

Frederick Philip Grove Among the Mennonites *

Reynold Siemens *University of Alberta*
with Peter Brown†, Winnipeg, Manitoba

During the period 1913–15 Frederick Philip Grove was principal of Winkler High School, Manitoba, in which he taught several subjects including Literature. Various details of this particular portion of Grove's life are documented, both by himself in such personal accounts as *In Search of Myself* (1946) and the *Letters of Frederick Philip Grove* (1976) and by Margaret Stobie in her study *Frederick Philip Grove* (1973), to name a few sources. What is not mentioned in autobiography and scholarship is the fact that one of Grove's students during these important, embryonic years at Winkler, a community then as now predominantly Mennonite, was a young man who later became a successor of Grove as principal and teacher of Literature at the same school, namely, Peter Brown.

Brown, who died recently in retirement in Winnipeg, made no small contribution to the development of adolescent minds in Grove's former school during the middle of this century. Once Brown's pupil in Winkler, the present writer remembers well Brown's inspiring treatment of Shakespeare, Browning, and his great favorite, Grove, and a few years ago contacted Brown, hoping he would share his wide first-hand knowledge of Grove during his Winkler sojourn and, possibly, provide new information in an interview regarding this major Canadian writer. Brown graciously agreed, and recorded below are his words in reply to the questions asked him.

Siemens: You say Frederick Philip Grove was your High School teacher in Winkler. What span of time did he teach there? What subjects did he teach?

Brown: Mr. Grove was the principal of the four-room Winkler High School for the two teaching years 1913–1914 and 1914–1915. As principal of the school he taught all the subjects of Grade IX, X and XI. These subjects were Chemistry, Physics, Science, Algebra, Geometry, Literature, Composition, Grammar and History. While fluent in German, he had the

Third room teacher, a young man, teach high school German.

Siemens: Did Grove have a special empathy for Mennonites? After all, he married a Wiens girl from the Lowe Farm area who was Mennonite.

Brown: The trite saying, "Tell me who your friends are, and I will tell you who you are," would appear to apply to Frederick Philip Grove really very well. He had arrived in Manitoba late in 1912. The harvest season that year was the wettest on record all along the Red River Valley from Manitoba to Kansas, U.S.A. Grain farmers suffered horrendous losses and itinerant laborers were destitute. Even before he reached Manitoba, Fred Grove was out of funds. He subsisted on a meal a day and slept or, should I say, spent the nights on straw piles or hay stacks.

Haskett citizens to this day suggest that Grove was at the end of his resources when he arrived there early in January, 1913. His arrival would also have been his introduction to the "full dinner pail." The cash-flow at Haskett will have resembled what was par for the area that year. The Jacob Warkentins, with four children of school age that year, had him over first and introduced him to Mennonite hospitality. He called frequently at the Isaac Warkentins, where the open-handed hospitality was repeated. And the Fehrs, Eliases and Giesbrechts maintained this Mennonite social custom.

Haskett was the shopping centre, railroad ticket office, Post office and port of entry for the area. People met in Haskett on Saturdays. About five miles northwest of Haskett, the Wakeham school was located. Miss Catherine Wiens was the Wakeham teacher during the Winter-Spring term of 1913. I believe there are no school records of two teachers' meetings, but Mr. Grove and Miss Wiens, half his age, pretty and able, did meet.

For the 1913-1914 school year the Winkler school board engaged both Fred Grove and Catherine Wiens, the latter as the primary teacher and Grove as principal. During the 1914 school break Fred Grove and Catherine Wiens were married. Both served the Winkler community the following year.

For thirty-four years the Groves shared their joys and sorrows. She encouraged him, particularly in his literary efforts. And he tried to lighten her burdens as best he could. They were very close to one another throughout life.

His empathy for Mennonites found expression in many ways beyond marrying one. He was on friendly terms with Mennonite teachers in Winkler. The Mennonite farmers at both Haskett and Winkler confided in him. If they found strange plants or animals, Grove was sure to hear about it. He corresponded with I. J. Warkentin during his first year in Winkler when I.J. was in Leipzig.

Siemens: Did Grove win early recognition as a writer in any way whatever during the time he taught at Winkler?

Brown: What with a full teaching load of Grades IX, X and XI, plus night school subjects of the same grades for a class of public school teachers from out of town, and also Saturday morning of the Grade XII Algebra, Trigonometry and Analytics as well as Green's History, Grove was very busy and the Winkler community must have remained quite unaware of his literary talents.

