GUARDIAN WEEKLY
April 19 1998

Nature on the rack

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Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature
by Linda Lear
Allen Lane/The Penguin Press
634pp £25

Silent Spring
by Rachel Carson
Penguin 320pp £7.99

WHEN Rachel Carson published Silent Spring in 1962 the United States chemical industry, the press, academia, and many eminent politicians and scientists turned vile and pustulous. Her critique of the widespread misuse of poisonous chemicals was interpreted as a kick in the groin of Western progress.

This mild-mannered, apolitical, middle-aged woman who had spent a virtuous life peering into rock pools, writing occasional magazine pieces and editing government tracts became overnight an establishment she-devil. Carson was accused of being a communist, of being emotional and using scare tactics. She was "biased", "amateur" and "had abandoned science".

She was none of these, but the ideologues, the scientific establishment and the industry spokesmen queued up to vilify her. Silent Spring was described as "more poisonous than the chemicals she attacked", and Carson was dismissed as fanatical. The industry mounted a massive PR campaign. The US, it was said, would collapse without its chemical industry and Carson was accused of putting the free world at risk of hunger and disease. The more they protested, the more the public understood Carson's case that the chemical industry was effectively out of control.

As her meticulous biographer, Linda Lear, notes, Carson exposed two raw nerves. By deliberately using the rhetoric of the cold war to persuade readers of the urgency of the message, she forced industrialists into a debate they neither wanted nor expected. While there was nothing scientifically new in what she wrote about the interconnectedness of nature, her tone and sharpness were luminous. Silent Spring led directly to what is today called "environmentalism".

The second was gender. Silent Spring was one of the first social critiques of modern industrial behaviour and Carson was in all ways an outsider. Her vision included past and future generations, other species and unquantifiables. Life was not all arrow-straight modernity, as industry, governments and scientists would have it, but full of messy human values and sensitivity. While she never linked the lot of postwar Western women with that of nature, others did and the early US feminists took great courage from her stance.

But was she a saint, as Lear would seem to make her in this exhaustive hagiography that is swamped at times with tedious circumstantial detail of a life that only became really interesting near the end? Vulnerable and conscientious, yes. Passionate and determined, of course. But two good non-fiction works and a few magazine pieces do not warrant uncritical adulation for her writing. 2012

Happily Penguin has reissued Silent Spring to coincide with Lear's welcome biography and the two are best read together. There is barely a sentence of the original that does not apply today, but the pity is that no one has been commissioned to write a new introduction to consider Carson's legacy.

Carson, who was dying of cancer even as Silent Spring was being published, would be reaching for her typewriter. For all the clamour of environmentalism and all the weasel words of governments, the situation is no better.

Industry can still get away with poisoning communities and farmworkers. Great swathes of farmland are little more than ecological deserts, bird numbers are declining everywhere, almost every river in Britain is poisoned with man-made chemicals, cancer mysteriously afflicts almost one in three people in industrial societies and, looming, we have the headlong rush into the unknowns of genetic engineering.

Moreover, the chemical industry, more powerful than ever, uses precisely the same techniques and language to destroy and discredit its critics today. It's all very depressing, but we must trust that people will listen to the other brave Carsons who are emerging.