

Reviews of History

Werner O. Packull, *Peter Riedemann: Shaper of the Hutterite Tradition*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007. Pp. 251. \$41.47.

Werner Packull adds to the knowledge of early Hutterite history with this very fine, detailed study of the life and contributions of Peter Riedemann. Packull's earlier book, *Hutterite Beginnings, Communitarian Experiments during the Reformation* (1995), which was translated into German by Astrid von Schlachta (1996), provides the background to this study.

Packull's book was preceded by the large and detailed recent study of Riedemann by the German scholar Andrea Chudaska. Her book is also entitled *Peter Riedemann* (2003). Thus, within the space of a few years, two excellent studies have been published about this important sixteenth century Anabaptist reformer. Both Packull and Chudaska interpret Riedemann from the perspective of theological and social history, or as Chudaska says, "geistes- und sozialgeschichtliche Aspekte" (42).

Packull organizes Riedemann's story chronologically. He notes that the first reference to Riedemann is in the Hutterite *Chronicle*, which records that in 1529 he was imprisoned in Gmunden, Austria. Although a native of Silesia, very little is known about Riedemann's early life. Sources are silent about who influenced him to become an Anabaptist, where he joined the movement, or when. After Riedemann was freed from his imprisonment in Gmunden, he made his way to Moravia, and lived with communalists for the rest of his life. Of the various communalist groups in the area, he threw in his lot with the Hutterites as the ones who, he felt, most faithfully followed the teachings of scripture.

Riedemann became a missionary for the Hutterites, traveling to various parts of Germany to settle disputes, strengthen leadership, and win back those who had left communalism. From 1529 to 1542 he spent nine years in prison in three different locations. Surviving this ordeal in sixteenth-century prison conditions was in itself a remarkable accomplishment. During his last imprisonment in Hesse, he was called to become the leader of the Hutterites in Moravia. Riedemann escaped from prison to accept this assignment, and served in this capacity for the last 14 years of his life. He died in 1556.

To tell the story, Packull draws on his years of studying early Anabaptism. By drawing on diaries, the Hutterite *Chronicle*, many letters, court records, and more, he not only fleshes out the major narrative of Riedemann's life, but also develops many smaller narratives within

the large one. Packull takes time to analyze theological influences, trends, and developments. In particular he discusses Riedemann's two writings in considerable detail. He devotes a full chapter to a discussion of Riedemann's *Confession* composed during his imprisonment in Hesse.

Two aspects of Riedemann's life, however, are not developed as fully as one might have hoped. The first area about which Packull is largely silent is the influence of Silesia on Riedemann's early formative years. Instead, Packull attributes Riedemann's formative theological influence to the Hans Hut circle in Gmunden. The question is what influence Silesia played in Riedemann's life, since a vigorous communal Anabaptism existed there during his youth. The other influence, which is not developed extensively, is that of the Tyrolean Anabaptist movement. This omission is somewhat curious since Packull has written extensively on Tyrolean Anabaptism. Many Hutterite communalist members and leaders in Moravia came from this area, and thus Tyrolean Anabaptism clearly had a significant influence on Riedemann. It seems that the influence of central German Anabaptism, especially the legacy of Hans Hut, is overemphasized at the expense of other influences.

Despite these shortcomings, Packull's study is a very fine contribution to a fuller understanding of Peter Riedemann, and his role in the sixteenth century Hutterite Anabaptist movement. This is the best English language study of Riedemann, and the Hutterite community of his day. Its thoroughly researched content, and well-written style will make it a valuable, and enjoyable, resource for many.

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H. G. Mannhardt, *The Danzig Mennonite Church: Its Origin and History from 1569-1919*. Trans. Victor G. Doerksen; ed. and annotated by Mark Jantzen and John D. Thiesen. North Newton, KS: Bethel College and Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2007.

