BOOK REVIEW

Mary-Louise Engels, Rosalie Bertell: Scientist, Eco-Feminist, Visionary**. Toronto: Women's Press, 2005, 176 pp., $16.95 paper.**

Reviewed by **Suzanne Elston**, Newspaper Columnist

Dr. Rosalie Bertell defies just about every label that can be used to describe her. Traditionally, heroes are generally young, usually male, and are quite often distinguished by brazen acts of momentary heroism. Rosalie is a tiny, physically frail nun whose career as a crusader began more than 30 years ago when she was in her early 40s. Nuns were once defined by lives of quiet devotion. Not so for Dr. Bertell, whose dedication to a life of service has been played out on the international stage and as an epidemiologist, biometrician and crusader. Now 75 years old, and in failing health, Bertell continues with her seemingly tireless efforts to make victims visible.

Dr. Bertell's remarkable life and achievements have been chronicled in a new biography by Mary-Louise Engels, simply entitled, *Rosalie Bertell: Scientist, Eco-Feminist, Visionary.*

Engels' book begins with the night in 1973 when Rosalie first spoke out publicly about the hazards of low-level radiation. As Engels tells the story, Bertell's audience was a group of citizens from Lockwood, New York who had gathered to hear about the proposal to build a nuclear power plant in their community. Bertell's testimony was so compelling that the community voted down the proposal shortly thereafter.

Engels then introduces Rosalie the child. Frail from birth, the daughter of an American father and Canadian mother, Rosalie was plagued with childhood illnesses and gifted with a passion and ability for mathematics. Unable to endure the physical demands of the life as a Carmelite nun, a vocation that she choose at the age of 22, Bertell was forced to leave

the monastery after suffering congestive heart failure. She joined the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart once her health improved, and pursued an academic career as a student, (earning a PhD in mathematics in 1966), teacher and cancer research scientist. It was Bertell's work as a researcher on the Tri-State Leukemia Survey that examined the incidence of leukemia in Maryland, New York and Minnesota, which ultimately led to her testimony to the Lockwood residents in 1973, an event that not only changed her life, but the world.

What has followed has been more than three decades of crusading on behalf of those who have been victimized by environmental contamination. Bertell's research has taken her to the far corners of the Earth where she has documented the health effects of radiation from power plants and nuclear weapons testing, the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal, the contamination of the Great Lakes, and the impact of pollution on indigenous communities in the Canadian North. During this period, she has suffered numerous life-threatening illnesses as well as attempts on her life and attacks on her scientific credentials. Bertell's assertion that a safe environment is a basic human right has fuelled her work and also gained her numerous international honours including the prestigious Right Livelihood Award (also known as the alternative Nobel Peace Prize) and a place on both the United Nations Environmental Programme's Global 500 Roll of Honour and Cambridge University's list of 1000 Outstanding Women of the Twentieth Century.

In the course of her work, Bertell moved to Toronto and founded the International Institute of Concern for Public Health. "I chose to live in Canada," she wrote in her 2001 acceptance speech for the MacBride Peace Prize, another one of her many honours, "because of a long distaste for the US superpower mentality and constant escalation of the nuclear arms race."

Bertell is also a prolific writer and has penned numerous articles, academic papers, essays and reports. Her best known work, *No Immediate Danger: Prognosis for a Radioactive Earth*, (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1985) is a 435-page volume that been compared to Rachel Carson's prophetic book, *Silent Spring* (New York: Mariner Books, 1962) for its vision and influence. Bertell herself has been compared to both Rachel Carson and Florence Nightingale.

As Engels writes, "Indeed, the similarities among the three women's lives are striking. All survived sickly childhoods, eschewed marriage and devoted themselves to careers related to public health." Engels continues, "In Rosalie's case, she attacked the integrity of the scientific, governmental, and corporate establishments, their moral leadership and direction of society, exposing their carelessness with human health and the natural world"(164).

Given the body of Bertell's work, Engels' 176-page book offers a modest snapshot of Bertell's accomplishments that left me wanting more. Despite this shortcoming, Rosalie Bertell is well worth the read and offers, among other things, a good basic primer on radiation physics. It concludes with a characteristic quote from Bertell herself:

"We are part of a great chain of people who care about the Earth, about the life that gives it fruitfulness, and about a world where rights would be respected, children cherished, and peace prevail. We have to be part of something bigger than ourselves, because our dreams are often bigger than our lifetimes" (171).