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And No Birds Sing
Fifty Years Since *Silent Spring*

Aftershocks

The Reaction to Silent Spring

by Thomas Conuel

Outraged voices; sneering challenges; condescending nicknames; a refusal to believe scientific evidence gathered and researched over years pointing to dangerous trends damaging the natural world and threatening human populations. The findings are accepted by the scientific community with alarm, but others, mostly big industries backed by well-oiled public relations firms, react with high-decibel opposition. They question the validity of the overwhelming scientific evidence that supports the claims. They fire off barrages of personal aspersions against the messengers delivering the bad news.

No, the above is not the current crop of political candidates and naysayers prowling the land who deny the validity of climate change and question the painstaking science behind the conclusions that greenhouse gases are warming the planet to a dangerous degree. Instead, the outcry was part of the reaction and attacks directed against a quiet scientist who fifty years ago, after meticulous research, warned that we were poisoning our environment with dangerous chemicals and we must stop or face grave consequences.

In nature nothing exists alone. We are all part of the great chain of life, and poisons in the environment will eventually find their way into ecosystems and eventually our own bodies. That was the simple core message that Rachel Carson delivered in the book *Silent Spring*, a publication that many consider the most important book of the twentieth century. But in spite of the classic's popularity, a bellicose minority scoffed at its scientific findings and to this day curse the author for helping to jump-start the environmental movement.

Rachel Carson backed her findings with careful research distilled from multiple sources. A detailed "List of Principal Sources" (54 pages in the third edition of *Silent Spring*, 1962) cites all manner of scientific data, expert opinions, and research papers (i.e., "Liver Flukes in Cattle," U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, Leaflet No. 493) as building blocks supporting her premise. But no matter. As with today's climate change deniers, the opposition



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to *Silent Spring* came mostly from industry-backed mouthpieces who refused to acknowledge scientific fact.

As Paul Brooks detailed in *The House of Life*, his literary biography of Rachel Carson, the opening salvos against *Silent Spring* came almost immediately after its serialization in *The New Yorker* beginning June 16, 1962, from “a relatively small (though very rich) segment of society, the chemical and related industries (such as food-processing), and—in the federal government—the immensely powerful Department of Agriculture.” At the heart of the bitter attacks against Rachel Carson, Brooks wrote, was this: “She was questioning not only the indiscriminate use of poisons but the basic irresponsibility of an industrialized, technological society toward the natural world. She refused to accept the premise that damage to nature was the inevitable cost of ‘progress.’”

Her opponents launched a two-pronged attack against her. First came the attempts to intimidate her publisher and suppress sales of the book. Since its serialization in *The New Yorker*, *Silent Spring* had been the subject of over 70 newspaper editorials and commentaries, many laudatory but shocked. The Velsicol Chemical Corporation launched the fight to suppress the book by claiming that it contained inaccurate accusations against one of its products, chlordane, a now-banned pesticide. They threatened to sue the publisher, but when Houghton Mifflin refused to back down the threatened lawsuit vaporized.

Silent Spring became an immediate bestseller, spending 31 weeks on *The New York Times* list and confounding the initial strategy launched by its opponents to prevent publication and widespread discus-

sion of its shocking conclusions. So quickly did the book become a central topic that *The New York Times* ran a headline above a story: “*Silent Spring* is Now Noisy Summer.”

Discrediting the book and its author, her research and findings, and her motives became the next strategy. As John Hanson Mitchell points out in his introductory essay here in *Sanctuary*, Rachel Carson was subjected to a torrent of abuse, condescension, and name-calling intended to misrepresent her diamond-hard scientific facts as misty hysterical speculation from “the nun of nature.” Though Carson was a highly trained scientist and well-known author, critics focused on spreading innuendo regarding her personal life—she was an unmarried woman, a spinster, a bird lover, a cat lover, an odd duck. But that type of belittlement didn’t work either, proving the old adage from Shakespeare’s *The Merchant of Venice*, “but at the length truth will out.”

The next salvo against the book came from the National Agricultural Chemicals Association, which got right to work producing a booklet, “Fact and Fancy,” which attempted to refute Rachel Carson’s research and analysis. Monsanto Chemical Corporation, a giant in the industry, tried a stab at parody with a lame publication, *The Desolate Year*, describing a world without pesticides, dominated by hyperactive predatory insects and raising the specter of malaria, yellow fever, sleeping sickness, and typhus rampant across the land.

Brooks noted that many of the most virulent attacks against Rachel Carson came from agricultural journals and state institutions whose research was heavily funded by the chemical industry. In one particularly blatant distortion, a fable for the future in the *American Agriculturist* presented a grandfather and a young boy desolate and alone and reduced to eating acorns in the woods. The rest of the family had died from malaria caused by mosquitoes or had starved due to swarms of grasshoppers and other insects eating the crops—all because a book called *Quiet Summer* led some fools to believe that no chemicals should be used in agriculture (a total misreading of *Silent Spring*).

TIME magazine joined in condemning the book, calling it emotional and inaccurate. *Reader’s Digest* piled on, canceling a planned condensation of *Silent Spring*. *The Saturday Evening Post* labeled the book alarmist and assured readers that their world was not being poisoned. There were organized letter-writing campaigns flailing Rachel Carson with invective-filled comments. *The New Yorker* took numerous broadsides for the sin of first publishing her findings.

