Canadian Geographers and Their Contributions to Mennonite Studies

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When I received the invitation to participate in this Conference I demurred because I have not worked on Mennonite topics for over two decades. I told Frank Epp to seek out one of our younger geographers who was more active in this field. As you can see that did not happen. Once I began work I found out all too quickly that I need not have been all that concerned. The fact is that the geographical research literature is very thin. Fortunately it is quite varied, so that there are at least examples of different kinds of approaches on which I can base my talk. What I will do is offer some explanations of why the contributions are so few, review the scholarly literature which exists, and end up with some thoughts on what geographers might usefully do in the future. We will find that part of the explanation for the limited work done by geographers may lie in the very nature of geography itself and in combination with the state of the discipline in Canada.

GEOGRAPHY AS A DISCIPLINE IN RELATION TO MENNONITE STUDIES

Geography takes as its starting point the surface of the earth. The earth as the home of man is central to geographical enquiry: spatial patterns and connections, man-land relationships, the total character of regions, and how and why all these have changed through time are basic themes in our geographical scholarly endeavours.

People create their own geography. The economic aspirations, religious and social values, aesthetic attitudes, and ecological concepts of Mennonites interacting within the natural environment and the wider socio-economic and administrative world shapes the geography of the areas where they live and form distinctive regions.

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Obviously then an ethnic or religious group can be studied geographically. Usually this will be done by examining the group's spatial distribution and any significant resulting relationships; by investigating the group's associations with natural, social and economic variables within an area; and by studying the total ensemble of human and physical features within the region occupied by the group and its interrelationships with other parts of the world. This implies a variety of research objectives and approaches.

The important point for our purposes here, however, is that geographers do not address themselves to the essential elements of Mennonite identity and life — the theology, culture, and historical events which make Mennonites distinctive among the world's peoples — for their own sakes. That research is the responsibility of other disciplines, where a considerable mass of scholarship has accumulated about which we will hear later in this conference. Geographers often make use of that information in their own research on Mennonites, but as a means of explaining the problems central to their own scholarly concerns. When we investigate Mennonites we tend to study them within the broad context of the earth as the home of man — that is population distribution and change, settlement, land use, organization of economic activities, communications, relationships to the environment, settlement patterns and facilities, urban centres, and the cultural landscape. These are generally analyzed and presented in the context of other geographical studies of the earth, rather than in their relationship to Mennonite studies. Further there is a pronounced tendency to specialize within some field of the discipline recognized as important by other geographers. The result is that no significant number of geographers concentrates in a sustained way on Mennonite research topics. By a significant number I mean at least half a dozen or so scholars who exchange ideas and stimulate one another in their research endeavours. I should add that some geographers deliberately do not specialize on a particular topic within geography but concentrate on a country or region and attempt to acquire a comprehensive scholarly understanding of that part of the world which they can then communicate to others. Thus, despite much specialization in the discipline the broad comprehensive approach is still encouraged in geography.

There are other very practical reasons for the limited number of geographical studies of Mennonites. The number of geographers in Canada is small. Most of us are busy doing essential reconnaissance exploration of the geography of man in Canada. Mennonites, of course, are an essential element of this geography, but most geographers who have written on Mennonites also work in other areas of the discipline. We have only one outstanding specialist, H. L. Sawatzky, who has made
Mennonites his research area, and even he is interested in other geographical topics in which he is doing significant work.

For a first-rate review of the variety of ways in which geographers approach ethnic studies see H. Schlichtmann (1977).

GEOGRAPHICAL STUDIES OF MENNONITES

Enough research has been published by geographers on Mennonites to demonstrate the range of contributions they can make. Usually these research endeavours are pioneering forays on various geographical aspects of Mennonite life: as a minimum they have added to the substantive body of knowledge on the Mennonites. At best they have advanced our understanding of Mennonite culture.