Many parts of the European Mennonite story have received a great deal of attention, and studies of early Anabaptists, Mennonites in the Netherlands, Germany, Switzerland and Russia are readily available. The almost two and one-half centuries of Mennonite life under the Polish crown, however, have been relatively neglected. This volume,

written almost a century ago and now published in English translation, provides a refreshing response to that omission.

H. G. Mannhardt, pastor of the Danzig Mennonite church from 1879 to 1927, presents an insider's view of a congregation at the center of Mennonite life in the Vistula Delta, first under the Polish crown, then under Prussian/German rule.

In presenting his portrait of the Danzig Mennonites from 1569 until 1919, Mannhardt selects a wide variety of events and developments to depict a vibrant community that successfully confronts challenges such as religious intolerance, economic exclusion, social pressure, and congregational conflicts. Considerable attention is given to efforts designed to curtail opportunities for Mennonites or to effect their expulsion from the city and its lands, as well as the Vistula Delta. Numerous unscrupulous officials attempted to exact personal gain from a relatively unprotected minority. In some instances the author seems to stress threats more than the action taken by a variety of officials, city councils as well as the royal court itself to intervene on behalf of the Mennonites. Thus, when Mennonites were castigated as "heretics", or disloyal members of society, because of their beliefs and practices, supporters regularly came to their defense. Sometimes, because of pressure from the guilds, the city council called for expulsion of Mennonites from church lands outside the city walls yet quietly permitted them to settle on city lands, or even to reside within the city. On occasions, when officials from other cities and regions denounced Danzig for tolerating Mennonites, the proud city advised these critics that Danzig was fully able to conduct its own affairs.

It should be noted that Mennonites were never expelled from Royal (Polish) Prussia; in contrast, the Protestant king of Prussia twice ordered and partially implemented a royal decree of expulsion. Similarly, when the members of the sejm in the Warsaw Confederation of 1573 stated they would not go to war with each other or kill people because of religious belief, the provisions of this decision, as Janusz Tazbir and others have shown, were applied to Mennonites also. On occasion, unscrupulous officials gained the ear of the king and persuaded him to issue statements against the Mennonites. Responses were predictable: other officials informed the king of the economic significance of Mennonite productivity, and another royal pronouncement, sometimes hastened by a Mennonite contribution to royal coffers, allayed Mennonite concerns.

Readers are given numerous vignettes of Mennonite church life. Mannhardt discusses close ties between Mennonites in Polish Prussia and in the Netherlands. The Danzig Mennonite Church did not conduct its services in German until the second half of the eighteenth century, although elsewhere in the Vistula Delta German was adopted much

earlier. Strong commercial ties between Danzig and the Netherlands, as well as the personal anti-Prussian bias of Danzig Pastor Hans van Steen probably contributed to this situation.

Mennonites maintained an active program of assistance to the needy, and when floods, fire or other misfortunes left people destitute, Mennonites gathered funds to help any members of the community. On other occasions, they gave financial support to help build both Catholic and Lutheran churches. When a Catholic bishop conducted an inquiry into Mennonite beliefs in 1678, he gave a favorable report; a Mennonite minister wryly noted that the decision had been facilitated by a generous financial contribution.

In the middle of the eighteenth century, recurring wars brought deteriorating economic conditions to Danzig and again Mennonites were pressured to avoid competition with non-Mennonites. They thus found themselves restricted in occupations, but, as Mannhardt notes, this did not lead Mennonites to forget the poor. Near the end of the eighteenth century, with Royal Prussia now under the rule of King Frederick II, and land acquisition restricted, Mennonites began to consider emigration. After receiving a strong invitation, several thousand eventually emigrated to Russia. Early in the nineteenth century, Danzig Mennonites united into one congregation and built a new church.

At this time the traditional Mennonite opposition to serving in the military became a contentious issue. Mannhardt discusses the different views, then explains how the Danzig congregation led in adopting a position that allowed persons to choose whether they wished to serve in the military or serve their country in some other way. Making adherence to the historic peace position optional led a number of ministers and members of rural congregations to emigrate, mostly to America. Although Mannhardt does not mention this event, early in World War I he was chosen to address a public rally in support of the war.

