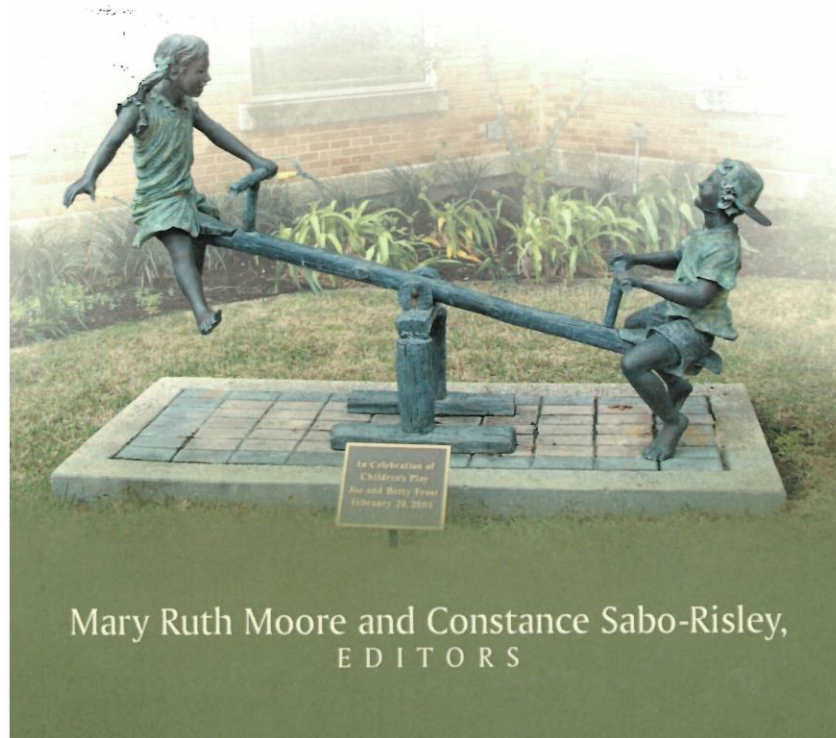



ESSAYS IN HONOR OF JOE L. FROST

Play in American Life



Mary Ruth Moore and Constance Sabo-Risley,
EDITORS



Stormy Passages: Searching for “A Straight, True Light”¹

— ELIZABETH GOODENOUGH —

There is no joy in the easy way.²
--Kurt Hahn

No circumstance whatever will excuse any keeper for failing to exhibit the lights in his charge at the prescribed time or for neglecting to keep them burning with the greatest possible brilliancy.
--1905 Rules and Instructions for the Guidance of Lightkeepers,
Canadian Marine Services, Department of Transport ³

Since 1995 I've been inviting people to comment (through memoir, essays, fiction, poetry, graphic artwork, digital audiowalk or film interview) on a significant private realm of early life that has left vivid images in memory. How was this space or place meaningful? How does it resonate with your present life? Many have extended their speculations to the subject in general, and have spoken about one or more “secret spaces” that provoke imagination--from the experiences of other children to the making of art. The striking variety of places and behaviors, in a range of prose styles, share the conditions of being intensely memorable vignettes that enable some conclusions about the situations and spaces that need preserving and extending because of their salutary influence on the human spirit. These

offerings help provide an iconography or conceptual map of the regions of childhood.

Although I expected this autobiographical exercise to yield a few archetypal zones--under a bush, up in a tree, behind the stairs--I discovered a galaxy of unexpected playscapes. These accounts also infuse subjects I teach, such as the portrayal of environmental themes in children's literature from its 18th-century origins to the present. Ritualistic spaces in narratives, like handmade hideouts, tell us about power differentials between children and adults. Histories of play, placemaking, and predation cross over in texts of solo survival from *The Life and Adventures of Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884) to *Island of the Blue Dolphins* (1960). Island sagas recount how castaways subsist by fort building. Such works offer a microcosmic look at ancient ecological truths that endure into the 21st century. They delineate a psychogeography long recognized as ideal for play--the shoreline. As Penny Wilson states, "The ultimate loose part is the sea and the earth and the space where they meet" (16).

