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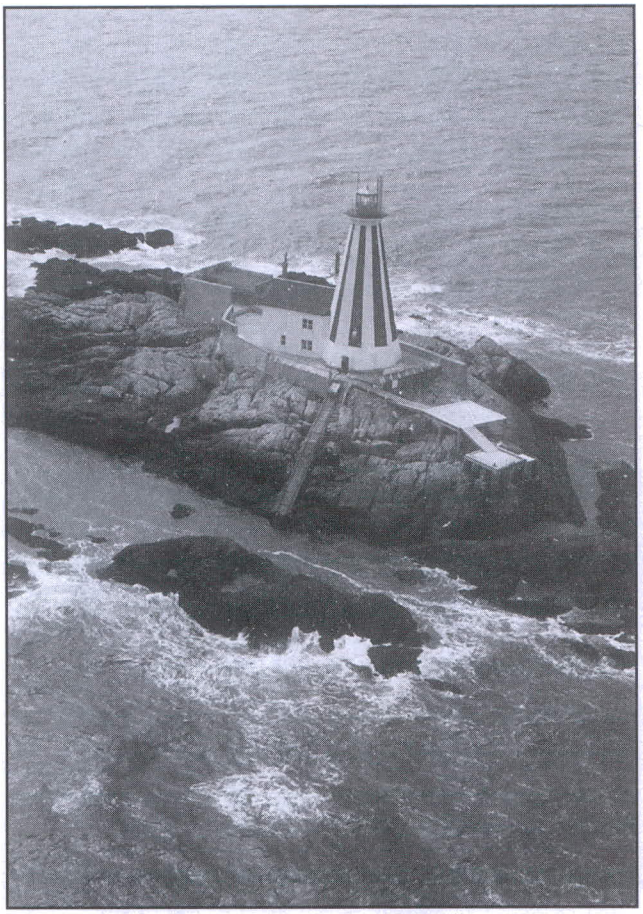
From Sea to Shining Sea: A Lightkeeping Journey

By Chris Mills

It's a long way from Gannet Rock to Dryad Point - about 3,043 miles as the crow flies. Gannet sits south of New Brunswick's Grand Manan Island in the turbulent Bay of Fundy. Its black and white vertically striped tower warns of the treacherous Murr ledges to the west. Across the continent, Dryad Point marks the junction of Seaforth Channel and Lama Passage on British Columbia's winding Inside Passage. Protected from the swells of the open Pacific, the keepers' houses are surrounded by lush lawns and gardens. A trim red and white concrete lighthouse stands on the point just a few feet from the sea, and at first glance it seems that this must be an idyllic spot.

Gannet is anything but idyllic - here, the old wood tower and concrete house are anchored and guyed to a god-forsaken mound of conglomerate exposed to the full fury of the open Atlantic. The Mi'qmak people called it "bare place," and bare it is - only the hardiest of weeds and grasses survive the wind and saltwater, anchoring themselves in crevices in the concrete and stone. Even the seabirds for which the place was named disappeared when the station was built in 1830, losers in the competition for residency on a spot so small the keeper could walk around his house and tower in less than 60 seconds.

Gannet Rock was my home away from home for two and a half years, the longest time I spent at any of my four Atlantic coast lighthouses. Sitting now at Dryad Point, overlooking the gardens and fruit trees and the little lighthouse on the point, I can reflect with some nostalgia about life on the Rock. It was a hard place to live, both environmentally and socially. Two of us worked 28-day shifts, alternating with another pair of keepers. Although we mostly got along, the combination of confinement and the mechanics of everyday living, to say nothing of personal idiosyncrasies (and hygiene), made life on Gannet a challenge for each keeper.



Gannet Rock Light Station, New Brunswick in 1991. This photo and all photos in this article by or courtesy of the author.

Yet as geographically and socially austere as it was and is, Gannet held a fascination for me that did not lessen over time, as tides and arguments, storms and laughter, weather observations and engine checks, monotony and helicopters, marked the passing of months and years. Granted, it is easier to reflect on that life now that almost half a decade has passed since I did my last shift on the Rock, but I think given the chance, I'd do it again. Unfortunately, that chance is gone. The last keepers were pulled off Gannet in the spring of '96, and with the old house boarded up and the generators roaring away, the tower stands its vigil alone.

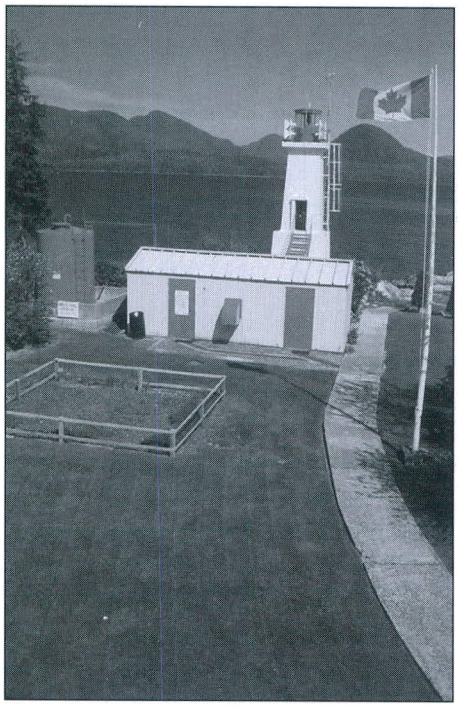
Back on the opposite coast, Dryad Point is still a vital, busy spot. Our white and red sector light occults four seconds on, one second off, identifying us as the point where Seaforth Channel twists and narrows into Lama Pass. Built in 1899 to help guide Klondike gold rush traffic, the light now marks the way for a gold rush of another kind: tourism. Each year hundreds of cruise ships, yachts, power cruisers, ferries and kayaks pass this north end of Campbell Island. As the commercial fishery and logging decline, it seems that tourism is the wave of the future on this wild north coast. But despite the increase in vessel traffic, the future of Dryad Point and the

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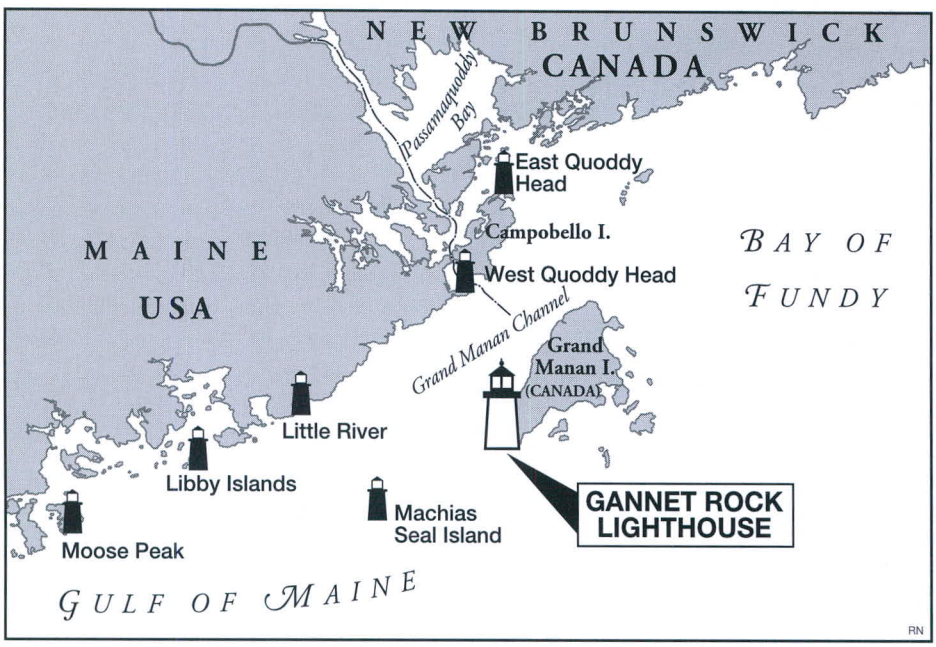
other 26 attended lights in British Columbia seems much less assured. Automation and destaffing, says government, is the logical, cost effective way to provide aids to navigation in a time when radar, sounders and satellites have rendered lights and horns ancient and costly aids to the mariner.

