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# The Prophet of Dry Hill: Lessons From a Life in Nature

David Gessner

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## THE PROPHET OF DRY HILL

lessons from a life in nature

DAVID GESSNER

author of *Return of the Osprey*



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**David Gessner : The Prophet of Dry Hill: Lessons From a Life in Nature** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised The Prophet of Dry Hill: Lessons From a Life in Nature:

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Free at Last!By David WilliamsDavid Gessner's book, The Prophet of Dry Hill, is as important to read for its language as for its content. Those of us who have read Gessner's work over the years have witnessed a progression from an adolescent self-consciousness over his persona as "a writer" to this largely unselfconscious achievement. Of course, the book is not free of those early stumblings, but the prose is crisp and clear and focused, even though the themes still echo the author's -- but subtly. Gessner says of John Hay, the prophet being memorialized here, in writing of the alewife run, " He may have seen in the herring's black eyes and shining scales something close to personal salvation both as a man and a writer. He knew that he had found his

subject." Here, Gessner also reveals himself finding his own subject. His earlier books on ospreys never quite escaped from being books about his writing about ospreys. But here, John Hay and the Cape take over and the self-conscious writer slides back from view. Not that it isn't well-written; for all of that it is better written. The opening line of the chapter titled "Exodus," is finely crafted alliteration: "With the warm weather came waves of movement." He must have enjoyed creating that line. I can imagine him as excited as Dylan Thomas was when he penned "the rain wringing wind." Echoes can be heard here too of the best works of American wilderness writing. Gessner's return to the need for "relinquishment" revive a theme found in Faulkner's great hymn to relinquishment in "The Bear." As John Hay before him, Gessner here is doing his part to keep alive a legacy, an American tradition, of nature writing vital to our national identity. I disagree with Gessner at one point: Thoreau is not "the fountainhead of this thought." The tradition was carried to the New World and to Thoreau by the Puritans, and this faith was delivered to those saints by prophets before them. It can be found in the Old Testament. It is in danger today of being drowned in oil slicks and ipads and post-modern solipsism. Here, David Gessner is helping to keep alive the sense that inspired Prophets like John Hay of some fiery mystery that does exist outside the text. As we stumble forward into an uncertain and unnatural future, no greater compliment can be paid a writer.<sup>13</sup> of 13 people found the following review helpful. Two tuned to the nature of Cape Cod

By Corinne H. Smith

In "Encounters with the Archdruid," John McPhee takes a hike with former Sierra Club president David Brower and uses that scenario to present an informal biography of the noted conservationist and environmentalist. David Gessner employs the same technique here as he looks at the life of Cape Cod naturalist and writer John Hay. Perhaps the general public is not as familiar with Hay's work as it is/was with Brower's, and that's a shame. His is the third name linked to the nature writing about the Cape, after Henry David Thoreau and Henry Beston. Founder of the Cape Cod Museum of Natural History, Hay started out as a poet apprentice to Conrad Aiken. Gradually he found his own voice and began writing longer pieces, eloquently describing the habitat and birds and fishes of his adopted home. When "The Run" came out in the 1950s, it was the first book to focus on the lives of herrings and on their place in the grand scheme of the natural cycle of seasons. Gessner becomes friends with Hay, and as he accompanies the elderly gentleman on walks, he learns much about the man and about the way the Cape used to be. "The Prophet of Dry Hill" reads more like a few casual excursions and tame adventures than a traditional biography, and that suits the subject just fine. Hay, then in his mid-80s, is slowing down, and both men believe that his time here is limited. And like David Brower, Hay says what he thinks about the interconnectedness of all things and the blindness of politicians to see it. It's the end of an era on the Cape, where little old cottages are being torn down to make way for million-dollar mansions. In fact, by the end of the book, Hay and his wife have relocated to a more secluded place in Maine, and Gessner and his wife have moved to North Carolina. Neither can afford -- in one way or another -- to stay on that beautiful sandy peninsula at the easternmost edge of the continent. This book is not the first to reminisce about the way the Cape used to be. It surely won't be the last. But it also serves as possibly a final walk along the shoreline with a man who cared deeply for the land and all of its creatures; a man who made a difference in conservation of Cape land; and a man who contributed deeply to our canon of American nature writing. It also solidifies David Gessner's place in that genre as well. It is one of the few books I've read that I know I need to read again, this time with a pen in hand to underline and star the best passages.<sup>6</sup> of 6 people found the following review helpful. Beautiful, Powerful, and Wise