Simon Nicholson's coinage of "loose parts" (Wilson 17) could catalogue this giant playground: ample driftwood, dirt, mud, lobster buoys, brambles, fields, rock caves, ponds, and the teeming areas between high and low tides. In the words of Calvin and Hobbs, "There's treasure everywhere!"TM This unruly universe of clandestine beach environments--from tidepools and sandcastles to dugouts and cliff walks--reveals enormous diversity. Embellished with dune grass, seaweed, shells and other beach-comb marvels, sand castles empower children to exercise godlike creativity. Scientific studies of brain activity reveal that play develops an infinite range of musical, spatial and emotional intelligences. Fantasy islands resonated this way with my students at Claremont McKenna College. Tom Sawyer's island remained their favorite part of Disneyland. Unlike the rides, over as fast as our dog eats dinner, this synthetic retreat offered a place to hide and script their own scenarios as did Twain's twelve-year-old small-town troublemaker.

Through accounts like theirs I began to learn how narratives of becoming develop organically from imaginative play. Placemaking and

storytelling originate together somewhere outside of cognition. These twin survival skills of our species negotiate boundaries between self and other. While using all the senses, they cultivate an instinct for one's own "story." In his contribution to *Secret Spaces of Childhood*, the great naturalist E. O. Wilson identified an innate impulse to build, "an enhanced joy in the construction of habitation" foundational to play. Wilson views the quest for "secret hideaways" as a "universal," a "fundamental trait of human nature" that is "of ultimate value in survival." By connecting "identification of place" to "nourishing individuality," Wilson turned play inside out for me. He alerted me to a process influencing psychic evolution.

As someone who has raised children, written in a journal, and been in psychotherapy, I kept looking for connections among play, place, and personal stories. Guided by others to the interior life of play, I saw how place marks itself on those growing up. Likewise the physical world gets written upon by every generation. Children seek to escape grownups in ways that paradoxically ease their passage into adulthood. Yet the 1990s generation of children seemed to be playing--or straying--outdoors less and less. I began to raise funding for what would become a PBS documentary *Where Do the Children Play?* This 2007 film explores the changing face of childhood in urban, suburban and rural settings. It looks at how the demise of recess coincides with helicopter parenting, ubiquitous screen entertainment, and "stranger danger." Post-film community conversations and my own students helped me form questions like "What does it mean to do nothing?" or "Have you ever been lost outdoors?"

The following paragraphs discuss how a geographical extremity spawns stories about growing up away from sprawl, mall, electronics and school. Lighthouses offered a 19th-century rural childhood right into the 1960s. Boys and girls made toys with their own hands--sleds, boats--using tools readily available. Work and play merged and were dignified by responsibility for protecting the lives of fishermen, sailors and civilian passengers. A deep understanding of birds, flowers, wildlife, weather, and the seasons set the rules, not the playground director, coach or teacher. Like mountain goats, children climbed up rocky cliffs, learning how to be fully in touch with their own bodies. They and their parents were disciplined

by ever present physical dangers of cliffs, freezing water, slippery rocks, undertows and violent winds.

Lighthouse literature has changed my understanding not only of our maritime heritage but also of the complex challenges of growing up: routine, special skills, and character all come into play when someone must row a boat in howling gales against the tides, swing downwind of those who are drowning, and haul them up and over a transom. A mission that fulfills everyone's need to be needed defines the myriad jobs of lighthouse keeping. The hard work involved in taking care of others demands abandonment to both military order and a readiness for risky improvisation. In this narrow but empowering setting, children serve an active apprenticeship, sharing responsibility for guarding the safety of adults. As explained to an eight-year-old in Julia L. Sauer's *The Light at Tern Rock* (1951): "An emergency—the kind that cannon is for—means there's a ship off there on the Ledges breaking up. There are helpless sailors—clinging like black ants to spars—being washed to Eternity while you watch" (46).

Lighthouse stories for and about the young include experiments in both fictional and autobiographical forms. They borrow from a wide range of popular genres including history, fantasy and myth; pioneering, travel and castaway sagas; mystery, crime and detective fiction, as well as a literature strewn with nautical disasters. Many, like *The Swiss Family Robinson* (1812) and its sequels, spin off from Defoe. *The Life and Strange, Surprising Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner*, deemed a survival skills manual by Rousseau, was the only book allowed Emile, his model student. Island and lighthouse lore take young readers places where romance and science fiction rarely go. Unless, that is, we include ghost stories in which encountering one's own imagination provides the scariest tale ever told. Mingling gothic horror with an inescapable, remote island tower conjures anxiety and loneliness. Robert Louis Stevenson, whose grandfather built lighthouses, knew that keepers, like Benn Gunn marooned for decades, could sail around the bend.

