

The Story of a Novel: How We Found Ephraim Weber's 'Three Mennonite Maids'¹

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This essay is driven by a novel. It deals not only with a gently satiric work of fiction, but also with the social and religious conditions that accompanied its coming to be. The work of fiction at the heart of my research presumes to project a version of the Mennonite community of Waterloo County in the early decades of the last century. On a more intimate level, the novel "Aunt Rachel's Nieces" could be seen as having emerged directly out of the trajectory of a particular person's life – its author, Ephraim Weber, who lived from 1870 to 1956. Weber was a great-grandson, on his father's side, of Kitchener's founding father Benjamin Eby and grandson, on his mother's side, of the prominent Kitchener entrepreneur and adventurer Jacob Y. Shantz. After growing up first in the Natchez area of what is now Kitchener and then in what is now Bridgeport, Weber moved west (in the last years of the nineteenth century) to join his homesteading family in Alberta, not yet a province, and then still known as the Northwest. Eventually he married (he had no children), received an MA in German literature from Queen's, and came close to earning a PhD (with a dissertation on the English

translations of Goethe's *Faust*) from the University of Chicago. His greatest "claim to fame," as he so well acknowledged, was to have been the regular correspondent, over a period of forty years, with the author of *Anne of Green Gables* (1908), Lucy Maud Montgomery.

Weber's principal professional work was as a (mostly reluctant) teacher in small town Canadian prairie schools, though he longed all his life to be a writer. His novel, "Aunt Rachel's Nieces," though by no means the only thing he ever wrote, was without a doubt his major literary achievement. The manuscript of this work, completed some seventy years ago, initially preserved by Weber and, after his death, by his wife Annie – and then apparently lost – came to light in the context of circumstances I will document here. It was recovered in the fall of 2002, after Paul Tiessen and I had searched for it for thirteen years. What follows is the story of this work – or several stories: an investigation of the context out of which "Aunt Rachel's Nieces" emerged, a commentary on the writing of the novel and the challenges faced by its author, and an account of the manuscript's discovery and recovery by two scholars too curious about it to let it be.

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"Aunt Rachel's Nieces" is set in what Weber calls the environs of Kitchener in the 1920s. This was a time when Mennonites continued a struggle, begun some decades before, to negotiate an appropriate place for Mennonite church members in a world that seemed to offer ever greater challenges to traditional beliefs and ways of being. On more than one occasion the author described the plot of the novel to friends:

Lucinda, Luan[n]a and Luella, Mennonite sister-maids, break away from the sect because of restrictions dating from a simpler period of culture. Aunt Rachel makes a will that brings them back: in their poverty they accept the stipulation that they be full members [of the church] again for three years, cap, bonnet, ancle [sic] skirts (knee-skirts being at their height) and all for an inheritance. The girls are ambitious to sing, "read" and play piano, the younger two still at high school.

The minister of the local congregation has been sent to jag it back to earlier discipline; Uncle Levi, main executor of the will, is for strict discipline, a stout supporter of the church, and father of a bunch of jealous girls – Aunt Rachel left them out. So the Lu's have a time of it toeing the mark. Their poverty pinches the more because of their refinement; they *must* get that money; they tremble on the verge of missing it. A church

council is held when time is up; the fear of another church split saves the girls (Weber, *Weber's Letters Home*, 64-65).

Weber had considered a number of titles for his work. The first page of the manuscript has several options crossed out: first, "A Mennonite Story," then "Where There's a Will," then "More Mennonite Maids," then "Three Lu's and One Will," and finally, "Aunt Rachel's Nieces." The novel begins as follows:

Lucinda, Luanna, and Luella were the only ones of her forty nieces and nephews that Aunt Rachel had succeeded in naming permanently. She loved to name them in pairs and sets. A number of times she had tried to have a Mary and a Martha in at least one of the families of the "Freindschaft"; but the parents and relatives, knowing the Bible rather well, would unfailingly object that nobody could foretell which one would develop into Mary, and which into Martha. A Mary named Martha, and a Martha named Mary, "Ach, how stupid that would be," cried Aunt Selina.

So the maiden aunt and the eldest member of a family of nine felt sweetly gratified when she had completed the building up of a set of Lu's in her youngest sister's family. The babies were not baptized with these names – Mennonites do not baptize infants; but the names were recorded in fancy letters in the family Bible, as well as in the books of the registrar of births. To all this the matronly aunt had attended with prompt devotion (Weber "Aunt Rachel's Nieces,"1).

The narrative reveals that the girls' mother has died young, and the three sisters grow up under the tutelage of their father, Pa Schrupp, who is sometimes bewildered by his three daughters' desires and actions but is, significantly, generally supportive of them and of their particular artistic sensibilities and pursuits. Lucinda, the eldest, is 19; she is deft with a needle and has a wonderful singing voice; Luanna, 17, loves literature, and dramatic readings especially; Luella, 15, is "plagued," the novel tells us, "with a passion for the piano" (2).

One Sunday morning, early on, the girls confront their father with the news that they have decided to quit going to meetings, to church. "And w'y then?" he asks. "Well, we don't fit in," Lucinda offers, falteringly, and then adds, "The discipline is too strict in some ways that are not important." When her father asks her to explain, she says, "Oh you know, dad, how in our plain long skirts and caps and bonnets we all look alike, just like sheep; and we never have any worldly pleasure, even of

the harmless kind.” Lucinda’s younger sister Luanna shares her older sister’s sense of confinement. She longs to take a trip to the city, to see Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*: “We’re studying the play these days in our literature class,” she says, “and our teacher says it would be a sin to miss it.” Their fifteen-year-old sister Luella – the youngest – chimes in: “And, dad, . . . I don’t want to die some day without having been young.” She goes on to announce that she intends to go, next week, “to the high school dance!”

