
Selling Laissez-faire Antiracism to the Black Masses

Rose Wilder Lane and the Pittsburgh Courier

◆

DAVID T. BEITO AND LINDA ROYSTER BEITO

The ideals of liberty, individualism, and self-reliance have rarely had a more enthusiastic champion than Rose Wilder Lane. A columnist and popular author, she held firm to these beliefs during the New Deal and World War II era, when faith in big government was at high tide. Through her book *The Discovery of Freedom* ([1943] 1984a), she became a key transitional figure from the Old Right of the 1930s to the modern libertarian movement. Of equal fascination but much less known today is Lane's sustained effort to promote laissez-faire ideas in columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the largest black newspaper in the United States. Although Lane was white, she used this unusual venue creatively to promote the philosophy of limited government. During World War II especially, her outspoken activism generated headlines. She was not only investigated by the FBI for "subversive" remarks, but denounced by Walter Winchell, the leading nationally syndicated journalist and radio commentator in the country.

David T. Beito is a professor of history at the University of Alabama; **Linda Royster Beito** is chairperson of the Department of Social Sciences at Stillman College.

The Independent Review, v. 15, n. 2, Fall 2010, ISSN 1086-1653, Copyright © 2010, pp. 279-294.

It is generally forgotten now that during the 1930s and 1940s many respected blacks continued to oppose the New Deal. Among them was Oscar De Priest, the first black member of the House of Representatives from the North, and best-selling novelist Zora Neale Hurston. They favored the Republican Party not only because it had denounced the New Deal and the Fair Deal, but also because of its civil rights record. For example, conservative Republicans in Congress, such as the anti-New Deal icon Hamilton Fish, fought aggressively for antilynching and other civil rights legislation (see Jonathan Bean's introductions, congressional testimony by De Priest and Fish, and a Senate discussion on such issues in Bean 2009b, 164–70, 190–96). In 1947, the Republican majority in the so-called do-nothing Congress investigated and prevented Senator Theodore G. Bilbo of Mississippi from taking his seat because he promoted coercion against black voters (Dittmer 1995, 7–8; Flegler 2006, 1–27). Lane's story can offer new insights into the libertarian and conservative strain of this previously ignored antiracist tradition during this period, which historians have slighted.

It is almost impossible to discuss Lane's life and worldview apart from the history of the American frontier. She was born in 1886 in De Smet, Dakota Territory, to Almanzo and Laura Ingalls Wilder and had an exciting childhood marked by crop failures, destructive fires, and the death of her only sibling in infancy. The Wilders moved frequently, living in such places as Spring Valley, Minnesota; Westville, Florida; and finally Mansfield, Missouri. A string of adversities bolstered Lane's lifetime habits of resourcefulness, self-reliance, and stoicism. After completing high school, she worked for Western Union and in 1908 ended up in San Francisco, where she married newspaper reporter Claire Gillette Lane. Their only child died in infancy. Disenchantment with her incompatible and unambitious husband soon set in, and they divorced. She went on to become a reporter for the *Kansas City Post* and the *San Francisco Bulletin*. She also wrote short stories (Holtz 1993 8, 14–33, 47–60).

Shortly after World War I, Lane began a brief but memorable flirtation with communism. She intended to join the party after hearing John Reed speak but missed out because of a bout with influenza. Although she did not sign up after her recovery, she remained "at heart a communist" until a visit to Russia in the 1920s brought her disillusionment. A peasant's remark struck a nerve. Although his village had followed communal values for generations, he surprised her by saying that central state planning "will not work. 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 1936, 2–8).

Lane's literary career blossomed during the 1920s and 1930s. Her articles appeared in the *Ladies Home Journal*, *Harper's Monthly*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, and her books included biographies of Jack London, Henry Ford, and Herbert Hoover. A job with the Red Cross allowed wide travel in Europe and the Middle East, opening up many experiences that informed her fiction. Her most successful novels, *Let the Hurricane Roar* ([1932] 1985) and *Free Land* ([1938] 1984b), drew on the

homesteading struggles of her parents and grandparents (Holtz 1993, 66–67, 91–98, 232–39, 280–83). She and her mother, Laura Ingalls Wilder, collaborated closely on *The Little House on the Prairie* books. Lane's behind-the-scenes role included editing, rewriting, and some ghostwriting (Holtz 1993, 379–85).

After the publication of *Free Land*, Lane concentrated on nonfiction writings, most of which championed unadulterated laissez-faire and opposition to Roosevelt's domestic and foreign policies. During this period, she befriended Isabel Paterson, an influential columnist for the *New York Herald Tribune* "Books." Paterson, like Lane, was a novelist and a libertarian-minded thinker. Paterson's most important philosophical work was *The God of the Machine* ([1943] 1993), which explores the contrast between market dynamism and human creativity, on the one hand, and the mischief inflicted by do-gooders armed with state power, on the other. Although Paterson greatly influenced Lane's ideas, the two were highly dissimilar in literary style, argumentative methods, and temperaments (Cox 2004, 62–63, 216–17, 257, 284–86).

