Rachel Carson Was Not Alone [1]

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Book Review by Shealeen A. Meaney

Women Who Helped Build Today's Environmental Movement

In celebration of Earth Day this week—Wednesday, April 22—we're reprinting a piece from Women's Review of Books *as part of the TW Reading Series. Shealeen Meaney puts the spotlight on female environmentalists and conservationists, acknowledging a long history of public advocacy that, except for the work of Rachel Carson, often goes unrecognized.*



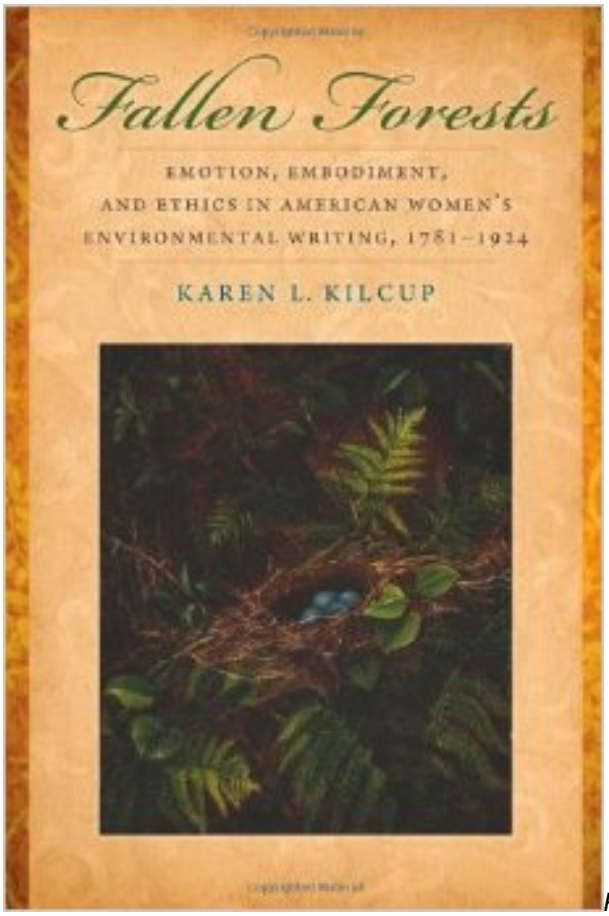
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If history does not repeat itself but instead rhymes, then it behooves us to listen for the echoes. From voluntary simplicity and green fashion to environmental racism and corporate coverups, two recent books illustrate the value of looking backward even as we think about how to move forward with the challenging work of environmental advocacy today. And both remind us that while environmental justice may be a new term, people have been fighting environmental *in*justice for a long time, and many of these people were women.

Authors Karen L. Kilcup and Robert K. Musil introduce us to nineteenth- and twentieth-century women who combined scientific, cultural, and political insight with literary talent to engage both the emotions and the consciences of everyday American readers. Kilcup's *Fallen Forests* and Musil's *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters* examine the work of women who sought to educate Americans about environmental issues and transform American attitudes toward the environment itself.

As Kilcup explicitly notes, nineteenth-century debates over resource control, consumption, and conservation anticipated many current struggles, and nineteenth-century female writers' attempts to popularize their causes and appeal to common cultural values will be familiar to those who grapple with similar issues today. Whereas her book focuses on nineteenth-century American women environmental writers, Musil moves from the mid-nineteenth century through the twenty-first, introducing us to scientists, activists, and authors who have changed the ways Americans understand their relationship to the nonhuman natural world.

Beyond Thoreau



Fallen Forests, a work of literary criticism, is intentionally expansive, aiming to broaden narrow conceptualizations of "environmental literature" and to counteract what Kilcup sees as an idealizing tendency in much eco-criticism.

Encompassing the vast sprawl of the long nineteenth century—temporal, geographic, cultural, and even formal—her

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study is impressive in its range. It considers such widely diverse genres as sentimental fiction, captivity narratives, and poetry, as well as hybridized and oral genres. By declining to confine environmental literature to Thoreauvian nature writing and lyric poetry, she brings an array of women's voices into conversation with one another in ways that challenge what counts as environmental literature.

From Lydia Sigourney's poetry about Cherokee removal to Californio ranch owner Maria Amparo Ruiz de Burton's 1885 novel *The Squatter and the Don*, Kilcup covers the full territory of the United States from East to West and includes the writings of Native, Anglo, African, and Mexican American women.

Kilcup offers nuanced readings of the rhetorical strategies that these authors employed to move their audiences toward what they believed would be more ethical thought and action. Focusing on what she calls "literary emotional intelligence" (building on psychologist Daniel Goleman's work on emotional intelligence), Kilcup pays particular attention to the ways that these writers negotiated the complex and culturally diverse associations of the "feminine" with both nature and emotion.

