

JMS: Twenty Years of Expressing the Mennonite Tradition in an Ever-Changing World

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When Harry Loewen first told me about his dream to establish a learned journal for all of Mennonite Canada he took me by surprise; I couldn't help thinking that he might be getting a bit too big for his lederhosen. Did he really think that his Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg required such an ambitious scholarly outlet? With typically infectious enthusiasm Harry soon convinced me that his dream was indeed a realistic possibility, although not quite in its original form as it turned out. Harry was banking on the cooperation of Mennonite scholars at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario, but discovered that they were planning to establish *The Conrad Grebel Review*, a scholarly journal that would have a theological orientation. Left on his own, Harry decided to establish a more secular historical and literary journal that would not be a direct rival to the one in Ontario. With characteristic conviction he promised in the first issue that "*The Journal of Mennonite Studies* will be firmly rooted in the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, but will seek to express that tradition in an ever-changing world in which Mennonites are also subject to change."¹ It was a statement of principle to which he adhered faithfully throughout his fourteen years as founding editor of *JMS*.

While the long-established *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, published in Goshen, Indiana, served as a useful model for Harry, he had no intention of making *JMS* a pale Canadian version of it. He knew he had neither the scholarly nor the financial resources for a quarterly, and he soon realized that even two issues per annum would not be feasible. After all, *MQR* had been founded in 1926 and American-Mennonite scholarship was at least a generation ahead of its Canadian counterpart, which was just beginning to gather steam in the seventies and early eighties. Harry decided to publish one issue per year, at least initially, but to leave open the possibility of a second issue in those years when a greater volume of articles and other materials would warrant it. Actually, he discovered over the years that it was more practical and less costly to expand the annual volume when necessary than to produce two separate volumes within a given year.

Harry shrewdly timed the debut of his journal so as to benefit from a unique conference on the then current state of Mennonite scholarship and research in the major fields and disciplines, a conference on the "State of the Art of Mennonite Studies" handsomely funded by the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and held at St. Michael's College, Toronto, in June 1982. The conference itself was scheduled to coincide with the publication of Frank Epp's *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940. A People's Struggle for Survival*, Volume 2 of a then-projected four-volume history of the Mennonites in Canada. The conference was a windfall for Harry. He was able to publish the conference papers as the first issue of *JMS* under the guest editorship of T. D. (Ted) Regehr, one of the organizers of the Toronto conference and the scholar who would continue the "Mennonites in Canada" historical series after the premature death of Frank Epp.

That first issue in 1983 gave *JMS* not only immediate legitimacy as a scholarly journal but also gave Mennonite scholars an up-to-date picture of the various fields of research—what had already been done and what still needed to be done. Disciplines like History, Literature, Sociology, Economics, Education, Religious Studies, Theology, Politics and Geography were thoroughly reviewed and analyzed in these articles in terms of their Mennonite input. Established scholars like Ted Regehr, Roy Vogt, John H. Redekop, William Klassen, Gerald Friesen, Leo Driedger, Calvin Redekop, John Warkentin, Waldemar Janzen and of course Harry Loewen himself, gave "state-of-the-art" accounts of their respective disciplines and pointed the way for other scholars to follow. In his Introduction, guest editor Regehr pointed out the basic duality in Mennonite scholarship: "Some scholars are clearly very much concerned about pure research, scholarship and truth for its own sake. Others are more concerned about the application and relevance of discovered or revealed truth to current and practical

problems.”² Thus, the parameters and possibilities for Canadian-Mennonite scholarship had been defined and illustrated and *JMS* was off and running.

