

Turning Off The Lighthouses by Silver Donald Cameron

ISLE MADAME, NS –

Bill Baker once dreamed of living on an island and keeping a lighthouse. Didn't we all? Decades later, mature and prosperous, he hunted northward from New York looking for an island to buy. Connecticut, Massachusetts, Maine. Not much available. Unaffordable. New Brunswick, Nova Scotia. He found his island at 45.58.37 North Latitude, 61.35.02 West Longitude: Henry Island, four miles off the west coast of Cape Breton, where the evening sun sets into the Gulf of St. Lawrence behind the distant smudge of Prince Edward Island.

And there was a lighthouse on the island, a flashing white light with a six-mile range, on a 53-foot octagonal tower built in 1902 by Jos. McDonald for \$3,489. The lighthouse and its site belonged to the Canadian Coast Guard. Baker owned everything else, including the lightkeeper's vacant house. The lighthouse was serviceable but shabby; the Coast Guard has lost \$35 million from its budget since 1994, and now owns 40% more property than it can really afford. With some local people, Baker formed the Henry Island Lighthouse Preservation Society to help maintain it.

"The Canadian Coast Guard was amazingly co-operative," says Baker. "Our help was embraced." The Society does painting and minor repairs, cuts the grass, keeps things trim. When the site was vandalized, they installed an elaborate security system: video cameras, movement sensors, tape-recorded warnings, all remotely monitored by ham radio operators across the bay. (Baker is President of New York Public Television, and an electronics buff.) But the lighthouse is not closed to the public. If you want to see a picture, check the website (<http://members.aol.com/w1bkr>). If you want to visit it, call Bertie Smith at (902)787-2515.

Cut now to Fort Erie, Ontario, where the Point Abino lighthouse was de-commissioned in 1996. The lighthouse can be reached only by a gated private road through a group of expensive "cottages" whose owners, chiefly American, constitute the Point Abino Association. The PAA refuses to provide public access; the Coast Guard has been paying handsomely to use what was once a public road, and even Heritage Minister Sheila Copps had to get the PAA's permission to visit the site.

Treasury Board requires that the Coast Guard convey surplus lighthouses to Public Works, which offers them to other government agencies; if those agencies don't want them, the lighthouses are to be sold to the highest bidder. The Point Abino lighthouse is appraised at \$390,000, and PAA members have a cheque ready. But a non-profit heritage group, the Point Abino Lighthouse Preservation Society, wants the building preserved and used as a Veterans' Memorial and community archive. At their urging, it was designated a National Historic Site in 1998. Astonishingly, the designation provides no protection. The feds are still entitled to sell the property, and the new owners can do whatever they like with it -- raze it, build condos or sell it to Disney. And the community group has no way of raising \$390,000.

Such dramas are playing out across the country. A century ago, Canada had more than 800 manned lighthouse; today it has 583, and fewer than 10% are manned. Within sight of my home, four lighthouses have been demolished and replaced by skeleton towers. Automation and electronic navigation are making lighthouses redundant -- though some of us who sail without extensive electronics might challenge that -- and the Coast Guard can't afford to retain them.

In many places, communities have leased them, and found creative uses for them -- as inns, galleries, interpretation centres -- but Treasury Board's insistence on disposing of them by sale to the highest bidder threatens this whole grassroots evolution, and there will never be another window of opportunity. The lighthouses are public enclaves on prime waterfront and splendid development opportunities for coastal communities, but once sold they will never be returned to public use.

The lighthouse preservation movement is strongest in Nova Scotia, where the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society is lobbying for a federal Lighthouse Protection Act which would allow communities to become "trustees of the lights" for the nation. (For details, see the Society's Web site, www.ednet.ns.ca/educ/heritage/nslps) There is a useful precedent in Canada's 1988 Heritage Railway Stations Protection Act. Today only 3.5% of Canadian lighthouses have full heritage protection; in the United States, the comparable figure is 70%.

Preserving architectural heritage, distinctive scenic features and public access to shorelines ought to be a motherhood issue. Given the high testosterone levels of Ottawa's privatizers, however, who knows? At present we can only pray for more Bill Bakers, and fewer recalcitrant outsiders like the cottagers of Point Abino.

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