During their history of 450 years Mennonites have frequently occupied large tracts within which they established well-rounded communities based upon agriculture, sometimes even dominating the urban centres within the tracts. That is, they created the geography of those areas. Such Mennonite geographical units have been characteristic of the North German Plain, South Russia, and a number of districts in Canada, the United States and Latin America. They are defined by geographers as culture areas.

Three Canadian geographers have made comprehensive studies of selected areas dominated by Mennonites: Alfred Siemens (1960) investigated the Mennonite settlements of the Lower Fraser Valley, John Warkentin (1961) those of South Central Manitoba, and H. L. Sawatzky (1971) the Mennonite settlement of the Chihuahua province of Mexico.

The word “area” in the phrase “culture area” is important. It is not social structure or the intricacies of theological debate which is the focus of research but the

- evolution of settlement,
- the relationship with the environment,
- the development of an agricultural economy,
- changing land use and settlement patterns,
- the creation of a distinctive landscape,
- the establishment of facilities including houses, shelter belts, roads, and trading centres,
- and the relationship with large non-Mennonite urban centres and with other regions.

I have listed the factors at some length because I want to give you a sense of the empirical down-to-earth approach of the regional geographer.

What I have just described is essentially the broad integrated perspective characteristic of regional geography, with the boundaries of the
regions in this instance defined by the area occupied by Mennonites. Such studies gain greatly in the understanding they provide if an historical-geographical approach is used, in which the reasons for the changing character of the area are carefully analyzed.

Let us take Sawatzky's book, *They Sought a Country* (1971), as an example of this kind of work. This is a comprehensive historical-geographical analysis of how a few thousand Mennonites in the 1920s and later established a new agricultural home on a sub-humid plateau in Northern Mexico. A great strength is the author's intimate knowledge of farming and of technical, economic, and cultural factors which enter into agricultural enterprise. Sawatzky's book is not abstract analysis, but a living account of the establishment of an agricultural community. Telling detail is always carefully and critically placed in the context of agricultural processes and the conventions by which the community lives. The nature of the land, patterns of land use, quality of life, and relations with the larger society are brought out. Cause and effect are always there in this rich study. Exact descriptive analysis such as found here is a rare commodity amongst scholars, and from it a full explanatory picture and interpretation of the land and the ways of the people emerge. This is a very important book which gains significance with time, because it is so firmly based on acute field observation and comparative analysis.

A book which should be singled out for comparison with Sawatzky's work is J. T. Lemon's study of south-east Pennsylvania, *The Best Poor Man's Country*, published in 1972. Lemon, an historical geographer at the University of Toronto, applies some of the questions current in modern geographical and North American colonial studies to a rich agricultural area on the colonial seaboard settled by Quakers, Mennonites, Germans, and Scots-Irish. He examines the socio-economic development of the region from 1600-1800, and analyzes the interplay between cultural background, quality of natural resources, land use, urban settlement, proximity to market, and the movement to the frontier, in accounting for differences in economic well being and in the character of the settlements. Central to the analysis are the values and aspirations of people and the evaluation of the significance of ethnicity in directing geographical development. The ethnic groups are considered in a judicious, sometimes comparative enquiry, and the book is a beautiful example of how we can attain a better understanding of Mennonites by seeing them in relationship to other people.

In many ways Lemon's book is similar to Sawatzky's, but Sawatzky addresses the research questions from his own deep knowledge of the land and its problems, and the character of the people, and makes ample use of field observations, whereas Lemon comes at the questions from the current concerns of the discipline and his own interest in what motivates
people in a new relatively open land and how this relates to the formation of a community.

Both books are head-and-shoulders above most culture area studies because of each author's particular analytical research focus and his penchant for generalizations which provide good insights into the respective groups and areas. These books are highly empirical, but neither is a bland portrayal or inventory of facts because of the effective way each author synthesizes very diverse information and analyses in the interpretation of each region.