This inaugural volume of *JMS*, comprehensive and diversified as it was, could not, of course, define the journal's specific nature and goals. That was left for subsequent issues. In his “The Birth of a New Journal” in Volume 1, Harry's “manifesto,” he made it clear that *JMS* would not be an elitist academic journal intended exclusively for scholars and academic specialists, but rather a journal meant to attract a more general Mennonite “lay” readership as well. Harry stated what the character and goals of *JMS* would be based on three major concerns:

We believe there is a need for a journal which will reflect, support, and evaluate the emerging and developing literature, art, and culture among Mennonites, with a focus on Canadian Mennonites. There is also a need for a journal which will seek to come to terms with an urban culture to which Canadian Mennonites find themselves exposed in increasing measure. Finally, there is a need for a journal which will grapple with intellectual and academic issues to which university-oriented Mennonites are exposed.³

Note that only the last of these three concerns refers specifically to academic research and that Harry placed considerable emphasis on literature and art. And his emphasis on the new urban culture adopted by Canadian Mennonites showed his awareness of changing trends.

Having specialized not only in history but in theology and German literature as well, Harry had the right professional background to edit the kind of journal he envisioned. Harry and I also shared a special interest in Russian-Mennonite history and culture, an interest we had in common locally with fellow Winnipeg scholars like Victor Doerksen, Abe Dueck and George Epp, among others. From the beginning Harry and the rest of us on the Editorial Committee agreed that *JMS* should place a strong emphasis on Russian-Mennonite and Canadian-Mennonite history and culture and that it should publish not only scholarly articles but also creative writing and book reviews. Interestingly enough, although we may not have had this consciously in mind at the time, this had been precisely the emphasis and format of Arnold Dyck's secular *Volkswarte* and *Warte-Jahrbuch*, journals that ran in the mid-thirties and early forties.⁴ Unfortunately, Dyck's *Warte* project was somewhat premature and could not be sustained for more than a few years because it was lacking in financial support and sufficient readers.

Harry was more fortunate in that respect. Not only did his Chair, sponsored jointly by Dr. David Friesen of Winnipeg and the federal government's Multicultural Secretariat, provide him with most of the funds to produce a journal, but the University of Winnipeg itself provided support in the form of secretarial help and by covering the mailing expenses. The D. W. Friesen printing firm in Altona, Manitoba, also helped by printing the early editions at a special rate. After that the printing of *JMS* was taken over by the University of Winnipeg's printing department. To build up his subscription roster Harry drew on a list of subscribers kindly furnished by Roy Vogt, publisher of the Winnipeg-based monthly *Mennonite Mirror*, a general magazine that in a sense prepared many of its readers for a journal like *JMS*. Harry also drew up further lists of potential subscribers on his own. It did not take long for *JMS* to reach a circulation of over 400, a circulation that reached 500 at its peak. Curiously enough, the circulation is still around 450 after twenty years, although the size of each printing has ranged between 600 and 700, of which at least 500 copies are usually mailed out.

One of the first things Harry did to get *JMS* more firmly established and in the public eye was to organize, in cooperation with colleagues at Winnipeg's Canadian Mennonite Bible College and Mennonite Brethren Bible College, annual symposiums at which Mennonite scholars gave papers that provided ready material for inclusion in the journal. The symposiums alternated among the University and the two Mennonite colleges and were invariably well attended. Harry also took the initiative in soliciting articles for *JMS*. He was in contact with a wide circle of Mennonite scholars and knew how to commission articles by suggesting suitable topics to explore when he knew the expertise and will were there. He also relied on us "regulars" on the Editorial Committee to come up with articles as often as possible, as he himself usually did. He also expected us to do most of the copyediting while he served as the "front man" who designed each issue and made sure that its contents were respectable and submitted on time. When Harry asked me to join him as co-editor in 1990, the year I retired from the University of Winnipeg, I suspected that this was his way of binding me more tightly to him so that he could continue to utilize me as a reader, copyeditor and contributor. I must add, however, that he was a very warm and benign taskmaster and it is interesting to note, in this respect, that five of the original eight members of the Editorial Committee — Leo Driedger, Abe Dueck, John J. Friesen, Peter Pauls and Al Reimer — are still serving in that capacity 20 years later.

