

## Featured Review: Larry Towell's *The Mennonites*

Larry Towell, *The Mennonites: A Biographical Sketch*.  
London: Phaidon Press, 2000. Pp. 262. Cloth, \$89.95.

This is not your typical Mennonite coffee table book brimming with photos of lovely homes and factories, prosperous farms, businesses and large churches. It is, rather, both a beautiful and gritty book. Sometimes it is a brutal account, but always it is gripping, a story of courage and survival, a really tough chapter in our long Mennonite history that has desperately needed telling for decades. The story concerns some of the 50,000 conservative colony Mennonites in Mexico who, for a variety of reasons – church rules, economy, poor education, drought, high birth rate – have often become landless and economically marginalized. Many of these have been forced to seek work in Canada. Estimates are around 50,000 but many hundreds if not thousands are in constant transit so that accurate figures are impossible.

Their story is told by one of Canada's top photojournalists, Larry Towell, who first met them in his neighborhood in southern Ontario in 1989 and over the next ten years sometimes helped drive their beat-up vans and cars to Mexico where they frequently spent the winter.

The eight by ten-inch book, somber black with matching slipcover, is symbolic of the centuries-old songbook without notes (Gesangbuch) which Old Colony Mennonites in Latin America still take to Sunday church services today.

The text – poignant stories often centred around travel to and from Mexico – could hardly be equaled by the most imaginative fiction writers. The pages of text are of thin, Bible-quality paper and, frustratingly, indented from the pages with pictures. There are no page numbers, supposedly because the numbers would distract from the photographs. The captions are in the back of the book and hard to match with the photos because of the lack of page numbers.

There are 115 black and white photos from various colonies in Mexico and rural southern Ontario where the Mennonites have found employment on vegetable farms. The photographs, however, are infinitely more than pictures or snapshots; they are art, culled from thousands by a master of his trade and honed in the conflicts and human dramas of India, Palestine, El Salvador and Nicaragua. A few photographs have been published before in *Life* and *Canadian Geographic*. Many show the bleak Mexico desert landscape as backdrop to the new home the Mennonites fled to from Canada to save their way of life in the early 1920s.

Some rare photos, never published before, show social customs, school classrooms in session and people at worship. Others, such as those showing girls smoking and young people drinking, will be shocking to North American Mennonites but are, in reality, not uncommon scenes in some of the more conservative colonies even today, where sports activities are still not allowed by the leadership.

In contrast, many photographs of children and family and farm life show a warmth and almost Rembrandt-like quality. One such photograph shows three adults lovingly putting the finishing touches on a coffin with the small child, hands folded and angelic, already “sleeping” inside. A photograph of a young girl sitting inside by the kitchen table with light highlighting her hair and the bread on the table is a masterpiece. The man who holds this camera clearly loves his subjects.

One of the most stunning photographs covers two pages and shows a couple with three small, blond children in front of their decrepit, adobe house in Mexico. Poverty just shouts from this picture and it could serve as the cover of John Steinbeck’s classic, *Grapes of Wrath*, but this photograph was taken in the 1990s, not the 1930s. The book is a realistic portrayal and the text is as moving as the photographs.

Towell writes, typically: “The sides of Jacob’s shoes are split open. His skin looks a thousand years old. Dirt circulates through his veins.” The pages of text reveal more about the conservative Old Colony Mennonite society and customs in Latin America than anything that has been written so far and there are distinct positives highlighted by Towell among the obvious negatives. Towell’s characters are real life. You can smell the poverty, desperation and the very insides of the

1977 Ford pick-up with ill-fitting topper crammed with twelve sweaty people as it makes its way painfully, with countless breakdowns, from Canada to Mexico.