Give Me Liberty (1936) recounts Lane's break with communism in deeply personal terms, but her political outlook found fullest expression in *The Discovery of Freedom*. Her philosophical system rested on the premise that each autonomous individual possesses in equal measure a kind of "energy." Governments are incapable of marshalling this energy, but societies that leave people alone to exercise their "inalienable" rights will flourish: "Each living person is a source of this energy. There is no other source . . . individuals generate it, and control it." By contrast, the centralizing state, whether Communist, Nazi, or New Deal, rests on a "pagan faith" that an outside "authority" of some type controls or should control individuals ([1943] 1984a, xi–xiv, 3).

Because *The Discovery of Freedom* appeared in the same year as Isabel Paterson's *The God of the Machine* and Ayn Rand's individualist novel *The Fountainhead*, Stephen Cox calls these authors collectively the "Libertarians of '43" (2004, 281). The parallels between them go beyond ideology. All three were ruggedly independent career women who overcame modest origins and had troubled romantic relationships, usually with men who were not their equals in ability or ambition. Given this background, an individualist worldview had understandable appeal. As Cox explains, "[W]omen were more important to the creation of the libertarian movement than they were to the creation of any political movement not strictly focused on women's rights. . . . People who were used to doing for themselves might have a larger conception than other people of the things that individuals can and ought to do for themselves" (2004, 195, 281).

The heyday of Lane, Paterson, and Rand was also that of the American Old Right. More a political tendency than a movement, it entailed a distrust of centralized power, the New Deal, and foreign intervention and alliances. Leading figures included Senator Robert A. Taft of Ohio; John T. Flynn, the head of the New York City chapter of the America First Committee; and Robert McCormick, publisher of the *Chicago Tribune* (Moser 2005). Most were Republicans and midwesterners. Old

Right leaders accused Roosevelt of conspiring to subvert the Constitution through an all-powerful federal government and foreign adventurism. During the late 1940s and early 1950s, many of them fought against Truman's Cold War policies, such as U.S. membership in the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (Doherty 2007, 59–66).

Like others on the Old Right, Lane feared that Roosevelt's prewar foreign policy imperiled liberty at home and fed a senseless war fever. Much more than Paterson and Rand, she embraced political activism. In the late 1930s, for example, she campaigned for the Ludlow Amendment, which would have required a national referendum for Congress to declare war. Although she rejected pacifism, she did not want young men to be drafted again "to fight on foreign soil in a foreign war for foreign interests" (Lane 1939a, 4). If the United States compromised its neutrality, Lane warned, a return to the barbarism of World War I was in store, "when mob-hates are loose and police power rules, when an unpopular opinion is a crime" (1939b, 4). Although Lane always distrusted Roosevelt's intentions and methods, she backed the U.S. war effort after the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. Confident in the ultimate triumph of a relatively free society over totalitarianism, she asked: "Win this war? Of course, Americans will win this war." The only possible impediments to success were New Deal bungling and bureaucratic hubris ([1943] 1984a, 262; see also Holtz 1993, 309–11).

When *The Discovery of Freedom* appeared, Lane was in the middle of the most remarkable but least-studied phase of her career as a columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, the most widely read American black newspaper of the time. Her weekly column appeared from 1942 to 1945 and reached several times more readers than anything else she wrote during this period. The circulation of a typical issue was 270,000 (Simmons 1998, 81), whereas the total print run of *The Discovery of Freedom* during Lane's lifetime was only about one thousand (Powell 1996). Via the mail and hand delivery by Pullman porters, the *Courier* gained distribution throughout the United States, including the South (Washburn 2006, 8).

When Lane began her association with the *Courier*, it was riding high. The man responsible for this success was the paper's founder, Robert L. Vann. Originally a Republican, Vann had recommended in 1932 that blacks abandon Hoover and turn their pictures of Lincoln to the wall. However, he gradually lost faith in Roosevelt because of the New Deal's neglect of racial justice, reliance on governmental centralization, and tax increases. Upon Vann's death in 1940, his wife took over as publisher (Buni 1974, 194, 316–20, 325). During World War II, a stimulant to circulation was the *Courier's* "Double V" Campaign for victory against fascism overseas and Jim Crow at home (Washburn 2006, 140–45).

Lane had first learned about the paper through a black woman who worked for her as domestic help. She liked what she saw and wrote a fan letter to Joel A. Rogers, one of the columnists. Rogers, a self-taught leading popularizer of black history, apparently was instrumental in getting her hired (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 31, 1942; Pinckney 2002, 14–21). Although Lane's previous writings were almost silent on

race, her interest in the *Courier* was not surprising. An obvious attraction was its columnists' ethnic and ideological diversity and the lively interchange between them. They included Ted Le Berthon, a white drama critic; Kumar Goshal, an Indian expatriate and independence activist; and S. I. Hayakawa, a Japanese American semanticist who later became a U.S. senator from California (Buni 1974, 141; Washburn 2006, 140–45).

The paper's star attraction, however, was the main editorial writer, George S. Schuyler (Williams 2007). Dubbed the "black H. L. Mencken" because of his scathing prose, he was well on his way to making the transition from independent socialist to libertarian-conservative. Schuyler, like Lane, was an unrelenting anti-Communist, always ready to denounce the party's infiltration and manipulation of black organizations and causes (Buni 1974, 137, 238). He fought many Roosevelt- and Truman-era policies, including continued segregation under the New Deal, the internment of Japanese Americans, and the dropping of the atomic bomb (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 30, 1943, May 29, 1943, August 18, 1945; essay by George Schuyler in Bean 2009b, 176–78).