Another scholar and colleague who has been an important mentor and guide for *JMS* is James Urry of Victoria University of Wellington in New Zealand. James, who has been in the vanguard of Russian-

Mennonite studies for many years, has frequently been of great help to the editors and to the rest of us at *JMS*. He has given much sound advice on editorial matters over the years and has not been afraid to offer constructive criticism when needed. He has also made more contributions by way of major research articles than any other scholar has—14, to be exact. Most of his articles have been ground-breaking studies in Russian-Mennonite history viewed from new perspectives and customarily placed within wider non-Mennonite contexts. Not only has James Urry been an exemplary scholarly model to follow, but he has also been unstintingly generous in assisting other scholars with their *JMS* projects not only with advice but with relevant research materials where needed. I might also point out that in recent years, especially, more “outsiders”—non-Mennonite scholars as well as American-Mennonite scholars—have been added to the roster of contributors as the journal has become more widely known.

Going through successive volumes of *JMS* one can see how the annual symposiums provided not only content but also tended to set character by providing dominant themes and focuses for the various issues. Volume 2 (1984) set the stage for that kind of format with articles by John B. Toews and Harry Loewen, which were given as papers at a symposium in November, 1983, on the relations between the General Conference Mennonites and the Mennonite Brethren in Canada. Toews’ “Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada” delved into the irreconcilable differences between the Mennonite Brethren movement and the Old Church in Russia (which became the General Conference in Canada), differences that allowed for a degree of cooperation, especially during the migration to Canada in the twenties, but would not bring about a reunification.⁵ Harry’s paper, on the other hand, was of a literary nature and traced the beginnings of a Mennonite creative literature in Russia and its much wider and more rapid development in Canada.⁶ Volume 2 contained additional articles on Russian-Mennonite history—one an assessment of Johann Cornies by Harvey L. Dyck⁷, another a reappraisal of Russian-Mennonite immigrants of the twenties by Henry Paetkau⁸—as well as two further literary articles: “In Search of a Mennonite Imagination” by Victor Doerksen⁹ and “Derche Bloom Råde’: Arnold Dyck and the Comic Irony of the *Forstei*” by Al Reimer.¹⁰

Volume 3 (1985) carried half a dozen articles on Russian-Mennonite history, four of them originating as papers given at a symposium in 1984. Included in this issue was James Urry’s “Through the Eye of a Needle: Wealth and the Mennonite Experience in Imperial Russia,” certainly one of the most seminal articles ever published in *JMS*. Another highly seminal article in the same issue was Werner O.

Packull's, "The Origins of Swiss Anabaptism in the Context of the Reformation of the Common Man," which has been widely quoted over the years and was recently included in an international anthology. Volume 5 (1987) included three innovative and diverse papers given at a University of Winnipeg symposium in May, 1987 on the topic "The Influence of World War II on Canadian Mennonites."¹¹ This issue also included Rudy Wiebe's "The Skull in the Swamp", an intriguing account of his controversial start as a novelist in the early sixties. In the 1989 issue (Vol. 7) *JMS* got another boost from the bi-centennial of Russian Mennonites with valuable articles on Mennonite involvement in wars—from the Crimean War (Urry and Lawrence Klippenstein)¹², to the Franco-German War (Barbara Dick), to World War II (Ken Reddig). Under Harry's editorship there were other articles that dealt with Mennonite involvement in wars, especially the troubled period that began for the Russian Mennonites in World War I so positively with their splendid alternative service record (the *Sanitätsdienst*) and ended so negatively with the *Selbstschutz*, the rash military self-defense organization that instead of helping made the situation during the Civil War even worse for the Mennonites.¹³ This rather ambivalent chapter in Russian-Mennonite history has probably been more openly dealt with in *JMS* than it has anywhere else.