Pa Schrupp, whose identification with his conservative Mennonite community is confirmed by his Pennsylvania-Dutch dialect, “almost begs for mercy. ‘Oh my! W’ere iss all this headin’ for? Worldly clo’ess, dances, theayterss – then Sodom,’” he exclaims. “Now if our elders had-a wrote the Bible, then we might get up a conf’rence to see if it wass time to write it ower again to suit my daughters; but ass long ass the sun an’ starss obed’ently swing in their path an’ bring seed-time an’ harvest, so long we childern off men must also do the rewealed will off our Heavenly Father.” He makes “two stooping strides for the Bible” while his daughters go their ways. When Lucinda calls him to dinner he is “making up a list of supporting passages,” choosing not to eat “because of his disturbed peace of mind.” Observing her father, Lucinda, the eldest, finds it hard to eat, too, though Luella calls her dad’s fast “a mere pose for sympathy” (3-5).

Thus emerges the central conflict in the narrative, not between father and daughters, but between three young women and the prescribed expectations of the most rigidly dogmatic members of their community. It is precisely when the girls are about to leave their congregation that Aunt Rachel pulls them back. Aunt Rachel, “tall, commanding,” visits her nieces early in the narrative, in a chapter entitled “Unwelcome.” The girls, in spite of the fact that their great aunt has interrupted their clearing the floor so a classmate can teach them to dance (“getting ready to oil the floor,” Luella fibs) are “hopeful she would be nice this time” (7). When Aunt Rachel complains that the girls have been noticeably absent from church, Lucinda tries to persuade her that their breaking away “from over-strict discipline” might help them “to enjoy life and succeed in the world” (10). Aunt Rachel will hear none of that, and urges her niece to keep herself “unspotted from the world like it sayss in the Bible, and be true to God” (11).

When Aunt Rachel dies suddenly, of a stroke, shortly after her visit with the girls, her three nieces hear from her chief executor, their rigid Uncle Levi, the details of her bequest – that each of them should receive \$1000 (an enormous sum in their circumstances), subject to the principal condition that they all, for “at least three yearss from the present date . . . must belong to the Mennonite congregation

[they were] brought up in – attend its serwicess off worship – obserf its ordinancess – be governed by its discipline – and conform to its wayss and dress.” Hearing this, the otherwise “heavenly-happy Lu’s,” the narrator tells us, are thrown into “the slough of despond.” When Uncle Levi exits, the three young women sit helpless on the sofa: “‘I’m breathless,’ Lucinda gasp[s]. ‘I’m petrified,’ Luanna mumble[s]. ‘I’m gone limp,’ Luella drawl[s]” (16). The imaginary uses to which the girls might put the money promised by the will are limitless and, finally, seductive. After much debate, they agree that Aunt Rachel’s challenge has been issued “for the good of [their] spiritual characters” (27) and they resolve to “honor her memory” and begin their “three years’ Lent” (31). We should not let Weber’s allusion to Lent escape our attention, for the girls’ persistent efforts – in the context of restraint – to override dogma with creative insight and expression culminate in an enlarged vision of community and shared intimations of the Infinite.

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Ephraim Weber, the author of this narrative, was raised as a Mennonite. He would remain interested in religion and church activities throughout his life, but his direct association with the Mennonite church came to an end in the first decade of the twentieth century – a period during which he regularly discussed, with correspondents like Lucy Maud Montgomery, a transformation in his thinking on religious matters. In an October 1902 letter he told Montgomery that he was “in a transition from the old thought and creed to some new and undefined life.” (Weber “A-precis”) In fact, it could be argued that the Mennonite world Weber more or less abandoned around 1902 was changed utterly by the time he began deliberately to renew his interest in the people of his heritage some three decades later. So his novel, set in the 1920s, has about it something of the tenor of the 1890s and the era that immediately followed, a period in Waterloo County Mennonite history with which Weber was most intimately familiar.

This was a period during which historians of the Mennonite church documented what they have called a great awakening. Mennonites were being challenged to address the question of how to engage the dominant North American culture (with which they had greater commerce than ever before) and remain faithful at the same time. This change in the way Mennonites saw themselves, especially in relation to the world at large, had far-reaching implications well into the twentieth century.

A principal cultural and religious force in the new Mennonite reality that emerged in the later decades of the nineteenth century was a quasi-denominational periodical called *The Herald of Truth*, founded in

1864 by John Fretz Funk, the same entrepreneur and churchman who, some thirty years later, was to found the Mennonites' *Young People's Paper*, for which Ephraim Weber, in the late 1890s, became a prolific contributing editor. Historian Leonard Gross has observed that it was in the *Herald of Truth* that major new Mennonite institutional concerns developed "in embryonic form" – concerns such as "the Sunday school, mutual aid, publishing, missions, education, historical interpretation, peace work and relief work" (Gross 85). Gross remarks that towards the end of the nineteenth century Mennonites were encountering substantial new challenges, even the end of their use of the German language. He notes that by 1898 "the Mennonites in general [had] turned 'English'" (86). German – the most prominent marker of their distinctiveness – "had been dropped as mother tongue by the younger set" (86), many of whom, to use the prevailing discourse, were being "carried away in the whirlpool of worldliness" (87).

