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Akaroa Lighthouse
New Zealand's Beacon of Refuge

By Elinor DeWire

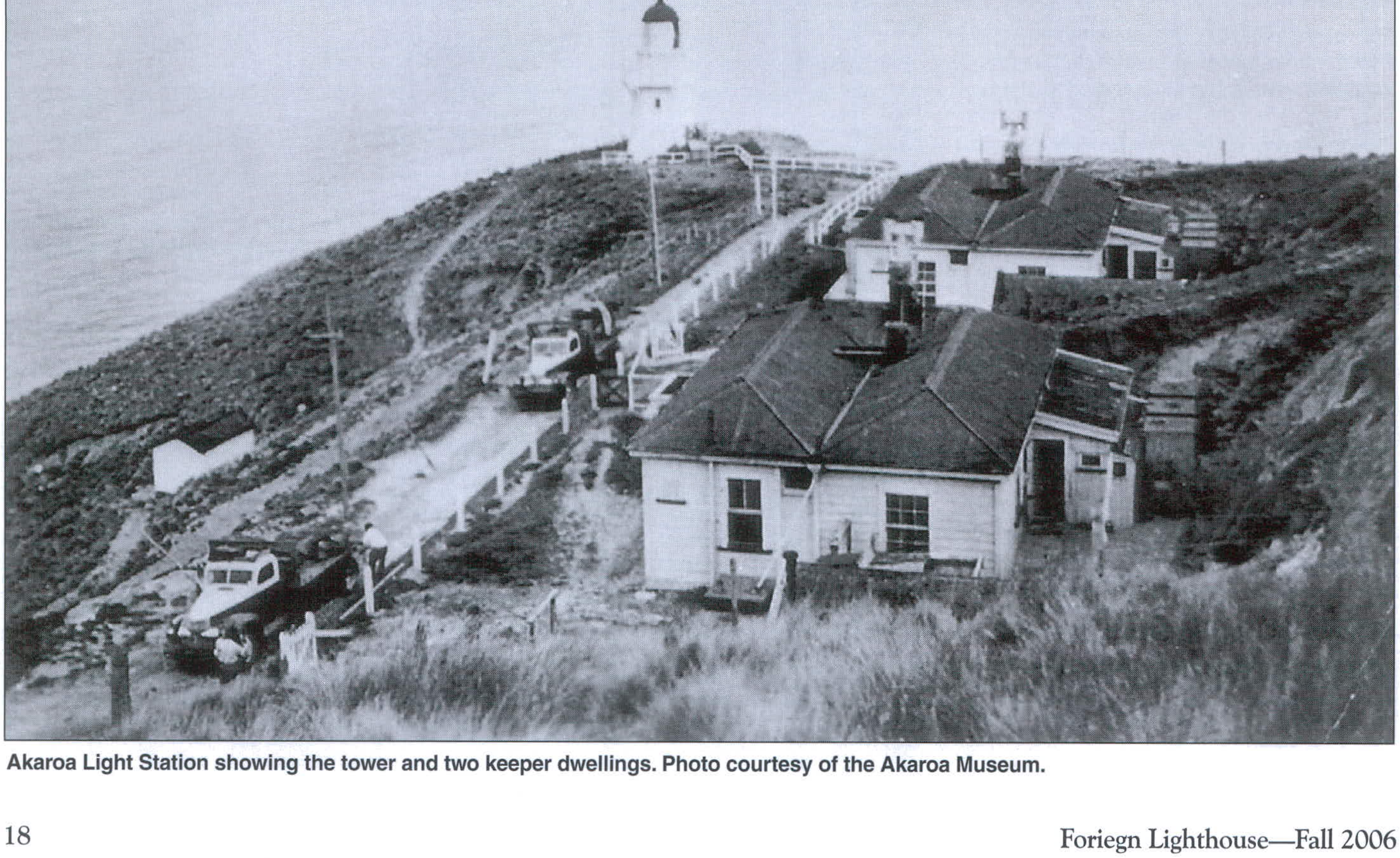
Dutch explorer Abel Tasman, backed by Holland's East India Company, was the first European to see the mountainous and mysterious "Southern Continent." But as he sailed along the coast near present-day Golden Bay in December 1642, an encounter with the native Māori proved fatal for several members of his crew. Tasman left, never to return. Later voyages by his countrymen confirmed his discovery and named it *Nieuw Zeeland*, after a large province in Holland and its powerful Dutch East India Company directors.

More than a century later, England's Captain James Cook circumnavigated New Zealand and charted its islands and major harbors. As he sailed along the central east coast of South Island in March 1770, he encountered what he thought was a smaller island, though he did not confirm the fact by sailing around it. He named the place for Joseph Banks, the botanist aboard the *Endeavor*. Banks Island turned out to be one of Cook's most famous cartographic mistakes. It was really a mushroom-shaped peninsula with two fine harbors. The name later was changed to Banks Peninsula.

