



Sambro Island 1758



The Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society
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The Lightkeeper™

MERRY CHRISTMAS!



WHEN SANTA CAME TO GANNET ROCK

SENATORS VISIT EAST AND WEST LIGHTHOUSES

NEWFOUNDLAND KEEPERS SAVE LIVES

FAREWELL

IT'S TIME TO RENEW FOR 2011! SEE ENCLOSED NOTICE



The objectives of the Nova Scotia Lighthouse Preservation Society are: to promote and to support the preservation and awareness of Nova Scotia

lighthouses; to assist community groups in leasing or taking ownership of lighthouse sites; to provide access to written research and photographic documentation, to initiate oral history research and to classify and monitor the status of historic lighthouse sites.

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e-mail: ketch1@eastlink.ca

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Cover Photo: Brier Island's "Western Light" stands guard on a bitter winter evening. *Chris Mills*

Cover Inset: Gannet Rock's glowing Christmas tree in 1992. *Chris Mills*

FROM THE EDITOR

We hope you enjoy this seasonal issue of *The Lightkeeper*. As your thoughts turn to family and friends during the holiday season, think back to the days when lightkeepers and their families celebrated Christmas along the coastline of the Maritimes.

Christmas on the lights was usually a special time for families in an era when isolation often meant strong family ties. At this time of year I like to read the "Fall and Winter" chapter in Evelyn Richardson's *We Keep A Light*, which tells of the family's Christmasses on Bon Portage Island, in south west Nova Scotia.

After the Richardsons had selected and cut their Christmas tree "Then came the bustling and squeezing and pushing to get the tree through the doors and upended,

room with awakened memories off all the Christmas Eves we ever knew, all the tremulous thrill of being about to

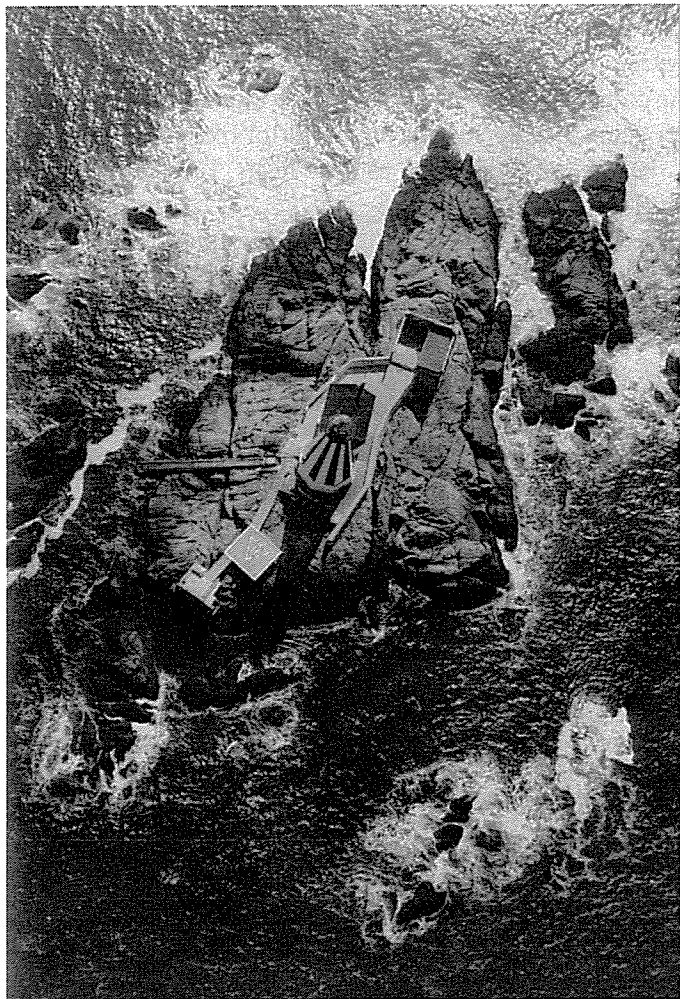
and heavenly to bear touching, of becoming for a few hours part of the miracle and sensing in our own hearts, tight with joy and love, the birth of a new world of peace, and good will to all men."

Nova Scotia lighthouses sit empty now, and peace seems an almost impossible dream, but we continue to hope and work for it, and for our guiding lights.

