

# The Quiet on the Land: The Environment in Mennonite Historiography<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

In 1984 American scholar Donald Worster called upon historians to consider nature as a “powerful determining force throughout history.” They should contest the standard idea among theorists like Marx and Freud, who saw in nature only a “passive landscape in which human labour toiled and created.”<sup>2</sup> Other environmental historians have added nuance to the discussion. William Cronon defined environmental history in 1993 as an enterprise that “tries to reconstruct the endless layers of change that we and the earth have traced upon each other.” He continued that “the lines and shapes we draw on the land reflect the lines and shapes we carry inside our own heads and we cannot understand either without understanding both at the same time.”<sup>3</sup> More recently, in 2001, Richard White observed in environmental historiography “a field mature,” becoming more than the “Whiggish...story of environmental sin.”<sup>4</sup> It was time, White suggested, “to read environmental history in the way that [we] have to read literature” on any other topic – race, region, and class – “in order to claim basic historical literacy.”<sup>5</sup> Environmental history had thrust itself on the craft of history in general, offering itself as a variable in the interpretation of numerous historic subjects.

Mennonite society is an obvious subject for the attention of environmental historians. As the “quiet in the land,” the quintessential farmers, they imbued life-on-the-land with religious meaning. Mennonites clearly “struggled with the land,” they imagined it in particular “lines and shapes,” and they intertwined it with other ideas, perhaps not with “race and class” but certainly with religion and ethnicity. What is the state of the art of Mennonite environmental history? From a cursory survey of the field, it seems that historians of the Mennonites as well as Mennonite historians have been loath to adopt the hermeneutics of “environmental history.” And if few environmental historians write about the Mennonites, few church and social historians systematically link Mennonites to the natural world.

Questions of land ownership, cultivation practice, or environmental imagination are infrequently pursued. The “quiet in the land” it seems have been rather “quiet on the land,” at least on the subject of land, nature and the environment.

To find historical accounts in which Mennonites encounter the environment, students of history need to exit the main corpus of Mennonite historiography. It is in the writings of a handful of social scientists and economists, in the scattered paragraphs of environmental histories, in local histories, in unpublished theses, in fiction and in personal diaries and letters that the student of history can best find the rudimentary components of a Mennonite environmental history. Looking carefully at these sources, one can even observe two broadly conceived avenues of enquiry. In the first instance are those writings that judge Anabaptist behaviour in the environment, either lauding or condemning it. They ask whether or not Mennonites were a people committed to nurturing the soil and living in harmony with nature, itself in a state of equilibrium. Their presuppositions reflect what a native American, Lawrence Hart, describes simply as the “Anabaptist tradition of closeness to the land.”<sup>6</sup> Reflecting a second approach are studies documenting a dialectical relationship between the land and its inhabitants, a relationship key to the understanding of Mennonite culture in general. They chart a people’s broader intention on the land, their concern with order and sustenance of the household, their climatically-induced fears and joys, their responses to a changing natural world. They note not only how Mennonites affected the land, but also how land and changes in nature affected Mennonites. Clearly both approaches – the concern with correct behaviour and the study of dialectical relationship – can illuminate the lived experience of Mennonites in North America. Both can bring Mennonites back into a natural environment where for centuries they lived out their religious calling, developed a resilient ethnic identity and built a communitarian culture.

### Sinners and Stewards

Adding in a crucial way to a debate on Mennonites and the environment is Calvin Redekop’s groundbreaking *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*. Although the book is an anthology of writings – personal, theological, economic, scientific – it stimulates important questions about Mennonite history. The writers suggest implicitly and explicitly that most Mennonites have disregarded a sustainable natural world. Indeed, it seems that the primary intention of Redekop and the dozen contributors is to *prescribe* good environmental behavior because

there is so little real love of soil among Mennonites to *describe*. In the introduction Redekop cites his own Mennonite family for complicity in turning semi-arid Montana into a Depression-era dust bowl and singles out for praise the native Americans and their affinity with the land.<sup>7</sup> Much of the rest of the book is a record of what Richard White calls “environmental sin.” Economists James Harder and Karen Klassen Harder argue that “the drive for unrestrained economic growth itself has become the most important problem facing humanity.”<sup>8</sup> Amish farmer David Kline observes an environmental myopia and that the experience of “many Anabaptist families proves...that ‘a man standing in his own field is unable to see it.’”<sup>9</sup> Sociologist Michael Yoder, who does document an environmental consciousness “among some modern Mennonite farmers,” nevertheless joins the lament, concluding after a thorough survey that as Mennonites “we are rarely able to ignore the economic ‘bottom line’” and thus have become reliant on chemicalized farming.<sup>10</sup> Biblical scholars provide an admonition, reminding readers that in the Old Testament Adam and Eve are “made out of top soil” and “commissioned...‘to serve’ the soil” and that in the New Testament Christ “restores the relationship between humankind and the rest of the created order.”<sup>11</sup> Theologian Walter Klaassen takes the book to its crescendo: “as far as I am aware, we [as Mennonites] have done *no thinking about the resources of our tradition of nonviolence in the human war against mother nature;*” and even in history “it was the need to survive and not love of the land that produced the expertise and care of the land for which Mennonites became famous.”<sup>12</sup>

