



Golden Light: The 1878 Diary of Captain Thomas Rose Lake

James B. Kirk, Thomas Rose Lake

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Discover the 19th century along the mid-Atlantic through one year in the life of a young Jersey Shore sea captain. With extraordinary details, this book is a wondrous vehicle for traveling back to 1878. "It's a little slice of history that needed to be smelt, felt and looked at. I feel incredibly lucky to have brought it to people," the author, James Kirk III, told The New York Times in an interview. The book is based on the 1878 ship's record kept by Capt. Thomas Rose Lake in a tiny leather diary. Miraculously, it survived a century and fell into the hands of James B. Kirk, II an English teacher and historian. With annotations and details imbuing this journal with context, he turned the captain's observations into a fascinating picture of a vanished time, place, and way of life. In the Foreword, New Jersey's eminent historian John T. Cunningham, who offered early encouragement to the author, calls this "a volume that is a treasure trove." Thomas D. Carroll, folklorist and writer, who has taught at the University of Pennsylvania and worked for the Library of Congress and Smithsonian Institution, calls the work "a Rosetta stone" for the late 19th century coast. Maritime historian John M. Kochiss describes the magic of reading the first-hand history this way: "Unlike any other book before, I found myself mouthing, then almost hearing Captain Lake's words... And all this alchemy brews forth." And Stephen Dunn, winner of the 2001 Pulitzer Prize for poetry, says: "History needs its passionate pursuers. Golden Light is alive with such attentiveness." The 45½-foot sloop Golden Light sailed the coast from Virginia to New York and back again with cargoes of clams, oysters, fish oil, or sweet potatoes. The crew encountered storms and heavy seas, but also found excitement in races with other boats, in the people they met, in the places they put in. Golden Light provides a rare picture of the all but forgotten east coast oyster trade in the last quarter of the 19th century -- the end of the age of sail and the agrarian era in America. As such it is of great value to social historians. It is also an indelible and moving document of the last year in a young man's life. Capt. Lake, a gregarious young soul, found his south Jersey home, the bustling New York harbor, and backwater of Virginia equally fascinating, and his experiences touch us as an example of a good life -- even when it is painfully clear that the life is to be cut short. As the author writes of the diary: "In its pages is the final cry of a way of life which, for better or worse, would return no more. As such, the diary is a poignant vignette -- an ambrotype faded at the edges but with the central portrait clear -- of a young man's happiness, simplicity, and struggle. It must give us pause." James B. Kirk II died before the work was completed and his son James B. Kirk III finished the task so lovingly begun.

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