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Poisonous passions

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BOOKS

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***Silent Spring at 50: The False Crises of Rachel Carson* by Andrew Morriss, Roger Meiners and Pierre Desrochers - Cato Institute, £16.20, pp. 344, ISBN 9781937184995**

Fifty years on since the publication of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, this is indeed an excellent time to assess its cumulative historical impact. After all, it is still cited as one of the most important environmental books of the 20th century, and seen by many as the publishing phenomenon that launched the modern environment movement. Many of today's environmental leaders have enthusiastically acknowledged Carson's attack on the indiscriminate use of man-made chemicals to control pests as a critical influence on their own intellectual development.

All of which makes it an irresistible target for one of the most virulently ant environmental 'think tanks' in the USA today - the Cato Institute, the publisher of *Silent Spring at 50*.

The editors' intention is made clear right up front: to convene a group of authors collectively to trash the scientific credibility of Rachel Carson, providing in the process another platform for rolling out the Institute's extreme libertarian ideology.

For the most part, the daggers are inserted with steely politeness. Only rarely are the authors permitted to reveal their true feelings, as Pierre Derochers and Hiroko Shimuzu do in describing *Silent Spring* as 'vintage technophobic muckraking in quality literary clothing'.

With a spurious show of 'balance', the collection opens with an interesting 'proCarson' piece from Wallace Kaufman. He provides at least some insights into Carson's philosophical world view, her motivation in writing *Silent Spring*, and her deep concern about the arrogance of most of the scientific establishment at that time, as she put it:

The 'control of nature' is a phrase conceived in arrogance, born of the Neanderthal Age of biology and philosophy, when it was supposed that nature exists for the convenience of man.

In all her previous work, Carson had conscientiously complied with the idea that 'good science' requires an uncompromising commitment to evidence-based objectivity.

In *Silent Spring*, her publisher encouraged her to liberate herself from that position, and to take on the role of a passionately partisan advocate. And she did feel liberated; as she herself said:

I consider my contributions to scientific fact far less important than my attempts to awaken an emotional response to the world of Nature.

That partisanship provides plenty of ammunition for the Cato Institute to launch a full frontal on Carson's legacy. And I have to say, this is done with some justification. There is no doubt, for instance, that Carson ignored a lot of evidence about the impact of pesticides on birds that would have weakened her overall case. And although she made it very clear that she was not calling for a ban on the use of all pesticides, she studiously refused to mention any of the benefits from their use at that time.

Ironically, the authors in this collection are just as partial in their use of evidence.

For instance, they pretty much fail to mention that Carson's principal concern was the use of DDT and other organophosphates in laying down 'indiscriminate barrages of poison' to contain certain pests - with massive knock-on impacts on many other species. By the mid-Sixties, even the agro-chemical lobby had acknowledged this was just foolish and wasteful, with *Silent Spring* a major influence in helping to accelerate the move towards much more specific chemicals applied in more targeted ways.

Having said all that, as a great admirer of Rachel Carson, I have to admit that by far the best articles in this very uneven collection are those that revisit the often lurid concerns that Carson raised both about the build-up of toxic chemicals in our bodies and the possibility that this would usher in an unprecedented surge in the numbers of people dying of cancer - which we now know to have been grossly exaggerated - and about the impact of DDT in particular.

As someone who was always rather less enthusiastic than some of my colleagues about the need to phase out DDT altogether (in that it was clearly so much more effective in helping to control malaria than anything else), I found the article by Donald Roberts and Richard Tren on the history of DDT and its use in various public health campaigns by far the most compelling. DDT still plays an important role in helping to control malaria in many countries.

As for the rest of it, even the Cato Institute's all-important ideological intent cannot excuse such monstrous turgidity.

The whole of the final third of the book is devoted to some of the Institute's most popular environmental hobby-horses: the wicked influence of federal regulatory bodies such as the Food

and Drug Administration and the Environmental Agency, riding alongside the innovation-crushing influence of the so-called precautionary principle.

UK and EU readers (even those that are genuinely interested in the debate about the appropriate role of regulation in environmental policy-making) will have little sympathy with these laboured, UScentric efforts further to demonise Rachel Carson as 'the mother of the precautionary principle'.

But what more could we reasonably expect? The Cato Institute taking upon itself the task of re-evaluating the legacy of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* is a bit like Richard Dawkins deciding he would be the best person to re-evaluate the legacy of the Bible. For those of us hoping for a more balanced re-appraisal, including a lot of the quite legitimate concerns raised in this work, I'm afraid we'll have to look elsewhere.

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