There are no broadly-conceived geographical studies of the Mennonite communities in Ontario, Saskatchewan, or Alberta that I am aware of. In 1960 Alfred Siemens, University of British Columbia, completed an M.A. thesis on Mennonite settlement in the Lower Fraser Valley which I have not seen. Siemens in 1968 edited a collection of essays on the human geography of the Lower Fraser Valley but because the authors were concerned with the general processes which shaped the cultural landscape since pre-historic times Mennonites receive only brief mention. A fine example of a comprehensive geographical study of a group often associated with Mennonites is John Ryan's 1977 book on the Hutterites of Manitoba.

2. Thematic and Analytical Geographical Studies

Most professional geographers of the last two decades have not worked in the comprehensive regional approach just described. They narrow their research objectives and select finite, specialized topics for detailed analysis. If they choose to do research on Mennonites the Mennonites often are not selected for their own sake, but as a case study which will throw light on some current major research focus in the discipline. Mennonite studies gain as a side result, as it were. In this kind of research endeavour there are often very close, interdependent and mutually beneficial research relationships with other disciplines. On the frontiers of scholarship disciplines often converge.

In the discussion which follows I have classified the research on Mennonites into what seemed to be the appropriate sub-fields of geography, and I also discuss some fields where I think promising contributions could be made in the future. Indeed, I start with a vital field of study which, sadly, geographers have neglected with respect to Mennonites.

a) Population Geography and Urbanization

Migration has been and is an integral part of Mennonite life, whether from country to country, farm to city, or region to region. How mobile is the Mennonite population in Canada? I know of no comprehensive studies which thoroughly analyze the changing distribution of Mennonites within Canada over time. Cartographic analysis is essential in this research and that is why geographers should have a hand.
Urbanization of Mennonites and its social consequences is a theme actively pursued by sociologists and economists. Geographers have made almost no contribution to this important topic. There again their special skills would be of use, and at least one Mennonite geographer, Alfred Hecht, has the technical capability to do the necessary analysis at the cutting edge of modern demographic research.

Urbanization is, of course, a world-wide phenomenon and Mennonites are part of a much much wider process. The fear of the city was and is by no means unique to Mennonites. They had special concerns, but so did the French Canadians in rural Quebec and so do Canadian native peoples swept up in the same urban spiral. Some illuminating comparative studies could be made, and in doing these I would place more hope on the sociologists and historians than on geographers, because there are very significant implications for social structures and community adaptations.

(b) Man-Land Relationships

Mennonites came to Canada as farmers, as did the great majority of immigrants to Canada before 1914. Social science research on the development in Canada of the agricultural economy, land use, and rural settlements is with very few exceptions in a primitive state.

No geographer, I believe, has contributed substantial published research on the late 18th and early 19th century Mennonite agricultural settlements of Ontario. I must add, however, that an historical geographer at the University of Guelph, Kenneth Kelly, has in the last 15 years produced outstanding scholarly accounts of agriculture in 19th century Ontario. His work begins to provide the context within which more particular studies on the Mennonites could be done. Kelly is a heartwarming exception in this area.

In the Western Interior, E. K. Francis (1955) was a pioneer in the study of Mennonite agricultural development in his book *In Search of Utopia*, and I confirmed and extended some of his agricultural findings in my Ph.D. thesis (1961). Both Francis and I used a descriptive historical approach. Recently geographers have been much more analytic. William Carlyle (1981), University of Winnipeg, attempted to determine whether ethnicity affected present-day agricultural practices in Manitoba, and to do this compared Mennonite agriculture with non-Mennonite agriculture in two comparable farming regions in the province. In his very careful study Carlyle brings out a variety of factors which underlie the land use practices of any area: the general agricultural infrastructure, the great significance of what at first sight might seem to be minor environmental differences, the importance of farming tradition, the availability of technical and financial advice and willingness to accept it, and, of course, contrasts between ethnic groups in many of these factors. Carlyle con-
fronts us with the continuing complexity of agricultural life; in that life there is always initiating, responding, and resisting. To explain differences between Mennonite and non-Mennonite agriculture is very difficult, and really demands a level of research where the role of individuals and the associated community response has to be considered. Carlyle’s valuable article points in that direction.