As one, only slightly extremist, letter read:

“Miss Rachel Carson’s reference to the selfishness of insecticide manufacturers probably reflects her Communist sympathies like a lot of our writers these days.

“We can live without birds and animals, but, as the current market slump shows, we cannot live without business.

“As for insects, isn’t it just like a woman to be scared to death of a few little bugs! As long as we have the H-bomb everything will be O.K.”

H. Davidson—San Francisco

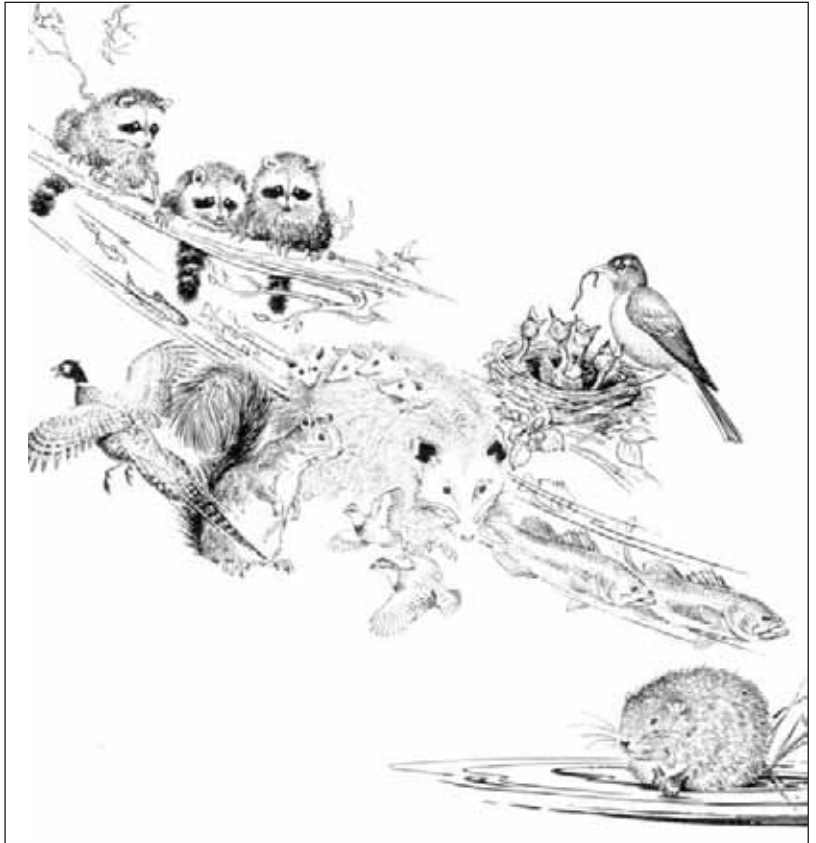
But for all the wrong-headed opposition, *Silent Spring* brought a flood of positive responses as well as awareness and change. President Kennedy ordered a study of the DDT controversy caused by the book, and the report that followed from the President’s Science Advisory Committee validated and thanked Rachel Carson for raising awareness of the toxicity of pesticides. “No one could any longer deny that the problem existed; the question now was what we were willing to do about it,” noted Paul Brooks.

Rachel Carson appeared before a Senate Committee on environmental hazards in June 1963, and two days later she testified before the Senate Committee on Commerce. Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall quickly became a powerful ally in the fight to regulate pesticides.

Silent Spring caused controversy and discussion overseas. In England, members of Parliament wrangled over its findings and how to protect the English countryside. The book was published in France, Germany, Italy, Denmark, Sweden, Norway, Finland, Holland, Spain, Brazil, Japan, Iceland, Portugal, and Israel and galvanized nations into action against indiscriminate use of pesticides.

When Rachel Carson died at age 56 on April 14, 1964, two years after the publication of *Silent Spring*, reaction to her death mirrored the emotions unleashed by the book. In the final years of her life, Rachel Carson received numerous letters of support from readers, which she treasured, as well as a slew of honors and awards. The Isaak Walton League of America cited her work; she received the Conservationist of the Year award from the National Wildlife Federation, and the Audubon Medal from the National Audubon Society; she was elected into the prestigious American Academy of Arts and Letters; and, perhaps for her the best award was the Schweitzer Medal of the Animal Welfare Institute, named after Albert Schweitzer, the humanitarian, missionary, and doctor whose philosophy of reverence for life inspired Rachel Carson and to whom *Silent Spring* is dedicated.

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Silent Spring generated local and national organizations dedicated to a clean environment including the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Wilderness Society, and the Environmental Defense Fund—all influenced, at least partially, by Rachel Carson. The Environmental Protection Agency, created in 1970, sprang from concerns raised by *Silent Spring* in 1962.

When she died of complications from breast cancer at her home in Silver Spring, Maryland, after a long struggle against the illness, opponents put forth the story that the only reason she had written about chemicals damaging the natural world was because of her own health problems, which was yet another untruth. Rachel Carson began work on *Silent Spring* in 1958, two years before her cancer diagnosis. She was a writer not afraid to take on a difficult and troubling subject, and in the end delivered a message that changed the world for the better.

Perhaps the lesson here is that there will always be a credulous minority who will not accept the validity of scientific research. But those who struggle on to protect the environment should consider Rachel Carson’s acknowledgement in *Silent Spring* “to a host of people...who are even now fighting the thousands of small battles that in the end will bring victory for sanity and common sense in our accommodation to the world that surrounds us.”

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