If these writers cite modern Mennonites for failure in nature, established scholars of “old order” Anabaptist groups, those on the periphery the North American Anabaptist society, do just the opposite. Indeed, these writers observe an Anabaptist “exceptionalism” among the Amish and Old Order Mennonites. Social scientists in particular offer positive interpretations of these anti-consumption, technologically wary people. Some of these works, such as the studies by David Sommers and Ted Napier, are quantitative studies that compare and contrast Amish and Old Order Mennonite behaviour with that of their non-Anabaptist neighbours.<sup>13</sup> Other studies are more qualitative in method. John A. Hostetler, for example, argues in his 1993 edition of *Amish Society* that “soil has for the Amish a spiritual significance,” directing them, as Adam and Eve were, “to keep the garden, protecting it from harm through the use of [their] labor and oversight” and “looking after it on behalf of God.”<sup>14</sup> Personal accounts also echo this harmony between the Amish and the land: David Kline’s *Great Possessions*, published in 1990 with strong endorsements from leading U.S. newspapers and environmental advocate Wendell Berry, describes a “kind of farming that has been proven to preserve communities and

land and is ecologically and spiritually sound....<sup>15</sup> Historians of these “old order” groups have offered similar observations for times past. In his 2002 *Garden Spot*, David Walbert describes the early and mid-twentieth century Pennsylvania Amish sense of rural preservation, in which farmers are called to be “stewards of God’s creation, to husband the land...for future generations.” This observation is then juxtaposed with an encroaching “rurality” in which stewardship is seen merely as the “wise” investments of “commodities.”<sup>16</sup> In his 2000 *The Amish on the Iowa Prairie, 1840-1910*, Steven Reschly argues that even before the advent of the tractor or chemical farming Amish agriculture was a model of environmental stewardship.<sup>17</sup> Quantitative analysis of four late nineteenth-century census tracts illustrates that the Amish farms in Iowa – with their specific “Pennsylvania Dutch” preoccupation with the fecundity of the soil and commitment to the use of legumes, manure and deep cultivation – were more “successful” and “balanced” than the farms of Yankee, Welsh, German and Irish neighbors.

Observations of Anabaptist exceptionalism also have been made by historians in the broader community. In fact, several notable scholars have lauded conservative Mennonites of the “dust bowl” or the western-Midwest semi-arid wheat plain, a broadly conceived region in which Calvin Redekop observed Mennonites engaging the land with reckless bravado. Consider the work of Donald Worster, a dean among American environmental historians. Tucked away in the text of his 1979 *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s*, are several paragraphs that describe conservative Mennonites – the Kleine Gemeinde-descendant Koop and Doerksen families of Haskell County, Kansas. They were, notes Worster, “all residential, diversified farm people – indeed, a most successful model of that declining agricultural order.”<sup>18</sup> Katherine Jellison’s 1993 *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology*, repeats Worster’s observation with respect to the Haskell County Mennonite women. They “were excluded,” and hence also distinguished from cavalier and capitalistic “mainstream rural society by their unique religious customs, their German language and their families’ reliance on traditional, labor-intensive farming methods.”<sup>19</sup> A broader Southwest-Kansas Mennonite approach to agriculture is implied in Pamela Riney-Kehrberg’s 1994 *Rooted in Dust*; in her analysis, it was only after the Great Depression that Mennonite “farmers moved further and further” from the well-rooted ideal of a farm that produced both “sustenance, as well as a cash income.”<sup>20</sup>

Another set of studies, these unclaimed and mostly unpublished, tentatively extends this thesis of Anabaptist exceptionalism to acculturated Mennonites. The studies observe among progressive Mennonites a religiously informed approach to farming and to the environment during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Peter G.

