and waved up at her.

British Legion veterans solemnly lowered banners to salute the return of each boat. Like the lady in the patriotic dress, these elderly men with their berets and white gauntlets had been standing by the lighthouse for hours. As one of the Dunkirk vessels – a fire-fighting barge from the Thames docks – loosed off its hoses in a multiple spray that arced high into the air, the sergeant in charge of the Legion squad shouted, 'Don't look at it, boys! It'll make you want to go!'

The crowds cheered, the sun shone, the Sea Cadet band played, and flags waved. This was what celebration of Operation Dynamo – the so-called 'Miracle of Dunkirk' – meant decades after the event. On that anniversary day, I sensed the light-hearted striking of a defiant pose against an historical backdrop which, like a harbour wall, is lapped by tides of popular memory.

When Paul Gallico's story *The Snow Goose* was first published in the American *Saturday Evening Post* in the autumn of 1940, there was nothing about Britain's circumstances to lighten the hearts of Americans like himself who had travelled in Europe, seen Nazism at close hand and learned to detest it. America had not yet joined the war, and in the summer a few months before, over 300,000 British and Allied troops had been rescued from the beaches and shallows of Dunkirk, with trawlers, motor-boats, yachts and launches – the so-called 'Little Ships' – playing a key part in the rescue. Most of the exhausted soldiers were taken to ports like Ramsgate and disembarked along the harbour walls. *Perfugium Miseris* is the motto carved into the granite of the lighthouse at the harbour entrance: 'Safety for the Storm-tossed'.

Gallico made his name as a sports reporter for the *New York Daily News* in the 1920s, and once wrote about being knocked out by the heavyweight boxing champion Jack Dempsey. Fearless in search of a story, he had offered himself as a sparring partner and, confident that his New York readership would understand the literary references, he compared Dempsey to David, Siegfried and Roland.

But Gallico always wanted to write fiction, what he later called 'great' stories. In 1936, disillusioned at what he saw as the end of an heroic age of American sport, he moved to England and then travelled through Europe. His father was an Italian composer, and his mother was Austrian, and he felt his family background represented the cultural dignity of

Europe that was threatened by fascism. Fiction might be a means of reasserting that dignity. ‘It is a fact,’ he wrote, ‘startling perhaps in its implications, that fiction has far greater propaganda value, and gains far more credence among readers, than actuality.’

He realized that a story linked to the Dunkirk evacuation – however tenuously – was the ‘great’ story he had been searching for. ‘Nothing that has happened in the war has captured my imagination as much as the evacuation of Dunkirk.’

And so he wrote *The Snow Goose*. It was described as a novella, but it is in fact a short story which takes no more than half an hour to read. The Dunkirk scenes, which come at the end, take up only a few pages. The setting for most of the story is what Gallico called ‘one of the last of the wild places of England’, a stretch of marshland on the Essex coast at the mouth of the Thames estuary where it opens to meet the wide horizons of the North Sea.

Following his move from New York Gallico travelled through England and became fascinated by the historical layers of the different English regions, particularly those along the east coast where invading Germanic tribes – Angles, Saxons, Jutes – settled after the Romans left. In *The Snow Goose* Gallico delights in the ancient customs of the Essex coast, relishing Saxon names like that of the hamlet of Wickældroth, and Frith, the name of the young girl who is one of the three central characters of his story.

The other human character is Philip Rhyader, a wildlife artist and recluse who lives in a deserted lighthouse far out on the Great Marsh. He is disabled, with a twisted spine and a malformed arm, and he both shuns and is shunned by the few people who find their way on to the mudflats – wildfowlers, mostly, who resent his attempts to protect the flocks of over-wintering birds that settle around his home.

The third central presence in the story is one of those wild birds – the Snow Goose, a rare incomer from Canada. It is a beautiful creature – purest white with black wing-tips – which has been blown off course by an Arctic storm, whirled across the Atlantic and then wounded by a hunter’s gun on the edge of the marsh. Barely alive, it is found by the young girl Frith, who brings it to Rhyader in the hope that it will be healed by this malformed man who, despite his frightening appearance, always shows kindness to wild creatures.

The bird is indeed healed and becomes the pretext for Frith to make return visits to the lighthouse. This distinctive creature, its plumage gleaming like ice among the drab colours of the marshland, is the focus of a child’s wonder. Over the years, as the child becomes a woman, as the Snow Goose departs each spring on migration with the Pink-Footed Geese with which it now associates – and then faithfully returns in the autumn – it becomes a symbol of the growing relationship between Rhyader and Frith. Then one year it does not depart on migration but stays. ‘This is her home now,’ says Rhyader, ‘of her own free will.’