Siemens: Do you think Grove's own life experiences and the persons he met influenced the subject of his writing?

Brown: Yes. Very much so. Indeed, many of his books are largely his own life's experiences, often thoroughly embellished. His encounters with multiform people where he taught, his in-laws, publishers, ordinary folk, university and very humble acquaintances, all walk across his pages.

At Haskett, near Winkler, he had two Mennonite farmers as intimate friends. Destitute, hungry, in overalls, cold — it was January when he arrived there — these farmers fed him and put him up. They were no mere casual visits. According to present day recollections of the octogenarians, the views of their elders in 1913 were endorsed by Grove, be it in the field of world politics, economics or socialism. Hunger is a great leveller!

In Winkler he associated with the C.P.R. station agent, the banker and the doctor. And he dressed well.

Siemens: What authors did Grove admire, as far as you know? Did he emulate any of them?

Brown: In school he exhibited considerable familiarity with Shakespeare, Dickens, Tennyson, Browning, Scott, Macaulay, Schiller, Goethe and many others. He was well read indeed. He made the works of these and other writers come to life in his classes as though he had known them personally.

Siemens: Did Grove see himself belonging to a certain literary tradition? Or divorced from it?

Brown: Grove mentioned writers of the widest literary tradition and across the whole gamut of modern and classical cultures and then went off at a tangent all his own. Where is there a writer who can fill volumes about himself, his relatives, his family? His innumerable occupations included that of farm-hand, teacher, school principal, writer, publisher, commercial agent, farmer, dairyman and horse wrangler. You name it. His fortunes went from a state of affluence to one of abject poverty. He hobnobbed with hobos and was the confidant of aristocrats. Then, too, he regarded himself as belonging to the Ottawa-Toronto clique, yet bought a dairy-farm out in the sticks.

Siemens: As you knew him, did Grove have a special gift for the tragic? — or the humorous? Can you make any comment regarding this?

Brown: Grove was inured to all manner of experiences and hard-

ships; abuse from his father, adulation from his mother, valet service in childhood and through youth until the family fortune was frittered away. He had never learned to make do, to live on his own lean, meagre earnings. The excessive wealth in his childhood and youth was no training for frugality. Hence, when a windfall was their lot, they bought a car, furniture, house, an acreage and horses. In Winkler he bought school supplies while the school board collected tuition fees from non-resident students for whose class use the supplies were purchased. He was in abject poverty when he arrived in Manitoba late in 1912. For instance, he wore his only trousers, a pair of overalls, when he called on Dr. Fletcher, Deputy Manitoba Minister of Education, to ask for a permit to teach school in Manitoba. He had ample personal experience to picture the tragic.

Siemens: How do you feel about Grove's writing, having known him personally? Is his great acclaim justified now looking in retrospect?

Brown: From my reading of *Over Prairie Trails*, *In Search of Myself* and *A Search for America* I am not setting myself up as someone to judge the "value" of Grove's writings, though I have also read reviews and other reactions to most of his published works.

In school I believed all the stories he told, including this one: "I was a tobacco farmer in Kentucky. One day one of my hired men came running breathlessly to the field where I was cultivating the tobacco crop to tell me that my wife had gone into the stall of my two Percheron stallions and one of them had bitten off one of her ears. I rushed home. I found the ear, fetched needle and thread from the house and sewed the ear back on. A few days later one could hardly tell that it had ever been off."

Baron Münchhausen!

At Winkler he found an eagle with a broken wing. He put splints on the wing, hired a farmer to take him and the bird to the U.S. border twelve miles away and released the eagle on the American side. It may have survived the injury and lived. The incident does show Grove's interest in all forms of life.

Now — does he deserve all the acclaim, all the honor, all the awards showered upon him? He did bring honor to Manitoba as a teacher and as a writer. He was accepted in multilingual circles where he definitely excelled. Can we say that he overcame the handicap of excessive wealth and, later, extreme poverty? He was at ease in learned circles yet did not shun the itinerant harvesters.

Today, Grove would be given a Canada Council grant to pursue his first love, writing. In his day he had to go into the rugged hinterlands to provide the bread and butter for himself, wife and child.

Yes, let's leave him with his honors.

