Closing The Circle The American Optimism Of Laura Ingalls Wilder

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It was the summer of 1894. Their wagon had halted where the ferry would take them across the Missouri River, while across the parched landscape they had just traversed, "covered wagons stood one beyond another in a long, long line." The woman spoke to the child at her side, "That's your last sight of Dakota." At twenty-seven, she had turned her back on Dakota and a failed homestead to set out for a new life in the Missouri Ozarks, leaving behind her own family and her husband's, in every way all she had ever known of home. Her journal of that desperate trip was published only after her death, many years later, when the simple narrative gained luster as the earliest writing of Laura Ingalls Wilder, author of pioneer fiction for children.

The reasons for this unclosed gap are complex, but the deepest reason is that Laura Ingalls Wilder had committed herself to a material, a method, and a myth that finally made her assessment of her experience too painful to continue. The Wilder books are, in style and as individual works, realistic novels, but the unifying structure of the series is that of a romance that tends toward myth. What poses as autobiography and history actually becomes an archetypal story with roots deep in American experience and Christian tradition and deeper still in ancient anxieties concerning human
fecundity and the nourishing land. In its commitment to authenticity, however, it confronts finally some facts too obdurate to be assimilated to its shaping purpose. The autobiography can proceed only so far as the myth will carry it.

The myth is the familiar one that identifies America as a new Eden, the Garden of the World, a version of the Promised Land wherein fallen man will achieve virtue by hard labor, redeeming himself as he redeems the land from wilderness. Within this framework develops the archetypal romantic story of the young lovers whose union marks the triumphant end of struggle and the establishment of a fruitful order on the land. The Wilder books demonstrate, on the one hand, a radically pure commitment to this optimistic vision and, on the other, a gathering test of its premises against the historical reality that it must assimilate. In these children's books that carry their heroine to the verge of maturity but fail to allow her to enter it, we can find a figurative tracing of a significant strand of American experience. In the failure of closure lies a uniquely American dilemma.3

The interval between Wilder's brief first journal and the emergence of the novels is almost forty years. Much of the period was filled with minor journalism, but at some time after 1930 Wilder wrote the first version of her life story, a book-length manuscript entitled "Pioneer Girl." It was never published, and its deficiencies reveal the difficult transition from the naive fidelity of the original private journal to the sophisticated simplicity of her later fiction. "Pioneer Girl" contains the germ of all the later books except Farmer Boy and Little House on the Prairie, but it is undeveloped—largely devoid of tension, complexity, or dramatic interest. But the manuscript ends with the phrase, "At last I had a home of my own," a theme the fiction that later grows out of this narrative will vividly render and explore.4 The difference between "Pioneer Girl" and the published novels is startling and seems to have grown out of a simple technical change: by converting the narrating "I" to the narrated "Laura," the author moves her text from the realm of history to the realm of fiction.

Laura's story is directed at children, with serious intentions as a bridge between generations. The narrative dramatizes the child's successive engagements with the world—from parents' home to home of her own—and enforces the values necessary for success, but it also accepts the authorial/parental responsibility not merely to caution and to enforce values but to reassure, to offer a predictive model of success. And finally, overlaid upon the essentially parental intention of the series, and blending with its broader purposes of transferring lore across the generations, is its national and historical intention. "I realized that I had seen and lived it all," Wilder wrote. "Then I understood that in my own life I represented a whole period of American history.... I wanted children now to understand more about the beginning of things, to know what is behind the things they see—what it is that made America as they know it."5

Wilder's autobiographical impulse has led to an awareness of American history, and the quest for a home of her own has merged insensibly with national destiny. The early books present idyllic images of home, but as the narrative moves into subsequent books, this domestic tranquillity is dissipated and merely making a home becomes problematical. By midway in the cycle the theme has become self-conscious as the central issue becomes not home, or making a home, but homesteading. The books from this point on focus on the intersection of the personal effort to make a home with the broader issue of national land policy. Implicit in this grand design is its end in maturity, both personal and national.

