



THE DISCOVERY OF FREEDOM

ROSE WILDER LANE

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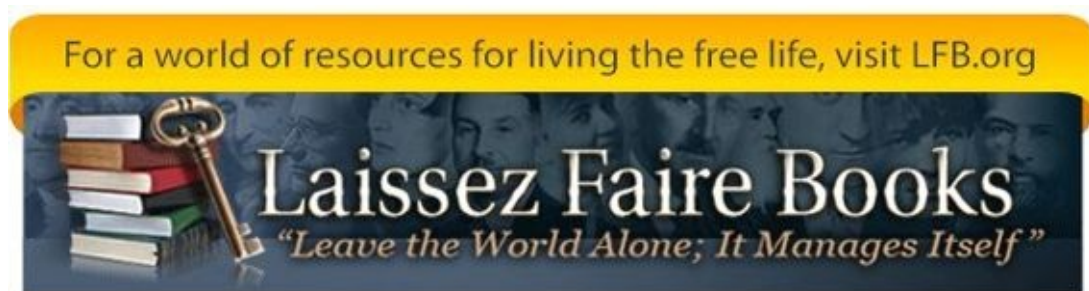


THE DISCOVERY OF FREEDOM

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Man's Struggle Against Authority

ROSE WILDER LANE



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Editorial Preface by Jeffrey A. Tucker

People schooled in the libertarian idea are prepared for the thesis that freedom is productive and protective of human rights, whereas despotism is neither. Many years ago, I first glanced through Rose Wilder Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom* and assumed that it was an eloquent statement of known truths, so surely there was nothing much to learn here. Maybe it was right for beginners.

In my second reading, some ten years later, I was struck by the depth and sweep of her argument and how it goes far beyond conventions. The problem, as she sees it, is not just the state, but rather the universal penchant for repressing the human spirit. The state is only the most egregious form of authority.

Finally, on my third reading, I got it. This is a supremely radical and challenging work, one that essentially turns the world upside down. Nearly every expert on the topic of the history of civilization will tell you that the regime is what makes the difference between whether a nation rises or falls.

Lane takes another view entirely. She says it is not the regime but the absence of the regime that sets the human spirit in flight and permits it to create and make beautiful things out of the uncivilized world of the state of nature. She pictures the whole history of humanity as a struggle to be free of authority — not just this or that authority but all authority.

The problem as she sees it is that men have a penchant to want to rule others. This expresses itself in every area of life in which we allow it to happen. In the voluntary sector of society, we are at least free to flee the impositions, and flee we must if we hope to create and build and prosper. But when authority grabs hold of the law, matters change, and we are no longer free to get away. That's when the human spirit is most threatened with death.

Lane tracks the struggle from the ancient world through modern times. The first attempt she identifies with begins with the prophet Abraham, who asserts a law independent of civil authority and yet serves as a basis for judging all authority. This culminates with the arrival of the Christian faith, which heralded the individual and recognized his rights, not by virtue of membership in a tribe or political unit, but universally by virtue of one's very humanity. This attempt was subverted, however, with the union of church and state.

The second attempt that she chronicles will astound every reader without exception. She marks it with the life of Muhammad, founder of Islam. Here was another attempt to free humanity from the chains of earthly authority, and the results (as she sees them) were the flowering of civilization in art, commerce, science, and scholarship. It is through Islam that Christendom discovered the writings of the ancients, derived its number system, found its technology, and cast off its forming bias against commercial dealings.

It goes without saying that this section, probably more than any in the book, will come as a revelation to readers raised in the current epoch, in which we Americans are constantly told about the inherent dangers of Islam. Why don't we know about this side of history? Lane's explanation is rather plausible: Our official history is Christocentric in the extreme, and we are thus denied much information about the period between the 7th and 12th centuries — a gigantic swath of time in which most of the action took place outside the parameters of Christendom.

But of course, we know what happened to Islam. Its free spirit didn't last; it became consumed by war and war preparations — and finally relented to authoritarian institutions. Its promise died.

What is the third great epoch? It began in the New World with the American colonies. In this section, Lane's prose soars to all-new heights. Her love of America has nothing to do with the

tingoism we know all too well. It is a love of individualism, experimentation, risk, entrepreneurship, creativity, reward, and the inspiration that comes with building a new civilization itself. What a hymn to our history she writes!

And note the date. This was written in wartime. There were censorship rules at the time, things you could and couldn't say. What might she have written about war authoritarianism that she did not dare to write? I think we can imagine. In fact, you can read between the lines. She saw America betraying its history, principles, and destiny. And what would she write today?

There is so much wisdom in this work, so much to challenge and surprise us. Lane was learned, passionate, and remarkably creative, and her prose is that of a well-honed professional writer and researcher. This book is a gift. Its lessons are for our time and all time.

Foreword by Wendy McElroy

Rose Wilder Lane (1886–1968) is famously the daughter of Laura Ingalls Wilder, whose childhood memories provided a series of children’s books that are collectively known as the *Little House on the Prairie*.

Within individualist circles, Lane is best remembered for her powerful essay “[Give Me Liberty](#)” (1936) and especially for her nonfiction book *The Discovery of Freedom: Man’s Struggle Against Authority* (1943). In his historical overview entitled *Radicals for Capitalism*, Brian Doherty refers to Lane as one of the “three furies” of the libertarian movement, alongside her contemporaries Ayn Rand and Isabel Paterson. If so, Lane was the soft-spoken “fury” whose claim to that name springs from the passion for freedom she inspired in others.