Daniel Kauffman, the most prominent spokesman of the new disposition, had declared in the *Herald of Truth* in 1896 that "[t]he day is past when we can sit down with folded arms and rely upon the spirit of inbred Mennonitism to fill our churches" (in Gross, 87). Mere pious faith and a sense of history and peoplehood that had once kept the Mennonites true to the beliefs of old were no longer sufficient to sustain the Mennonite community, and were especially inadequate to attract and retain young people, so easily distracted by the worldliness that encroached on every side. So, in an attempt "on a grand scale to contain and package church life and program in the face of real and threatened modernity" (Gross, quoting Robert Kreider, 100). Kaufmann and others invoked a new authoritarianism which found expression in a new doctrinal approach to Mennonite discipleship. In their attempt to provide clear direction to members of the Church, and to give clear-cut answers to questions that might confront them, Kaufmann and like-minded leaders redefined "what it meant for Mennonites to be in the world but not of it at the closing of the nineteenth century" (Hurst 42). In keeping with arguments such as that put forward in 1895, "that the strength and power of Mennonite witness lie in being different from the world" (citing G.L. Bender, 57), the call for distinctive dress went out.

Building upon the foundation laid in the sermons of the powerfully influential Mennonite evangelist John S. Coffman, Daniel Kauffman "identified the woman's prayer covering as one of seven biblical ordinances" (92). Up to the 1880s Mennonites had embraced two ordinances. "Now church leaders regarded women's obedience to wearing the head covering on par with Christian obedience to practicing baptism and communion" (92). Whereas Mennonite women had previously worn the head covering – understood as "an expression of

Mennonite plainness” (92) – for prayer and worship, they were now compelled to wear it all the time. Women who objected to wearing it were perceived as “prideful, disobedient, lacking in consecration, or ashamed of the gospel” (94) and they were seen to be disrespectful of “God’s order of authority: God, Christ, Man, Woman” (92).

Given some of Ephraim Weber’s comments (in letters and essays throughout his life) that revealed his discomfort with rigid programs of belief and practice within religious institutions, it is not surprising that he would have found worthy of fictional exploration the issue of woman’s attire and women’s head coverings – and the way the issue was addressed by the Mennonites in general and by his home community in particular. In “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces,” Weber, who was throughout his adult life appalled by the power of tradition to enslave, gently mocks the activities of district and general conferences of the Mennonite Church he knew where, between 1865 and 1950, no fewer “than 230 resolutions were passed on nonconformity in dress, more than on any other subject” (Gingrich 6).

Although “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces” revealed Weber’s impatience with what he called the “sectish Christian orthodoxy” in the context of which he grew up (Weber *Ephraim Weber’s Letters Home*, 188), the novel is not driven entirely by Weber’s critical apprehension of what a pathetic institution the church obsessed with orthodoxy can become. Weber’s approach to his material is, in fact, propelled by his vision for what a positive force a worshipping community – especially one that embraces the role of the arts in Christian expression – might represent. Throughout his life Weber was regretful about rather than intolerant of what he took to be the narrow sectarianism in which he grew up. He never found any church that didn’t leave him “searching for something spiritually poetic” (93).

As early as 1903 Weber remarked that: “The human soul is evolving into tremendous complexities, and it seems to me that we need new blood in our religion and ethics” (Weber A-precis, 20). Some thirty years later he observed that “[t]he churches are deader than its clergy admit. We seldom find a service that refreshes and inspires. . . . Possibly a residue of spiritual life will save the church from extinction, and some day grow to power. How long, O Lord!” (Weber “Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston, 10 June 1934). Ten years later, after a lifetime of looking for a church that would support his spiritual needs, Weber, by then an old man, continued to regret that “the churches don’t help me get deeply awed by the might and sublimity of God. . .” (Weber, *Weber’s Letters Home*, 93).

To be sure, “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces” takes issue, albeit rather playfully, with what Weber all his life thought of as the need to scrap forever “our parish sects and incidental creeds.” But the parallel thrust in the

novel is rooted in Weber's consistent favoring of the "enlargement of mental and religious horizons" (Weber, "Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston, 26 Sept. 1944). At 75 he reiterated sentiments that reflected this point of view. "Poetry well rendered," he wrote, "sublimely transcends this ugly sectishness [sic] of the theological creeds" (19 Dec.1945). "Aunt Rachel's Nieces" embodied for him the persistent struggle of the poetic soul. Lucinda and Luanna and Luella – his three Mennonite maids – succeed, in the novel, in revealing to their community that the expression of creative sensibilities, in the congregation and elsewhere, does not so much hinder as enhance the spiritual lives of people who would seek communion with God. It was, after all – as Weber had observed decades before – the artist, the musician, the poet, who engaged in the "serious and profound undertaking [of reaching] into the flying chaos of thought and emotion [to] bring out . . . a hint of the Infinite, for whom mortals are thirsting so" (Weber, "A-precis," 7).

As early as 1898 Weber had inveighed against creeds that, he argued, could neither "nourish the understanding nor quicken the inner man" (Weber, "Do you Think For Yourself?"). The substance of his novel suggests that he paid particular attention when regulations concerning the way Mennonites dressed were generally "encoded in church statutes" and "made a test of [church] membership" (Epp 237) – especially when the woman's bonnet in particular became, in the nineteen-twenties, "the focus of . . . friction" (243) at First Mennonite Church in Weber's home town of Kitchener.