From the start, Lane's enthusiasm and self-confidence were in full bloom in her columns. Rather than hiding or trimming her laissez-faire views, she seized the chance to promote them. A favorite method was to seek out topics of direct concern to the subscribers. Her maiden column glowingly characterized the "Double V" Campaign as part of the more general struggle for individual liberty throughout U.S. history. "Here, at least, is a place where I belong," she wrote. "Here are Americans who know the meaning of equality and freedom" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 31, 1942).

No libertarian has ever more creatively weaved together laissez-faire and antiracism than Lane. Her columns favored the centrality of the individual over artificial collective constructs such as race and class. Instead of indulging in the "ridiculous, idiotic and tragic fallacy of 'race,' [by] which a minority of the earth's population has deluded itself during the past century," all Americans should "renounce their race" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, March 27, 1943). Judging by skin color was comparable to the Communists' assignment of guilt or virtue on the basis of class. In her view, the "delusions" of race and class harkened to the "old English-feudal 'class' distinction" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 20, 1943). The collectivists, including the New Dealers, were to blame for filling "young minds with fantasies of 'races' and 'classes' and 'the masses,' all controlled by pagan gods, named Economic determinism or Society or Government" (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 27, 1943).

If the *Courier* was an exhilarating opportunity for Lane to advance the message of individualism and free enterprise, it also gave rise to some painful self-reflection. Although blacks had suffered from segregation, so too had "pale-skinned" folk like her. Before her exposure to the paper, she had wrongly "accepted the myth of 'the Negro race.' Dark-skinned persons served me, and I was kind and courteous to them, with the damnable kindness and courtesy for which there is no forgiveness." She had

heard of lynchings and other racial injustice, but had assumed they were isolated incidents. Reading the *Courier*, however, had shown her to be an “utter fool” and “a traitor to my country’s cause, the cause of human rights” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1943).

Lane asked her black readers to appreciate how hard it was for whites to overcome these old patterns of bigotry. From infancy, the schools had taught them the collectivist delusion “that whiteness is the ineradicable mark of superior race.” Half in jest, she said that “the progress of my people is slow. . . . The American White is generally a friendly fellow, good-hearted, generous, and meaning no harm to anyone. His errors, even his cruelties, come from the false beliefs instilled in him by his environment and training. He needs help to overcome them.” One way for blacks to “solve the White problem” was to mail copies of the paper to “more ignorant whites” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 6, 1943).

Lane’s libertarian approach led her to recast familiar issues, at least for readers of the *Courier*, as in her challenge to the self-proclaimed “friends of the Negro.” The modern liberal’s claim to friendship with an entire race was just as implausible to her as that of the leftist who pronounced himself a “lover of humanity.” Friendship is individual, not collective or impersonal, Lane argued. It is “an emotion felt by one person for another person; it is as unique and exclusive as love. Nobody can be a friend to anyone whom he never saw, nor whose very name he doesn’t know. . . . Try being a friend to musicians. It can’t be done” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1943). Thus, when Schuyler called for abolition of the term *Negro*, she heartily approved but conceded that doing so was not a decision for her to make. To millions, the word *Negro* represented “pride in achievement and the fellowship in the struggle for human rights,” and “[e]very pale-skinned American who attacks the Jim Crow wall finds himself in this dilemma: and it is a genuine dilemma” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 13, 1943).

Lane even anticipated in a small way the strategy of the lunch-counter sit-ins in the 1960s. She suggested that blacks emulate the crusade of “shy, sensitive, Victorian” women like her who had once asserted their right to smoke in restaurants: “we never questioned that individuals are responsible for any injustice that they submit to. So we did not submit. We smoked in public places. . . . A waiter rushed to your table and contemptuously told you to leave. . . . You put out the cigarette and doggedly choked down some food from your plate. The next time you ate, you did it again” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 19, 1944). Through this method, these women had worn down a prejudice bit by bit.

When promoting her vision of a free society, Lane highlighted black success stories to illustrate broader themes of entrepreneurship, freedom, and creativity. One column compared the accomplishments of Robert L. Vann and Henry Ford. Vann’s rags-to-riches story illustrated the benefits in a “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,” and Henry Ford’s showed how a poor

mechanic can create “hundreds of thousands of jobs . . . putting even beggars into cars” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 30 and November 27, 1943).

Lane championed free-market capitalism but did not necessarily trust the capitalists. She blamed the “Big Boys” for doing more than anyone else to destroy capitalism; “they can get themselves murdered in cellars for all I’d care.” Pro–New Deal insiders, such as multimillionaire Joseph Kennedy, were anathema because they profited from political connections. She charged that other capitalists had undermined the cause of free markets over the years by bankrolling far leftist causes. Others, no doubt, yearned for an “American Hitler,” even though if they got their wish, he would “have them tortured in American concentration camps” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, December 25, 1943, and July 1, 1944).