Some have compared *The Discovery of Freedom* to a novel because of its flowing and captivating style. If so, then Authority is cast as the villain of history who pursues Freedom through time for nefarious purposes. In short, Lane chronicles the struggle between freedom and authority that has defined human history. In this, she foreshadowed the approach of the libertarian theorist Murray Rothbard, who viewed all of human history as a contest between liberty and power, from which liberty emerged as the irresistible force. He wrote, “While the short-run prospects for liberty at home and abroad may seem dim, the proper attitude ... is that of unquenchable long-run optimism.”

Lane’s description of authority through time is straightforward:

They replace the priest by a king, the king by an oligarchy, the oligarchy by a despot, the despot by an aristocracy, the aristocrats by a majority, the majority by a tyrant, the tyrant by oligarchs, the oligarchs by aristocrats, the aristocrats by a king, the king by a parliament, the parliament by a dictator, the dictator by a king, the king by ... there’s six thousand years of it, in every language.

In her introduction to *The Nature of Man and His Government* — the magnum opus of libertarian educator Robert LeFevre — Lane spelled out the fundamental issues that defined the struggle between freedom and a constantly mutating but constantly the same authority:

The basic question, on which the answers to all other questions depend, is: What is the nature of man? The only political question is: What is the nature of the institution named “Government”? It is a simple fact that all men’s future for centuries is being determined by the answers that Americans give to these fundamental questions. We have it in our power to make a new world. There has not been such a responsibility since the time of Adam.

Like Rothbard, Lane believed freedom to be a historically irresistible force. The reason? America. In the United States, at long last, individual rights and self-sufficiency had been allowed to flourish. There, man’s creativity had triumphed over authority and, so, allowed private property, civil rights, and representative government to surge forward. Lane believed America was the hope of the world. Although *The Discovery of Freedom* was published while the United States was mired in World War II, and the outcome was not yet clear, the book’s final paragraph declares,

Win this war? Of course Americans will win this war. This is only a war; there is more than that. Five generations of Americans have led the Revolution, and the time is coming when Americans will set this whole world free.

The Discovery of Freedom's first print run from the John Day Company was only 1,000 copies. Nevertheless Lane's book was influential. It became what is known today as a "cult classic" circulating hand-to-hand within sympathetic political circles.

The libertarian theorist Albert Jay Nock stated that Lane's book had "shown the male world of the period how to think fundamentally.... [E]very shot goes straight to the centre."

The prominent journalist John Chamberlain credited *The Discovery of Freedom* as one reason he converted from socialism to "an older American philosophy" of individual rights. Chamberlain wrote

If it had been left to pusillanimous males probably nothing much would have happened.... Indeed, it was three women — [Isabel] Paterson, Rose Wilder Lane, and Ayn Rand — who, with scornful side glances at the male business community, had decided to rekindle a faith in an older American philosophy. There wasn't an economist among them. And none of them was a Ph.D.

I had already absorbed the message of Albert Jay Nock's *Our Enemy the State* and Hilaire [sic] Belloc's *The Servile State*, but it was Isabel Paterson's *The God of the Machine*, Rose Lane's *The Discovery of Freedom*, and Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead* and (later) *Atlas Shrugged* that turned Nock's conception of social power into detailed reality. These books made it plain that if life was to be something more than a naked scramble for government favors, a new attitude toward the producer must be created.

Much of Lane's appeal came from the very fact that she was *not* an academic who rebutted the Keynesian doctrines of her time in economic terms. She was a populist who spoke from the heart in a sweeping manner with anecdotes that both empowered ideas and brought them down to a common level; she painted boldly on a large canvas.

The Discovery of Freedom opens with the words "Here lies a planet, whirling in sunlit space...." and ends with the words, "Americans will set this whole world free." Indeed, Lane's extreme emphasis on individual expression led her to question her friend and contemporary Ayn Rand on the atypical style in which Rand's novelette *Anthem* was written. In a recent introduction to a new edition of *Anthem*, Rand herself noted, "To Rose Wilder Lane, in answer to a question, [Ayn Rand] classified [*Anthem*] officially as a 'poem.'"

Despite being warmly received, a second edition of *The Discovery of Freedom* did not appear until 1971. Lane herself was dissatisfied with the book, and so she refused to grant permission to reprint it during her lifetime. Until the second and posthumous edition appeared, Lane's ideas were popularized largely through a 1947 book entitled *The Mainspring of Human Progress* by Henry Grady Weaver, which drew openly from Lane's work. In a 1999 readers poll conducted by The Modern Library on the most influential books, *The Mainspring of Human Progress* was rated 48th; *The Discovery of Freedom* was 67th.

Rose Wilder Lane has found her place in intellectual history as an integral but unique voice within the libertarian "Old Right." She stands on the same stage as Ayn Rand, John Flynn, Garet Garrett, Henry Hazlitt, Albert Jay Nock, H.L. Mencken, Isabel Paterson, Leonard Read, and Hilaire Belloc. *The*

Discovery of Freedom has found its niche as an early and passionate celebration of individual freedom and of man's creativity. LeFevre called it "one of the most influential books of the 20th century," and Rothbard included it on a list of books that he recommended Arno Press reprint as the essential library of liberty.

But Lane was much more than merely the author of *The Discovery of Freedom*. As the book implies from its style and its rich personal stories, Lane was a novelist, a world-traveled journalist, an accomplished lecturer, and an indomitable activist for freedom.