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Weber, who visited Kitchener in 1928 after living in other parts of North America since the turn of the century, must have had some direct knowledge of the strained circumstances in the congregation during the 1920s, circumstances that included a 1921 resolution by the Waterloo County Ministers' Meeting to make "the wearing of the bonnet – not only to church but everywhere – a test of [church] membership for women" (248). When in June 1922 Bishop Manasseh Hallman refused to serve communion to the women of the First Mennonite congregation who were wearing hats (rather than regulation headgear), 139 members of the Church "submitted a petition to the annual meeting of the Ontario Conference" to express their "opposition to the bonnet regulation" (248). But the official demands for the regulation headgear persisted, and resolutions were passed at the 1923 and 1924 annual Conference sessions, demanding that "those who deliberately transgress the doctrines of Christ and decisions of Conference, forfeit their right to communion. . . until they are willing to conform to the same" (quoted in Epp, 25). When the First Mennonite minister "continued to refrain from disciplining women

who wore hats” and was subsequently silenced by church authorities, over 100 dissenters within the congregation “announced that they were seceding from First Mennonite and the Conference to form an independent congregation” (250). This resulted in the founding of Kitchener’s Stirling Avenue Church.

That Weber had very likely been apprised of the circumstances at First Mennonite in Kitchener, then “the most urban of Ontario Mennonite congregations” (247), became evident well after his novel was completed, in a request he made to Leslie Staebler in October 1945. After spending the summer revising “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces” Weber sent the unpublished novel to Staebler, and requested that, after reading the work, his Kitchener friend should pass the manuscript on to Mrs. Irvin (Ervine) Shantz, Weber’s cousin, on Cameron Street. Weber would have known that when the “unfortunate conditions” that led to church division in Kitchener in the mid-1920s unfolded (247), his cousin Mrs. Irvin Shantz was among the members of the congregation who had walked out.

Women’s headgear figures large in “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces” where Weber speculates humorously that the bonnet issue might be resolved another way. If everyone could be persuaded to wear a distinctive headdress, Mennonite women wouldn’t feel so isolated and oppressed. In the novel, Lucinda’s Mennonite cap becomes a discomfiting distraction in the Huttle Hall (community) Choir in which she sings. The choir leader’s irritation with Lucinda’s regulation headgear is so compelling that the choir establishes a bonnet committee to try to design a head-dress that would at once serve Lucinda’s need for a prayer covering and at the same time provide an acceptable costume for the entire chorus. The challenge is to dress everyone in such a fashion that Lucinda, a prized soloist, will blend right in. What the bonnet committee comes up with, the narrator observes, is “not hat, not cap, not bonnet, beret or turban” (Weber “Aunt Rachel’s Nieces,” 92). Nor is it acceptable to everyone. One member of the choir, before leading her supporters out the door in a huff, declares that she is “not going to wear a Mennonite cap to humor one queer member” (93).

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It was as scholars interested above all in the literature of the Mennonites that Paul Tiessen and I stumbled upon Weber and his work. We were poking around in the National Archives in Ottawa in the midst of another research project when we first came upon the Weber files. We began to read his letters, where his own self-conscious references to his writing drew our attention – especially statements like the one in a letter dated October 13, 1945. Weber, then 75 years old, and living in Saskatoon, confides in his boyhood friend Leslie Staebler in Kitchener:

“I’ll be mailing you my novel (in manuscript, alack and alas!), *Aunt Rachel’s Nieces*. Of course with a title like this it would have to be a Mennonite story, wouldn’t it?” Implicitly dismissing his own remark in a letter to Staebler written over thirty years before, in 1912, that he had “lost interest for the most part, in Berlin [Kitchener]” (Weber, *Weber’s Letters Home*, 41), Weber, appealing to his own and Staebler’s life-time of correspondence about their shared hometown, its culture and its inhabitants, continued: “Of all people I can think of, you seem to me to be the best qualified to read this bit of fiction: you know the Mennonite mores and the Pennsylvania Dutch soul, as well as the English language on its literary side. So, pray try it, and if sometimes you and your good wife, a good second to you in this matter, I fancy, may read a chapter together perhaps, that would be ideal.” Then Weber interrupted his somewhat hesitant, self-conscious appeal with an exclamation peppered by a bit of dialect he knew would be familiar to his Waterloo County friend: “For gracious sake! – I haven’t ever sent you a copy of all this, have I? Am reaching the forgetful stage, *ach,ach,ach!*” Finally he added “And would you, after having read the story at your leisure, take it to 25 Cameron St. E., to Mrs. Irvin Shantz, my cousin, at your convenience?” (115).

As early as June 1936 Ephraim Weber had written to Wilfrid Eggleston² that he had “spent countless weeks on a yarn about three Mennonite maids, sisters.” Four months later he wrote: “The last short yarn I began wouldn’t stop at 3000 nor at 4000 words, so I let it spin to novelet length.” He was up to 107 pages, he said, and hoped “to catch the psychological curtain at page 250.” Weber noted that the story was “a creation of the L.M. Montgomery type, of course: character continuity and atmosphere, &c.” He was sure of at least one thing, he remarked in his inimitably self-deprecating way, writing it was “good practice” (Weber, “Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston, 18 Oct.1936).

As Weber’s letters suggest, the novel circulated in manuscript throughout various parts of Canada and the USA in the late 1930s, and the 1940s. Weber observed in a letter in 1938 that he was “collecting impressions on it, from friends, of course, and they are not all honey sweet” (10 July 1938). An old friend in New Hampshire had been particularly harsh, he remarked, and a member of the “Old Colony” Mennonites (a group quite different from the Mennonites Weber portrayed) “was annoyed” at the way Mennonites were “misportrayed.” But his minister’s wife, “a B.A.,” had “found the yarn decidedly superior to L.M.M.’s latest (Jane of Lantern Hill), [though] not in the least like it!” (10 July 1938). By the end of 1939 the novel had made a circuit of Canadian publishers, and had been rejected by four: Ryerson, Macmillan, McClelland & Stewart, and Allen. “The yarn has merit,”

Weber wrote to Eggleston in November 1939, “and the disadvantage of being ‘different.’” Fiction “has gone cheap,” he observed, and, alas, he didn’t “speak the language” of the contemporary literary world (28 Nov.1939).