Genzinger's 1995 Guelph University thesis, "Mennonite Representations of Nature in the Nineteenth Century," concludes from a survey of Waterloo Township, Ontario writings – local histories, sermons and letters to the Mennonite newspaper, the *Herald of Truth* – that even though Mennonites may not have had a "unified" view of nature, they gave it much thought. Perhaps these Mennonites ignored "the idea of stewardship to nature" or the environmental implication of non-resistance, but in contrast to their contemporaries, they emphasized humility with respect to nature, lauded agrarian simplicity, worried about technological pride, and preached against using things "created by the Lord...[for]...luxury and self indulgence...."<sup>21</sup> Barbara Jane Dilly's 1994 doctoral thesis, "A Comparative Study of Religious Resistance to Erosion of the Soil and the Soul," focuses on early twentieth-century farming practice among the Brethren (whom she erroneously refers to as Mennonite Brethren), the Old Order Amish and Evangelical Lutherans of Iowa.<sup>22</sup> Dilly concludes that the Brethren for one did link the "soil and the soul," drawing "on their traditional 'Gemeinschaft' to coordinate and harness changes in a way that exemplified good stewardship, neighborliness and brotherhood." Perhaps these Anabaptist farmers were skeptical of Amish plough culture (seeing that it creates "hardpan" and kills "micro-biological life forms"), but they nevertheless embraced specific "yeoman" values.<sup>23</sup> They accepted small, scattered "fragmented holdings" and focused on the successful generational succession of land to sustain a solidaristic ethno-religious community. Carol Jenkin's 1986 dissertation "Mennonite Values and Farming Practice," focusing on acculturated Mennonites in central Kansas, asks "whether there is a coherent Mennonite value position concerning agriculture?"<sup>24</sup> Even though they used artificial fertilizers and herbicides, she found that Mennonites possessed certain "yeoman" values. They rented relatively little land and were skeptical about increasing farm size to rationalize the use of large technology. They resonated with the values expressed in the November 1984 Laurelville, Pennsylvania "Mennonite Statement on Farming" that venerated mutual aid, separation from mainstream America, farming as "a commitment to obedience, faith and simplicity," and the very existence of the family farm. Furthermore, they demonstrated "a preference for crop rotation, a concern for soil and tillage conservation...and growing crops that can be utilized with livestock." As Jenkins sees it, "history is making a significant difference" for these farmers.<sup>25</sup> Environmental sensitivity among progressive Mennonite farmers might not be apparent to the casual observer, but it is to young scholars such as Genzinger, Jenkins and Dilly.

## An Environmental Dialectic

The writings above debate the degree of “distinctiveness” in the agricultural practices and views of nature of acculturated Mennonites. A close examination of Mennonite scholarship suggests another agenda. It reflects the ideas of Cronon, White and others that environmental history is not only about human affects on the ecology and debates on “environmental sin.” It is also a history of a dialectical relationship in which humans and nature affected each other, a line of enquiry that sees nature as dynamic and resilient, itself changing and forcing adaptations to it. It claims to avoid “essentializing” nature and argues that it must not be seen in timeless equilibrium. Instead, this scholarship recognizes that long before the arrival of agriculture, nature itself was dynamic and changing over time. This genre argues that while non-native farm crops and so-called weeds have been viewed through the lens of commodification, these plants nevertheless are part and parcel of nature. It points out that environmental history also interprets the way in which people imagine the natural world and includes the meanings they ascribe to it. And it sees humans as relating to nature with multiple motivations, some material, but others cultural and social.<sup>26</sup>

To find this more cultural and less ecological approach to the history of Mennonite on the land, the student again needs to go beyond the standard corpus of Mennonite history. Historical geography, Mennonite literature and the Mennonite farmers’ own records are of particular help in revealing this dialectical relationship between Mennonites and nature. Arguably, historical geographies of past decades were more interested in documenting progress as the methodical advancement of farming, than in describing the dynamic nature of human-environmental relations. However, in so far as these geographers saw in the physical world an independent variable forcing farmers to adapt, these scholars contributed to this discussion.