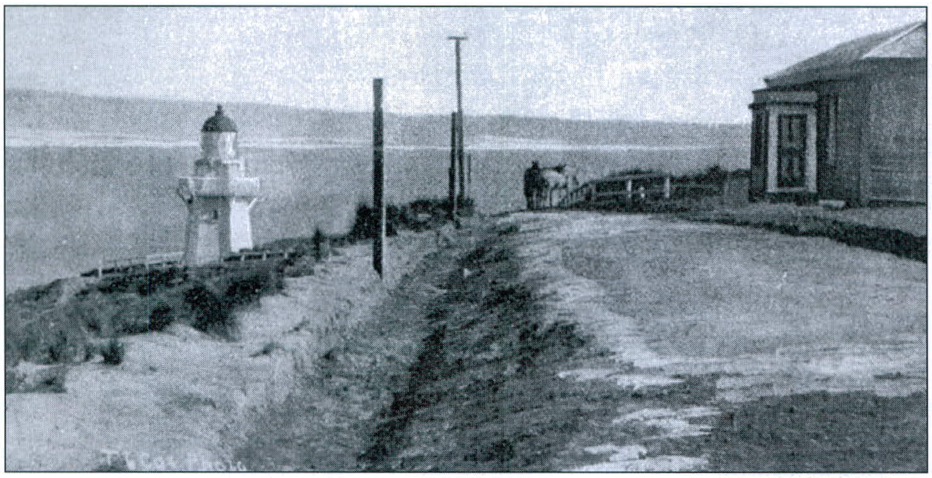
The largest harbor on the peninsula was called Akaroa by the Māori, or "the long harbor." It had formed eons before human settlement when an extinct volcanic crater eroded and filled with seawater. The harbor cut deeply into Banks Peninsula from south to north, creating a refuge from storm winds and waves. Māori tribes revered the area for its good farming and fishing and as a retreat from the harsh winter southerlies that slam South Island. They had struggled for dominance of the region for centuries.

By the time sealers and whalers arrived in the 1790s, the Ngai Tahu people ruled the region around Akaroa. Earlier hostilities between Europeans and the natives had ended, and the Ngai Tahu traded with the sailors, supplied them with flax, meat, and sweet potatoes, and climbed to the summits surrounding the harbor to serve as whale spotters. Humpbacks arrived in late autumn to calve in the shallow warm waters around Banks Peninsula. Whaleships anchored in sheltered Akaroa Harbor and sent longboats to harpoon the whales and tow them back to Akaroa.

At first, processing of whale blubber was done shipboard, but in 1837 the first permanent settlement on South Island—a British whaling station—was established at Peraki a few miles southwest of Akaroa. Within ten years, whaleships from England and several



Akaroa Light Station showing the tower and two keeper dwellings. Photo courtesy of the Akaroa Museum.



A view of the Akaroa Light Station in 1898. Photo courtesy of the Christchurch City Library.

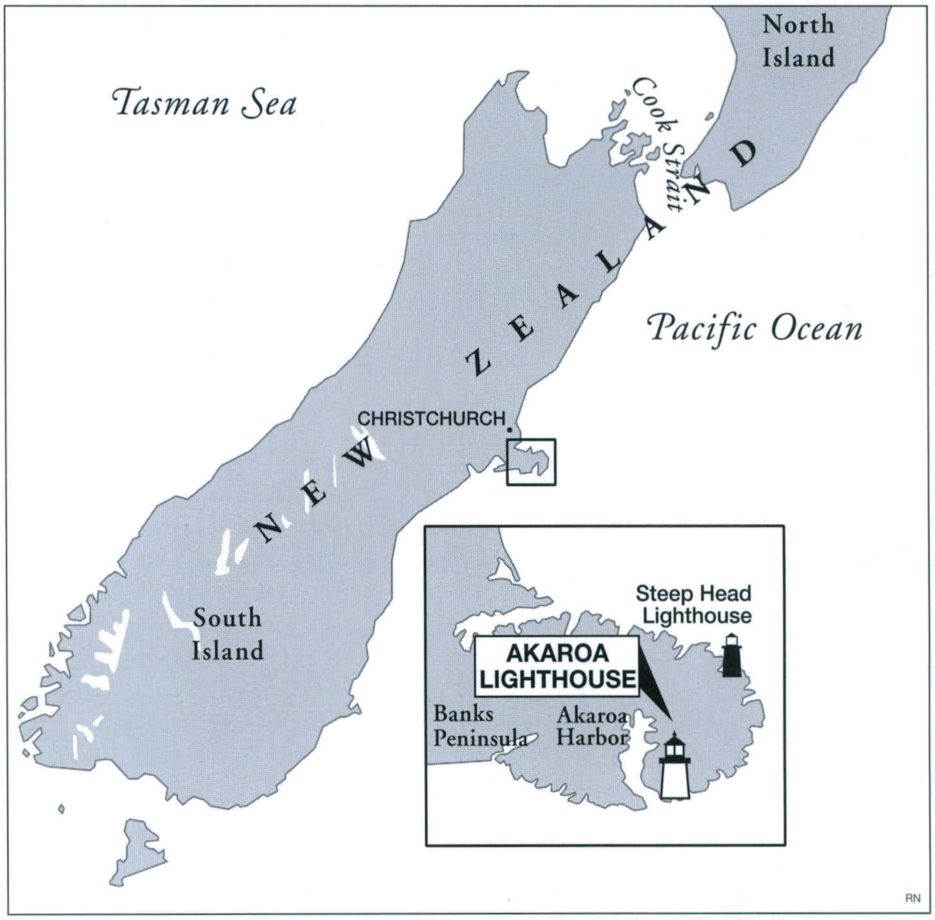
other nations were using the harbor for provisioning and the processing of whales. A small permanent community grew, predominantly French. The whalers often were at odds with local missionaries who came to convert the Māori to Christianity and felt the sailors' bawdy behavior set a poor example. (A large trypot still sits on the waterfront of the town, an icon of its raucous past.)

