Private Writings

Always, Rachel. The Letters of Rachel Carson and Dorothy Freeman, 1952–1964. MARTHA FREEMAN, Ed. Beacon, Boston, 1995. xxxii, 569 pp., illus., + plates. $35.

"All I am certain of is this: that it is quite necessary for me to know that there is someone who is deeply devoted to me as a person, and who also has the capacity and depth of understanding to share, vicariously, the sometimes crushing burden of creative effort, recognizing the heartache, the great weariness of mind and body, the occasional black despair—someone who cherishes me and what I am trying to create."

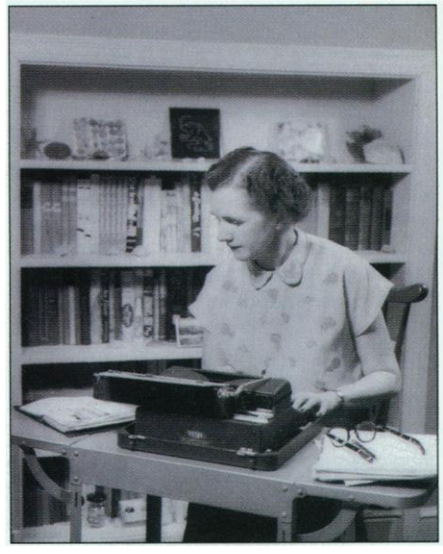
Thus wrote Rachel Carson to her dear friend Dorothy Freeman. Freeman, a naturalist, housewife, and former teacher, had written to Carson at the end of 1952, the year after the publication of the best-selling *The Sea Around Us*, on hearing that Carson was building a cottage near the Freemans' on Southport Island in Maine. They met there the following July. Thus began an 11-year loving and mutually supportive friendship unfolded in this rich collection of letters. The editor is Dorothy's granddaughter and herself a "character" in the book, born the year the correspondents met. Rachel Carson was then 46, Dorothy Freeman 55. The public Rachel Carson is well known, but these letters bring us the private person, warm caring, courageous, with many joys in life, but also burdened by family cares and, in the later years, an avalanche of devastating illnesses.

Carson's methods of writing are also revealed in the letters. She wrote *The Edge of the Sea* and *Silent Spring* during these years. In 1956 she wrote to Dorothy, "Once . . . talking of *The Sea* [*Around Us*], I tried to describe the thing that happens when one has finally established such unity with one's subject matter that the subject takes over and the writer becomes merely the instrument through which the real act of creation is accomplished. . . . In order to have this happen, the writer must for a time lose himself utterly in his work. In those four years [of writing *The Edge of the Sea*] I could never do that." Earlier in February 1955, when her niece Marjie, a diabetic, was ill, she wrote, "I was just beginning to feel that the revision of the coral chapter was going right, and I must devote myself to it. . . . I think I wrote you a year ago that my great problem was how to be a writer and at the same time a member of my family. . . . It is that conflict that just tears me to pieces. Now, so near the end, I wonder why I can't have peace for even ten days, but I have thought of no practical solution."

Marjie died in 1957, and Carson adopted her son, Roger. She henceforth had, in addition to her mother, a small child to care for and support as a single woman. Roger was often ill and had school problems, but Rachel's letters often report happy times with him, school plays and bird-watching. Dorothy, who lived in Massachusetts, 500 miles from Rachel's home in Maryland, could only help during their Maine summers. Rachel wrote, "I feel I never half expressed my gratitude for the joy you gave Roger many times last summer, and the chances you gave me to draw a relaxed breath, and do some work." The joys Rachel and Dorothy shared included nature, especially Maine marine life and birds and bird song ("the woods we love—woods where hermits and olive-backs and veeries sing"). In addition they shared and wrote about music, their beloved and personified cats, and many books—offering a veritable course on nature and science writers for readers of this book.

During the first summers on Southport, the Freemans helped with Carson's research for *The Edge of the Sea*, particularly in the study of tidepools. Dorothy's husband, Stanley, took photographs, some of which appear in *Always, Rachel*. The letters will take the reader back to Rachel Carson's books: Maine explorations recounted are found in the "Rocky Shores" chapter of *The Edge of the Sea*, the first ecological field guide I ever encountered, one that enables the reader to learn about the lives of sea creatures, not just their names. Carson did not invent this genre, but I and others have used her book as a model for our own ecological guides. Most of *The Edge of the Sea* is based on Carson's own scientific experience along the Atlantic coast in Maine and earlier in summers at Woods Hole.