These were the sorts of references we encountered when we first looked into Weber’s work. And the more references to his novel we found, the more intrigued with it we became. We couldn’t help but wonder if a copy of it might still exist. The hunt itself became a kind of adventure. We began, of course, by making official inquiries of various kinds, and we sent letters to the editors of selected newspapers across the continent. Weber had lived in Waterloo County, in various small towns and larger cities on the prairies, from Lajord to Outlook to Oxbow, Calgary to Battleford to Saskatoon. He had spent time in Kingston, Philadelphia, and Chicago and had finally retired to Victoria, B.C. We made contact with friends and heirs, archivists and scholars. We had good luck in locating the executors of Weber’s estate, and received permission to use the novel in any way we deemed appropriate – should we ever find it – but the manuscript eluded us.

Our frequent and persistent enquiries at the National Archives failed to yield up the manuscript; so too did our many letters of inquiry throughout the 1990s, though our queries drew several people to share their personal memories of Weber. In one amusing case, our letters evoked thirteen pages of memories about an idiosyncratic Nanaimo couple, Annie and John Weber, who, unfortunately, had nothing to do with our Webers whatsoever. We sent and received letters and made contact with anyone we thought might have memories that could lead to the success of our hunt. We interviewed the Staebler’s maid. Leslie Staebler’s daughter, Elizabeth Devitt, when we spoke with her in Waterloo (in the company of her sister-in-law Edna Staebler), revealed that she had recently disposed of all literary artifacts that had survived her father’s death. Among the items she threw out, she recalled, were her father’s letters to Ephraim Weber, the original envelopes possibly replete with the newspaper clippings Staebler habitually sent to his friend, documenting years-worth of theatre and musical activities Leslie Staebler and his children were so involved in in Kitchener-Waterloo.

We spent a warm afternoon sitting on the front porch of 234 Clemaw Avenue in Ottawa, where we heard Wilfrid Eggleston’s gracious widow, Magdalena, tell us that she recalled reading Ephraim Weber’s novel, but believed that her late husband had returned it long ago. The vast bulk of Eggleston’s literary estate was already in the national archive, she noted, although his home study, which held the most personal of his effects, and was right at the top of the stairs, only meters away from where we sat, remained as it had been when

he died. We wondered whether the novel might be in there, but Mrs. Eggleston's daughter Anne was resting upstairs, and Mrs. Eggleston didn't invite us in.

When I spoke on the telephone with Annie Weber's niece, one of Weber's heirs, she recalled that many of Weber's remaining personal and literary effects had disappeared within days of Annie Weber's death in December 1959. Whatever might have remained of Weber's papers had been carted away, the niece suggested, by a man who had boarded with her Aunt Annie during the closing years of her life – a man who did odd jobs for Mrs. Weber in exchange for room and board. Among the tasks he had performed in recent years, as Annie Weber herself had reported to Wilfrid Eggleston in a letter she sent him in July, 1957, was “re-typing the best copy” of Ephraim's major work. So we knew that at least one copy of the novel had remained in Annie's home after Ephraim died.

Even the Montgomery heirs – Stuart Macdonald's daughter Kate and her mother, Stuart's widow – searched through long-neglected boxes stored away in the basement of the family's Toronto home, cautiously hopeful that some literary artifacts related to Weber, papers that may once have been overlooked, might surface now. All these efforts yielded nothing but to alert a lot of people to the fact that Ephraim Weber's novel manuscript had once existed, and that we were looking for it.

Several years later, and strictly by chance, I came across an announcement that the National Library had in 1997 acquired the papers of the then recently-deceased Egglestons' only child, Canadian composer Anne Eggleston, the woman who had been resting upstairs a few years before while we sat on the Eggleston porch. I made inquiries on the spot, hoping to learn that Weber's novel might have surfaced somehow among the things gathered from the family home when Anne Eggleston died. I found out that representatives of the Library had indeed gone to the Eggleston home after the composer's death. Library staff had cleared out everything they thought might be of interest for the composer's archive. When I enquired as to whether they might have found materials relevant to the composer's father, the eminent journalist Wilfrid Eggleston, I was informed that the Library's interests had been limited to *Anne* Eggleston alone. The National Library and National Archives were then still separate entities: the Library collected Anne Eggleston, the composer, and the Archives held the papers of the man of letters, her father. Apparently these related national agencies, although housed in the same building, did not routinely communicate with each other. I was both disappointed and dismayed, imagining that Weber's fiction manuscript might have remained all these years in Eggleston's study, and might now, at the last, have been

disposed of by representatives of the National Library who may have failed to appreciate its worth.

A few more years went by. Then, out of the blue in the fall of 2002, we received notice from Anne Goddard, our consistently helpful and supportive contact at the National Archives of Canada. She informed us that she had, as she remarked, "finally had someone here tackle the few boxes of material we had transferred to us by the Trust Company handling Magdalena Eggleston's estate – and buried among what we thought was [her husband, Wilfrid] Eggleston's Green Gables transcripts was a typed draft of a novel by Ephraim Weber. . . . Is this what you were looking for?" (Goddard) Could our search be over? We sent for the material at once, and were delighted to open a package containing the Archives' photocopy of a 300-page type-script called "Aunt Rachel's Nieces." And so our thirteen-year search for Weber's Waterloo County Mennonite novel had come to an end.

