

D.S. Murray...For The Safety of All

By Katie Macleod

“The Butt of Lewis Lighthouse was one of the highlights of my childhood,” says author Donald S. Murray, of the landmark that stands in his home district of Ness. “I remember as a young child climbing up there. It was a very distinct, beautiful day, and you could see all of Ness, profoundly interesting from the top of a lighthouse. I think my love affair with lighthouses began that day.”

Donald’s personal connection to lighthouses, and his story of climbing up the tower at the Butt of Lewis with then-keeper Donald John Smith, appears in the early pages of *For the Safety of All*, his latest book, published last month by Historic Environment Scotland and the Northern Lighthouse Board as part of Scotland’s Year of Coasts and Waters. In the introduction he writes of lighthouses that “there has been a closeness and steadiness to our relationship, as if, for much of my life, they have kept pace and in close contact with me.”

For the Safety of All is a history of Scotland’s lighthouses, but it is far more nuanced and layered than a straightforward account of their emergence on our coastlines. “I was given a blank page by Historic Environment Scotland,” says Donald, explaining that because there are already many good books about the history of lighthouses in existence, he “didn’t want to duplicate that.”

He started planning the structure of the book during long walks – “I don’t write ideas down, I walk, that’s my way of planning” – and eventually undertook months-long, in-depth research that involved reading countless books and visiting lighthouses across the country from his base at a friend’s house in Lochcarron during the winter of late 2019 and early 2020.

What emerged from those walks, interviews, and research is a fascinating history that interweaves stories from the lives of lightkeepers over the centuries with the physical development of the lighthouses themselves. Each chapter covers a distinct theme, beginning with the universal creation of lighthouses and the Scottish tradition of lighthouse building, and moving on to lighthouses in times of war, their appearance in literature, the innovations that accompanied their construction, and their relationship to the natural world.

Some of the stories featured in the book were ones which Donald already knew from his childhood in Lewis and from friends in Shetland, where he now lives, but others appeared over the course of writing the book. “There was a lot that was really quite interesting, but when you’re writing a book, there are avenues you can’t go down. There’s too much of a diversion in them... Sometimes the book is as much what you leave out, as what you put in.”

The stories that did make the final cut are varied and wide-ranging, from locations like Arbroath, Tiree, Fraserburgh, and Skye. From the Western Isles alone, there’s the tale of how supplies for the Butt of Lewis lighthouse used to be landed at the beach at Port Stoth, before the road was built, and how the building itself came under fire in the Second World War; the first-hand account from Calum Macaulay, a lightkeeper from Breasclete, who helped rescue passengers from a sinking East German cargo ship carrying sugar from Cuba through the Pentland Skerries; and even a report of lightkeepers at Eilean Glas in Scalpay attempting to save a Great Auk that had been found in St. Kilda in 1821.

Donald’s research, and the editing process, was even more detailed than one might expect for a project of this scope, partly because of the devotion lighthouses encourage in their fans: “You have to be incredibly careful with lighthouses because there are people who are experts in their knowledge of them.”

As well as meticulous research, *For the Safety of All* also features many previously unpublished photos, carefully chosen by Alistair Burns at Historic Environment Scotland to complement the narrative. “There was enormous talent and enormous skill that Alistair showed in choosing the right photos for the book, I was really impressed. It’s a beautiful book,” says Donald of the finished product.

Released on 29th July, the book has already been praised by *The Herald*, *The Times*, and *The Scotsman*, described by the latter as “an illuminating love letter to the lighthouses of Scotland.” After multiple publication delays due to the pandemic (it was originally set to go on sale in October 2020), the official book launch event will be taking place at Sumburgh Head Lighthouse in Shetland on 8th August. Attendees will be welcomed by music from island musicians including Claire White, Iain ‘Costello’ Maciver, and Donald Anderson, and there will even be a blast of the lighthouse foghorn, one of the only remaining working foghorns in the country.

“You know, as islanders we’re all affected by lighthouses,” Donald muses. “I’ve got a lighthouse here in my view, the Bressay one, right in front of me – and they’re almost invisible to us. At one time, if you consider our ancestors, they must have looked like they came from a science fiction story.”

It’s not science fiction, but with poetry, last-minute shipwreck rescues, historic architectural firsts, and even a murder, Donald’s latest book – his love letter to lighthouses – has something for every reader to enjoy.



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By George Mair

THEY have stood for centuries as beacons to guide sailors in perilous seas and iconic examples of Scotland’s technological innovation. Now the fascinating history of Scotland’s lighthouses has been revealed through the stories and voices of their keepers in a new book.

For the Safety of All
A Story of Scotland's Lighthouses
Donald S. Murray

THE SUNDAY TIMES
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