Their letters trace the origins and development of *Silent Spring*, originally the title only for the chapter on birds. The book title Carson first proposed was *Man Against the Earth*. Carson wrote in February 1958, "It was comforting to suppose that the stream of life would flow on through time . . . without interference by one of the drops of the stream—man. . . . It seems time someone wrote of Life in the light of the truth as it now appears to us. And I think that may be the book I am to write. . . . As man approaches the 'new heaven and the new earth'—or the space-age universe, if you will—he must do it with humility rather than arrogance." About this time Olga Owens Huckins wrote Carson a letter describing bird deaths from pesticide spraying. By 8 February Carson had rented a tape recorder to assemble "a lot of my poison-spray material." By 12 June she had talked for two-and-a-half hours with William Shawn, the editor of the *New Yorker*. "He is completely fascinated with the theme and obviously happy and excited at the prospect of presenting it in the *New Yorker*" (as *Silent Spring* and *The Edge of the Sea* had been). "To immerse oneself almost completely in a project is ideal—something I haven't been able to do since *The Sea*." Dorothy was not so convinced. Rachel wrote, "I know you dread the unpleasantness that will inevitably be associated with its publication. . . . But it is something I have taken into account. . . . There would be no future peace for me if I kept silent." But later that year her mother, her close companion throughout her life, became ill, needing constant care, and died. "These are hard days and hard nights disturbed by dreams of death," Rachel wrote to Dorothy.



"Rachel Carson at work." [From *Always, Rachel*]

By early 1960 Rachel herself was ill with breast cancer, and all the remaining years were a battle against not only cancer but heart disease, an ulcer, iritis, and what was diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis and rendered her unable to walk for a time. Bone cancer came later. Radiation and other invasive treatments, nausea, pain, and exhaustion became a constant part of her life. Treatments for breast cancer in

that era included "Krebiozen, androgens, estrogens, removal of adrenals, pituitary [extracts]." One wonders whether her medical care, by more than half a dozen different physicians, was the best of that era. When gold treatment was urged for her arthritis, she found in her search at the National Institutes of Health library that it should not be given to anyone who had recently had undergone radiation (as she had). Her comment: "What this does to my already great cycnicism about doctors you can perhaps imagine."

Nevertheless, courage she had in great quantity. In November 1960 after the cancer had metastasized and there were more x-ray treatments Rachel wrote, "I'm trying to finish the chapter on herbicides over the weekend . . . I've gotten some wonderful material for it—partly through Justice [William O.] Douglas, . . . partly thru Dr. [Frank] Egler. . . . And I have included my own observations."

By February 1961 there were new illnesses, and Rachel felt that life "had burned down to a very tiny flame, that might so easily flicker out." She was thinking of shortening and altering the book: "The whole thing would be greatly boiled down and contain less of illustrative detail and would perhaps be more philosophic in tone." By September, however, she was able to write Dorothy, "I am working late at night most of the time now. If I can fight off the desire to go to bed around 11:30 I seem to get my second wind and be able to go on. This chapter has been very difficult. . . . What lies underneath the most important part . . . is a whole field of the most technical and difficult biology—discoveries only recently made. How to reveal enough to give understanding of the most serious effects of the chemicals without being technical, how to simplify without error." Finally in January 1962 she wrote, "Last week was rather a momentous one, for I achieved the goal of sending 15 chapters to Marie—like reaching the last station before the summit of Everest. I also sent her duplicate copies for Mr. Shawn. . . . *Shamelessly* I repeat some of his words—'a brilliant achievement'—'you have made it literature' 'full of beauty and loveliness and depth of feeling' And with his remark about publishing in the spring I suddenly feel full of . . . 'a happy turbulence'. . . . All the people who are so eager to have it to work with will snap up copies of the *New Yorker*." The book itself was published in September 1962 and became, like *The Sea Around Us*, a number-one best seller; sales were over 100,000 by December, requests for appearances and speeches and invitations to receive medals were continual. Rachel's Christmas letter to Dorothy reads, "It has been a mixed year for us both—joy and fulfillment . . . in *Silent Spring* published and making its mark. On the other hand, the shadows of ill health. For me, either would have been a solitary experience without you."