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So how did is novel come to be? Ephraim Weber was in his mid-sixties and freshly retired from teaching when he once more seriously turned his hand to his most consistent desire and most compelling ambition – to be a writer. It was, after all, as a fellow writer that Weber had first approached Lucy Maud Montgomery in 1902. His concerns about writing filled the pages of their many letters to each other in the years before and after *Anne of Green Gables*. Weber, though often near despair that he was able, over his lifetime, to produce so little for publication, never lost his desire to find a legitimate place in the world of literature. By December of 1933, Weber's first year of retirement, he reported that he had enrolled in a correspondence course with the Newspaper Institute of America and had begun to practice writing 1000-word "storiottes" (Weber, "Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston", 21 Dec. 1933). The following March he wrote to Eggleston and reflected on his new writing venture: "Why journalism to learn story-writing?" he asked rhetorically. "Because of my retiring and idealistic temperament. I need some worldly ballast, some grit in my style, more contact with the earthy stratum of life" (4 March 1934).

At Eggleston's suggestion, Weber had written a half dozen biographies for the "Canadian Who Was Who 1900-1933," a multi-volume enterprise under the editorship of Charles G.D. Roberts (28 Dec, 1933). Even here Weber "[h]ad a little difficulty hitting the taste of the managing editor," he wrote, and went on to exclaim: "[H]ow to make a living writing literary things?! Have agonized all my life trying to solve that problem. It beat me, and drove me to teaching; and now I don't feel as if I [have] lived my life. My present eleventh hour attempt at creative literature must look pathetic to my friends" (20 July 1934).

Some five months later, ever more aware of Eggleston's growing stature as a nationally-known literary figure, Weber complained: "Moi, I have so far succeeded in cluttering up my drawers with practice material, the short story. To learn a new art at my age takes a lot of practice. Twenty years of teaching has left me stuffed with theory and principles and analysis, but devoid of creation. So I'm trying to reconstruct myself. Be oh so patient with me. Am slow as geology . . . the net day's work is microscopic" (11 Dec. 1934).

The two men began to exchange manuscripts, each invoking critical comment from the other, neither acknowledging overtly the poignant shift that had taken place between them. The teacher (Weber) had clearly become the student, and the former student (Eggleston) had taken on the role of critic and mentor. In June 1935, Eggleston, after having reviewed carefully a number of examples of Weber's writing, employed an uncharacteristically intimate tone as he gently cajoled the former teacher he so much admired:

I would like to see you tapping the rich sub-conscious stream of your personality and experience, in your stories [Eggleston began]. . . . I would like to see about them a Weberesque quality – unique, characteristic – embodying in them a something – *je ne sais quoi* – which nobody else could possibly imitate or duplicate. I know you have rich stores to draw from, if you can fish them out of the deep well of personality. . . . You have observed over a good many years the tragi-comedy of life; you have personally gone through several of its phases; you know about its ironies and ecstasies, its frustrations and its compensations. Isn't the trick, now . . . to go exploring back through those conscious and sub-conscious paths to the earliest memories, and see if [you] can't pour out the distilled spirit of those rich experiences? (4 June 1935)

Perhaps Weber took to heart what Eggleston conveyed to him here – possibly observing, rightly, that his younger friend was telling him exactly what he himself might have suggested to a promising student years ago. For it was to the "rich stores" of past experience that Weber appealed when he next began to compose. His experience of the next few months, the summer of 1935, would encourage him "to go exploring back through those conscious and sub-conscious paths to [his] earliest memories," as Eggleston had urged him to do.

In September 1935, on his way home after a trip east where he visited the Egglestons in Ottawa, and Lucy Maud Montgomery and her husband Ewan, recently settled in Toronto, Weber wrote to Eggleston from Winnipeg: "We stayed a while in Kitchener on the way West.

More and more ancient friends would have us. Then approached the date of the big Mennonite conference, and we were persuaded to wait for it; I thought it would be a means of studying Mennonitism anew, in its latter-day aspects – which it was” (14 Sept. 1935). In his Christmas letter that year Weber invoked the *Who Was Who* project Eggleston had introduced him to, remarking that he had been asked to “take in hand the reconstruction, abridgement and revision of the manuscript of [his] grandfather’s [Jacob Y. Shantz’s] biography.” He remarked that it would be “a labor of love,” and wondered if he could afford the time it would demand. He reported, also, that he had been “broached’ on the question of writing a cultural history of the Mennonites in Canada.” He observed to Eggleston that “[t]his too would prove a labor of love” because “the Mennonites are limited readers, and publishers are cautious.” Clearly the subject was of some interest to him, for he went on: “If I had more years and money I’d try it, for it ought to be done.” He continued to waver: “The Pennsylvania-German Mennonites are the nerve centre of the topic and as they are scattered pretty well over the continent, and the outlay in gathering material would be prohibitive for me, I could perhaps make a magazine article. . . . Que pensez-vous, mes amis?” (15 Dec. 1935). Two weeks later, Eggleston replied enthusiastically, declaring that he liked “the idea of a book on Mennonite culture.” He wondered if there might be “any Mennonite leader” prepared to make some inquiries to the Carnegie or Rockefeller Foundations “to get a large enough grant to cover the secretarial work of gathering the information at least” (Eggleston). Weber thanked him for his encouragement, but remarked that he feared it was “forty years too late.” The Mennonites, he observed, “are being assimilated to the ways of the world at a disheartening rate.” Moreover, “the living representatives of the truer Mennonitism are in far-scattered places and are too aged to talk worth a cent” (Weber Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston, 23 Jan. 1936).