MYTH, MATURITY, AND THE HOMESTEAD ACT

We may speak of the Homestead Act in terms of maturity if we recognize that it rested upon tacit assumptions grounded in the earliest national experience with the land and did not realistically address the complexities of its own
historical moment. It was less an actual instrument of American land policy than an expression of an American dream regarding man's place on the land. The law itself came too late really to be needed; its restrictive provisions almost guaranteed failure on the lands to which it applied; and it was responsible, finally, for settling only a small fraction of the western lands. The Homestead Act suffered from planning based on two centuries of pioneering experience in the humid woodlands of the East and Midwest, lands that had lent themselves to successful subsistence farming on relatively small parcels of forty to sixty acres, supported by ample and predictable rainfall. On such a land a man with an axe, a gun, and a plow could support a family, and a country composed of such isolated and self-sufficient family units both ratified and reinforced that optimistic American vision of the new world as the Promised Land, in which survival depended upon constant labor to redeem a hostile wilderness and success would come as a sign of grace.6

This is the story that the Wilder books tell—the mythic and religious component substantially displaced by the specifically historical but implicit as an interpretive framework. In this experience of a particular family with the general provisions of the law, however, we can see in little a critique of the Homestead Act and a testing of the assumptions behind it. The law is inadequate, and the gap between myth and circumstance fissures lives lived by faith.

The central paradox is essentially Jeffersonian, the need to structure a great nation with a minimal government. The myth posited an ultimate religious authority, the Reformation had established the individual's direct access to that authority, and thus the mediating functions and claims to authority are inherently suspect, the more so when the government is national and the problem individual and local. The Homestead Act itself, as the formal presence of governmental authority, could be at best but a necessary evil despite its intention to remove barriers between the land and the people for whom it was manifestly destined.

The Homestead Act expressed a growing political sentiment that land should go directly to those who would live on it, rather than pass through government land sales to speculators and developers and finally to settlers. The result, however, was the formal binding of the homesteader to a remote authority whose legitimacy he questioned. Even more significant, by the time the act became law, most of the humid woodlands had been settled. The available lands were prairie, offering little wood and diminishing rainfall the further west the settlers pressed. After a generation of frustration and failure the would-be homesteader could see that more than 160 acres were needed to sustain a family, that subsistence farming was no longer practicable, and that expensive new technology rendered the farmer dependent on a cash crop, borrowed capital, vast transportation networks, and an international marketplace. The injustices of this new dependency had political consequences in the agrarian movements.
of the 1890s, which presaged the twentieth-century tradition of assigning large areas of general welfare to governmental responsibility. Few prairie settlers suspected that a new land needed a new politics, and many left the land before the agrarian protests. In the 1840s and 1850s, the frontier had leap-frogged to the more hospitable lands of Oregon, but after the Homestead Act the plains lured, then baffled and often defeated, the first wave of settlers. Among the defeated was the family of Laura Ingalls.

TESTING THE MYTH: FROM WOODLAND TO PRAIRIE

Laura's version of this story begins in the last forest east of the plains, the great hard-wood stands of central Wisconsin. Little House in the Big Woods is a radically different book from those later in the saga, a winter's tale of a safe and comforting home surrounded by a mysterious but sustaining forest. The opening page establishes the forest as the prime reality in the family's lives:

As far as a man could go to the north in a day, or a week, or a whole month, there was nothing but woods. There were no houses. There were no roads. There were no people. There were only trees and the wild animals who had their homes among them. (P. 1)

The forest and its animals are fearsome, but Pa protects his family and the forest affords them food and shelter. The hostility of the forest to agriculture is barely acknowledged, as Pa once muses on his work with the grubbing hoe: "Those sprouts are getting waist-high around the stumps in the wheat-field. A man just has to keep everlasting at it, or the woods'll take back the place" (p. 193). His work to clear the land is not emphasized, and the wider world of commerce and government does not exist. Laura lives in a child's Garden of Eden in which the heroic values of the later books are latent in the powerful images of family love and parental responsibility.