This may or may not be so. Light station destaffing and downgrading may well be more a result of government financial policy than a direct response to changes inherent in technology and modernization. The number of boaters rescued or directed to safety each year by BC lightkeepers seems to indicate that keepers provide much more service than just a light and a horn. And the aviation reports that allow vessel pilots to safely approach Chatham Sound, Klemtu, Bella Bella - these, too, are provided by the lightkeepers. Through all of the political wrangling and promises of high levels of service from automated sites, there are still people on the water and in the air who need the light, the horn, and the watchful eyes of the keepers.

Ironically, my own introduction to lightkeeping had a great deal to do with automation. In a kind of perverse manner, lighthouse destaffing allowed me the opportunity to find work as a relief keeper when stations were being shut down and the old timers were retiring, and younger keepers were retrained as radio operators and Coast Guard ships' deckhands. Granted, there was no promise of long term employment. The first contract that arrived in the mail said to expect three weeks' work, although "the requirement for your services may be for a shorter period, depending on the availability of work and the continuance of the duties to be performed." And although those first three weeks eventually lengthened to nine years, that written condition always left a feeling of uncertainty in me.



The view of the Dryad Point Light Station's British Columbia grounds from Chris Mills' office window in 1997.



When I found that 21 days as a relief lighthouse keeper was not nearly enough to satisfy my desire, I became hell-bent to find all the lighthouse work I could. Passing up what seemed to be a more secure job as a newspaper reporter in Newfoundland, I lunged head-first into lightkeeping. It was a gamble, but it paid off. Not only did I find five years' work on Nova Scotia and New Brunswick lights, but five years of the most incredible experiences on rugged islands that most people don't know exist. And it was the end of the road for lighthouses in the Maritime provinces; I was able to record the life and times of stations that would soon be empty, automated sites. By the time I left for British Columbia in early 1994, "the duties to be performed" had been terminated and 260 years of lightkeeping in Nova Scotia had come to an end.

When the cruise ships pass Dryad Point during the summer months, we wave to the people lining the decks. A melodious bell tone signals passengers that the public address system is about to broadcast interesting facts about local history and wildlife. The commentary reverberates across the narrow channel: "On our port side is Saunders Island, where you'll be able to see several nests of the bald eagle. And to starboard you'll see the lighthouse at Dryad Point, built in 1899. In the early days the keepers lived an isolated existence and experienced primitive living conditions. Even today the keepers' rainwater is collected in cisterns, and is used for drinking, watering the garden and even washing the dog." We have to laugh when we hear these happily simplistic descriptions of lighthouse life - no mention of our day that begins at 0300, the crucial three hourly weather observations, the continuous station upkeep, occasional search and rescue work, and the keepers' role in the growth of the coast. And *we* don't have a dog.

Lighthouses *do* have an aura of romance and folksy intrigue, though, and it seems that very few people ever get beyond the image of the solitary keeper living in splendid isolation on a little piece of his own paradise. Over the

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years this myth has been fed by countless newspaper articles and radio and television shows about lighthouses and the "lighthouse lifestyle." I recall one interview I did a few years ago for a local cable channel in Halifax. It was December, and the cameras were set up underneath an escalator in a shopping mall. Directly adjacent to the "studio," dozens of children and their parents were lined up to visit with Santa, and "Woody the Talking Christmas Tree." An aura of unreality pervaded the atmosphere; I had recently come off a shift on Gannet Rock and it took all of my concentration to answer the interviewer's questions while the rest of modern society got on with Christmas joy. "I love it, a real lighthouse keeper," my host bubbled, and then proceeded to ask about the romance, the loneliness and just what *did* we do all day out there? I came away from it laughing, but at the same time thinking about the reality of lightkeeping that wasn't explored that day - the work that kept lights burning and the fog horns blaring and saved thousands of lives; a proud tradition that has lasted the better part of three centuries in Canada.

Although there are undoubtedly attractive and even romantic aspects about this job and life, it's not all day dreaming and book writing. As the cruise ships pass, I have a choice of many chores with which to fill my day. On the early shift, it all starts at 0300 when the keeper on duty rolls out of bed to suit up and head out to do the first weather [report] of the day. Roughly the same routine is shared by 26 other keepers on the early watch, spread out over 500 miles of coastline from Victoria's Trial Island to Green Island, just below the Alaska panhandle. In the summer when it's light by 0400, getting out to do a weather is a pleasure. In the winter, we peer into slashing rain driven by north east gales to note cloud types and heights, visibility, atmospheric phenomena, temperatures, sea conditions.

At Dryad, since the local airport depends on our reports, we're running a tight hourly triangle in the mornings between the house, Stevenson Screen (where the thermometers sit), and the radio room where the observations are recorded and then transmitted. Each day Prince Rupert Radio starts the weather collection at 0340. After a three-hour break it all starts again at 0640, 0755, 0855, 0940, 1055, 1240,1540 and finally the last two local marine weathers at 1940 and



The *Star Princess* passing Dryad Point, B.C. in 1997. Dryad Point upper right.

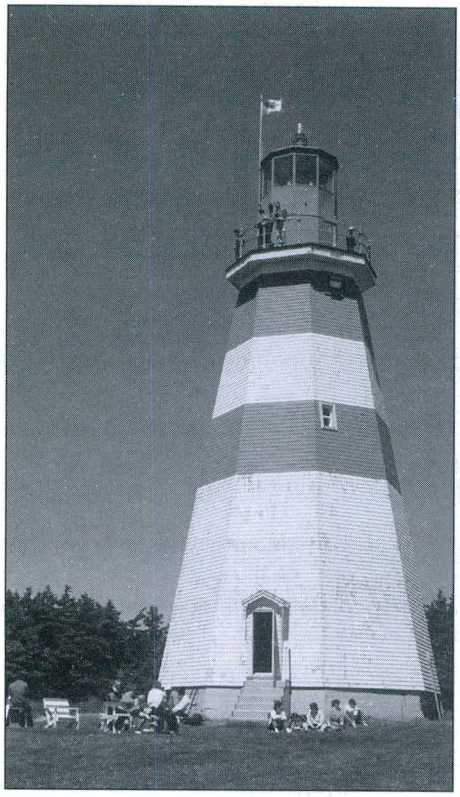
2140. After a while, reporting the weather becomes almost instinctual. You can be outside, mowing or hammering away at a boardwalk project and suddenly catch yourself and say "it's time." Sure enough, it's 25 past the hour, and time to grab a notepad, read the temperatures and "do the clouds."

With the regimen of weather observations setting the tempo for the day, all other work has to be done within the morning's hourly and the afternoon's three hourly segments - painting the tower, houses and sheds, mowing the lawns, maintaining boats, floats and the derrick, showing curious visitors around, and performing the assortment of electrical, plumbing and carpentry tasks that crop up in the run of a year. Coast Guard ships load and off load supplies, helicopters bring groceries and technicians to fix everything from faulty fog horns to household water pumps. Most days are routine, with enough variation to keep things interesting - float planes buzzing the station, a pod of southbound killer whales, incredible rainbows, salmonberries to be picked up on the hill by the radiobeacon tower, and the ever-changing parade of fish boats, kayaks, cruise ships and sailboats passing our living room window.

