

The Lizard & The Cloch – Time and Place in 19th Century Foghorn Installations

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ABSTRACT: This paper will present two previously unknown cases of noise complaints in the UK in the late 19th Century, detailing reactions to new foghorns at The Lizard in Cornwall in the 1870s, and at the Cloch lighthouse at the mouth of the Clyde in 1897. I will address what these two case studies can tell us about the way the sound of the foghorn was received into the coastal environment, how feelings about this sound in the coastal soundscape change over time, and how foghorns affected a sense of place for the individuals living there.

KEYWORDS: foghorns, place, time, sound phobia, sound romance, 19th century.

1. Introduction

This paper will detail two noise complaints from The Lizard in Cornwall and the Cloch on the Firth of Clyde, regarding the installation of new foghorns at the end of the 19th Century. The former is sourced from the archives of the Board of Trade, an held in the brutalist bulwark of the National Archives in Kew outside London. The second is sourced from the Clyde Lighthouses Trust, a small lighthouse body that was responsible for a small area of the Firth of Clyde from Greenock to Little Cumbrae, and whose archive is only partially indexed at the Mitchell Library in Glasgow.

In existing literature the voices documented from this period are often restricted to internal communications of the lighthouse authorities, but in locations where foghorns were installed they brought about a dramatic shift in the coastal soundscape. Those experiencing the change have hitherto been largely invisible in the historical record.

Diaphone foghorn technology emerged in the UK around the 1860s, with major testing sessions in 1873 on the South Foreland in Kent prompting the installation of foghorns across the UK. Existing literature on the foghorn is scarce, with one text on the historical timeline and engineering history of the foghorn and little else, despite sound recording practices and projects such as the World Soundscape Project often featuring foghorns.

The two case studies I have presented here are rare finds in the archives. The reasons for this I believe are multiple. Firstly, the Trinity House archive is very fragmented due to their building being almost destroyed during the Blitz. Secondly, this material is often of low priority: information related to lighthouse keepers and genealogy tends to be prioritised in these archives. There may also have only been a few instances of complaints: these two disputes were serious and ongoing, and many foghorns were located far enough away from towns or local residents for the sound to be softened by distance.

These two case studies have been chosen for the sonic material they contain, in the form of detailed sensory testimony regarding the hearing of foghorns at the moment of installation. There are many discussions to be had regarding these case studies, which are not addressed here: the nature of noise in liminal geographic zones; how perceptions of foghorns are affected by their connectedness to weather; the nature of warning sounds as representative of safety, and how we can talk about sounds as connected to industry that is in decline. This paper details the case studies, and picks up two threads: time and place.

2. Case Studies

2.1. Case Study 1: The Lizard & Thomas Hart

In 1868 water-colourist Thomas Hart built a house called Polbreen at Polpeor on the Lizard Point in Cornwall, the most southerly point in the UK. By 1871 he had moved there with his

family (which eventually extended to 12 children). In 1878, Hart got wind of Trinity House's plans to erect a fog signal in front of the lighthouse. Hart's house, which is now a youth hostel, is just a few hundred metres from where the foghorn was to be erected. He wrote to the lighthouse board, Trinity House, in December of that year:

Sir,

Having been informed that application has been made by your board for a plot of ground at Polpeor – Lizard for the erection of a fog signal – I try to state that this piece of land is only about two or three hundred yards from my residence – such a building will not only greatly interfere with the comfort of my family but will materially deprecate the value of my property. (MT 10/259/2)

Hart had moved to the area from Falmouth for peace. The house is isolated, a 25-minute walk from the village on Lizard, and very much in the shadow of the foghorn. A follow up letter from his lawyers stated that:

Mr Hart built his house on the secluded site it occupies in order to be secluded and undisturbed by noise or nuisance; but it is manifest that the proposed Fog Signal station will be as great a nuisance as it is almost possible to conceive. (Ibid.)

The foghorn was a siren, described by a local reporter as “very weird and melancholy... with prolonged reverberating echoes through the surrounding precipices and caves”. (Renton, 2001, p51)

Having received little in the way of a satisfactory response, Hart later wrote again to Trinity House, sounding considerably more irate:

We find the fog horn here when blown a fearful disturbance, by night it completely prevents sleep in our house, and we have had a great deal of its noise lately both by night and day. It has ruined my property commercially, and curtailed my time as an artist. (MT 10/259/2)

He asked that the lighthouse body visit the site, to experience the foghorn for themselves, and fully comprehend the disturbance it was causing. However, following consultation with the Board of Trade, Trinity House decided not to compromise, effectively brushing off Hart in order to avoid setting a precedent for future cases.