Laura's earliest memories are complemented by her second book, Farmer Boy, which recounts the childhood of Almanzo Wilder, who became her husband. Set in upstate New York, it presents an idealized version of what her father's Wisconsin farm might have become in another generation, a home almost completely self-sufficient but bonded by familial piety and patriarchal authority. The connection between labor, successful crops, and abundant food is everywhere clear and immediate in this world of forests, lakes, and ample rainfall. The child is initiated into the world of work, and ultimately into the outer realm of a cash economy. If family love is at the center of Little House in the Big Woods, the secondary virtues of industry and thrift are rehearsed in Farmer Boy. In both books, the sense of closure, of permanence and finality, is very strong. The remaining books of the series—and the continuous lives of Laura and Almanzo—take the child's dream of home into the world of adults and history, challenge the values posited in the Edenic world of the first two books, and come to rest, in both book and life, in adult versions of paradise regained.

The Wilders of upstate New York were in fact, as well as in the child's memory, prosperous and well established; it is hard to understand why that family uprooted itself in the father's middle age to relocate in Minnesota. The midwestern land did yield more plentiful harvests at lower cost, but the Wilders may also have responded to the same westering, Edenic yearning that drove Laura Ingalls's father. Charles Ingalls, by most objective measures, and probably by his own, certainly knew more of failure than of success. The abandoned homes and ruined crops that form the background of Laura's narrative are fewer in the fiction than in history. Charles Ingalls took his family not directly from Wisconsin to Indian Territory (Little House on the Prairie), but rather meandered to Missouri, back to the Wisconsin farm, then to a hotel he kept in Iowa. In Little House on the Prairie, however, the cozy home in the Big Woods is abandoned for Charles Ingalls's vision of Eden on the Kansas Prairie.
In the West the land was level, and there were no trees. The grass grew thick and high. There the wild animals wandered and fed as though they were in a pasture that stretched much farther than a man could see, and there were no settlers. (P. 2)

The central section of *Little House on the Prairie* becomes an American version of Swiss Family Robinson, as the isolated family diligently converts a receptive wilderness to a new home. The chief danger is the threat of hostile Indians, but they accede to destiny and depart for the West, leaving the land to the settlers for whom, in their own eyes, it is manifestly intended. At the end of the volume, however, the Ingallses discover that their perfected homestead is just over the line into territory reserved for the Indians, and they must move before the soldiers remove them. Charles Ingalls is furious at the stupidity of his government.

“If some blasted politicians in Washington hadn’t sent out word it would be all right to settle here, I’d never have been three miles over the line into Indian Territory. But I’ll not wait for the soldiers to take us out. We’re going now!” (P. 316)

The next book, *On the Banks of Plum Creek*, marks a transition as the family reengages society and the establishment of a home is clearly connected with the economic order of wage work and cash crops. The myth, however, remains the context of their effort and sustains their courage: the grasshopper swarms become the biblical plague of locusts, a trial that must be endured before the “good people” are led to “a land flowing with milk and honey.” “Oh, where is that, Ma?” Laura’s sister asks. The moment is a test of their faith. Ma says, “‘Well, your Pa thinks it will be right here in Minnesota’” (p. 217).

