

“Wild creatures are my friends:” Rachel Carson, Scientist and Writer

Rachel Louise Carson was born on 27th May 1907 in Springdale, a small village close to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. She was the youngest of three children born to Robert Waden and Maria McClean Carson. It was the rural setting of the family home that both allowed Rachel’s mother to pursue her own interest in her immediate environment and transmit this sensitivity for her natural surroundings to her children. Maria Carson, influenced by the turn of the century “nature-study movement” with its roots in theology and natural history, inspired her children with her fondness for observing animals and nature.¹ In parallel with this, Rachel discovered her talent for writing at a very young age, and, influenced by her mother, allowed her childhood experiences playing in nature to flow into this. “Wild creatures are my friends” was at the heart of her very first “book,” drawn and written as a present to her father in her childhood.² That her literary ability was more than mere precocity is indicated by the fact that, a short time later, her short stories were published in the “St Nicholas” childrens’ magazine for which no lesser authors than Mark Twain and Rudyard Kipling had previously written.

Unlike her sister and her brother, Carson graduated successfully from high school in 1925 and continued her education at what is today Chatham College, where she planned on majoring in English. Her studies were only possible due to a scholarship and painstakingly earned contributions from her parents. Carson graduated successfully in 1929, having changed her major to biology in 1928, in spite of poor job prospects for women in this field. She continued her studies in the sciences at the John Hopkins University in Baltimore, supporting herself with laboratory work and teaching duties, and was able to gain her MA in zoology in 1932.

After she was forced to abandon her PhD for financial reasons and could not find an adequate teaching position, Carson took a part-time position with the U.S. Bureau of Fisheries as a science writer. Part of her job was to interest the general public in marine and freshwater biology via radio programs. Alongside this, she published a string of articles in regional newspapers in the 1930s, focusing mostly on marine life in the Chesapeake Bay, some of which already touched on the topic of the pollution of regional waters. Her success in this line of work earned her a full-time position at the Bureau of Fisheries as an aquatic biologist with the Division of Scientific Inquiry.

In 1937, Carson succeeded in having one of her articles, “Undersea,” published in the *Atlantic Monthly*. She was soon asked to expand it into a book. 1941 saw the publication of “Under the Sea-Wind: A Naturalist’s Picture of Ocean Life,” which marked the beginning of Carson’s career as a professional author. The essay as well as the book already displays her characteristic integration of literary and scientific writing, colored both by nineteenth-century romantic tradition on the one hand and by early twentieth-century ideas of nature conservation and preservation on the other, as well as by new discoveries in ecology. Central to Carson’s thinking was the view

¹ Linda Lear, *Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature*, 2nd ed. (New York, 2009), 13ff.

² *Ibid*, 16f.

that communities of living creatures were at the core of every natural system, and that the two things were therefore inseparable.³

Although it did not bring her commercial success, Carson's book contributed to her career progress at the Bureau of Fisheries. Thanks to positive reviews, it also became easier for Carson to place her articles, increasingly also in national publications. She now had more space to stand up for environmental conservation in the public sphere. Her position in the information department of the reorganized "Fish and Wildlife Service" opened up new possibilities to influence the themes addressed in her published articles. She published more commercially successful books in the 1940s and 1950s, including notably *The Sea Around Us*, which was turned into an Oscar-winning documentary film in 1953. This brought her enough financial security to eventually be able to resign from her employment and concentrate entirely on her writing. Thematically, the issues of ecosystem conservation and environmental protection now became her foremost concern.

"The Poison Book:" *Silent Spring* and Rachel Carson's Influence on the Environmental Movement

It was due mainly to her last book that this respected but somewhat retiring author of non-fiction metamorphosed into a political figure with unexpected influence and lasting impact. *Silent Spring* became the catalyst for the beginning environmental consciousness in the US. In this book, Carson attacks the widespread and unregulated use of chemical pesticides such as DDT, which until then had been sprayed indiscriminately from airplanes over wide areas, even including some residential areas in conurbations like Long Island and Detroit. Not only did this decimate and poison other animal species in the ecosystem in addition to the targeted insects, ultimately bringing about, according to Carson, a "silent spring" in which "no bird sings." DDT would also affect human beings, who absorbed the poison from certain foodstuffs, threatening them with cancer and other serious health implications, the full extent of which would only become apparent much later.