From all of us on the NSLPS executive, have a wonderful Christmas and holiday season.

When Santa Came to Gannet Rock

Chris Mills



A GANNET'S EYE-VIEW OF GANNET ROCK IN THE EARLY 1990s.
CHRIS MILLS

'Twas the night before Christmas
And on Gannet Rock
The wind it was blowing
At forty-five knots

The story begins on Christmas Eve, 1992. I've got an old 8mm video camera in my hand and I've just made up a little variation of the famous Clement C. Moore poem as I pan around the well-worn, but cosy living room at the Gannet Rock lighthouse.

It is indeed gusting to 45 knots, out of the nor'west. The wind hits the big old wooden lighthouse and slithers along the walls of the concrete dwelling attached to it. The one we two keepers live in.

It's just me and my shift partner Rodger Maker, stuck out here in the Bay of Fundy, about 12 kilometres south of Grand Manan, New Brunswick, in this 161 year-old

lighthouse. It's my first Christmas on Gannet, and Rodger's too. On a good day he can almost see his house in Deep Cove, on the southern Grand Manan shore. My home is far away, south of Halifax.

We're out here for our 28 day hitch, which this time around, includes Christmas. It's bloody cold out, but the lighthouse diesel is thudding away next door and the Kemac in the kitchen is roaring and the massive Enterprise pot burner in the living room is giving off a warm glow.

We've installed a Christmas tree – a small balsam fir I cut down in the woods behind my home in Ketch Harbour, near Halifax. It's survived being wrapped up, thrown in the back of my truck, loaded into a helicopter and dragged into this house in the middle of the sea. It's got sparkling coloured lights on it and the lighthouse cat is lurking beneath, ready to pounce on stray bobbles.

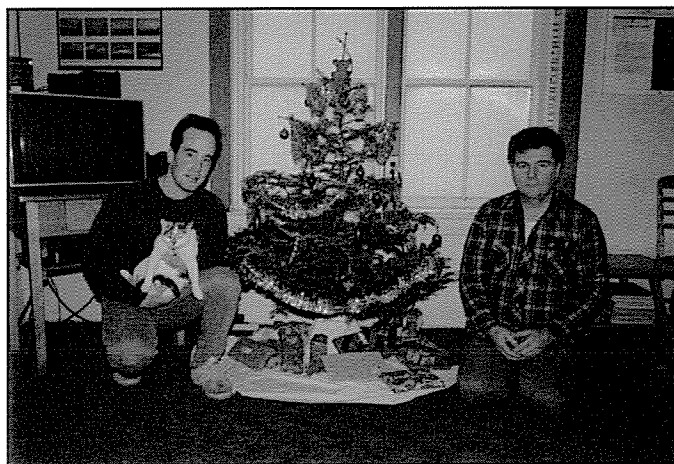
It's dusk, and I'm filming the tree and view through the leaky old wooden sash windows, with the concrete deck and railings outside, the rolling sea and beyond that, the broad mouth of the Bay of Fundy.

The wind gauge now shows a gust of 60 knots. Earlier, I'd attempted to run a few laps on the tiny deck surrounding the tower and the house, but it was almost impossible with the wind, and it was bitterly cold. Plus, I was wearing a bulky Mustang floater suit. Not a great rig for running.

Just after dark, Rodger and I hatch a plan. In the living room, we've got a VHF radio we use to keep in touch with the local fishermen. It sits alongside the wind gauge, the barometer, the lighthouse logs and the weather books. We mostly keep it on channel 69, which is frequency the fishermen use to call us all hours of the day and night, to check our weather conditions.

Rodger also has his own radio, which he keeps by his bed on a small table in his room. He keys the mic and in his best Santa voice, calls:

"Ho, ho, ho! Gannet Rock, this is Santa Claus.



KEEPERS CHRIS MILLS AND RODGER MAKER IN THE LIVING ROOM AT GANNET ROCK, CHRISTMAS 1992. CHRIS MILLS



GANNET ROCK'S CAT LURKS BENEATH THE TREE. CHRIS MILLS

Are you on this channel?"

The plan unfolds. I walk to the living room VHF and answer: "Copy that Santa. This is Gannet Rock."