To those with no previous introduction to the subject, *The Mennonites* may seem surreal. It packs such an emotional wallop you would imagine it would leave anyone carrying the name Mennonite reeling. But the contrary is true. The book, like the magazine articles with photos, has drawn some compliments but more yawns and a sputtering of criticisms from the Mennonite community. Some Mennonite institutions and at least one museum that could have reaped rare information about this chapter of Mennonite history from an "outside" professional, have chosen not to invite him or display his work. Nevertheless, he has appeared at several "Mennonite" functions to date. A window has been opened to us through this artistic masterpiece.

Unfortunately, relatively few Mennonites will ever see this book. Few mainstream Mennonites in North America will pay even the reduced sale price of \$79.95 and the subjects of the book, the hardscrabble colonists who have lost their land and often even their faith and families in the tortuous journeys in and out of Mexico, can't afford it. Tragically, even if they could, few would be able to read it.

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Larry Towell, *The Mennonites: A Biographical Sketch*.  
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duotone photographs.

Accomplished photojournalist and poet Larry Towell has produced a powerful, if sometimes troubling, photo-textual document of his time spent with Old Colony Mennonites in Ontario and Mexico. Over a span of ten years, he and his camera accompanied several families as they attempted to maintain not only their faith but their very existence in the face of drought, abusive farm bosses, and the creeping modernity seducing their young people away from tradition. The photo subjects range from simple portraits of weather-beaten farmers to images of the hard work and often the squalor that accompanies the families from Mexico to the produce farms of Southern Ontario.

Part Dorothea Lange and part John Steinbeck, Towell's images provide a stark narrative of human survival and determination in the face of what seem to be fantastically overwhelming odds. Unfortunately, Towell's work is less sure than Lange's or Steinbeck's

about its attitude towards that suffering. While Lang's and Steinbeck's representations of Depression-era suffering was deliberately didactic in intent, the political message of *The Mennonites* is somewhat muted by an ambivalent presence behind the lens. Towell's photographic eye tends towards the ad hoc and improvisational verité of the moment, a tendency that may give life to the unframed subject but risks blurring the specificity of the composition. I suspect that this may be at least partially deliberate: the book emphasizes the fact that this group of Mennonites exists at the margins of historical time. The points of reference to the modern world (electricity, the rubber-tired tractor) thus become secondary to what Towell sees as the Old Colony Mennonites' existential connection to both the land and working the land. It is this connection that makes their uprootedness particularly difficult, and Towell – who has documented the effects of dispossession amongst the landless in El Salvador and Palestine – makes his sympathy for their situation clear throughout. In an image that captures this loss with particular poignancy, a group of Mennonite women are being blown off a road by a wind filled with the drought-stricken dirt of Durango, Mexico

Towell's subjects alternate between being camera-shy and slyly self-aware, and the photographs consistently draw out hidden aspects of both individual and communal character. The written prose also alternates, between evocative image (“The moon in Progreso hangs like a moist eye on the tip of Bernardo Giesbrecht's orange tree”) and strained simile (“The brush, piled like bones, is burned in the sun-bleached day, adding more heat to the equator and more black to the rain clouds”; “Landhunger, when it bites, begins to suck at the skeleton of the landless”). Towell is a gifted observer of what he witnesses, but the over-stylized prose here frequently threatens to obscure, rather than illuminate, his subjects. While this may not be intended as a strictly journalistic text, Towell has a tendency to insert his subjectivity too strongly between reader and image. The captionless pictures provide their own stark poetry and are something of a reprieve from the breathless intensity of the interstitial observations that accompany them. The prose is at its best when it highlights the gritty realities of day-to-day existence – the harrowing journey from Canada to Mexico with the Peter Peters family is a small triumph of on-the-ground journalistic style.

Physically, the book is impressive, from its forbidding black exterior to the high-quality photographic reproductions. Curiously, though, while the photographs are printed on rich paper stock, the textual commentary seems to be printed as an afterthought, on thin paper that occasionally blurs the print and interrupts the aesthetic seamlessness of the text as a whole. The overall construction of the

text, however, emphasizes the stark choices facing the Old Colony Mennonites as they negotiate their various bargains with geography, economics, and modernity.

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