A. O. McQuillan (1978) University of Toronto, carried out similar work in Kansas, for the period 1875-1925. He compared the farming success of French Canadian, Mennonite, and Swedish settlers, and determined that though the Mennonites were indeed the leading farmers as suggested by common wisdom accepted stereotypes of farming success did not entirely hold because French Canadians, contrary to conventional opinion, were more successful than Swedes. McQuillan endeavoured to gauge the importance of the work ethic as a differentiating factor but it is, quite properly, very cautious in his generalizations. Now that computers are available advanced statistical techniques can readily be used in correlating ethnicity with many other factors. D. Todd and J. S. Brierley (1977) of the University of Manitoba examined the relationship between ethnicity and attitudes to economic development in 1961-1971 amongst British, Dutch, French, Mennonite and Slavic groups in Manitoba. Broad statistical studies, however, do not generally have the explanatory power of historical investigations, and they usually only point towards problems which need further study. David de Garis DeLisle (1982), a geographer with the Canadian Federal civil services using the Mennonite agricultural villages of Southern Manitoba as his study area, endeavoured to ascertain the effect of varying distances to fields on individual cropping practices. He found that distance was only one of a number of critical variables significant in crop management.

Work of a similar nature has not been published for the Saskatchewan and Alberta Mennonite settlements. Nor is the situation any better in British Columbia.

The research endeavours published to date point to what might be accomplished in the future. It is evident that much research remains to be done on the Mennonite agricultural experience in Canada. The transfer of aspirations, attitudes, and techniques from Europe to the New World must be investigated, as well as the actual contributions which Mennonites made to opening up new lands. At present, for instance, myths are possibly being perpetuated on the extent to which Mennonites contributed to the introduction of dry land farming techniques on the prairies in the late 19th century (Neufeld, 1981). Research must not only focus on what the Mennonites accomplished, but on the documentation of the transfer mechanisms by which other peoples were influenced. Coincidence is not enough. By the same token much research is needed on the
commercial introduction of special crops such as sugar beets, soya beans, and sunflowers into the prairies in the 1940s and 1950s, and on the role of Mennonites as innovators. Certainly the role of the Co-op Movement and of men such as J. J. Siemens of Altona, Manitoba, must be studied. John Friesen's M.A. thesis on the sugar beet industry of Manitoba (1962) is a ground-breaking study in this regard.

Another aspect of the man-land relationship requires very special analysis — the attitudes of Mennonites to the land itself and the question of values and stewardship of the environment. Such ecological concerns are of great interest to us today because there is wide-spread recognition of how technological man damages the natural environment. Actually such destruction has been going on for a long time. Have Mennonites treated land any differently from other groups? One can, of course, expect in the normal run of human behaviour to find great differences amongst individual Mennonites. Are there any unsung Mennonite conservationists, say since the 1920s? There would appear to be an opportunity here for oral geography and history research projects. A few years ago a Ph.D. candidate in geography or environmental studies at the University of Toronto took a stab at investigating the stewardship of the land by Mennonites, concentrating on the Amish of Waterloo County. The dissertation foundered but the student was pointing in the right direction. Sawatzky (1971) in his book on the Mennonites in Mexico makes perceptive comments on exploitation and conservation in his discussion of how Mennonites care for the land.

Historical geographers are in an ideal position to make research contributions to the investigation of man-land relationships because of their background in physical as well as human geography, and their sensitivity to the complexities of cultural diffusion and agricultural innovation and the impact of man on the physical environment. It is an extremely difficult area of research because you are relating values to actions, not staying safely within one or the other.

(c) Landscape Studies.

