

# Hochfeld: Ein Steppendorf im Bürgerkrieg, Ukraine, 1918–19

A Review Article

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Arnold Dyck, *Hochfeld: Ein Steppendorf im Bürgerkrieg, Ukraine 1918–19*. (Uchte, Germany: Sonnentau Verlag, 1998). Soft cover, Pp. 128.

Arnold Dyck's declining years were, for the most part, not happy ones. He came to regard himself as a cultural anachronism, and in articles, letters and interviews expressed his near despair over the "Americanization" of Canadian Mennonites. For Dyck this was a negative term which implied first and foremost a linguistic displacement from German (both High and Low) to English, a process he believed would inevitably lead to cultural debasement and the ethnic erosion of his beloved Mennonite Volklein. With a growing sense of futility and alienation he shuttled back and forth between Canada and Germany during the last fifteen years of his life. No longer feeling at home in either country, he took refuge in the memories of his remote Russian past.

Despondent as he was over Mennonite writing, by which he meant "*das deutsche Buch*," Dyck himself kept on writing, although he published very little after 1960 and at his death ten years later left behind a pile of manuscripts. The most important of these late writing projects was his long-planned sequel to his earlier autobiographical novel *Verloren in der Steppe*. Regarded by many readers as Dyck's masterpiece, *Verloren* was the only one of his novels written in High German rather than in his beloved *Plautdietsch*. It followed that its sequel would be in the same language. In switching to High German for his autobiographical novels Dyck may have had the book market in Germany in mind. Whatever the case, his decision to write fiction in High German raises an interesting point.

Although Dyck had spent considerable time in Germany going back to his student days before World War I, he retained in his written High German traces of his Low German origins in Russia, where High German had been taught from outdated nineteenth-century textbooks. He once revealed in a letter that in writing *Verloren in der Steppe* he had thought in *Plautdietsch* and then translated his thoughts into High German. His Mennonite readers had no problem with Dyck's Mennonite-flavored High German and accepted it as both natural and charming, since most of them had learned the same archaic High German at school and in church. To readers in Germany his German would, of course, have sounded provincial and idiomatically impure. The Dyck children, having been bred to standard High German rather than to *Plautdietsch*, have also expressed reservations about their father's German style, a point which bears directly on the form of the manuscript now published as well as on its curiously elusive history.

When the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society was publishing its definitive four-volume history of Dyck's complete works in the 1980s, the editorial committee was unable to track down the manuscript of Dyck's sequel to *Verloren*, although it was known to exist and one of the five editors had actually read it before Dyck died. Several times one or more members of the family seemed willing to produce it, but it never materialized and the edition had to be completed without it, much to the editors' regret.

Now that the novel has been published by the Dyck family, the reasons for the long delay are also emerging. And an intriguing story it is. According to daughter Hedi Knoop, Dyck left behind a fully completed manuscript of the novel. It was, she states in a private letter, "written in excellent German... apart from a few Mennonite colloquialisms" and entrusted to her for publication.

Apparently, the manuscript was brought to Canada after the war for final editing by daughter Elsie. What happened then, according to Hedi, was that the manuscript became part of a "family drama" involving divorce proceedings and so lay in limbo for more than 25 years. When she finally received back the manuscript "there were several essential chapters missing." She speculates that the original copy "may have been destroyed" and that all that remained of the manuscript were the parts Elsie had retyped and edited.

So the text as published is an incomplete and collaborative one at best. The family editors state in a note at the end of the novel that the closing chapters of the text “have unfortunately been lost.” They then give a brief summary of the missing material. There is also reason to believe that Dyck’s “Mennonite” High German was editorially “corrected” in the interests of providing a more standard High German style. Certainly the relatively formal style in *Hochfeld* differs considerably in many places from the more intimate style of *Verloren*.

Setting aside the tangled history of the manuscript, what about the novel as published? That it has been published at all is welcome news to Dyck’s loyal readers. However, although interesting and for the most part entertainingly written, this published version of *Hochfeld* is not quite the masterpiece those readers might have anticipated. As always, Dyck’s skill in evoking the past and creating believable characters by economical narrative means is evident throughout. His handling of individual scenes—both the dramatic action scenes and the quiet, intimate ones—is as surehanded as ever. Even in scenes of violence and emotional turbulence, his narrative pace never gets ahead of itself, always maintains that inner control, that calm in the eye of the storm characteristic of all good storytellers.