"Santa" responds with another hearty.

"Ho, ho, ho!"

(in the best style and tradition of the Coca Cola-type Saint Nick). "I'm coming to Grand Manan tonight," he says "and I'd like to stop in at Gannet Rock to give my reindeer a rest. Request clearance to land on your helicopter pad."

I snicker off-air and then key the mic. "Roger, copy that Santa. Altimeter 998. Wind north west 40, gusting 50. You are cleared to land Gannet Rock."

More laughter from each of us. We're having fun. We've each had a couple of "Pink Gannets" (a stylish and singular concoction comprised of pink lemonade crystals, desalinated Bay of Fundy water and a splash or two of vodka). Then, something happens. Someone else calls Santa on the radio.

"Are you there Santa?" says a little voice. It's a boy.

Rodger keys the mic with a deep "Ho, Ho, Ho! This is Santa. And who am I talkin' to?"

The boy responds: "Duane...Green!"

Of course Rodger knows who Duane Green is, but in his efforts to keep the magic going, he responds: "Duane Green! Yes, of course. Ho! Ho! Santa knows all about you, Duane. You've got two brothers, haven't you Santa...er...Duane?"

Much laughter ensues. Santa signs off, with a promise that he'll visit Duane on Grand Manan tonight,

provided he's "all tucked in and sound asleep when old Santa arrives."

Meanwhile, I have the camcorder pointing at Rodger, sitting at the edge of his bed. He's wearing a green work shirt and work pants. He's got brown hair and no beard. He doesn't look like any Santa I've ever seen. But he sounds an awful lot like the jolly old elf. Except when he says to me "Jesus, I started something!"

By now, channel 69 is getting busy. This time it's a woman's voice, strong and full of fun.

"Hi Santa!"

"Hell - oo there," Santa drawls. "And who am I talkin' to?"

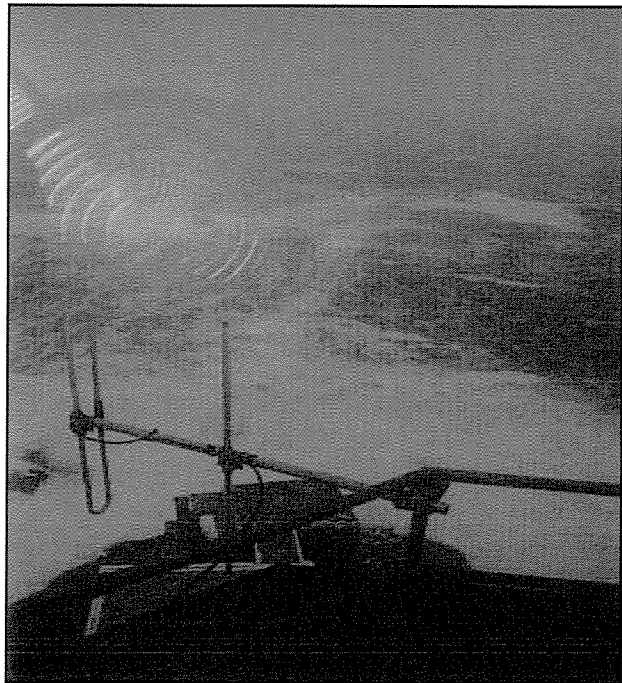
"You're talkin' to the Mom," she responds, "and I've been reeaalll good!"

A loud snort of very poorly suppressed laughter from me. Then, a long pause from Rodger as he attempts to regain his composure. It's long enough that the voice inquires saucily: "Where'd you go Santa?"

Santa, still shaking with laughter, responds with "Just about fell out of my...Oh! Ho, ho, ho, no siree! Old Rudolph kept her on her skis!"

With a short and merry "I'll see you later!" (we can hear an explosion of laughter in the background at the woman's home) she signs off, and Santa replies with "You'd better not! You'd better be under the sheets!"

Despite almost upsetting Santa's sleigh, we've got the routine down to a science now. Kids keep call-



HEAVY SEAS VIEWED FROM THE LANTERN ROOM AT GANNET ROCK. THIS WAS A COMMON SITE IN THE FALL AND WINTER. CHRIS MILLS

ing, from Grand Manan and from across the bay on Digby Neck. They all want to know when Santa's coming, and where he is now and when a little, shy voice says something hard to make out, Rodger wings it, saying "Ho, ho,ho! Sorry, didn't quite get that. The old wind's a blowin' and Santa didn't hear you too well, but I'll be there a little later, okay?" and the like.