Lane’s main goal, however, was not to glorify the individual entrepreneur, but to illustrate the benefits of “uncontrolled” free markets for ordinary people. Proponents of central state direction, she argued, did not realize the ability of decentralized markets to bring order out of chaos. A free economy was “NOT planned by a few persons and NOT enforced by the police”; it was instead “planned by all the individuals and controlled by the free choices of all the individuals working, selling, buying and consuming material things” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 27, 1944, capitalization in original).

Although Lane wanted this planning accomplished through “laissez faire . . . liberty and individual initiative,” she feared that most Americans had passed the point of no return (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 10, 1944). Over time, the habit of seeking security in the New Deal and wartime bureaucracy was becoming harder to break: “It’s human to be safe and freedom isn’t safety; freedom demands self-reliance and courage.” In proclaiming the “four freedoms” (freedom of speech and expression, freedom of religion, freedom from want, and freedom from fear), Roosevelt had misunderstood the fundamental meaning of the term *freedom*. Freedom was not a “freedom to” or a “freedom from” anything. According to Lane, “Freedom is self-control; no more, no less” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 20, 1945).

The increasing intrusiveness of state welfare and public education, according to Lane, had undermined freedom as self-control by chaining Americans to the whims of politicians. As an alternative to the welfare state, she put her trust in “free mutual associations” and “uniquely American . . . neighborliness” as the best solution to problems such as poverty (*Pittsburgh Courier*, July 17, 1943). Past experience also provided similar models for meeting educational needs. During the early nineteenth century, Americans had created “a marvelous variety of private schools, suited to every demand and every income.” This system worked in tandem with local public schools “directly controlled by tax-payers in each district, and open to all children.” Instead of continuing this combination, Americans had substituted the German philosophy of centralized schooling that the “child belongs to the State.” The resultant high taxes left the middle class unable to send their children to private schools. Their only choice was to rely on a monopoly system in which the state

dictated curricula, grades, teachers, and pedagogical methods (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 27, 1945).

Like Ayn Rand, Lane held that excessive altruism was inimical to both individualism and liberty and that “[s]elfishness is the very basis of human worth.” She thought that those who tried to live through the lives of others were debasing themselves. Her views on this subject also informed her affinity for individualist feminism. Just about everyone, she observed, knew the sad case of a “daughter so wholly devoted to a parent, a girl who lives so completely for her sweetheart, or a wife for her husband, that as you say ‘she hasn’t a soul to call her own.’” Worse still was the widespread tendency to admire those “who live ‘unselfishly’ for Humanity, spending all their time and energy in doing good (as they see good) to others.” These men and women were generally parasites who took their “food and clothing from men who work to produce clothing and food” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 15, 1944).

Although her home was in Danbury, Connecticut, Lane sought to be a team player at the paper. She often referred to the other columnists, both to praise them and to offer gentle criticism. She also attended such Pittsburgh functions as the launching of the SS *Robert L. Vann*, a liberty ship (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1943). When Joel A. Rogers suggested that soldiers, students, and others form “writing clubs,” Lane immediately offered her services. She volunteered that she had “some small success in helping a few youngsters to get started on the right track in fiction writing.” After praising Lane’s writing skills as unexcelled, Rogers listed her Danbury post office box and urged readers to drop her a line. It is unclear if anyone took her up on this offer (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 30, 1945).

Despite the kind words between them, Rogers, like the other columnists, was not always sure what to make of Lane. He wrote a glowing review of *The Discovery of Freedom*, but he showed little understanding of what Lane was all about. He appears to have regarded her as a fellow modern liberal, and she must have found it difficult to restrain herself when he said that her magnum opus had showed that “property has conspired more than anything else to deprive man of freedom” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, April 24, 1943).

Although Lane was not about to second-guess a positive review, she was unable to hold back when Rogers wrote that black authors had an obligation first to decide whether they were writing for blacks or for whites. Lane politely retorted that he had misunderstood the purpose of literature, which is to tell the “truths of human life.” There “is no more the idea of Negro novel, by a Negro, than there is in the notion of a blond novel by a blond.” Although Margaret Mitchell was a brunette, her motivation and purpose was not to produce a novel for brunettes. For the same reasons, it was a fallacy “to imagine that there can be proletarian literature, Negro literature, socially-conscious literature, propaganda fiction written to serve a cause” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 5, 1944).

Although Rogers did not take Lane’s bait, Manet Fowler, another black columnist at the *Pittsburgh Courier* and an anthropologist, had something to say. Fowler

charged that Lane had wrongly assumed that it was possible for blacks to ignore the reality created for them by a racist society. Hence, they had an obligation to assume “their share in the larger battle,” and “they MUST learn about, write about and talk about [things] as Negroes—since things are that way.” According to Fowler, Lane had undermined her own case by the selection of Margaret Mitchell as an illustration. Was there, Fowler asked, a more egregious example than *Gone with the Wind* of “propaganda for the Old Order in the South?” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, March 11, 1944, March 18, 1944, capitalization in original).