By the 1830s, the need for a navigational aid at the harbor entrance was obvious, but with tenuous claims on the region by at least three European nations and reluctance to invest money in a land so distant and unsettled, it was years before Akaroa or any other New Zealand port got a lighthouse. A bonfire or other crude beacon may have existed on one of both of the heads enclosing the entrance to Akaroa, but no records survive to confirm this. In 1841, a year after the Treaty of Waitangi founded New Zealand as a Crown Colony of Britain, the Governor established a Harbour Masters Branch, the precursor to the modern Marine Department of New Zealand. Its employees promptly stressed the need for lighthouses, but their pleas went unheard.

By 1845, more than one-hundred wrecks had occurred along the New Zealand coast and perhaps dozens more that were undocumented. Merchants and ship-owners continued to complain about the lack of navigational aids, but several years passed before the colonial council at Wellington put a simple lantern on a cottage roof at Pencarrow Head at the eastern entrance to Wellington Harbor. Its purpose was to guide shipping through Cook Strait—the treacherous waterway separating North Island from South Island—but also to temporarily assuage angry shipowners until Parliament sent money for better lights. In 1858 a light tower finally was built on the cliffs of Pencarrow Head. The Kiwi lighthouse service formally was launched, but twenty-five more lighthouses would be constructed and commissioned before a beacon shone over the important harbor of refuge at Akaroa.

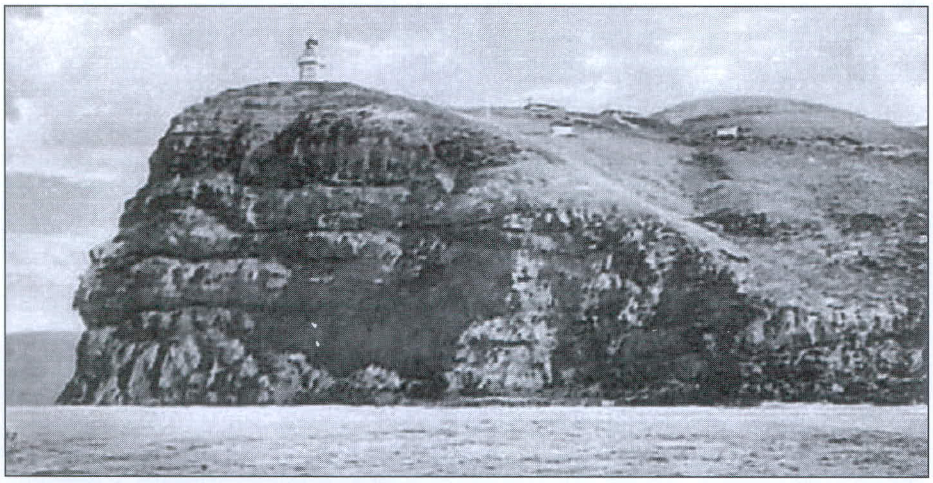
During that period, responsibility for the establishment of lights was in continual flux, sometimes loosely delegated to local shipmasters' associations and marine agents and at other times firmly in the hands of the Colonial Government. In 1866, a decade after New Zealand became a self-governing colony, responsibility for navigational aids fell under the aegis of the newly-created Marine Department, superintended by a visionary but under-funded engineer named James Melville Balfour. He managed to step up lighthouse construction by allowing the use of cheap, local materials for the towers, an affront to his English superiors at Trinity House, who regarded stone as the only material befitting a Royal sentinel. Balfour also suggested important changes in regulations for lightkeepers, explored new fuels and fog signaling devices, and impressed upon the powers in Mother England the need to adequately light all of New Zealand's ports and perils.

