CAPE COD has appealed to the imagination and curiosity of merchant-adventurers, pilgrims, and fishermen, until finally more disinterested observers of man and his environment have been attracted to its low-lying shores. The reason for this is twofold. There is, in the first instance, a wonderfully varied and suggestive countryside of shining dunes and somber pine woods, of marshy shores and warm, fragrant uplands, of swift tidal rivers and purple cranberry bogs; a coast encircled by the sweep and glare of the ever-present sea. Matched with and habiting this unique land is a race of people whom fate and the shape of their extensive sand-bar home have combined to render isolated and individual. The hardships under which they have fought to live have molded from the early Puritan stock a miniature nation of heroes. The Cape has stamped them unmistakably and forever. They belong to it, and it shelters or slays them. Their lifelong association with sea and sky and sand, alternately friend and foe, has developed in them certain marked characteristics. They are largely silent, as the sky is silent; they are strong and tenacious as the undertow that eats away their shores; and under the stimulus of a new idea they move no faster than the drifting dunes before the summer gale. There is an indomitable courage about their silent cunning when
ground down to the level of the sea by the force of the storm. There is a habit of repression fostered and strengthened by the frequent crises in their lives when words will not avail. One does not shout to the tempest; the lee shore hears no cries; the circling gulls are indifferent.

Many have visited the Cape, and dozens have recorded their impressions of the journey, the country, and the people. Two alone have left accounts at all comprehensive and appreciative. About the middle of the last century Thoreau came to the Cape. In his own words:

I made a visit to Cape Cod in October, 1849, another the succeeding June, and another to Truro in July, 1855; the first and last time with a single companion, the second time alone. I have spent, in all, about three weeks on the Cape; walked from Eastham to Provincetown twice on the Atlantic side, and once on the Bay side also, excepting four or five miles, and crossed the Cape half a dozen times on my way; but having come so fresh to the sea, I have got but little salted. My readers must expect only so much saltiness as the land breeze acquires from blowing over an arm of the sea, or is tasted on the windows and the bark of trees twenty miles inland, after September gales.¹

Here was a man who had trained himself in observation and in the expression of the results of his observations. What did he find? Or, more accurately, what does he tell us he found? For one thing, he found ample opportunities to display his superior learning. His account is full of what this man said and what that historian contributed. Together with this relatively unimportant information there is, to be sure, a certain substratum of impressions gleaned from the Cape itself by H. D. Thoreau

¹ H. D. Thoreau, Cape Cod (Boston, 1883), 1.
himself. The former is tiresome after the first hundred pages; the latter is too scant in volume to satisfy the reader who desires a full account of the Cape and an analysis of its character and peculiar individuality. Again, there is apparent here in even greater degree than in *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers* or *Walden* the underlying egoism of the man. Everything must relate to him. Whenever a philosophical thought appears, it is warped out of its true course by the bias of the author and his partiality for himself. An example will make this plain. Thoreau and his companion have arrived at the Highland Light, where they spend the night.

The lighthouse lamps a few feet distant shone full into my chamber, and made it as bright as day, so I knew exactly how the Highland Light bore all that night, and I was in no danger of being wrecked. Unlike the last, this was as still as a summer night. I thought as I lay there, half awake and half asleep, looking upward through the window at the lights above my head, how many sleepless eyes from far out on the Ocean stream—mariners of all nations spinning their yarns through the various watches of the night—were directed toward my couch.\(^2\)

At his best, Thoreau has a fine gift of description, which he exercises only too rarely. In his peregrinations down the Nauset beach beneath his umbrella—which, with the wind at his back, “helped us over the sand at a rapid rate”—he gazed with a discerning eye at his surroundings.

