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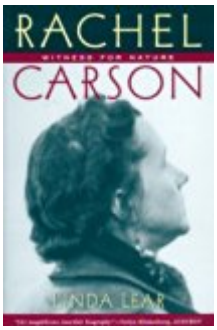
Linda Lear. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. xviii + 634 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-8050-3427-1.



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Linda Lear begins her excellent biography of Rachel Carson by recounting a scene from a 1963 Congressional hearing. Carson, whose widely influential study of the dangers of pesticides, *Silent Spring*, had been published less that a year earlier, sat quietly, waiting for the hearing to begin. Unbeknownst to everyone around her, she was dying of cancer. As Senator Abraham Ribicoff called the meeting to order, he introduced Carson by paraphrasing what Abraham Lincoln had said upon meeting Harriet Beecher Stowe. "Miss Carson," Ribicoff intoned, "we welcome you here. You are the lady that started all of this." Lear uses this incident to introduce one of the major themes of her study: that Rachel Carson, a quiet woman who prized her solitude and privacy, had been thrust into this public position by her deep love for the natural world and by the threats posed to it by humanity's technological arrogance. Rachel Carson, Lear argues quite convincingly, was "meant to bear witness," (p. 4). But this brief vignette also speaks to another major achievement of Lear's biography, a more subtle but perhaps more important one. Lear shows once and for all that in order to understand Carson's monumental influence on the postwar environmental movement in America, we need to rethink the implied Ribicoff's implied narrative: that this demure "lady" came out of nowhere to single-handedly affect a major intellectual reorientation in American attitudes about chemical pesticides and the environment. The story, it turns out, is a bit more complicated than that.

Lear does a terrific job "placing" Carson and contextualizing her youthful influences. Carson was born and raised in Springdale, Pennsylvania, a small town along the Allegheny River east of Pittsburgh. Her early appreciation of the natural world grew from this place, and from bearing witness to its industrial transformation. As a child, Carson developed an affinity for nature writers like Gene Stratton Porter. She began writing, herself, at a very young age and had her first story published in Mary Mapes Dodge's *St. Nicholas* when she was only eleven. She was soon winning prizes for her stories.

Rachel Carson had planned to study English in college and become writer, but her discovery of the biological sciences pulled her in an entirely

different direction. Thus began what Lear describes as an almost schizophrenic struggle on Carson's' part to fix upon a vocation. The struggle was more than just a difficult choice between two appealing intellectual courses of study, for Carson was keenly aware of the difficulties she would face as a female scientist. A career as a writer was the more sensible choice. Carson chose science. After graduating from Pennsylvania College for Women, Carson earned a master's degree in zoology from Johns Hopkins. She would have pursued her Ph.D. had not the depression and family responsibilities gotten in her way. Without a Ph.D., Rachel Carson had to rely on her ability as a writer to build a career as a government scientist. She began by writing radio scripts for the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries, and she steadily worked her way up the ladder to the position of Information Specialist for the Fish and Wildlife Service. Though she had solid scientific credentials, Carson never got the opportunities, or the respect, afforded field scientists. Instead, she carved out a unique niche within the bureau as a science writer who interpreted the FWS's research for the public. Never able to get more than one foot solidly planted within the male world of professional science, Carson instead became a go-between, a role she made the most of over the course of her career.

Lear does an excellent job tying Carson's environmental awakening to the vast expansion of government science during World War Two, and to its many connections to military technology. Her own field of oceanography expanded rapidly in conjunction with naval research. As early as 1945, Carson expressed concern about governmental efforts to develop and test chemical pesticides. That year, she proposed to *Reader's Digest* a story on the testing of DDT at the Patuxtent Research Refuge in Maryland, but the magazine declined the offer. Carson also edited the FWS's biological survey of the Bikini Islands, undertaken prior to the 1946 atomic testing there. She emerged from World War Two at the heart of an enlarged government bureaucracy but increasingly disconcerted about the instrumental ties between science, technology, and human efforts to control nature.

