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# Agents of Change: Three Women Who Made a Difference

Linda J. Lear '62

Connecticut College, [lear.linda@gmail.com](mailto:lear.linda@gmail.com)

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# CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

**Sykes Alumnae Lecture  
Reunion 2012  
June 1, 2012**

## **Agents of Change: Three Women Who Made a Difference**

### **Carson, Cantwell and Conant: The Burden of Conscience**

**By Linda J. Lear '62**

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Thank you President Higdon. It is an immense honor to be invited to give the Sykes Society Lecture at my 50<sup>th</sup> reunion.

Since I have the podium, I will seize the opportunity to thank several people in addition to Lee Higdon, with whom it has been such an honor and a pleasure to serve this college as a member of the Board of Trustees.

And now, welcome and thanks to the fabulous members of the Class of 1962, to alumni of all classes, to honored guests and to generous friends. To my classmates who may remember me simply as the “class song leader,” a Schwiff and secretary of the Student Council, I can only stand here in thankfulness and humility and say “WHO KNEW what any of us would become—and how very many of you in this room are indeed “agents of change.”

This afternoon I want to speak briefly about three women who made a marked difference in our world by changing public attitudes. Each was an agent of change, but each was first of all an ordinary woman with a vision.

As someone who has spent a good many years studying the life and legacy of Rachel Carson, I wanted to begin with her example. Rachel Carson was born in 1907 and died in 1964. She graduated from Pennsylvania College for Women, Class of 1929. Carson’s landmark book, “Silent Spring,” will also celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary this month. Our graduation on June 10, 1962, and “Silent Spring’s” appearance in the pages of *The New Yorker* occurred in the same week. I first encountered Rachel Carson on the cover of *The Saturday Review of Literature*, which I found in my family’s mailbox when I returned to Pittsburgh from New London. I remember looking at Carson’s photograph wondering what gave her the courage to go up against the powers of the Establishment — and how did she dare demand that we change the way we viewed ourselves and our world? I had no idea that photograph would be the beginning of a lifelong quest.

The two other women I want to bring to you today are two of our own: Mary Cantwell (1931-2000) was a member of the CC Class of 1953. She was awarded the College medal in 1983. Elizabeth Babbott Conant, (1929 – and is intensely alive and vibrant at 82), was a member of CC Class of 1951. She was awarded the College medal in 1995. Many of us knew Babs first as our approachable Dean of Sophomores, and as a challenging professor of biology and zoology. Who can forget her famous lectures on the Krebs cycle! If there are any alumnae who remember Mary Lee Cantwell, I hope you will make yourself known to me. It has been my privilege to correspond with her younger daughter, Margaret Lecher, who has generously answered my questions and contributed to my understanding of her remarkable mother.

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Carson, Cantwell and Conant share many talents, but more importantly they share similar visions. All three of these “agents of change” graduated from women’s colleges. Two majored in English and two changed their majors to science. All were born north of the Mason-Dixon Line, and all were deeply influenced by what I call a physical and spiritual “sense of place.” Each woman drew on that sense of place in their calling to be agents of change.

Rachel Carson reacted to the pollution of western Pennsylvania by big industry and discovered in the sea and its creatures “something to write about.” Although she spent the bulk of her career as a government editor in the Fish and Wildlife Service, her heart was lost to the rocky coast of Maine and to the “sea around us.”

Cantwell carried her Catholic girlhood and its values and terrors from the woolen mills of Bristol Harbor, Rhode Island, to the caverns of Manhattan, to which she lost her heart and from which she drew inspiration and energy. She mastered the magazine industry at a time of its greatest influence and shaped the genre of magazines for educated women. She wrote about, and lived out, the first wave of feminism.

Elizabeth Babbitt Conant spent her childhood on a Jersey farm and the lakes of Canada. She chose a Quaker education and spirituality in Philadelphia, and fell in love with scientific inquiry. Her curiosity to know how life worked gave her a passion for biology and a commitment to share with others what she discovered.

Carson, Cantwell and Conant were truth-tellers, though none embraced that role without immense sacrifice. All three were challenged by the biggest social issues of the past century: the atomic bomb, pesticides, evolution, reproductive choice, war and civil rights. Ironically, all three lives were challenged by cancer. Carson died of misdiagnosed breast cancer, Cantwell fought a losing battle against endometrial cancer, and Conant is a fortunate survivor of breast cancer.