By 1992, when *JMS* completed its first decade, Harry was able to report:

The journal has evolved in a gradual and rather natural way, providing a vehicle for a growing literature by and about Mennonites. More or less scholarly books in a wide range of interests and disciplines are appearing in ever greater numbers, and the editors would like to publish reviews of those which are or should (in our view) be of interest to our readers.¹⁴

The book reviews were indeed proliferating and Volume 10 carried 19 of them (contrast that with no reviews in Volume 1, two in Volume 2, four in Volume 3 and no less than 29 in Volume 20). Victor Doerksen of the Department of German, University of Manitoba, had taken over as Book Review Editor with Volume 7 (1989) and remained in that position until he retired in 1997. Since then there have been two book review editors to assign and edit the growing number of reviews; between 1996 and 2002 Abe Dueck of the Centre for Mennonite Brethren Studies edited book reviews pertaining to history, social sciences and religious studies and Mavis Reimer of the Department of English, University of Winnipeg, edited reviews pertaining to fiction and poetry. The size of the journal was also changing: Volume 10 had grown to just under 250 pages, as compared with the considerably slimmer earlier issues, and

JMS has kept on expanding under Royden Loewen's editorship (with Peter Pauls, retired Professor of English, University of Winnipeg, serving as copy editor). Harry had also given the journal a livelier front cover design with drawings, photos and inscriptions replacing the staid brown blankness of earlier covers.

It was inevitable that when Royden Loewen, who succeeded Harry Loewen (the two Loewens are not related) as Chair in Mennonite Studies, took over the editorial reins of JMS with Volume 15 in 1997 there would be further changes. Not only was Roy's academic training different from Harry's in that he was first and foremost a research historian, but perhaps more importantly he belonged to a new and younger generation of scholars who had not grown up in the old "triumphalist" school of Mennonite history which our generation had to cope with, and thus had a more critical and professionally disinterested view of Mennonitism. For this younger generation of Mennonite scholars taking an anti-traditionalist stance towards Mennonite research subjects is entirely natural, nor do they shy away from pursuing negative aspects of their history and culture. In this, they are very much in tune with Mennonite creative writers and artists, who have been taking radical stances towards Mennonite experience for decades.

In Volume 15 (1997), Roy's first as editor, he characterized JMS as "a reputable, peer-reviewed interdisciplinary medium, reaching both a Mennonite and wider academic and literary readership" (Foreword). This description struck a new note by stressing both the scholarly nature of the journal and its mandate to become part of a larger world of research and scholarship. Under a new heading of "JMS Forum" Roy ran eight articles drawn from a 1996 symposium that focused on Ted Regehr's *Mennonites In Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed*, Volume 3 in the "Mennonites in Canada" series, which in Roy's words "tells the hitherto uncharted story of the Mennonite experience in the highly technologized, urban and integrated society of mid-twentieth century Canada" (Foreword). The articles were "responses" by various scholars on some of the main themes of Regehr's book and made for a lively JMS issue that was augmented by five other research articles, five works of short fiction, two review articles and 29 book reviews.

Roy followed this auspicious debut as editor with annual symposiums that focused on neglected, non-traditional themes and ideas reflecting some of the contemporary debates on society and culture now favored by many academics. They included such topics as "Mennonites and the Soviet Inferno" (1997), "EnGendering the Past" (1998), "History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations" (2000), "Mennonites and the City" (2001) and "Return of the Kanadier" (2002). These neoteric fields of research have provided recent issues of JMS

with articles that offer vital and expanded perspectives of Mennonite experience and show how those new perspectives relate to the non-Mennonite world. By way of example, Volume 16 contains articles by Colin P. Neufeldt, Peter Letkemann, Marlene Epp and Harry Loewen that examine the tragic history of "Mennonites and the Soviet Inferno" from new and compassionately discerning perspectives. Of special note, perhaps, is Krista Taves' graduate-school paper "Dividing the Righteous: Soviet Mennonites as Cultural Icons in the Canadian Russian Mennonite Narrative, 1923-1938," an article that probes, in a new and arresting way, the tendency of Russian-Mennonites who emigrated to Canada in the 1920s to see their Russian experiences in terms of martyrdom and who extended that view to the Mennonites who were victimized in the Soviet Union between the wars, thus blinding themselves to the changes that were actually taking place among the Soviet Mennonites.

