

## NO IVORY IN LIGHT TOWERS

By E. M. RICHARDSON\*

**A**S some of you may have gathered, I am the last person in the world to disparage island lightkeeping, but I must admit it has its limitations as a preparation for public speaking. However, I was asked merely to tell you about some of the problems besetting me as an author who works far from libraries and reference sources, and without the stimulation of fellow workers.

I realize, of course, that many difficulties facing me must necessarily differ from those plaguing a town or city writer and, as a matter of fact, I have found no solution for most of my own peculiar problems. I am afraid the only help I can hope to be is to encourage some of you to say, "Well, if *she* can do it, so can I!"

On learning that I am a published author, some new and well-meaning acquaintances exclaim, "I suppose, 'way off there on that island, you had to do *something!*" The idea being that writing books is one easy way of killing time, and perhaps not so reputable as some. Others share the view of a French writer, de Gaultier, who declared, "The poet, retired to his tower of Ivory. . .resembles, whether he so wishes or not, another solitary figure, the watcher enclosed. . .in a lighthouse." And I find many people connecting, or confusing, the two towers. I can assure you that at least one lighthouse, that on Bon Portage, contains no ivory. And island life is, of necessity, too strenuous, too self-dependent to allow much time for wooing inspiration and seeking hidden lessons in seashells, unless it be for a short introspective retreat such as Anne Morrow Lindbergh describes in her delicate and beautifully written *Gift from the Sea*. And when I say "island" I mean something rather different from Betty Macdonald's suburb of *Onions in the Stew*. After all, Montreal is an island, or Manhattan. Fraser Darling, a British writer, more nearly approximated our experience, and in his book *Island Life* he states his conclusion, "One family is too small a unit to live alone on a small island. Life is not economical when you have to turn your hand to every kind of a job perforce; nor is one family big enough to create and maintain a proper social evolution." I read this some years ago, when our family of five seemed to have overcome most drawbacks of island living, and I was then reluctant to agree with him. I see the truth of his arguments now—too much must be won and held

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by the work of our hands to leave sufficient time and strength for sustained creative effort. Don't mistake me, the life itself can be satisfying creative, and my husband and I remain deeply committed to it; but we realize that lightkeeping is far from a perfect adjunct to writing.

To show what I mean, perhaps I can tell you briefly about our island and lighthouse, while I apologise for what will be repetitious to any of you who may have read *We Keep a Light* recently enough to remember that part of it. For most people the word *lighthouse* evokes pictures of a slender stone tower rising from an overwhelmed reef; but our little wooden building on its grassy point scarcely presumes to claim relationship with those famous aristocrats. True, the island lies three miles offshore, and is often wind-swept and fog-drenched; but it contains six hundred acres or more and soon after going there we added small scale farming to lightkeeping, with the added chores that livestock and gardens mean. Then, while my three children were of school age, I doubled as teacher.

On the island we have fewer interruptions perhaps, than where doorbells and telephones play hob with a writing schedule, but those we do have go deeper and last longer. From the first, Bon Portage has been a favorite summer vacation spot for friends and relatives. Always at other seasons there have been the occasional stranded seaman, and lobstermen caught ashore by a change in the weather. This means they must stay with us overnight at least, usually it means several days of waiting for wind and sea to moderate. And indifferent hospitality, it seems to us, would be unforgiveable in a place where a guest, though he felt unwelcome, could not leave. We gladly do what we can. I have friends who say, "But why do *you* bother? Those men are nothing to you." Offislanders just don't understand. I cannot discuss my writing with them, but if trouble should strike Bon Portage, those are the men we must ask to risk their boats and their lives to bring us help. They are the men who have proved they will do just that. Some are men who, sagging at the wheel with weariness after a day's pounding at sea, put out again to carry us home, when we are caught on the mainland and our smaller boat cannot safely stem into the storm. But it does seem that, insofar as guests are concerned, we go from one extreme to the other: from weeks without any contact with mainlanders, to weeks when the island is fairly overrun with them.

