

# The Outermost House Theme Endures After 75 Years

by Don Wilding

NATURE HAS CHANGED CAPE COD'S LANDSCAPE for thousands of years. This ongoing change is also creation, according to author Henry Beston in the pages of his Cape Cod literary classic, *The Outermost House*.

"Creation is here and now," wrote Beston. "So near is man to the creative pageant, so much a part is he of the endless and incredible experiment, that any glimpse he may have will be but the revelation of a moment, a solitary note heard in a symphony thundering through debatable existences of time."

Since its publication 75 years ago in October of 1928, *The Outermost House* has undergone dozens of printings. At the Cape Cod National Seashore's book stores, *The Outermost House* and Henry David Thoreau's *Cape Cod* are consistently top sellers. Rachel Carson, author of the ground-breaking *Silent Spring*, said Beston's book was the only book to ever influence her writing.

As Brad Lynch of *The Barnstable Patriot* newspaper wrote earlier this year, Beston "anticipated and helped to shape the world's interest in conservation and preservation. He can be rightly termed the spiritual father of the Cape Cod National Seashore."

Beston built his 20 x 16-foot house on the Eastham dunes in 1925 and stayed there, on and off, for the next couple of years. The book, which is subtitled *A Year of Life on the Great Beach of Cape Cod*, emerged from notes he scribbled at the kitchen table of his two-room bungalow. The House was dedicated as a literary landmark by the U.S. government in 1964, but "the Fo'castle," (Beston's name for his house), and the rolling duneland, which stretched for nearly three miles south of the Eastham Coast Guard station, were both obliterated by the abnormal high tides caused by the Great Blizzard of February 6 and 7, 1978.

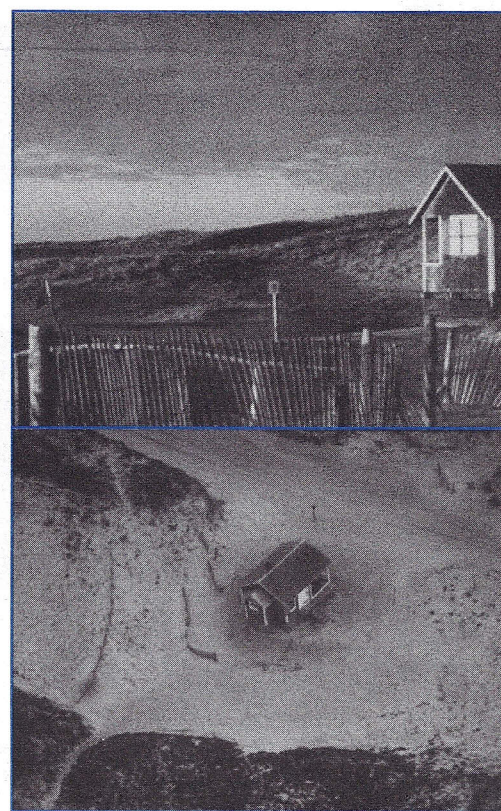
"I suppose there are millions who wouldn't know what Beston is talking about, but obviously there are a good many people who do know," wrote Winfield Townley Scott in his book, *Exiles and Fabrications*. "And I think they know it in the sense of discovery, in the sense of apprehending - as readers so often find when they come upon a significant poem - that here is something they feel but could not define."

Beston's words, "Creation is here and now," rang true over and over again during the Fo'castle's 53 years. Countless storms and billowing surf have pounded the Outer Cape for centuries. It was the elements of nature that led to the House being moved twice - eventually leading to its demise.

Beston married author Elizabeth Coatsworth following the publication of *The Outermost House*, and settled in Hingham, Massachusetts, a town located just south of Boston. While living on Hingham Harbor, he saw a brewing storm in January 1933 as a potential threat to his Cape Cod retreat. Before the storm, there was 20 feet of dune between the house and the water. The following morning, just five feet remained, with a noon high tide still to come. The water rose to within a foot of the door before subsiding.

"It might be that the house had served its purpose and its hour," Henry wrote in a lengthy article for *The New Bedford* (Massachusetts) *Standard Times* on March 19, 1933. "But its hour had not come and The Outermost House is still monarch of its sand dunes on the outer beach."

Following the 1933 storm, the first move took the house farther back on the dune. Later on, other weathering hollowed the dunes under the structure, forcing another relocation in 1944. Storms and surf continued, reducing the dunes and overall land mass of Nauset Spit over the next 12 years. Nan Turner Waldron, author of the book, *Journey to Outermost House*, was



A high tide on a new moon, together with the storm surge waves, drove the tide to 14.5 feet above mean low water.

Heavy bands of snow developed just a few miles inland, but across the Outer Cape, wind-driven rain fell. Wind gusts at Chatham were officially clocked at 92 miles per hour, although some unofficial reports put the wind speed closer to 120 mph.

As it was then, and still is: "Creation is here and now."

"The Outermost House marked the place where one man searched for and found his humanity in nature," wrote Wellfleet Bay Sanctuary Director Wallace Bailey in the April 1978 edition of the Massachusetts Audubon Newsletter. "That place itself has now returned to nature. We can best commemorate both man and place by continuing the search."

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Now, in 2003, 75 years after the book's publication and 25 years after that great storm, the theme of Beston's message still resonates loud and clear. "The phrase had been the soul of the book, rooted in this house," Beston wrote in 1933.

Beston, who died in 1968, occasionally retreated to the Overlook Inn in Eastham when the elements on the beach turned harsh. While staying at "The Fo'castle," he witnessed bird migrations, shipwrecks, severe weather conditions, or just absorbed the roar of the sea outside his door. As a journalist who had dedicated his life to being a "writer-naturalist," he merely wanted to experience what this small corner of the world had to offer.

Beston embraced the experiences of the wind blowing through the dune grass, thousands of monarch butterflies hovering over Nauset during their migrations in autumn, the power of a winter nor'easter, and the roar of the surf. Those experiences are still very much alive for anyone who walks the sands of Coast Guard Beach - as it was for Beston 75 years ago.

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That was only a preview of what was yet to come.

The Great Blizzard of 1978, which claimed The Outermost House and several other landmarks along the New England coast, was the grandest storm of all.



Henry Beston in the beret, in front of Massachusetts Governor Endicott Peabody, at a ceremony denoting the Outermost House a National Literary Landmark, October 11, 1964.

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