The "EnGendering the Past" symposium, by way of example, provided ten papers for the JMS Forum (Volume 17, 1999), papers that brought unprecedented focus to bear on the role of women in Mennonite history—from Katie Funk Wiebe's sparkling and challenging key-note address "Me Tarzan, Son of Menno—You Jane, Mennonite Mama" (the title speaks for itself) and Linda Huebert Hecht's prodigiously researched "A Brief Moment in Time: Informal Leadership and Shared Authority Among Sixteenth-Century Anabaptist Women," to such probing male-produced contributions as Stephen B. Boyd's "Theological Roots of Gender Reconciliation in 16th Century Anabaptism: A Prolegomena" and James Urry's "Gender, Generation and Social Identity in Russian Mennonite Society." A clever touch added to this volume was the picture on the cover: Jan de Bray's 17th-century painting of "Abraham and Margaretha," a prosperous-looking, middle-aged Mennonite couple smiling and contentedly holding hands.

The "History of Aboriginal-Mennonite Relations" JMS Forum in Volume 19 (2001) also came up with important new research and produced an amazing variety of written formats ranging all the way from a meticulously researched but unsettling (to Mennonite readers) article like Donovan Giesbrecht's "Metis, Mennonites and the 'Unsettled Prairie,'" which presented a disturbing picture of how early Mennonite settlers in Manitoba were seen to have "stolen" land from the Metis, to the personal memories of aboriginal writers like Jennifer S. H. Brown and the unusual but eye-opening "conversation" between Janis Brass and Marilyn Iwama on their experiences in Metis-Mennonite homes. These informal and self-reflexive forms of exploring this symposium topic may not have pleased academic and research "purists," but they provided many unusual and unexpected insights

for the reader to ponder. Even the more standard research articles in this volume, in the words of the Editor in his Foreword, "are especially committed to applying new academic models to this complex [Aboriginal-Mennonite] relationship." Indeed, some of these "articles" may be said to combine scholarly and creative writing in new and innovative forms that may become more common in the future.

These recent examples illustrate how the nature, range and focus of *JMS* are changing under Roy Loewen's editorship. And yet, looking back, it seems only natural that Harry Loewen, given his eclectic interests in Mennonite history, theology and literature, should have developed a scholarly journal based on the more traditional and formal styles of research and scholarly writing that were taken for granted in his time. The strong emphasis on Russian-Mennonite studies can also be seen as growing naturally from the Russian-Mennonite heritage shared by most Manitoba Mennonites and many others in various parts of Canada. Coming here as refugees in the twenties, the Russian Mennonites arrived with a powerful nostalgia for their lost homeland, a nostalgia that soon solidified into a commitment to preserve and understand the history and culture of that lost world. Arnold Dyck and other early and mid-twentieth century writers pioneered that process with journals like the *Warte* and the important Echo-Verlag series of books on Russian-Mennonite life and history before the Revolution (most of the series has been translated into English in recent years). And *JMS*, as part of its *raison d'être*, has from the beginning made many valuable contributions in scholarly research to that heritage.

Studies in Canadian-Mennonite history and culture, especially those dealing with the 1870s "Kanadier" tradition, having started later and taking longer to develop, are only now coming into their own. And here again Roy Loewen came along at the right time. As a highly productive scholar himself, he has concentrated on the Canadian-Mennonite tradition, especially in Manitoba, as it has developed since the 1870s. It is, after all, his own tradition and one that it is only natural for him to pursue as editor of *JMS*. Roy knows that urbanization is affecting the process of Mennonite acculturation and producing an ever more sophisticated society and culture, a confident urban society that no longer considers itself an isolated minority but that is still proud of its past and wants to know more about it. And that again is where *JMS* comes in, as well as other Canadian-Mennonite journals like *The Conrad Grebel Review*, with its emphasis on Mennonite ethics, theology and culture, and Delbert Plett's ambitious Steinbach, Manitoba-based history magazine *Preservings* with its plethora of articles on Mennonite personalities, family histories and regional historical and cultural topics.

