

Tempests & Teapots: Coming to Terms with the Past

by Gary Geddes

There are a few lines in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* that have always haunted me:

Full fathom five thy father lies;
Of his bones are coral made;
Those are pearls that were his eyes;
Nothing of him that doth fade
But doth suffer a sea change
Into something rich and strange.

When I was a child in Vancouver, my grandfather fell from his fishboat and drowned off Point Atkinson Lighthouse. He had come down to Vancouver hoping to replace his false teeth, which had been lost overboard in Malaspina Strait off Powell River, but refused to stay home while they the dental work was being done. The boat was found with the engine running, rubbing against the rocks below the lighthouse, but his body was never recovered. I imagined it drifting along the bottom of the sea, moving with currents amidst forests of kelp and underwater plant-life, nosing continental shelves and exploring the world of strange creatures Jules Verne had written of in *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*. As a student at the University of British Columbia, I would often hear the mournful notes of the foghorn or see the lighthouse winking at me across the waters, a reminder of the mystery and brevity of life here on the ragged edge of the continent. Not surprisingly, I have had a lifelong fixation with lighthouses and shipwrecks.

One of the most hair-raising wrecks took place off Pachena Point on January 22, 1906, when the *Valencia*, on a run from San Francisco to Victoria, lost its way in fog and struck the rocks. Captain O.M. Johnson had miscalculated his position, drifting too far north to make the entrance to Juan de Fuca Strait. No more than thirty yards from shore, with hundred-foot cliffs towering over them, passengers and crew of the *Valencia* ought to have had a chance, but the savagery of the huge breakers smashing into the barnacled rocks proved insurmountable. Four lifeboats capsized, women, children and crew spilled into the sea only to be torn to rags on the rocks. Distress rockets blasted away two of the captain's fingers. By morning, those passengers who had been secured to the masts and rigging had perished from exposure and cold; they hung from their strings like marionettes. The Lyle harpoon gun, a last hope for getting a secure line to shore along which the few remaining passengers and crew might be carried in a harness, proved inadequate. The first line frayed and the second, reaching its mark, slipped unsecured from the cliff back into the water. Only eleven of the 160 passengers survived. This and other disasters along the Graveyard of the Pacific embarrassed the Canadian government into action, resulting in the establishing of the Bamfield life-boat station, upgrading and manning the West Coast Trail, and building several lighthouses, including the one at Sheringham Point, where an asserted effort is now being made by the community to keep the lighthouse and adjoining acreage in public hands.

A lighthouse is a beacon of hope, a symbol of human solidarity. The elegant white pinnacle that stands watch at Sheringham is no exception. Long an important landmark and guide to mariners entering the often turbulent waters of the Strait of Juan de Fuca, this historical monument has not only guided ships and small craft home to port since 1912, but also proved a source of legend to those whose families manned the light.

Joe Arden, grandson of the first lighthouse keeper, has no shortage of stories. Ask him about riding cows at the lighthouse, about the eleven-foot octopus, and about the cougar shot while it stalked his young uncle at the blackberry patch. He also tells of a huge cigar-shaped log-raft that contained 19-million board feet coming apart when it struck the Sheringham rocks. The Strait of Juan de Fuca was closed down for four days while the round-up took place.

Lanny Seaton, a former coast guard employee married into the Clark family which originally sold the Sheringham property to the government, considers the lighthouse and attached eight acres a sacred trust, which needs to be preserved intact for future generations. He's one of a group of highly motivated homeowners and public-minded citizens working to keep this piece of our heritage intact.

"There's no end of valuable projects we might achieve in the long term," Lanny says. "It's all about the value we place on local history."

As a potential model, Lanny describes how the U.S. government, along with some federal funding, turned over many of its installations to the U.S. Lighthouse Society, which has restored the lights one by one and returned them to the communities, who manage the sites and develop unique ways of creating revenue, such as the sale of replicas for which they hold the copyright and receive a small royalty.

Residents and other interested individuals have formed the Sheringham Point Lighthouse Society to advance their concerns. They not only want the property to remain unaltered and preserved for public use, but also are determined that the artifacts and oral history, including Joe Arden's stories, be cherished and preserved. MLA Brian Kerr, interviewed in his Sooke office in August, believes this approach makes sense.

"I believe in preservation," he said. "I went into politics to make a better world for my grandchildren."

Several years ago, when I made my way north by sloop to check out my ancestral ghosts and to write my floating memoir, *Sailing Home*, I was very grateful for the existence of lighthouses. I had none of the fancy modern navigational equipment, only ears, eyes and charts. I was also fascinated by the legends surrounding coastal lighthouses, many of which are told in Donald Graham's two histories, *Keepers of the Light and Lights of the Inside Passage* (Harbour Publishing, 1985 and 1986 respectively). I heard from fishermen and coastal residents at least a dozen stories about the Egg Island Light, an important navigational aid between Cape Scott and Rivers Inlet, which is open to the full fury of the Pacific. In one story the keeper's house was swamped by tidal waves and his wife and children were saved only by taking refuge on the far side of the island.

Lighthouses and their stories are a crucial part of our heritage, as important to preserve as our literature, art and architecture. Heritage is no small matter; it is not a tempest in a teapot. Regional and municipal councils, greedy for tax revenues, are often lax when it comes to heritage issues. However, there are exceptions to the rule. Point Atkinson Lighthouse, near where my grandfather drowned, has long been designated a provincial park and is visited by hundreds of citizens and tourists each day. Trails are publicly maintained. Several of the old buildings are used occasionally by local Scout troops. You can sit on the rocks and toss out a line or watch the shipping in Vancouver harbour, which includes vessels at anchor from all the major ports of the world and an amazing choreography of small power boats and sailing craft performing their beautiful dance from Coal Harbour and False Creek to Howe Sound.

As Victoria and surrounding municipalities reach their limits, population growth will push westward towards Sooke and beyond. Only farsightedness will protect this area from Disneyfication, the kind of excessive, ugly and indiscriminate building going on in so many small communities north of Nanaimo, where properties to be subdivided are stripped bare of trees, native burial grounds disappear under highways and shopping malls and theme parks, and little thought is given to long-term planning and the quality of life.

More than 2500 people have signed a petition encouraging the Canadian Coast Guard to resist pressure from developers to sell, swap or alter the access to public lands currently deemed excess.

"Fortunately," says Michael Galizio, president of the new society, "there are a lot of enlightened and public-spirited individuals working for the Coast Guard who cherish their history and its monuments. What we need now is to continue to get local, provincial and federal politicians on side."

I am more preoccupied these days with preserving the Sheringham Point Lighthouse and its property than with wild imaginings about my drowned grandfather. However, I sometimes think of him still in his watery underworld and wonder where his bones, stripped clean and white, finally assumed a sea change and took their rest. Perhaps, life's tempests over, he relocated his lost set of false teeth at the bottom of Malaspina Strait, not a mere five fathoms, but 950 feet deep, and clicking rhythmically in the cold, green current.

French Beach, Christmas, 2004
Gary Geddes

(Gary Geddes, one of Canada's most distinguished poets, authors and editors has given readings across North America and the UK, Europe, Asia, Latin America and the Middle East. Among his honours are the National Poetry Prize in Canada, the Americas Best Book Award in the Commonwealth Poetry Competition, the Gabriela Mistral Prize of Chile, and a Poetry Book Recommendation in the UK. Geddes was born June 9, 1940 in Vancouver. He completed his MA and PhD at the University of Toronto. Geddes has taught in the Department of English at Concordia University, BCIT, and the University of Victoria. In September, 1998, he was appointed as The Distinguished Professor

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