The Woman Who Was Rose Wilder Lane

Born on December 5, 1886, in De Smet, Dakota Territory, Lane was the first child of Almanzo Wilder and Laura Ingalls Wilder, and the only child to survive into adulthood. The latter fact testifies to the harsh life in the homesteader's cabin on her parents' farm, which was plagued by drought, bad crops, and family illness. Economic hardship caused the family to move several times during Lane's childhood, finally settling on a dairy and fruit farm named Rocky Ridge Farm in Mansfield, Missouri.

Lane had attended school in De Smet and then completed the eighth grade in Mansfield. Her schooling was a rocky road. In later diary entries and notes, the intellectually incorrigible Lane described how she sometimes refused to attend school because of conflicts with the teacher. In 1901 she completed the ninth grade in Crowley, Louisiana, while living with an aunt. There she displayed the depth of her intellect by compressing three years of Latin classes into one year of learning.

But the family had no money for her further education. Returning to Mansfield after graduating, Lane learned telegraphy from the father of a school friend who was a railroad stationmaster. With this skill, she set out into the wider world and became what was then called "a bachelor working girl." By her eighteenth birthday she was working a daily shift at Western Union and then another shift in a hotel. The highly marketable skill allowed Lane to travel widely from Missouri to Indiana and California over the next five years.

In his biography *The Ghost in the Little House: A Life of Rose Wilder Lane*, William Holt comments,

Much of her emotional energy, as well as considerable time and money, were invested in trying to separate herself from a bondage to her mother, to live by values and in a style that in essential ways repudiated her upbringing.

In later life, however, Lane returned to her home in the Ozarks and welcomed the values she had abandoned earlier.

In 1909, Lane married Clare Gillette Lane — a traveling salesman and sometimes newspaperman. In 1910, Lane gave birth to a son who either died as a baby or was stillborn. Later in life, she wrote to friends who were mourning a child and referenced her own loss, but in vague terms. The experience seems to have left her unable to bear more children.

There are conflicting accounts from Lane herself about the next few years of marriage. Letters she wrote home to her parents painted a jolly time of work and travel as the couple traversed America. Her diary entries told a different story — one of depression and despair. (In all, she would fill 84 notebooks over her lifetime.) Indeed, Lane allegedly attempted suicide by self-administering chloroform, from which she woke up with a headache. Eventually, the Lanes settled in what is now the Silicon Valley area of Northern California where they sold real estate; Lane became one of the first female real-estate agents in the state. Her turbulent marriage underwent several separations before ending in an amicable divorce in 1918; Lane was 32-years-old and never remarried.

Her married years had been formative in another manner. Embarrassed by her lack of formal education, Lane read ravenously and launched her career as a writer. Specifically, in 1915, she accepted a position as an editorial assistant at the San Francisco *Bulletin*, a radical labor newspaper that featured Sinclair Lewis and Sherwood Anderson. Also in 1915, Lane's first book appeared — a biography of a famed aviator entitled *The Story of Art Smith*. In 1917, Lane's second book was published: *Henry Ford's Own Story* on which Lane worked directly with Ford to reveal the story of his

motor company and the innovation of bringing assembly lines to the production of cars. Other biographies followed.

In 1918, Lane quit her job at the *Bulletin* to pursue a full-time career as a freelance writer. She was remarkably successful. For example, she published a series of articles in the lifestyle magazine *Sunset*, which were collectively known as “Life and Jack London.” In late 1918, she was offered a publicity job with the American Red Cross and moved to the bohemian Greenwich Village to await her posting. She made a longtime friend of Floyd Dell and knew Max Eastman and John Reed.

In late 1918, she was offered a publicity job with the American Red Cross and moved to the bohemian Greenwich Village to await her posting. There Lane became a longtime friend of Floyd Dell, who later was an associate editor of the *New Masses* magazine, as well as becoming acquainted with Max Eastman and John Reed.

In short, Lane became a “Red.” In her essay “[Give Me Liberty](#)” (1936), which was first published as an article for the *Saturday Evening Post* under the title *Credo*, Lane wrote,

In 1919 I was a communist. My Bolshevik friends of those days are scattered now; some are bourgeois, some are dead, some are in China and Russia, and I did not know the last American chiefs of the Third International, who now officially embrace Democracy. They would repudiate me even as a renegade comrade, for I was never a member of The Party. But it was merely an accident that I was not.

During a trip to the Balkans to assess Red Cross relief efforts, however, she became disillusioned by her first-hand experience of collectivism and centralized power. She resigned from the Red Cross when the Armistice was signed (November 11, 1918).

Returning to America, Lane traveled across the nation trying to find her niche. No longer bohemian, neither did she fit in at her parents’ hometown in Missouri. Writing seemed to be her major solace. In 1919, an autobiographical novel, *Diverging Roads*, appeared after also being serialized by *Sunset*. In the same year and not under her own name, Lane published her first of several nonfiction travel books, *White Shadows on the South Seas*, which she ghostwrote for novelist Frederick O’Brien. Perhaps the best known of her works from this period is the first biography of President Herbert Hoover, *The Making of Herbert Hoover* (1920), which led to a 40-year friendship between the two.

Restless, she returned to Europe and roamed Albania, becoming convinced that the Continent was doomed to continual bloodshed. In their essay “Diachronic Frontiers: Landscape Archaeology of Highland Albania,” Robert Schon and Michael L. Galaty wrote,

In 1921, Rose Wilder Lane ... visited the Shala Valley of northern Albania with a pair of Red Cross co-workers who hoped to establish a school in the mountains. They were accompanied by Rrok Perolli, an agent of the interior ministry, Rexh Meta, a 12-year-old Muslim orphan (and head of his household) whom Lane eventually put through Cambridge University.... In her memoir of the trip, *The Peaks of Shala* (1923), Lane vividly describes the customs and beliefs of the members of the Shala tribe she encountered and recounts a number of discussions she witnessed concerning the place of tribal society within the nascent nation state.