Their vision of prosperity is not to be. Illness and failed crops force them into the unsettled lands of the Dakota Territory. *By the Shores of Silver Lake* is the pivotal work in this cycle, as Charles Ingall’s private quest finds official sanction in the government’s offer of a homestead. When he returns from filing his claim, his humorous account identifies the government as adversary, but it does not obscure the solemnity of the moment as he binds the family to his commitment: “‘Well, girls, I’ve bet Uncle Sam fourteen dollars against a hundred and sixty acres of land, that we can make out to live on the claim for five years. Going to help me win the bet?’” (p. 237). The three girls accept his terms. The last idyllic glimpse of the Ingalls family on the hard-won Dakota homestead (*These Happy Golden Years*) belies the fact that Charles would rent then sell his homestead and become a respected but decidedly unprosperous journeyman carpenter. 11 He probably would have done better to stick with his Wisconsin property or even to have gone on to Oregon, as he dreamed; but if the fiction accurately reflects his motives, he succumbed to the lure of the open prairie, where land need not be cleared, where the axe and the grubbing hoe could be forever set aside. 12 He did not know that he faced invisible barriers against which he had no tools.
The first barrier, paradoxically, was the lack of that very forest he had fled. The little log house of Wisconsin is duplicated in Kansas only by hauling scarce timber from a river bottom. The new house in Minnesota (On the Banks of Plum Creek) is built of milled lumber bought on credit. The self-sufficiency of the woodland farmer gives way to the dependence of the prairie farmer on distant markets and distant suppliers. Food comes not from the land but from the railroad, itself laid on ties from the forests back East, and the house is heated by eastern coal—unless the blizzards that rage across the treeless plains drift shut the railroad cuts. Then the Ingallses have only hard twists of marsh hay to burn to heat their home (The Long Winter).

Conditioned by two centuries of woodland experience, the early plains settlers—indeed, the government itself—tended to view the treeless landscape as incomplete. In 1873 the government attempted to supplement the Homestead Act by providing, in addition to a homestead, a Tree Claim to anyone who would plant and maintain it in trees. Almanzo Wilder staked such a claim, but his explanation of the government program is framed in his doubts and Laura’s:

"These government experts have got it all planned," he explained to Laura. "They are going to cover these prairies with trees, all the way from Canada to Indian Territory. It’s all mapped out in the land offices, where the trees ought to be, and you can’t get that land except on tree claims. They’re certainly right about one thing; if half these trees live, they’ll seed the whole land and turn it into forest land, like the woods back east."

"Do you think so?" Laura asked him in amazement. Somehow she could not imagine those prairies turned into woods, like Wisconsin. (These Happy Golden Years, p. 171)

By and large the tree planting was a failing gamble against nature. Almanzo Wilder maintained his tree claim for some years (The First Four Years), but the great drought that broke his farm took the trees as well, and only a few twisted scrubs of more recent growth dot the site today. Except in the towns and in the yards of the scattered farm homes, the Dakota landscape remains as treeless as when the first settlers arrived.

The trees failed because the rainfall would not sustain them. The line that marked the margin of the great woodlands was a warning of a more intransigent barrier lying slightly farther west, the line where precipitation averages twenty inches annually. Despite this line’s invisible, merely statistical existence, it is one of the most important boundaries in our nation. Vegetation, wildlife, and American Indian cultures recognized it and modern agricultural technology has found ways to cross it, but the Ingalls family knew it only by the symptomatic disasters along its verge. From the tree line westward, the older system of humid-lands agriculture continued to serve, but less and less well, because rainfall averages do not reflect the actual cycles of wet and dry years, nor that necessary moisture sometimes comes in life-threatening blizzards. By the bad luck of history the Ingalls family settled finally near De Smet, almost exactly on the twenty-inch precipitation line but near the end of a wet cycle. Here they began to wrest their Eden from nature.

They failed, of course—in history, not in the world of Laura’s books, which is the world of romance. From Farmer Boy to These Happy Golden Years, her narrative had moved toward the inevitable conclusion of all romance, the establishment of young lovers in a green and fruitful land. It is a dual climax, in fact, for not only are Laura and Almanzo established in their little gray home in the West, but Pa and Ma, in our last view of them, have successfully made their latest home on their claim as well. Beneath the romance is the myth of the American Eden that gives Laura’s version of the story meaning and value.

THE FAILURE OF MYTH:
THE FIRST FOUR YEARS

Although stories end, lives go on, however, and the history Laura continued to live was at
such variance with the myth that to recount it would challenge her sustaining faith and prove, finally, to be impossible. A child’s eye and a child’s faith in the myth inform the eight books of her career until marriage. The tension between mythic vision and a commitment to history and autobiography had permitted a narrative blend that drew strength from both poles, creating a fiction both credible and charming. The circumstantial detail and autobiographical fact provide authenticity and give the illusion of history, while the style, the dramatic technique, and the selective emphasis vitalize—and fictionalize—that history. At the same time, action and structure bend the narrative so strongly toward the mythic that we can speak of it as romance. Yet the author’s commitment to her own sense of what had actually happened brings her to the contingencies of reality that challenge the romantic dream.