There are also days where everything happens at once and there is just not enough time to get the work done. We'll start painting the house early in the morning when Rupert Radio calls with a message to expect the helicopter in an hour. In the meantime the Coast Guard vessel *Narwhal* has sent its work boat in to deliver 10 barrels of Jet B aviation fuel and four yards (200 bags!) of gravel. Three kayakers land on the beach to ask for directions to Ocean Falls and fill their water bottles, and of course want to climb the tower while they're here. And in the middle of all that it's time for yet another weather observation. Days like these don't happen every week but do occur often enough that we half expect them most of the time. As outlined by the Coast Guard's *Lightstation Procedures Manual*, maintaining a "state of readiness" is part of lightstation life. Our VHF radio is on 24 hours a day, the binoculars are always in the front room, and even when I get up to use the bathroom at one in the morning, I look out the window to make sure our light is still flashing. On a lightstation, home life and work are inextricably connected and the nebulous line between the two shapes our very existence.

By the time I began lightkeeping in the Maritimes, "state of readiness" seemed to apply more to our readiness to abandon the stations, leaving automated equipment to do the work. It's not like de-staffing was a sudden change, though - back in the early '70s the Coast Guard began hauling out the old "blast and grunt" horns, and replaced them with tiny whooping electronic emitters. Main lights were left to turn or blink 24 hours a day, and many stations went from three families to two, and often one. In the east, lightkeeping became a purely maintenance job, and although keepers continued to assist

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Seal Island Lighthouse, N.S., in 1990.

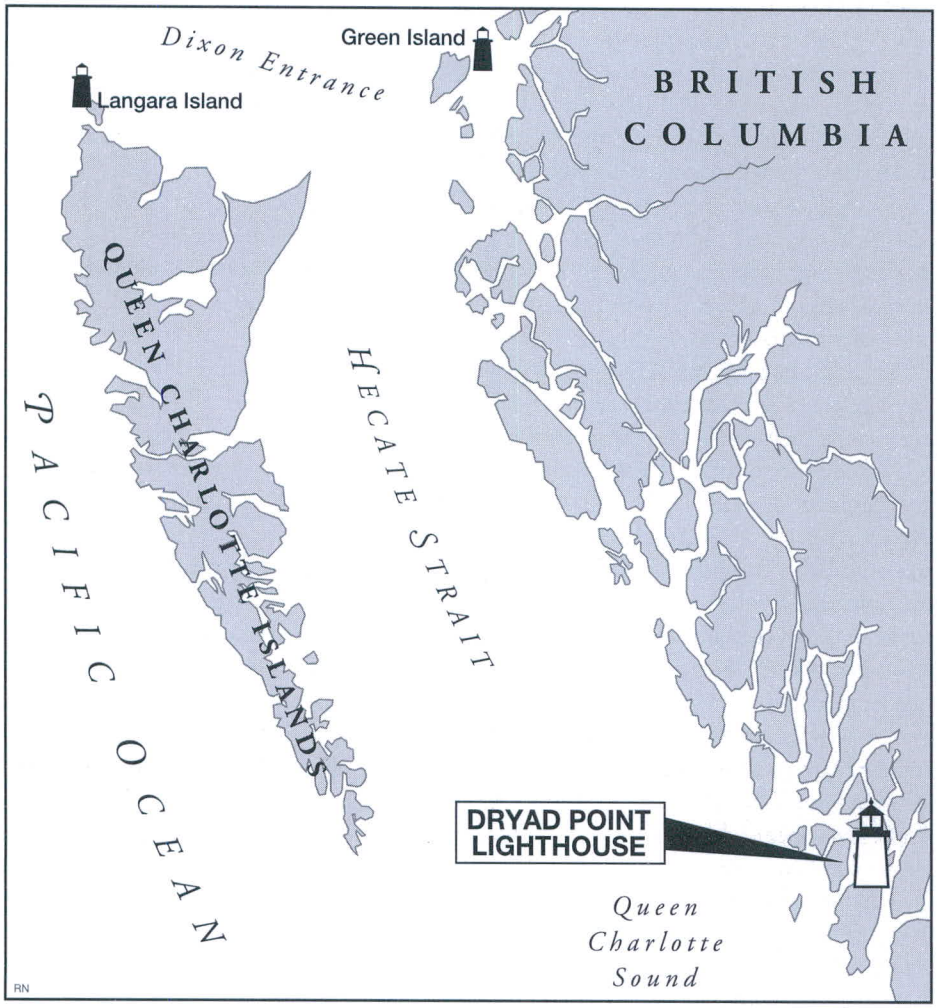
mariners and provide the coast with "eyes and ears," the Coast Guard downplayed their role, stating again and again that coast watching and search and rescue were not in the keeper's job description. Perhaps not, but who could refuse to respond to a frantic call in the night when a fishing boat lost power and drifted onto the rocks a scant mile away?

The face of lightkeeping changed more between 1970 and 1989 than it had in the more than two centuries since France had laid the first stone for the great light at Louisbourg, Cape Breton in 1733. Although no major destaffing took place immediately after "semi-automation," lightkeeping had suddenly experienced a massive change in direction and focus. Morale slowly withered as keepers waited for the inevitable pink slips. Some waited more than two decades, as the sweeping staff cuts envisaged by the Coast Guard were delayed by equipment failures and politics, two things they hadn't figured into their grand scheme of modernization.

The biggest cuts came in the 1980s when hundreds of keepers in the Maritime Provinces, Quebec and Ontario suddenly lost their connection with the work and way of life they'd known for generations. On the Nova Scotia lights I had known in childhood, tidy white houses and outbuildings were razed or just left to rot. Those that remained were subject to the shotgun blasts and destructive fires of the ubiquitous vandals. At a few sites the houses were sold, jacked up and moved to new locations - sometimes to a hill above a small fishing village and in one case to a subdivision overlooking a flowing tide of automobiles on the Trans Canada highway. Toward the end of the 1980s there was constant uncertainty on the remaining staffed lights. When would automation remove keepers and leave their stations abandoned to the elements? When Lunenburg's Cross Island was destaffed only five months after I had set up house there, I became an itinerant keeper, pushed from station to station as automation nipped at my heels.

By the end of October 1993, I was halfway through my last 28-day stint on Machias Seal Island. My shift partner was Paul Cranford, a musician and publisher of Cape Breton fiddle music. He'd spent nearly 20 years on Saint Paul Island, a jagged hump of rock jutting into the Gulf of St. Lawrence. In 1991 the station was closed and the houses boarded up. Cranford was flown by helicopter to Gannet Rock and Machias Seal to choose a new station. Even after wind and wave pounded St. Paul's, Gannet probably seemed pretty bleak. Paul decided on Machias, and by the fall he'd begun the usual 28-day rotations on his new island.

Although we'd had a good tour of duty, I noted in my diary, "I'm strongly tempted to make this my last shift ever." The fall seemed very quiet after summer's bustle of tourists and breeding seabirds. There were more rumblings of lightstation closures - this time at Letite and Gannet Rock. At Cape Forchu, Nova Scotia's last holdout, the keepers had left in the summer. Work was drying up. The only glimmer of hope came from Newfoundland and British Columbia, where a total of nearly 69 lights were still flashing away under the care of resident keepers. I decided to look west. By January I'd arrived in Vancouver and within a month the urban jungle of the lower mainland was 500 miles to the south. I was heading to Green Island, the icy jewel in the crown of British Columbia lighthouses.