In 1928, Lane moved back to the Ozarks to live on her parents’ farm, building them a new house and redesigning the old one for herself; she also unofficially adopted two orphaned brothers and

homeschooled them. At that point, Lane was among the highest-paid women writers in America; for example, she received \$10,000 for the serialization of her novel *Cindy*. Through to the early 1940s she was a frequent contributor to prominent magazines such as the *Saturday Evening Post*, *Harper's*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Ladies' Home Journal*, with several novels becoming bestsellers. Nevertheless her generosity often left her close to penniless. And the mood swings that plagued her life continued, prompting Lane to diagnose herself as manic-depressive. During her manic phase, Lane wrote for herself; when depressed, she ghostwrote for others.

Finances took a decided turn for the worse in 1929 with the stock-market crash. Lane and her parents were left destitute. In 1930, however, her mother indicated a path out of poverty. She approached Lane with a very rough draft of a novel about her childhood, titled *Pioneer Girl*. Always astute about marketing, Lane realized that Depression America would welcome the story of the indomitable and caring Ingalls family as they struggled with hardships that would break most people. In 1931, Harper & Row published *Little House in the Big Woods*, which sold very well. The book turned into a series with eight more titles. Eventually, the nine books formed the original series with several more being added decades later. The series was popularized to modern audiences through the ten-season TV series *Little House on the Prairie*, which ran for 207 episodes from 1974 to 1983.

How intimately Lane collaborated with her mother in writing the series is a matter of scholarly debate. According to Holtz, Lane's contribution was "nothing less than a line-by-line rewriting of labored and underdeveloped narratives." But, in truth, no one knows. However extensive the collaboration was, it seemed to open up creativity within Lane, who wrote her two most successful novels during this period. Both were about the trials of homesteading in the Dakotas: *Let the Hurricane Roar* (1932, later retitled *Young Pioneers*) and *Free Land* (1938). The novels were serialized for high fees by the *Saturday Evening Post* and adapted for radio.

In the 1940s, Lane's writings began to focus on politics. Her abiding interest in the political world can be judged by her circle of friends, which included Herbert Hoover, Max Eastman, Upton Sinclair, Ayn Rand, and Isabel Paterson. Moreover she continued to travel widely in post-World War I Europe, becoming a keen observer of the political and economic circumstances abroad.

The essay "Give Me Liberty" chronicles her shift from communism to championing individual rights. She begins by sketching the genesis of her former beliefs and states, "I was not a member of the Communist Party. Nevertheless, I was at heart a communist." What happened?

Lane explains the "point [at which] that first doubt pierced my Communist faith." The doubt came as the result of contemplating a series of questions.

Who owns this great wealth [of society]? The Capitalist. What creates wealth? Labor. How does the Capitalist get it? He collects a profit on all goods produced. Does the Capitalist produce anything? No; Labor produces everything.

What stopped Lane short was the communist solution.

When the Capitalist is gone, who will manage production? The State. And what is the State? The State will be the mass of toiling workers.

Yet this did not describe any State she knew of.

In a visit to Transcaucasian Russia, Lane met with a peasant family in their comfortable village

home where the host forcefully “said that he did not like the new government.”

Her reaction:

I could hardly believe that a lifelong communist, with the proofs of successful communism thick about us, was opposed to a communist government. He repeated that he did not like it. “No! No!” His complaint was government interference with village affairs. He protested against the growing bureaucracy that was taking more and more men from productive work. He predicted chaos and suffering from the centralizing of economic power in Moscow.

Deeply shaken by the encounter, Lane asked herself “dizzily,” “What ... is The State?” to which the villager objected. She worried about the impact communism would have on the small, happy village. Back in America, she wondered

whether that ancestral home, that village, have yet been wiped from the soil of Russia to make way for a communal farm, worked in three daily eight-hour shifts, plowed by tractors and harvested by combines, illuminated at night by enormous arc-lights. Do my host and his wife eat, perhaps, in a communal dining hall and sleep in communal barracks?

She devoutly hoped their standard of living had improved, but if advances were “done for the people in former Russia, it will not be done by them, but to them. And what will do it? The State?”

In asking herself this question, Lane experienced an epiphany.

[I]n actual fact, The State, The Government, cannot exist. They are abstract concepts, useful in their place, as the theory of minus numbers is useful in mathematics. In actual living experience, however, it is impossible to subtract anything from nothing; when a purse is empty, it is empty, it cannot contain minus ten dollars. On this same plane of actuality, no State, no Government, exists. What does in fact exist is a man, or a few men, in power over many men.

Economics rather than politics lay at the core of Lane’s disillusionment with communism. Politically, communism (as she conceived it) opposed the state. Economically, communism needed to assume the reins of power in order to impose its vision. Thus, “[e]very advance toward personal liberty ... was lost by the collectivist economic reaction.” Inevitably, the economic reaction would be led by a small number of men rather than by a “republic.” Lane concluded,

Any government of multitudes of men, anywhere, at any time, must be a man, or few men, in power. There is no way to escape from that fact.... [I]n the Soviet Union ... the aim of its rulers is an economic aim. Economic power differs from political power.