Mrs. A. J. Wilder, looking back down the years, was compelled to try to continue the story of Laura through a personal history so disheartening as to deflect the romantic impulse toward the tragic. The progress toward maturity of the fictional Laura is directed implicitly toward the idyllic, domestic image of the first two books in the cycle. But the idea of maturity has also been linked with a radical independence. Early in The Long Winter (pp. 12–13), Laura and her father discuss the muskrat’s house. God tells the muskrat to build a warm house against the coming winter, but he leaves people free to choose their houses, to succeed or fail on their own. Later her mother reinforces the lesson: “I hope you don’t expect to depend on anybody else, Laura,” she says. “A body can’t do that” (p. 127). These moments are preliminary to an epiphanic realization at the Fourth of July celebration in Little Town on the Prairie, when a moment of insight blends the personal, political, and religious elements of the myth that is guiding her life. “God is America’s king,” she understands suddenly.

Americans won’t obey any king on earth. Americans are free. That means they have to obey their own consciences. No king bosses Pa; he has to boss himself. Why (she thought), when I am a little older Pa and Ma will stop telling me what to do, and there isn’t anyone else who has a right to give me orders. I will have to make myself be good.

Her whole mind seemed to be lighted up by that thought. This is what it means to be free. (P. 76)

Her life will be a test of virtue, in which success or failure will carry divine sanction. Destiny awaits her in her marriage to Almanzo Wilder and their attempt to establish their own version of the pastoral romance.

The manuscript of The First Four Years, which follows the young lovers into their own efforts at homesteading, remained unpublished at her death. Although Wilder had conceived of this book as an entry into adult fiction, she had laid it aside after finding it too painful. To become an adult is one thing. To expand the vision of fiction is another, and the autobiographical detail of The First Four Years challenges the simple optimism of the earlier books. Ambiguities that had remained latent emerge as explicit alternatives to life on the homestead. Town life has permitted Laura’s adolescent social growth and fulfillment, and the town itself, although ugly, now offers economic opportunities denied the farmer. The farm, on the other hand, furnishes a beautiful landscape but forecloses further horizons, the Oregon her father dreams of. The opening chapter frames the young lovers against a benign, star-studded prairie sky, but the second chapter calls all in doubt, for the adult Laura has a new skeptical vision. “I wish you would do something else,” she says to Almanzo. “I don’t always want to be poor and work hard while the people in town take it easy and make money off us” (p. 4). Almanzo’s argument for the independence of the farmer, for the direct equivalence of work and reward, wins her over to a merely tentative acceptance.

The subsequent narrative tries to reconcile the romantic search for the Promised Land to the farmer’s resolve to take root and persist. Laura’s personal maturity must blend with the historical sequence in which the farmer replaces the pioneer. The missing term in this formula is
the broad economic framework in which the pioneer and the farmer struggle, an economy that values cash over land and opportunism over hard work. The novel glances toward but does not face the challenge posed to its central values by the relationship of the farmer to the government, the financial institutions, and the economy as a whole. Such complexities are beyond the ken of this young couple, as they are beyond the province of the earlier books: in Eden or in the Promised Land, neither capital nor civil government is needed. Now, however, the natural disasters that marked the early books are no longer the Wilders's only problems. Their optimism leads them to take on high interest debts, but a deflating economy helps ensure their failure. The story, however, barely acknowledges Almanzo's debt at 3 percent a month, and a man afraid of a Republican victory in 1894 represents the only political commentary (pp. 93, 120). Laura's doubts in her opening dialogue with Almanzo are at root matters of economics and government, but they are soon submerged in the battle with nature.