Consider, for example, three works undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s that studied, among other themes, the process by which Mennonite farmers adapted to the land’s “constraints.” John Warkentin’s *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba*, a recently published 1960 York University dissertation, charts the progress of Mennonites as they established prosperous farm communities on Manitoba’s Mennonite East and West Reserves. Here success came once farmers changed agricultural practices to work in harmony with the Canadian winter, learned to cultivate ancient lake-bottom clay soils, disbanded restrictive “Old World” villages, and heeded the advice of government agents.<sup>27</sup> James Lemon’s 1972 *The Best Poor Man’s Country* surveys southeastern Pennsylvania and describes how Mennonites overcame

odds, oftentimes occupying second-rate land with not the best limestone soils but rather “fairly poor quality red shales and gravelly soils,” and survived through hard work, mutual aid and commitment to generational succession.<sup>28</sup> D. Aidan McQuillan’s 1978 work on the “ethnic adjustment on the Kansas prairies,” published in 1990 as *Prevailing Over Time*, is a “study in the Americanization of three rural ethnic groups in central Kansas: Mennonites, Swedes, French-Canadians.” McQuillan defines “Americanization” in part as the successful adaptation to a “demanding physical environment whose constraints were poorly understood.”<sup>29</sup> The bareness and the “hot, dry winds sweeping over the prairies,” the “trials of drought, prairie fires and grasshopper plagues...intense heat and searing winds,” all “discouraged many Mennonite Kansas farmers.”<sup>30</sup> But the Mennonites prevailed because of a “tenacity” set in “their Russian grassland experience,” and especially because of “their religious faith, the most powerful molding force” that emphasized “a cheerful acceptance of stinging environmental setbacks as the will of God.”<sup>31</sup> In these accounts, farmers’ activity in the environment mattered less than what nature required of them.

A related theme in Mennonite environmental relations is the way in which nature was conceptualized and imagined by human culture. These works echo Simon Schama’s hypothesis that “our entire landscape tradition is the product of...a rich deposit of myths, memories and obsessions” and quite apparent “if only we kn[e]w where to look for them.”<sup>32</sup> Mennonites, too, imagined their natural worlds, constructing these ideas in particular ways to support their basic cultural values.

One example of this culturally created environment is captured unwittingly by local histories. There are few farm settlements in North America that do not possess these parochial texts housed in celebrated fashion in mammoth 8 ½ by 11 inch, multi-pound books of 500 or more pages in length. They contain valuable descriptions of Mennonite farm practice and cultivation strategies, but also of the ethos of land ownership, narratives of conquest and possession, and stories of survival on imagined frontiers. Oftentimes they contain contradictory accounts of an affection for the environment and a determination to “subdue” it. The history of La Crete, Alberta – the world’s most northerly Mennonite farming community grounded in a massive forest just 200 kilometers south of the Alberta-Northwest Territory boundary – follows a typical local history format: the section on the pioneer years is followed by booster chamber-of-commerce accounts and then by dozens of family histories.<sup>33</sup> Within the business section in the La Crete history is a chapter entitled “agriculture and logging industry.” In it the authors are unequivocal in their praise of the Mennonite settlers: “these courageous people, who first settled here had a close association with the land. Their forefathers had always shown a great love for the

soil. It is this trait that classified them with the exceedingly capable farmers."<sup>34</sup> Ironically, this "love for the soil" provides the resolve to create the settlement and undertake the subsequent massive land-clearing enterprise. In this narrative certain events are key and historical minutiae critical: land clearing, for example, "improved remarkably" after 1943 when "P.I. Friesen [became] the first in the area to own a crawler tractor....a No. 22 Caterpillar gas machine."<sup>35</sup> In local history, "love for the soil" is the unlikely founding element in the construction of the idea of "progress."

Another set of texts bearing the stamp of the Mennonite imagination of the land is that of fiction and poetry. In this construction landscape can sometimes imprison or it can redeem, or it can do both. Vicki Schreiber Dill's exposé on "Land Relatedness in the Mennonite Novels of Rudy Wiebe," sees ambivalence in Wiebe's description of Mennonite relationship to land, at once imprisoning the Mennonites in the northern parkland described in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, but then also promising redemption in the Paraguayan Chaco of *The Blue Mountains of China*.<sup>36</sup> In Miriam Toews' *A Complicated Kindness* the environment signals everything that is repressive about Mennonite culture; here ascetic Mennonites spurn freedom in "temperate climates" and "shy farmers" start "up their own whacked-out communities in harsh climates...."<sup>37</sup> In his 2000 article "Going on Foot: Revisiting the Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba," geographer John Warkentin uses the comic Low German fiction of Arnold Dyck to illustrate the overwhelming, almost psychologically debilitating affect of the vast and open land, "land...at the Edge, a world of new spaces" and the "'end of the earth'...a terrifying, sublime plain" on the human imagination.<sup>38</sup>