Carson, Cantwell and Conant made a difference in our world and in the lives of those who read their words and witnessed their activism. Each of them was animated by what I call a “*burden of conscience*” that impelled them to speak out, to attempt to change our attitudes and hopefully improve the quality of our lives. All three were acute observers of human behavior, of the natural world, and of what it means to live in community. And each woman optimistically believed that our communities, our society, our world could be made better if our individual consciences were troubled – if we were disturbed enough to work for changes in social attitudes.

For Carson, Cantwell and Conant the burden of conscience meant that in their chosen fields of writing – about science and nature – about social issues that affected women’s lives and sexuality – and about peace and against prejudice – each woman of necessity stepped out and became a social activist. Their legacies can be found in the perhaps the most important book of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, “*Silent Spring*,” in the pages of women’s magazines like *Mademoiselle*, *Vogue* and the editorial page of *New York Times*, in the classroom and the laboratory, in the field and the community center.

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**Rachel Carson** was a nature writer who stood in wonder at the ecological interconnectedness of the non-human world and at the interdependence of all life. Her trilogy on the sea, especially her 1951 blockbuster “*The Sea Around Us*,” revealed to the public the post-war discoveries of oceanography. But by 1957 Carson was convinced that how we Americans viewed the natural world and our place in it had to be transformed from an attitude of human arrogance and pseudo-control of nature to one of humility and cooperation. In “*Silent Spring*” Carson educated the public about the power of hydrochlorinated chemicals – like DDT – which had revolutionized the relationship between farmer and insect, and promised to eradicate those insects we deemed “pests.” She exposed the consequences of the massive misuse of pesticides in the environment calling them *biocides* because they were and are persistent in soil, air and water, and in our bodies. They

were, she wrote, the biological equivalent of an atom bomb.

Furthermore, Carson argued that the public had a right to know what their government was putting out into the environment which might be harmful to humans and to non-humans. Some of us will remember playing behind the mosquito spray trucks on a hot summer's evening without ever a thought that we were bathing in a potentially harmful, even deadly chemical cocktail. Carson wrote:

*We have allowed these chemicals to be used with little or no advance investigations of their effect on soil, water, wildlife and man. They have immense power not merely to poison but to enter into the most vital processes of the body and change them in sinister and often deadly ways." (16) Future generations are unlikely to condone our lack of prudent concern for the integrity of the natural world that supports all life." (13)*

The conclusions of "Silent Spring" were sensational and caused a national debate. Carson's courageous witness created a new environmental consciousness in America. Although she died in 1964, "Silent Spring" helped launch the contemporary environmental movement and marked the first time that the health of the whole planet was put on the national agenda. Carson was a social critic and a revolutionary voice writing about human conceit, and desperately worried about the future of all life. She took a risk, changed attitudes and made a difference.

Mary Lee Cantwell, like Carson, never wanted to be anything but a writer. At Connecticut Mary was editor in chief of the *Quarterly*, Literary Editor of *Koine* and a staff member of the *College News*. I believe she is unequivocally one of very best non-fiction writers of her generation. Her memoir, a trilogy of three separate works written between 1992 and 1998, was published together as "Manhattan Memoirs" in 2000.

Cantwell left Connecticut College for New York City in 1953 with the clear ambition of getting a job at *Mademoiselle* – any job just to learn and to write. She achieved that and ever so much more, all the while falling in love with New York City during that period when the burgeoning feminist movement was changing many women's lives.

Cantwell's New York in the late 1950s and 1960s is captured in her memories in such perfect detail and literary voice that it is almost like reading your own mind and saying "How did she know that about my life?" Cantwell balanced marriage, motherhood (two daughters), and a demanding career as the managing editor of *Mademoiselle* for twenty-three years, contributing editor of *Vogue*, and finally as a member of the editorial board of *The New York Times*. She did this all the while contributing a dizzying array of freelance essays, recipes and travelogues. Her writing included the social topics of her times. Cantwell helped formulate public opinion on issues where there were and are no easy answers or "magic solutions." But Cantwell's best writing was about the changing public and private lives of women.

Cantwell's memoirs, especially her first volume, "American Girl," contain some wonderful reminiscences of her time at Connecticut College, all delivered with incisive accuracy and all unabashedly authentic. Here is one of my favorites. I wish I could have written this:

*I remember walking back to my dormitory on foggy New London nights after hours in the library in love with John Donne or perfect numbers or the mysterious and wonderful fertilization of pinecones. I remember when someone spoke across centuries, or an idea caught me, or a formula was miraculously made clear, and I remember that I felt like a pole vaulter, up in the air and clearing the bar.*

Cantwell loved Connecticut College and later subjected her two daughters to spontaneous and lusty renditions of our Alma Mater (the old version) whenever they drove by New London on the way to or from Rhode Island.