We soon met one of these wreckers—a regular Cape Cod man, [though how Thoreau was so sure that this specimen cast up before him was typical, he neglects to state] with whom we

\(^2\) Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 161.
parleyed, with a bleached and weather-beaten face, within whose wrinkles I distinguished no particular feature. It was like an old sail endowed with life—a hanging-cliff of weather-beaten flesh—like one of the clay bowlders which occurred in that sand-bank. He had on a hat which had seen salt water, and a coat of many pieces and colors, though it was mainly the color of the beach, as if it had been sanded. His variegated back—for his coat had many patches, even between the shoulders—was a rich study to us, when we had passed him and looked round. It might have been dishonorable for him to have so many scars behind, it is true, if he had not had many more and more serious ones in front. He looked as if he sometimes saw a doughnut, but never descended to comfort; too grave to laugh, too tough to cry; as indifferent as a clam—like a sea-clam with hat on and legs, that was out walking the strand. He may have been one of the Pilgrims—Peregrine White, at least—who has kept on the back side of the Cape, and let the centuries go by.\(^3\)

This is not the work of a sympathetic and appreciative observer, one sensitive to humble, lowly nobility. It is a wonderfully rich and suggestive description, certainly. It is above all, however, the opinion of a scholar who can rejoice only in scholarship, the impression of a study-bred man who feels that all outside his study is but the shadow of some incredible reality which he domiciles in his books and in his mind. Much the same intellectual arrogance is observable in other of his writings. He is never happier than when he can thrust nature aside after extracting from her a text for his discourse, and can swing off, unhampered by the intrusive jade, into speculation upon lofty speculation. He is not one with mankind; rather he addresses them from a cloud-capped tower—in abstractions. Mankind is to him a vague ag-

\(^3\) Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 52-53.
gregate, a crowd in the distance, not to be individualized, or distinguished from a flock of gulls. Throughout his whole work is this flood of cool, clear inhumanity, as warm and sensitive to human hearts and human hopes as the crystal flow from a mountain glacier. His views of nature are, as a necessary consequence, largely intellectual. Instead of seeing in nature, with Wordsworth, the moods of man, he founds on nature a metaphysical castle whose ramparts touch the sky, but whose battlements and strongholds likewise touch only air. Where are the other elements which the Greeks realized were part of man's composition? Are earth and fire and water to be ignored?

Egoistic withdrawal from the responsibilities of life carries with it its own penalty in a near-sighted and foreshortened view of that despised ferment. No style, however elaborate and flexible, no ear, however carefully attuned to the musical rhythms of the spheres, can make up for a life barren of human contacts and understandings. Thoreau enjoyed talking to such quaint characters as presented themselves to his inquiring eye; the passage above shows how susceptible he could be to picturesque exteriors. The same spirit exactly breathes through his description of a sand dune. There is no more ardent enthusiasm—and no less. People are to him but specimens, and with the same curious scientific accuracy he collects bipeds without feathers and bipeds with feathers. All is grist that comes to his mill, but the stupidest miller should know the difference between corn and wheat.

From the point of view of style, Cape Cod falls below the high standard set by A Week and Walden. The
care and love of workmanship are missing. The book reads like a tired journal, in which the facts are set down in the first words that come to mind, and the author is never concerned to polish them up. As a result, there is a barrenness and an unattractive shallowness about the book; a shallowness which is found to a lesser degree even in Thoreau’s best work. This self-centeredness seems to be inherent in all of Thoreau’s mental processes, although it is sometimes obscured or hidden beneath the gorgeous intellectual tapestries and musings themselves, which are comparable to the mystical Oriental philosophies that he so eagerly studied.

In brief, Thoreau never entered into the life of his fellows, and therefore can not understand the sort of environment which influences a man’s life. The Cape Codder depends on his native soil and his native waters; without them, he is not; removed from them, even in the mind of a strolling littérateur, or conceived apart from them and not rather viewed as a product of them, and they as the fit surroundings for him, he is inevitably an anomalous and misunderstood miracle. There is a sneer in all Thoreau’s condescending consideration of the native Cape individual; there is no word of approval or genuine appreciation of the life or the people. He walks through their midst. He might as well have remained beside Walden Pond, for all the understanding of the Cape he gains by this excursion. He covers considerable beach, has gazed quite frequently at the sea, now and then peers inland to the Bay, and passes the time of day with one or two inhabitants; but out of it all has come a superficial, prejudiced, and singularly unseeing survey. As a genuine portrait of the Cape, it is a failure; as the
work of a literary man, it shows only very occasionally any artistic deftness, and then generally by way of satire, as in the description of the wrecker. His talents are patronizing; his mind betrays his heart to silence. H. M. Tomlinson, who admits his admiration of and debt to Thoreau, has gone far beyond his model in this insight into the human motives, hopes, and aspirations that render man’s relation to his environment of permanent and vital significance in the history of a racial mind.