Most writers, however, differentiate a rigorous, life-giving culture in nature from a mind-numbing institutionalism. Poet Di Brandt, for example, sees in Mennonite history a love for "wildness," a life-giving intention to "locate...geographically on the edge of [wildness], the edge of the wild prairie, the steppes, the Chaco, the Mexican desert." She sees this "wildness" not as frightening, but as redemptive; it is an ecoeroticism directing a "Mennonite celebration of dirt."<sup>39</sup> A similar viewpoint arises in Patrick Friesen's poetry. Daniel Lenoski concludes that Friesen sees "himself as a defender of the natural....", attempting "to reveal the way out [of consumer culture] back to the land...where rain hangs from the cabbage and frost fights in the trees" and in the process declaring that "everything that lives is holy."<sup>40</sup> However constructed, the environment is not benign in the lives of Mennonites.



## Contrasting Narratives of the Ecological Dialectic

The most powerful texts illustrating the evolving dialectic between an amorphous and dynamic environment and religiously driven, ethnically conscious inhabitants, are those dealing with the farmers themselves. In his 2002 book *Before We Were the Land's: Yarrow, British Columbia*, Leonard Neufeldt, a poet turned historian, removes the boundary between fiction and autobiography.<sup>41</sup> The numerous short biographies he edits recount how Soviet-era Mennonites make their homes on the fertile berry land of the recently drained Sumas Lake in the shadow of Vedder Mountain. Here is a story about a relationship with a distinctive geographical space. The move to Yarrow is not a simple relocation; it is a journey to a "promised land" located at the end of a treacherous journey in a temperate climate behind a mountain range, at the end of a life that begins in revolution-torn Russia and crosses harsh and frigid Prairie Canada.<sup>42</sup> Neufeldt concludes that while Yarrow "was an actual, powerfully present place," it "took on the aura of a myth."<sup>43</sup> In their texts, Mennonite farmers are the land's possession as much as the land is theirs.

In a research project of my own, I examined the diaries, letters, account books, family narratives and community histories penned by Mennonite farmers in Manitoba, Kansas and Belize and found in them a constant preoccupation with land.<sup>44</sup> And although I agree with Waldemar Janzen that few Mennonites possessed a spiritual tie to land, a mystical affinity with nature, there is much in farmers' personal writings that reveals a complex relationship with it.<sup>45</sup> This complexity is especially clarified when the texts of farmers from distinctive environments are contrasted.<sup>46</sup> A comparison of the relationships with the land of Mennonite farmers in Steinbach (Manitoba), Meade (Kansas) and Spanish Lookout (British Honduras, renamed Belize in 1982) shows how farmers of a single congregation and extended kinship network, approached three different landscapes. In trying to learn their respective land's characteristics, in devising strategies to live on it, in seeking the affirmation of state authorities and in preserving religious values, they also devised three distinct approaches to land. In the nature of their relationship with the land, farmers gave testimony to their cosmologies and religion. And in the account of this relationship they contested simple correlations that either exonerated them of or condemned them to environmental mismanagement. Their texts, for example, disallow a neat link between environmentally sensitive cultivation practices and communitarian or Anabaptist values.

Despite the physical differences, Mennonites in the semi-arid western Kansas, frost-prone Manitoba and hot and rainy British Honduras communities shared certain fundamental perspectives.<sup>47</sup> Although

few Mennonite farmers claimed a mystical union with the land, they romanticized the idea of land and certainly each saw in it a guarantee of religious continuity.<sup>48</sup> For the most conservative of these farmers, those from British Honduras, land provided a geography for the “Kingdom of God,” the territory for a closely-knit congregational life. For the most progressive in Kansas, land was a symbol for status, a measure of God’s blessing, the financial source for charity, the mechanism by which a middle class expressed the imperative of responsible action. Each of these communities pressed the land to yield a bounty and linked agriculture with the creation of order in nature, with the drawing of straight lines on the land. Huge effort was expended on semi-arid plain, intemperate prairie, or cleared jungle in the building of roads, fences and garden rows along cardinal points, thus giving testimony to Yi-Fu Tuan’s observation elsewhere that social “harmony was...believed to be a fruit...of ‘order on the land’.”<sup>49</sup> And intersected with this relationship was a culture of respect: farmers of all three communities disavowed Sunday field work, all practised religious rituals of thanksgiving, all gave inordinate heed to weather patterns and mythologized the bumper crops, as well as the crop failures and the memorable storms.

