

"No Sorrow like Our Sorrow": Northern Protestant Ministers and the Assassination of Lincoln, by David B. Chesebrough. Kent, OH: Kent State University Press, 1994. xxii, 200 pp. Illustrations, tables, appendixes, notes, bibliography, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY DOUGLAS FIRTH ANDERSON, NORTHWESTERN COLLEGE

David Chesebrough vividly draws attention to a neglected type of source for historical study: sermons. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century topics of local, regional, or national focus can often be illumined by an investigation of published and unpublished sermons, for, as Chesebrough notes, they generally provide at least "reflections of current thought, emotions, problems, issues, values, practices, prejudices, and beliefs" (xi).

This volume amply demonstrates Chesebrough's point. The book is a well-focused study of 340 published sermons preached by northern clergymen in the seven weeks following the assassination of President Abraham Lincoln on April 14, 1865. His analysis copiously documents the nuances of five dominant themes presented in the sermons: poignantly expressed grief; the elevation of Lincoln to the status of moral saint and martyred national hero; the focusing of responsibility not on the assassin John Wilkes Booth but rather on the South and slavery; the overwhelming stress on retribution rather than mercy toward the South; and the pervasive assumption that the assassination, while tragic, was nonetheless within the providence of God.

From this intensive examination, and with his earlier study *"God Ordained This War": Sermons on the Sectional Crisis, 1830-1865* (1991) providing him further basis for judgment, Chesebrough persuasively concludes that clergy were the most punitive of northern groups in the immediate aftermath of the Civil War. They preached against perceived moral laxity (even Lincoln came in for some criticism for having been in a theater when killed) and for "the imperatives of nationalism" (101) instead of individualism and nonconformity. At first loyal to Andrew Johnson, these northern clergy were rapidly disillusioned with the new president's leniency toward the South. "Perhaps the greatest consequence of the post-assassination sermons," Chesebrough observes, "was the contribution they made to the immortalization of Abraham Lincoln" (110).

A problem with assessing the significance of sermons is how to determine how much they articulate more or less implicit popular sentiment and how much they actually shape public opinion. Chesebrough does not attempt to resolve this problem; rather, he appears to assume that the clergy he examines are primarily reflectors rather than shapers. Support for this assumption and some attention to the

social characteristics and numerical strength of the sermons' audiences would have strengthened his analysis and might have enabled him to generalize more plausibly about broader sectors of northern public opinion than he in fact does. He also acknowledges that his use of published sermons means that the clergy represented tended to be from congregations wealthy enough to sponsor publication. His sample is national in scope, but he provides a breakdown by state that is helpful for further research. The greatest percentage—over 40 percent—came from New York and Pennsylvania. Only two of the sermons were from Iowa—one by a Des Moines Presbyterian and the other by a Davenport Congregationalist—but over 15 percent of his total sample was from the Midwest (Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Michigan, Nebraska, Ohio, and Wisconsin).

The usefulness of the book is particularly enhanced by a fine set of photographs, two complete sermons in an appendix, and an annotated bibliography of the sermons used. In deepening our understanding of the role of clergy in nineteenth-century America, Chesebrough also provides an admirable model of the potential of sermons as historical sources.

Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town: Where History and Literature Meet, by John E. Miller. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994. xii, 208 pp. Illustrations, maps, notes, index. \$24.95 cloth.

REVIEWED BY NICOLE ETCHESON, UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH DAKOTA

John E. Miller has tried to give this collection of essays the unifying thesis that history and literature are mutually enlightening. Certainly Laura Ingalls Wilder's popular children's series, the *Little House* books, offers promise for that approach. Yet Miller's attempt fails largely because there is no consistent effort to develop that thesis. Three of the ten chapters focus on De Smet, South Dakota, the "little town" of Wilder's books, one compares her fiction to the art of Harvey Dunn, others explore themes such as "freedom and control" and "love and affection" in Wilder's work, and still others examine storytelling and historical fiction by using examples from Wilder's books. The thesis of history and literature disappears along the way.

The title is misleading in other ways as well. The book is not about Laura Ingalls Wilder nor about De Smet. It is rather a set of reflections on aspects of Wilder's work. Often there seems little to connect one chapter to another except that examples are drawn from the *Little House* books.

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