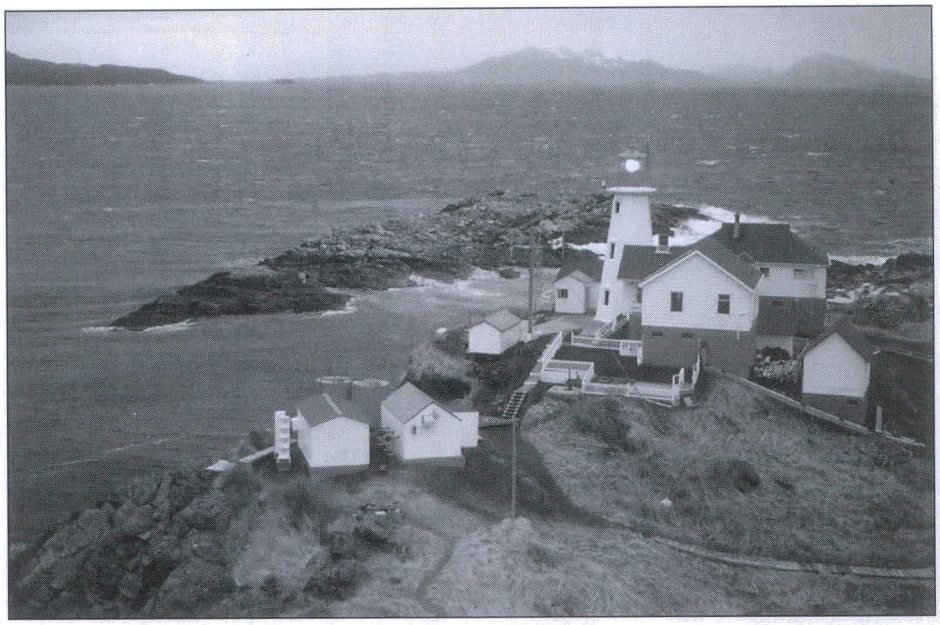
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It's been said "that only the ignorant or ambitious take on Green Island." As winter's Arctic outflow winds batter the treeless, grassy islet, its keepers may well be mindful of the old saying, although it is probably a combination of ignorance and ambition that has brought them there. Green has traditionally been a proving ground for new recruits - if you could last a year on Green, you could handle any station. Summer was and is a pleasure; lovely sloping lawns below the houses, the Alaskan and Coast mountains looming across the sparkling waters of Chatham Sound, and the sun setting behind Dundas Island, leaving a deep orange glow in the western sky.

Winter is a different matter. It's hard to believe or even imagine in July or August that in four or five months a 50-knot northeast wind will blow for weeks on end. The snow will fall horizontally, and 12-foot seas slash spray across the helicopter pad, where the salt water freezes into a miniature seascape of two-foot-high ridges. Sheets of sea water coat the spindly wind sock pole until it's the size of a redwood stump. "Heavy freezing spray" is a common remark at the end of Green's three-hourly local weather observations, and even as the southern lights on the Prince Rupert circuit report snow and north east gales, they smile and say to themselves "It could be worse. We could be up on Green Island."

I spent six months on Green Island - long enough to experience the icy blast of winter and the serene calm of summer. As tours of duty go, mine was shorter than average, but not by much. In its nine-decade history, more than 40 principal keepers and at least three times as many assistants have come and gone, some staying only a few weeks. For longevity, the record holder is John Moran - he and his family weathered 18 years on the island. It couldn't have been an entirely disagreeable life for the Morans - two sons also became keepers and went on to serve on Triple, Barrett Rock and Egg Island.

With the Morans' retirement and departure from Green in 1936, an era of long-standing family care of the island had ended. The second world war saw four principals come and go, and after that, no one family stayed for more than five years. It wasn't always the weather that drove people off Green - the constrictive living and working arrangements on an island smaller than a football field often brought families closer than they wanted to be. After all, who could live for months or years in constant contact with only one other family, and not feel the lack of privacy and the strain of over familiarity- even if you *liked* your neighbours. If you didn't, situations could get out of hand. The lack of detail in some departmental correspondence served to convey the feelings of drama and tension experienced on some islands: "Apparently there has been very little communication between them [the principal and assistant keeper] since the shooting incident some time back."



Green Island Light Station, B.C., 1994. From left: fog horns, oil tanks, engine room, boathouse, tower, assistant's dwelling & principal dwelling. Mountains of S.E. Alaska in the background.

The old principals sometimes ruled their tiny kingdoms like dictators, controlling the lives of the families like they controlled the rules and duties of the lightstation. Tales of mistreatment of assistants by keepers have become the stuff of lighthouse lore, re-told and embellished over the years. One keeper had a fondness for dressing up in Nazi uniforms on the weekends; another decreed that the assistant and his wife be ready at a moment's notice to wave to passing ferries and cruise ships. And as late as the 1986, one principal's wife laid down the law to the new assistant's wife: "You're my neighbour, but you won't be my friend." Quite a welcome on the new couple's first day on the station.

Throughout the late 1950s and early '60s, one keeper on Green Island went through at least half a dozen assistants. His memos to the marine agent in Prince Rupert are a collage of dissatisfaction and disapproval. "McCrae has changed his mind again. I believe he is bushed. His cooking is slowly killing him. [He] Never complains of tooth ache on rainy days. On good days when I expect a hand with something he sends over for aspirin and stays in bed. The man played me for a sucker. I have overlooked too much, too long."

Until the late 1950s, assistant keepers were hired *and* paid by the lightkeeper, and although many keepers were reasonably friendly people, some treated their assistants as nothing more than servile dogsbodies. By 1960, long after other government positions had attained decent pay and workload equity, assistant keepers were finally hired as civil servants, and to some extent this curtailed the exploitative, or at least capricious, treatment by the more miserable principals.

By the time I had arrived on Green Island as a relief assistant keeper, the old days and the old ways were long gone. The principal keeper referred to me as his neighbour and his work partner, while still retaining responsibility for the station and the work to be done. And despite Green's social and geographical shortcomings, life on that tiny island rekindled in me an interest in lightkeeping that had waned towards the end of my time in the Maritimes. As the Messerschmitt helicopter made its way over the hills surrounding Prince Rupert, I caught my first glimpse of the flashing light at the northern entrance to Chatham Sound. My

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first sight of the cluster of white and red buildings surrounding the lighthouse as we circled to land brought to mind the lights I had known as a young boy 25 years ago in the Maritimes - generators roaring, flag flying, and the rotating eye of the lighthouse sweeping a pencil-thin beam over the sea. It was a sight I had never expected to see again.



Young Chris Mills as a wannabe keeper on Brier Island, N.S. in 1971. Photo by mom.

I built my first lighthouse when I was six. It was a crude affair, constructed from the sun-bleached wood of lobster traps tossed ashore by winter storms. On the business end of the "tower" was a trouble light, complete with red 40-watt bulb. I had a fog horn, too; a shiny chrome bicycle horn with a big black rubber bulb, mounted on a stick adjacent to the "lighthouse." In my young mind, the light and its attendant horn performed a crucial task each night, guiding ships and fishing vessels to safety in St. Mary's Bay, on the southwest coast of Nova Scotia. I insisted that it be ready to shine each night, although I'm sure that once I went to bed, my mother or father would turn it off and put it away for the night. No matter. A spark was lit within me, and I was captivated by the lighthouse.

Just down the road from our summer cottage, where my little light flashed its nightly welcome and warning, a real lighthouse did the same thing through the efforts of three keepers and their families. There was a red and white horizontal-striped tower, an extremely powerful and frightening fog horn, and two large, neat dwellings, along with various ancillary sheds, stairways, gates and the flagpole, with maple leaf snapping in the breeze. On foggy days the horn sent two resonant, ear-splitting, body-vibrating blasts into the murk, while the men tended diesel-driven compressors and kept the light going. For me, these were powerful images and sounds - the security of the light, and the fog horn's blast amidst the chaos of wind, dark and fog. I knew then that I had to be a keeper.