While the main focus of *JMS* through the years has been on Russian and Canadian Mennonite secular history, especially the latter in recent years, this survey would not be complete without further mention of other themes and topics that have received prominent attention. The journal has included Mennonite creative writing in the form of short fiction and poems in all but a few of its volumes. The fiction alone, some of it by well-known authors like Armin Wiebe and Warren Kliever and some of it translated from authors like Arnold Dyck, numbers almost two dozen, combined with at least a dozen examples of Mennonite poetry in both English and German. Add to that over thirty articles on Mennonite literature and literary themes, as well as several articles on Mennonite music (by Wesley Berg), and important articles on *Plautdietsch*, Mennonite Low German, by linguistic experts like Jack Thiessen, Reuben Epp and Jacob Loewen, and we can appreciate how strongly the literary and cultural focus has been represented.

The same can be said of the focus on Mennonite religious history and theological issues. There have been about 20 articles on the Anabaptist period alone, including a fine series of six articles on Menno Simons and his times by the University of Manitoba religious scholar Egil Grisliis. Other valuable studies on Anabaptism have come from such scholars as Abraham Friesen of Santa Barbara, California, and Werner O. Packull, Conrad Grebel College. Another fine religious article is "Mennonite Swedenborgians" by Adolf Ens and Leonard Doell, which appeared in Volume 10 (1992) (101-117). Altogether, no fewer than 40 research articles have been devoted to the study of Mennonite religious history and the issues they have raised.

Looking back over the two decades of *JMS* one realizes that one of its underlying assumptions from the beginning has been that Mennonitism has not only a spiritual history going back to its Anabaptist origins, but that it also has a rich ethnic history that constitutes the flesh-and-blood body housing that religious soul. That diversified Mennonite ethnicity stretches over close to five centuries by now and provides endless sources of scholarly investigation just as Mennonite experience provides endless material for creative writers and artists to draw upon. Rudy Wiebe's latest novel, *Sweeter Than All The World*, is a wonderful example of how the spiritual and ethnic histories of Mennonitism can be combined in a work of fiction that covers the entire span of Mennonitism from Anabaptist times to the present. And in a sense this is the kind of integration Harry Loewen had in mind when he designed a scholarly journal that would be secular in nature but based on Anabaptist principles.

As already mentioned, the rapidly growing urban culture of Mennonites in this country has had a reciprocal effect on the development of *JMS*. Inheriting a comparatively narrow, insular and

self-referencing tradition of Canadian-Mennonite research and writing, *JMS* has from the outset tried to establish higher and broader standards of scholarship with a more secular and objective approach to Mennonite history and culture and has welcomed scholars and critics from outside the small circle of Mennonite “insiders.” This has not always been easy to do. In the early years, especially, Harry was sometimes hard put to find enough articles for a given issue to meet the standards we were trying to set. He did not usually have the luxury of having so many articles on hand that he could choose to include only those of highest quality. And some of the articles he did include needed to be thoroughly reworked and scrupulously edited before they were fit to be published. For Roy this is less of a problem as the articles are more numerous these days and usually written by well-trained professionals. A minor problem does arise from the symposiums at times: namely, should all the papers be included in the next issue of *JMS*, or only those of the highest quality? And the younger Mennonite scholars now coming along in ever-greater numbers, while bold and original in research initiative and applying sophisticated methodologies, do not always display writing skills of a comparable quality and allow themselves to fall under the spell of trendy jargon and pretentious phraseology.

In conclusion, one can say with confidence that *JMS* has come a long way as a scholarly journal designed to serve not only the growing world of Mennonite research and scholarship but the Mennonite community as a whole. It has consistently tried to maintain—and to raise wherever possible—its standards of research and scholarship in an ever-widening and changing range of Mennonite experience. There is little doubt that urbanization, regardless of its cultural advantages and social benefits, will continue to dilute and erode the ethnic context in which our people have lived their faith and their social customs for so long. The role of *JMS* has been and will continue to be that of compensating for that loss by keeping alive the Mennonite past and examining it from as many points of view and critical standards as the scholars working in the Mennonite vineyard can bring to bear. One can only hope that these new studies will not become so esoteric and specialized as to discourage our “lay” readers from reading them. It is more likely, however, that wider and more critical perspectives on Mennonites will give both academic and general readers of *JMS* more revelatory and well-informed perceptions of Mennonitism both past and present. And so, the future of *JMS* seems assured in the hands of an energetic and innovative editor and an experienced and dedicated Editorial Committee as more and more Mennonite and non-Mennonite scholars go on sifting, reconstructing and expressing the realities of the Mennonite world as it has been and as it is today.