Lane took Fowler’s challenge as an opportunity to elaborate. Even though agreeing that any “reality” was a proper medium for fiction, including politics, science, “fame, class, power, race,” she reiterated that “these are only externals to the inner meanings which it is fiction’s function to express.” The main concern of Tolstoy’s *War and Peace*, for example, was not the lives of Russians or the backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars, but rather the “human soul. Everything else in that packed novel is as external to that inner meaning as the clothes his characters wear” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1944).

Though Lane emphasized the exploration of human truths as crucial, she acknowledged that the writer’s background has a close bearing on the quality of fiction. It is impossible to write well “about people I cannot know.” Thus, she could tell a competent story about parents and children in Harlem and Iceland and be “true to fatherhood, motherhood, and childhood,” but she would never be true “to the sights and sounds and habits and phrases of Harlem or Iceland.” She agreed that white authors had utterly failed to capture the lives of blacks. As a result, ordinary whites knew them only as “Jemima on the radio (good soul!),” Octavus Roy Cohen’s stereotyped characters in the *Saturday Evening Post*, or the wrongheaded “Victorian ideas of woman’s honor” that encouraged lynching (*Pittsburgh Courier*, April 1, 1944).

Although few people were as radically pro-laissez-faire as Lane, the effort to combine free markets, individualism, and antiracism was not highly exceptional. Classical-liberal ideas were critically important to both abolitionism and the history of the civil rights movement (Bean 2009a, 4–5, 7–11). Moorfield Storey, the founding president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, was a champion of the gold standard, free trade, and minimal economic regulation. Oswald Garrison Villard, the organization’s first treasurer, had a similar background (Beito and Beito 2000; Moreno 2007, 86–87).

There is no evidence that Lane had any direct influence on her intended audience or for that matter on broader political discourse among blacks. However, individualist and small-government ideas in a broader sense were not alien to the *Pittsburgh Courier*’s readers. Although few went as far as Lane, blacks from all backgrounds throughout U.S. history had long echoed her celebration of self-reliance, individualism, entrepreneurship, and disdain of government paternalism. When asked what should be done with emancipated slaves, Frederick Douglass had replied: “Do

nothing with them; mind your own business and let them mind theirs. Your *doing* with them is their greatest misfortune.” Booker T. Washington had later urged blacks to embrace thrift, investment, and the work ethic rather than rely on outsiders. Even Washington’s great rival W. E. B. DuBois had championed free markets as a “black Mugwump” in the 1890s (for all, see Moreno 2007, 37–41). During the early 1930s, Representative Oscar De Priest regularly denounced Roosevelt’s New Deal programs. Historian Dennis S. Nordin calls De Priest “an ideologue wedded to libertarianism . . . believing in protection of property owners and rights of businesses. Big government and public welfare went against his views and instincts” (1997, 57).

At about the time Lane was writing for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, individualist black novelist Zora Neale Hurston was advancing a remarkably similar critique of racism. The parallels in their writings were so close that it is often impossible to tell them apart. As with Lane, a defining feature of Hurston’s individualism was a rejection of race distinctions in either a positive or a negative sense. A passage in her autobiography *Dust Tracks on a Road* recalls that bitter encounters had convinced her to shun “class or race prejudice, those scourges of humanity,” and instead to receive “the richer gift of individualism.” For Hurston, race pride is just another facet of racism, a “sapping vice” that holds blacks back. Worse, it makes them vulnerable to the schemes of the “racial cardsharps” who obsess over past wrongs (Hurston 1984, 323, 325, 331).

Many of Lane’s columns highlighted how the web of wartime controls threatened individual liberty. She was ready to applaud, or at least to express sympathy for, any hints that Americans still had a spirit of rebellion. When the United Mine Workers broke a no-strike pledge in 1943, she considered this action a hopeful, though poorly timed, sign that a union was “doggedly refusing to submit to tyranny.” By standing up to the federal government, the miners were returning to the tradition of Samuel Gompers, the relatively antistatist founder of the American Federation of Labor, who “wouldn’t touch politics with a 10-foot pole” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, January 30, 1943).

Twice during the war her dissenting attitudes crossed over into direct action. The first time was in early 1943 in response to a broadcast featuring Samuel Grafton, a contributor to the *New Republic* and a New Dealer. He provoked her by combining praise for Social Security and a call to send American teachers to educate Germans about democracy. Lane scribbled a postcard to Grafton that if American teachers said “to German children, ‘We believe in social security’ the children will ask, ‘Then why did you fight Germany?’ All these ‘social security’ laws are German, instituted by Bismarck and expanded by Hitler.” In a final flourish, she added that Americans still did not want to be “taxed for their own good and bossed by bureaucrats” (qtd. in Holtz 1993, 316–17; see also Walsh to Special Agent in Charge, March 15, 1943, in U.S. Department of Justice 1943).