At this point the rhythm of the story changes, becoming urgent and impressionistic. One day Frith comes to the lighthouse and finds Rhyader stowing provisions in his sailing dinghy: he is going to sail to Dunkirk to help with the evacuation. ‘Men are huddled on the beaches like hunted birds, Frith, like the wounded and hunted birds we used to find and bring to sanctuary . . .’ As he sets off on his journey, the Snow Goose follows, flying above him in slow, wide circles. ‘White sail and white bird were visible for a long time . . .’

Now the story takes on the quality of myth. The reader learns about Rhyader's exploits at Dunkirk – and about the Snow Goose hovering above him as he hauls men into the dinghy to carry them from the beaches to the waiting Royal Navy ships – by overhearing a conversation in a pub, where a couple of Cockney soldiers are swapping stories.

‘A goose, a bloomin’ goose, so ’elp me. It come flyin’ down out of the muck an’ stink an’ smoke of Dunkirk. It was white, wiv black on its wings, an’ it circles us like a bloomin’ dive bomber. And then around a bend ’e comes in a bloody little sailboat, sailing along as cool as you please . . .’

And so the reader eavesdrops as the soldiers drink their watery wartime beer and tell how Rhyader ferried six or seven of them at a time out to the waiting ships, his good hand on the tiller and the rope of the main sheets clasped between his teeth. ‘An’ over’ead all the time, around and around, flies the ruddy goose . . .’

Then, in a cinematic fade, we are in the company of two naval officers in a Pall Mall club, drinking pink gins and discussing the legend of a white bird flying over the lines of men at the sea's edge. One of them tells how, returning from Dunkirk, his crew sighted the wreckage of a dinghy which had been machine-gunned from the air, with a body half-submerged beside it. On the thwarts was a white bird with black pinions. At that point his ship turns to avoid a German mine, which explodes, destroying the wreckage. When the turmoil of seawater subsides, the white bird is seen flying towards the Essex coast. The Snow Goose is returning to Frith as Rhyader's emissary, to bid her farewell.

Gallico's novella is of course intensely sentimental. Eyebrows were raised in the New York literary world when the eminent publishing house of Alfred Knopf took the story and published it in 1941 (it was published in Britain the same year, and an English critic later adapted an Oscar Wilde quip to write that ‘one must have a heart of stone to read *The Snow Goose* without laughing . . .’). And yet in writing a story of Dunkirk in the form of fanciful myth – and in writing it at the darkest of times when London was being bombed and before America had come into the war – Gallico caught the essence of Dunkirk as a turning-point for public resolve.

As I watched the flotilla of Little Ships returning to Ramsgate from their anniversary visit, I thought what an odd assortment they were. There were gentlemen's cruising launches, with brass fittings, teak decks and mahogany hulls. Names like *Sundowner* and *Lazy Days* evoked thoughts of sunlit afternoons upriver from Henley. There were seaside pleasure boats, too, whose names – *New Britannic*, *Miss Margate* – contained memories of candy floss and tea on the sands and trips round the bay. In the harbour there was a paddle-steamer, the *Medway Queen*, whose chunking rhythms would have been heard from Tower Bridge to the North Foreland every day of a pre-war summer, bringing East End trippers to the seaside towns of Essex and Kent.

Even today the idea that these lovely vessels, with their evocative names, had to face the full armoury of Blitzkrieg is incongruous and disturbing – *Sundowner* strafed, *Miss Margate* machine-gunned, *Medway Queen* dive-bombed. Inevitably the public response was outrage: ‘They can't do that. It's not right!’ And so the British people turned instinctively to their new leader Churchill and asked, ‘What must we do?’

It is the incongruity of the Dunkirk story – the mismatch between lyricism and mechanized warfare – which Gallico manages to capture in his ‘great’ story. A rescue mission undertaken by an outcast, a perilous journey across the sea, a snow-white bird flying above lines of exhausted men, the bird’s departure as a spiritual messenger. These are the elements of myth: recounted tales of heroic deeds. And, as Paul Gallico intended, the response of those Americans who first read his fictional account of an historic event in the *Saturday Evening Post* in the autumn of 1940 was overwhelming: ‘We must do what we can . . .’

Paul Gallico’s *The Snow Goose* (1941) is available in a paperback edition, combined with *The Small Miracle*, from Penguin: 80pp • £4.99 • ISBN 9780140299526.

ANDREW JOYNES lives in Ramsgate. His earliest landscape memories are of the Kent shore of the Thames, across the estuary from the marshes of Essex. There the twin towers of the ruined Saxon church of Reculver are silhouetted like Rhyader’s lighthouse, and the skeins of geese are like the smoke of bonfires in the winter sky.