



Where Is the Next Rose Director?

John Blundell¹

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“Behind every great man there is a great woman” has to be close to being the most hackneyed expression in the English language, but in the case of Milton Friedman one has to give really very serious credit to Rose Director, his wife.

They met in graduate school at Chicago when Jacob Viner sat his students alphabetically and there was nobody between Director and Friedman. She was a very young sister of Aaron Director (founder with Ronald Coase of the *Journal of Law and Economics*), but older brother was more of a mentor and father figure.

She co-authored with Milton the international best seller *Free to Choose* (1980) and co-produced the resulting ten-part TV series which showed all over the world (but not in France). It aired just as Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan came to power. It caught a wave, but a wave the Friedmans had helped to generate. To Cato Institute founder Ed Crane, *Free to Choose* “really kick-started” the rebirth of classical liberalism in the U.S. (Irwin 2009).

When Milton turned 90, President Bush invited him and Rose to lunch at the White House and joked openly that the only person he (Milton) had ever lost an argument with was his wife (Bush 2002).² And on the 100th anniversary of Milton’s birth a London paper, *The Daily Telegraph*, ran this headline over my op-ed of appreciation: “Milton Friedman was peerless until he met his wife” (Blundell 2012).

Of the two, Rose was always the feistier and more libertarian policy person. Gary Becker once commented: “It was an extremely close intellectual fellowship, and she was not someone who got credit for things she didn’t do. They discussed ideas constantly. Her feelings about the importance of private markets, opposition

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2. Milton at first refused the White House invite. Ed Crane had to call him, and Cato kindly took care of all the details to ship them from one coast to the other.

to big government, were even stronger than his. Her lasting influence will be as a collaborator, but she was a major contributor to the collaboration, and that's a significant legacy" (Weber 2009).

And Rose never felt in awe of Milton. When asked if she ever felt overshadowed she answered: "No. I've always felt that I'm responsible for at least half of what he's gotten... I feel that I have much of the responsibility for his success" (Robinson 1999).

While Milton is best known as a monetary theorist (his license plate was "MV PT"), and as proponent of the all-volunteer army through his work for President Nixon, school vouchers, and market ideas generally, he commented that his 1957 book *A Theory of the Consumption Function* was "my best purely scientific contribution" (Friedman and Friedman 1999, 222).³ The work was a challenge to Keynes. It was developed in conversations with Rose, who had worked on household consumption with Dorothy Brady and Margaret Reid. Indeed in the preface Milton wrote that the book was: "in essential respects a joint product of the group, each member of which not only participated in its development but read and criticized the manuscript in its various stages" (Friedman 1957, ix).

Milton's first major foray into popular writing was *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962). Rose took his notes from a series of lectures at Wabash College, Indiana, sponsored by the Volker Fund, and as Milton wrote in the preface: "She pieced together the scraps of the various lectures, coalesced different versions, translated lectures into something approaching written English, and has throughout been the driving force in getting the book finished" (Friedman 1962, xvi). It sold 500,000 copies, was translated 18 times, and through samizdat copies helped tear down the wall (Doherty 2007, 301), along with works by Hayek and Mises, as Rose was later to note. It gave them both a lot of pride and satisfaction.

After retiring from Chicago, moving to 1750 Taylor Street in San Francisco, and winning the 1976 Nobel Prize in Economics, Milton was approached to make a TV series by WQLN. He was not that keen, preferring reading to TV and having a Hayekian preference for reaching intellectuals, not masses. But Rose had other ideas and she prevailed as a project planned to last 18 months now dominated their lives for a full four years.

WQLN, however, was a PBS station. Neither Friedman wanted tax dollars involved, so they wrote out a list of wealthy folk they knew, and over \$10 million (in today's money) was quickly raised. Through Ralph Harris (Lord Harris of High Cross), whom I succeeded as Director General of London's Institute of Economic Affairs, WQLN found a private production company in England headed by Tony

3. Milton also called the central tenet of the book—that current consumption is not driven by current income but expected lifetime income—"embarrassingly obvious" (Friedman and Friedman 1999, 225).

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Jay (Sir Antony Jay), who knew public choice economics.⁴ He was soon to make *Yes, Minister* and *Yes, Prime Minister*, reputedly Hayek's and Thatcher's favorite TV programs. Daughter-in-law Esca Hayek has fond memories of F. A. Hayek laughing out loud at the exploits of the bureaucracy.

As I wrote in *Ladies for Liberty*, “Rose was deeply involved, steeped in the ideological and logistical aspects of the whole project as well as the psychology of building a team that could be open and honest yet constructive as they struggled to bring complex ideas to the television screen. It was, after all, to be presented by somebody who, while an old hand at televised interviews and debates, had to date never experienced the unnerving sensation of looking directly into a camera” (Blundell 2011, 180).

Free to Choose was billed as “A Personal Statement.” Eben Wilson, one of the production team, told me: “In fact the views were those of Milton adjusted by Rose and edited by both. When Milton spoke to camera what you heard was the result of a fascinating brainstorming session involving both of them. Logic, language and ideas were battered into shape on location and without a script” (Blundell 2011, 181). A quiet cough, a murmur, a raised eyebrow by Rose was all it took to stop filming. Milton and Rose would huddle and thrash through the economics. And if they agreed to disagree he would deliver his lines terribly, “so Rose always won” (182).

Of *Free to Choose*, Milton said: “Her title as associate producer was far more than a formality. She played an indispensable role: she participated in every planning session and every editing session; she was on every shoot and involved in every discussion about the content of my statements to the camera; she was the best critic of my performance, and perhaps more important, the only one willing to be blunt in criticizing me, and the most helpful in setting me on the right track” (Ebenstein 2007, 204).

It was Rose who then took the ten TV programs and turned them into the eponymous book. It was the #3 best-selling nonfiction book of 1980 according to *Publishers Weekly*; it sold 400,000 in hardcover and over one million in paperback with 17 translations and who knows how many samizdat copies (Cassidy 2009, 80). In Japan alone a staggering 200,000 hardbacks flew out of the doors.

The TV series became a phenomenon beating out *Masterpiece Theatre*. Can we today conceive of any economist getting higher ratings than *Downton Abbey*? Market penetration was so high that when Queen Elizabeth II met Milton at a party she hosted on her boat in San Francisco harbor she proclaimed “I know you.

4. Jay had read Buchanan and Tullock and Niskanen through the IEA publication program (Blundell and Robinson 1999).

Philip [her husband the Duke of Edinburgh] is always watching you on the telly” (Friedman and Friedman 1999, 569).

The Friedmans tried to follow up on *Free to Choose* with a low-budget program and book, *Tyranny of the Status Quo* (1984), but it was no match and fizzled out. It was probably a mistake.

So my question actually is not “Where is the next Milton Friedman?” but rather “Where is the next Rose Director?”

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