Our guest-book shows that since the publication of *We Keep a Light*, over two hundred people come each summer to

visit the lighthouse, which is open to public inspection. Since visitors see every room in the house I am forced to be a fairly good housekeeper—rather against my natural inclination! I have no place but the living-room in which to write and when visitors, in such numbers and at any moment, must be welcomed and shown about, I cannot leave manuscript strewn around. However, it is a joy to share our island and our home with most of these guests, especially with those who sense why we love the life and who present to us aspects of their off-island world, and so keep us from becoming self-centered, with ingrown minds.

We have a tyrant most authors escape. Time and tide. . . says the old adage, and along the shore the greater of these is tide. I like this yarn, because it shows how the tide's influence, once established, is seldom thrown off. Hoddie sailed in and out of Shag Harbour for many years, leaving on the early ebb, coming home on the flood. When he retired from the sea, Ford cars were coming into use in the district, so Hoddie bought one and had it put into his barn. And there it sat, while the truth gradually dawned upon the village that Hoddie was scared of the thing. Finally a neighbour pointed out to him the pleasure and convenience he was denying himself. "I know. I know. 'Tain't right." Hoddie admitted. Then, with grim determination, "An' t'morra morning *on the ebb* I'm atakin' her out."

While we are not so bound by the tide as are the fishermen, we are affected, since we cannot land or launch our boat at dead low water, nor at the full if a sea is running. I can never say, "From such an hour to such an hour I shall be writing and should not be disturbed." That would be the very time a change in wind or weather would mean I must drop everything to get a "mug-up" ready, gather mail and the supply-list, so that one of the men can go to the main while the tide suits.

You might think that, free from the demands of school and business hours, our days would flow by in a clockless dream. This is far from so; many aspects of lightkeeping demand close attention to time, and the keeping of exact records. Without a strict schedule—though it must often be broken—family life on an island would become formless, if not chaotic. This was especially true while the children were at school and I was perpetually racing the minute hand. Then (though this was to prove a blessing in disguise) in 1939 the clock assumed new authority.

Along with other lightkeepers, we were at that time enrolled in Coastal Defense and required to listen to our radio

for ten minutes every four hours, to receive coded instructions regarding lights and fog-alarms. Morrill took over the toughest session, that at 3.30 a.m., but since I was nearest the radio during the day, most of the scheduled listening fell to me. We were near enough the convoy lanes that we saw crippled ships limping past and the depth charges of the anti-submarine patrols often rattled the lighthouse windows, so we needed no urging to do our part. Yet, in the way that personal inconveniences can, in time, overshadow great issues, peace came to mean to us, primarily, that blessed time when we could both leave the lighthouse for four hours at a stretch; could go to bed and sleep through the night. Remember, there are no holidays and no Sundays for lightkeepers, and we had six years of this special duty.

"But sweet are the uses of adversity," I tried to console myself, stumbling back to bed on the cold winter nights during 1943-44. For, amid the busiest portion of our lives, I had taken the notion to write a book, telling just why I lived in a lighthouse and liked it. And those ten minute vigils at the radio were providing me with the time I had feared I couldn't possibly find. At night I schooled myself not to fall asleep at once but to put my mind upon what I wanted to write the next day; my first book was all planned in the quiet dark, while I waited for the alarm to summon me to the 11.30 schedule.

Due to lighthouse construction, the radio must be kept in the living-room and could not be heard from the kitchen. Hence, four times daily, I *had* to leave my work and spend five to ten minutes listening. I kept paper and pencil (later my typewriter) handy, and so gained about twenty writing minutes daily. That year taught me concentration and how to salvage precious moments. Believe me, I did no staring at blank sheets, nor ripping pages from typewriter to wastebasket—as authors in fiction seem fond of doing—for there were always words waiting for their transcription to paper. Not likely those conditions will ever be duplicated for any of you, nor again for me, but perhaps you have other scattered moments you might put to use.