Aside from these common perspectives, each of the three communities did have specific ways in which they related to their respective environments. A comparative analysis highlights a central irony: environmental stewardship and communitarian commitment were not necessarily commensurate with each other. The Kansas farmers, perhaps the most accepting of commercial agriculture, ever-increasing farm sizes and rural depopulation, were the most environmentally sensitive, especially to soil conservation. The British Honduras farmers were the most conservative and least individualistic, keeping land titles in the name of the church and censoring upward mobility. Still, they also seemed the most cavalier, driven as they were by the indominatable jungle; they slashed, burned and bulldozed their way through the bushland and then courted the agents of the global export market. In some ways the Kansas farmers were even more cavalier than the British Honduras conservatives. In Kansas land was commodified and only available to a declining breed of successful farmers, some well-to-do from oil and gas discoveries and others from irrigated land. In British Honduras land was seen as a divine gift for the procurement of communitarian humility. Both places sought to profit from the cultivation of land, but because the profits were envisioned for different purposes – varying combinations of individual status and communitarian solidarity – the environment was also eventually considered in diverse ways. In their imagination of and behaviour on the land, these Mennonite farmers made a living, developed a sense of social order, and nurtured a cosmology. Their environmental

history ultimately served less to distinguish them from non-Mennonite farmers, than to distinguish the three Mennonite communities from one another. Their relationship with the land told a story of cultural evolution. Mennonites left an imprint on the land, but the land also had its affect on them and this very dialectic revealed an evolving set of religious values and ethnic identities.

### Conclusion

For a people long associated with quiet agrarian worlds, Mennonites have not often been subjected to systematic environmental history analysis. A survey of North American Mennonite history during the last generation reveals a continued interest in church history and a new concern with the social issues of gender, ethnicity and class. An environmental history of Mennonites remains to be written. Still, there are promising developments. Historians of the “old order” Anabaptist groups have highlighted their close ties to the land and several unpublished but extensive works have advanced similar ideas for acculturated Mennonites. Not all works are laudatory, and the recent anthology *Creation and the Environment* has focussed a set of hard questions that historians of “Mennonites on the land” will need to ask. The evolving field of environmental history in North America, which calls on historians to move beyond a documentation of “environmental sin,” suggests a particular promise for the history of Mennonite relations with the land and indeed for Mennonite culture in general. Perhaps historical geographies of earlier decades celebrated progress too myopically, but at least they placed the Mennonite farmers where they belonged—within nature. As several recent studies of Mennonite literature show, Mennonites indeed linked their cosmologies to the power inherent in nature and to the redemption of harmonious adaptation to it. Farmers’ own accounts, especially when considered in comparative fashion, reveal a complex dialectical relationship with land, certainly one that questions simplistic associations between environmental stewardship and communitarian values.

A continued search for historical nuggets documenting a Mennonite relationship with the land will surely reveal many other sources than those cited above. It was a relationship at the foundation of the North American Mennonite experience. These accounts may not exonerate Mennonites and other Anabaptist groups of environmental mismanagement, but they will reveal a culture deeply and significantly inter-related with the land. The absence of a deep-plough or animal-draft culture did not mean that Mennonites took land for granted or that they ignored a religiously and historically informed ethic of land

