Lighthouses - The Race to Illuminate the World

by Toby Chance and Peter Williams

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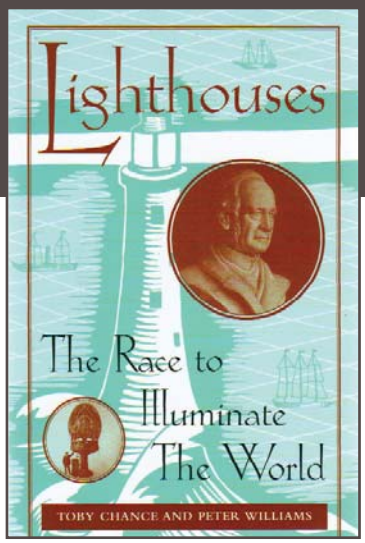
Book Review by Peter Mackay



This is a "must have" book for anyone who has more than a passing interest in the history of lighthouses. It does not cover the well trodden ground of the building of the towers and heroic battles with the elements, but focuses instead on the development of the lights that shone from them. In fact there are three intertwined themes; the rise of the great lens making firm of Chance Brothers in Birmingham; the role of governments in France and Britain in promoting (or not) the development of lighthouse technology; and the world wide expansion of lighthouses across the world using British French and, latterly, Swedish, technology to make the lights shine brighter and more reliably.

The book draws heavily, and I think for the first time, on the archives of Chance Brothers who dominated the British optical glass business in the 19th century, and shows how closely they worked with leaders in the field, such as Sir David Brewster and the Stevenson and Douglass families, in the evolution of optics to the massive dioptric lenses of the late 19th century (e.g. the 8 ton lens at Sule Skerry). It shows how Chance flourished despite the negative attitudes and policies of the British Government (in contrast to the French).

Having made its name by providing the glass for the Crystal Palace in 1851, the firm went on to dominate the lighthouse optical industry and under an official monopoly were the sole suppliers to the GLAs. Indeed (and this is not in the book) such was their domination that in the early 20th century the NLB archives show that the Stevensons were seeking unsuccessfully to use French suppliers who were cheaper and thought to be just as good. Chance provided more than 2000 lights in 73 countries, and its know-how spread even further. The book has fascinating chapters on the British contribution to the spread of lighthouses not only throughout the Empire, but in the Far East, Japan and South America-and reminds us again of the Scottish contribution, through the Stevensons` family firm and, with them, Richard Brunton in Japan, John Thomson in Singapore and George Slight in Chile.

There is a very full (and useful) bibliography, which however surprisingly omits Munro`s Scottish Lighthouses or Nicholson`s Rock Lighthouses, which may account for the authors` inaccuracies on the relationships between the three GLAs in the British Isles and a good index. This is a book both to enjoy as a continuous narrative and to use as a work of reference and a stimulus to further reading.

FROM A ROCK TO A HARD PLACE

The story of Jean Clark Zwolińska MBE
By Dale Vargas

This book describes the life of Jean Craig Stewart Clark. Born in a lighthouse on a rock sticking up out of the sea off the west coast of Scotland, Jean and her four siblings spent their childhood moving from home to home with each new posting of their lighthouse keeper father. It was unusual but strangely fulfilling upbringing in remote, inaccessible but beautiful places. Life was not easy in an inhospitable climate in days before mains electricity and central heating, telephones and television. But there were compensations: miles of unspoilt coastline and acres of countryside in which to roam. It is a way of life that no longer exists now that all lighthouses are automatic.

After a whirlwind romance and marriage Jean found herself in 1947 in Warsaw, a city devastated by the war, with two small children and no knowledge of the language. Food and other necessities of life were in very short supply and the country was in the firm grip of Stalinism.

This story tells of how Jean not only survived in this unfriendly regime with the help of a lifeline from the British Embassy but became the first port of call for many Brits "lost" in Warsaw, a role that was recognised by award of the MBE in 1978.

The book also gives an insight into the social interplay between the Poles and the British, two very different cultures that have, in the course of history, become entwined in unexpected ways.

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