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Lightkeeping on the St. Lawrence: The end of an era

Normand Lafreniere

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Lightkeeping on the St. Lawrence outlines the history of lightkeeping in the St. Lawrence River and Gulf from its emergence in 1803 until automation replaced the last lightkeeper in 1988. Fog, hidden reefs, rocks, and sandbars have made the waters of the river and gulf among the most treacherous in the world. In the earliest days of lightkeeping in this region, the safety of the mariners had to be weighed against the problem of giving aid to enemy ships. With peace between French and English, safety became the overriding factor and the number of lighthouses, then light pillars and lightships, increased dramatically.

This is a tale of shipwrecks and storms, of the lonely existence of the keeper who endured harsh working conditions, often alone or with but one or two assistants. While some lighthouses offered accommodation for the keeper's family, the occupation of lightkeeping was always one of stark isolation. Based on extensive archival material and interviews with surviving lighkeepers, the book describes the onerous working day of the men of the lights, whose duties ranged from painstakingly cleaning reflectors to repeatedly sounding the fog signal on an endless night watch. It was a difficult life with scant reward, but the diligence of the keeper kept the country open to commerce in times of peace, and safe from enemy attack in times of war.

Published with the assistance of Parks Canada in both English and French editions, the book includes thirty-five illustrations (many in full colour), maps, and tables.

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