It's getting late. The wind is still gusting to 40 or more. I can see the beam of our main light racing along the tops of the waves outside the living room window. The calls are dropping off, but there's one more, before old Saint Nick has to get busy delivering presents.

"Merry Christmas Santa!" says a little girl. Her voice is tiny, and shy.

"Ho, ho! Merry Christmas," says Santa. "And who is this?"

A pause, then "It's Lori."

"Ho, ho! Have you been good, Lori?"

"Yes", says the little voice.

"That's great," says Santa. "Well, old Santa's on his way to Grand Manan."

Another pause and then a worried "Are you coming to Whitehead?" This is a smaller island south east of Grand Manan, about 10 km north east of us, with a small population of fishing families. I can see the regular flash of its lighthouse through our living room windows.

Santa responds with a hearty "Oh, ho, yes sirree! Chris Mills has got some fish chowder for me and I'm comin' to Whitehead right as soon as I leave Gannet Rock!"

We laugh as the little voice, now relieved, says "I'm going right to bed! Merry Christmas to you!"

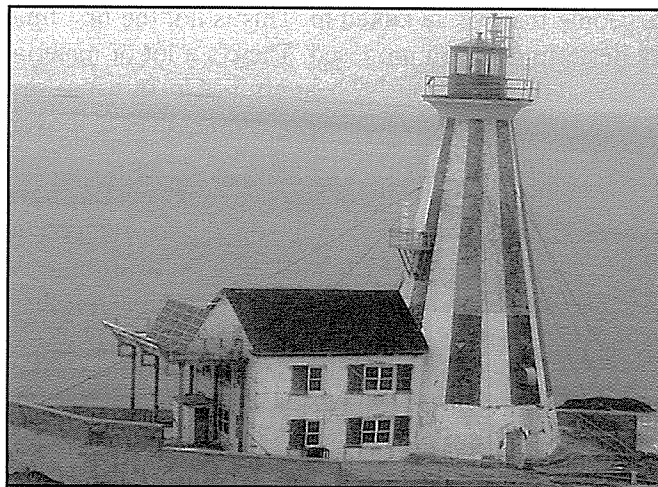
It's so sweet and touching and a fitting end to our little escapade. And, as it turns out, it's a pretty good Christmas out on Gannet Rock.

Although it stays bitterly cold and windy, we're warm enough in the old, uninsulated house. We open presents that our families have sent out with us. We cook a huge Christmas meal, complete with all the trimmings. Then, Rodger and I settle in for the rest of the shift, with the regular lighthouse weather reports, maintenance jobs, installing storm windows, painting, and cleaning.

Aside from the relentless cold and the fog horn blasting through tall, ragged columns of sea smoke, it's an uneventful shift. But in retrospect, it's an intensely memorable time— with Santa's visit, the battering of the wind and sea and a healthy dose of Christmas spirit.

Today, Gannet Rock is empty of human life. The dwelling has been gutted and solar power for the battery-operated light and foghorn means the old thudding diesel is long gone. The wooden tower is rotting and its paint is peeling, and there's word it may just disappear one day.

I can't bear that thought, but fortunately, the good memories prevail.



GANNET ROCK IN 2008. A DOZEN YEARS OF ABANDONMENT HAS TAKEN ITS TOLL. *DFO/CANADIAN COAST GUARD*

I'll always remember the night Santa made a whole lot of kids happy around the Bay of Fundy, and helped two lightkeepers with their own unforgettable Christmas out on Gannet Rock.

This story appears in A Maritime Christmas: New Stories and Memories of the Season, published by Nimbus Publishing in Halifax, 2008.

SENATE COMMITTEE STUDIES LIGHTHOUSE STAFFING ISSUE

Chris Mills

The senate committee charged with making recommendations on lighthouse staffing and evaluating heritage legislation for Canada's seamarks has wrapped up its east and west coast fact-finding mission. The tour followed last year's plan to resume the de-staffing initiative, and the announcement by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in May this year that 976 lighthouses across Canada were now surplus property.

