DURING THE SECOND decade of the 20th century, the United States was thrown into a period of internal turmoil not seen since the Civil War. The difference between this era of internal struggle involving different factions of American society and those which had occurred previously was that this time period was largely influenced by external pressures, either real or perceived. Woodrow Wilson's liberal social policies caused America to examine its conscience and at the same time, World War I and the Russian Revolution began the erosion of the perception of the United States by the American public as a superpower isolated from the troubles of the world. Although Harding's "Return to Normalcy" in the 1920s touted the return of conservative ideals and a retreat from foreign affairs, the United States, in fact, became a global player after World War I. This process had started in the late 19th century with the expansion of the Navy and the Spanish-American War; however, it reached its full fruition during and following the Great War. As a player in global politics, the government came to realize that not only would it influence the world but that the world would also influence it.

This realization manifested itself in the federal surveillance of radicals throughout the country such as Emma Goldman and John Reed. The perception was that the United States was in imminent danger from saboteurs representing every ideology from the Kaiser’s Germany to radical anarchism. But the surveillance was not limited to prominent spokespersons like Goldman and Reed, as Charles H. McCormick makes clear in Seeing Reds. McCormick shows, through a thorough examination of federal records of the Bureau of Investigation (forerunner of the FBI) and other federal investigative agencies, both civilian and military, the extent and significance of federal infiltration of such radical organizations as the IWW. Well-written and thoroughly researched, the book clearly demonstrates the lengths to which the government was willing to go in order to keep an eye on and actively disrupt the activities of the radical Left in the Pittsburgh area. Although loaded with detail about individual comings and goings of most of the major players, the book does not bog down but instead reads rather quickly and easily.

McCormick operates from the premise that the federal government exhibited paranoia about domestic spying which resulted in its dispatching spies to infiltrate radical organizations. The main focus of spying was workers’ organizations such as the IWW and the Union of Russian Workers (UORW). The concept of industrial spying was nothing new in Pennsylvania; the Pinkerton agency, acting at the behest of coal mining companies, sent agents to infiltrate the Molly Maguires in the anthracite coal fields in the 1870s. The difference in the 1910s was that it was no longer the companies who instigated the investigations and hired private agencies (although the companies were aware of the spying and cooperated fully, as might be expected), but the government. It was no longer just a threat to a company’s or industry’s economic well-being that was at stake — the issue was national security. Not only did the government view the radical individuals and groups as threats to the companies’ hegemony, but, in the government’s eyes, such parties even ran counter to the interests of the United States. It was actually believed in some circles that the IWW was plotting a Russian-type revolution.

How or why the government arrived at this conclusion McCormick does not say. The reader is hard-pressed to understand why the IWW posed such a threat to the government when statements such as “only eighteen persons... attended the second meeting of the Pittsburgh IWW branch,” (p. 54) appear throughout the book. McCormick shows the reader the who, what, and how of the infiltration, and does so in impressive detail, but the why is never really addressed. The IWW appeared to be nothing more than a small group of idealistic organizers among steelworkers who seemed largely uninterested in what they had to say.

The actual infiltration seems at various times like anything from a third-rate spy novel to the Keystone Kops. McCormick focuses on the exploits of one spy in particular, Louis M. Wendell, who used the thoroughly anonymous cover name of L. M. Walsh. It is largely the reports of Wendell, newly made public under the Freedom of Information Act, that form the basis of McCormick’s research. A shadowy figure both before and after his time in Pittsburgh in the late 1910s and early ’20s, Wendell rose to the top echelon of the IWW organization. McCormick’s reliance on Wendell’s reports lend an air of immediacy to the events since Wendell is reporting on the events to his superiors as they are happening. Wendell’s ability to infiltrate the rank-and-file
of the organization, however, was hampered by the fact that he did not speak a foreign language. This seems to have been a problem for nearly all the agents and supervisors of the BI, despite the fact that they were focusing on foreign workers as the source of labor and radical agitation.

