

Bringing Rose Lane to Life

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By Lawrence W. Reed

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Commentary

To the limited extent that Americans today know the name Rose Wilder Lane, it mostly results from collaboration with her mother in

producing a series of Little House books about pioneer life in the late nineteenth century. They became the basis for nine seasons of a popular television show, “[Little House on the Prairie](#)” (1974–1982). Lane deserved posthumous praise for her literature, to be sure, but thanks to a new book from editors David T. Beito and Marcus Witcher, it is more apparent than ever that her contributions to ideas of liberty outrank everything else in importance.

She was without a doubt a [founding mother](#) of [modern libertarian theory](#), a fierce proponent of individualism, an uncompromising critic of racism and other collectivist perspectives, and a proud defender of laissez-faire economics. All of that comes through loud and clear in “[Rose Lane Says: Thoughts on Race, Liberty, and Equality, 1942–45](#)”—in a fine biographical introduction by the editors, followed by eighty-four essays by Lane herself, all of which appeared in the largest black-owned newspaper of its day, the Pittsburgh Courier.

Beito and Witcher explain that Lane wasn’t always a libertarian. Born in 1886, she even flirted briefly with socialism and communism until an eye-opening visit to the Soviet Union in the 1920s disabused her of those sentiments. Her Midwest upbringing then reasserted its influence on her thinking, leading her to champion hard work and freedom over entitlement and state worship. Once she saw big government in action, she thereafter wanted no part of it. Well before her magnum opus, “[The Discovery of Freedom](#),” appeared in 1943 and before she started writing a weekly column for the Courier, she knew her calling in life was to oppose it, tooth and nail, in all its disguises from Soviet tyranny to New Deal interventionism.

I learned much more about Lane in the editors’ 28-page Introduction than I ever knew. This remark from a Soviet peasant, for instance, left a deep imprint on her: “In Moscow, there are only men, and man is not God. A man has only a man’s head, and one hundred heads together do not make one great head. No. Only God can know Russia.”

Lane was no pacifist, but she despised the notion of drafting Americans to fight in foreign wars in which we had little direct interest. She befriended and defended the courageous black journalist and fellow Courier columnist [George Schuyler](#). She denounced as

“ridiculous, idiotic, and tragic” the growing tendency for people to identify themselves by race instead of by their individuality. She spoke truth to power without mercy, attacking Franklin Roosevelt, the New Deal, and the entire notion of “central planning” for all the right reasons.

When a state trooper sent to investigate her “subversive” behavior knocked on her door, she rhetorically sliced and diced him until he backed off. I wish I could have been a fly on the front porch when she sternly advised him, “I am an American citizen. I hire you. I pay you. And you have the insolence to question my attitude? ... What is this—the Gestapo?”

When I finished the Introduction, I was salivating to read the 84 Courier columns that Beito and Witcher present. I was not disappointed. Lane’s writing is mesmerizing. She’s direct, concise, and clear as a bell. No column—no paragraph, in fact—leaves the reader wondering what she was trying to say. How refreshing it is to read the work of a writer who says what she means and means what she says, with no ifs, ands, or buts to muddy the message!

What did Lane think of “economic equality?” In her own words,

“True, every human baby is born on a planet that gives nobody any food, clothing or shelter. That’s economic equality. But from their first yell, no two babies are alike.

“Human energy must constantly attack this stubborn earth, and make from its soil and rocks the human necessities. Let human energy stop doing that for 60 days, and we’ll all be dead Men are not born equal in weight, or in height, or in talents or tastes or brains or energy.”

If you’re a newcomer to Rose Wilder Lane’s stance on economic systems, you’ll learn quickly that she didn’t equivocate. She wrote,

“I oppose socialism, because I am for capitalism.

“I am for the capitalist society in which a penniless orphan, one of a despised minority, can create the Pittsburgh Courier and publicly,

vigorously, safely, attack a majority opinion.

“I am for the capitalist economy in which a poor mechanic can create the Ford Motor Company, creating hundreds of thousands of jobs and putting even beggars into cars. I am for capitalism, in which unknown poor men can create Woolworths and Kresges and super-markets and movies and candy bars and gas ranges and refrigerators and bathtubs and airplanes, and the strongest, most productive country on earth. I am for the unknown, unimaginable future that men can create only in capitalism. There are very few things that I am willing to die for; capitalism is one of them.”

Now that the old lessons about the harm of protectionism are being forgotten, what Lane said about it in 1944 should be dusted off and remembered in 2024, and beyond:

“A ‘protective’ tariff is supposed to be an act of the State, benefiting a ‘class’ of subject or citizens. Actually, it is a use of the State’s police force to rob all people.

“It is supposed to ‘benefit’ capitalist-manufacturers, by raising the price of the goods they sell. It does keep out of a country, by force, the cheaper goods we could otherwise buy. It does compel citizens (including the capitalist-manufacturer) to support bureaucrats, policemen, frontier patrols and Coast Guards, to prevent us from buying these cheaper goods. That is, it does rob every American, every time he buys anything.”

Whatever topic Lane addressed in each of her columns, she did so with remarkable clarity. More than once as I read through them in the quiet of my home study, I erupted in a cheer. From conscription to dependency on government programs to the near-meaningless differences between communism and fascism, Lane’s writing stands out as some of the most clear-eyed stuff libertarians have ever produced.

It wasn’t an easy task for Beito and Witcher to assemble this collection of columns from the great Rose Wilder Lane. In many cases, they had

to reconstruct them from remnant material, since original, hard copies of the Pittsburgh Courier are hard to find. All who love liberty, or even just well-written commentary of any kind, owe them a debt of gratitude. If this volume leads to new generations of Americans appreciating an author they should have never forgotten, what Beito and Witcher have accomplished will be nothing short of a profound and welcome public service.

Essential Women of Liberty: Rose Wilder Lane



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Lawrence W. Reed

Author

Lawrence Reed is president emeritus of the Foundation for Economic Education (FEE) in Atlanta, Georgia; and is the author of “Real Heroes: Inspiring True Stories of Courage, Character, and Conviction” and the best-seller “Was Jesus a Socialist?”



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