She divided politics from economics because politics was based on “broad principles” that could remain “unchanged indefinitely,” whereas economics dealt with

material things; it dealt directly with actual carloads of coal, harvests of grain, output of factories. Economic power in action ... is subject to drought, storm, flood, earthquake and

pestilence, to fashion, and diseases, and insects, to the breaking down and the wearing out of machinery. ~~And economics enters into the minute detail of each person's existence — into his eating, drinking, working, playing, and personal habits.~~

The latter impact worried Lane the most because an “economic ruler” would make decisions that defined people's lives down to such trivial detail as whether or not chewing gum had economic value. To respond quickly to changing circumstances such as storms and flood, power *must* reside in few hands and eschew the checks on power that limit government. And, so, what Lane saw in Russia

was not an extension of human freedom, but the establishment of tyranny on a new, widely extended and deeper base.... [T]he Soviet government exists to do good to its people, whether they like it or not. And I felt that, of all the tyrannies to which men have been subject, that tyranny would be the most ruthless and the most agonizing to bear.

It would be more ruthless because the individual and human willfulness were communism's enemies. To succeed, communism needed to crush both. The individual would be replaced by a “human bee swarm,” an “ant-hill,” because the “Communist hope of economic equality in the Soviet Union rests now on the death of all the men and women who are individuals.” Thus, Lane wrote, “I came out of the Soviet Union no longer a communist, because I believed in personal freedom.”

But everywhere else in postwar Europe, she found people enslaved by medieval caste systems and bureaucracy. In Italy, Lane saw the nation being galvanized by the collectivism of Mussolini, and she tried to argue instead for the individual. “Why will you talk about the rights of individuals!” the Italians finally exclaimed. “An individual is nothing. As individuals we have no importance whatever. I will die, you will die, millions will live and die, but Italy does not die. Italy is important. Nothing matters but Italy.”

Lane realized that the rejection of one's self as an individual was the core of communism and collectivism.

The realization led Lane to wonder in turn, “What is individual liberty?” and was she truly free? The answer began with a recognition of the truth proclaimed by the Declaration of Independence: all men are created equal by God with both self-control and self-responsibility. In America, she saw the pinnacle of that truth in practice.

And yet a question remained. Is “personal freedom ... worth the terrible effort, the never-lifting burden, and the risks, the unavoidable risks, of self-reliance.” Everyone must answer for themselves, she concluded, but freedom “cannot long exist except among multitudes of individuals who choose and who are willing to pay for it.”

The American people had chosen to pay and they reaped the rewards.

Americans are the most friendly and courteous people. There is more laughter and more song in America than anywhere else. Such are a few of the human values that grew from individualism while individualism was creating this nation.

In 1938, at the age of 52, Lane moved to the farmhouse in Danbury, Connecticut, a few miles away from Isabel Paterson's home. There Lane would spend the rest of her life. There, her focus became almost exclusively political, writing nonfiction regularly only for *Woman's Day*. She excoriated

President Roosevelt's New Deal through which the American economy was being socially engineered toward a "creeping socialism."

She wrote,

a group of sincere and ardent collectivists seized control of the Democratic Party, used it as a means of grasping Federal power, and enthusiastically, from motives which many of them regard as the highest idealism, began to make America over. The Democratic Party is now a political mechanism having a genuine political principle: national socialism. The Republican Party remains a political mechanism with no political principle. It does not stand for American individualism. Its leaders continue to play the 70-year-old American professional sport of vote-getting, called politics.

To protest against measures like social security, Lane ceased to write the commercial pieces that brought her a high income on which she needed to pay high taxes. Her outspoken opposition to Social Security as a "Ponzi scheme" that was destined to destroy the American economy brought her to the attention of the authorities. Allegedly at the request of the FBI, a Connecticut state trooper visited her home to inquire after her political beliefs and motives. In response, she wrote and published a pamphlet titled "What is this, the Gestapo?" An FBI file was opened on her.

As war neared, Lane spoke loudly in favor of the Ludlow or Peace Amendment that required a national referendum before any declaration of hostilities could be declared; she opposed with equal vigor the prospect of conscription. During the war years, from 1942 to 1945, Lane preached *laissez-faire*, individual rights and antiracism through a weekly column in the widely read black newspaper, the *Pittsburgh Courier*. Her first piece declared, "Here, at last, is a place where I belong. Here are the Americans who know the value of equality and freedom."

In 1943, Lane's political magnum opus was published: *The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority*. In that same year, Ayn Rand's novel *The Fountainhead* and Isabel Paterson's *The God of the Machine* also appeared. Collectively, they became known as the mothers of the modern libertarian movement. Indeed, some credit Lane with coining the phrase "libertarian movement."

Until her death on October 30, 1968, Lane worked tirelessly in promoting libertarian ideas through writing, lecturing, and activism. She wrote for a wide-ranging political spectrum, from the National Economic Council to the Volker Fund, but always she stressed individualism and personal liberty. She lectured for and financially supported Robert LeFevre's Freedom School — an experiment in teaching libertarianism at the university level.

With her mother's death in 1957, Lane inherited the extremely lucrative royalty rights to the *Little House on the Prairie* series. This ended her modest lifestyle and she returned to one of her lifelong joys — world travel. At age 78, during the Vietnam War, she became a war correspondent in South Vietnam, reporting back to *Woman's Day* magazine. She also returned to commercial writing, including a bestselling book on the history of American needlework and a follow-on novel to the *Little House* series titled *On the Way Home*.

Lane died in her sleep at age 81 on the brink of embarking on a three-year world tour as a journalist for *Woman's Day*.

An inscription on her grave reads, "An army of principles will penetrate where an army of soldiers cannot." A lone woman with an unquenchable passion for liberty will do the same.