The sand-hills, with their acute outlines, and their shadows flung rigidly from their peaks across the pallor of their slopes, were the apparition of inviolable seclusion. They could have been waiting upon an event secret from our knowledge, larger than the measure of our experience; so they had still the aspect of a strange world, not only infinitely remote, but superior with a greater destiny. They were old, greatly older than the ancient village across the water. Ships left the village and went by them to sea gay with the bunting of a first voyage, with a fair wind, and on a fine morning; and when such a ship came back long after as an old plank bearded with sea moss, to the dunes under which it stranded the day was still the same, vestal and innocent; for they were on a voyage of greater length and import. They had buried many ships; but, as time moved to them, all on the same day.4

Thoreau is unable to humanize his nature in this way, because only a writer who knows men as well as nature can do so.

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There is a man, however, who studied the Cape for over a year from the vantage of a hut on the Eastham beach, a mile and three-quarters south from the Nauset Coast Guard Station. From this temporary home he

watched the Cape with a penetrating, discriminating eye, more than seventy-five years after Thoreau scudded down wind before his umbrella. *The Outermost House* is a faithful and sympathetic series of essays written simply, yet with dignity, on various subjects suggested to Henry Beston by the scenes around the “Fo’castle,” his house on the dune. “The Beach;” “Autumn, Ocean, and Birds;” “The Headlong Wave;” “Lanterns on the Beach;” “Night on the Great Beach;” “The Year at High Tide;” “Orion Rises on the Dunes;” are the titles of some of the chapters. Mr. Beston knew his Thoreau and has followed him in style, more or less, as he has followed him in subject; but in many respects he has surpassed his leader. There is in his study of the Cape less booklore and more observation; less philosophy and more genuine and sincere appreciation of the sea and land.

The whole difference in attitude may best be illustrated when we realize that *Cape Cod* is the journal of Thoreau, while *The Outermost House* is the journal of Cape Cod. In the former the author is the hero; in the latter the Cape is allowed to write its own story. There is a fine self-effacement about Beston that immediately places him head and shoulders above Thoreau when it comes to reporting observations, and incidentally opens to him the secret places of the land and the hearts of its sturdy people. Thoreau was inevitably barred from the confidences of the Cape by his arrogant sense of superiority. He was permitted to peer into the facts of the Cape; of their significance he knew nothing. To Beston the Cape was a friend, and as with a friend he com-

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muned. Whereas Thoreau lightly skimed the surface of the "Right Arm of Massachusetts" — which he aptly enough pictures "boxing with northeast storms" — and gathered from its shifting dunes hardly more enduring impressions than his scurrying feet left upon the flowing sand, Beston burrows into the Cape for shelter, and becomes part of it. From his ten-windowed cabin on the top of a dune, with the ocean rolling at his front door, his back door open to the wide marshes of Eastham, and his heart and the energies of his mind and body perpetually sensitive to all the moods of the vast personality he had come expressly to know and to trace intimately, this twentieth-century observer watched with opened eyes the wheeling gulls and seasons, the everlasting flow of tide and time across his beach. In a larger sense his account is the romance of the sea, the year, and the Cape; and with a sure perception of the significance and hidden meaning of their tangled relationships, he has witnessed the mighty drama of the elements.