Not long after my driftwood beacon was built there were big changes down the road at the light. New equipment was moved in: automatic diesel generators, electric horns and other fancy, expensive electronic devices. By the time it was all hooked up, the complement of keepers had been reduced to two and the old 'round-the-clock watch system had been abolished in favour of one eight-hour duty period for each man. The new horns were interesting, if nothing else - two, three-second electronic wails every minute, punctuated by a belligerent "pop" at the end of each blast. A group of people from the island's village drove out one night to see the new equipment and hear the horns. Probably the most polite comment was "sounds like an elephant in distress." To me it sounded like a lightstation in distress, and it felt like the end of the lighthouse.

In a way it was. Within five years the second keeper was transferred to another light, and the station was left in the sole care of the principal and his wife. The Coast Guard put up a gate so that when no one was home, cars couldn't drive up to the house. Even when the keeper *was* home the place had an empty feel. The big duplex was torn down, the steps to the old fog horn ripped out and burned, and the old wooden gate with its proud "Brier Island Light and Fog Alarm" complete with red painted maple leaf, was dismantled. Although it would be another 10 years before the last keeper was pensioned off and his house boarded up, it seemed that the life of the station was gone. Today there are very few tangible reminders of the big, bustling lightstation I knew as a child - only the tower and a derelict garage remain. Nearby, a flat area covered with crushed gravel marks the spot where the keeper's white house once stood. Not long after it was abandoned, vandals crept in during the night. A few sloshes of gasoline and a match later, there was nothing left but a gaping foundation filled with smoldering timbers.

There were other places, though, where the lightstation remained the centre of the community of local fishermen and mariners, keeping a weather eye out for the lobstermen, supplying emergency gas and diesel, patrolling the shoreline. Long after Brier Island's light had been reduced to a solitary man and wife operation, the station at Seal Island, off the south west tip of Nova Scotia,



The Seal Island, N.S. station before it was unmanned in 1990.



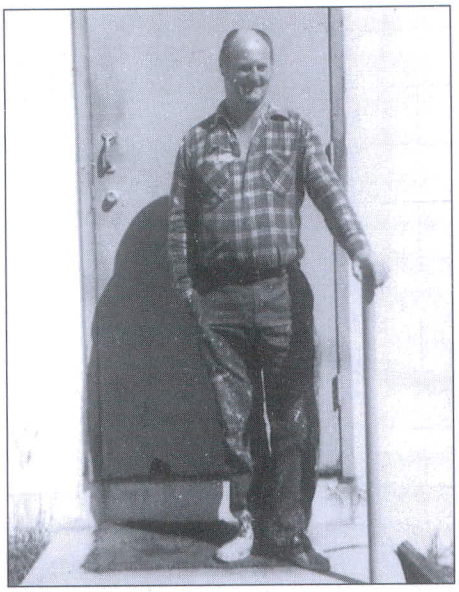
The station in 1992 after automation. Something missing?

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still had two families who maintained the light, horn, radio beacon and the two sets of thundering generators that provided the lifeblood of the station. People had lived on Seal since the 1820s. The pioneering families settled the island to save shipwrecked mariners, who, if lucky enough to make it to shore, would soon succumb to exposure and starvation on the low scrubby island. By 1831, the government of the day had seen fit to construct a large wooden beamed structure, braced with heavy timbers and natural-growth knees. The fixed light shone out over the water for the first time on November 28, 1831, and not until 1990 were the last keepers given notice and sent off to other Coast Guard positions. Fittingly enough, it was the husband of the great grand niece of one of the island's first settlers who radioed the station's last weather report to Yarmouth Coast Guard Radio on a cool October morning.

I began visiting Seal in the early 1970s with my birdwatching parents, braving the sometimes tempestuous 20-mile crossing in a local fisherman's Cape Island lobster boat. I soon made the acquaintance of the principal keeper, who had only recently transferred out from a New Brunswick light. Ray Tiner was the quintessential lightkeeper, fully committed to the functioning of his engines, light and foghorn. Although the station lawn was mowed by a population of roving sheep, the lighthouse was always gleaming with fresh red and white paint and the station compound was a busy place.

Ray and his assistant went about their business in paint-splattered work clothes, as the Lister diesels droned and the light turned in endless circles high in the tower. Ray was always willing to stop his work to show visitors around, and answered innumerable questions from the keen young boy who was almost mesmerized by the workings of this fascinating entity, the lightstation. I'm sure Ray wasn't mesmerized by the job. He'd been a keeper for more than twenty years and had a no-nonsense approach to the logistics of lightkeeping. And when he wasn't busy painting or servicing engines he was caring for his ailing wife, who couldn't cook, clean the house or even bathe herself as her illness progressed. And still the quiet dedication to the lighthouse. I thought Ray was an extraordinary person, but he really just got on with what had to be done, without complaint.



The "quintessential" light keeper Ray Tiner at Seal Island, N.S. - 1983.

Almost five years after Ray Tiner had retired from Seal Island, I, too, became one of its lightkeepers. Change was in the air, and it was a very different station than I had known a decade before. By the late 1980s, automation had already closed most of the neighbouring stations, and the once busy morning radio schedule - "Good morning lights, it's Yarmouth Coast Guard Radio, go ahead Green, Pease's, Whitehead, Bon Portage, Candlebox, Cape Sable, Seal..."- had been reduced to Seal alone.

In 1986 the keepers' families had been moved off and the station was now tended by bachelor crews, working 28-day shifts. By late 1989 the station had literally been torn apart, as ragged trenches were dug for the placement of new cables to connect the automated equipment to the new engine room. Although we worked throughout the summer filling the holes, building fences and painting the engine room, it was, in a sense, for naught. By early autumn the last shift crew was taken off and the big house, with its hardwood floors and plaster walls, was bulldozed into the ground.

Today, the site is a far cry from the station that was once the communications centre of Seal Island, with its radio-phone, post office and ever watchful keepers. Amidst the wreckage of the station barns and sheds the old lighthouse still stands. Inside, the whitewashed beams still show the names of past keepers (Seal must have appealed much more to its guardians than British Columbia's Green Island; only 15 principal keepers served there during the station's 159-year history) and visitors: "Miss Poole [the island schoolteacher] August 15,1895;" "Albert Watt 1923;" and "Amber Penney, Lightkeeper's wife March 23,1982."

At the top of the tower an aero-marine beacon turns throughout the day and night, as little diesels purr in a nearby, non-descript, vinyl-sided building. Bulk diesel tanks sit in what was the basement of the house, and the old engine room by the shore is silent, home to the swallows that nest in its walls as the breeze blows through the open door.

I'd heard about the lighthouses of far off British Columbia long before I landed on Green Island or watched the salmon fleet steaming past Dryad Point. Not long before I left Seal Island I met one of the helicopter engineers working out of the Canadian Coast Guard's Regional Headquarters in Dartmouth. Although he'd been living in Nova Scotia for a few years, he was originally from Victoria and knew many of the lighthouses and lightkeepers around Vancouver Island. There was no comparison between the east coast and west coast lights, he said; Estevan, Carmanah, Pachena, they were all like miniature parks. The Coast Guard even flew out old fuel tanks to sandblast, paint and then reinstall them on the stations. I looked out at our own tanks, surrounded by diesel-tainted turf, red paint thinly concealing decades of rust. "Yup," said the engineer. "No comparison."

Four years later, Green Island would mark for me the beginning of a four-year journey covering seven lighthouses and most of the northwest coast of British Columbia. It was also a journey that reintroduced me to the work behind the title of "lightkeeper,"and the eclectic mix of folk that made up the ranks of the keepers. While the waning state of lightkeeping in the Maritimes had given me time to indulge in reflections on the history of the lights and the singular (some might say quaint) aspects of the life of the lightkeeper, the BC lighthouse system left me little time for pleasant daydreams about lightkeeping. We were too busy maintaining winches and derricks, checking generators, changing oil and filters, filing weather observations and keeping an eye on the steady stream of tugs, fish boats and ferries that churned past us each day. And there was the routine, the routine that became almost implanted in my soul, as dictated by the

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weather's three-hourly requirements, the 12-hour Climat readings, the standby generator's weekly exercise and the paperwork's monthly demands.