Unfortunately, the superintendent did not live to see his vision realized. He drowned in Timaru Harbor in 1870 while attending to marine business. John Blackett succeeded Balfour and immediately set about firming up his predecessor's long-range plan for lighting the coast. He sought input from Master Mariners he thought knew the coast well, including the skipper of the *Luna*, which operated part-time as a lighthouse tender. Among the sites the *Luna's* master recommended was Akaroa Harbor, where twenty-five shipwrecks had been documented.



In January 1875, Blackett and Customs Department Secretary Robert Johnson sailed to Akaroa Harbor on board the *Luna* to look for themselves. They immediately agreed that Banks Peninsula was a navigational hazard and that the harbor at Akaroa had possibilities. They chose precipitous Akaroa Head, sometimes called North Head (though it was actually more east than north of the opposite head), as the most sensible site for the lighthouse. The head jutted some fifty miles east into the South Pacific and would offer ships a clear view of the light, whether they were passing the head or making for the harbor.

Blackett and Johnson told their superiors that Akaroa Harbor was a critical safe haven for ships caught in storms along South Island's eastern shores. They also expressed their belief that the harbor eventually might become a major lumber port and rock cod fishery, as well as the site of a large naval base. It was well protected by two high capes and surrounded by rich evergreen forests of ancient kauri trees (the sequoias of New Zealand), and it was ideally positioned to defend the colony from attack from the east. The predominantly French population, which had intermarried with English settlers and remained in Akaroa after the British had established sovereignty, was eager for a lighthouse and the increased commerce it would bring.



A good view of Akaroa Lighthouse from the sea, showing the height of North Head on Banks Peninsula. Photo courtesy of the Akaroa Museum.

Blackett and Johnson smoothed the waters between the Colony and the Crown by suggesting that Canterbury Province, in which Akaroa was located, share the cost for the lighthouse with the government. But the province had already emptied its coffers to build sentinels at Godley Head and Timaru Harbor and saw little benefit in building a lighthouse for Akaroa Harbor. They may have correctly surmised that the harbor would not live up to anyone's expectations. The navy eventually chose Wellington for its operations and neither trees nor fish nor asylum from storms ever made the town rich.

Even so, the harbor got its lighthouse in 1880, funded entirely by the Marine Department. A lantern for the proposed Akaroa Lighthouse was ordered in 1877 from Scotland's renowned Stevenson family of marine engineers, along with a first order flashing lens from Chance Brothers of Birmingham, England. The lantern and lens would require more than two years to fabricate and ship to distant, antipodean New Zealand. Meanwhile, construction of the light station began in April 1878.

First, a trail had to be hacked out of the steep rock face below the proposed site using dynamite and the muscle of oxen and Māori conscripts from the local community. Materials and laborers were landed at protected Haylocks Inlet, a narrow 1200-foot long cove in North Head. As rock was blasted away, it was reduced to rubble with picks and hammers, then shoveled onto drays and hauled down to the sea. Slowly, a narrow zigzag trail made its way to the site of the light station 300-feet above sea level. Switchbacks had to be fortified with dovetailed rock beds and walls to prevent collapse from erosion. Where a stream coursed through the road, a square rock culvert was installed. After ten months of backbreaking work, punctuated by numerous complaints from the laborers and bouts of every imaginable type of weather off the Pacific and Southern Oceans, the quarter-mile long access was completed.

Work then began on a landing area situated on pilings seventy feet above high water, supposedly out of reach of the waves. A platform and derrick, built of native kauri wood, was completed at the base of the access road. A thirty-foot ladder led down to the beach into protected Haylocks Inlet. On March 7, 1879 the Blake Brothers—contractors for the light tower—docked at the new landing, hauled materials to the summit using ox-drawn drays, and began assembly of the wooden lighthouse.

It had been fabricated in England and shipped in pieces to Akaroa on the *SS Duke of Argyle*. Five weeks after construction began, an early autumn Southerly (similar in temperament and violence to a New England Nor'easter) assailed the coast and knocked down the half-completed wooden lighthouse. The storm also claimed the life of William Black, the project overseer. He had gone on foot to the town of Akaroa, seven miles away, and was caught in the storm on the way back. Workers found his frozen body along the lofty trail that led over the top of Akaroa Head.

A pall of doubt fell over the project, and several of the Māori said Black's death and the demise of the partially-completed lighthouse were bad omens. But the project resumed, and by the beginning of summer the hexagonal, four-storey, double-walled tower was in place. Realizing that storms could topple it with ease, the new overseer ordered the gap between the tower's inner and outer walls filled two-thirds full with ballast, probably leftover rock from construction of the switchback road. This would help anchor it to its windy perch. The copper-domed lantern was arduously carted up the access trail and lifted onto the tower, followed by sections of the huge lens. Two modest homes for the keepers also were completed.