An area of geography which particularly fascinates me is that which focuses on the nature of the settlements which the Mennonites created. What was the Mennonite imprint on the land? Are there distinctive landscapes? What is life like in these environments created by man? Our interests range from flower gardens and buildings to the total landscape ensemble.

In Ontario the Mennonites introduced a distinctive barn style from Pennsylvania which had its origins in Europe. Peter Ennals (1972) of Mount Allison University analyzed and mapped the barn styles of Southern Ontario, and there has been at least one undergraduate thesis on barns in an Ontario township which has numerous Mennonite farm-
steads. But how did the Ontario Mennonite farmstead which we know today develop? Is it distinctive? We don’t know much about this except for the popular knowledge of Amish farmsteads. And is there a difference in character between the landscape of the Mennonite regions and that of other parts of Ontario? These are subtle matters which require the eye and feeling of the artist as well as the skills of the social scientist.

In Manitoba a very distinctive settlement pattern was introduced from South Russia consisting of farm villages and open fields divided into narrow strips. These have been studied by Francis (1955) and Warkentin (1961). This pattern was transferred to Saskatchewan from Manitoba, and Carl Tracie (1976), formerly of the University of Saskatchewan, has described them in a comparative study of Mennonite and Doukhobor settlements in Saskatchewan, and Richard Friesen (1977) analyzed their functional efficiency and traced their disruption.

Much more work remains to be done on building techniques and on house and barn styles. Fortunately the interest in heritage preservation of the past two decades ensures that a few examples are being preserved, and also that some research on origins, distributions, and modifications of buildings has been stimulated. A string research effort on building styles is needed for all Mennonite communities across Canada.

The contrasts in farmsteads among various ethnic groups can be pronounced and point towards very different life styles. An uncle of mine bought a farmstead, located between Winkler and Roland in Manitoba, laid out by a man of British origin, probably an Ontarian. It was a pleasure to visit there because it was so spaciously, even extravagantly laid out, with its shaded lawn a small park surrounding the house, set well back from the road; large orchard; barn and outbuildings distant from the house with the buildings placed in their own fenced yards; extensive enclosed pastures; and a vast dense shelter belt a couple of tree-rows wide, providing a backdrop for this pleasant ensemble. It was a favoured place for immense family gatherings because four generations could form their own congenial groups (or not, as they chose); older individuals strolled peacefully about meditating by themselves, children explored, yelled, and organized games, yet all could conveniently and turbulently come together at lunch or Faspa and then disperse to follow their own inclinations once more. As a child I could never quite figure out why life seemed so different on Uncle John’s farm from the other, usually much more austere and utilitarian farmsteads, which I also knew. Now I partly understand, and I may also add that those great old farmsteads, seemingly wasteful of land, are as much a relic of the past in Manitoba, with land costing over hundreds of dollars an acre, as are the landed estates of England.

I want to make a further point from these reminiscences. The
Mennonite farm villages of Southern Manitoba and Saskatchewan have a similar feeling of protective enclosure and provide a comforting pleasant physical environment, but nurture whole communities not only single families. How life on the farms or in the villages fits into that of the larger society is a matter for cultural geographers, sociologists, historians and novelists to explore. Some local histories are happily beginning to illuminate Mennonite rural life, such as the work of Irene and Peter Petkau on Blumenfeld, Manitoba (1981).

(d) Cultural Studies.

It is apparent from what I have just said that Mennonites have made a distinctive cultural imprint on the land which merits serious attention within the total North American context. Culture also influences behaviour patterns which may have a spatial dimension and are thus of geographical significance.