In early November, senators including Bill Rompkey, Dennis Patterson, Elizabeth Hubley, Lowell Murray and Rose-May Poirier visited a number of Newfoundland lighthouses, including Long Point Twillingate, Allan's Island, Puffin Island, Green Island and Cape Race. They spoke with lightkeepers, mariners and other stakeholders in an effort to assess the importance of staffed lighthouses. Later in November the committee turned its attention to British Columbia, visiting lighthouses including Cape Mudge, East Point and Trial Island.

According to a report in BC's *Courier Islander*, "Overwhelming public support of lightkeepers should scuttle Ottawa's latest attempt to destaff lighthouses."

Senator Nancy Greene-Raine told the *Courier Islander* "We're getting the message loud and clear from

the people that we've talked to. This is not the first time that destaffing's been proposed. There's a lot of material already on record and we've heard from a lot of witnesses. We're hearing so many interesting stories over and over, the same thing."

Although the bulk of Canada's lighthouses have been de-staffed since the early 1990s, 51 stations in British Columbia, Newfoundland, and New Brunswick (Machias Seal Island) remain staffed by resident families, rotational crews, or in the case of some Newfoundland stations, keepers working eight hour days on-site, but living off-station.

In late 2009 the federal government announced it planned to resume lighthouse de-staffing (the latest in a series of efforts to remove keepers from all stations except for Machias Seal Island, which is to remain staffed for sovereignty reasons). Federal fisheries minister Gail Shea was forced to put that move on hold after a public and political backlash, especially from British Columbians.

Senator Bill Romkey told the *Courier Islander* "(We've heard) safety issues, tourism issues, heritage issues, endangered species issues. We've heard from ferry operators, float plane operators, we've heard from people who operate kayak businesses."

In British Columbia, media coverage of the issue has been intense, but very little has surfaced from Newfoundland. Ironically, almost all but five of Newfoundland and Labrador's isolated island stations have been de-staffed; the remainder are road accessible, and most do not even have overnight accommodations for their keepers.

The Coast Guard has re-staffed some stations, such as Cape Anguille and Fort Amherst, and built small offices for the keepers on duty. At Powles Head, near Trepassey, retired keeper Tom Corrigan bought his former lighthouse home from the government, and he continues to live at the lightstation, while another keeper stops in from time to time to check on the lighthouse.

In Nova Scotia, where it has been almost two decades since the Coast Guard sent the last keepers home, the main issue has been retention and protection of a once vast system of lighthouses, dwellings and outbuildings. There are very few intact lightstations remaining in the province, and only a small percentage of lights have been saved by municipalities and community groups.

Interested groups are now able to petition Parks Canada to take over surplus lights. It remains to be seen how successful these groups will be, and how they will deal with the logistics and expense of dealing with aging wooden and concrete buildings.

Given their difficulty of access, the fate of many island sites may already be sealed: without strong grassroots support and cooperation from government, we stand

to lose lights which have for years provided guidance and warning to generations of seafarers.

ISLAND KEEPERS REMAIN A LIFE SAVING SERVICE IN SOUTHERN NEWFOUNDLAND

Chris Mills

It's not the first time the keepers on Green Island, Fortune Bay, have come to the aid of mariners in distress. In early October this year Michel Mahe was on his way home to the French Islands of St. Pierre et Miquelon from the Newfoundland port of Fortune. Seas were dead calm as he departed, but at just before 10 on the morning of October 8, a squall whipped up huge seas at the southwestern tip of the Burin Peninsula.

Mahe was accompanied by his mother and two beagles in his small boat. He later told a reporter "It was so bad, my main goal was to get to the lighthouse, to Green Island. It was getting worse and worse and I just couldn't turn around."

Mahe finally made it to Green Island, which sits between the Burin Peninsula and St. Pierre et Miquelon. The island's two lightkeepers hauled Mahe's boat to safety and took the "badly shaken" crew and dogs to the keepers' house, where they stayed for five days. When the sea finally calmed, the keepers helped Mahe re-launch his boat for the trip home.

"If it wasn't for them, I maybe wouldn't be talking to you now," Mahe told a reporter. "I'm so grateful, for sure."