On the night of January 1, 1880 the lightkeepers fueled and lighted the kerosene lamps, wound up the clockworks, and set the lens turning. The light from the 28-foot tall tower emitted a white flash every ten seconds from its perch 270-feet above the sea. It could be seen for 23-miles. The station had cost the Marine Department more than £7000.

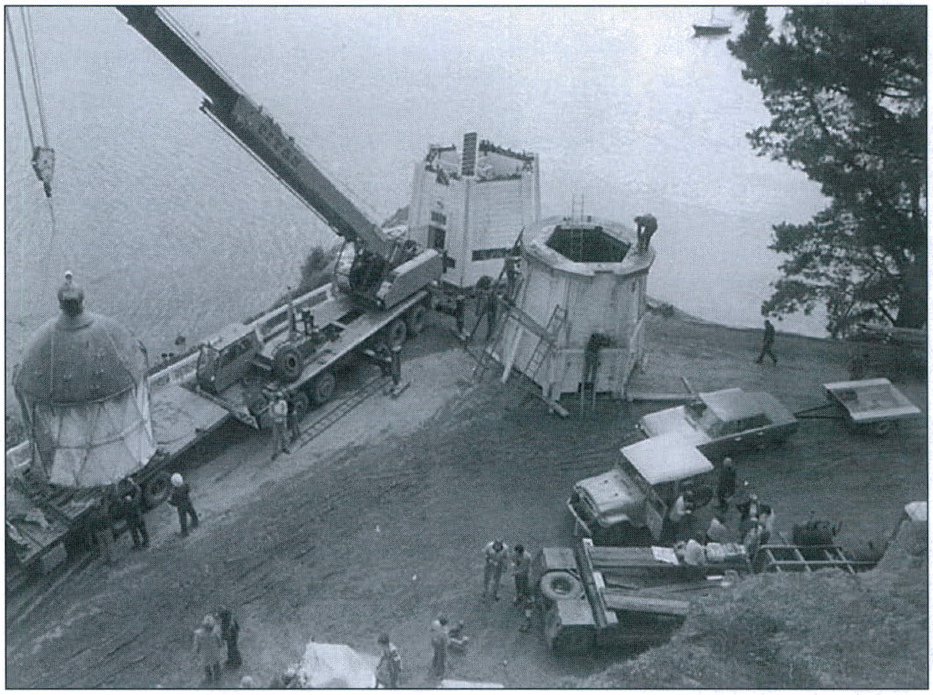
Akaroa Lighthouse soon earned a dreadful reputation among lightkeepers as "The Penal Station." Its families had no means of communication with the town other than walking the seven-mile sheep trail over the summit of North Head. No boat or horse was provided. About four times a year, the tender landed with food stores and fuel, weather permitting, but if it was late with deliveries, rationing went into effect. A garden fared poorly, the hens had to be heavily sheltered to prevent their being blown away, and fishing was risky, except from the landing and only on calm days. Fortunately, a local sheep farmer checked on the station every few weeks and kept the families supplied with mutton.

The logbook for the early period clearly reveals the consequences of isolation, food shortages, and forced cohabitation. Principle keeper, Alexander Parks, recorded:

> *July 11, 1883—The assistant keeper made a complaint to me that my son had stolen two eggs from his fowl-house. On endeavoring to find out from him if he actually saw my son take the eggs, both he and his wife were most insolent and abusive to me, saying I was a wretch, the same as all the rest of them in the light service, from the highest to the lowest, but admitted he did not actually see the boy take the eggs.*
>
> *July 20, 1883—About noon today the assistant keeper's wife came to my house and said she wanted to have some words with me. I said I did not, and if it concerned the eggs, her husband was the person I should hear, not her. She would not be denied and I said: 'Please, Mrs., go out of my house.' She would not go and I went around to see her husband and asked him to take his wife out of my house. He told me he would not do any such thing…I went back to my house and found his wife pouring out angry words to my wife, who was in tears, and my children terrified. I put the assistant's wife, gently but firmly, out of my house. Then they made a combined attack on me, and to avoid them, I retreated into my house…*

Besides the agitation caused by hardship and living in such close proximity, the keepers were burdened with tedious and sometimes difficult collateral duties. Lloyds of London, the major maritime insurance agency for Britain and its colonies, had a presence in New Zealand by this time and insisted that a signal station be set up at Akaroa Lighthouse to alert its agents of the arrival of ships. At first, when an inbound ship was sighted, the assistant keeper had to walk roundtrip to town to use a telephone, but pressure from Lloyds and other maritime interests resulted in the laying of a phone line to the lighthouse. Keeper Parks made the first call by phone in February 1885.