Editors Mark Jantzen and John Thiesen have enriched this volume by adding an introduction, footnotes, photos and an index. Victor Doerksen has provided a very readable and accurate translation. An epilogue by Tomasz Ropiejko, current pastor of the Pentecostal congregation now worshipping in the former Mennonite church, recounts the challenges faced in restoring a war-damaged building to its original purpose. Anyone interested in the Mennonite story in Poland and Prussia will find this book rewarding.

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Lawrence M. Yoder, *The Muria Story: A History of the Chinese Mennonite Churches of Indonesia*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006. Softcover. Pp. 376.

The Muria Story is the account of the Chinese Mennonite Church in Indonesia. Although the reviewer approached the book with relatively little knowledge of Indonesia, he found Yoder's account comprehensive and stimulating.

Yoder divides the book into six parts. First is a brief background of Indonesia and the first Mennonite missionaries to Java, the island where the story takes place. The Christian movement first reached Asia in the eighth century. Our story takes place in the area around Mount Muria, to which Catholic missionaries came as early as 1640 (24), and Mennonite contact in 1852. Part two describes the Kudus Movement, the beginning of the Muria Mennonite churches in the town of Kudus (1918-1930). The beginning of the church was spontaneous, coming through the conversion of Tee Siem Tat and his wife (44ff). The church that grew up around Tee's leadership found the Dutch Mennonite Mission (given a congruence of theological understanding). Because of their maturity and relative affluence, the new church soon seized a kind of independent status under Tee's leadership. The group became the seed from which grew a Muria association of churches, which related to the Mennonite Mission, although in control of their own affairs.

In part three, the original group reached out in evangelistic efforts to other towns surrounding Mount Muria. This outreach led to also to the rise of new leaders, such as Gombak Sugeng. The period leads also into part four, "Crisis and New Age – 1941-1955". In World War Two the Japanese occupied Indonesia. The Chinese church had certain privileges in the Dutch colonial era, but now their ethnicity became a liability, as the occupying government was also at war with China. Following the war, the coming of Indonesian independence, which challenged Chinese youth to show that they were genuinely Indonesian, brought fresh challenges to the Muria churches. Part five takes the story up to 1967 and part six concludes the account in 1980.

Lawrence Yoder worked with the Muria churches under MCC throughout the 1970s. He started the history collaborating with a writer from the Muria Church in 1976, and completed the primary account in the Indonesian language in 1985, with the English translation coming in 2000 (9). The present edition was published in 2006 and makes the story available to a wider audience. *The Muria Story* is well told, with helpful maps and tables, and clear understandable language. At first the language seems almost too simple, but the effort to keep unfamiliar names and places straight reveals the strength of the writing.

Yoder raises a number of missiological ideas. One is the use of healing as outreach. Western minds do not so readily see healing as a spiritual issue. Another issue concerns tensions that come with financial matters. The relative wealth of the Chinese community meant that the agencies tended to direct funds to the Javanese church, leading to occasional hard feelings. A third is the difficulty of the contextualization process. Although the church was Indonesian from the beginning, efforts to translate Christian and Mennonite concepts into appropriate forms led to misunderstanding. The idea of peace as understood in Mennonite circles also stood in tension with rising nationalism following World War Two. Most significantly, one notes the strength of leadership in the church from the beginning. People such as Tee Siem Tat and his wife, Gombak Sugeng, Hermann Tan, and Charles Christano are worthy examples.

One notes also that mission efforts could hinder the growth of the church (293). Yet a careful reading suggests that both the Western churches and the Indonesian church can rejoice in the story Yoder tells. There were leadership struggles and failures, misunderstandings and retreats; but throughout one is impressed with the faithfulness of God and of the church.

This is a story worth knowing, and we thank both the Muria church and Yoder for their work in bringing it to the larger church. It is well suited to use in colleges and seminaries, as well as for any church group willing to embrace the challenge of learning more of the story of which we are all part.