The story focusses on the tragic consequences for Mennonites of the Civil War and particularly of the Makhno terrorism in the fall and winter of 1919–20. Although fictionalized, the plot and characters closely follow what we know of Dyck’s own life at this stage and that of his family and native village of Hochfeld in the Yasykovo colony just north of the Old Colony and south of the city of Ekaterinoslav. The protagonist is again Hans Toews, now a young married man, who appeared so memorably as a boy in *Verloren*. The novel opens in rather pedestrian fashion with a lengthy historical sketch of Hochfeld which moves back in time to the origins of the Mennonites in the Reformation and ends with a brief account of World War I and its aftermath in Russia. Beginning it *in medias res* would, I think, have been a better strategy for a short novel. But after this slow start the novel quickly gathers dramatic momentum and moves along nicely.

Those who have read other Mennonite accounts of this tragic time will be familiar with the sequence of events depicted here. The main events begin with the ominous weeks in the fall of 1918 after the occupying German and Austrian forces withdraw and in the absence of any state-imposed law and order the Mennonite villages are left naked of protection from bandits and political opportunists. Their fervent hope is that the counter-revolution being mounted by Kolchak and Deniken’s White armies will prevail against both the local terrorists and the Reds. That succour, however, fails to arrive in time and the Mennonites are forced to set up their own *Selbstschutz* (Self-Defense) to act as a police force.

What follows is a temporary stand-off which enables Hans Toews and his wife to conduct a private school during the winter of 1918–19. But the following summer the Reds arrive and that is the end of the Self-Defense. Tension mounts

as acts of terrorism become commonplace, including the murder of Hans Toews' older brother and his two sons. In late September the Makhnovists chase out the Reds and for the next several months bring an unprecedented reign of terror to the region.

Hans, along with other young Hochfelders, is commandeered to drive a supply wagon to the city of Ekaterinoslav for Makhno's army. He survives that ordeal only to arrive home in the aftermath of a savage massacre at nearby Eichenfeld (over 70 men and boys slaughtered), as well as other mass killings in surrounding villages, including 18 in Hochfeld. Toews is asked to serve as secretary for the newly formed village soviet and along with his fellow villagers has to endure six weeks of brutal occupation by Makhno's wild men.

When Makhno's forces are finally chased out of the area by the Whites, another catastrophe strikes—a typhus epidemic. Hans, his wife and his brother Behrend survive the dreaded disease, but scores of villagers die, including his father. Although the terrorists had taken most of their horses and other livestock and consumed most of their food, the villagers retain feeble hopes that they will be able to carry on now that spring has arrived. Unfortunately, the closing chapters dealing with the ensuing famine, food relief from America and the new hopes generated by possible emigration to Canada are missing and the novel ends rather abruptly.

The most memorable part of *Hochfeld* is the gripping account of Hans' hazardous days in Ekaterinoslav as a wagon supply driver for Makhno. This was obviously one of the most dramatic moments of Dyck's life and he does full justice to the experience, which includes a close-up view of Makhno himself and Hans' rare opportunity to observe the wily Batko in action. This dramatic episode would have made a fine short story in itself and contains some of the best writing in the novel.

What is missing completely from this story is any treatment of what would have been one of the most important elements of community experience during this crisis, namely, the element of faith and prayer. We know that Dyck was not essentially a religious man and that he has very little to say about Mennonite faith and the church in any of his fiction. But the prolonged crisis of life and death in this terrible situation would have elicited many fervent prayers and solicitations of a spiritual nature from a faith-oriented people such as the Russian Mennonites.

As a student of Arnold Dyck's work, I found the reading of this posthumous novel an odd experience. I had the feeling that every once in a while the real Arnold Dyck was stepping forward with a scene in his best manner only to be lost in shadows of generalized prose until he emerged again with another brightly realized episode. What I miss also in this truncated novel is the delicately ironic tone used by the narrator in Dyck's earlier fiction. Of course, a story as grim as this one does not allow for much ironic play in the telling, but in the more relaxed family scenes there are flashes of the ironic wit readers of Dyck have come to expect.

*Verloren in der Steppe*, with its almost mystical illumination of the concrete, everyday world and the delicate inner dialogue between the naïve boy Hans and the sophisticated adult narrator, rose to the level of a minor masterpiece. *Hochfeld* is an interesting book which at its best easily surpasses most other Mennonite accounts of these tragic events. Had the original manuscript been published instead of of this fragmented version, the novel might well have turned out to be, as daughter Hedi Knoop claims, “the most homogeneous and mature of all of [Dyck’s] books.” In any case, the Dyck children are to be commended for finally making *Hochfeld* available even in this less than pristine form.