In spite of illness and pain Carson did make some trips in connection with *Silent Spring*, notably to San Francisco to lecture at the Kaiser Medical Center and explore Muir Woods from a wheelchair. Late in 1963 she was able to prepare the manuscripts of her earlier books to donate to Yale University. These and other correspondence are available to historians at the Beinecke Library at Yale. She lived long enough not only to finish the seminal book of the environmental movement but to witness its early effect, its discussion on television, in Congressional hearings, even in the British House of Lords. In a 1963 letter Dorothy received only after Rachel's death in April 1964, Rachel wrote, "My regrets, darling, are for your sadness, for leaving Roger, when I so wanted to see him through to manhood. . . . I have had a rich life, full of rewards and satisfactions that come to few, and if it must end now, I can feel that I have achieved most of what I wished to do. That wouldn't have been true two years ago, when I first realized my time was short."

This book is well edited, with helpful marginal notes. But would Rachel Carson have wanted these intimate letters, full of expressions of romantic feeling, published? In her preface Martha Freeman expresses the belief that Carson would be happy with

"Rachel and Dorothy: a Southport picnic." [From *Always, Rachel*]

Vignettes: Field Experiences

"Excuse me, madam," said a tall Southerner of the Colonel Carter type, as he swung his hat from his head with an elaborate bow, when he met me at the edge of an orange grove in Florida one April day. "I venture to address you without an introduction as I see you are a taxidermist." Then, almost before I could recover my breath, quite lost from the shock of this unjust accusation, he added in a trembling voice with a suggestion of nearby tears, "my mother-in-law was one also." Later I found that the said connection by marriage was a studier of ants and their habits. So that her pursuits and my own were really more alike than if she had followed taxidermy as her mourning son-in-law had intimated. The term entomologist does not seem generally understood throughout good collecting regions. Several times in New Hampshire, when I have owned to being one I have found it understood to mean a member of some religious denomination. As one very old man in Jackson said when I owned the soft impeachment, "Well, I dare say, it's a good enough belief, but, as for me, I'm an old fashioned Hardshell Baptist like my folks before me and I ain't no use for your new sects."

—*Annie Trumbull Slosson*, 1917

Near home a fine young jack rabbit crossed our trail. . . . Well, we had jack rabbit for supper! It is good exercise to eat jack rabbit—gives you an appetite. . . . Jack rabbit is economical, one piece two inches in diameter and half an inch thick will last an average man all day if he chews constantly and his jaws stand the strain. . . . I am going to try stewing some of what is left. . . . Maybe if we soak it all night and boil it all day we shall be able to chew the juice.

—*Mary Sophie Young*, 1914

From *American Women Afield: Writing by Pioneering Women Naturalists* (Maria Myers Bonta, Ed.; Texas A&M University Press)

the book. I am not convinced. Carson was a very private person; she refused to have personal articles written about her or to have her battle with cancer revealed. There is much discussion of burning the letters as late as February 1964. Some letters were burned earlier, but Carson's will returned Dorothy's letters to her. In any case, we are the richer for the chance to read these selected but very largely unedited letters. Together they make a remarkable autobiographical narrative and reveal a woman who created important and lyrical works and who is responsible more than any one person for the return of the osprey and peregrine falcon, for which many of us are grateful.

Nancy G. Slack
Department of Biology,
Russell Sage College,
Troy, NY 12180, USA

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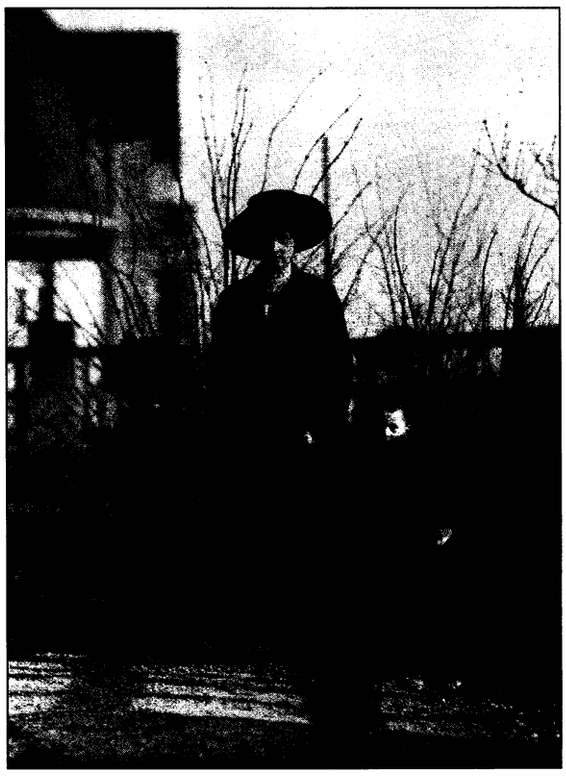
An Unlikely Naturalist

My Double Life. Memoirs of a Naturalist. FRANCES HAMERSTROM. Illustrations by Elva Hamerstrom Paulson. University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, 1994. xii, 316 pp., illus. $35; paper, $16.95. A North Coast Book.

