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.

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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.

Although the reflections do not make as cohesive a whole as Miller would like, they are insightful, absorbing, and based on meticulous research in the various drafts of Wilder's novels. The chapters on the meaning of freedom and on romance in Wilder's novels are particularly thought provoking. This is a revealing portrayal of how Wilder constructed her novels, crafting autobiographical fact into literary fiction with editing help from her daughter, Rose Wilder Lane. Themes of community, society's influence on fiction, and the prairie's impact on its residents are well explored. Certainly, fans of the *Little House* series will find the book interesting, although they may find Miller less concerned than they with the issues that dominate public discourse on Wilder's fiction. Miller never discusses at length Lane's contribution to her mother's work, but he is clearly aware of the argument that it was Lane, not Wilder, who "wrote" the *Little House* books. He just as clearly disagrees with that interpretation.

One sometimes wishes that Miller would have pushed his own interpretations further. He mentions that Laura's only brother died as an infant when she was nine years old. This sole male Ingalls, aside from Pa, makes no appearance in her books. Miller dismisses this omission as a result of her desire to keep unpleasantness out of novels intended for children. Perhaps so. Nevertheless, that inhibition did not prevent her from including her sister's blindness and the near homicidal actions of the woman whose family she boarded with when first teaching school. Miller's explanation seems too facile, and one wishes he had probed further.

Throughout this series of reflections, Miller has expended little effort to make what are essentially independent essays cohere. Some have appeared in print before, and there was evidently little editing to fit them into this collection. As a result, there is much repetition, not only of examples but of basic explanatory information. One does not need to know, every time *The First Four Years* is mentioned, that it was not intended for children and was not submitted to a publisher until after Wilder's death.

Laura Ingalls Wilder's Little Town is best savored chapter by chapter. But it should be read by those interested not only in Wilder and her fiction, but by those interested in life on the last agricultural frontier.