Notes

- ¹ Harry Loewen, "The Birth of a New Journal," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* [hereafter *JMS*], 1 (1983) 4.
- ² T.D. Regehr, "Introduction," *JMS* 1 (1983): 6-10.
- ³ Loewen, "The Birth of a New Journal," 4.
- ⁴ Arnold Dyck was a Manitoba Mennonite author and publisher. See: Al Reimer, "The Role of Arnold Dyck in Canadian Mennonite Writing," *JMS* 9 (1991): 83-90.
- ⁵ John B. Toews, "Brethren and Old Church Relations in Pre-World War I Russia: Setting the Stage for Canada," *JMS* 2 (1984), 42-59.
- ⁶ Harry Loewen, "The Mennonite Writer as Witness and Critic," *JMS* 2 (1984), 113-123.
- ⁷ Harvey L. Dyck, "Russian Servitor and Mennonite Hero: Light and Shadow in Images of Johann Cornies," *JMS* 2 (1984), 9-28, and "Agronomist Gavel's Biography of Johann Cornies (1789-1848), trans. and ed. by Harvey Dyck, *JMS* 4 (1982), 29-41.
- ⁸ Henry Paetkau, "Russian Mennonite Immigrants of the 1920s: A Reappraisal," *JMS* 2 (1984), 72-85.
- ⁹ Victor G. Doerksen, "In Search of a Mennonite Imagination," *JMS* 2 (1984), 104-112.
- ¹⁰ Al Reimer, "'Derche Bloom Råde': Arnold Dyck and the Comic Irony of the *Forstei*," *JMS* 2 (1984), 60-71.
- ¹¹ See T. D. Regehr, "The Influence of World War II on Mennonites in Canada," *JMS* 5 (1987), 73-89; Marlene Epp, "Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the 'Underside,'" *JMS* 5 (1987), 90-107; and George K. Epp, "Mennonite Immigration to Canada After World War II," *JMS* 5 (1987), 108-119.
- ¹² See James Urry and Lawrence Klippenstein, "Mennonites and the Crimean War, 1854-56," *JMS*, 7 (1989), 9-32; Harry Loewen, trans. and ed., "Recollections of the Franco-German War, 1870-71," by Barbara (Böhr) Dick, *JMS* 7 (1989), 33-50; and Ken Reddig, "Judge Adamson Versus the Mennonites of Manitoba During World War II," *JMS* 7 (1989), 51-70.
- ¹³ See Al Reimer, "*Sanitätsdienst* and *Selbstschutz*: Russian-Mennonite Nonresistance in World War I and its Aftermath," *JMS*, 11 (1993), 135-148; David G. Rempel, "Mennonite Medics in Russia During World War I," *JMS* 11 (1993), 149-161; James Urry, "Mennonites, Nationalism and the State in Imperial Russia," *JMS* 12 (1994), 65-88; James Urry, "After the Rooster Crowed: Some Issues Concerning the Interpretation of Mennonite/Bolshevik Relations During the Early Soviet Period," *JMS* 13 (1995), 26-50.
- ¹⁴ Preface, *JMS*, 10.

Remembering a Mennonite Studies Course at the University of Winnipeg

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I believe it was 1985 or 1986 when I first registered in Professor Harry Loewen's course in Mennonite Literature at the University of Winnipeg. I knew nothing of Mennonites, aside from what I'd gleaned from Professor Don Bailey's lecture on the Anabaptists in a first-year European History course – a course that covered some 300 years in two months. That short introduction had sparked my interest. Also, as an English major, I wanted to expand my reading beyond the mainstream British and American literature that crowded the reading lists of our English courses in those days. Professor Loewen had Canadian books on his course, and that was where my interests lay. I was Canadian. I was not Mennonite, and I did not realize, then, that Mennonites had anything much to do with me. Little did I know I had grown up in their very midst. All my life I had been virtually surrounded by Mennonites – as I was soon to discover.