This protestation would have ended the matter had not somebody who considered Lane’s postcard subversive informed the FBI’s regional office. A state trooper, sent at the behest of the office, came to Lane’s house to check into it. When during

the encounter the trooper said that he did not like her attitude, she was ready to pounce: "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?" After some more back and forth, Lane asked the flustered trooper if the postcard was subversive. His affirmative answer brought the retort: "Then I'm subversive as hell!" The trooper promptly backed off, promising not to pursue the matter because Lane was a writer. Lane gave him no relief, however, declaring that it was her right as an American citizen, not only as a writer, to speak as she pleased. The trooper slinked away, but Lane was just getting warmed up. She publicly demanded the name of the person who had informed on her and asked if the federal government was censoring the mail of Americans (*Oakland Tribune*, August 18, 1943; *Zanesville Signal*, August 11, 1943; Lane 1943, 1–2). Her subsequent letter to J. Edgar Hoover promised that when "an investigator puts so much as the toe of his boot across the line protecting any American citizen's right to free thought and free speech, I regard it as that citizen's duty to refuse to permit this, and to raise a loud yell" (Lane to J. Edgar Hoover, September 9, 1943, in U.S. Department of Justice 1943).

Lane prepared an account of the incident (curiously written in the third person), *What Is This—the Gestapo?* (1943), for the National Economic Council, an Old Right organization, which gave it wide circulation. Newspapers across the country, including those in her home state, took Lane's side, and Roger Baldwin, the head of the American Civil Liberties Union, wrote to Hoover on her behalf (*New Haven Journal Courier*, August 11, 1943; Roger Baldwin to Hoover, August 31, 1943, in U.S. Department of Justice 1943; *Delta Democrat-Times*, September 2, 1943). An editorial in the *Chicago Tribune*, the key national voice of the Old Right, was especially hard-hitting. It urged Congress to "question Att. Gen. Biddle and his subordinate, J. Edgar Hoover. What do they think they are? The answer appears to be Himmler" (*Chicago Tribune*, August 8, 1943). Although Hoover did his best to defend his bureau publicly, he privately characterized the original inquiry as "ridiculous," suggesting that if "we haven't something more important and pressing to do we ought to cut personnel" (Hoover to Baldwin, September 3, 1943, and Memorandum for Mr. Nichols, August 14, 1943, in U.S. Department of Justice 1943).

Lane's second foray into direct action was a one-woman protest against rationing. Her method was to become almost self-sufficient on her three-acre farm in Connecticut. "If a person admits government has the right to say if he can eat," she declared, "there is no liberty left." She raised her own hogs, cows, and chickens, grew her own vegetables, made eight hundred jars of preserves, and used honey as a substitute for sugar. Her only money income was the \$60 per month she received for her columns in the *Courier*. She boasted that self-sufficiency allowed her to earn a living by writing fiction. It also left her income so low, she happily advertised, that she no longer had to pay taxes to the federal government (*Sheboygan Press*, April 4, 1944).

This time relatively few people came forward to defend her effort. The critics were especially upset that one of her stated goals was to evade taxes. Complaining was

one thing, but striking at the lifeblood of the war effort (even in this small way) was another. Walter Winchell, then at the height of his fame as a radio commentator and gossip columnist, indignantly opined that the boycotted taxes also funded the American military, which protected “Americans such as Rose Wilder Lane” (*Lincoln Sunday Journal and Star*, April 9, 1944; *Troy Record*, April 10, 1944). Others, who were not necessarily hostile, dismissed her campaign as quixotic. Schuyler, who was rapidly moving in Lane’s ideological direction, wrote that although many “will sympathize with her, few will follow her. Most people regard taxes as an unavoidable evil which none can really escape until death” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, April 15, 1944).

Despite this general lack of support, Lane struggled on and extended her personal campaign into the postwar years. In 1946, the *Chicago Tribune* reported in a sympathetic story that she was still largely self-sufficient (*Chicago Tribune*, October 26, 1946). According to Lane, governments had tried to fix prices “since before the big flood and it’s never worked.” Her self-sufficiency also freed her from paying taxes to support government agencies she opposed, such as the War Writers Board (*Sheboygan Press*, April 4, 1944; *Kansas City Star*, October 25, 1946).

By being so vocal in her private rebellion, Lane was engaging in risky behavior, as she must have known. Despite the conflict’s reputation as the “good war,” protection of civil liberties was often shaky (Steele 1999, 143–72, 223–34). Roosevelt had launched a crackdown against “isolationists” on the political right. Government leaders relied on the same methods of censorship, character assassination, and guilt by association later to be deployed against Communists during the Second Red Scare. The anti-isolationist scare culminated in 1944, when the U.S. attorney general staged an ill-fated show trial of more than thirty administration critics on charges of promoting sedition in the armed forces. Although the defendants constituted an unsavory lot, mostly cranks and anti-Semites, the trumped-up nature of the case inspired understandable fears of a more general crackdown on the administration’s more mainstream critics. The chief publicist of the anti-isolationist scare was Avedis Derounian (a.k.a. John Roy Carlson), the author of highly publicized exposés of noninterventionists. The first of these books, *Undercover*, topped the nonfiction best-seller list for 1943 (Ribuffo 1983, 178–224; Moser 2005 130–33, 151–65). Under a pseudonym, Derounian wrote a letter to Lane asking her to explain her views. Lane, of course, was always ready to oblige the request of an apparently sincere neophyte, but her lengthy reply, as described in his second book, *The Plotters*, published in 1946, mystified Derounian, who concluded that it “made little sense. Her extreme individualism and extreme laissez faire attitude have seemingly alienated her from events in this world” (Carlson 1946, 282).