Also in that year, the station was provided with a small barn and a horse named Polly. The keepers were delighted and wrote in the log, "No more kowtowing to the neighbors for the loan of their bullocks." Two incidents had spurred the Marine Department to purchase the horse. The first, a month before the telephone was installed, involved Keeper Parks' brother who was visiting the station and accidentally fell over the cliff. He was rescued but suffered serious injury. Parks ran to the neighboring sheep farm to borrow a horse to take his brother to a doctor in Akaroa. A few weeks later, the assistant keeper's pregnant wife announced that her labor had begun and she needed a midwife. The new phone was temporarily out of order, due to wind, so the couple walked the entire distance to town where their newborn daughter arrived only three hours after their arrival.



Disassembly of the Akaroa tower in 1980 prior to moving it to a new location in town. Photo courtesy of Maratime New Zealand.

The telephone was problematic time and again, especially during storms. On June 30, 1894 a Southerly hit the area and cut the phone line. It also disabled the ship *Hero*, trying to pass North Head on its way into the harbor to seek refuge. As the vessel was pushed toward the rocks below the lighthouse, the crew hoisted the Union Jack upside-down as a signal of distress. With the phone out, the only recourse for the lightkeepers was to ride to Akaroa on horseback for help. The assistant keeper pulled on his oilskins, saddled old Polly—still in service at the lighthouse but growing feeble—and set out for Akaroa. The mare was not happy to leave her warm barn and set out in the storm, which had developed into a blizzard, but she obeyed the assistant and was credited with finding the way to town and back over the snow-covered trail.

Ten hours later the running lights of a ship were sighted below the lighthouse by the principle keeper, indicating that his assistant had arrived in town safely and alerted the harbormaster. The vessel searched for several hours but did not locate the wreck until morning, at which time it was towed into the harbor. The logbook noted "Spectators lining the cliffs set up a hearty cheer when the rescue was effected."

Watches were kept in the tower from dusk until dawn and during storms and periods of fog. Though there was no fog signal, there was plenty of work to do maintaining the lighthouse and the homes, and eking out a living. The Marine Department quickly realized Akaroa was the one of the worst assignments in New Zealand, rivaled only by Puysegur Point Lighthouse on the southern tip of South Island. Though records didn't clearly spell out the fact, Akaroa Lighthouse was used as a punishment and probation assignment in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The logbook not only bears out the sad fact that affairs among the keepers and their families were often strained, but it also hints at the suspicion that not every man sent to Akaroa was a model servant:

> *December 30, 1890: I called the assistant's attention to the light, which was a very inferior*

> *one. I pointed the fault to him, but he appeared to resent my authority of interference, and told me I was all blow. One word led to another, and running up to me he shook his fist in my face, saying, let it be a bloody caution to me if I made him mad.*

The offender later feel asleep on watch several nights in a row. He was reported as "derelict" by his superior and was dismissed from Akaroa Lighthouse. In 1908, another keeper sent a letter to the Secretary of the Marine Department begging forgiveness for allowing the light to stop revolving while he was on watch. He was accused of being drunk at the time. Alcohol, though strictly forbidden, was his painkiller of choice for a toothache:

"On Saturday I went to Akaroa for the mail and got two teeth out, from which I suffered very bad pain and distress."

The man fell asleep a second time a few weeks later and again allowed the lens to stop revolving. He was transferred to Puysegur Point Lighthouse, a place much too far from civilization for a man to get a ready supply of toothache medicine.

In September of 1911, Antarctic explorer Captain Robert Falcon Scott recorded in his journal that in the night his ship, the *Terra Nova*, had passed Akaroa Lighthouse. Scott was on its way to attain the South Pole for England. Akaroa was the last landfall light and glimmer of civilization Scott and his crew saw. As history has confirmed, Scott not only was beaten to the Pole by Norwegian explorer Roald Amundsen, but died in an Antarctic storm a few months later while trying to return to his base camp.

For much of its career, Akaroa Lighthouse was an active weather station, one of few on South Island's wild eastern shores. Starting in 1907, keepers' duties included sending weather reports four times a day to the New Zealand Meteorological Service office at Christchurch, nestled on the north side of Banks Peninsula. Basic weather equipment was installed at the station and the keepers were trained to make observations of temperature, pressure, wind speed and direction, dew point, and general sky conditions and sea state.

Electricity came to Akaroa Lighthouse in 1935 with the installation of a kerosene generator. Keepers now had power in their homes and the light was produced by an electric bulb. The nightly task of filling the lamps with kerosene and winding up the weights that powered the clockworks ended, but the manual equipment was not removed in the event the generator failed and the old system had to be put back in service. When Britain entered World War II in September 1939, most of the lights on New Zealand's coast were either dimmed or extinguished to prevent their aiding the enemy by silhouetting Allied ships. Since Akaroa Lighthouse was a first order sentinel, its beacon was shut off and remained dark until 1945.