No matter where she lives, a woman writer who has a family and no household help has her own peculiar troubles. Agnes Newton Keith, of *Land Below the Wind* and *Three Came Back* calls them the biological disadvantages of being a Mummy writer rather than a Daddy—thinking, no doubt, of her son's demands. It's true a wife can spare her husband interruptions and minor irritations in a way no one can do for her. But, on

the other hand, we wives have our biological advantages, too. When everything you write seems utter rubbish and you're convinced you haven't got what it takes to do better—ever—it's something to know you have a husband who will support you, supposing you never write another word! And men *do* learn to respect their wives' absorption in their work, even when it means breaking long-established habits. If Morrill asks me something that doesn't actually need an immediate answer and I mumble in a vague dumb sort of way, he recognizes that I don't want to be disturbed just then and postpones the whole thing. To such urgent demands as "Where did you put my pipe?" or "Do you know where I left the hammer?" I've learned to say (without detaching my mind), "Now, I saw that." For some reason this assures him that I have his interests at heart and am searching my memory, when actually I am clinging desperately to a slippery idea or a telling phrase. Nine times out of ten he soon rejoices, "Oh, here it is." and no harm is done by my deceit. But I wasn't asked to talk on *How to Fool Your Husband!* At any rate, I think you can understand that, whatever else it may have been, it wasn't boredom or empty hours on my hands which started me writing.

Why does *anyone* start to write? I suppose there are as many answers as there are authors and would-be authors, yet this remains the great mystery of the whole thing. None of us can explain to a non-writer the complete "why", or name the urge that drives us on and, when thwarted, leaves a queer hunger and a nagging dissatisfaction; nor can we describe the exhilaration when words come freely and lend themselves compliantly to our use. A critic in the *London Times* limits the basic reasons for writing to three. "Cash, vanity, and the poetic impulse probably exhaust the range," he says. Though cash always comes in handy, I suppose the second, vanity, more nearly covers my case, for I *was* stirred by a desire to vindicate my choice of life. But it was not quite that simple. I wanted to share a worthwhile experience but, above all, I write that first book to recapture and hold everything possible of the early island years. I could have had no conscious presentiment of nearing and tragic change, yet I remember that I wrote under considerable pressure to get things down as quickly as possible. It was a happy book because, though life was often circumscribed, it usually wore a smile and it marched to the enticing rhythms of tides and seasons. One good rule for starting to write would be to have something that *demand*s to be told, I would say.

I somehow managed to complete that first book inside a

year. I can see now that more time might have rectified shortcomings, but much of my feeling must have found its way through my words, for many readers, British and American as well as Canadian, have written me—are still writing me—most understanding letters. Then in March of this year, the Library of Congress asked permission to transcribe it into Braille. That is a wonderful thing, I feel, to happen to any book, and a thing that leaves me prouder, and humbler, than I can tell you.

I should like to say here that my writing headaches have *not* included obdurate editors. The Ryerson Press launched me, a completely unknown author, at a time when their output was limited by war restrictions, and they have been kind and helpful ever since. Though I have not had the same personal contacts with them, my British and American publishers, too, have proved friendly and considerate. This is lucky for me; it would be difficult to cope with an unreasonable editor, where the only exchange is by mail and maildays can be anywhere from a week to a month apart.

I should also like to say that, despite a rather widespread belief that Canadians are predominantly narrow-minded Puritans, it was the editor for the American Book Club, and not the United Church Publishing House of Canada, that asked for deletions and rephrasing in the sometimes trenchant vernacular in my novel. I don't know that this proves anything, but I thought it worth mentioning.

"One book doesn't make an author," I knew; but simmering in my mind I had long had an idea for a novel. Once *We Keep a Light* had been accepted I thought I'd soon have a second book written. That's what I thought! Apart from gaining the necessary time—and this problem confronts all writers who must do other work, as most of us must—I had run into few problems while writing the simple story of our own life. When I began fiction I met other, and very real, difficulties. Wherever one works, the chief struggles are apt to be in finding a suitable idea, with the ensuing plot and with the characters; though the actual getting them all on paper accounts for most of the sweat and the swearwords. There is also the task of establishing an authentic background, especially if one is dealing with a past period or a little-known locality.

First must come the idea. Some authors find theirs in the compost-heap (I presume); others weave theirs loosely out of gossamer; the great writers have found all they need in everyday life and commonplace people. A good book need only deal with the life of an ordinary individual for the least amongst us

knows and endures stupendous struggles, and the answer to life is in those struggles, can we but find it. Speaking as a reader, I dislike contrived difficulties. Often I am tempted to say impatiently to an agonising character, "But those aren't iron bars. They are merely cowebs too near your eyes. Put up your hand, man, and brush them away." The simple story must, however, be told by a writer who can depict commonplace lives with understanding and (again speaking as a reader) compassion. Still, there should be no lack of ideas; I think they are all around us, like unheard sound waves, and now and then our mind, attuned and receptive, brings in one that satisfies our taste and need. But apparently an idea sometimes picks a writer, rather than the other way around; that seems to be what happened to me!