Although Lane often allied herself with the Old Right, her foreign-policy views did not fit into any of the usual categories. In her own way, she was an extreme internationalist. Moreover, unlike many on the right, she rejected protectionism as robbery to enrich a few special interests. To her, business owners who championed high tariffs for their personal benefit, including the National Association of Manufacturers,

were no less “socialistic” than the New Dealers. But she also differed from liberal internationalists in her disdain for the proposed United Nations, regarding it as tainted for giving legitimacy to dictatorial and authoritarian regimes (*Pittsburgh Courier*, December 23, 1944).

Her animus against the United Nations notwithstanding, she did not oppose international political ties. Instead of proposing a new “world-peace plan,” however, she preferred to rely on an old one: the U.S. Constitution. Under its provisions, she pointed out, any group of sixty thousand people could join the United States if they formed a government that did not interfere “with the liberty of any honest citizen and [that was] deprived of power to hinder trade or to wage war.” If the United States let this process unfold, “[t]here’s no reason at all why it shouldn’t cover the whole earth” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1943). By contrast, the United Nations was going to be a flop because it depended on failed, old-world military methods. If the United Nations was the only available option for world peace, she added, “give me strychnine” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1943).

At a time when faith in government planning was unusually robust, Lane was doggedly optimistic about the ultimate triumph of libertarian ideas. A 1945 column describes the certainty of a future “laissez faire world” where “nearly everyone will know that all men are born equal and endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights.” To those who doubted this possibility, she asked, “Who could have dreamed the United States of America?” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, May 26, 1945).

Only a few months later, in September 1945, events put Lane’s optimism to a severe test when her affiliation with the *Courier* came to an abrupt end. She later called this termination the only time that she had been fired from a job, and she suspected that her political views had something to do with it. Toward the end, she certainly gave no hint of trimming her sails. In her final column, originally intended as the first installment in a series, she used Danbury, Connecticut, as an illustration to attack zoning (*Pittsburgh Courier*, September 8, 1945). Under zoning, she wrote, an individual has “no legal right to live in [his] own house” but is “merely to be permitted to occupy it.” Is it possible, Lane wondered, that Joseph Goebbels had been right to predict that the war’s winners would end up adopting National Socialism’s economic principles? (*Danbury News-Times*, July 23, 1945). The loss of her column was personally upsetting, but not a great financial blow. For the first time, the sales of her mother’s books were beginning to give her a comfortable, steady income (Holtz 1993, 325).

Despite being fired, Lane was not completely finished with the *Courier*. In 1948, she wrote a letter to the editor that reiterated a major theme in her columns. She praised letters in a previous issue that supported abolition of the term *Negro* and other racial references. For Lane, such a campaign was necessary because judging people “by their ‘races’ which did not exist” conflicted with the “revolutionary American principle of individualism” as embodied in the Declaration of Independence. The United States had no hope of achieving its stated ideals, she stressed, unless every

American “destroys segregation in his own mind” (*Pittsburgh Courier*, February 28, 1948).

In the last two decades of her life, Lane rarely wrote again about racial issues or referred to her years at the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Instead, she concentrated on playing a hands-on mentoring role in launching the *libertarian movement*, a term she apparently coined. She also wrote book reviews for the National Economic Council and then for the Volker Fund, an organization from which the Institute for Humane Studies later emerged. Despite the similarities in her views and Ayn Rand’s, the two had at best a strained relationship (Doherty 2007, 18, 131–32, 185). Although never an orthodox Christian, Lane, unlike Rand, greatly appreciated the positive contributions of the shared “Jewish-Moslem-Christian” tradition (*Pittsburgh Courier*, June 26, 1943). She also kept her distance from William F. Buckley and his new *National Review*. His version of conservatism struck her as an aristocratic and “reactionary” holdover of the philosophy “that a commonwealth is a mystic Being, that Governments are ordained by God” (qtd. in Holtz 1993, 333, 345).

Much more to her liking was the libertarian Freedom School headed by Robert LeFevre, a charismatic radio commentator and businessman. LeFevre was later the inspiration for the character Professor Bernardo de la Paz in Robert Heinlein’s science fiction novel *The Moon Is a Harsh Mistress*. At one point, Lane almost emptied her modest banking account to keep the struggling Freedom School afloat. She also guest-lectured there. During the postwar period, Roger MacBride, a future Libertarian Party presidential candidate, came under her wing as a kind of surrogate grandson and her designated heir. Another admirer was economist Hans Sennholz, who was later the president of the Foundation for Economic Education, a libertarian educational organization. Lane had few political heroes, but Barry Goldwater’s presidential candidacy inspired her to hope for a revival of free-market and individualist ideas (Holtz 1993, 343, 345, 347–48).

At age seventy-eight in 1965, Lane jumped at the opportunity to travel to Vietnam as a correspondent for *Woman’s Day* under the auspices of the Department of Defense. Her articles were typically upbeat, stressing the Vietnamese people’s proud traditions and resilience. These articles also showed that a belief in the domino theory had replaced her previous advocacy of noninterventionism. “If South Vietnam goes, then all Southeast Asia will go communist,” she declared. “And then will come Australia, the Philippines and Hawaii. . . . And that means the United States!” Lane was scheduled for another trip overseas when she passed away in her sleep in 1968 (all from Holtz 1993, 355–59, 367, 371).