Spooked by the unsolved mystery of three lighthouse keepers in the Scottish Hebrides who disappeared without a trace, Wilfrid Wilson Gibson wrote "Flannan Isle" (1912). This ballad foreshadows the 2009

video game *Dark Fall II: Lights Out* as well as "things that go splash in the night" in the Haunted Great Lakes Series of Frederick Stonehouse. Illness and privation cause mental illness in the 1990s series for young adults, *Ghostly Lights* by Annick Hivert-Carthew. Based on macabre histories of insanity and suicide, these tales prove (as did Alexander Selkirk who went barking mad after 52 months stranded on an island) that Crusoe's chronicle of 27 years, two months, two weeks and five days must have been fiction. Yet the cold, turbulent seas of world classics continue to lure scavengers. *Treasure Planet*, a 2002 Disney animation, attenuates the dangers of the icy swim for an electronic age. This version of being stranded on an island is called by A. O. Scott of the New York Times "less an act of homage than a clumsy and cynical bit of piracy."

Today's lighthouses, functionally extinct, are targeted for teardown; yet as spiritual embodiments they continue to inspire children's authors and illustrators, librarians and collectors of juvenile books. These iconic sites chronicle a history of play, first dramatized by the traditional heroic adventure and then complemented and even displaced by an ethically grounded female counterplot: a property-based conception of home. I was curious about how constructions of gender evolve in this genre. I wondered how stories of Canadian lighthouses differed, if at all, from those told in Maine or England. What recreation do isolation and bad weather invent? What happens when a young person confronts unforgiving natural elements alone? Or must live with a parent whose first responsibility is to the light? How do authors bring alive the history and material culture of making domestic space on these outposts? How does a profoundly symbolic watchtower speak today through the reproduction of souvenirs, photographs, postcards, and songs? Searching for answers regarding these oppositional forms of play drew me first to the ancient voyages underlying Western literature. Some of the patterns formulated in Christopher Booker's *The Seven Basic Plots* and Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* helped me imagine energy leading to an irresistible path. Then the confined lighthouse setting pointed me to new stories evolving from the enormous mystery that gender difference represents.

Storytelling conjures nothing more thrilling and dangerous than

crossing waters to battle monsters of the deep. The ancient plot of *Voyage and Return* chimes with General Patton's hurrah: "Wars are won by people who actually go out and do things." Such calls to action—where warfare and water align—have transformed young men from Beowulf and Ahab to Hornblower. Despite his parents' entreaties, tears, and commands, Crusoe states that "nothing would serve me but I must go to sea" (1-2). Just as Moses in the bulrushes, rescued from the Nile River, led his people through the Red Sea, heroes must enter water and emerge on the other side. R. M. Ballantyne attests in *Battles with the Sea: Heroes of the Lifeboat and Rocket* (1883): "The only war which deserves the name of 'glorious' is fought—has been and will be fought to the end of time—on our seacoast."

Boys' adventure tales on both sides of the Atlantic require that before he can achieve manhood, the hero must embark. Great fights that require bravado and the restlessness of youth embody wanderlust so powerful that it seems genetic. Ballantyne's *The Coral Island* avers, "... as far back as our family could be traced, it had been intimately connected with the great watery waste . . . Thus it was, I suppose, that I came to inherit a 'roving disposition'" (6). Over a hundred stories by W. H. G. Kingston (1814-80) recall in their spirit the untamed success of Captain Mayne Reid, author of *The Boy Tar; or A Voyage in the Dark* (1860): both writers explain *How Brittainia Came to Rule the Waves* (1900).

On seaways—highways of the past—only elevated lights could save mariners from their watery terrors. Such redemptive analogies inspired waves of religious tracts and series like *How the Pennypackers Kept the Light* (1912) by Sophie Swett. The Elm Island and Pleasant Cove series *Cruise of the Castro* (1871) and *The Child of the Island Glen* (1872) by Rev. Elijah Kellogg point to the enduring popularity of ocean-going formulas. For example, his *Live Oak Boys; Or, the Adventures of Richard Constable Afloat and Ashore* advertises the paradigmatic boy who "brought up under stern discipline of New England in the old time, must find some vent for his surplus vitality, and expended it in 'pranks' . . . The general prophecy of his native village was that he would go bad. Instead he went to sea and by skillful management amassed a great fortune. It was in the 'good old times'

of privateering, and the book is replete with stories of sea fights, wrecks, and all the adventures which capture the souls of boys."