I spent much of my childhood on a small island near where I now live. On a rocky hillside was the family burying-ground of the early settlers, and off to one side was the shallow grass-grown depression known as "poor Billy's grave," though Billy's body had long since been exhumed and reburied on the mainland. In that empty grave lay the germ of a story which entered my consciousness then and remained there down through the years. When I opened my mind to it, other half-forgotten tales rushed in to bolster and supplement it. My trouble has been, not a dearth of ideas but an overwhelming flood, for I live in a region rich with drama, past and present, and the material has scarcely been touched. (I don't believe I am particularly favoured in this; there are few places in Canada not equally rich). I cannot explain why a past age should have engrossed me to the exclusion of the present; the stuff of books—and life—joy and tragedy, achievement and defeat, and the beauties of faith and courage are in today as abundantly as in yesterday. But for me the stories heard in my childhood drown out today's stirring tales; people of a former generation intrigue me most; perhaps because they lend themselves to manipulation more readily, and because they have been so long entrenched in my imagination.

My plot grew rapidly from the original idea; it was full grown before I could get a word of it down on paper and, fortunately, proved sufficiently pliable to be changed in detail when I began to use it. Here again I had a superabundance and I started *Desired Haven* with great confidence. It was not published until eight years later—and then only half the story I had set out to tell. The delay was largely due to personal problems which often demanded every bit of my time and strength.

During one year I wrote nothing, but throughout the others I plugged away whenever possible. This was usually only in the three months from New Year's to April and spring housecleaning. However, during the non-writing months the story grew—in a distorted fashion—as provocative situations and pertinent bits of conversation presented themselves and were trapped with words hastily scrawled on odds and ends of paper. These scraps were thrust into mailla envelopes to be used, or discarded, when next I could get down to work. Many proved useful, but that haphazard system made for duplications and confusion. And always, when I rebegan work each winter, I would find myself dreadfully rusty—slow and fumbling. It's just as well I come from a stubborn breed.

In an article in the May *Atlantic Prof.* Cowden warns, "Practice is as essential to the writer as it is to the violinist. Lack of practice results in the same clogging of the spirit in the one case as in the other," and he goes on to say, "The writer will find the task easier if he makes a habit of it and it becomes a regular and natural element of his living." Don't we all agree! Like Hoddie, I am forever resolving, "T'morra mornin' on the ebb. . ." but unlike him I am usually unable to implement my resolutions, though I well realize that long periods of inaction, such as mine, are not conducive to good or easy writing.

Then (getting back to my novel) to complicate matters, after a few winters' work and several false starts, I was forced to acknowledge that I had just too much story for one book. By that time characters and situations had become so closely interwoven that I was unable to delete to any appreciable extent. That pointed up one disadvantage of a solitary writer; I had no one with whom to discuss such a problem. Another author might have shown me where to be ruthless with characters who, like the Arab's camel, had insinuated themselves into the story's tent. Though I still believe one book would have been stronger and more coherent, I was forced to divide the story. It's too late to bewail that now; *Desired Haven* was published in 1952 and I am now working on its sequel—the book I had in mind when I started.

As I've said, the idea and the plot came willingly, and my characters were soon real people to me, possessing distinct personalities and ways of speech. I knew they would use the same tangy and picturesque vocabularies as the fishermen who visited the lighthouse. So, I could see my people and hear them. It was when I was ready to introduce them to my readers that I met a headache peculiar to writing remote from libraries and



museums. *Where could I find answers to the swarming questions that arose:* What would my characters be wearing? What did they eat? How did they furnish their small homes? What were their beliefs and interests, here on this isolated shore? I had loved my great-grandmother's tales of "the olden days" but I had never asked her such questions as "When you were first married, did you cook over a stove or a fireplace?" I was fortunate in possessing the one informative local history, but it gave few homely details and beyond its scope I was completely on my own, unable even to visit people who might have knowledge I needed. The letters upon letters I've written "oldest inhabitants"! I probably put as many words into them as into my novel itself. My mother responded nobly, and she remembered old tales that threw a light upon clothes and customs and the type of boats used at the time of which I was writing. She also donated her collection of family tintypes, to which I could refer for details of dress and coiffures. Retired sea captains, living far from their old Nova Scotian homes, but possessing retentive minds, wrote me fascinating yarns. Thus, though letters are a slow and arduous way of gathering information, they have given me much authentic material.

