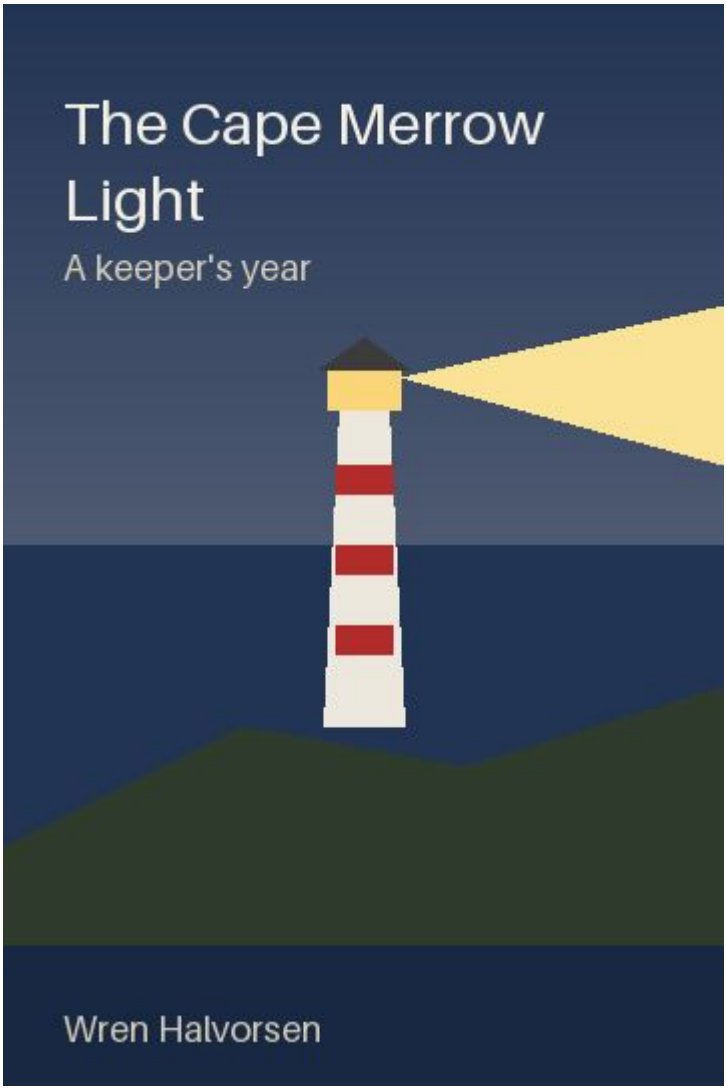


The Cape Merrow Light

A keeper's year

Wren Halvorsen

Saltmarsh Press

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About this book

1. Arrival

The mail boat put me ashore at Cape Merrow on the first of March, with two crates of books, a box of lamp wicks and a letter from the Lighthouse Board that said, in its last line, “The previous keeper will show you everything.” The previous keeper had left in January. What he left behind was a logbook, a kettle and a cat named Fathom who had decided, long before I came, that the warmest place on the cape was the lamp room.

The light stands on a shelf of grey rock forty feet above the water. The house is joined to it by a covered passage, so a keeper can reach the stairs without stepping outside, which in a northeast gale is not a small thing. There are 112 steps to the gallery. I counted them the first night and every night after, until I stopped noticing.

The logbook was the best teacher I had. Every entry gave the time the lamp was lit and put out, the weather at six-hour intervals, and anything that passed: a trawler, a pod of pilot whales, once a rowboat “with two men in it, neither of them rowing.” I kept to the same form, and I have used it for this book.

> *March 3. Wind NE, force 6. Lamp lit 18:04, out 06:31. Fathom asleep on the clockwork. Glass shows a falling barometer; expect a hard night.*

A light is a machine for keeping time as much as for keeping ships off the rocks. It turns once every twenty seconds, which sailors read as its name: two white flashes, a pause, and one more. If the clockwork stops, the flashes stop, and a ship that has been counting them no longer knows which headland it is looking at.