BC's first lightkeepers also had little time to reflect on their splendid isolation and pride in lightkeeping - they were busy polishing brass, keeping a watch for fog, hauling jugs of kerosene up steep tower steps, repairing cantankerous fog signal boilers, bucking driftwood when the government coal ran out, planting gardens and just plain surviving. Twice-annual supply deliveries by the government tender brought the staples - hundreds of pounds of tea, sugar, flour and canned goods. Not that the deliveries were always on time. Some families very nearly starved when supply tenders were delayed and when massive swells and wicked winds kept workboats away from landings for weeks on end, for fear of being smashed to kindling against the rocks.

Even when a late delivery was not critical, it was damn discouraging. In a 1945 Green Island logbook a scrawled note on the margin of a yellowed page is tinged with sarcasm: "No boat this month. No groceries. Lightkeeper lives on fresh air." These times were not unexpected, but on an island with scant garden space, the timely arrival of supplies was important. And so was the mail, that link to news of family and friends ashore. Each and every word of stale news in four-month-old newspapers was read, re-read and discussed in the light of kerosene lamps at the end of a long day's work.

Back on the east coast it had been the same, although many stations were much less isolated. Some British Columbia lightkeepers complained they'd heard that on the Great Lakes there was so much spare time on some stations that the men spent much of the day working on hobbies. Snorting in wonderment and perhaps disgust, they turned their minds back to their own "free time" activities - cutting firewood, hacking space for gardens out of the dense bush, and trying to eke out an existence on paltry wages and the infrequent supply runs. Undoubtedly, there were some better supplied stations in the country - those near towns and villages - but by and large, most keepers were on their own - buying extra coal for heating, buying their own boats and sometimes taking other jobs just to make ends meet.

It really wasn't until the late 1950s that the lighthouse service effectively entered the 20th century. For the bulk of British Columbia's lighthouses, sometimes a hundred miles from the nearest road or town, there were two major changes that dramatically altered life for their keepers - electricity and helicopters. On the east coast, electrification had begun in the'30s and '40s, relieving the keepers at less isolated mainland lights of the long night watches tending kerosene lamps in the tower. On BC's north coast, the last light was electrified in 1962 and its old vapour lamp retired, no doubt to the delight of the lightkeeper.

Electricity, though, meant much more to the keepers than an effective and reliable source of light for their flashing beacons. It also meant refrigerators, freezers, toasters, washing machines and even television. Suddenly the modern conveniences that had for so long been part of mainland life were within reach. Not that all of these machines became part of lighthouse life immediately. In 1964 the marine agent in Prince Rupert suggested to one lightkeeper "that anything electrically controlled are a source of trouble. I would like to suggest that if possible to keep away from automatic stoves and timing devices for cooking." Easy for him to say, living in the city.

Still, it was a far cry from the turn of the century, when even hot water plumbing was not looked on favourably by the lighthouse authorities. In February 1902, a terse message from Ottawa to the marine agent in Victoria laid down the law: "Hot water in a bath room is considered a luxury, and if keepers desire luxuries they must pay for them themselves." The hot water connections had been ordered by Vancouver's Brockton Point lightkeeper, who obviously had a great deal of gall to request the items, given that Brockton Point was "the only lighthouse in the Dominion that has a bath room of any kind supplied to it."

In 1911, one lightkeeper could not even requisition door mats (at the princely sum of $1.50 each) for his lighthouse on Berens Island, "as the conditions would have to be very exceptional to warrant the supply of such material." Nine decades later, oil-fired hot water tanks, bathroom vanities and moulded acrylic tub surrounds are the norm on many lightstations, as are Coast Guard-supplied door mats and other similar "luxury" items.

If electricity (and running water) improved the lightkeepers' lot, it could be said that helicopters revolutionized their lives. Now even the most isolated stations were no more than an hour or two from the nearest city. Supplies could be ordered monthly, fresh food could arrive much sooner, and most importantly, emergency medical attention could be given much more quickly and effectively. Throughout the 1960s, helo-pads went up all along the BC coast, constructed on station lawns or hunkered on spray-washed rocks. Suddenly the lights were more civilized. At the same time as the pads went up, comfortable frame houses were built to replace the old, drafty buildings that had weathered the storms and the downpours of six or seven decades. More than halfway into the 20th century, the lights were finally beginning to catch up with the standard of living enjoyed by most mainland Canadians.



Dryad Point, B.C. station grounds from the tower in 1997. Note cruise ship.

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Today, the north coast lights have a functional mix of the old and the new. Stations with the smaller (8.5 kilowatt) generators still have the traditional kitchen oil stoves, sitting like pleasant elderly ladies next to modern microconvection ovens and coffee makers. I can't help but remember the functional mix of the old and the ancient back on Gannet Rock. The big uninsulated concrete house was heated by three oil stoves - two old relics that produced more noise than heat, and in the living room a sooty giant double burner Enterprise, to which was attached at least twenty-five feet of serpentine, painted aluminum stove pipe. Whenever the fog horn was blowing, the stovetop would rattle and the lights, 150-watt bulbs naked in their fixtures, would flicker and fade with each of the horn's three blasts per minute.

Power still isn't plentiful, so when the lights go dim and black smoke flies from the back of the engine room, you know it's time to turn off the dryer or the microwave. Some stations have a neighbourly signal procedure for clothes drying or baking days - a little flag in the window will indicate that it's one family's day to make buns or finish off that massive load of spun-dry diapers.

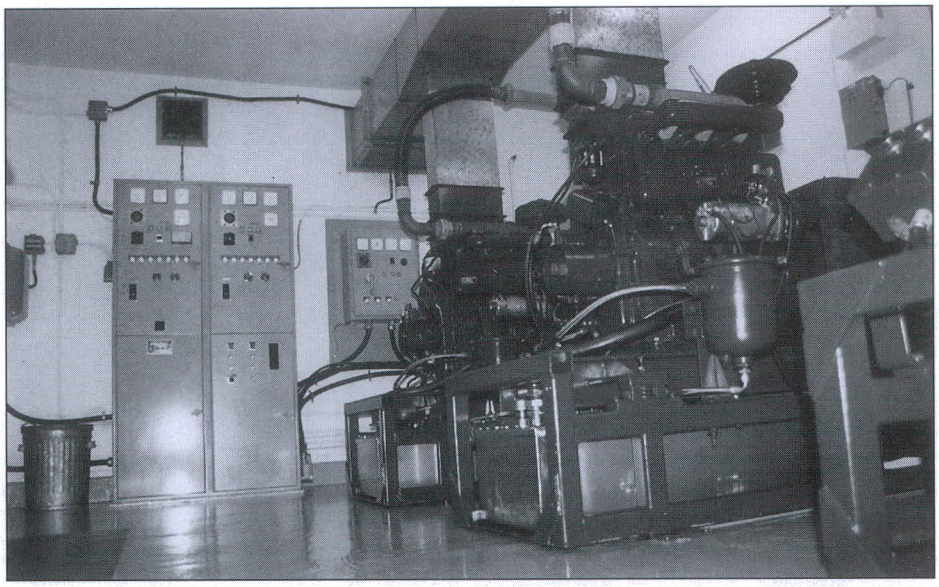
With a few exceptions, the past four decades have seen many improvements on the lights. With satellite TV, cellular phones and even internet access (imagine going back to four-month-old newspapers!) on some stations, isolation is no longer felt so keenly at many stations. It has probably made things easier for the families, who can now fly out for holidays and "blow off some of the dust" that invariably settles on life in an isolated spot. Some days the routine is all that one needs, providing an enclosed, safe, mostly predictable day within whose parameters you feel you have accomplished something. And then there are days when you want to get away from the incessant drone of the generators, the relentless weather observations, the same chit-chat with the neighbours. You want to fly the hell out and explore the coast, or even just go for a walk without having to attend to some little station duty.

