

Sentinel of the Seas: Life and Death at the Most Dangerous Lighthouse Ever Built

Dennis M. Powers

Citadel (2007)

ISBN 9780806528427

Reviewed by Richard R. Blake for Reader Views (5/07)

“Sentinel of the Seas” reads like a novel. Dennis Powers has written another classic masterpiece which chronicles man battling the sea. As in his earlier works “Treasure Ship” and “The Raging Sea,” Powers has thoroughly researched his work. He spent five years in preparation, searching archives, original journals, dairies, ship logs, Lighthouse Board Reports, and doing personal interviews of survivors, and their families. The lighthouse was built on St. George Reef which is one of the most hazardous reefs off the West Coast.

Powers recounts the history, engineering and construction of the lighthouse. He also explains the various lighting and sound warning devices used over the history of the lighthouse. Powers masterfully weaves into the record heroic stories of the men and women who designed, built, and maintained the St. George Reef Lighthouse from it’s completion in 1892 until it’s abandonment in 1975, and renewal in 2002.

“Sentinel of the Seas” heralds the career of Alexander Ballantyne, who supervised the project, as well as the careers of George Roux, and Fred Permenter the lighthouse keepers. Powers details the work of the “wickies,” lighthouse life, the history and the development of other U. S. lighthouses. He shows a deep appreciation for the courage the lighthouse keepers demonstrated in the midst of crashing waves, tumultuous storms, and hurricane force winds which they faced on a recurring basis.

Turnover among the personal was significant. Powers explained it this way: “This station was one of the least sought-after assignments in the service. Potential wickies had already heard what duty would be like on Dragon Rocks. It had earned its reputation.” I personally enjoyed the insight into the contrast between routine work and boredom of the assignment with hazardous way of life of the lighthouse keepers. Powers uses descriptive phrases that made me feel “the enveloping curtains of cold mists” or hear the “barks of the seals, cries of the seagulls, and the crashing surf.”

This is great adventure reading, brilliantly written. I highly recommend “Sentinel of the Seas” to everyone who loves epic adventure stories of the adventure of the sea, shipwreck, and nautical history.