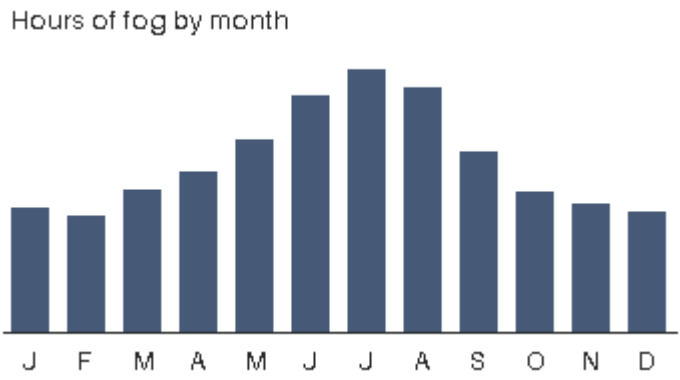
2. The lamp

The lamp itself is smaller than people expect, a burner no wider than a dinner plate. What makes it reach the horizon is the lens around it, eight panels of glass prisms that bend the light into beams. The prisms have to be wiped every morning. Salt dries on them in a fine white film, and a film you can barely see costs miles of range.

My day was set by the lamp’s hours, which the Board publishes as a table for each month. The table below is the one pinned beside the lamp room door.

Month	Lit	Out	Hours burning
March	18:05	06:30	12.4
June	21:10	04:15	7.1
September	19:25	06:05	10.7
December	16:00	08:20	16.3

Fog is the other clock. When the far buoy disappears, the keeper starts the fog signal and keeps it going until the buoy comes back. I logged fog in hours, and by the end of the year the numbers made a shape I could have guessed: the fog comes with the warm months, when the sea is still cold.

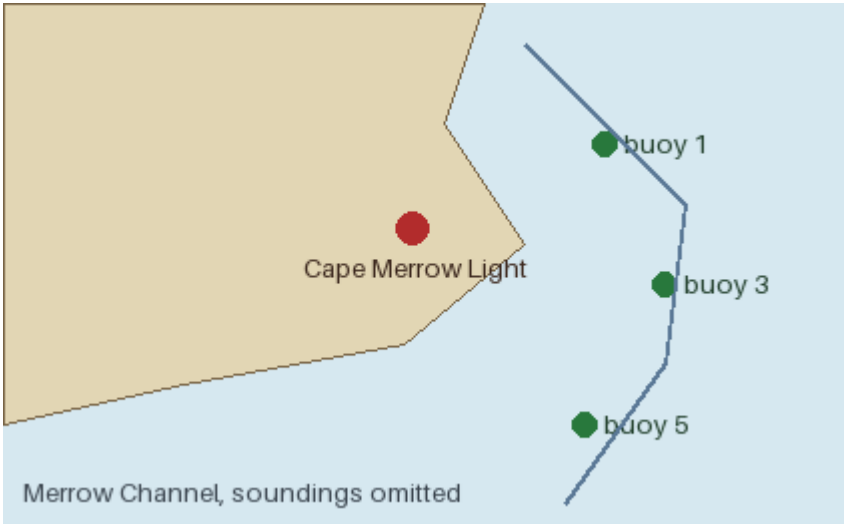


Hours of fog logged at Cape Merrow, by month.

Fathom ignored the fog signal entirely. The only sound that moved him was the lid of the wick box, which he could hear from the bottom of the stairs.

3. Winter

By November the mail boat came every two weeks instead of every week, and then only when the sea allowed. I learned to plan in fortnights: flour, lamp oil, coffee, and a list of small repairs that could wait for calm days. The channel buoys were checked from the gallery with a telescope each morning. If one had dragged its mooring, the report went out on the radio at noon.



The cape and the Merrow Channel buoys.

Winter work at a light is mostly about keeping water out. Every storm found a new way in: under the passage door, through a cracked pane in the lantern, along a seam in the oil store roof. My notes from those months read like a list of leaks and the order I fixed them in.

- Seal the lantern pane on the north side before the next gale.
- Re-hang the passage door, which drops a quarter inch every winter.
- Move the oil drums off the floor of the store, onto planks.

- Write to the Board about the radio battery, again.

On the last night of the year the wind dropped, the sky cleared, and I could see three other lights along the coast, each counting its own pattern. I wrote them into the log by name, as the old keeper had done every New Year’s Eve, and went up the 112 steps one more time to wipe the glass.

About this book

The Cape Merrow light, its keeper, Saltmarsh Press and Wren Halvorsen are fictional. The text and pictures were made for pdfconversionapi.com as sample data and are released under CC0-1.0.