An elevated light prominently displayed to guide endangered humanity can easily suggest someone who becomes a prophetic leader, "a light unto the nations" (Isaiah 49:6). Such life-saving analogies were common among peoples of the Mediterranean where watch fires could be seen far out at sea. In *Voyage to the Pharos* (2009) by Sarah Gauch, a boy journeys from Rhodes on a trading ship to see the greatest lighthouse of all time, a 400-foot tower standing at the mouth of the harbor at Alexandria. On the island of Pharos ("lighthouse" in Greek), high rocks and a long vaulted ramp led up to a staircase where a huge bonfire burned at the summit. After a treacherous four-day journey across the Mediterranean, the boy saves the day. From the top of the mast, he sees the light of Alexandria and yells to the pilot to go south by southwest. In the nick of time, the ship escapes wreckage, and the boy is praised for steering real men to safety, an outcome that recalls the ending of *To the Lighthouse* (1927) by Virginia Woolf where James Ramsay steps onto the rocky promontory of manhood.

James's desire to undertake a journey suggests why lighthouses occupy the same archetypal space as castles on a hill in English folk legend. Both are objects of male quest embodying safe homecoming after a voyage in the wilderness. Both destinations inherit romantic lore. The folktale tower, the medieval fortress, the island and the spiral staircase are irresistible literary locales. Their enclosure and exposure encourage spying, hiding, climbing and nesting. James Ramsay's urgent question about when he will go to the lighthouse echoes escapist longing in James Barrie's *Peter and Wendy* (1912) about a boy who won't grow up. This island pastiche of British boys' seafaring and adventure tales was subverted in Woolf's high modernist text. Barrie's play, a hit on the London stage the night she saw it on her twenty-first birthday, was deemed by this pioneering feminist as too sentimental. Like Carl Jung, as I have written in "Children Never Forget," she too was acutely aware of the dangers of becoming simply a "role" person and of never discovering one's own voice (160).

Virginia Woolf's approach reversed expectations of plot-driven narratives in favor of the quest for a room of one's own. In female-authored

stories for and about youth, lighthouse turf becomes metaphor for the psyche, not a prop for character development. Building on ancient myth, regional history, and anthropomorphic fable, these works identify with interior space and the lighthouse beam. For example, a 1942 classic by H. H. Swift and Lynd Ward personifies a Little Red Lighthouse who feels it has become useless when a giant bridge is built with a warning system and crown of lights. But as a storm whips up and fog rolls in, the bridge cannot be seen from below. Without the bridge's light or bell, a "fat black tug" crashes into rocks nearby. The Little Red Lighthouse discovers it is still needed. So popular was this picture book that when New York City's little red lighthouse was to be dismantled in 1951, public outcry registered this building under the George Washington Bridge as a protected historic site.

Likewise in *Women of the Lights* (1996) by Candace Fleming, Harriet Colfax tends "Old Faithful" with her friend Anne Hartwell on "the inland sea" of Lake Michigan (37). Serving from 1861 to 1904, Colfax indicates how keeper and lighthouse become one. Both are guardians. Alone and lonely, threatened by the same storms, they are always looking out, like a constant sentinel or parent. Said Ida Lewis, "The light is my child and I know it needs me, even when I am sleeping" (23). Like religious tracts that beamed spiritual lessons, such works teach what Mary Ellen Chase calls in *The Story of Lighthouses* (1965) "the secrets of taking things" as they come, "without grumbling or fear" (137).

Tough solitary girls now dominate a new genre of lighthouse adventures. With not a room but a tower to grow her powers, 12-year-old Jessie draws on tragic male perspectives as well as a mad old woman in Anna Egan Smucker's *To Keep the South Manitou Light* (2005). Such stories are now being passed on in a spate of historical fictions for girls, a juicy irony adhering in their production. Women writers are using archives of male-mandated logs from keepers to authorize a feminist literature based on 19th-century wonder women. The Dear America series, for example, offers *A Light in the Storm* (1999) structured as the Civil War Diary of Amelia Martin in Fenwick Island Delaware. Having read in a 1911 New York Times about Ida Lewis taking over her father's duties when he became ill, Karen Hesse models Amelia on Ida and other women who

"sacrificed and struggled to keep their lights burning through some of this country's darkest hours." Ida like Amelia placed her own life in peril and saved 22 people in her career yet recoiled from publicity when Ulysses S. Grant visited her home.

Ida Lewis's modest stance resembles Kate Walker's, who retired in 1919 after 34 years as keeper of Robbins Reef Lighthouse, New York Harbor: "There is so much you think that isn't needful to say." Walker's words express the kind of personality that can survive decades of being alone, just as General Patton's, cited above, call to mind the action necessary to put one's life on the line for others. The gender division in lighthouse narratives for children demonstrates how women are caretakers in more ways than one. Not only did 19th-century women "man" watchtowers, earning their way in a maritime military system by merit, but their daughters today are also preserving both the beacons and the stories of past heroines who without fanfare kept the lights burning.