The first reference to Weber’s working on his novel appears in a letter to Wilfrid Eggleston some six months later, in June 1936, almost a year after Weber’s visit “home” to Kitchener. “I haven’t published a thing,” he wrote, and then added: “Have spent countless weeks on a yarn about three Mennonite maids, sisters.” He had produced 48 pages, he wrote, but just then, in the midst of his letter-writing, his wife had come home with a new novel by the prolific and best-selling (though little known today) author Warwick Deeping (1877-1950). Ephraim and Annie had read Deeping’s 1935 novel *Sackcloth into Silk* to each other “by turns.”³ Oh, Weber lamented then, his “fond Maids were wrecked! – dull as daily chores” in the face of the “smartness. . . current mannerisms, profanity, illegitimate love-making, shallow versatility in life-purposes, and unintelligible slang” of Deeping’s work. He

despaired: "I hardly have the heart to go on" (7 June 1936). Some four months later, however, in another letter to Eggleston, he picked up the subject of the novel once more. "You'll have lost all literary respect for me," he wrote, "to have nothing to show after three years of freedom for it! My drawers are cluttered with scribbler's debris, and my mind and spirit with inferiority complexes. However, I'm pegging away in low spirits if not in despair." As to "writing that cultural history of the Mennonites," he added, he was "afraid of it financially," and had decided to work on the "yarn" instead (18 Oct. 1936).

Weber's first reference to the novel in his letters to Staebler did not come until two months later when, in his annual Christmas letter, he commented on their favorite subjects of discussion: theatre and music. "The dramatic season was raging when you wrote," he began, "and all your young people were drilling each other and themselves to act plays. Now they probably are doing similarly to sing Handel's *Messiah*. I hope so and wish I could hear the public rendering of it. Am particularly interested in this piece, as in a yarn I'm spinning it occurs!" Driven by his ever-present sense of inadequacy, Weber went on to undercut his own enthusiasm with a typical self-deprecating caution: "The story is stretching out to novel length," he wrote, "and is probably on the primrose path to the everlasting bonfire" (Weber *Ephraim Weber's*, 310). Three days earlier he had written to Eggleston: "I'm spinning away at the yarn and unspinning some from time to time. Am often oppressed with its trivialities, but as it is a character story, it needs details aplenty to make it realistic. I may never have the nerve to show it to you. However, the writing of it is making the days go by fast and giving me a good appetite for after-supper reading" (Weber, Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston, 19 Dec. 1936). A few months later he reported to Eggleston that the work was near completion. "You will never have the patience to read it," he ventured, once more revealing his lack of confidence in the work, "though I hope some day Lena [Eggleston's wife Magdalena] may." He offered some self-analysis: "In aiming to secure the illusion of reality, I have been dwelling too much on trivial details. I'll need about 75 pages to complete it. My Mennonite Maids, on the border between Mennonitism and the world, are sorely put to it to heed the terms of their aunt's will in inheriting some of her money and the reader will not take any interest in them unless he knows them intimately, which calls for a close-up and unhurried view of their situation" (29/31 May 1937).

Weber's progress on the novel was hindered by his and Annie's move to Saskatoon in June 1937, though by November that year he was able to report to Eggleston that he had had trouble getting the work to stop. "However, 'tis writ," he declared. "The Mennonite reader may find it interesting," he ventured, adding, "but Mennonites

are poor readers!!” (Eggleston, “Letter to Ephraim Weber, 4 Nov 1937). Responding to Eggleston’s reports on his own attempts at fiction, Weber wrote: “We are in suspense to see your novel – the first Eggleston novel, and wish you an early and satisfactory publisher.” Five days later Eggleston wrote from the Royal York Hotel in Toronto, with his own spectacular news: not only had he just then been invited to join the Royal Commission on Dominion-Provincial Relations, but his first novel (*The High Plains*) had been accepted by Macmillan. One can only imagine the range of Weber’s emotions when he read the letter, and absorbed Eggleston’s editorializing: “I can hardly believe that my first novel is accepted by the first publisher I approach!” Weber’s former student wrote. “Aren’t you supposed to hawk your MSS. around among a dozen or more publishers, each of them rejecting it with great gusto?!” Then, almost as if catching himself, Eggleston added: “It is very fitting that you & Mrs. Weber should be the first to be told, because I owe so much of any little mastery of English I may have to your encouragement, inspiration and *practical help* in years gone by” (9 Nov. 1937). Weber replied within the week: “Dear friend Wilfrid, It never rains but it pours, and to him that hath shall be given. . . . wife and I congratulate you copiously on your double success. . . . Mrs. W. says ‘we’re proud to know you,’ which is true, though I moved an amendment: ‘We’re prouder than ever to know you,’ to which she assented readily. If ever we gain any pale moonish fame,” Weber continued, poignantly, “it will be because we have satellites around the greater heavenly bodies of Eggleston and Montgomery!” (15 Nov. 1937)

To Leslie Staebler a few weeks later Weber reported that his novel was complete. It “differ[ed] colossally from the Elsie Singmaster and the Mabel Dunham type,” he elaborated boldly, remarking that the “pioneer” had “faded out of the picture” in his work (Weber, *Weber’s Letters Home*, 77). He had written it, he said, for educated Mennonites. “My long manuscript hasn’t made its maiden trip [to a publisher] yet,” he wrote to Eggleston in July 1938, as he was still circulating it to friends (Weber, “Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston”, 10 July 1938). That December he told Staebler that his novel “lies in manuscript here in my study until the Christmas rush among the Eastern publishers is over. If after a dozen trips it still roams at large like an unheeded ghost,” he speculated gloomily, “I shall let you people see it in manuscript, to read it or not, according to taste” (Weber *Ephraim Weber’s Letters Home*, 82). He did not mention that he had already sent it to The Ryerson Press and it had been returned (Weber, “Letter to Wilfrid Eggleston”, 8 Nov 1938).