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James O. Lehman and Steven M. Nolt, *Mennonites, Amish, and the American Civil War*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007. Pp, xi + 353. Index. Hard cover. \$39.95 (US).

In their telling of the Mennonite and Amish experience during the Civil War, James O. Lehman and Steven M. Nolt explicitly challenge history's usual portrayal of religion's capacity "to motivate war efforts, stem surrender sentiments, and make sense of crushing disappointment" as an injustice to the role of faith. They contrast the choices made by most Mennonites and Amish to abstain from what became a national crusade with those of other immigrants who sought to prove their patriotism through participation in the war or of other pacifists

who ended up justifying war to end the perceived greater evil of slavery. In this telling of the stories of their own people they explicitly make the broader argument that religious conviction be considered as an independent variable in the choices humans make.

The authors craft data gleaned through extensive archival research in numerous repositories – note the seventy pages of endnotes – into a richly textured narrative of religious outsiders negotiating with a host culture itself in turmoil. Repeatedly the subjects of this study did in fact borrow and adapt from that culture, sometimes importing the very means for maintaining their distinctiveness. A particularly insightful means for framing responses to the moral dilemmas of the time is the distinction between self-understanding as subjects – typified by a willingness to offer equivalency in exchange for military service – and as citizens – typified by the expectation of being granted an exemption in recognition of conscience. This interpretive thread weaves through the book with implications teased out in comparisons between Anabaptists and Quakers and between various Anabaptist groups.

The authors track the Mennonite and Amish experience across the duration of the war. Anxieties heightened by Lincoln's election in 1860 boiled over in secession, the fall of Fort Sumter, and popularly supported calls for voluntary enlistment. Battlefield losses sobered both sides with the realization that prosecuting the war would demand the ongoing recruitment of troops. Conscription, first at the level of state militias and later by the two warring national governments, forced the issue for persons with scruples against participation in such violence. During 1863 and 1864 Mennonites and Amish living in the Cumberland Valley of Pennsylvania and the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia experienced wartime devastation as the theaters of conflict moved right into their own communities. The book contextualizes this narrative in three cultural locations – the predominantly Pennsylvania German ethnic enclave in southeastern Pennsylvania, the Shenandoah Valley in Confederate Virginia, and a more diverse amalgamation of communities in the Yankee-dominated Midwest.

Mennonites and Amish in southeastern Pennsylvania were a subset within the religiously diverse Pennsylvania German subculture. With over a century's history of negotiating their relationships in these communities, they had assumed various civic responsibilities. "Politics within the Pennsylvania German milieu could appear less a compromise with an evil world than an expression of participation in a friendly ethnic community" (23). In turn, key political powerbrokers – the prime example was Lancaster's own Radical Republican Congressman Thaddeus Stevens – fostered deep loyalty at the ballot box among these plain Germans by protecting their interests. During

the war he repeatedly maneuvered provision for a commutation fee by conscientious objectors into Union draft legislation.

Mennonites in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia might trace their roots back to Pennsylvania, but they found themselves in a region not only overwhelmingly English but also within the Confederacy. Already religious and ethnic outsiders, they not only opposed the war in general, but were also inclined to sympathize with the Union. Unsettledness associated with spectators insisting on public votes for secession, scouts enforcing the Confederate draft and military units maneuvering in the region culminated with Union General Sheridan's efforts to burn out the Confederate's agricultural and economic Valley base during the fall of 1864. The large number of Union sympathizers who went north with the Union army more than symbolized the vulnerabilities these Mennonites lived with throughout the conflict.