The Discovery of Freedom

The Discovery of Freedom: Man's Struggle Against Authority revolves around the conflict between authority and individual freedom.

The book opens with a splendid presentation of the theory underlying individual liberty. Lane begins with human nature, for which the “imperative desire is to continue to live.” This is not an easy task. Nature pits itself against human life through the hardships caused by winter, storms, drought, and a myriad of threats including other animals. It is individual energy that pushes back the enemies of man but an individual alone can hardly produce enough energy to survive. He needs allies; he needs society. Lane explains,

The brotherhood of man is not a pretty phrase nor a beautiful ideal; it is a fact. It is one of the brutal realities of human life on this inhuman planet. All men are brothers, of one blood, of one human race. They are brothers in one imperative desire to live, in one desperate necessity to combine their energies in order to live. Any man who injures another, injures himself, for human welfare is necessary to his own existence.

As necessary as other people may be, however, their cooperation creates a dilemma, because the dynamic “is always a struggle for control of their combined energies.” In that struggle, each person acts “in accordance with his personal view of the desirable, the good.” Unlike insects that work en masse for the good of the swarm, individuals often work against each other because they have differing views of “the desirable, the good.” Then the question becomes who or what decides? Who should control the energy?

The Old World answer is authority, which goes by many names: God, tradition, race, society, king. But life-preserving energy is necessarily individual and authority cannot create it, only obstruct it. Authority destroys the energy in an attempt to control it through a planned economy. Lane writes,

When anyone says, “a planned economy,” he means, a control of the human energy used in producing and distributing material goods, by an Authority consisting of a few men, and according to a plan made by those men — and enforced by the police.

This results in enormous waste, because no one can coordinate the needs and desires of a thousand people, let alone millions. Indeed, it is often difficult for even two people to decide on trivial matters such as what to have for dinner. A planned society also results in a static one, where living conditions change only sporadically, “in jerks, so to speak,” when the irrepressible energy of individuals breaks through.

Nevertheless, Lane sees a valuable role for government.

It is necessary because — to date, and perhaps forever — a few men stupidly use force to injure others, and nothing but force will stop them. When there was no Government, every man had to be able to defend himself, by force. He seldom shot anybody; the need for force is actually very little. But he had to carry a gun.

She calls the need for each individual to defend himself “a nuisance” that government obviates. Who

a person consents to government, she argues, it is a consent for government to use collective force

to hinder, restrain, or stop individuals and minorities who act in ways that a majority does not approve or does not act to defend. Stop, thief!

Thus, she concludes, “the need for Government is the need for force; where force is unnecessary, there is no need for Government.”

No force is necessary in economic exchanges. But force enters when government holds an economic monopoly or attempts to regulate the exchanges. By their very nature, control and regulation maintain the status quo and prevent growth for

economic progress is a change in the use of men’s productive energy.... A planned economy, therefore, is a use of force to prevent the natural use of human energy.

Monopolies are one of the main vehicles of a planned economy and the people who live under them take them for granted as though they had always existed. It never “occurs to them that salt, tobacco, railroads, telegraph, telephones, radio, need not be owned by Government.”

The psychological effect of this dependence was evident upon comparing Europeans, who lived under monopoly, with Americans, who did not.

You recognized an American as far as you could see him, by the way he walked. Chin up, head high, briskly going somewhere, with an unconscious mastery of the earth he trod. No European moved like that.

The effect on society is no less devastating. To control millions of people, a monopoly-enforcing government divides them into classes and makes separate plans to rule each. This sets one class against another and runs counter to “the brotherhood of man” that Lane had called “one of the brutal realities of human life on this inhuman planet.”

Moreover, because government uses police force, it has no way to know where to place limits. Lane observes, “[r]ecently in Europe, it has been the limit of a majority’s willingness to endure the increasing poverty that results from an increasing waste of human energy.”

She notes elsewhere, however, that such governments almost always result in a revolution that destroys them.

[H]uman energy must be productive, to keep people alive. When force obstructs it, people suffer privation and hunger. In rebellion against this misery, they rebel against the ruler whom they hold responsible for it. So history is full of wars of rebellion. Behind the rebel leaders, are men who are hungry.

But with rebellion, a story as “old as human life” replays.

When these revolts succeed, they are called revolutions. But they are revolutions only in the sense that a wheel’s turning is a revolution. An Old World revolution is only a movement

around a motionless center; it never breaks out of the circle.

The hungry men trust and thank the new ruler, the new government, for the lifting of oppression that they themselves accomplished. The new government uses “more and more force, more police, more soldiers ... piling regulations on regulations, decree on decree” in an attempt to maintain control.

Nevertheless, as the people grow hungrier and hungrier, they continue to look to the new government for remedy. After all, “how does a man on this earth get butter? Doesn’t Government give butter?”

Only America has escaped this vicious political circle. Americans have used “an unprecedented fury of human energy attacking the non human world, and making this earth more habitable for human beings.”

In turn, Americans are “safer, healthier ... more comfortable” than any other nationality on earth.

Lane asks why. A child born on American soil is not intellectually or physically superior to one born elsewhere. America’s resources are no more vast than Russia’s. What happened in America to make the outcome so different?

Part 2 of *The Discovery of Freedom* examines human history to find the path that brought a free society to America. It breaks the revolution toward freedom and struggle with authority into three sections.

The first attempt at revolution dates back to the biblical days of Abraham and his belief that God had created human beings to be free. Then Lane traces the rise of authority through to the time of Christ and the Roman Empire.

The second attempt begins with Mohammed and the expansion of Islam as a doctrine of freedom. She presents an idealized version of feudalism and proceeds through to Britain and the Magna Carta.