But after three weeks or a month in civilization it is often a relief to return to the delights and routines of island living. Some keepers have relished life on one island, staying ten or twenty years. Others have yearned for new challenges and new vistas and have moved every few years, sending crated furniture and belongings down the highline to the waiting ship. For a while I moved every few months, anxious to see the lights, the coast, the people. One of the radio operators began calling me "Suitcase," as I skipped from Green to Ivory, back to Green, over to Langara, and then off to Ivory again. Although I was stationed on Ivory for two and a half years, my accommodating neighbours were supportive of further travels along the coast - over to McInnes, up to Boat Bluff, back to Green, Langara again, and another shot at Bonilla before heading home to Ivory.

I met many keepers as I worked my way west to Langara light and south along Hecate Strait and the Central Coast. There were people who'd spent their whole working lives on the lights, and there were people who'd been loggers, fishermen, bank managers, teachers, librarians, railwaymen, mechanics, students and professors. They'd come to the lights for different reasons, but despite varied characters and outlooks, they almost all shared a dedication to their work, and a feeling of pride and service. They'd all left behind the "real world" to live in isolation: they'd painted their towers in the hot glare of the sun; felt the sting of wind and rain at the 0330 weather; marveled at the parade of tides and seasons past their doors; spent days waiting for the fog to clear so the helicopter could land with groceries and a fat sack of mail; and wondered how anyone could live any other way.

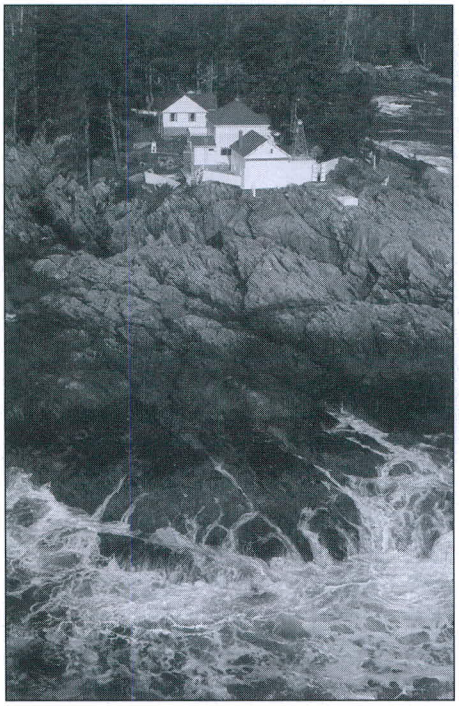
Although the locations and the history of British Columbia's north coast lights have made the experiences memorable, it is the people who have introduced me to the warmth of the light. It had been similar on the east coast, but here there was a real sense of community, even though we were spread out over 250 miles of coastline north of Vancouver Island. Much of the feeling of community is reinforced by the lighthouse communications circuit, commonly known as "the Alan," and now officially called the "ALN." Its original meaning was "Automated Lighthouse Alarm Network," a monitoring system designed to take care of the lights when the keepers were removed. Today it's a lifeline for the lights, a sometimes tenuous VHF link between individual stations and Prince Rupert Radio, through a long chain of repeaters sitting like squat sentinels on mountain tops along the coast.

The ALN is the great uniter and divider of lighthouse keepers. It's a staticy pipeline for weather observations, official messages, medevacs, grocery orders, inter-station gossip, personal (!!) phone



The immaculate engine room at the Bonilla Island, B.C. station in 1996. At least two principal keepers laid down the law that footwear was to be removed before walking on the engine room floor!

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Ivory Island, B.C., 1995.

calls, station business. It's a rumour mill and party line. Of course *no one* monitors the ALN line. Somehow, though, everyone seems to be aware of the big mix-up over so and so's grocery order when they got 50 pounds instead of 50 grams of mushrooms, or how a new recruit imagined he could smell the mainland from treeless, rockbound Triple Island.

There is an element of nosiness on the lights, but also an element of concern for and support of fellow lightkeeping families. These days particularly there's a certain sense of solidarity amongst the families. In summer 1994, news that automation would be resuming sent shock waves across the circuit. Who would be affected, how long would it take, how could the safety of mariners and aviators be ensured? These and hundreds of other questions and concerns were raised, discussed and dealt with on the ALN. Meetings were held, small triumphs celebrated, plans of attack formed. And then, in August of 1995, the bomb was dropped. All 35 lights in the province, with their 70-odd keepers, were teleconferenced with Coast Guard headquarters in Vancouver through each of the lighthouse circuits. The feeling in the air was electric as it was announced that eighteen stations in Canada would be shut down within a year and a half, including eight in BC. The remaining lights would go by the year 2000. There was an outpouring of emotion as disembodied voices along 1000 miles of coastline spoke out in frustration and anger and fear.

Four years later, the anger, frustration and fear are still there, though they have been somewhat replaced with a kind of grim acceptance. It looks like most of the lights will go, even though the weather observations, the search and rescue, and the environmental monitoring can't be duplicated by any machine yet made. Who or what will train experienced eyes on the sea and sky, pick up a distress call on a local VHF channel, or talk a nervous boater through unfamiliar waters? The coast will be a colder, darker, more dangerous place without the cordon of lights and their keepers who have served BC mariners for almost a century and a half.

Despite the news of continued destaffing, we were reluctant to quit the lights. By the fall of 1996, the light at Dryad Point, 12 miles south east of Ivory Island, had come up for competition. The Bergen family had lived there since 1964, and the station had passed from father Henry to son Harvey. In the old days, a family association like this would have continued until the next generation was ready to take over. But not at the end of the twentieth century. With Dryad on the chopping block for "fiscal '97," Harvey Bergen was forced to move to far-off Bonilla, which would probably be one of the last stations to go. And so it was that the Bergens packed up three decades of life on the Inside Passage and shipped out to Hecate Strait.

For the Mills family, it was an opportune, if not long term, move. My wife Seana and I had been married in Nova Scotia the summer before, almost a stone's throw from the old lighthouse at Sambro Island. The minister who married us had lived in Bella Bella for a decade, and she'd known Dryad and Ivory like she knew the drive from Sambro village to Halifax. A week later we left for the west coast, heading for home on Ivory. By the fall it was apparent that we would soon be broadening the lighthouse experience to include another member of the family. Dryad Point seemed like the ideal station, since it was only a ten-minute boat ride from the community of Bella Bella where a hospital, store, post office and other amenities were available. By the end of January we'd said good-bye to our good friends at Ivory Island and headed for inside waters.

Our daughter Maris was born in Prince Rupert on a beautiful sunny April afternoon. A scant week later she was with us aboard the big Sikorsky helicopter, heading down the coast over the channels and inlets, past Bonilla, McInnes, Ivory and up Seaforth Channel, to begin the first months of her life at Dryad Point lightstation.



Lovely Bonilla Island, B.C., date unknown.

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It's been a long journey from my little driftwood light to Gannet Rock and finally, Dryad Point. As I sit in my office overlooking the station, the new horn on the point is sending its little "peeeep" into the light morning fog. In June, the new solar array was installed on top of a small aluminum building, power cables snaking their way out to the point in a trench dug through the clover-covered lawn. The old horns have been switched off; they were the same ones the villagers said sounded like an elephant in distress 25 years ago in Nova Scotia, just down the road from my driftwood lighthouse. The same changes that took the life from the lighthouse there are now happening here.