Yet a third scenario played out in the Midwest, in settlements of migrants from Pennsylvania or recent immigrants from Europe, scattered from Ohio to Iowa. These Amish and Mennonites faced pressures by New England Yankee leaders in their communities who were intent upon a reform of society that demanded participation by all citizens. The result for religious nonconformists was a much starker posing of the alternatives, either to stand in exposed isolation or conform to the mainstream pressures. The multiple backgrounds out of which various Amish and Mennonites had come yielded a more diverse range of political responses than the Pennsylvania Germans' loyalty to the party of Lincoln. Given the Yankee insistence upon a highly democratized sense of citizen-like responsibility, it was in this Midwestern context that leading Mennonites articulated a much more clearly demarcated two-kingdom theology, insisting that consistent nonresistance demanded withdrawal from politics.

Lehman and Nolt underscore the conventional wisdom that Mennonites and Amish avoided ownership of slaves, arguing that these Anabaptists were likely even more consistent on this point than were the more outspoken Quakers. The book does break new ground in tracing a more complex range of political choices made by Anabaptists during the Civil War, particularly in challenging the assumed preference for the Union with cases of overt loyalty to the Confederacy in the Shenandoah Valley. The authors argue that following the experience of the war, a sharply dichotomized two-kingdom theology really did make sense for many Mennonites. Such conclusions call for bringing more nuance to interpretations by Mennonite progressives in the twentieth century who decried sectarianism as being an imposition of fundamentalism. Finally, this book tells the story of certain Americans who were wrestling with what it meant to be distinctively Mennonite in the mid-nineteenth century. Yet in the end the authors suggest another

lens – that of viewing their subjects as members of a global Mennonite communion whose experience of living through the Civil War in the United States factored profoundly in what made them distinctive within the context of their international church family.

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Richard K. MacMaster, *Mennonite and Brethren in Christ Churches of New York City*. Kitchener, ON: Pandora Press, 2006. \$35 (Cdn), \$32 (US). Soft cover. Pp. 382.

The literature on urban Mennonites is far too thin. For that reason alone we can be grateful for this book by a New York City-native and Mennonite historian, Richard MacMaster, which tells the story of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches in North America's largest city.

Chapters 1 and 3 describe the work of three General Conference Mennonites (including Ann Allebach, the first Mennonite woman ordained in North America) who ministered, quite independently from one another, in New York between 1893 and 1967. The three had different styles and theologies, but each engaged in nondenominational or interdenominational work, rather than launching explicitly Mennonite congregations.

The second major narrative (chapters 2, 4-7) details the efforts of Swiss (Old) Mennonites and Brethren in Christ, mostly from eastern Pennsylvania, in beginning churches clearly identified with their conferences. Between 1949 and 1960 a half dozen such churches emerge. These Mennonites went to New York with a desire to “save souls”—both the irreligious and those involved in Catholic or Jewish congregations. Although these Mennonites rejected the Social Gospel, they were committed to working with the poor and moved to lower-class Harlem and South Bronx neighborhoods that became increasingly desperate in subsequent years. One result of the choice to work in such settings was that the new churches were always economically dependant on mission boards in the Mennonite hinterlands. The congregations also relied for leadership and stability on their “ethnic Mennonite” founders. A subtheme in these chapters is the tension between these rural transplants and their home conferences as the new urbanites began to question traditional Mennonite markers of dress and decorum.

Chapters 8-10 describe the 1960s and 1970s, years of economic struggle for the city, white flight, a drug epidemic, soaring crime, and

slum clearance that displaced tens of thousands of poor residents. Mennonites joined neighbors in political organizing, but seemingly failed to cultivate adequate indigenous leadership in their own churches. Not all the young congregations survived these years.

The final section (chapters 11-12) describe the churches during the New York renaissance of the 1980s and 1990s, a period marked by the arrival of millions of new immigrants who bolstered the city's population and economy. These years also witnessed a renaissance of Mennonite church planting. Now, however, churches formed around distinct groups rather than specific neighborhoods: recent Ethiopian or Garifuna arrivals, for example, or theologically progressive ethnic Mennonite graduate students.

