



Orion of the Dunes: A Biography of Henry Beston

Daniel Payne

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A masterful portrait of an essential and unexamined American writer.

When war broke out in Europe in 1914, a twenty-six-year-old Harvard writing instructor named Henry Sheahan volunteered with the American Field Service in France. After serving as an ambulance driver on the western front (and witnessing the horrific battle of Verdun), Sheahan, now going by the pen name Henry Beston, began to write children's stories (his fairy tales were immensely popular with the children of his Harvard classmate and close friend Theodore Roosevelt). In September of 1926, Beston spent a two-week vacation in a Cape Cod shack he'd built high on an isolated stretch of dunes overlooking the Atlantic Ocean. As he later wrote, "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 resulting book, *The Outermost House*, is universally considered a classic of American nature writing, frequently compared to the works of Henry David Thoreau and John Burroughs. In his later books, Beston explored the ways that the modern industrial era was endangering the vital connection between humankind and the natural world, and he is now recognized as a key transitional figure in the twentieth century's fascination with ecology and nature and as an avatar of the conservation movement.

In *Orion on the Dunes*, the first biography of Beston, scholar Daniel Payne-granted unrestricted access to the writer's archives and drawing on interviews with friends and family-has crafted a scrupulously researched narrative; one presenting a masterful portrait that traces the intellectual growth and tumultuous life of a vital American writer whose work and thought have exerted a tremendous pull on poets, naturalists, and novelists alike. This is the backstory to a life at once hidden and transparent that is here finally revealed.

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