Keeper Tom Clark with his Māori wife, Meri, and their children in 1959, after the family had transferred from Akaroa Lighthouse. One of the boys was born during the Clark's tour of duty at Akaroa from 1955-1958. Photo courtesy of Whitcomb & Tombs Ltd.

Two years later, New Zealand became an independent nation. It was a quiet changing of the guard, and other than a few celebrations held around the new nation and the complete handover of power to the New Zealand Parliament, nothing much changed. A large sheep ranch had been established on North Head, necessitating travel through a half dozen gates to reach the lighthouse. The oil generator was replaced by a diesel engine in 1951. The following year, the principle keeper's house burned to the ground, cause unknown. The Marine Department transferred the assistant and moved the principle keeper into the assistant's house. The station had no fog signal and was less difficult to manage since the installation of electricity, so a single keeper sufficed.

Not long afterwards, T. A. Clark was assigned to Akaroa Lighthouse. He arrived on April Fools Day 1955, fresh from service as an assistant at Tiritiri Lighthouse. With him were his Māori wife, Meri, and their two young boys. A third son was born during their three-year tenure at the station. Much of what we know of everyday life at Akaroa Lighthouse was related by Clark in his biography *The Sea is My Neighbor.*

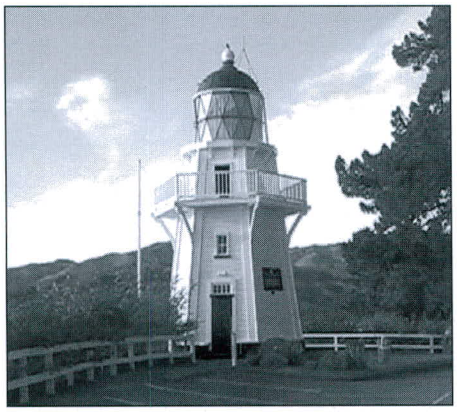
Though Clark served in the modern era, he experienced many of the same problems early keepers faced. Akaroa Lighthouse was still isolated and prone to foul weather. Between 1940 and 1955 there had been fourteen keepers, confirming that the place truly was an undesirable assignment. By the 1950s, the equipment and buildings were showing their age too, and whispers of possible automation were circulating. But Clark gave the place a good review.

Despite a number of personal setbacks, he seemed to love the desolate loneliness of the place and thought the assignment was a wonderful opportunity to teach his children self-sufficiency and love of nature. Beneath the keeper's quarters was a 12-inch crawlspace where a colony of blue penguins sought warmth. Their little chortles could be heard in the night, but if a storm were impending they cried loudly. The Clarks were well-versed in weather signs, but they found the penguins to be reliable early predictors of storms. The children at first were unnerved by the birds' cries, but soon grew accustomed to them.

Wildlife was a constant source of fascination at Akaroa Head and quickly became the primary entertainment for the Clark kids. The zoo included thousands of seals that gathered on the rocks below the lighthouse and whales that lounged in the cove with their calves. At times, the sea was red with krill and the whales would remain for weeks to feed. Clark taught his sons to identify flora and fauna on the point and to understand why there were no trees: The wind and salt spray stunted and burned all but the hardiest plants.

A few days into his assignment at Akaroa Lighthouse, Tom Clark hitched a ride to town with a neighboring rancher and bought a cow "on the blind." The purchase had been prearranged by a stockyard manager and was less than satisfactory. It took two days to herd the cow to the lighthouse, for she was old, heavy with a calf, and belligerent about climbing the steep trail to the lighthouse. The journey only served to hasten her decline. Within a day of her arrival on the station, the calf was born too early. The cow's milk production was low and gradually dwindled. She weakened day by day until she died a few weeks later. Clark was sure he'd been sold a nag: "A number was branded on her flank, '36,' and I am certain this was her age!"

Clark and his wife tried their hand at planting a winter garden a few weeks after settling in, but it also proved disastrous. After much work tilling and sowing a plot near the edge of the cliff, a handsome crop of cabbages, beets, carrots, and parsnips was produced. Clark was justifiably proud of the garden and sure it would keep his family in fresh vegetables for part of the winter. But one night in July a gale blew up and sent blobs of spendrift up and over the cliff. The salty foam settled on the vegetables and burned them to death. The dregs were eaten by a family of opossums.

