

Foreword: Editor

The 2010 issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* begins with a rich selection of writings from the Fifth International 'Mennonite/s Writing' conference hosted at the University of Winnipeg on 1-3 October 2009. The conference's sub-theme, 'Manitoba and Beyond', signified the location of the conference, but also the remarkable literary genius that the sprawling city of Winnipeg and small towns and villages of the southern Manitoba plain have produced. The 2009 conference in Winnipeg was co-convened by Dr. Hildi Froese Tiessen who convened the first of the 'Mennonite/s Writing' conferences at Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo, Ontario in 1990. She served as a keynote speaker at the second 'Mennonite/s Writings' conference in Goshen, Indiana in 1996, and co-chaired the other two, Goshen in 2002 and Bluffton, Ohio, in 2006. Fittingly, we welcome her as guest editor of this issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, an issue that begins with her reflection on the nine conference papers published here. Hildi's energy, vision, aesthetic sensibility and eye for precision infused every aspect of the conference and the production of the essays in this issue.

The four research papers that follow the literary section reflect a highly diverse research agenda. They focus on several countries (Canada, the United States, Paraguay, Mexico and Russia), span both the 19th and 20th centuries, and build on various academic traditions. Albert W. Wardin Jr's article is a coincidental salute to the 150th anniversary of the founding of the Mennonite Brethren and its rich historical narrative; Wardin offers a biography of Baptist missionary August Liebig, elaborating on P.M. Friesen's 1910 argument that Liebig infused the nascent Mennonite Brethren with an evangelical

spirit without steering the young denomination from the Mennonite fold. Ben Nobbs-Thiessen critiques the mid twentieth century work of sociologist J.W. Fretz and other North American scholars on Mennonite colonization in Paraguay and Mexico; Nobbs-Thiessen suggests that this scholarship reflects the dislocating process of urbanization among North American Mennonites and the profound ambivalence they had toward conservative agrarian lifeworlds. Travis Kroeker and Carole LeClaire, a Mennonite and a Métis respectively, enter a conversation on the meaning of cultural appropriation; they suggest that ethical and trusting relationships begin when power relations are named and contested, when religious practice is understood in its own right and when an open exchange of story takes place. Bradley Armishaw analyzes the fascinating migration of Hutterites from the United States to Canada during World War I; using sources from Canada's National Archives in Ottawa and regional newspapers he highlights this country's profound ambivalence and less than benevolent attitude to these communal and non-violent people.

The interdisciplinary nature of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* is again highlighted in a rich book review section. The varied discourse on fiction, poetry, memoir, biography, history, anthropology, and ethics illuminates the multifaceted nature of Mennonite society and culture. The readers of this journal are well served by the untiring work of book review editors Brian Froese and Kathleen Venema.

The very long standing commitment to excellence by way of copy editing by the two veterans – Peter Pauls and Al Reimer – is recognized again, with appreciation. Hildi Froese Tiessen and Mary Ann Loewen's work in copy-editing is also acknowledged with gratitude.

Respectfully submitted,
Royden Loewen

Foreword: Guest Editor

Writers of Mennonite heritage create, through and in their work, shared cultural memories. They enact public acts of remembrance by recalling for their Mennonite readers, in particular, strangely familiar places and people and modes of being and codes of behavior. For many people who have left their Mennonite roots the landscape of Mennonite life they find encapsulated in poems and stories by writers who have known what it means to be Mennonite comprises the only Mennonite environment they continue to inhabit.¹

We cannot speak of contemporary Mennonite writing in Canada without placing at its centre Manitoba, where it began. Rudy Wiebe was not born in Manitoba but was living there when *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) – the first nationally-recognized work of literature by a Canadian Mennonite – was published. Winnipeg’s Turnstone Press published significant early works of most of the writers we identify today as having been nurtured within the Mennonite community: David Bergen, Sandra Birdsell, Di Brandt, Lois Braun, Victor Enns, Patrick Friesen, Sarah Klassen, Audrey Poetker-Thiessen, Miriam Toews, David Waltner-Toews, John Weier, Armin Wiebe, and others. Winnipeg’s little magazine *Prairie Fire* has published a plethora of stories and poems, interviews and special issues by or about writers the collective of which its editor Andris Taskans has famously dubbed “the Mennonite miracle.” Indeed, if the southern steppes of Ukraine could be seen as a significant place of sojourn for the migrant “Russian” Mennonites over the course of their history, possibly the most

prominent subsequent “homeland” for this nomadic people is southern Manitoba – its plains and villages, and its capital, Winnipeg.

