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The Lighthouse and the Town: How Landmarks Hold Memory

In coastal towns, a lighthouse is rarely just a navigation aid. Long after satellite positioning has made its beam unnecessary, residents still treat the tower as a symbol of shared history, and visitors treat it as the proper beginning of any story about the place. This essay argues that landmarks such as lighthouses endure because they give communities a fixed point around which memory can be organised (Hale 41). The argument draws on local histories and on recent work in cultural geography, and it asks what a town loses when its landmarks lose their original purpose.

The first reason a landmark holds memory is that it is visible from nearly everywhere. A resident walking to work, a fisher returning to harbour, and a child looking out of a classroom window all share the same view, and that repeated view becomes a common reference point. Nair describes this as "a kind of silent agreement about where the town begins and ends" (112). Because the landmark does not change, people can measure their own lives against it: a family may say that a grandmother was married the year the tower was repainted, and the date feels secure in a way a calendar entry might not.

The second reason is that landmarks give a community something to protect. When the Port Selby lighthouse was automated in 1987, the town formed a preservation society within a month, and its newsletters show that members were less concerned with the lamp than with what the tower represented (Whitcombe). Preservation work offered ordinary residents a role in the story, whether as volunteers, donors, or guides. In this sense a landmark does not simply record the past; it produces new shared activity in the present.

Critics sometimes argue that this attachment is sentimental and that resources spent on old structures might serve living residents better. The objection deserves a fair hearing, since maintenance of a sea-exposed tower is costly and the money is finite. Yet the evidence from Port

Selby suggests that the two goals are not opposed. Tourism linked to the tower now supports several seasonal jobs, and the society reports that school visits have doubled since the visitor centre opened (Whitcombe). The landmark pays, in part, for its own survival.

A related concern is authenticity. If a lighthouse no longer guides ships, is a tour of its lamp room honest? Hale answers that authenticity lies in continuity of care rather than continuity of function (58). A tower that is repainted, repaired, and opened to the public by successive generations has a real history, even if its job has changed. That history is part of what visitors come to see, and part of what residents hand on to their children.

In conclusion, landmarks such as lighthouses endure because they are visible, shared, and worth the effort of care. They give a town a place to stand when it tells its own story, and they invite each new generation to take part in keeping that story alive. When a landmark loses its first purpose, the community has a choice: let it fade, or give it a new one. The towns that choose the second path find that memory, like a lamp, needs tending to keep shining.

Works Cited

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