She also considers the meanings and material consequences of these associations in women's lives in general. As she notes in the first chapter, the specifics of these associations as well as their cultural valences were not universal. For instance, despite feminist critiques of the dangers inherent in ideologies that essentialize femininity, Kilcup argues that for some Native American authors, women's maternal roles and presumed affiliations with nature brought them the social power and cultural authority that undergirded their environmental advocacy.

Her take on environmental texts that, in Kilcup's words, "complicate or even depart from today's environmental orthodoxies" is particularly refreshing. Ruiz de Burton's *The Squatter and the Don* writes "against wilderness"; this late-nineteenth-century novel also exploits dominant stereotypes of Native Americans and working-class Mexicans in order to buttress the author's defense of the elite Californios' land tenure system. In the process, Ruiz de Burton both critiques the unsustainable uses of land by new Anglo settlers and implicitly discounts earlier claims to ownership by Native Americans. Contemporary readers are likely to be uneasy with the author's politically incorrect views, but Kilcup maintains this novel is still fascinating from an environmental justice perspective.

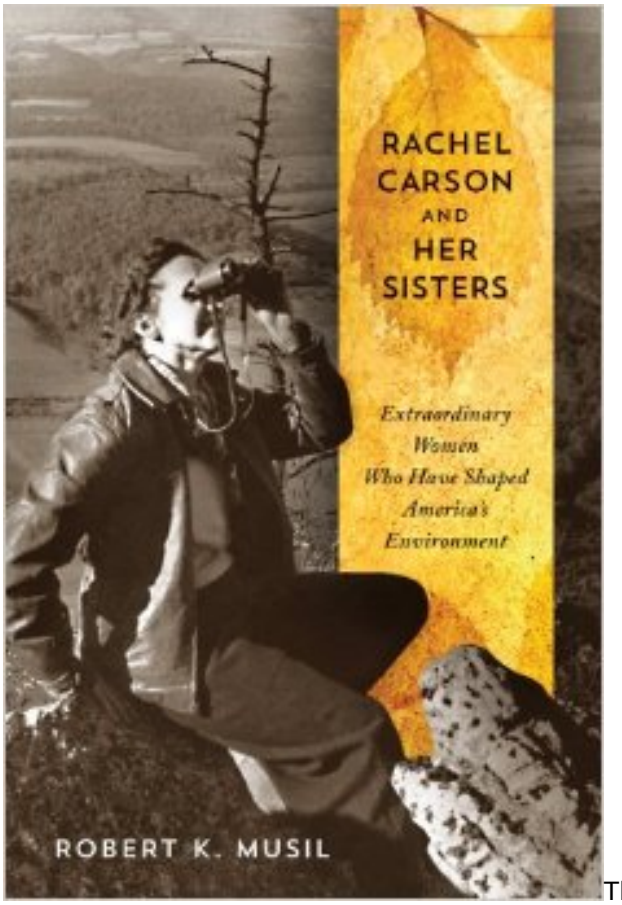
While her book's inclusiveness is its strength, Kilcup stretches terms such as "environmental justice" in ways that dilute their potency. A similar nebulousness arises when she reads the laboring body as a "natural resource" in her analysis of works by poet Lucy Larcom, author of the 1889 autobiography *A New England Girlhood*, and escaped slave Harriet Jacobs.

However, some of these same passages in *Fallen Forests* explore the often-ignored intersections of embodiment, eco-criticism, and environmental justice. They connect Kilcup's analysis with crucial work by feminist theorists like Stacy Alaimo, whose most recent book is *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self* (University of Indiana Press, 2010), and Susan Hekman, whose many publications include *Private Selves, Public Identities: Reconsidering Identity Politics* (Penn State Press, 2004).

From Binoculars to Biologists

In contrast, Robert Musil's *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters* is decidedly less engaged with current feminist and cultural theory, but it does intersect with *Fallen Forests* in attending to the women who transformed American ideas about the environment. It even references some of the same women. In celebrating Rachel Carson's work, Musil takes on the important task of contextualizing this environmental luminary within a tradition of women's research, activism, and authorship.

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The goal is admirable, though the resulting book is somewhat hard to characterize. *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters* is labeled “Environmental History” and “Women’s Studies.” In the introduction, Musil speaks directly to readers who may be reading it in a course—but at times, I found myself wondering what that course might be. Despite this, he aims to “keep you engaged, and to give you a few ‘Wow! I didn’t know that! moments,’” and at least for me, the first half of the book succeeds in doing just that.

The opening chapters introduce some truly extraordinary and absolutely fascinating women, most of whom will be unfamiliar to many readers. Musil tells the stories of women naturalists such as Graceanna Lewis and Florence Merriam Bailey, who advanced both the scientific study and popularization of ornithology in the U.S., as well as of writers such as Susan Fenimore Cooper and Olive Thorne Miller, whose respective writings for adults and children inspired and nurtured the nascent national interest in conservation.