One of the book's strengths is the description MacMaster gives in many places to the tremendous social and demographic changes New York City underwent during these years. The social dislocation, neighborhood transition, economic nadir and revitalization all provide valuable context, although that context is not always integrated into the churchly narratives. Stories of ethnic Mennonite church workers, including a good number of women, add a great deal to the story. For example, one meets Anna Buckwalter, who remained at her Bronx apartment long after the neighborhood around her crumbled, continuing her Bible club for street children, taking in indigent elderly, and watching drug-dealers and arsonists eventually burn all the tenements around her. In contrast, portraits of African American or Puerto Rican Mennonites generally lack depth and detail. MacMaster includes many personal names, often presenting readers with long lists of those who served on this or that committee.

As the title suggest, the book is about Mennonite and Brethren in Christ *churches*; there is little material here on Mennonites who moved to New York to escape their religious heritage or who gradually drifted away from it in the pursuit of wealth or education, even though that is another part of the Mennonite experience in and with America's largest city.

Unfortunately the narrative ends in 1994-1995. One wishes the book had included an epilogue with at least capsule updates of the churches in 2006, especially since it seemed by 1994-1995 strong indigenous leadership was finally emerging.

The book raises many themes that bear further investigation, such as the emergence of political conscience. Those who went to the city to save souls soon developed an urban awareness of social and political systems. A 1963 survey revealed that New York's church-planting Mennonites were committed to voting and civic engagement in a way that their rural siblings back home were not (110-11). Similarly, ecumenical relations and experimentation was

more intense, and sometimes fractious, in these urban churches. Pentecostalism, Caribbean religious traditions, and black evangelicalism interacted with and often displaced traditional Mennonite piety. And one wonders about the implications of contemporary mass immigration—a phenomenon whose contours were still emerging when the book's narrative ended—for urban Mennonites. What does the transnational character of today's North American metropolises mean for Mennonites who increasingly make their homes there? One hopes others will follow MacMaster's lead in studying urban Mennonites.

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John J. Friesen, *Building Communities: The Changing Face of Manitoba Mennonites*. Winnipeg: CMU Press, 2007. Pp. xiv +230. Soft cover, 8 1/2 x 11 inch format. \$32.50.

Building Communities: The Changing Face of Manitoba Mennonites is the fruit of a long teaching, reading and preaching career. John Friesen grew up on a farm near Rosenfeld, Manitoba. He was educated at the Mennonite Collegiate Institute, the Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Bethel College, and graduated with a Ph. D. degree in history and theology from Northwestern University in Illinois. He then began a 37-year teaching career at his alma mater, the Canadian Mennonite Bible College and its successor institution, the Canadian Mennonite University. He experienced personally, or has witnessed many of the changes described in his book.

The communities Mennonites built in the 1870s were unique and relatively isolated from the outside world. They pursued a vision rooted in their Russian heritage, but changes were made to accommodate different and sometimes difficult conditions in their new homeland. Thematic chapters on the immigration, community, church, educational, agricultural and political developments, covering the period from 1870-1920, comprise the first of three longer chronological sections of the book.

The second part, covering the period from 1920 to 1950 deals with the more extensive engagement of Mennonites in Canadian society. The first part of this section, however, deals with the disengagement and emigration of those who were unwilling to accept assimilation, particularly as it was promoted in the public schools. That, however,

was offset by the arrival of a new wave of migrants from the Soviet Union, and the restructuring of life and institutions in Mennonite communities.

Expanding horizons and integration of Mennonites into all aspects of Canadian life comprise the themes of the third part of the book, which carries the story forward to the year 2000. Community building remains the central theme, although it takes on new, more diverse and forms.

John Friesen has an unusually empathetic understanding of what are in this work called the conservative or conserving Mennonite groups who rejected pressures to change and become more integrated into Canadian society. In the narrative, augmented by helpful tables and appendices, he identifies the numerous groups, churches and conferences, and explains, non-judgementally, their aspirations and struggles. Religious beliefs and practices were obviously very important and led to various divisions and schisms. Friesen, however, places greater emphasis on shared Mennonite religious life. He focuses on three main influences - conservative, Anabaptist and evangelical - but argues that these are shared elements. Differences pertain to the relative emphasis rather than fundamental differences. The strong sense of community, albeit diverse, provides the central and unifying theme of the book.