(e) Other Studies

A number of Mennonite geographers are doing significant work on Mennonite settlements in Latin America. I have already mentioned Sawatzky’s study of the Mennonite settlements of Northern Mexico. He also has described the Mennonite settlements in British Honduras (1969), now Belize. Alfred Hecht (1975, 1976) of Wilfrid Laurier University has carried out research on the Mennonite settlements in Paraguay. His work is representative of much analytic modern day economic geography, particularly his quantitative analysis of transportation in its relationship to the agricultural economy of the Mennonite colonies. Hecht in collaboration with J. W. Fretz has also prepared more general studies of rural industrialization and problems connected with food production in the Chaco settlements which will be published shortly. This will make his findings available to a more general audience.

These are important scholarly endeavours because they provide scholarly information and interpretations of the pioneering experiences of Mennonites from either Europe or Canada in physical environments and under governmental administrations which are very different from those in the areas from which they came.

Alfred Siemens of the University of British Columbia is another Mennonite geographer who has research interests in cultural geography and in Latin America. He has written a text book on North America (Siemens, 1977) in which his appreciation of cultural groups is apparent, but Mennonites are hardly mentioned.

I have not as yet touched upon one area which goes beyond scholarly enquiry though it is based upon it — reflective essays on the Mennonite condition. Two geographers, H. L. Sawatzky and Alfred Hecht, have written broadly interpretive essays on what is happening to Mennonite communities in the current world. In 1970 Sawatzky published a
paper on the viability of Mennonite rural communities in Manitoba in which he foresaw that vital cultural characteristics such as the use of Low German would gradually atrophy and in time Mennonites would be identified solely as a religious denomination. He is in a strong position to comment because he is capable of doing comparative work both across time periods and across different Mennonite culture areas. In an as yet unpublished article he draws attention to the fact that in a number of Mennonite rural communities there has been a repeating pattern of the concentration of property in a few hands, emergence of a landless group, and resulting social stresses. Hecht (1980) reviewed the relationships between the Mennonites and Indians in the Chaco stressing the mutual economic dependencies and cultural tensions that emerge whenever different groups inhabit the same region, and the soul-searching of motives that often follows. These essays suggest that geographers may now be going beyond empirical research studies to contemplative and incisive statements on the significance of what they have observed and studied.

FUTURE WORK

I will mention four areas in which I think geographical work on Mennonites will be particularly useful, and conclude with a proposal. Comprehensive book-length studies, either of major regions where Mennonites live in Canada or of a broad topic such as changes in population distribution would be valuable to many scholars and of interest to the general public. Historical-geographical investigation of Mennonite settlement and economic activities needs to be continued both in its own right and because Mennonites have made a considerable contribution to the settlement of this country. But more than studies of the Mennonites are required. No definitive scholarly studies have been done in any discipline on the agricultural development of Canada, on settlement patterns, or urban development. Many of us have been dabbling in such topics for years but in the past decade and a half great changes have taken place in the scholarly community with respect to these research fields, especially in history and geography. Numerous new and important research problems are being investigated and the research is of a much higher quality. Considerable light can be thrown on these topics by historical-geographical studies of Mennonite themes.

The ecological, emotional, and spiritual relationships of Mennonites with the land deserve special mention. It is something one talks about but it is a very difficult area of research and we will be fortunate indeed when more work is done in this area. Once again it would be most rewarding if this were done in conjunction with studies of other groups.

Geographical studies, whether reconnaissance or more detailed, of
Mennonites in other parts of the world should be encouraged. They contribute to our broader understanding of Mennonites elsewhere, but furthermore we can’t understand ourselves unless we have a knowledge both of the larger society in Canada and of Mennonites living outside our country.

My proposal is that some of our young geographers should be encouraged to produce an Historical Atlas of Mennonites in Canada. This would be of interest and use to both scholars and general readers. An atlas always raises many questions, so it would stimulate further research to explain distribution patterns and changes in those patterns.

I have the temerity to make this suggestion because Mennonites are a very dispersed people, gathered into a few foci in Canada, and a clear picture of changing Mennonite spatial distributions, their imprint on the land, and interrelationships with many kinds of factors can only be seen through maps.

Bibliography