And now I should like to introduce my scrapbooks and notebooks. If you have access to a good library and archives, these are scarcely worth the trouble I take; for me, they have proved essential. The scrapbooks started with informative pictures hastily clipped from newspapers and magazines, and pasted in a discarded scribbler to keep them from getting lost. Later, as I recognized their value, I used large regulation scrapbooks and now have several, one for each subject in which I am interested.

Of even greater help were, and are, my note books. I've never taken a course in writing nor do I subscribe to any writer's magazines. Mistakenly or not, I have confidence that given time and enough paper and pencils I can lick what I want to say into shape. That doesn't mean that I don't eagerly welcome helpful hints. And since I am denied the privileges of workshop discussions, literary "jam sessions", and lectures by leading authors, I early began to make notes from articles about the art of writing, and to copy evocative sentences from other's books. My first notebook starts with this quotation from Charles Reade, "I milked 300 cows for it, but the butter I made is mine." I still feel it pertinent to my work, and perhaps I salve my conscience with it, though even Moliere acknowledged, "I took my own where I found it." Many terms relating to sailing ships and vessels were "milked" from my reading, for steam had

replaced canvas in the coastal packets of my childhood travels and, of course, a little girl was not allowed to accompany her brothers on their visits to vessels anchored in the harbour.

In his penetrating review of *Desired Haven* in the *Queen's Quarterly*, Desmond Pacey calls my second-hand recounting of wrecks and sea adventures "an annoying habit." I assure him it was one I adopted unwillingly and after many trials and errors. But how else could I recount such incidents but second hand, as they came to me? Short of shipping on a wind jammer? And that might well prove annoying in other ways, for though I love the sea and sing its praises loudly, once I am at its mercy, it spares me nothing. I didn't resort to the method I used until I was convinced I lacked the experience and detailed knowledge for immediate reporting. Unfortunately, I knew just too much to be satisfied with a few glib nautical phrases and the hazy imagination which seems to get some writers of sea-tales by. At least no old salts have taken my ships or my navigation to task.

There is, of course, a narrow limit to what help one can get from other people's work and, at any rate, once I started writing I was forced to restrict still further my reading, already restricted from the omniverous delving of my youth. This may not have been all deprivation. "Reading maketh a full man," but over-reading, like over-eating, may become a drug to dull and blunt the mind. I believe it was good for *me* to see with my own eyes, to ponder more on what I saw, to live first-hand instead of following my early tendency to lose myself in the vicarious life offered by books. On the other hand, without what books have taught me, I should have missed much of what life has laid at my feet, where books are still my chief contact with other minds, and have proved true friends when winter seas and ice kept all others away.

To get back briefly, to the business of producing one's own books. To the beginner I would say only this, "Don't lose faith in yourself. Every writer has his or her own advantages and disadvantages and we can all find excuses, but excuses, no matter how valid, put no words on paper. Don't tell yourself, 'It's all right for her to talk. Now if I were living somewhere away from the interruptions I have, somewhere like in a lighthouse. . .'" I assure you, you would only be exchanging one set of problems for another. I am under no delusion that a move to the mainland would cancel my problems.

As I said at the start, lighthouses provide no ivory towers, but they do gain a hold on one's affections. I find myself in

sympathy with the little girl who lived at the Brier Island Light, off Nova Scotia, and who, when she was five, went with the family for a picnic on the mainland. When lunch time came she could not be found, but the others finally caught up with her, some two miles further along the highway. They asked where she was going.

She replied, "I want to go to the end of the road and see the lighthouse."

"Oh," they told her, "You won't come to the end of this road and there is no lighthouse on it."

She turned to face them. "What a funny place to live. No end of the road and no lighthouse. Let's go home."