McCormick describes a cast of characters on both sides who all seem just as ill-suited to their roles as Wendell, and who turn the whole affair almost comic. In addition to Wendell, the primary character in the book is Jacob Margolis, a lawyer who regularly defended workers and agitators in deportation hearings and other legal matters, becoming the focus of government investigations, and who continually seemed disappointed that he was never mentioned in the same breath nationally as Goldman. There also is a very young J. Edgar Hoover who made his initial reputation in rooting out radicals; his efficiency in professionalizing the Bureau led to its eventual reorganization as the FBI and his being appointed its director. There is also Special Agent in Charge (SAC) of the BI "radical squad" in Pittsburgh, Robert Simms Judge, who, despite being the chief agent at the Pittsburgh bureau, had administrative experience which amounted to "managing his father's drugstore for a couple of years" (p. 19). It was agents like these, relying on "experts" and "informants," many of whom were receiving information second- and third-hand through translators, who formed the backbone of the government's investigations. Such was the expertise of the agents and their superiors that they saw no contradiction in the fact that the people they suspected as spies for the Kaiser during the war were the same people they suspected after the war as being Communist revolutionaries. McCormick cannot help hiding his amusement and at times disgust with the whole affair. At one point Wendell and another agent are ducking each other in an Erie train station, both believing the other to be trying to give the other up.

Almost forgotten by McCormick in the events of the time were the efforts of more mainstream labor organizations such as the AFL and the UMWA, which were successful at organizing in such places as Homestead and Westinghouse. McCormick indicates, almost unintentionally it seems, that while the Wobblies were seemingly pounding their head on the wall to get people to listen to their message of "One Big Union," it was the mainstream unions who were actually having success and winning the hearts and minds of the workers. McCormick seems sympathetic to the IWW, although he's frank in talking about its failure throughout the region.

While the (mostly) men who did the work were laughable, the work they were doing was not. McCormick cites numerous cases of civil rights violations by the government in its efforts to root out radicals and revolutionaries, especially during the Palmer raids of the UORW and IWW following the war. The raids on the UORW, an organization formed mostly as a meeting and ethnic society for Russian workers, were especially offensive. A number of examples show how cases were made for deportation of foreign workers based on evidence such as selling radical songbooks. The Palmer Raids (named for Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer) on the UORW essentially shut the organization down. The Raids on the IWW were not as successful, but mostly because the union was dying of its own accord.

The scariest parts of the book reveal the real significance of the events in and around the Pittsburgh steel district in those years. McCormick shows that Hoover's notorious pattern of surveillance of suspected enemies, which continued throughout his long career, started in the 1910s. The backlash in the 1920s against the government's actions laid the groundwork for a public mistrust of government which had not really existed before and would not truly manifest itself until Vietnam in the 1960s and the post-Watergate era. McCormick shows in his analysis of the "Red Scare" a foreshadowing of McCarthyism, but also reveals a great deal of why the American public to a large degree no longer trusts its own government.

Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature
by Linda Lear

by Bradley R. Fisher

Pennsylvania has done much to remember Rachel Carson, the Springdale-born scientist and environmentalist whose writings and ideas helped found the modern environmental movement in the 1960s. Her name graces a 34-mile hiking trail that extends from North Park to Harrison Hills Park in Allegheny County, passing through her birthplace. In Harrisburg, the State Department of Environmental Protection is housed in the Rachel Carson Office Building, atop which nest a rare pair of peregrine falcons, a species saved from extinction by Carson's activism.

There are even two Pittsburgh educational organizations dedicated to furthering Carson's ideas and life work: the Rachel Carson Homestead Association, an indoor/outdoor museum and educational center based in her family's five-room farmhouse in Springdale; and the Rachel Carson Institute, an academic forum at Chatham College which sponsors public education and discussion on environmental issues. With the presence of these landmarks and the efforts of these organizations and our public schools, it's quite probable that our children are learning more about this famous native daughter than we ever did.

Now the rest of us can catch up. Linda Lear's comprehensive new book, Rachel Carson: Witness for Nature, makes the connection between Pittsburgh, Rachel Carson, her 1962 book Silent Spring, and the cleaner air and water we enjoy today. In this first complete biography of Carson, it appears at a key point in history — 34 years after Carson's death, Linda Lear has been able to draw both on first-hand accounts of Carson's life from still-living colleagues and friends, as well as on archival material not available until recently. Lear is Research Professor of Environmental History at George Washington University: she grew up near Springdale and had a biology teacher who was a college friend of