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The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson and the Rise of the Environmental Movement by Mark H. Lytle

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BOOK REVIEW

The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson and the Rise of the Environmental Movement. 2007. Mark H. Lytle. Oxford New Narratives in American History. Oxford University Press, New York. \$17.95; x + 277 pages, illustrations. ISBN 978-0195172478.

In 2004 an editorialist for the New York Times Magazine likened the persistent intolerance of the use of DDT maintained by the U.S. public to the much-publicized persistence of DDT in the environment (Rosenberg 2004). The editorial argued that the extreme stigma placed on DDT by Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* has impeded and at times prevented African countries from using the chemical to control malaria-transmitting mosquitoes, forcing them to rely instead on less effective, more-expensive pesticides and intervention measures. The claim is then made that this intolerant pressure has cost hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of African children their lives, and that Rachel Carson, because of *Silent Spring*, is implicated in this tragedy. *Silent Spring* is thus still an influential, even controversial and perhaps misunderstood, environmental book.

The Gentle Subversive: Rachel Carson and the Rise of the Environmental Movement is a recent narrative biography that seeks to shed additional light on Rachel Carson as an author and on the role she and her books played in the U.S. environmental movement of the late 20th century. The book's author, Mark Hamilton Lytle, is Professor of History and Environmental Studies at Bard College. Appropriately, the book's 2007 publication year marks the 100th anniversary of Carson's birth. Two biographies of Carson are already available, one by a close friend, published less than a decade after Carson's death in 1964 (Brooks 1972), and the other, a lengthy, exhaustively researched volume published a decade ago (Lear 1997). A comparatively slen-

der volume, *The Gentle Subversive* aims to be different in 2 important ways: format and focus. Formatically, this book is a narrative biography, striving to cast the facts and happenings of Carson's life as a highly readable story, with ample descriptive detail. The focus of *The Gentle Subversive* is on Carson as a writer. This is welcome because Carson's legacy is embodied in the books she wrote, particularly *Silent Spring*. Adding interest to this approach is Carson's statement that, while it was clear how she developed her interest in nature (through her mother's close involvement in her education about the natural world as a child), her fondness and proclivity for writing were a mystery (pp. 252–253). Lytle focuses the biography on this mystery, not solving it, but reporting on its development and consequences.

While not surprising, it is ironic that *Silent Spring* (1962), wherein Carson details man's insults and injuries to nature through the indiscriminant use of pesticides, has produced her most lasting impact on the world. *Silent Spring* was not Carson's most critically acclaimed work, nor did it focus on her true passion: the natural history of wild things, especially marine organisms, in their natural habitats. Given its writerly focus, *The Gentle Subversive* works its way chronologically through each of Carson's major writing projects, beginning with several short stories she wrote for an acclaimed children's magazine as an adolescent. Lytle carefully describes the development of each project idea and Carson's preparation and process for bringing each to fruition. In her time Carson's most acclaimed and popularly successful book was *The Sea Around Us*, winner of the 1952 nonfiction National Book Award. Her previous book, *Under the Sea-Wind*, though not as popular, also received high praise from critics. The success of these books established Carson's reputation as a respected biologist and nature writer, imperative to the eventual impact of *Silent Spring*.

A theme underlying much of the book is that of the struggle of an environmentally concerned woman to make a difference in a male-dominated corporation-driven world. Tying into this theme, Lytle argues that the network of support, likened to an interdependent ecological network, Carson developed through her familial, educational, professional, and platonic relationships was crucial to her persistence and success in this endeavor. Lytle also points out the significant familial and personal challenges with which Carson had to cope as she pursued her combined passions of nature and writing.

The Gentle Subversive is divided into 6 parts. The main body comprises 4 chapters, named for the 4 seasons and corresponding to the seasons of Carson's life. Each of these chapters extensively treats Carson's major writing project from that season. Summaries and direct quotations from each book are included, providing a window, through her own words, on Carson's interests and talents. "Spring" centers on *Under the Sea-Wind* (1941), "Summer" on *The Sea Around Us* (1951), and "Fall" on *The Edge of the Sea* (1955). Coming full circle, the winter chapter covers the writing of Carson's well-known book with "spring" in its title. This period was the winter of her life, during which she struggled with serious health problems, including breast cancer. Complications from this cancer would end her life less than 2 years after publication of *Silent Spring*.

The 5th part of the book is the epilogue, describing the development of the environmental movement in the U.S. during the 1960s and 1970s. Prominently featured is the role *Silent Spring* played as a wake-up call, a touchstone, and a rallying cry for those on both sides of the issue. The environmental movement resulted in the formation of the Environmental Protection Agency and gave rise to much of the environmental legislation in effect today, including the National Environmental Protection Act, the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the Endangered Species Act. This section also goes on to explore some recent attempts to undermine Carson and *Silent Spring*, which according to Lytle have been politically motivated attacks seeking to weaken the foundations of environmental legislation. The discussion in this section is interesting, informative, and reasonably objective.

Finally, the afterword is a biography of the biography, a bit of a self-exposé from the author on his motivation and approach for writing *The Gentle Subversive*. While somewhat unusual, it is very interesting. Evidently, Lytle could not resist including it, especially, as he points out in this section, since he practiced great self-restraint to not provide extensive narrator commentary at certain points in the book so as to maintain the narrative flow of the biography. One such comment, suppressed earlier in the text, but voiced in the afterword is that the debate on pesticide use in the 1960s parallels the current debate on the role of humans in global climate change (pp. 253–254). All this insight is undeniably fascinating, but the best part of the afterword is what amounts to an informal annotated bibliography of the important written works in the development of the academic field of environmental history, many of which have appeared contemporaneously with Lytle's career.

As an ecologist, I found that in several cases explanations of basic ecological principles (e.g., trophic pyramids, niches) were not satisfactorily clear. The lack of clarity is understandable, given the author is not an ecologist, but the reader should be forewarned to expect no solid scientific explanations or assessments of the principles discussed or the claims made by Carson in her books, especially not relative to recent ecological research. Such explanations, however, are no reason to read or not to read this book, but more clarity on certain relevant aspects of ecology would have been desirable.

Overall, this book is a worthwhile read for those interested in the development of the U.S. environmental movement and, specifically, in the life of one of its icons. *The Gentle Subversive* succeeds in allowing the reader to become acquainted with Carson as a writer, which proves to be a rewarding improvement upon merely recognizing her name as the author of *Silent Spring*. *The Gentle Subversive* also provides an intriguing look at the career of a highly successful environmental writer and yields insights into how to effectively communicate scientific and environmental issues to the public. Lytle's own writing is clear, concise, and pleasant, facilitating and enhancing the reader's study of the life of Rachel Carson. Judged against what it sets out to do, *The Gentle Subversive* receives high marks as a narrative biography and a work of environmental history.

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