The major section of this issue of *Journal of Mennonite Studies* is made up of scholarly studies of elements of what has come to be recognized as a substantial field of literary activity in Canada: the literature of the Mennonites. This volume begins, appropriately, with the city of Winnipeg and the role it plays in a variety of Mennonite literary texts – sometimes as a primary actor, sometimes as the ground upon which action takes place. Sometimes, too, Winnipeg sits silently, as Paul Tiessen observes in his lyrical reflection on this iconic place in Mennonite writing, as a looming presence, both alluring and menacing – felt, but neither seen nor heard.

Few literary events have brought more attention to the experience of Mennonites – or at least to one imaginary rendering of what a young adult reared in the bosom of a culture in transition might “send up” as the experience of Mennonites – than the explosion upon the literary scene in Manitoba and Canada and much farther afield of Miriam Toews’ *A Complicated Kindness*. It is fitting, then, that two articles in this collection are devoted to that enormously successful work of fiction. Interestingly, both Natasha Wiebe and Noon Park read this novel – with its flagrant, often hilarious dismissal of so many cultural and religious codes and practices deeply embedded in the “givens” of a sectarian Mennonite communal sensibility – in the context of particular self-understandings at the heart of Mennonite consciousness; that is, of martyrdom and diaspora.

As if sharing the urge to re-read, and, in a certain sense, to redeem their own understanding of Mennonite experience, poets Di Brandt and Sarah Klassen have posed questions about how Mennonites today might think about the suffering Mennonites’ earliest ancestors endured in the decades of martyrdom. Ann Hostetler and Tanis MacDonald reveal here how both poets, in their respective works, objectify realities they identify with their heritage by projecting parallel realities upon movements and figures that never embraced the imperatives embedded within the Mennonites’ theological understandings: the eco-critical theories of contemporary scholars in Brandt’s case, and the self-negating postures of a modern “martyr” like Simone Weil in the case of Klassen’s poetic reflections on Weil, the French philosopher and activist.

If Brandt and Klassen, as Hostetler and MacDonald reveal, look outside the immediate Mennonite community for some form of enlightenment, the next two commentators, observing Mennonite religious and cultural landscapes from a feminist perspective, suggest that much is revealed when we engage a literary form that has received relatively little attention in the world of Mennonite literary studies: life-writing.

As if referring back to an alternative understanding of Rudy Wiebe's reverberating declaration that "peace can destroy many," Mary Ann Loewen and Doug Heidebrecht foreground, in their essays, women who refused to keep their peace, their assigned posture of silence and marginality, but rather found ways to speak out, thereby revealing as much about the mid-twentieth-century Mennonite cultures that oppressed them as about themselves.

Just as the number of genres that give form to Mennonite writing in Canada expand, to absorb and mirror the broader literary contexts of the culture at large, so too does our understanding of Mennonite print culture resonate with the emergent international field concerned with "the history of book." Mennonites – because of their intellectual beginnings and their adherence to *The Book*, the Bible, and their commitment to the principle that its text must be open to all – have been a literate people from the start. With writers, James Urry observes, come readers. Urry's essay offers an exploration of the book culture that pertained among some of the Mennonite migrants to Manitoba especially during their early years of settlement. Like many other of the studies in this volume, Urry's work, engaging questions that remain relatively unexplored in Mennonite literary circles, will stimulate further exploration.

It was "Mennonite/s writing in Manitoba and Beyond" that was the theme of the conference for which these papers were written. It is appropriate, then, that this collection closes with Martin Kuester's discussion of how the writing of Canadian Mennonites – both the works of individual writers and the phenomenon of Mennonite/s writing as a whole – has been both embraced within the literary readerships and sensibilities of other peoples (Germans, for example), and illumined in the context of theoretical grids such as the discourse of post-colonialism, or Deleuze and Guattari's theory of minor literatures.

This volume of essays will perhaps remain the most palpable reminder of the conference on "Mennonite/s Writing" that took place in Winnipeg in October 2009. The memories of individuals who shared much or all of the events of that four-day event will carry much else as well: the outstanding literary performances of writers David Bergen, Di Brandt, Connie Braun, David Elias, Patrick Friesen, Walter Hildebrandt, Ann Hostetler, Sarah Klassen, Maurice Mierau, Elsie K Neufeld, Al Reimer, Andreas Schroeder, David Waltner-Toews, John Weier, and Rudy Wiebe. Or the panel made up of people who were there in the early years of Turnstone Press – including poet Di Brandt and the influential literary editors David Arnason and Wayne Tefs. And all day the last day, a bus tour, richly documented in compelling commentaries by John J. Friesen and conference host Royden Loewen, commentaries focused on details of the prairie home of these Mennonite writers: the

landscape of southern Manitoba that is richly inscribed in the lines and between the lines of so many of the literary texts of Canadian Mennonites.

Hildi Froese Tiessen
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Note

- ¹ From my opening remarks for the second evening of readings at the conference “Mennonite/s Writing: Manitoba and Beyond,” in Winnipeg on 2 October 2009.