Similar doubts, however, had earlier counterpointed the evocations of the beauty of the virgin prairie and its conversion to the Garden of the World. The latent skepticism that had redefined the Homestead Act as a bet with the government had turned finally to open disbelief. As Laura grows up she realizes that a family cannot sustain itself on virgin land: her family's success would not have been possible without her father's property in town and the wages he earned at carpentry. She sees families separated by the requirements of the Homestead Act.

The storekeepers stayed in town to run their stores and bach in the rooms behind them, while wives and children lived all summer out on the prairie in claim shanties...to satisfy the law, and the boys broke the sod and planted crops, while the fathers built the town and tried to make money enough to buy food and tools from the east. (Little Town on the Prairie, pp. 49-50)

Experience has modified the vision of the prairie Eden that lured Pa Ingalls from the Wisconsin woodlands. A woman separated from her husband by the requirements of the Homestead Act explains its economic fallacy:

"Whoever makes these laws ought to know that a man that's got enough money to farm, has got enough to buy a farm. If he hasn't got money, he's got to earn it, so why do they make a law that he's got to stay on a claim when he can't? All it means is, his wife and family have got to sit idle on it, seven months of the year. I could be earning something, dressmaking, to help buy the tools and seeds, if somebody didn't have to sit on this claim." (These Happy Golden Years, p. 119)

Laura's own homesteading, as a young wife, takes place not upon a claim still to be won but upon one already established by a self-sufficient bachelor who has a tree claim as well. Nonetheless, even with such a substantial beginning, Laura and Almanzo's life in The First Four
Years is an unrelieved series of disasters. Here­
tofore, trials faced with courage had led always
to reward, but now the lovers are all but de­
stroyed by drought, hail, fire, disease that crip­ples the heroic Almanzo forever, ruinous
debt, and eventually the loss of their home,
their claim, and their second child. Such con­
centrated misfortune jars sadly with the forced
high spirits of the final pages: “The incurable
optimism of the farmer . . . seemed inextricably
to blend with the creed of her pioneer fore­
fathers that ‘it is better farther on’—only in­
stead of farther on in space, it was farther on in
time . . .” (pp. 133–34).

The actual defeat that lies just past the final
pages of this book indicates that the young
Wilders faced problems that faith, hard work,
and courage could not surmount. They were
representative figures in a national failure of
received myth to guide individuals and their
government in the face of new climates and
changing economics. Farm debt, high interest
rates, and low crop prices were connected with
the larger issues of the gold standard, a deflat­
ing economy, surplus production, and railroad
monopoly. The agrarian reformers demanded
that such issues not be left to Providence or to
individual initiative. In that spasm of desperate
demand for economic relief through govern­
ment action we glimpse the institutional begin­
nings of the contemporary welfare state.

Whether government ought to enter directly
into its citizens’ lives is a matter of conviction,
but the acceptance of this entry reaches matur­
ity in our own time. It also runs counter to
every value, implicit or explicit, in Laura Ingalls
Wilder’s story. She is silent upon the role of
government, but she implies that formal govern­
ment is at best suspect and sometimes perni­
cious, and that self-governance is primary and,
finally, sufficient. Laura and Almanzo’s ordeal
is ultimately a moral one. Although their con­
temporaries demanded a new political order,
the Wilders saw no political dimension to their
struggle and responded to defeat only by reas­
serting the myth. They look forward to better
fortune, or a better land, “farther on.”

Their optimism also springs from hindsight,
for they did finally achieve a fine and happy
farm home. The optimism within the story,
however, is a false note, an attempt to impose
the myth of the earlier books upon increas­
ingly intractable material. Beyond The First
Four Years, in the unwritten gap between it
and the journal account of their removal
from Dakota to Missouri, On The Way Home,
lies the defeat of the young Wilders. Their
family saga epitomizes the history of the
Homestead Act, in which a uniquely American
aspiration is defeated by the realities of the
Great Plains.