stewardship. These histories will show that while Mennonites may have been the “quiet in the land,” they were not silent on matters of the environment and not unintentional in their relationship with nature.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I wish to thank Steve Nolt for his comments and for arranging a double-blind peer review of this article. I also thank Ken Sylvester for his comments on this paper
  - <sup>2</sup> Donald Worster, “History as Natural History: An Essay on Theory and Method,” *Pacific Historical Review* 53 (1984), 5.
  - <sup>3</sup> William Cronan, “The Uses of Environmental History,” *Environmental History Review* 17 (1993), 17.
  - <sup>4</sup> Richard White, “After word: Environmental History: Watching a Historical Field Mature,” *Pacific Historical Review* 70 (2001), 105.
  - <sup>5</sup> White, 110.
  - <sup>6</sup> Lawrence Hart, “The Earth is a Song Made Visible,” in *Creation and the Environment: An Anabaptist Perspective on a Sustainable World*, ed., Calvin Redekop (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 172.
  - <sup>7</sup> Redekop, *Creation and the Environment*.
  - <sup>8</sup> James M. Harder and Karen Klassen Harder, “Economics, Development and Creation,” *op. cit.*, 3.
  - <sup>9</sup> David Kline, “God’s Spirit and a Theology for Living,” *op. cit.*, 63.
  - <sup>10</sup> Michael L. Yoder, “Mennonites, Economics and the Care of Creation,” *op. cit.*, 73 and 74.
  - <sup>11</sup> Theodore Hiebert, “Creation, the Fall, and Humanity’s Role in the Ecosystem,” *op. cit.*, 120; Dorothy Jean Weaver, “The New Testament and the Environment: Toward a Christology for the Cosmos,” *op. cit.*, 137.
  - <sup>12</sup> Walter Klaassen, “Pacifism, Nonviolence and the Peaceful Reign of God,” *op. cit.*, 140 and 142.
  - <sup>13</sup> See: Ted L. Napier and David G. Sommers, “Farm Production Systems of Mennonite and Non-Mennonite Land Owner-Operators in Ohio,” *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation* 51 (1996); David G. Sommers and Ted L. Napier, “Comparison of Amish and Non-Amish Farmers: A Diffusion /Farm-Structure Perspective,” *Rural Sociology* 58 (1993): 130-145; M.H. Bender, “An Economic Comparison of Traditional and Conventional Agricultural Systems at a County Level,” *American Journal of Alternative Agriculture* 16 (2001).
  - <sup>14</sup> John A. Hostetler, *Amish Society* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), 114. For an elaboration of this thinking see Eugene P. Erikson, Julia Erikson and John A. Hostetler, “The Cultivation of the Soil as a Moral Directive: Population Growth, Family Ties and the Maintenance of Community among the Old Order Amish,” *Rural Sociology* 45 (1980): 49-68; John A. Hostetler, “Toward Responsible Growth and Stewardship of Lancaster County’s Landscape,” *Pennsylvania Mennonite Heritage* 12 (1989): 2-10.
  - <sup>15</sup> David Kline, *Great Possessions: An Amish Farmer’s Diary*, (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990), xix. For similar musings see also the magazine *Farming* which Kline founded in 2001 as well as Richard H. Moore, Deborah H. Stinner and David and Elsie Kline, “Honouring Creation and Tending the Garden: Amish Views of Biodiversity,” in Darrell Addison Posey, ed., *Cultural and Spiritual Values of Biodiversity/United Nations Environmental Programme* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
- For a personal account less focused on nature, but indirectly linking “old order” life-world to harmony with the environment see Isaac Horst, *A Separate People: An*

*Insider's View of Old Order Mennonite Customs and Traditions* (Kitchener: Herald Press, 2000).

- <sup>16</sup> David Walbert, *Garden Spot: Lancaster County, the Old Order Amish and the Selling of Rural America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 211.
- <sup>17</sup> Steven D. Reschly, *The Amish on the Iowa Prairie, 1840-1910* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000).
- <sup>18</sup> Donald Worster, *Dust Bowl: The Southern Plains in the 1930s* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 174. For similar observations about the Mennonites of Haskell County, some of whom were first cousins to the Meade Mennonites, see: Katherine Jellison, *Entitled to Power: Farm Women and Technology, 1913-1963* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), 37-38.
- <sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.
- <sup>20</sup> Pamela Riney-Kehrberg, *Rooted in Dust: Surviving Drought and Depression in Southwestern Kansas* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1994), 172.
- <sup>21</sup> Peter G. Genzinger, "Mennonite Representations of Nature in the Nineteenth Century," Guelph University, MA Thesis, 1995, 193, 203, 251.
- <sup>22</sup> Barbara Jane Dilly, "A Comparative Study of Religious Resistance to Erosion of the Soil and the Soul," University of California, Irvine, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1994. Most noteworthy for this study are the conclusions Dilly makes with regard to the Brethren, a "German Anabaptist sect from Pennsylvania" which settled here in the 1850s, 33. Dilly erroneously refers to them as "Mennonite Brethren"; it seems the "Brethren" in the study are members of either the Church of the Brethren or Brethren in Christ.
- <sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.
- <sup>24</sup> Carol Jenkin, "Mennonite Values and Farming Practice," Kansas State University, Ph.D. Dissertation, 1986, 4. Her study is not historical, but for the purposes of our survey, it adds the analysis of late twentieth century farm practices.
- <sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 112, 119, 121.
- <sup>26</sup> I am grateful to Brian Cannon for directing my thinking in this regard. See: Brian Q. Cannon, "Pushing History Beyond Human Institutions: Studying the Rural Environment," paper presented to the 'New Trends in Rural History Conference,' April 2004, Iowa State University, Ames, IA.
- <sup>27</sup> John Warkentin, *The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba, 1960* (Steinbach MB: Hanover Steinbach Historical Society, 2000).
- <sup>28</sup> James T. Lemon, *The Best Poor Man's Country: A Geographical Study of Early Southeastern Pennsylvania* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 63-64.
- <sup>29</sup> D. Aidan McQuillan, *Prevailing Over Time: Ethnic Adjustment on the Kansas Prairies, 1875-1925* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990), xvii.
- <sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 61; 63.
- <sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.
- <sup>32</sup> Simon Schama, Introduction, *Landscape and Memory* (New York, Knopf, 1995), 14. For even more recent examples that include this approach see: Beth LaDow, *The Medicine Line: Life and Death on a North American Borderland* (New York: Routledge, 2001); John C. Weaver, *The Great Land Rush and the Making of the Modern World: 1650-1900* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queens University Press, 2003).
- <sup>33</sup> Bill Neufeld, Tena Friesen, Jake B. Wiebe, Jake P. Friesen and Mary Ann Pruyser, *A Heritage of Homesteads, Hardships and Hope, 1914-1989, La Crete and Area* (La Crete, AB: La Crete Then and Now Society, 1989).
- <sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.
- <sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
- <sup>36</sup> Vicki Schreiber Dill, "Land Relatedness in the Mennonite Novels of Rudy Wiebe," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 58 (1984): 50-69.
- <sup>37</sup> Miriam Toews, *A Complicated Kindness* (Toronto: Knopf, 2004), 5 and 13.