The third and the only successful attempt at revolution is America. With no coordinated leadership, the American Revolution spontaneously erupted and championed the new concept of individual rights that had emerged in the colonies. In this optimistic section, Lane discusses the United States Constitution, property rights, the Industrial Revolution, the right to vote, and democracy.

When Lane refused to reprint *The Discovery of Freedom* and, instead, spent much of the 1950s trying to rewrite it, the last section on history was undoubtedly the reason. Claiming that she wrote the book in a “white heat,” Lane readily admitted to having made “technical errors.” Indeed, she seemed embarrassed by the book’s many historical misstatements. LeFevre described a phone conversation in which he asked her for the right to reprint the work.

I began by saying something to the effect that I had just finished reading her great book, *Discovery of Freedom*. I extended my congratulations on producing a truly marvelous work.

“It’s a very bad book,” Lane said.

I shook my head. “I must have a poor connection,” I apologized. “It sounded as though you said it was a bad book.”

“It is. That’s what I said.”

“Don’t talk that way about that book!” I said. “It’s a very good book. I ought to know. I just read it.”

“It’s a very bad book. I ought to know. I wrote it.”

To critique the historical errors would be a simple matter but it would miss the importance of *The Discovery of Freedom*. Nock was largely correct when he stated that Lane was mistaken on details but “when it comes to anything fundamental, Mrs. Lane never makes a mistake. She is always right.”

Actually, she came to regret one or two points of fundamental analysis as well. For example, she regretted the depiction of property rights as originating from government and requiring government for their continued existence. But flaws in her fundamental theory are few.

Ironically, the “white heat” style that resulted in so many errors may have contributed to *The Discovery of Freedom*’s popularity. It reads like a fast-paced novel with bold, sweeping interpretations of history that are punctuated by vivid personal anecdotes. Lane’s enthusiasm is infectious and the book has an undeniable fascination. Even claims with which I disagreed often made me pause; enough of the truth was present that I turned the claim over in my mind to find exactly where my point of disagreement arose.

The Discovery of Freedom is an engaging book that might best be consumed in a “white heat.” After then the reader should return to the section on theory for a second and more careful read.

The Situation

—1—

HERE is a planet, whirling in sunlit space.

This planet is energy. Every apparent substance composing it is energy. The envelop of gas surrounding it is energy. Energy pours from the sun upon this air and earth.

On this earth are living creatures. Life is energy.

Every living creature has consciousness and desires. The imperative desire is to continue to live and living is not easy. Life struggles to exist, among not-living energies that destroy it.

The energy of heat, cold, storms, floods, drought, is the deadly enemy of every human being. His second enemy is the living energy of other creatures, the animals, the plants, that kill him and that he kills for his food and other uses.

Everyone must constantly be defended against these enemies. Farmers and sailors and doctors always know this. Linemen know it, and engineers, chemists, truck drivers and railroad men and oil drillers and sand-hogs and construction workers and airplane pilots and weather forecasters—all the fighters who protect human lives in modern civilization, and keep this civilization in existence.

These men, who know the human situation on this earth and stand the brunt of it, enable others to forget it.

The thinkers—scholars, teachers, writers, politicians—fed and warmed and lulled like babies, can forget their real situation. But their acts recognize it. They live in houses, they use electric lights, they pay someone to stoke the furnace. They are thrifty of water when a drought threatens their city water supply, and their lives. And, as men never were able to do before, they take precautions against the microbes that kill more people than wars.

Men are alive on this earth, only because the imperative human desire is to attack the enemies of human life. Today many Americans may not know this—unless fire, flood, hurricane, epidemic breaks through the thin defences built around them.

But how are they using their energy? How have Americans been using their energies for a hundred years? What is the meaning of this Republic in history, but an unprecedented fury of human energy attacking the non-human world, and making this earth more habitable for human beings?

Swiftly, in seventy years, Americans have built defences against darkness—from pine-knots and candles to kerosene lamps, gas jets, electric bulbs, neon lights, fluorescent tubes. In my lifetime Americans have created astounding defences against weather—from fireplace and stove to furnace, radiators, automatic oil-burners, insulation, air-conditioning.

Americans make the stupendous attack on Space: steamboats, railroads, subways, automobiles, planes, stratosphere flying, inter-planetary rockets. And on Time: telegraph, transoceanic cables, telephones, radio, television.

In less than one century, human energy—*only in these States and on the western rim of Europe*—has made such a terrific attack on the enemies of human life that it has created the whole modern world.

Why was such an attack never made before?

For sixty known centuries, multitudes of men have lived on this earth. Their situation has been the everlasting human situation. Their desire to live has been as strong as ours. Their energy has always been enough to make this earth at least habitable for human beings. Their intelligence has been great

Yet for six thousand years, most men have been hungry. Famines have always killed multitudes and still do over most of this earth. ~~Ninety-five years ago, the Irish were starving to death; no one was surprised.~~ Europeans had never expected to get from this earth enough food to keep them all alive.

Why did men die of hunger, for six thousand years?

Why did they walk, and carry goods and other men on their backs, for six thousand years, and suddenly, in one century, only on a sixth of this earth's surface, they make steamships, railroad motors, airplanes, and now are flying around the earth in its utmost heights of air?

Why did families live six thousand years in floorless hovels, without windows or chimneys, and in eighty years and only in these United States, they are taking floors, chimneys, glass windows for granted, and regarding electric lights, porcelain toilets, and window screens as minimum necessities?