By mid-1939 Weber was saying little about his work, except to declare to Eggleston that he had put his hand to essay writing. Among

his efforts was a defense of “earnest strugglers” like Browning’s Grammarian, described by Weber as a “retired Rabbi [who] realizes how much of his striving has failed to count with the world.” (Weber “Browning’s Grammarian”) Weber remarked also, almost in passing, that his novel, still in manuscript, had made several return trips to publishers (24/31 July 1939). By November 1939, with Canada at war, he was afraid that the work might never get into print. “Now more than ever,” he wrote, “I fear the world will not find it to its taste” (28 Nov. 1939).

* * *

Though the success of his Waterloo County novel eluded him, Weber discovered, during the next decade of his life, a sense of nostalgia for the territory in which he grew up. He was effusive in his response to his Kitchener friend Leslie Staebler’s epistolary remarks about Mabel Dunham’s *Grand River* (a documentary work published in 1945). “The old river we used to go a mile to bathe and splash in on a warm Saturday evening has assumed some little majesty for me,” Weber wrote, “the jungled banks where we used to swim, and the lovely plains with tall trees where it flowed past Natchez where my father grew up – under the big hill -- a spot of bucolic beauty” (Weber *Ephraim Weber’s Letters Home*, 130). He and his siblings had been reading Mabel Dunham’s novel *Trail of the Conestoga*, Weber wrote in 1946, a work of fiction “so deliciously spiced with our native Pennsylvania Dutch. . . . How we laughed to hear our precious childhood idioms again, after so many years’ neglect of them, as we took turns in reading it out to one another in the presence of Elsie’s husband and my wife, who wondered what the laughing was all about” (130).

A few years later, when Staebler sent Weber news of the “Waterloo County Centennial” that was to take place in the summer of 1952, Weber took great pleasure in the fact that there would be a celebration of the arrival of the “stalwart pioneers” of the eighteenth century – “the Webers, Sniders, Ebys, Schantz, Brubachers, Hunspergers, etc., &c, *un so veida*,” he remarked, reciting the names of the first Mennonite settlers (195). A few months later he expressed delight in the most recent of numerous articles Edna Staebler had published in *Maclean’s* over the past few years. He drew particular attention to an October 1952 piece she had written about Kitchener and Waterloo as “Happily Married Cities”: “And that article in *Maclean’s* . . . by Edna Staebler!!!!” he began. “She’s a daughter-in-law of yours, *n’est-ce-pas?* . . . I wish I knew her personally. . . . Her knack in writing up those Pensylfawhney-deitsch folks hits the right chord in my mechanism” (197).

A month later, in November 1952, Weber remarked: “It would be nice to get a note from Edna S. . . . And I’m glad she didn’t sell her

literary soul to *Maclean's* but remains a free lance contributor. She'll develop her literary soul better this way. She has a *fine knack of catching up folk souls*" (201). Evidently Edna Staebler did write to him for, just a few months later, the 83-year-old Weber wrote to thank her for her letter and to enquire about her work, while reporting on his own – especially a full length novel he had begun to write, he told her, some seventeen years before, rewritten three times, he reported, and sent four times to publishers in Toronto. Only MacMillan's, he remarked, showed any signs of having read it, "carefully typed tho' it was" (Weber, "Letter to Edna Staebler"). He described his work as "a latter-day Mennonite affair," and added that the manuscript "lies in a deep bottom drawer – and is doing no harm!" Continuing his letter two weeks later, he remarked: "My Mennonite novel is a new kind – maybe rather advanced to be perfectly true! But I have a feeling it would go over rather better now." He told her that if he were to try once more to get it published he would have to reduce it by a third. "I could easily while away a literary year at it," he mused; then he quickly added: "But then again, I don't believe I could stand the drastic simplification." Before exclaiming, as a closing salutation: "The literary deities fertilize our pens!" he offered to send it to her if she thought she'd "like to try a few chapters." He added three post-scripts to this rather chatty letter, the third of which said: "P.P.P.S. Do you like my title: 'Aunt Rachel's Nieces?'"

When he wrote this, Ephraim Weber was almost 83 years old. He would live another three years before he would slump to one side at his writing table, and die, on a Friday morning, while Annie was beginning to prepare lunch. He hadn't given up writing, even if his story of Aunt Rachel's nieces lay, like so much of his other practice material, unpublished, in a drawer. This essay has documented how we eventually found Ephraim Weber's three Mennonite maids. Yes, we found them along with the multiple worlds the search for them revealed to us.

Notes

- ¹ This essay was supported by an award from the Joseph Schneider Haus Museum in Kitchener, and was presented as the 2005 Edna Staebler Research Fellow's Lecture in March 2006.
- ² Wilfrid Eggleston, who would become a prominent Canadian journalist and man of letters, had been Ephraim Weber's high school student in the prairies. He had great admiration for Weber, whom he recognized as having been, next to his parents, the most formative influence in his life. See Wilfrid Eggleston, *While I Still Remember: A Personal Record* (Toronto: Ryerson Press, 1968).
- ³ "In Fiction and the Reading Public," (1932) Q.D. Leavis takes the novels of Deeping and Gilbert Frankau as the epitome of 'the faux bon', literature that 'touching

grossly on fine issues' was evidence of the debased taste of middlebrow readers." See Mary Grover, Sheffield Hallam University. "Warwick Deeping." *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 8 Nov. 2002. The Literary Dictionary Company. 22 February 2006. <<http://www.litencyc.com/php/speople.php?rec=true&UID=1199>>.

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