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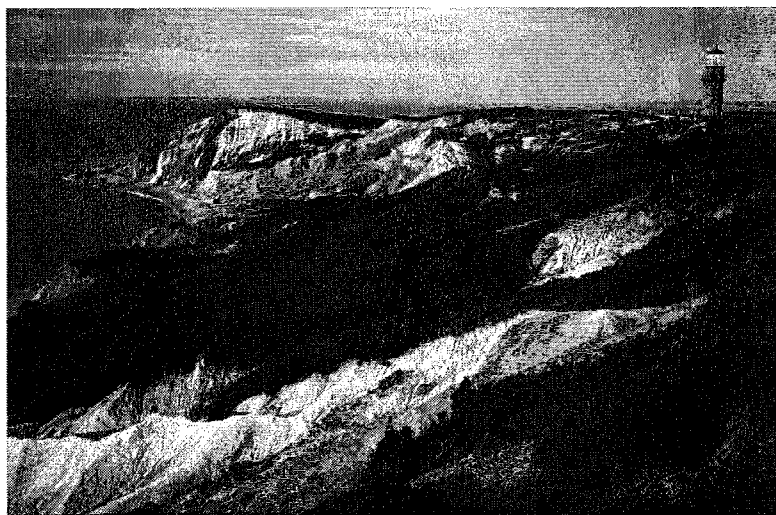
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## Where Presidents Go to Play

Martha's Vineyard, from a lump of glacial till to a Xanadu for celebrities. Alexandra Styron reviews "A Meeting of Land and Sea" by David R. Foster.



The lighthouse at Aquinnah on Martha's Vineyard. PHOTO: LIFE PICTURE COLLECTION/GETTY IMAGES

*By Alexandra Styron*

April 28, 2017 1:41 p.m. ET

**Early in** "A Meeting of Land and Sea: Nature and the Future of Martha's Vineyard," David Foster describes what he calls the "holiday test." Mr. Foster, an ecologist at Harvard, encourages his students to gauge the wisdom of their research topics by imagining a Thanksgiving conversation with "Uncle Bob and Aunt Hilary." An ill-considered choice might result in a scene like this: "After you stumble through a few sentences laced with terms like 'lake sediments,'

‘postglacial,’ and ‘pollen analysis,’ Hilary is peering over your shoulder toward the shrimp cocktail, and Bob interrupts to ask exactly who is funding this work and how it will lead to a real job.”

The point of the exercise is not to dissuade future ecologists from boring deep into their subject matter but to encourage them to make their work both compelling and relevant. I confess that Aunt Hilary remained much on my mind as I made my way through this grand survey of an island I know well. Mr. Foster’s book is lush and handsome, both exhaustive in its exploration of the island’s natural landscape and profoundly considerate of the human impact—past, present and future—upon that landscape. But ultimately it is the work of an academic. And so I wondered: Would my layman’s devotion to the place bear up under so much eco-science and data? Could I share Mr. Foster’s zeal for geomorphology, dendrology, climatology? For extirpated wildlife and failed zoning plans? Or was I gazing at the finger food?



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Well, a little.

But tenaciousness rewards the patient reader. The scope of Mr. Foster’s narrative is vast, and its fine detail is crucial to taking in the entire view.

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A MEETING OF LAND AND SEA

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*By David R. Foster*

*Yale, 336 pages, \$40*

As most any visitor will attest, the island is rich in personality. A corrugated triangle of land just off the coast of Massachusetts, it measures roughly 100 square miles, comprising six distinct municipalities.

Edgartown, with its stately whaling homes and preppy vibe, is a world apart from the wind-swept beach culture of bohemian Chilmark. Tisbury’s commercial hurly-burly ensures that it never gets confused with its more serene neighbor, West Tisbury. Aquinnah remains both wild and remote. And, well, nowhere is quite like the town of Oak Bluffs. But more protean than the character of the towns is the land they have come to

occupy. Rocky hillsides here, dense woods there; rolling green pastures and sandy grass plains; marshland, moors, brackish inlets, freshwater ponds. Together these diverse regions make up a highly dynamic ecosystem—all of it ringed by a spectacular seashore that, like so many other national treasures, is rapidly disappearing.

With a naturalist's sense of wonder and professor's educative skills, Mr. Foster tracks the myriad forces that have shaped the island, both literally and metaphorically. From its prehistoric beginnings as a lump of glacial debris to its modern designation as a Xanadu for vacationing presidents, the Vineyard appears in these pages less as a static landmass than as a constantly mutating organism. Forest gives way to farmland, which again gives way to forest; beaches erode only to backfill other beaches down the strand; rustic waterways become grist mills, then conservation land in perpetuity. And all along the way are the people drawn to the island for different reasons, shaping its resources as the tides shape the coast. As the professor and conservationist Nathaniel Southgate Shaler wrote of the island in 1874, "every nook and cranny will . . . give to those who search it in this spirit a mass of curious things, quite as rich as those we could bring to light out of the darkest corner of Europe, and far more comprehensible."

Of course, some of those things are finite. The last hundred years have seen an explosion of development on the island. Gargantuan luxury homes speckle the rugged shorelines, narrow roadways are often choked with traffic, new commercial districts abound. Every summer, the island's population explodes; the stresses placed on a fragile system cannot be overestimated.

But all is not gloom and doom. As a contextualist, Mr. Foster presents ideas—the now extinct heath hen was never particularly abundant anyway, the golf course you hate is better than the housing development originally planned—that can allay the fears of even the twitchiest tree-hugger. And his portraits of the people and organizations that have long protected the island are heartening. So, too, is his sense of history. For instance, a consideration of the island's arboreal complexion shows that tree species do succumb to various blights but are almost always replaced by more salubrious breeds, without any human intervention. In the end, one of the surest achievements of "A Meeting of Land and Sea" is the balance that is struck between concern and hope. For every graph that charts new construction, Mr. Foster offers a countervailing map delineating land that will remain forever wild.

As for the future of the Vineyard, change is, as always, the one thing we can count on. Here Mr. Foster counsels a measure of passivity, arguing for “less hubris” in our interventions. We cannot deter nature, nor can we stop progress. Rather we can assess all the attendant forces and make responsible decisions based on what we’ve learned. Mr. Foster’s protocol—alliances between landowners and conservation organizations, grants for local farmers, history-minded civic planning—is intended to work with nature, not against it. But still he would have us remember that we are, all of us, stewards of tomorrow. As a favorite island bumper sticker says, it is always time to “Save What’s Left.”

—*Ms. Styron is the author of “Reading My Father: A Memoir.”*

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