2.2. Case Study 2: The Cloch & the people of Dunoon

The Cloch lighthouse is on a sharp bend in the Clyde, where the channel narrows and the land juts out into a point, opposite the town of Dunoon. In the 19th and into the 20th Century steam packets would race round the bend and collide, sometimes sinking in minutes.

In early 1897 a new foghorn was installed in front of the whitewashed lighthouse. A steam powered diaphone, it replaced a whistle sounded by a boiler. It was not well received. By the 9 November that year, the Cowal District Committee of the County Council of Argyll had petitioned the Clyde Lighthouses Trust about the new foghorn.

The petition complained that:

The sound emitted by the fog horn recently placed on the Cloch Lighthouse is a serious nuisance to the inhabitants of the district lying within its range, it being so loud and penetrating that to the inhabitants of Dunoon (which is about two miles distant from the Lighthouse) it seems to be coming from a source a few yards outside their dwelling houses, and of such volume that in some parts of the Burgh where the configuration of the neighbourhood gives rise to an echo, it is so magnified by echoes and reverberation as to be almost overpowering. (T-CN 41.40)

The Cloch's character sounded more frequently than many other horns, sounding four blasts – high low, high low – of two seconds each in quick succession, every half a minute, but it was the timbre and quality of the sound that caused the most disturbance. Complaints started from its installation, with letters and poems written into local newspapers. One W.B.P., who had had the misfortune of moving near the Cloch, described it in a letter as though “as gigantic bull and his gigantic mate, which had stolen noiselessly up to my chamber window, suddenly opened their mouths and emitted their characteristic notes – the male a hoarse roar, and two seconds afterwards the female a shrill skreigh”.

The horn is described as a bull by W.B.P, a “howling fiend” by another, but also, according to one letter written in support of the horn, it had “at least as much melody in it as a Wagnerian opera”. A letter from the directors of Dunoon convalescent homes complains that: “The tones emitted resemble very much the cries of one in sore distress, and are enough to upset the nerves of even those in robust health”.

By November, letters were being exchanged between the Clyde Lighthouses Trust and the Northern Lighthouse Board, to the effect that the signal could be changed. Northern Lighthouse Board Engineers David Alan and Charles Alexander Stevenson wrote: “You will understand that we do not propose to diminish the power of the blasts, but to lower the pitch of both notes.”

What is happening here is twofold: Not just the volume is being considered, but the idea of how pleasant or unpleasant the sound was, with a preference for the lower note. The Cloch was thought to be ‘shrill’, and so it was proposed that the note be lowered. The soundscape was being considered, if by proxy.

Crucially for this discussion, David Alan Stevenson wrote in a letter on 25 November that year:

Originally this signal was produced by whistles blown by steam from a large boiler. Complaints were made of this signal which however ceased after the inhabitants of the district became familiar with the sound. (1897, NLC11/1/22)

Taking this as its prompt, the following section will discuss what these two case studies can tell us about the way we think about time, place and people in the coastal soundscape.

3. Time

3.1. Sound phobia into sound romance

Acoustic ecology can give us a lens to consider the case of the Cloch from outside the bundle of documents, taking cues from the sentiment in Stevenson’s letter above, that complaints ceased when people got used to the sound.

The Cloch is most interesting when considered in comparison to current attitudes towards foghorn sounds. The Cloch was a nuisance, and the petition claims that people were moving out of Dunoon as a result. And yet the foghorn appears as a sonic motif in films, literature, and music: John Carpenter’s *The Fog*, Ingram Marshall’s *Fog Tropes*. Responses to it are often nostalgic and emotional. Alvin Curran, in the sleeve notes to his large scale radio project, *Maritime Rites*, called it “the source of one of the most enduring minimal musics around us” (Curran, 2004)

How can a sound that was once causing people to up sticks and leave town be something associated with warm nostalgia a century later?

Barry Truax’s *Acoustic Communication* gives us a theory that can explain this phenomenon. He describes it as a ‘sound phobia’ turning into a ‘sound romance’:

The romance that builds up around the “disappearing” sound from the past is the counterpart to the phobia that usually surrounds a new sound, particularly when it replaces an older, more familiar one... the romance associated with a past sound arises from a nostalgia for a time and circumstance that no longer exists. The sound seems romantic because it has the power both to evoke the past context and to idealise it. (Truax, 1984, p19)

A 2013 performance titled the *Foghorn Requiem*, on the cliffs at Souter Point in South Shields, displayed exactly the romance and nostalgia of a lost sound as Truax describes it. The performance gathered a large brass band and a flotilla of ships, for a massive open-air performance. The ships gathered at sea were tuned to like a brass section: the brass played a phrase, and the ships would answer in echo. The foghorn was sounded at key points, with the final note of the performance a rare sounding of the foghorn, where the air tanks were allowed to drain. As the pressure dropped in the compressed air tanks, the foghorn grunted, coughed, spluttered, down to a low, slow final breath.

