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## Book Review: Lighthouses of the Georgia Coast

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## Off the SHELF

**Lighthouses of the Georgia Coast** by William Rawlings (Mercer University Press, 2021: ISBN 9780881467758, \$29.00)

Accounts from the period of the Great Storm of 1839 describe it as the worst storm in living memory. On December 14<sup>th</sup> of that year, the weather changed abruptly, ending the hitherto mild and beautiful season. The storm began with rain and terrific gusts of wind, followed by snow after a sudden drop in temperature. The drifts rose as high as the second story of a house. New England and New York bore the worst of the storm, but cities as far south as Baltimore, Philadelphia, and Washington, DC were affected. Roads and railways were blocked or became impassable; the mail went undelivered; and communities were isolated. The intensity of the storm was such that a contemporary newspaper wondered at the severe damage the storm had wreaked on land and asked what catastrophic consequences it would have had out on the ocean. The paper further speculated on the maritime disasters that would soon fill its pages. Such speculation was certainly prescient, because stormy weather persisted into the first half of January 1894.

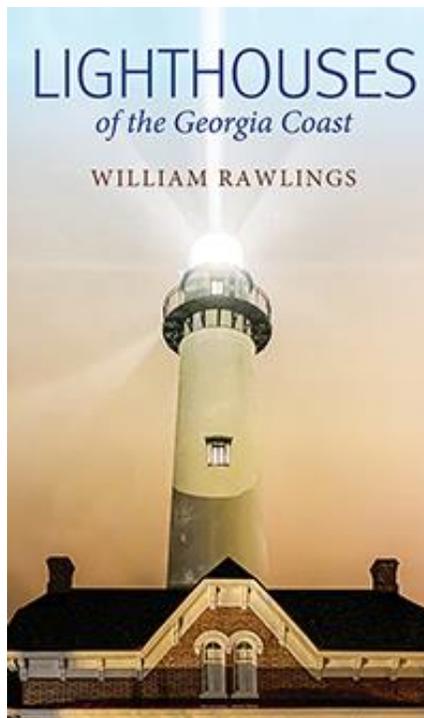
Temperatures in the region plummeted as low as 20 degrees below zero, rivers froze over, and seaports became clogged with sea ice. In an era when the American economy was largely dependent on its ports and maritime trade for manufactured goods, impassable and hazardous waterways had disastrous consequences.

Maritime occupations have always been dangerous. Even with today's incredible navigational aids and safety measures, sea travel is not without its perils—but in the waning days of the age of sail, the danger was real and ever-present. The loss and wreckage of ships were common occurrences, even without the additional hazards presented by large-scale storms, sea ice, high winds, freezing

temperatures, and low visibility. At least 192 vessels were lost over the course of six weeks between the end of 1839 and the beginning of 1840, and while the loss of life and shipping were considered tragic, they were neither unusual nor unexpected for the period. Even with today's meteorological systems, weather disasters still occur and generally are not all that unusual, but for much of recorded history, the weather was almost completely unpredictable, which made travelling the world's oceans all the more dangerous. Thus, humanity's only recourse has been to make preparations to avoid suffering the worst of dangerous weather events.

Indeed, the protection of maritime trade and the preservation of life prompted the construction of lighthouses to serve as navigational landmarks by day and beacons at night.

Nothing quite captures the imagination, stirs the nostalgic romanticism in one's heart, or serves as a more iconic symbol of hope than a lighthouse. The author begins by painting a chilling and inexorable image of the challenges facing seafarers for the greater part of human



*Image from the publisher*

history. Rawlings seamlessly weaves together such discordant threads as history, economic necessity, romanticism, and architecture to tell the story of lighthouses on the Georgia coast. These “beautiful anachronisms” seem to reach out from the pages to the reader like a proverbial beacon through the mists of time. Rawlings recalls the ancient origins of some of the earliest lighthouses in the Mediterranean, such as the fabled lighthouse of Pharos at Alexandria. He traces the history of the structure through the Middle Ages and the Age of Discovery to the golden age of lighthouses in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The history of Georgia lighthouses picks up in the 1730s with the lighthouse on Tybee Island. Rawlings explores the history of the Tybee Light, from the somewhat ephemeral pinewood

construction of the first structure, through a series of ever more sturdy lighthouses constructed in the area, to the fourth iteration that stands today. The chapter on the Tybee Light is well researched and presented in an interesting and easily digestible manner that is demonstrative of the quality of the entire work. Indeed, the vivid descriptions of storms, shipwrecks, and the historic context of the time periods, combined with the almost wistful, romantic, and hopeful mood defined by phrases such as the “age of exploration” and the “golden age of lighthouses,” should make this a welcome read for anyone interested in the history of Georgia or lighthouses.

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