During the 1940s, Carson again started sending out articles to newspapers and magazines, and, over the next two decades, she emerged as one of the era's most accomplished writers on science and nature. Her first book, *Under the Sea Wind*, appeared in 1941, to good reviews but only modest sales. In 1951, Oxford University Press published Carson's second book, *The Sea Around Us*, an immediate bestseller that won such coveted prizes as the National Book Award and the Burroughs Medal for nature writing. Initially serialized in *The New Yorker*, *The Sea Around Us* established Carson's reputation as an important literary voice. The commercial success of the book also allowed Carson to quit the FWS and devote herself to full-time writing. Carson's next book, *The Edge of the Sea* (1955), was also a bestseller. These latter two books showed Carson to be not only a gifted nature writer but also an accomplished popularizer of the rapidly developing science of oceanography. Lear also points out the remarkable gendered reactions to Carson's popular ocean books. Some could not fathom how a woman could achieve such a mastery over scientific detail. More often, men were shocked that Carson was actually attractive and feminine. Nonetheless, Carson achieved tremendous recognition and relative affluence by the mid-1950s. Even had she not eventually written *Silent Spring*, Lear intimates, we would still remember Carson as one of the premier nature writers of the postwar era. Indeed, the furor over *Silent Spring* may have done more to obscure these achievements; Lear does a great service reemphasizing their importance.

While Carson's star rose, personal responsibilities and nagging medical problems kept her from enjoying the fruits of her success. She became the adopted mother of a young boy, the son of a niece who died prematurely, and her own mother's care was increasingly burdensome. Even

though Carson chose not to marry and have a family, she still found her career path strewn with traditionally female family responsibilities. Emotionally, Carson was sustained by an impressive network of friends, among them important nature writers like Edwin Way Teale and Henry Beston. But her most intense relationships were with a series of female friends. Lear is to be applauded for her honest portraits of these relationships, and for her willingness to take them for what they were rather than trucking in reductionist speculation about Carson's sexual orientation. (Lear's bibliography suggests that she thought deeply about these issues even though she chose not to say much about them in the narrative itself). But if this biography has a weakness it is that Lear fails to crack Carson's shell of privacy. This in no way detracts from the historical value of the work, but it does leave the reader wondering about some of Carson's basic motivations in life.

Rachel Carson began research on what became *Silent Spring* in the late 1950s. In 1960 she discovered that she had cancer, and this, combined with a number of other health problems, slowed her work considerably. When it finally appeared in 1962 - first serialized in *The New Yorker* and then published by Houghton-Mifflin - *Silent Spring* was received with both enthusiasm and acrimony. Lear does a particularly good and even-handed job in describing the challenges and gendered epithets that came from the chemical companies and allied scientists. Lear also shows that *Silent Spring* was a keystone achievement that supported and brought together growing scientific evidence about the dangers of pesticides and a swelling grassroots reaction to broadcast spraying of chemicals like DDT. In many ways, *Silent Spring* was a group effort; without her ties to government and university scientists and her many connections among members of a growing environmental movement, Carson's book never would have achieved the success it did. Lears suggests that *Silent Spring* successfully coalesced a diverse body of science and sentiment extant in America at the time. That said, however, it was clearly Rachel Carson's eloquence, her sophisticated grasp of the science involved, her reputation, and her ability to strike postwar chords that made *Silent Spring* a masterpiece. Lear makes this case with equal vigor. Carson was unflappable in the face of vitriolic attacks. In public appearances she presented her case rationally, carefully, and with attention to scientific detail, proving clearly that the charges of hysteria and sloppy science had no basis in fact. Rachel Carson was, in short, a consummate professional in making her case against a professional world which had never afforded her equal status. More than that, Carson was able to draw on her own marginal status in the scientific community to communicate effectively with a general public that itself felt out of touch with, and suspicious of, the scientific establishment.

When Abraham Ribicoff referred to Rachel Carson as "the lady who started all of this," he may have mirrored mainstream perception in a number of ways. Certainly Carson's *Silent Spring* was a sudden catalyst in raising public concerns about pesticides, and about the environment generally. That its author was a woman struck many as news. But Lear's most important contribution to our understanding of Rachel Carson comes not in a reiteration of this traditional David vs. Goliath story, but in her more subtle contextualization of Carson's life and career. Carson did not come out of nowhere but had built, by 1962, a formidable career and reputation as a writer. Carson did not single-handedly create the furor over pesticides; her work, as she would have readily admitted, was deeply indebted to the contributions of others. And Carson was no mere "lady." She had, over a couple of decades, successfully crashed the male world of institutional science, and she was as qualified as anyone to equal membership in that world. Lear's biography shows that Carson's great power to affect public change came not from an essentially female voice, but from the voice of a woman who had struggled at the margins of a male world, who had mastered a

largely male discipline, and whose effective expression was shaped by the structural impediments that kept her from achieving full status as a scientist in that world. Science's loss was our gain. For these reasons and others, Linda Lear's ***Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*** should stand as the definitive treatment of Carson for many years to come.

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