THE MYTH SURVIVES:
RETURN TO THE WOODLANDS

By 1890 the Wilders had given up on Dakota.
They bided their time in tentative searchings
until they moved to Rocky Ridge Farm in the
Missouri Ozarks. There they found the quali­
ified success that is the province not of the
romance but of the realistic novel. “The Land
of the Big Red Apple” Missouri was called in
brochures that limned a new Eden.16 The
Wilders traveled there in the summer of 1894,
650 miles in a horse-drawn hack piled with a
few belongings. Seven years of drought had dis­
lodged this family from the prairies, but it was
a time of great distress nationally as well. Be­
hind the low farm prices and the debt that
forced the Wilders from their drought-stricken
land lay the misguided monetary policies of
their government, which brought on the Panic
of 1893.17 Other families had been displaced
from their homes in other locations; often the
Wilders met fellow wanderers in search of better
fortune.

Laura’s diary of this trip is sturdily optimis­
tic. She notes the changing terrain, the towns
and farms, and the parade of strangers. The
 parched Dakotas yield gradually to richer farms,
each new river and spring is a comfort and a
joy, and trees are a swelling motif in her entries.
Finally, the wooded hills of the Ozarks thrill
with promise: soft vistas, abundant wood and
water, and between the hills, land that can be
cleared for cultivation.
The road goes up hill and down, and it is rutted and dusty and stony but every turn of the wheels changes our view of the woods and the hills. The sky seems lower here, and it is the softest blue. The distances and the valleys are blue whenever you can see them. It is drowsy country that makes you feel wide awake and alive but somehow contented. (*On The Way Home*, p. 69)

These failed prairie farmers have returned to an Edenic woodland similar to the Big Woods of Wisconsin and the forest-enclosed farms of upstate New York. The homesite they select has timber and rock for building, a flowing spring for water, and apple trees, already planted. Almanzo is able to cut a load of firewood and sell it in town. The omen is clear: they are home.

**CLOSING THE CIRCLE**

Almost half a century separates the establishment of Laura’s ultimately successful home and the celebration of the quest in her fiction. The intervening years see the gradual perfection of Rocky Ridge Farm and the first tentative steps of Mrs. A. J. Wilder as a writer. The new home in Missouri developed by stages from a log cabin to a spacious farmhouse; the land holdings grew from the original forty acres to over two hundred. But the farm alone could not support the family: in the early years they were forced to remove to work in town, Almanzo as a drayman and Laura as a boarding-house cook. Prosperity came through these efforts as well as from Laura’s work for a farm loan association and her occasional journalism.¹⁸ Her success in Missouri finally justified the struggle that had begun in the woods of Wisconsin and afforded her the material for her earliest writing in the farm magazines, but it was a different order of success from the mythic vision that informs the cycle of her children’s books.

Her commitment to her actual life had enabled her to displace the myth but not to dismiss it. As a deep structure in her imagination, it determined what she would write and when she would stop. It could admit of struggle but not of failure, of setback but not of retreat, of growth but not of maturity and—finally—of realism as a style but not of the ironic testing of a dream by the reality of history. The myth that would have encompassed her father’s disappointed dreams, her mother’s and sister’s bleak and impoverished later years, and her own early experience with failure, is the darker myth of tragedy, which ends not in fulfillment but in the wisdom of resignation. The simple narrative of *On The Way Home* presents us the historical Laura as a young adult, already having incorporated failure’s lessons into a pragmatic engagement with her world. Her failure as a writer would be in her final effort, as *The First Four Years* reaches toward the adult world but falls short when her imagination will not comprehend the failure that history had thrust upon it.¹⁹

Even as an aged woman Laura Ingalls Wilder was not resigned. Her children’s books were published during the Great Depression, as their author watched the government she regarded with deep suspicion reach out for unprecedented involvement in people’s lives. These books are not political polemic, but their deepest argument makes almost no concession to secular authority. Their author came in her lifetime to the verge of the modern world but never wholly entered into it. Her adult life required adaptation to a complex society, but her inner vision sanctioned no aid in trouble save one’s self and—at extremes—one’s family. The cycle’s implicit message is optimism and self-reliance. The implicit political dimension of the stories was later developed explicitly by Wilder’s daughter, Rose Wilder Lane, whose instinctive dismay at the New Deal led her to determined opposition to the growth of government power.²⁰ The pattern continues with Roger Lea MacBride, Rose Wilder Lane’s god-son and heir, and the presidential candidate of the Libertarian party in 1976.