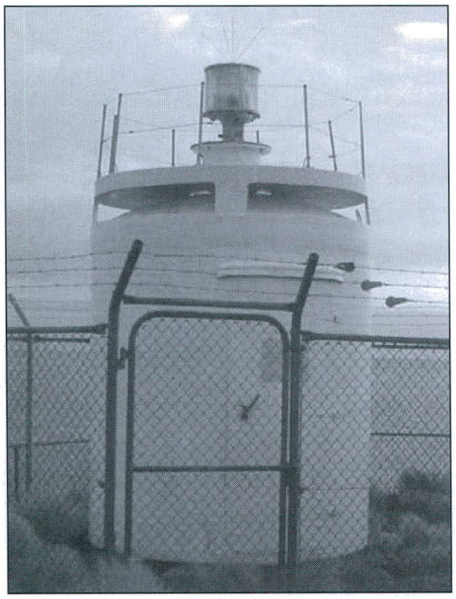


Akaroa Lighthouse today after the move from North Head. Located in the town of Akaroa, it is a popular tourist attraction. Photo courtesy of Gilbert Clausiuss.

Meri Clark, true to her Māori heritage, was a capable fisherman. She caught octopus by wading into the water of the cove and patiently waiting until she felt a tentacle wrap around her ankle. Then, she slowly walked back to shore pulling the octopus with her. Once in shallow water, her young sons wrestled it into a basket. The tentacles were severed off and taken to the kitchen where they were sliced, fried, and served with parsley sauce. Muttonbirds and puha, a native thistle plant, were on Mrs. Clark's lighthouse menu, too.

In July 1956 a powerful low pressure system formed a few miles south of Banks Peninsula. Clark heard the penguins crying beneath his house and saw the mercury ominously drop on the barometer. The resulting gale slammed the station with 75-knot winds. Giant waves broke over the landing area and sent spume high in the air. Anything not tied down outside was spirited away, end over end. Clark and a mechanic who had arrived a few days before to service the diesel generator made their way to the lighthouse to check the beacon, almost crawling in order not to be blown over the cliff.

After dark, the temperature dropped significantly. Snow and hail clattered against the windows and powerful gusts made the walls shudder. Meri Clark banked the stove for warmth and began cooking supper. She had no sooner started the meal than the wind ripped off the baffle from the chimney and sent a gust into the house, accompanied by soot and smoke. Tom Clark quickly closed the stovepipe and let the fire go out. It was too blustery to risk climbing on the roof to repair the baffle. His wife finished cooking on a portable stove.



The modern Vega Rotating Beacon where Akaroa Lighthouse once stood. Photo courtesy of Maritime New Zealand.

By bedtime, it was so cold in the house the couple decided to put a hot water bottle in bed with their sons. Unfortunately, the bottle burst and scalded one of the boys. Unable to get medical help for the child, they did their best to soothe the burns on his legs and feet with sulphanilamide powder. The treatment worked, and by the time the storm ended four days later the boy's burns were healing well.

Tom Clark transferred to East Cape Lighthouse in 1956. The people of Akaroa threw a grand farewell party for the couple and their children, for they had been well-liked. Rumors of automation continued to circulate, but Akaroa Lighthouse would remain a manned station for another twenty years. It was a difficult site to access and required a substantial expenditure to upgrade to self-sufficient operation. Instead of automating the tower, the Marine Department planned to decommission it and install a new automatic VRB (Vega Rotating Beacon) on a drum-like platform that enclosed a new generator and backup system.

Money became available for the changeover in the 1970s after the Marine Deaprtment gave way to the Ministry of Transport. Steve O'Neill, the last principle keeper, closed up Akaroa Lighthouse and its buildings in 1977 and took down the flag, bringing to a close almost century of service for the wooden tower. The VRB was installed and switched on, and the Marine Department announced that it would raze the old buildings. The tower stood in darkness until its centennial in 1980. The keeper's house and ancillary buildings were demolished, but the Akaroa Lighthouse Preservation Society raised money to move the historic lighthouse in sections down the winding road to the town. It was reassembled on old Cemetery Point (now called Lighthouse Point) overlooking the harbor and became a popular tourist attraction.

The light is lit on special occasions with permission from Maritime New Zealand, the current entity charged with maintaining aids to navigation. The Akaroa Lighthouse Preservation Society opens the tower for tours on a limited basis.

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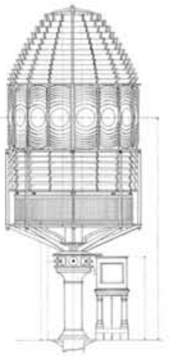

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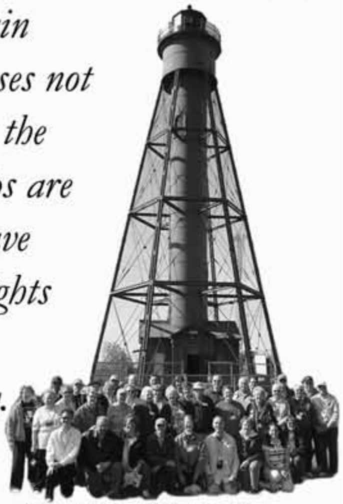

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