Cantwell's writing is suffused with a rare and vivid honesty. "What I remember best," she wrote later, "is

that we were all women – girls, really and that coming indoors at night meant coming into a hothouse scented with bath powder, cigarettes and on Saturday nights, Arpege... trust me, we were all delicious and we all smelled of Arpege.”

Mary Cantwell was one of the hundreds of young women who flocked to Manhattan from New England women’s colleges. She remembers it as almost a migration of women seeking writing jobs at *Mademoiselle* and or *Seventeen*. Unlike the previous century’s migration of women from farms to factory, Mary and her friends had the safety net of finding a white man to marry. Mary married the Wesleyan man she had met at Connecticut College, and was for a time secure. She was enormously shaped by the incipient feminist movement and especially by Betty Friedan’s “The Feminist Mystique.” At her 25<sup>th</sup> reunion (the only one she came to and did not enjoy) she wrote “Younger than the group of women from whom Ms. Friedan drew most of her research, we were nonetheless the group that most quickly embraced this feminism. It is ironic though that a generation which had been characterized as ‘silent’ should have turned out in the end, to have been so noisy. In feminism, it appears, we finally found our voice.” In her memoir she described her classmates: “Above all I remember how young we all were. We remain young too. We are all of us forever twenty-one.”

A keen observer of her generation, Cantwell wrote vividly about the pride and pain experienced by three decades in which women’s lives were transformed, and everything changes. Enduring a painful divorce, and the subsequent turmoil of economic insecurity as a freelancer, Cantwell changed attitudes by her ability to describe similar changes in other women’s lives. Named to the *Times* Editorial Board in 1978, by 1980 she was the author of many of the daring “Hers” columns that appeared in newspaper and drew enormous comment. She wrote honestly about important and controversial social policy issues like smoking, divorce, abortion and assisted suicide as well as the whimsical “Close to Home” columns in the Home Section about cooking on the weekends for her daughters. Margaret Cantwell Lescher recalled: “My mother had a great sense of occasion. Growing up, I knew of no other family who celebrated the broadcast of the Miss America Pageant, the Academy Awards and some episodes of ‘McMillan and Wife’ with champagne biscuits and ginger ale.”

Cantwell’s most effective efforts to change attitudes came from her editorials condemning the “squeal rule,” the label she coined for a 1982 Reagan administration proposal to forbid giving contraceptives to teenagers unless their parents were informed first. Such a regulation, Cantwell argued, would discourage effective contraception and only increase teenage pregnancies. Thanks largely to Cantwell, the squeal rule failed. Cantwell would be the last to think that her shared burden of conscience changed the way many of her generation viewed women’s work, women’s talents and women’s rights, but it did. And although there is reason to lament how many things have still to change, Cantwell’s writing and her brave outspokenness changed attitudes.

Elizabeth Babbott Conant has a special place in the hearts of those who remember her tenure at Connecticut College. A gifted student who came with an interest in medicine and a Quaker education, she became a student leader, the president of student government, and graduated Phi Beta Kappa. Deciding after a summer internship at Sloan Kettering that she would be a better teacher than surgeon, Conant went off to Harvard, where she earned her master of arts degree and a doctorate in biology.

Like Carson, Babs came to political consciousness in the Cold War and, as a Quaker interested in promoting international peace, she chose her first teaching job at the newly created International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan. Her choice was propelled by her longstanding work with the American Friends Service Committee, and her desire “to model a different American than the military program that dropped two atom bombs on Japanese cities.”

In 1958, our freshman year, President Rosemary Park invited Babs back to Connecticut College with a big portfolio: instructor in zoology, Dean of Sophomores, foreign student adviser, and Burdick dorm adviser.

Elizabeth Babbott Conant is unique among alumnae as she is, I believe, the only graduate who was appointed to the College faculty, served as an academic dean and then elected a trustee. That, I think, service takes the prize for devotion to an academic institution, and still Babs continues to be a generous benefactor. Her great niece, a 2012 graduate, will be our newly elected Young Alumnae Trustee in September.