By James M. Lang

I've read almost everything David Gessner has written, and this slim book towers above his already impressive body of work. Gessner's portrait of naturalist John Hay is frank and warm, and depicts Hay as a philosopher from whom we all could learn some profound lessons. Hay's commitment to the natural world, and his insistence that we look to nature for the questions and answers in our lives, rather than probing the inner recesses of our psyches, stands as a much-needed corrective to the easy psychologizing of daytime television and self-help books. Hay finds meaning in our lives in the passing of the seasons, and this book can help us find meaning there too. Gessner mirrors Hay's outlook by searching for meaning through his depiction of Hay, and by letting Hay speak for himself throughout the book, rather than philosophizing about Hay or dissecting his published work. This book is really a brilliant achievement of nonfiction writing in any genre, though of course it will have special appeal to anyone interested in the natural world.

David Gessner had always known of John Hay. A nature writing legend, Hay was a hero to the younger writer. But it wasn't until Gessner returned to his childhood home on Cape Cod that he befriended the older man. At first, Gessner thought he might write Hay's biography. But that idea gradually changed as the two talked and walked through the fifty acres surrounding Hay's house on Dry Hill. The book that resulted is a dramatic record of what the younger man learned from his elder. The Prophet of Dry Hill is the compelling story of two men and the year they spent together. But more than a book about friendship, it's a lyrical primer on the importance of living a life connected to the wild. John Hay has lived deeply on one piece of land for sixty years. As a consequence, he has much to tell Gessner--and us--about the importance of creating a strong relationship with the land we live on. His words speak to our forgotten need for space and for reaching beyond ourselves to the world outside. Seeing is the great discipline that nature teaches, Hay proclaims. Nature, not psychology, is the path to our true selves. In our split-second world, a life like John Hay's--rooted, connected to nature--provides a radical counterpoint to our technology-filled indoor existences. Gessner learned

much from this man on the hill. We too will be challenged and changed.

From Booklist  
In an era when the average person moves every 3.5 years, the notion of a man living 60 years on one piece of land is as quaint and anachronistic as button-hook shoes and the Pony Express; yet that's just what the legendary naturalist John Hay did on the 50-acre Cape Cod wilderness he called home. Fellow nature writer Gessner grew up on the Cape and returned there, planning to write Hay's biography. What emerged instead is an ardent memoir of the year they spent sharing the joys, wonders, secrets, and treasures of a landscape quickly succumbing to developers' bulldozers. As they explored surf and stream, observed spawning herring and diving gannets, an abiding friendship evolved between the revered octogenarian and the man young enough to be his grandson, a relationship as benevolent, fundamental, and momentous as any other in nature. Sharing a philosophy of life and living, Gessner eloquently reacquaints readers old and new to Hay's magnificent contributions to the art of nature writing. Carol Haggas  
Copyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved  
This book is an enormous gift, an act of preservation as important as any chunk of land purchased by The Nature Conservancy. John Hay's stature cannot be overestimated, and David Gessner has done him great justice.--Bill McKibben, author of *Wandering Home*  
"The Prophet of Dry Hill is a surprising book in many ways, tender, elegant, intelligent, always frank and sometimes very funny. This is a work of generous love, the story of a prickly friendship, but also and preeminently a short and fiery course on how to live in an increasingly crowded and confusing world."--Bill Roorbach, author of *Temple Stream*  
"Reading *The Prophet of Dry Hill* is like taking a long, soul-satisfying walk with two remarkable naturalists, John Hay and David Gessner. Through Hay's wise words and Gessner's keen observations, we witness a gentle unfolding of a friendship seeded in a shared passion for the natural world and nurtured in the unpredictability of human connectedness." --Kate Whouley, author of *Cottage for Sale, Must Be Moved*  
"If Thoreau had wanted a disciple, he couldn't have had a better one than David Gessner. Following the great nature writer John Hay around his Cape Cod haunts, witnessing Hay's increasing dismay at the development crushing his beloved Cape, Gessner has made Hay's *cri de coeur* his own. This beautiful book should inspire the reader to 'get down in nature, down in the water and the dirt,' as Hay urges. I am sending my copy of this book to the wildlife-destroyer in the White House."--Alice Furlaud, NPR reporter  
About the Author  
David Gessner is the author of several books, including most recently *Sick of Nature*. His *Return of the Osprey* was chosen by the *Boston Globe* as one of the top ten nonfiction books of the year. Gessner is currently the editor of *Ecotone*, a literary journal, and teaches at the University of North Carolina at Wilmington. He lives in Wrightsville Beach, North Carolina, with his wife and daughter.