The things that students take away from their teachers' classrooms are not always exactly what the teachers intend them to take away – a fact I fully realize, now that I'm a teacher myself. So I'm sure that there was much going on in that class that, had I been more diligent, I

would remember more clearly. I suppose I could go and look in my old notebooks, study up, as if for an exam, and get the facts straight. But instead I want to speak of the things that have stayed with me for twenty years, things I don't have to go and look up, ideas that have shaped my own thinking and writing, and the way I teach literature.

Professor Loewen is an exemplary teacher. His enthusiasm for his subject and his sincere interest in his students were evident in every class. His aim was to educate us about Mennonite culture, to reveal to us its value systems, beliefs, and historical roots. While all of the other students in the class were raised within that culture, I was not. Yet I was never made to feel like an outsider. Nor did Professor Loewen ever try to convert me (and in the interests of mutual respect, I refrained from trying to convert him).

I recall that the course was carefully designed. We studied works by Mennonite writers from the hard-hitting realism of the earliest text—*No Strangers in Exile* by Hans Harder, translated by Al Reimer, to the surreal, postmodern intricacies of Rudy Wiebe's novels, deepening our understanding with each new book we read and discussed together. In the process, I was introduced to information about Mennonite religion and culture that didn't merely help me to understand an "other" ethnic group, but helped me to understand the very society in which I had grown up. For I began to realize how influential Mennonites had been in shaping the city where I lived and the university at which I studied. Even more valuable, in my view, was my introduction to the considerable Mennonite contribution to art in Canada. It was in Professor Loewen's class that I first heard the name of Di Brandt, even before she had published her first book – the nationally acclaimed *questions i asked my mother*. Since that course I have a renewed awareness of and appreciation for the Mennonite voices in my own community – Patrick Friesen, Sarah Klassen, Armin Weibe, Sandra Birdsell, Diane Driedger, David Bergen, and many others, including some astounding new voices among whom I count several of my own students.

This cultural exchange is of course an important part of what we do in the study of the Humanities. But most importantly, I think, it was in this course that I gained a deeper understanding of the mysterious and complex origins of literature itself. In Harry Loewen's class, we approached the texts in a way that differed from my usual experience of studying literature in an academic setting to that point in my life. Instead of concentrating on the opinions of critics who had interpreted the symbolic structures and thematic concerns of the literature for us, Professor Loewen drew our attention to the circumstances in which those texts had been produced. He encouraged us to consider the cultural context out of which the literature emerged – with special

attention to the *difficulties* artists encountered in their desire and ability to create their art.

We learned to take into account the material hardships – poverty, imprisonment, the harsh necessity of physical labour. And, even more illuminating to me, we learned of the psychological impediments – impediments that sometimes had their roots in the very history of the artists' own culture, in this case a culture that valued truth so highly it distrusted the very practice of story-telling, with all the artistic embellishment that it entails.

A belief system that, at heart, did not value art?

This was indeed a new idea to me.

I had been raised and educated to admire the accomplishments of Yeats, Joyce, and Seamus Heaney. How easy their achievements suddenly seemed, raised as they were in a culture where poets were kings. I began to look at literature in a new way – not just Mennonite literature, but the literature of the members of any group that had been silenced or among whom artistic creation was not valorized.

So when I think about that course in Mennonite Literature, I see that it was not only a course about Mennonite literature. It had, as its highly inspirational subtext, a commentary on the strength and determination of the artistic spirit. This also is surely a vital element of what we study in the humanities. In closing I'd like to thank Harry Loewen for the insights he shared so freely with his students during his career at the University of Winnipeg. We were all certainly fortunate to have him here as a teacher for eighteen years, and we continue to value his work as a scholar and writer.