Back in 1994, Green Island's keepers saved a family from St. Pierre et Miquelon whose boat had overturned near the island. Tragically, a young girl died after spending time in the water.

The skipper of the ferry which runs between Newfoundland and St. Pierre et Miquelon has also been vocal in his support of the retention of keepers on Green Island. As we reported in the October/November 2009 issue of *The Lightkeeper*, Captain Charlie Dominaux of the MV *Arethusa* says he depends on accurate weather observations from Green Island's keepers. "Based on their information, I'm staying home, or I go. I'm carrying precious cargo. I don't want to take any chances, and I'm sure the passengers don't want to take chances."

FAREWELL

Chris Mills

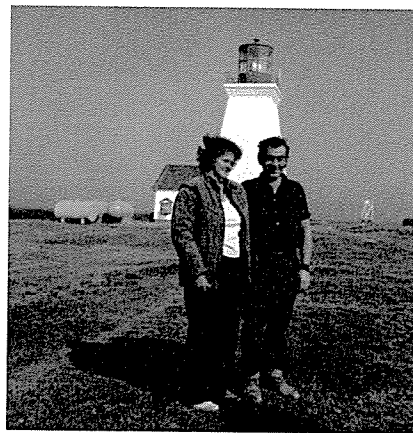
Gerry Spears was a true lightkeeper. Along with her husband Robert, she raised a family on the lights, spending more than two decades on remote Nova Scotia islands. In the 1960s, Gerry and Robert moved to Flint Island, off Port Morien in Cape Breton. The island is just a speck of sea-battered sandstone about three kilometers from the neareast substantial shore. Gerry's daughter Lana loved the island, despite its tiny size and crumbling cliffs.

22 years after they'd set foot on Flint, Gerry and Robert became a husband-and-wife lightkeeping team on Scatarie Island, off Main-a-Dieu. In the early years of the 20th century, more than a dozen families lived on the island, which boasted a school, church, post office, and two lighthouses.

The post office closed in 1957 and by 1982 only the lighthouse keepers remained, along with gaping cellar holes and the abandoned schoolhouse. When Rip Irwin and I visited Gerry and Robert in September 1987, the place had a desolate, lonely feeling, despite the Spears warm hospitality. Within a few weeks, the Spears were gone and for the first time in 148 years, no keeper tended the Scatarie light.

But it wasn't lights out for the Spears just yet. They moved to Fourchu Head, south of Scatarie, spending a year on the small island linked to the community of Fourchu by a rough causeway. Rip and I visited once again, documenting the Spears' last light, and the end of lightkeeping at Forchu Head. As at Scatarie, the Spears treated us to a great lunch, fabulous hospitality, and more tales of their time on the lights.

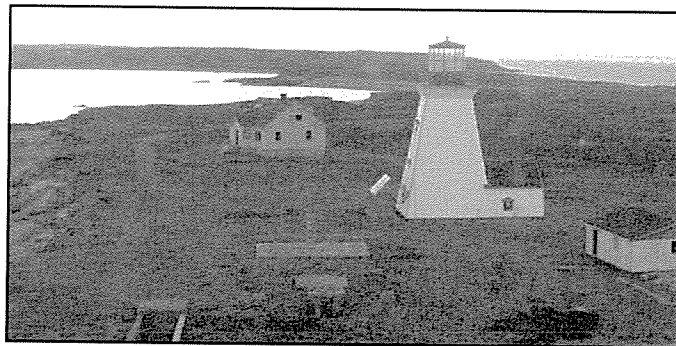
Geraldine Spears passed away on October 22nd in Glace Bay at the age of 72. She leaves behind her husband Robert, their daughter Lana, and son Bobby.



GERRY AND ROBERT SPEARS ON SCATARIE ISLAND IN 1987. CHRIS MILLS



FLINT ISLAND AROUND THE TIME THE SPEARS LIVED AT THE STATION. COURTESY ADELENE MACSHEFFEREY



SCATARIE ISLAND IN 2008. DFO/CANADIAN COAST GUARD

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HUGE SWELLS FROM HURRICANE EARL DRAW CROWDS OF SIGHTSEERS TO THE IERENCE BAY LIGHTHOUSE IN EARLY SEPTEMBER. FREEMAN DRYDEN