The past two decades have brought a new appreciation of Lane as a political activist and as a ghostwriter of *The Little House on the Prairie* books, but her columns for the *Pittsburgh Courier* have not received their due. Her work for this newspaper represented the most ambitious effort of any author during this period to promote laissez-faire ideas to a black audience. Through her columns, she often proved creative in linking her philosophical beliefs to current issues of major concern to her readers,

including segregation, civil disobedience, entrepreneurship, and the struggle for liberty, both overseas and at home.

References

- Bean, Jonathan. 2009a. "Introduction: Civil Rights and Classical Liberalism." In *Race and Liberty in America: The Essential Reader*, edited by Jonathan Bean, 1–12. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- , ed. 2009b. *Race and Liberty in America: The Essential Reader*. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Beito, David T., and Linda Royster Beito. 2000. Gold Democrats and the Decline of Classical Liberalism, 1896–1900. *The Independent Review* 4, no. 4 (Spring): 555–75.
- Buni, Andrew. 1974. *Robert L. Vann of the Pittsburgh Courier: Politics and Black Journalism*. Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press.
- Carlson, John Roy. 1946. *The Plotters*. New York: E. P. Dutton.
- Cox, Stephen. 2004. *The Woman and the Dynamo: Isabel Paterson and the Idea of America*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- Dittmer, John. 1995. *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Doherty, Brian. 2007. *Radicals for Capitalism: A Freewheeling History of the Modern American Libertarian Movement*. New York: Public Affairs.
- Fleegler, Robert L. 2006. Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938–1947. *Journal of Mississippi History* (Spring): 1–27.
- Holtz, William. 1993. *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Hurston, Zora Neale. 1984. *Dust Tracks on a Road: An Autobiography*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Lane, Rose Wilder. 1936. *Give Me Liberty*. New York: Longmans, Green.
- . 1939a. War! What Women in American Can Do to Prevent It. *Woman's Day* 2 (April): 4–5.
- . 1939b. We Who Have Sons. *Woman's Day* 2 (December): 4–5.
- . 1943. *What Is This—the Gestapo?* Chicago: National Economic Council.
- . [1943] 1984a. *The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority*. New York: Laissez Faire Books.
- . [1938] 1984b. *Free Land*. Winnipeg, Canada: Bison Books.
- . [1932] 1985. *Let the Hurricane Roar*. New York: Harper Trophy.
- Moreno, Paul D. 2007. *Black Americans and Organized Labor: A New History*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Moser, John E. 2005. *Right Turn: John T. Flynn and the Transformation of American Liberalism*. New York: New York University Press.

- Nordin, Dennis S. 1997. *The New Deal's Black Congressman: A Life of Arthur Wergs Mitchell*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- Paterson, Isabel. [1943] 1993. *The God of the Machine*. New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction.
- Pinckney, Darryl. 2002. *Out There: Mavericks of Black Literature*. New York: Basic Books.
- Powell, Jim. 1996. Rose Wilder Lane, Isabel Paterson, and Ayn Rand: Three Women Who Inspired the Modern Libertarian Movement. *The Freeman: Ideas on Liberty* 46 (May). Available at: <http://www.fee.org/publications/the-freeman/article.asp?aid=3345>. Accessed July 7, 2007.
- Ribuffo, Leo P. 1983. *The Old Christian Right: The Protestant Far Right from the Great Depression to the Cold War*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.
- Simmons, Charles A. 1998. *The African American Press: With Special Reference to the Four Newspapers, 1827-1965*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland.
- Steele, Richard W. 1999. *Free Speech in the Good War*. New York: St. Martin's.
- U.S. Department of Justice. 1943. Lane, Rose Wilder. FBI file. Washington, D.C.
- Washburn, Patrick S. 2006. *The African American Newspaper: Voice of Freedom*. Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press.
- Williams, Oscar R. 2007. *George S. Schuyler: Portrait of a Black Conservative*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press.

SUBSCRIBE NOW AND RECEIVE A FREE BOOK!



“*The Independent Review* does not accept pronouncements of government officials nor the conventional wisdom at face value.”

—**JOHN R. MACARTHUR**, Publisher, *Harper’s*

“*The Independent Review* is excellent.”

—**GARY BECKER**, Nobel Laureate in Economic Sciences

Subscribe to [The Independent Review](#) and receive a free book of your choice such as *Liberty in Peril: Democracy and Power in American History*, by Randall G. Holcombe.

Thought-provoking and educational, [The Independent Review](#) is blazing the way toward informed debate. This quarterly journal offers leading-edge insights on today’s most critical issues in economics, healthcare, education, the environment, energy, defense, law, history, political science, philosophy, and sociology.

Student? Educator? Journalist? Business or civic leader? Engaged citizen? This journal is for YOU!



Order today for more **FREE** book options

SUBSCRIBE

The Independent Review is now available digitally on mobile devices and tablets via the Apple/Android App Stores and Magzter. Subscriptions and single issues start at \$2.99. [Learn More.](#)

