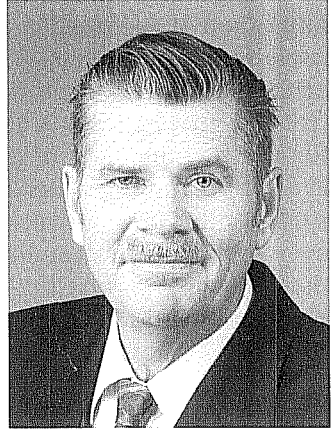


In Memoriam

Delbert F. Plett (1948-2004): A Tribute

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The death of Delbert F. Plett of Steinbach, Manitoba from cancer at the age of 56 has robbed Mennonite studies of one of its most energetic and colourful characters. Born into a large family of Mennonite Kleine Gemeinde background, Plett trained as a lawyer and practised law in Steinbach where he was widely known in the town and surrounding rural area. These contacts were later to prove crucial in his historical studies. Delbert was attracted to Mennonite history through his genealogical studies of the Plett family, a subject to which he remained deeply committed. But it was the discovery of a previously unknown corpus of documents written by members of the Kleine Gemeinde dating back to its foundation in Russia in the early nineteenth century that established his name in Mennonite studies. This vast collection of material, much of it primary documents still in private hands, was published in seven volumes. They provide a rich variety of original material in translation on the Kleine Gemeinde and other Mennonites accompanied by interpretive essays. Delbert's ability to present these sources and comment upon them increased in sophistication as each volume was published.

Delbert recruited numerous people to join him in his work of research, writing and publication. These included local people in the Steinbach area and eventually others worldwide. Delbert was active in the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society and chiefly instrumental in establishing the local the Hanover/Steinbach Historical Society. Under the auspices of the latter he encouraged regular meetings, public lectures and founded a newsletter which under his editorship grew into the journal/magazine *Preservings*. Academics, many of whom at first were reluctant to deal with this "amateur" historian – myself included -- soon found themselves contributing to his volumes and journal.

Preservings gradually developed into a publication quite unlike any other. It included a mixture of semi-academic articles, formal reviews of new books, family and local history with editorials and articles by Plett himself. These often dealt with a wide range of issues, from sharp responses to religious fundamentalism, to passionate pleas for the maintenance of old Mennonite traditions and communities. *Preservings* and his books, reprints of classic works in Mennonite studies and original work by others, eventually appeared under his own imprint, Crossway Press. Some of the more notable titles include the following: *Saints and Sinners* an overview of the history of the Kleine Gemeinde in Imperial Russia, *Diese Steine* (written with Adina Reger), a massive overview of the Russian Mennonites; *Johann Plett*, a "family saga" on Delbert's descendants; and *Old Colony Mennonites in Canada*. All these publications achieved a wide circulation as Delbert generously subsidized the costs not just of their printing, but also their distribution. His distribution network was immense reaching beyond North America into South America and parts of Europe.

All this work required Delbert to devote considerable time, energy and large sums of his own money in the pursuit of Mennonite studies. His work involved a love and passion that at times bordered on the obsessive. Somehow, while continuing his law practice, writing and publishing he also maintained an extensive correspondence with researchers and lay people. He also managed to find time to visit conservative Mennonite groups in Mexico and Belize, take tour groups to Poland, Russia and Ukraine and he even turned his hand to writing fiction and in a completely different genre, a religious tract. His specific point of view was always clear to see, especially concerning evangelical Christianity which he claimed was dominated by what he caricatured as pietist-separatists whose members were devoted to messianic visions completely alien to older Mennonite traditions. This emphasis proved controversial, winning adherents, but also alienating others with different perspectives on the past and present.

My own dealings with Delbert eventually developed into feelings of mutual respect. We shared a common concern to extend the knowledge base of Mennonite studies, improve the quality of interpretation of Mennonite history, consider the historical context of conservative Mennonites and to distribute our findings as widely as possible. I admired his energy and willingness to accept my criticism and advice although, as others have experienced, he often chose not to act upon it.

In 2003 he renamed the local historical society the Flemish Mennonite Historical Society although some, including myself, considered his usage of the term Flemish as problematic. For Delbert this term so encapsulated issues of faith, peoplehood and ancestry that in some ways it might be considered as a reflection of his mature vision of

the importance of the maintenance of conservative traditions in the Mennonite world. We will never know, however, where Delbert might have taken his views if he had been granted a longer life. For all his emphasis on the importance of the continuity of ideas for Mennonites, Delbert himself enjoyed being a maverick.

It is my hope, and no doubt that of his many friends and colleagues, that the spirit of his dedication to Mennonite studies will live on in the D.F. Plett Historical Research Foundation he established. For the present, however, we must acknowledge the significant contribution Delbert made to studies of the Russian Mennonites and their descendants, especially those of conservative persuasions.