Myth blurs distinctions between history, literature, and political tradition, presenting its simple argument for all occasions and insisting on adjusting history and present reality to itself.
The novels tell of a family’s failure on the plains and its retreat, but they also reveal a parallel literary failure to adapt the myth to reality, to evaluate the romance by the realistic novel. This failure questions as well the adequacy of a political tradition that rejects the expanded role of government that the prairie experience first engendered. It is tempting to speak here of a failure of maturity—personal, artistic, and political—in an American vision that adjusts with difficulty, if at all, to the tragic nature of a complex world. This political vision, however, has been substantially diluted by the liberal tradition regnant since 1932, and the popularity of Laura Ingalls Wilder’s books probably measures the strength of a sentimental attachment to values that our nation was by and large willing to modify in practice, at least for a time.

The 1980 election marked the reemergence of that dormant political tradition under the leadership of a president whose favorite television program was “Little House on the Prairie.” This shift in national sentiment was in large measure a response to a sense of national failure; the terms of our argument would seem to require us to identify it as a relapse into political immaturity. But here we perhaps verge on error in attaching the metaphor of growth to a vision too persistent to be outgrown. The virtue of this vision lies in its romantic readiness for challenge, a perennially youthful optimism that is particularly American. The resilience and hope that defy experience and refuse the consolation of defeat are a function not of age but of heritage. Henry James’s representative American speaks of his countrymen as possessed of “old heads and young hearts.” In this paradox lie both the success and the failure of Laura Ingalls Wilder.

NOTES

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1. Laura Ingalls Wilder, On The Way Home (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), p. 27. Other works cited in this article are Little House in the Big Woods (1932), Farmer Boy (1933), Little House on the Prairie (1935), On the Banks of Plum Creek (1937), By the Shores of Silver Lake (1939), The Long Winter (1940), Little Town on the Prairie (1941), These Happy Golden Years (1943), The First Four Years (1971). All are published by Harper and Row.

2. The problematical nature of The First Four Years has been well described by Rosa Ann Moore in “Laura Ingalls Wilder’s Orange Notebooks and the Art of the Little House Books,” Children’s Literature 4 (1975): 105–19. I am indebted in many ways to Professor Moore’s groundbreaking work with the Wilder materials and for her continuing help with my own interests.


4. The earliest reference to Wilder’s “life story” is in a letter from her daughter Rose Wilder Lane, ca. 1914, in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library, West Branch, Iowa. Laura Ingalls Wilder published articles in Missouri Ruralist from 1911 to 1925; many have been reprinted in that journal starting on 23 August 1980. A typescript of “Pioneer Girl” is among...
the Rose Wilder Lane papers in the Herbert Hoover Presidential Library. The earliest reference to it is in Rose Wilder Lane's diary entry for 7 May 1930.

5. Address delivered at the Detroit Public Library, 16 October 1937. The manuscript is in the Hoover Library.


7. See Billington, *Westward Expansion*, p. 648, on the prophetic demands of the Populists.

8. Oregon was substantially settled in 1842–44 and became a territory in 1848. Dakota did not become a territory until 1861, and large scale settlement did not occur until the “Dakota Boom” of 1878–85, in which the Ingalls family participated. See Billington, *Westward Expansion*, pp. 445–52, 622–24.


14. This is approximately the 98th meridian. As a line, of course, it is merely a convenience of map-making; we speak really of a fluctuating transitional zone. Twenty inches is the annual precipitation needed to grow crops by the methods practiced in the humid eastern woodlands.


16. The phrase seems to have been associated with the Stark Nursery of Louisiana, Missouri, and the promotional literature for the state generally. See Floyd Shoemaker, *Missouri and Missourians*, 5 vols. (Chicago: Lewis Bros., 1943), 2:794.