- <sup>38</sup> John Warkentin, "Going on Foot: Revisiting the Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 18 (2000): 59-81. See the original text in Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works*, Vol. II, *Koop enn Bua opp Reise*, Al Reimer ed. (Winnipeg, 1986), 81-82. For a study of a similar set of themes in the work of Arnold Dyck see M.L. Hadley, "Arnold Dyck's Verloren in Der Steppe: A Mennonite Bildungsroman," *Canadian Ethnic Studies* 1 (1969): 21-33.
- <sup>39</sup> Di Brandt, "The Poet and the Wild City," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 20 (2002), 96 and 99.
- <sup>40</sup> Daniel S. Lenoski, "The Sandbox Holds Civilization: Pat Friesen and the Mennonite Past," *Essays on Canadian Writing* 18-19 (1980), 139, 140.
- <sup>41</sup> Leonard N. Neufeldt, ed., *Before We Were the Land's: Yarrow, British Columbia: Mennonite Promise* (Victoria, BC: Horsdal and Schubart, 2002).
- <sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 196.
- <sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.
- <sup>44</sup> An examination of primary sources promises to be a vast treasure-trove of materials useful in constructing an environmental history: consider for example quotations from such sources in John L. Ruth, "Yes, I Loved the Earth," in his *The Earth is the Lord's* (Scottsdale PA: Herald Press, 2001): 424-485. See also Royden Loewen, ed., *From the Inside Out: The Rural Worlds of Mennonite Diarists, 1863-1929*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 1999.
- <sup>45</sup> Waldemar Janzen, "Geography of Faith," *Still in the Image: Essays in Biblical Theology and Anthropology* (Winnipeg: CMBC Publications, 1982) 137-157.
- <sup>46</sup> The findings below represent a summary of chapter two, "Snow Drift and Rainforest: The Environment and Cultural Trajectory," and the latter part of chapter eight, "Remaking Mennonite 'Tradition' in the Jungles of British Honduras," in Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth Century Rural Disjuncture* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, forthcoming).
- <sup>47</sup> For a recent first-hand rendition of the dust bowl experience in Meade County, Kansas, see, Walter S. Friesen, "Of Dust and Water: Survival in the Dust Bowl of the 1930s," *Mennonite Life* 56 (2001). The post-Depression era produced a widespread concern with soil conservation among American Mennonites. See for further examples: A.D. Stoesz, "Mennonites and Soil Conservation," *Proceedings of the Second Annual Conference on Mennonite Cultural Problems* (North Newton, KS: Bethel College Press, 1943); Ralph Felton, "Sugar Creek: A Pastor Demonstrates Soil Conservation," *New Gospel of the Soil* (Madison NJ: Drew Theological Seminary, 1951): 36-41, which tells the story of Mennonite minister, Rev. William Stauffer, efforts to restore lands to former health. See also various articles related to conservation in *The Mennonite Community*, a magazine published from 1947-1954 by the Mennonite Community Association of Scottsdale, Pennsylvania.
- <sup>48</sup> My father, master farmer Dave P. Loewen of Blumenort, once told me with reference to his bitter disappointment at having been shut out of a land deal, that his pain derived from the fact that "next to my love for the Lord and for my family, I love land the most."
- <sup>49</sup> Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977), 148.