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Linda Lear. *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature.* New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1997. xviii + 634 pp. $17.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8050-3428-8; $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8050-3427-1.

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The Rachel Carson Story

In his thorough review of Linda Lear's rich biography of Rachel Carson, Paul Sutter rightfully deems it the "definitive treatment of Carson for many years to come." Sutter outlines the major themes of Carson's life: her reticent nature and female-centered world, her passion for writing, her difficulties as a woman in the male-dominated world of science, and the literary reputation she established with her previous work that allowed *Silent Spring* to get a wide hearing. I also like the book very much and do not intend this review to diminish Lear's accomplishment in any way. (And, in the interest of full disclosure, I should note that I helped Lear by making some of the copy photos of images that appear in the book.) However, I would like to augment Sutter's review with some comments about how *Witness for Nature* relates to the historiography of environmental history.

As Sutter points out, *Silent Spring* was not Carson's only work, and Lear rekindles an interest in her earlier literary successes. The fact remains that for environmental historians interested in the late twentieth-century American disillusionment with industrial science and the domination of nature, any biography of Carson must accept as its central task an explanation of *Silent Spring*. Because Carson died in 1964, less than two years after the book's publication, Lear's biography is necessarily less about the book's later impact and more about how the sum of Carson's life experience equipped her to create such an effective work. And although Carson was by no means destined to write *Silent Spring*, Lear builds a compelling case for the formidable resources Carson brought to bear on the subject.

Biography is a difficult form of history to write. Revolving as it does around a single person, broader social and cultural trends can be elusive or pushed into the background. It is easy to see how difficult it can be to gain narrative or analytical distance from the subject, especially in this case, when close, sympathetic ties with Carson's associates, who have long vigorously protected her legacy, were necessary to gain access to crucial material. Lear's eye for even the smallest details of life–what people wore, the brand of typewriter Carson's mother used to type Rachel's manuscripts, the name of the station where Carson's father caught the train–all contribute to an intimacy and thoughtfulness in keeping with the creative vision and profound reticence Lear ascribes to Carson. This approach makes the book as readable as a good novel and renders the larger themes into subtexts.

The challenge is that this sort of elegantly understated story-telling, coming from the highly-respected "show it, don't tell it" school of writing, makes it difficult to employ overtly the sorts of interpretive frameworks and analytical turns that environmental historians have developed to draw clear connections between human culture and the land. The multitude of minute passing details Lear includes, particularly during Carson's childhood and college years, sometimes overwhelmed me and at points left me wishing for a bit of streamlining to make room for more context and interpretation.

As Sutter notes, Lear's bibliography demonstrates that she is clearly well-read in the literature of women and gender in science, the cultural history of nature writing, women's close relationships and sexuality, twentieth century history of biology and natural history, conservation and preservation, and big science and the military industrial complex, just to name a few of the areas encompassed by Carson's life story. But these concerns are mostly hinted at in the text instead of directly engaged. The reader familiar with the secondary literature

will nod knowingly, recognizing the significance of the citation, but Lear rarely tips her own hand. In steering a course through Carson's life, then, Lear has obviously made the conscious decision to use those perspectives to guide her choice of material and the structure of her narrative, rather than explicitly to dissect Carson's life under the microscope of any of these theoretical stances. This approach undeniably helps maintain focus and coherence in a monumental project.

Perhaps because of my own background in Science and Technology Studies (and in spite of my experience as a popular writer), I would have appreciated seeing these themes examined more, if only as extended commentary in the footnotes.

One of the interesting questions that Lear's picture of Carson's life raises is that of the means and modes of environmental activism. Throughout Carson's life, the picture Lear paints of her personality and activities is an interior one of lifelong social and emotional isolation. Although Lear does not explicitly make a theoretical statement in this regard, environmental historians reading the book will be interested in comparing Carson's early influences and later impact with accounts of male conservationists and their overtly political campaigns of the same period–David Brower's fight to save Dinosaur National Monument comes to mind. These men operated in the public sphere and belonged to established professional and social networks; Carson did not.

Although her work spurred activism, Carson herself was not a reformer by temperament or design, and she saw herself as a scientist-writer with something important to say rather than as a political crusader. Although she had harbored concerns about pesticides since the mid-1940s and began to include conservationist messages in her nature writing not long after, she was involved in several other natural history book projects in the late 1950s when she began working on what would become *Silent Spring*. Her originally abstract concern was particularized by personal accounts of friends who saw the birds and bees in their yards and woodlots die after repeated spraying. Her first research was aimed more at answering their questions than at creating a masterpiece of public polemic. However, from Lear's account of Carson's last year spent battling cancer and responding to her critics, it is clear that by then, Carson's consciousness had shifted to include wider economic and political issues. Had she lived, her further work could well have encompassed the social dimensions of the science she had come to question as dangerously detached from the fabric of life. Feminist theory suggests that Carson's personal, outsider approach is an often-overlooked form of action that deserves further attention. Lear's treatment of Carson shows the implied rewards of doing so.

Ultimately Lear's approach is not in the least flawed; the book's strong trade sales demonstrates the appeal of the narrative style. Environmental historians will find it enormously thought-provoking, engaging, and certainly a reference to the events of Carson's too-short life.

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