The fortnight ending, I lingered on, and as the year lengthened into autumn, the beauty and mystery of this earth and outer sea so possessed and held me that I could not go. The world to-day is sick to its thin blood for lack of elemental things, for fire before the hands, for water welling from the earth, for air, for the dear earth itself underfoot. In my world of beach and dune these elemental presences lived and had their being, and under their arch there moved an incomparable pageant of nature and the year. The flux and reflux of ocean, the incomings of waves, the gatherings of birds, the pilgrimages of the peoples of the sea, winter and storm, the splendor of autumn and the holiness of spring — all these were part of the great beach. The longer I stayed, the more eager was I to know this coast, and to share its mysterious and elemental life. . . .

6 Beston, The Outermost House, 10.
Here was a man who felt the underlying tides of life swelling beneath the conventions, surging to and fro under the mass of human barriers erected as if in defence between man and the earth which gives him a home. "The great rhythms of nature," says Beston, "today so dully disregarded, wounded even, have here their spacious and primeval liberty; cloud and shadow of cloud, wind and tide, tremor of night and day."

The beauty of his imaginative perception and the accuracy of his naturalist’s observation combine to produce a number of unforgettable pictures of Cape Cod.

One March evening, just as sundown was fading into night, the whole sky chanced to be overspread with cloud, all save a golden channel in the west between the cloud floor and the earth. It was very still, very peaceful on my solitary dune. The whole earth was dark, dark as a shallow cup lifted to a solemnity of silence and cloud. Turning toward the marsh, I saw a flock of geese flying over the meadows along the rift of dying, golden light, their great wings beating with a slow and solemn beauty, their musical, bell-like cry filling the lonely levels and the dark. Is there a nobler wild clamour in all the world? I listened to the sound till it died away and the birds had disappeared into darkness, and then heard a quiet sea chiding a little at the turn of tide.7

His appreciation of nature did not blind him to the possibilities of man's happiness and misery; rather did his love for the wild life about his camp sharpen his sensitivity to human life and death. In describing the wreck of the Montclair, which went ashore during his stay on the Cape, he says:

I can see the broken mast of the schooner from the deck of the Fo’castle. Sunday last, I walked over to the ship. The space

7 Beston, The Outermost House, 116.
under the after deck-house from which the men were swept—officers' quarters, I imagine—is an indescribable flung mass of laths, torn wood, wrecked panelling, sopped blankets, and sailor's clothing. I remember the poor, stringy, cheap ties. In the midst of the débris a stain of soppy pink paper caught my eye: it was a booklet, "If You Were Born in February." I have often seen the set of twelve on newsstands. The scarlet cover of this copy had seeped into the musty pages. "Those who are born in this month," I read, "have a particular affection for home"; and again, "They will go through fire and water for their loved ones."

Who brought this thing aboard? one wonders. Whose curious hands first opened it in the lamplight of this tragic and disordered space? The seventeen-year-old boy is dead of the shock and exposure; the stocky, husky-built man, the only survivor, is going on with the sea. "He says it's all he knows," said a coast guardsman.\(^8\)

One of his most admirable qualities is his ability to infuse life into his surroundings.

An invisible moon, two days past the full, had risen behind the rushing floor of cloud, and some of its wan light fell on the tortured earth and the torment of the sea. The air was full of sleet, hissing with a strange, terrible, insistent sound on the dead grass, and sand was being whirled up into the air. . . . I have never looked on such a tide. It had crossed the beach, climbed the five-foot wall of the dune levels that run between the great mounds, and was hurling wreckage fifty and sixty feet into the starved white beach grass; the marsh was an immense flooded bay, and the "cuts" between the dunes and the marsh rivers of breakers. A hundred yards to the north of me was such a river; to the south, the surf was attempting to flank the dune, an attempt which did not succeed. Between these two onslaughts, no longer looking down upon the sea, but directly into it and just over it, the Fo'castle stood like a house built out into the surf on a mound of sand. A third of a mile or so to the