John Morgenstern writes in *Playing With Books*, "We usually assume that children are socialized by the literature we give them but I am going to reverse that assumption in order to consider to what degree the rhetoric of children's literature is influenced by the rhetoric of children's play" (24). Like Morgenstern I have been "reversing that assumption" by identifying trends in tales whose evolution requires us to reconceive the rhetoric of gender. But intergenerational relationships also determine how we value and understand play. Atmospheric books about the seaboard—such as *Fog Magic* (1943) and *The Light at Tern Rock* (1951) by Julia Sauer—build on archives of environmental autobiography and private diary based on the Canadian Atlantic. Like Joe Frost's "Play during Hard Times" these writings describe conditions in which even the prospect of fun seems utterly squelched. At age six, living in "a three-room, clap-board, share-cropper's house on the remnants of a cotton farm near Muleshow," Frost became a junk sorter who also had to carry "a lard bucket down the hill in the afternoons to the barn" (160). Among his memories from the 1939 Texas Panhandle, where "dirt poor" boys and girls were expected to work in the fields and perform chores, he recalls times when "children were too exhausted to play" (160).

Like a message in a bottle, tales like Frost's from the worst of times go on to beget more stories that sustain us in the future. For example, off Cape Tempest a lighthouse keeper rescues a little girl after her parents are drowned. In Laura E. Richard's beloved novel *Captain January* (1891), an old salt adopts the infant "Star" (whose first word "Tar"—colloquial for seaman—implies that she adopts him as well). He delights in telling her stories, such as how he survived shipwreck himself, stranded on an island for fifteen years. The seventy-year-old lighthouse keeper and ten-year-old child are inseparable. To Maine townsfolk, who consider the old man "cracked," the Captain explains: "I don't have no school readers. The child learns out o' the two best books in the world,—the Bible, and William Shakespeare's book; them's all the books she ever seed—saw, I should say" (2). This odd couple proves how gender roles and perceptions of aging evolve, although the mutual need of old and young endures. So popular was this sentimentalized pair who redeem each other that it cheered an entire nation in the wake of the Great Depression. The 1936 film *Captain January* featured Shirley Temple singing and dancing "in the most lovable story she's ever had": "One star inside the old house, and the other atop of it" (9). Like the archetypal beacon of the lighthouse with which her name is associated, Star shows how a symbolic beam over the sea formulates a cultural landscape.

In the years leading to World War II, Kurt Hahn founded a sea school in Wales that became the model for expeditionary learning for Outward Bound and the United World Colleges. Outlining *Six Declines of Modern Youth*, Hahn cites "the decline in compassion," a condition termed "spiritual death" by William Temple. "The passion of rescue reveals the highest dynamic of the human soul," said Hahn: quoted by Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, at Colorado Outward Bound's 25th anniversary in 1987, this formulation continues to define *Leadership the Outward Bound Way* (2007). If, as Hahn claimed, "Young people today are suffering from the misery of unimportance," lighthouse children, needed every day as essential helpmates, help explain the dynastic nature of light keeping. Delineating the unconventional education passed on for decades in the same families, Evelyn Richardson records, "Laurie's education does not

stop with what he learns from his books. At 15, he knows and understands the engines and mechanical devices about the place, can run the boat, drive the ox, run the mower, make hay, care for the Light, identify the planes for our A.D.C. work and turn his hand to innumerable jobs. Best of all, he is completely dependable at all these tasks" (197).

These rugged stories offer a psychic and physical environment we may need to recover—in every sense of that word. They speak to contemporary Americans, who have been summed up by Amy Fusselman in her subtitle to *Savage Park* (2015) as "Nervous, Distracted and Afraid to Die" (2015). Sailing ships and lighthouses no longer beckon us as once they did. But they help us see that life-and-death situations have always been at the heart of children's literature. Orphan-centered fairy tales may take us Into the Woods, but "a straight, true light" has kept us afloat for centuries. Light keepers and their families embody endurance, courage and vital connections to the elements: "The Ryans were favorably known to mariners and fishermen. Because of their isolation, they loved, not man the less but nature more" (Wellman 174). This quotation from *Lighthouse People: Stories of Men, Women and Children who Worked and Lived on Lightstations in Newfoundland and Labrador* (1999) and other gritty collections enhance scientific research that presently provides little evidence of how people actually develop ecological consciousness. Through the gauntlet of danger, hunger and hardships, these books integrate sustainability into the growing contemporary discourse on play, space and risk.

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