The author provides much factual information, drawn mainly from the work of other scholars. He integrates and provides a structural frame of reference for this material, but does not add significant new insights based on research in primary archival sources. He is careful to footnote, perhaps excessively, his secondary sources. Thus, when discussing a contentious issue, he provides ten successive footnotes, all pertaining to five pages in a secondary work. That is an extreme example, but a single, more inclusive footnote would surely have been sufficient.

The author's overall approach is encyclopaedic. He offers much very useful and well documented factual information. But there are few individual or personal life stories. Controversial issues are either ignored or dealt with antiseptically. Thus, the highly contentious issues resulting in the forced withdrawal, for a time, of First Mennonite Church, Winnipeg, from the Conference of Mennonites in Canada is ignored. Other schisms are mentioned without, or with only brief, rather antiseptic references to the pain and agony, the human emotions, the blood and guts of wrenching of those experiences. Readers, for example, will not gain a real understanding of the anguish resulting from the loss of cherished religious experienced rooted in the German language and in cherished music and worship styles.

In any work of this kind there are always inclusions or omissions about which cranky readers complain. So I will add a few. It seems odd that the Locusts and Wild Honey musical group are given prominence

but the Mennonite Concerto is not mentioned. Similarly the early music and choir conductors are given prominence but there is only a brief picture caption reference to George Wiebe and none to Bill Baerg. Both contributed greatly to the preservation of cherished Mennonite choral singing. Similarly, the reference to the *Mennonite Mirror* failed to mention that journal's concluding publication carried the title, *Embracing the World. Two Decades of Canadian Mennonite Writing*. That was obviously an emphatic counter-point to older Mennonite doctrines emphasizing separation from the world.

The work is generously illustrated with numerous photographs. The larger format also permits the inclusion of side-bars, which add useful factual information, selections from primary documents, and personal stories and insights, thus enriching the factual narrative. The book will, however, probably be of greatest value to those looking for a very useful, well documented and carefully integrated history of the Mennonite experience in community building in Manitoba.

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Peter Letkemann, *The Ben Horch Story*. Winnipeg: Old Oak Publishing, 2007. Pp. xv +466. Soft cover. \$25.00.

Biographies based on insufficient research—whether by choice or necessity—frequently adopt the wings of fiction. Not so Peter Letkemann's *The Ben Horch Story*. Thoroughly researched, carefully documented and meticulously written, it needs no fictional flights. Twenty years in the making, it presents the life and career of this Mennonite musical icon in a fascinating and authentic narrative. But this is not just an intimate portrait of Horch. Letkemann's broad canvas enriches the Horch story with portraits of many other Mennonite musicians, singers, conductors and leaders who contributed to the history of Mennonite church music-making—especially in Manitoba—in the twentieth century.

Ben Horch was a superbly gifted musician, conductor and teacher with an intriguingly complex personality. His roguish smile in the cover photo reveals whimsy, shyness, warmth, shrewdness and unabashed humanity. These paradoxical characteristics blended into a charismatic personality that intrigued and entertained multitudes in the world of Mennonite church music and beyond. But there was also a more serious dichotomy in Horch's character. Esther Horch's sixty years with this man left her without illusions: " Sometimes

people thought he was an admixture of genius and madness... . Ben was obstinate, prejudicial and contentious for his convictions... . He always saw further than he could reach and knew more than he could explain.” She goes on to note, “Moderation was hardly in his vocabulary. It was all or nothing. He was a marathon worker” (Prologue, 3-5).