Conant recalls that returning to Connecticut as a dean meant realizing that formerly “scary people have first names after all.” She confided that being a dean was the hardest part of her tri-partite job – keeping up with those whose academic performance was shaky, and those of us to had sophomore “transfer-itis”, (myself included—she talked me out of it.) Babs remembers, “I also felt close in age and experience with the students,” and inevitably she had conflicting loyalties. “What,” she wrote, “do you tell a student brought to your office for trying to sneak late into the dorm through a window. You are supposed to say, “Tsk, tsk, poor choice, bad attitude.” But I wanted to say, “Tsk, tsk, wrong window.”

Babs left Connecticut in 1963 but returned in 1982 to serve a ten-year term! (I cannot imagine it) on the Board of Trustees. That too, she recalled, was a strange experience when you have once been part of the administration. She recalled how she, like all administrators, would scurry about getting reports ready for board meetings, planning programs and praying there would be no disasters, either acts of God or acts of students. But as trustee, she would arrive to find “meetings run like clockwork, upbeat reports, and no problems in sight except of course for money.” But she could see all the tired eyes of her once-fellow administrators and appreciated, more than others, the cost of excellence.

Conant left the faculty at Connecticut for the opportunity to teach zoology at the University of Nigeria in Nsukka at the height of the American Civil Rights Movement with the goal of learning something about the roots of black Americans. Her teaching and research were centered on the African lungfish, an air-breathing fish about which she later published widely and involved many of her students in collaborative research. She returned from Africa and married George Conant, a radio astronomer whom she had dated in what she describes as a “whirlwind courtship of fifteen years.” She subsequently taught at Wellesley and then moved to Charlottesville, Virginia, following George’s jobs. She taught for several years with great appreciation at Mary Baldwin College. In 1978, the Conants moved to Buffalo where again Babs found teaching assignments at local colleges, ending at Canisius College. But this outline of her academic career doesn’t begin to touch the deeper issues of her life in those tumultuous years: the anti-Vietnam War movement, peace vigils and teach-ins.

Conant’s knowledge of zoology and particularly the unique lungfish involved her in several debates with “creationists.” In Buffalo, the issues flaming the culture wars involved her in the pro-choice network and activities of civil disobedience. Conant’s “burden of conscience” required her to act personally to change attitudes towards war, race, aggression and human sexuality, and always in the name of civil liberties.

By the mid-1980s Babs and George had agreed to dissolve their marriage and Babs and Camille Cox, a woman she met in Buffalo at the Jungian study group, had become partners, and had come out, at least to close friends and family. Together they began expanding their campaign for civil rights to the lesbian and gay community.

Conant’s work first centered on presenting inclusive strategies to K-12 education majors and teachers-in-training so that their young LGBT students or children with lesbian and gay parents might suffer less isolation and bias. She also actively participated in Soulforce, a group which practices non-violent civil disobedience to challenge mainline churches over their attitudes toward the LGBT community. Always a teacher, Babs continues to work for the equitable treatment of gay and lesbian people and against the physical, emotional and spiritual violence that still faces many in the community.

In a letter to me recounting her activism, Conant defined herself as a “serial activist as times and

circumstances evolved.” But as usual, she underestimates her powerful work for social change. Babs presciently observed that in contrast to Rachel Carson and Mary Cantwell, who were “solo” activists – making their burden of conscience known through their writing – her social activism has unfolded primarily in the company of social activist groups: the Friends, the Pro-Choice Network, Ladies of the Lake, Dragon Boats and Soulforce. But from my perch as biographer, it is clear that Conant has been a singular and mighty agent for change. To be in her company is to be lifted to a better place, and energized to work for a better world. Elizabeth Babbott Conant and Camille Cox were married a week ago on May 23 in the sovereign state of New York after more than 29 years together as life partners.

Carson, Cantwell and Conant all drew their courage at least partly from time spent in the natural world – an experience that took each of them away from the common culture of their day. They were, as young women, aware of a different drummer and each moved upstream against conventional opinion. Each carried out their lives with a unique burden of conscience.

For Rachel Carson it was unfathomable beauty of the natural world that made her speak out against its wanton destruction. For Mary Cantwell it was the obligation to bravely live her life out and tell it painfully and fully. For Elizabeth Conant it is the obligation to the truth of self and the rights of all people.

For all three women the obligation to endure included the obligation to bear witness. These truth-tellers are our role models and our legacy: three ordinary women who made an extraordinary difference.

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