Naturalist writers like these were essential to the education of the young Rachel Carson, whose mother introduced her to the burgeoning nature-study movement from her earliest years. Of equal importance as her predecessors, however, are pioneering environmental health researchers. Musil introduces Ellen Swallow Richards—whom he calls the Mother of Ecology and the First Lady of American Science—whose research led to the first water quality laws in Massachusetts history; and Alice Hamilton, an early industrial toxicologist who uncovered the health hazards of benzene, mercury, and other chemicals widely used in American industry.

The third chapter of the book focuses on Carson’s contemporaries, reminding us that truly transformative work does not happen in a vacuum: While *Silent Spring* served as a wake-up call for many in the early '60s, the author was not alone in her growing concern about the nation’s environmental health. Furthermore, while the book elicited scorn and anger from some corners of industry and government, it was also a Book-of-the Month club selection, and advance chapters were eagerly consumed by readers of *Audubon* magazine.

After Musil’s discussion of the reception of *Silent Spring*, the unified structure and vision of his book shifts. He wants us to be inspired—“I have faith that many of you who read this book will decide to become even more engaged, informed, active citizens"—so this could be why he swiftly moves on to four contemporary environmental heroines. As Musil explains, “I know, admire, and have advocated alongside each of the main modern women I present in the second half

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of the book: Terry Tempest Williams, Sandra Steingraber, Devra Davis, and Theo Colborn."

The verb "present" is an appropriate one for what follows. While the book's first two chapters examine four or five figures apiece, the chapters that come after Carson each showcase the work of only one figure, offering sizable biographical introductions and summaries of her published works. Unlike the figures in the first half, these writers will already be familiar to many environmentally concerned readers.

Musil notes that for most of the women personal experiences with environmental dangers directly inspired their vocations. Like Carson, Steingraber and Williams write for broad public audiences and do so with literary style and lyrical grace, but unlike her, they unapologetically delve into the personal as they explore the social and political dimensions of environmental health. While Musil glancingly acknowledges these writers' feminist recognition that the personal is political, it would be helpful to see this idea more fully developed.

Perhaps not coincidentally, there is a notable historical gap in the text between the publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 and the work of these later environmentalists. Musil's own passion for public health—he is the former CEO of Physicians for Social Responsibility and an environmental activist in his own right—admittedly shapes the book and the women that he chooses to profile.

As a result, he omits women like primatologist Dian Fossey, who combined the roles of scientist, environmental activist, and popularizing author during the period in question, in order to focus on the public-health dimensions of Carson's legacy. Native American activists such as Winona LaDuke, who carries on the advocacy work and accessible environmental writing of Carson, would also be provocative to consider in relation to the women Musil introduces—athough as a nonscientist, LaDuke herself may be beyond the scope of his book.

Among the impressive women he does feature are many inspiring firsts, including the first woman to study at MIT (Richards), the first female faculty member at Harvard (Hamilton), and the first female professor at Cornell (Anna Botsford Comstock). In his introduction, Musil notes that the women he writes of shared a certain "advantage born of adversity":

> Since these extraordinary women were kept from the highest rungs of academic and scientific success, crossed and combined traditional disciplines, and aimed for wider and more popular audiences, they were spared the certitude, conventionality, and occasional cowardice of those crowned as keepers of the faith.

Rachel Carson and Her Sisters is most interesting when he explores the generative and creative potential of marginality—as with Gracianna Lewis, who focused her energies on popularizing science for broad public audiences when her bid for a place in academia was blocked because of her gender. Her impact as an intellectual and shaper of public opinion, Musil suggests, was the greater because of her location at the margins of academia. I found myself wishing for a deeper look at this issue of advantage in adversity, particularly if there are examples that suggest a critical rethinking of scientific orthodoxies.

Of course, any discussion of the productive potential of adversity and marginality runs the risk of romanticizing that marginality, but it's nevertheless relevant to Musil's topic and Kilcup's *Fallen Forests*. Both books underscore the importance of listening to lesser heard voices and seeking out alternate sources of knowledge—especially when the stakes are high and the dominant voices loud.

Publishing Information

- *Fallen Forests: Emotion, Embodiment and Ethics in American Women's Environmental Writing, 1781-1924* by Karen L. Kilcup (University of Georgia Press, 2013).
- *Rachel Carson and Her Sisters: Extraordinary Women Who Have Shaped America's Environment* by Robert K.

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Musil (Rutgers University Press, 2014).

Art Information

- "Rachel Carson Conducts Marine Biology Research with Bob Hines" [5](1952); courtesy United States Fish and Wildlife Service; public domain.

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Her work has been published in books and journals including *Women's Studies, Women's Studies Quarterly,* and the *Journal of Narrative Theory*.

This review by Shealeen Meaney originally appeared in a slightly different form as "Of Binoculars and Birdhats, Treaties and Toxicology" in Women's Review of Books *[6]*, January/February 2015.

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