I still think back to the Rock, and all the other stations I've left behind. The lights at Gannet and Dryad are linked by purpose and experience. Each of these stations represent in many ways the culmination of my lighthouse journey; Gannet was my last new east coast light and the place where the incessant rhythm of life on a light station entered my soul. Dryad is the final light of my BC years and will mark the end of my lightkeeping career, bringing to a close a job and a way of life I've lived for almost a decade. In November, I will leave this place with my wife and our little daughter, Maris, who was conceived by the sea on Ivory island. One evening not long ago she looked out the window as our beacon came on for the evening. She noticed the light and it held her attention until its steady flash had become part of her vision of the station. She won't remember this place, but it will always be part of her life.

For me, the lighthouse experience has come full circle. It has covered two very different coasts in the same country. I experienced the dying days of lightkeeping in the Maritimes; I was rejuvenated by the new experiences on the west coast. This experience has been powerful, evocative, maddening, challenging, blissful and poignant. As we near the time of further change, there is still a certain satisfaction in meditating on the lights at the end of the day. As I file my final weather [report] on a calm Dryad Point evening, my mind travels out to Bonilla Island, where these thoughts flowed from my pen on a blustery autumn evening last year:

With the day's work completed, the last weather has been picked up by Rupert. Outside the radio room window the fog horn blasts (and reminds me of the keeper on Machias Seal Island who always loved foggy nights - "I'll sleep good tonight with that blattin' bastard goin' ") as a south east gale hurls breakers on the shore and rain against the glass. Outside, the trees along the concrete walkway are waving about wildly, casting tormented shadows on the ground. Around the corner and across the little wooden footbridge, the engine room's brightly lighted interior is warm and dry. The big Lister HR3 changes speed as the station's fridges and stoves cut in and out; flickering amp and voltage meters read the load and output of the system, and there's the faint smell of paint and diesel.

Up on the hill above the houses, the tower's white light penetrates the dark. To the north and south, red sectors mark off-lying shoals, an endless pattern of "white-safe, red-beware." In our own warm house the oil stove takes the chill from the air. With a final check of the light out the window, it's time to end the day. The VHF is on, storm doors closed, and we are secure for the night.

Postscript

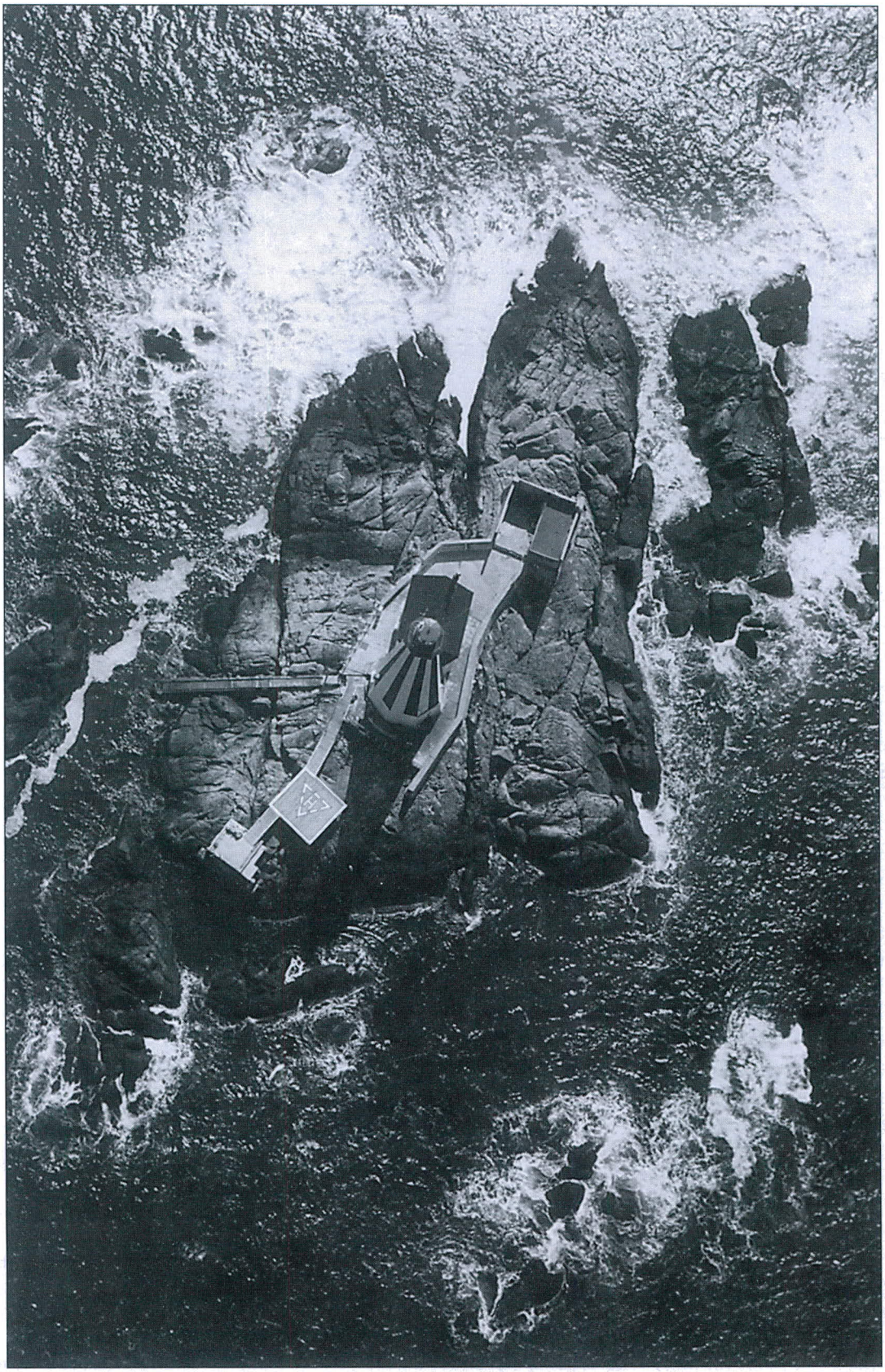
Three days before the end of March 1998, the Federal Minister of Fisheries announced that the lighthouses of British Columbia would remain staffed for the foreseeable future. While recognizing the province's strong historical and cultural ties to its lightstations, the Coast Guard also stated that "many of the remaining stations could also have been de-staffed without compromising safety." This statement contradicts the very foundation of the fight by mariners, aviators and lightkeepers to keep the lights staffed: safety through a human presence on lightstations along the coast.

There was jubilation on the lights, along with upheaval on stations where the eleventh hour reprieve had caught some keepers in the midst of getting ready for the move ashore they thought was inevitable. Later in the year, Newfoundland's lightkeepers received the same good news. In both provinces, the Coast Guard put out competitions for new lightkeeping positions, and plans were made to upgrade various lightstation facilities. So, while GPS and other electronic aids to navigation gradually supercede the old lights and foghorns, the remaining guardians on the east and west coasts of Canada continue their vigil over dangerous waters.



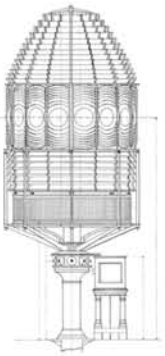
The abandoned principal keeper's dwelling of the Sambro Island Light Station, N.S. in 1998.

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Gannet Rock, N.B.

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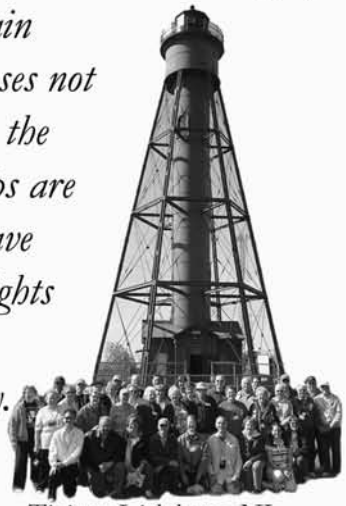
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