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\(^8\) Beston, *The Outermost House*, 122.
north I chanced to see rather a strange thing. The dune bank there was washing away and caving in under the onslaught of the seas, and presently there crumbled out the blackened skeleton of an ancient wreck which the dunes had buried long ago. As the tide rose this ghost floated and lifted itself free, and then washed south close along the dunes. There was something inconceivably spectral in the sight of this dead hulk thus stirring from its grave and yielding its bones again to the fury of the gale.\(^9\)

Thoreau's attitude toward wrecks is expressed in the following way:

The sea is not gaining on the Cape everywhere, for one man told me of a vessel wrecked long ago on the north of Province-town whose "bones" (this was his word) are still visible many rods within the present line of the beach, half buried in sand. Perchance they lie alongside the timbers of a whale.\(^10\)

This sort of quibbling brands the intellectual landsman for ever.

We have seen what opinion Thoreau held of the people among whom he was travelling. His sketch of the Wellfleet oysterman has been praised by some as an excellent picture of the average Cape Codder, but it is in fact not truly representative. Compare with it, and with the portrait of the wrecker quoted above, this passage from *The Outermost House*:

The majority of my neighbors are of Cape Cod stock. Born of Cape blood and reared in the Cape atmosphere, even men who have never been to sea have an instinctive turn for the sea and the ways of ships. But these wardens of the Cape [the Coast Guards] are not sailors ashore; they are "surfmen." The name is a wise one — men of the great beach, inheritors of a long


\(^10\) Thoreau, *Cape Cod*, 140. The italics and quotation marks are the author's.
local tradition concerning surf and all its ways. These men have heard the roar of the great beach sounding about their cradles. As I have already written, the sight of the surf in a great gale on the Cape is a spectacle of mingled exaltation, magnificence, and terror, while to venture it in a boat would strike any landsman as a lunatic performance. On such occasions, the sound, traditional surf knowledge of Cape men comes into play. Captains of coast guard crews here choose their launching ground, choose their moment, choose their wave. All together now, go! — and out she runs, the captain standing astern, facing the breakers and steering, the men pulling for their lives.\textsuperscript{11}

To Thoreau the inhabitants of the Cape are quaintly comic in their ignorance. He understands the country more or less in a superficial way, for naturalism is his study; and without being too unfair we may say that naturalism is his weakness. His attempts to reach genuine humanism only serve to mark his inability to dip beneath the surface of appearance and achieve the treasure at the bottom of the well. Some one — perhaps Thoreau himself — has said that Truth was customarily sought at the bottom of wells, but not so often found, since the seeker, seeing his own face reflected in the water, assumed he was gazing on the Truth! Some such Narcissus-like attitude characterizes the hermit of Walden. In his own peculiar way Thoreau enjoyed the Cape, as is shown by his letters;\textsuperscript{12} but to most readers \textit{The Outermost House} offers a more deeply understanding study of life on this “fragment of an ancient and vanished land.”

For Beston has lived on the Cape; Thoreau has but visited. Consequently Thoreau is as much a stranger at

\textsuperscript{11} Beston, \textit{The Outermost House}, 136.

the end of his visit as he was at the beginning. He advises a friend returning from an unsatisfactory trip to the Cape — "... you should have persevered ... and so, by long knocking at Ocean's gate, have gained admittance at last ...," but is incapable of following his own excellent advice. Beston, making the Cape his home for a year and returning to it every summer, has adopted it for his own; and the Cape in turn has admitted him to confidences and secrets granted to few. It is this communion which makes his account of his year so consonant with our feeling of a mysterious, living personality at his elbow as he writes, a personality which he has deftly and imperishably transferred to paper. When we once appreciate this fact, the almost epic quality of his narrative is explained. Thoreau made no pretence of achieving a complete character portrayal, as we see from the first paragraph quoted in this article; he realized his freshwater limitations. Perhaps the sea was too vast for the satisfactory speculations with which he was wont to enliven his peripatetic life beside his beloved Walden. Certainly his contacts with Cape Cod can be accurately defined as casual, transient, and superficial. Thoreau made an acquaintance; Beston gained a friend.