In the case of *The Cloch and the Lizard*, the new foghorn prompts a ‘phobia’; an attitude that Stevenson acknowledges will begin to change when he remarks that the residents became accustomed to the previous foghorn. In the case of the *Foghorn Requiem*, the piece was significant to those from the region, representative of the decline of shipbuilding industry in that area, with many of those in the audience having worked in shipbuilding yards or with parents who did. Hearing the sound of the foghorn there evoked the past, as Truax describes, idealising an era of production in Britain, now at the end of a long and deep decline. The composer, Orlando Gough, described it to me in an interview as “a celebration and a mourning for a whole era of industry and work” (Allan, 2013, p18)

And so the *Cloch* and the Souter Point foghorn represent the bookends of an era of shipbuilding in Britain. The *Cloch* at the mouth of The Clyde was installed in reaction to the increase in steam ships, and Souter Point in the North East of England is now sounded for tourists, the sound’s change in purpose marking a move from production to service, the sound epitomising Truax’s ‘sound phobia’ evolved into a ‘sound romance’.

But what can this case tell us about the way we think about sound and the way it has changed on the coastlines, and how that affects our sense of place? The lighthouse bodies’ displayed different attitudes to the complaints

4. Place

The two case studies discussed demand that we zoom out again, from considerations regarding time, to consider how the foghorn – and sounds in the soundscape more generally – have been considered in theories of place and place-making.

I use the term ‘place’ after Doreen Massey, who in “A Global Sense Of Place” (1994) wrote that place was “not a specificity which results from some long, internalized history... Wider social relations in which places are set are themselves geographically differentiated.” (Massey, 1994)

In tandem, I keep in mind Donna Haraway’s notion of the “intimacy of inheritance” (Terravona, 2017) when considering these archive materials, applied here to the intimacy of the sensory details contained within the case studies described, allowing new stories to

be told about the sound of the foghorn in the UK, to retain nuance and difference in experiences of sound, and avoid setting out an overly simplistic story of a new industrial sound disrupting and displacing a community. As shown by the *Foghorn Requiem*, the relationship to the sound of the foghorn is more complex than this.

Sound in the environment has a clear link to sentiment about belonging and home in these two studies, but as we saw in the previous section, this sentiment about a new sound in the soundscape is something that changes, performing an about-turn in the space of a few decades. What the case of the Cloch and the Lizard do tell us is that sound is a crucial part of discussions regarding the idea of place. However, much of the literature has little emphasis on the power of sound in place-relations.

Yi-Fu Tuan's 'topophilia' – a term developed in the 1970s – coupled sentiment with place, and is defined as containing “all of the human being's affective ties with the material environment.” (Tuan, 1974, p93) Sound is a part of this, but Tuan's writing emphasises the visual, referring to the 'images' we take from the environment, and its materiality. (Tuan, 1974, p113)

John Levack Drever, in a report on a project on sound and the environment to the inhabitants of Dartmoor expands on Tuan's topophilia, emphasising the sonic through an extension of the term to 'topophonophilia', which he describes as “the relationship between place, the sensation of sound, and sentiment” (Drever, 2007, p100). Applied to the banks of the Clyde and The Lizard at the end of the 19th Century, Drever's extension to include the sonic is crucial. Truax notes this link between place and sound too, referring to the work of the Vancouver Soundscape Project, which found that the acoustic community studied “was defined geographically in at least some people's minds by its sounds.” (Truax, 2001, p84)

Drever writes that his Dartmoor project was “a clear indicator of the deep connection that people have with the sounds they live within and help contribute towards making”, and this connection is echoed in the inverse, in the descriptions we have from those in Dunoon and Thomas Hart. For some of the people in Dunoon, the sound severed feelings of connectedness enough for them to leave the district. Thomas Hart appears to have given up his appeal to Trinity House and never left Polbrean, and we might speculate that Stevenson's nod to people becoming accustomed to sound is what happened in the shadow of the Lizard.

5. Conclusion

What the two case studies demand is that, as Drever suggests, we build a more prominent place for sound in our conceptions and understandings of place, ensuring that this also builds in considerations for the way we become accustomed and adjusted to sounds, through Truax's theory of sound phobias turning into sound romances.

The case of The Lizard and the Cloch pose as counter examples to the tendency to take snapshots of soundscapes, demanding that we consider both the complexity of our relationships to places and how our feelings about sounds change over time.

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