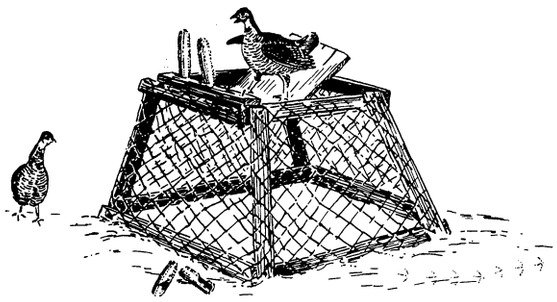
This is a compelling book about an extraordinary scientist. Its subject matter—the life of a woman wildlife biologist in the mid-20th century—is not one that at first glance has much meaning for us technophiles of the '90s. The writing is disjointed and unpolished. Yet I read the memoirs of Frances Hamerstrom with fascination, as she described her childhood as the privileged daughter of sophisticated upper-class parents on an estate outside Boston, a life in sharp contrast to her later adventures with Frederick Hamerstrom, one of the foremost wildlife biologists of the middle of the century and a protege of renowned conservationist Aldo Leopold. Frances Hamerstrom was also a student of Leopold's and a recognized and capable scientist in her own right. She and her husband published hundreds of articles, mainly on prairie chickens but also on hawks and other raptorial birds. Much of the last part of the present book was previously published as "Strictly for the Chickens" and contains anecdotes of the couple's escapades in what was then wildest Wisconsin, attempting to both study the grouse-like game birds and develop a plan for their management.

But the book's major charm lies in the childhood memories of a naturalist growing up in a family that expected its daughter to learn to dance, draw, make lace, and walk with a book balanced on her head. It did not expect her to dissect dead—and buried—blue jays with rusty razor blades, or to regularly leave the house to sleep under the stars and observe the birds at dawn, or to deliberately injure her gums with a sharpened pencil so as to be taken to the dentist and allowed to visit the Museum of Natural History in Boston as a consolatory treat. Frances did all of these things, and more, by the time she was 10 years old. I marveled at these stories, not only because they showed a degree of independence and determination that would have been incredible in someone twice her age, but because the passion for nature they portray seems to have sprung unbidden in a conventionally raised little girl. What made Frances want to find out what a jay's insides looked like? Her parents were not scientists, though her mother conveyed a love of plants and gardening that Frances kept for life. She was hardly taught, in or out of school, to explore the natural world, nor was she given books on natural history. She was not Hooked on Phonics. Instead, she read Darwin at age 11, surreptitiously, half convinced she was doing something wrong. Those of us committed to educating future scientists can only read about her exploits and wonder uneasily if the best we can do for our youth might not be to surround them with plants and animals and leave them alone.



Frances Hamerstrom and brother with nursemaid, "Anna, who pinched us." [From *My Double Life*]

"When I was a child I had two dreams: I wanted to live with wild animals, and I wanted to marry a tall, dark man. I did both" (p. 107). Under some duress Frances eventually took a place in society, though she frequented dancehalls and night clubs with boys of dubious social reputation. She met her husband—"a college boy who scarcely had a penny to his name, but whose formal evening wear was impeccably tailored" (p. 109)—at a football game; they became engaged on their third date. After their marriage, the Hamerstroms embarked on a career of wildlife study, making landmark observations of prairie-chicken breeding biology that enlisted the aid of field assistants from all over the United States. The helpers ranged from Boy Scouts to business executives, and they all came to stand in a canvas blind before dawn in the freezing cold and watch the "booming" display of the male prairie chickens. Frances worked with Frederick, checking field notes, cooking breakfast for the crews of assistants, setting traps, and banding hundreds of birds each year.



"Of course we had read the old books and articles . . . to learn how to trap chickens. The old-timers . . . often used a tip-top trap, set in a cornfield, and they had to empty it frequently. This sounded like an easy method for getting the winter's meat supply, and surely we could adapt it for banding. It was great fun to watch a prairie chicken land on top of the trap, prepared to eat ear corn, and watch him slide unwillingly down into the trap . . . In less than a minute he is inside and the counterweight has moved the top of the trap back up, ready for the next innocent bird. [From *My Double Life*]

Like most women scientists of her day, Frances recognized that prejudice against women existed, but she didn't spend much time dwelling on it. She