Why did workers walk barefoot, in rags, with lousy hair and unwashed teeth, and workingmen wear no pants, for six thousand years, and here, in less than a century—silk stockings, lip sticks, permanent waves, sweaters, overcoats, shaving cream, safety razors. It's incredible.

For thousands of years, human beings use their energies in unsuccessful efforts to get wretched shelter and meager food. Then on one small part of the earth, a few men use their energies so effectively that three generations create a completely new world.

What explains this?

The human situation on this earth is not changed; it can not be changed.

The quality of human energy does not vary greatly. A baby born in Kentucky in 1820 had no physical or mental energy superior to that of a baby born anywhere else at any other time.

The amount of human energy here is much less than anywhere else.

The physical earth has not changed in historical time. So raw materials do not explain what has been done with them here; the raw materials were here when the Mound Builders were. Vast quantities of iron, coal, oil, rubber, have always been available to human beings. Two thousand years ago when Caesar went west into Gaul, Europe was a rich and virgin wilderness inhabited by a few wandering savages, as this continent was a century ago. Not raw materials, but *the uses that human energy makes of raw materials*, create this rich new world.

The plain fact is that human energy operates more effectively in these United States than it has ever operated before, and more effectively than it operates today anywhere else on this planet.

It operates to make human lives safer, healthier, longer, more comfortable and more enjoyable.

Since life itself, and health and comfort and pleasure, are what all men have always wanted, obviously some obstacle has kept them from using their energies effectively, until now.

And since nothing is changed in the human situation on this earth, nor in human desires, the obstacle must have been in the nature of human energy itself.

Consider the nature of human energy.

A human being is a dynamo, generating energy. You are reading a book; you want to turn a page. You generate the energy that moves the muscles of your arm and hand, and turns the page.

This same energy has created the book. From the first stroke of an ax that a woodsman sinks into the living tree, to the printed pages bound and cut, every act of innumerable hands and minds that make the book and deliver it to you, is an operation of human energy generated by an individual's desire to act.

This individual energy, that you use to turn a page, is the only energy operating in the human world.

The ceaseless operation of this energy, ceaselessly attacking the non-human world and from it creating the necessities of human life, keeps men alive on this earth, and creates all the conditions which human beings live.

Individual energy, constantly generated and constantly acting, creates the physical necessities of human existence, and creates societies, civilizations, nations, kingdoms, principalities and powers, and all human relationships, all forms of human association.

Each living person is a source of this energy. There is no other source. Only an individual human being can generate human energy.

All energy operates under control. Whether it be the energy of an electron, a hurricane, or a man, all energy is controlled.

This fact makes scientific knowledge possible. Not-living energy—electricity, for example—always operates in the same way in the same conditions. No one knows what controls it, but because it is controlled, men who have observed how it acts can predict, with sufficient accuracy, how it always will act.

Living energy is different; it is creative, and variable. It changes, and it changes the conditions which it acts. It is unpredictable, because it never acts twice in precisely the same way. Not even two blades of grass in a lawn are identical. No two children of the same parents are alike; not even two quintuplets.

Yet living energy is controlled. Everyone knows what controls human energy. Your desire to turn a page generates the energy that turns the page; you control that energy. No one else, and nothing else, can control it.

Many forces can kill you. Many, perhaps, can frighten you. But no force outside yourself can *compel* you to turn that page. Nothing but your desire, your will, can generate and control your energy. You alone are responsible for your every act; no one else can be.

This is the nature of human energy; individuals generate it, and control it. Each person is self-controlling, and therefore responsible for his acts. Every human being, *by his nature*, is free.

But one person can not generate enough energy. A solitary man on this earth could hardly survive. His enemies are too numerous and too strong; his energy is too weak. To save his bare existence, he must have allies of his own kind.

The brotherhood of man is not a pretty phrase nor a beautiful ideal; it is a fact. It is one of the brutal realities of human life on this inhuman planet.

All men *are* brothers, of one blood, of one human race. They are brothers in one imperative desire to live, in one desperate necessity to combine their energies in order to live. Any man who injures

another, injures himself, for human welfare is necessary to his own existence.

~~Many men do not know this fact. It is not the first fact that men have not known, nor the only one that they do not know now. There are still people who believe that the earth is flat. Because it is not flat, because it holds them to its surface by the attraction of its spherical mass, they can behave, within limits and for short distances, as if it were flat.~~

Men who behave as if the brotherhood of man were not a fact, are alive to do so only because it is a fact.

Imperative human brotherhood creates the individual's relationship with other individuals.

This relationship is always a struggle for control of their combined energies. All friends, all lovers, know that each is constantly trying to control the other's acts, or yielding to the other's effort to control his acts. Shall we stay at home, or go to a movie? Which movie?

The uses of human energy are innumerable; therefore everyone's life is a continuous succession of choices. Since no two persons are alike, they rarely choose to act in precisely the same way at the same time.

This is the human dilemma. Each individual is the source and control of human energy, but no individual can not generate enough energy. To live at all, and then to get the values that he wants in living, he must combine his energy with the energies of others. But in doing this, he always encounters an obstacle to the direct use of his energy to achieve his own desires.

This obstacle is the problem of *controlling* the combined energies.

This is a fact of common experience. Everyone knows, too, that the larger the number of individuals, the more difficult the problem. Two persons can solve it in a moment, but just try to get a dozen families started to a picnic!

When this problem of control extends over millions of units of varying, unpredictable human energy, obviously no effort to control them all can possibly succeed.

Yet human beings always have combined their energies in order to survive on this earth, and human energy operates only under control. What, then, does control the energies of men in groups?

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