The theme of this—her "poison book," as she later referred to it in her private correspondence—had occupied her from at least 1945, or perhaps earlier.⁴ From 1958 onwards, Rachel Carson began to gather the material she had collected from a wide (and for a good part female) network of garden clubs, bird watching societies, and conservationists, but also renowned scientists, journalists, and influential personalities from politics and society, into a book. After its publication in June 1962, *Silent Spring* quickly became a bestseller; contemporaries compared its eye-opening effect with that of Harriet Beecher-Stowe's "Uncle Tom's Cabin," which brought the slavery question to public attention in the period before the American Civil War. The popularity of the book was in part fueled by the controversy surrounding it: representatives of the large agriculture and chemical industries, their allies in the US

³ Mark Hamilton Lytle. *The Gentle Subversive. Rachel Carson, Silent Spring and the Rise of the Environmental Movement* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 201ff.

⁴ Contrary to her own account and that of her editor and biographer Paul Brooks, her interest in this subject was not first awakened by the letter in 1958 from the avian conservationist Olga Huckins with whom she was acquainted; see Lear, 312-316.

Ministry for Agriculture, and not least a large proportion of the scientific establishment accused *Silent Spring* and its author of being unscientific and hysterical, or even of being part of a supposed subversion which was trying to return America to an age of starvation and sickness. Despite the superior financial resources of her opponents, Carson was successful in winning over the general public. In particular, her appearance in a televised debate with some of her most vociferous critics in April 1963 did much to promote her cause. A month later, Carson met with the presidential Science Advisory Committee, which subsequently followed her recommendations to a large degree in its inquiry into the pesticide question.

While writing *Silent Spring*, Carson's health had already suffered considerably; among other problems, she was diagnosed with terminal breast cancer at the end of 1960. Her untimely death in April 1964 ultimately reinforced her status as one of the most important figureheads for the swiftly forming environmental movement. Many of her ideas proved to be highly compatible with the revolutionary mood that swept the country in the 1960s. *Silent Spring* in particular could be easily read as a fundamental critique of conformist post-war society of the 1950s that had made unquestioning trust in economic growth, capitalism, consumerism, and scientific and technological progress the central tenets of the "American way of life." Indeed, Carson's own way of life, as an independent and successful woman in the male-dominated world of science and politics, was in itself seen as a form of subversion by many.⁵ Still, it was not just feminists, hippies and eco-warriors who felt the call to a more responsible relationship with the natural world. Due in part to Rachel Carson and her writings, a new sensitivity for this topic began to permeate parts of the societal mainstream as well. The "Earth Day" for example, which took place for the first time in 1970, was attended by up to ten million people. The same year, the increasing pressure on politicians led to the founding of the American Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). Its first big success, following seemingly endless legal battles, was the 1972 ban on the use of DDT in the United States.

Thanks to her canonization as "Saint Rachel of the *Silent Spring*,"⁶ Rachel Carson remains a controversial figure to this day. In recent years the central theme of *Silent Spring*, the use of DDT has once again become a focus of debates. Critics argue that the reluctance to use DDT in Africa, particularly in the fight against malaria, results in unnecessary deaths, while the scientific evidence for pesticide's carcinogenic effect on humans is still not unassailable.⁷ Regardless of the validity of this argument, this longstanding controversy shows that Carson's lifelong commitment to a greater respect and humility in our dealings with nature, and to a "biocentric" rather than anthropocentric understanding of our world, remains relevant and highly contentious in the political and social debates of our own age.

Ewald Blocher & Stefan Esselborn, translated from the German by Katie Ritson

⁵ See Michael B. Smith, "'Silence, Miss Carson!' Science, Gender, and the Reception of *Silent Spring*" in *Feminist Studies* 27/3 (2001), 733.

⁶ Lytle, *Subversive*, 204.

⁷ "*Silent Spring* is now killing African children because of its persistence in the public mind": Tina Rosenberg, "What the World Needs Now Is DDT," *The New York Times Magazine* (2004).