Horch was not an ethnic Mennonite. Born into a German Lutheran family, his parents joined the North End MB church in Winnipeg when he was a teenager and he became a life-long Mennonite. His German background, however, gave him a different cultural perspective; Letkemann points out that Horch “was able to accomplish what he did for Mennonite music because he was *not* an ethnic Mennonite” (39). Except for belated periods of study in California and Detmold, Germany he was entirely self-taught, but his musical knowledge and practice came from a wide range of classical music, church music and folk music, a range that went far beyond traditional Mennonite musical backgrounds.

He began his musical career in the late twenties as conductor of the North End Mennonite Brethren (MB) church choir and began teaching voice and musical theory. In 1932 he married Esther Hiebert, who also embarked on a career of vocal teaching and performing as a soloist. By the 1940s Horch was teaching and conducting school choirs in Winkler and Morden. He also established several junior symphony orchestras, including the Mennonite Symphony Orchestra. From 1944-55 he served as head of the music department at the Mennonite Brethren Bible College (MBBC) in Winnipeg, setting up music programs and the Oratorio Choir, activities that added prominence to his career but also set up some controversies.

Horch also became a *Kurseleiter*, an itinerant musical workshop leader, which meant traveling all summer to scores of rural Mennonite churches not only in Manitoba, but through Saskatchewan, Alberta and B.C and east to Ontario teaching everything from choir basics to conducting. His tireless efforts were greatly appreciated, but the scheduling became almost unbearable at times. And yet, with his amazing energy and dedication he never let his churches down. While overworked and woefully underpaid, Ben Horch accepted his trying conditions without complaint and with his irresistible enthusiasm always at its peak.

While Horch was transforming Mennonite church music into a more sophisticated and artistic mode, he also developed a passion for sacred *Kernlieder*, the “core songs” inherited from Russia, which he ultimately called “folk songs” of the Mennonite choral tradition and songs of “hurt and hope” (410). In fact, Horch made sure that the Mennonite Piano Concerto composed by Victor Davies in 1974 was based on *Kernlieder*. So while Horch wanted Mennonite church music

to become artistically more sophisticated, he never lost his spiritual commitment to Mennonite faith and church tradition. He knew he was in a unique position to meld the spiritual and the creative into spiritual art. And that drove him to look for new ideas and techniques, seeking improvement over what he had achieved in the past.

This constant search for perfection, energized by his inimitable sense of humor at rehearsals, endeared him to multitudes of students over the years. But his ever broader and more sophisticated program of church music also drew criticism from conservative colleagues and church leaders, especially at MBBC. Horch was frequently taken to task for trying to make church music an end in itself instead of a vehicle for church worship. It was a Catch-22 situation that eventually led to several nervous breakdowns for this dedicated and innovative musical leader. Horch finally formulated a plan for an independent Mennonite school of music, but that plan never materialized.

However, while Horch's career may have suffered under the tight restrictions of the MB church, those restrictions may also have inspired and directed the passionate commitment he showed throughout his career. Had it not been for his deep-rooted commitment to the Mennonite cause, he might have enjoyed an even bigger career as a secular musician, or even as an actor.

In his later years Horch became a radio music producer, starting with CFAM in Altona and then moving on to CBC in Winnipeg, where he served for fourteen years until his retirement in 1973. Having served the MB church for thirty years, he finally switched to a secular career and for the first time enjoyed a respectable salary. After receiving an honorary doctorate from the University of Winnipeg in 1974, Horch engaged in musical activities in the Mennonite community for the rest of his retirement.

What is gratifying about this extensive biography is that it does not glorify Ben Horch, but presents a fair and balanced approach to his life and career. Letkemann, having known and observed Horch closely for many years, is adept at depicting Horch's many virtues and skills as well as the less attractive sides of his character. In other words, this is not a hagiography, as Mennonite biographies often tend to be. This book is based on the verifiable circumstances of Horch's life and career, not on conjectures and unreliable memories. No matter how well you knew Ben Horch or what you knew about him, *The Ben Horch Story* will clarify and add to what you already knew. This is a definitive biography that might well serve as a model for future Mennonite biographies.

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