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Dennis Noble, *Lighthouses & Keepers*. Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1997.

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The startled waves leap over it; the storm
Smites it with all the scourges of the rain,
And steadily against its solid form
press the great shoulders of the hurricane.

-- Henry Wadsworth Longfellow "The Lighthouse"

Even after most (essentially all) manned lighthouses in the United States haven fallen to obsolescence or been fully automated, these structures still hold a sense of romanticism in our collective conscience. Longfellow manages to capture some of the danger and isolation and hope and loneliness that lighthouses engender in his fine poem. Such sentiments are what prompted me to approach *Lighthouses & Keepers*, Dennis L. Noble's history of United States lighthouses. Dr. Noble, who served twenty-one years in the Coast Guard and then earned his PhD in history from Purdue University , is eminently qualified to discuss this topic and his interest in the lighthouse legacy is amply demonstrated throughout the book.

As a historical survey, the book serves its purpose well and in an entertaining fashion more often than not. Dr. Noble has an easily read prose

style and lays out his history in a straightforward manner, taking us across the years from the completion of Boston 's Beacon Island lighthouse in 1716 to 1995 when the Boston Light Station became the last manned lighthouse in the U.S. I came away with a good sense of the rise and decline of lighthouse usage and the evolution of navigational aids in the United States by the time I was done. Dr. Noble also tries to bring us some of the mystique surrounding lighthouses and here he meets with mixed success.

The author is at his most effective when he focuses on the people involved. In the chapter on lighthouse keepers, Dr. Noble tells of Harriet Colfax, “the head keeper of the Michigan City Light Station in Indiana”. Dr. Noble relates how he and five U.S. Coast Guardsmen tried to duplicate Keeper Colfax's feat of maintaining the light during a raging storm. Coupled with a photograph of the sea lashed St. George Reef light station in California , the anecdote makes a strong impression on the life faced by men and women who kept the lights burning. In the chapter on building lighthouses, Dr. Noble takes us on a harrowing adventure with District Superintendent H. S. Wheeler who is tasked with building a lighthouse on Tillamook Rock off the coast of Oregon, one of the most isolated and dangerous locations where one was ever built. Wheeler's story reads as much like a pulp fiction thriller as it does history. Being able to mix this sort of detail with the more mundane facts of the development of lighthouse construction keeps the book moving along at both an interesting and educational pace.

Early on we are introduced to a number of characters who crop up time and again. Stephen Pleasonton is the chief villain of the story if a history of lighthouses were to have such a one. Mr. Pleasonton was fifth auditor of the Treasury Department whose office took control of navigational aids in 1820. Parsimonious to an extreme, his tight-fisted budgeting would continually endanger the lives of seamen. Winslow Lewis was Pleasonton's most trusted contractor and due to this relationship, the chief lighthouse builder for the

U.S. during the first half of the 19th Century. 1852 saw the establishment of the U.S. Lighthouse Board (and later the Bureau of Lighthouses) and the end of Pleasonton's rein of frugality. The Lighthouse Board worked hard to improve and standardize lighthouses and the training of lighthouse keepers. The men who led the Lighthouse Board and the Bureau like William B. Shubrick and George R. Putnam would oversee the expansion of the American lighthouse service in terms of both size and quality, to the greatest in the world at the time.

Some portions of the book do not live up to the quality of the rest. Given the subject, I am sure the author felt the need to touch upon the supernatural. Including ghost stories is a good idea whose execution is flawed because the narrative doesn't really add to the mythos surrounding lighthouses. He treats ghost stories in the way he treats more objective history, relating one topic after another and never really leaving us with any sense of story. This is unfortunate because Dr. Noble has earlier proved himself to be a solid storyteller. Here is his moment to shine. Instead he sticks to the grocery list. Moaning winds? Check. Disappearing girl? Check. Mysterious shrouded figure? Check. Compelling content? Three out of four isn't bad.

In a similar vein, the chapters on lightships and the lighthouse service fleets are low on narrative and high on ship specifications. The author runs down schematics in a way only a shipwright could love. To an aficionado this might prove fascinating; but not to me. As I read about lengths and displacements and beams, the words began to swim on the page, my eyes lost focus and my thoughts drifted off to haunted lighthouses and how someone could have murdered a young woman, ditched her body in the sea, blamed a ghost, and gotten away with it. Now that sounds like a good story.

The book winds down with location maps and a glossary of terms. Personally, I would have been better served had the glossary opened the book. If you are new to this sort of jargon, read this section before you begin the main portion of the book. The maps provide a good list of lighthouse locations but are otherwise a bit bland.

Despite the missteps along the way, I enjoyed the journey. I learned a great deal about the construction and architecture of lighthouses (more than I believed possible) and was actually entertained while doing so. I was introduced to a number of individuals who are in their own way pivotal to American naval and economic history. People that in a number of cases I would be interested in learning more about. *Lighthouses & Keepers* lives up to its author's intentions and provides an interesting narrative that makes the book worth the time to read.



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