Worms and Fishes

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Marten A. Syme

*Lifeboats for Victoria: The Story of Lifeboats and Their Crews in Victoria 1856 – 1979*
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‘W HY CARE FOR these dead bodies?’ Thoreau asked in his famous *Cape Cod*, written in 1855. ‘They really have no friends but worms and the fishes.’ He was speaking of those who died from shipwreck. While foot-slogging around the great dune that abuts the Atlantic near Boston, he was ruminating not so much on the loss of individual human life, but the inevitability of nature’s claim upon it.

Such transcendental bravado, bound to jolt a certain kind of Christian sensibility, was not common here. But, if Thoreau had been here and had gazed at the entrance of Port Philip Bay, he might have thought differently. As treacherous as the Rip can be, it was not inevitable that by 1858 twenty-seven ships had gone down, with a loss of fifty-three lives. The company of worms and fishes was small consolation for the other hundred people lost along the Victorian coast, especially to the west where the Southern Ocean roared in from the Antarctic.

In 1857 an event occurred near Portland that amply illustrated the way Australian colonists were resolved to resist the forces of nature. The coastal steamer *Admella* had gone aground on rocks and was breaking up. A crew in a lifeboat (an ordinary rowing boat) set off from Portland, not to row the eighty-five miles, but to be towed by a steamer. Well and good, perhaps, but when the lifeboat reached the wreck, the seas would not let it get near those still stranded on the *Admella*. Nor did they have much success; since four out of five passengers and crew lost their lives.

There were two other boats, smaller and larger, involved in this fiasco, and fingers were pointed, while the local heroes, who had risked their lives despite the technical odds, were defended. The upshot was that the need for special purpose lifeboats was officially acknowledged, boats to be placed at crucial ports along the Victorian coast, from Port Albert to Portland. It is the story of these boats and their communities that we have here, told for the first time by Marten Syme in his crisp, impeccably researched, beautifully illustrated and produced little book.

By 1858 Victoria had designed its own type of lifeboat, borrowed from the design of the Royal National Life Boat Institution in Britain, where local help for the shipwrecked had been a matter of concern since 1789, when, after a church service at South Shields, Northumberland, the coal ship *Adventure* went down, and a crowd on the beach watched the master and crew drown. ‘Money offered by church goers,’ Syme drolly reports, ‘failed to entice fishermen to chance death in a rescue attempt.’

Special boats, with trained, committed crews, backed by an infrastructure that maintained the boats, were essential. The enterprising Harbour Master of the Port of Melbourne, Captain Charles Ferguson, had five boats built by 1858, even though, within forty years, there was hardly any call for crew and boat in Port Fairy and Port Albert. It was the boats and crews in Queenscliff that lasted, even as ship-power and better communications steadily decreased the dangers of negotiating the Rip.

Syme’s liveliest chapters, really, are those on Queenscliff, where, by 1890, the crews of the lifeboats had enshrined themselves as local heroes. They did so conspicuously at the wreck of the *Gange*, off Point Lonsdale in 1887; press reports celebrated their feats and the lives that were saved. This was not the case after the wreck of the *Craigburn* off Point Nepean in 1891, when they failed to get through the Heads to the wreck, and had to lug their ropes and rockets overland to the back beach, where, even then, other boats were doing what rescue work could be done.

Much blame was sheeted home to the Queenscliff crew, but an official inquiry exonerated them. Soon afterwards, they resigned in a bid for more pay. Their small retainers helped a family during a bad fishing season, but the miserable sum helped the government coffers even more. Yet duty, and a sense of honour, demanded that they remain on call, which they did. They soon withdrew their resignations and went to sea again, without the pay rise.

It was clear by the 1890s, especially to the fishermen risking their own lives, that one of their two lifeboats was too heavy for the job, and that a motorised boat was both needed and feasible for work near the Rip. One was finally delivered in 1926.

I would argue (Syme does not; he tends to write as if facts can speak for themselves) that government authority failed crews and the public for thirty-five years before delivering what was needed. The famous boat *Queenscliffe*, with its Watson motor, was kept in service until 1976, when it was retired, much to the consternation of a fishing community three generations of which had mythologised themselves as lifesavers. The boat now sits in the local maritime museum, an icon of the town.

For a short book that could have happily been much longer, Syme has done a splendid job, subtly evoking the political and psychological realities. He calculates that between 1857 and 1940 the lifeboat service in Victoria carried 440 people to safety at a cost of thirty-eight pounds per life.