Siemens: In his classes did he display strong attitudes? Was he a conformist to the establishment? Or was he critical of it?

Brown: Grove was a conformist in his teaching. This would appear more readily in History and Literature classes than in Maths and Science. He endorsed the views of the authorities, of the establishment. After all, his upbringing was in that section of society. He enjoyed the fruits of conforming to the views of his parents. He lacked food and shelter when he failed to please his father. Conforming to his parents' wishes provided a certain lifestyle for him. He was literally naked and hungry as the result of not conforming when he arrived in Manitoba.

He was a conformist in teaching. He presented the subjects and the pupils were expected to learn them, master them. He was a conforming disciplinarian. On one occasion, Grove had all the children enrolled in the four-room Winkler school line-up outdoors to march in an orderly fashion into the school-house. A teenage lad, G. W. Neufeld, who later was a Winkler councillor for twelve years plus the mayor of Winkler for another twelve, did not conform as the situation required, and Grove tapped him on the head with the brass school bell. Then the march proceeded in an orderly fashion.

Siemens: What impression do you have of Grove's personal appearance?

Brown: He was always impeccably dressed in good dark colored woolen suits, with clean linen, clean black shoes, well brushed blond hair, blond brows and eyelashes. A six-foot-two, weighing no more than about 125 pounds, he was thin, somewhat sickly-looking with pale sallow skin — never that red, ruddy wind and sun burn of the Mennonite farm boys. And he was actually sickly. He was long-necked and he wore those stiff stand-up collars which accentuated the appearance of a long, narrow face and long pointed nose. He was at once an outstanding figure in any Winkler group.

Siemens: Can you remember any special emphasis in his teaching?

Brown: Yes, thoroughness. He knew well the subjects of Maths, Algebra, Geometry, Trigonometry, Analytics, Chemistry and Physics, and he expected good work from his students. His experiments in Grade XI Physics and Chemistry always demonstrated the proper principles. In Literature his stories were appropos the subject matter. In Composition XI he had us exchange letters as school exercises with Grade XI pupils in the Gretna Public School. The Gretna principal was a Scot, MacLennon by name. Our instructions were to fine-comb the letters we received for merit and demerit points. Altona did the same for us. Content, grammar, language, punctuation, all counted.

Siemens: Did Grove show interests outside of school? In wood-work? In community service? Etc.?

Brown: Grove actually persuaded the School Board to add Wood-work to the VIII-X school course. In reality, the Winkler S.D. provided only the basement room for this work. Mr. J. J. Enns, the Room II school

teacher, was in charge of the class. He, some of the class, and, I believe Grove, provided the tools for the work. The members of the class provided their own materials for what they wanted to build. This class did not survive Grove's tenure.

There were no adult study groups like the Pool Elevator, Co-op Movement, Credit Unions and Agricultural Societies in the Winkler area at the time. Indeed, it being Grove's first year of teaching all of the X to XI subjects for the first year, he must have been a very busy man getting ready for the next day's classes.

Siemens: Do you know of any attitudes of Grove's towards World War I? Was he German? Douglas O. Spettigue says he maybe was one, one who had Anglicized his name.

Brown: In my opinion Grove was not pro-German in the sense that he endorsed policies of Kaiser Wilhelm II. Grove attended Hamburg University, and, like the rest of us, was proud of his alma mater. I do not recall any occasion where Grove made a pro-German remark. With that Scottish mother, English-Swedish grandfather, plus more of the same on the father's pedigree and a nursemaid called Annette, the atmosphere where Grove grew up was not German.

I recall Grove telling me that the family name had been "Gropfe." Changing the "pf" to "v" was a small change indeed. It is much the same as changing "Braun" to "Brown." At that time I was not interested when or why the name was changed. My mother may actually have made the change. My father's Homestead Entry Receipt, issued in Emerson, Manitoba, August 30, 1879, has the English spelling. I can explain that. The registrar knew only the English spelling of the name and my father did not know enough English to protest. Also, Mrs. Brown and I have always spoken English to one another and, of course, also to the children. My daughter, Frances, coming home from school in Winkler one day, asked me: "Are we English or German?"

I still believe that Grove was not pro-German in 1914-18. He may well have been broken-hearted at the insane loss of life, at the stupendous destruction of property. On the last day of school at Haskett, Mr. Grove took his children on a picnic to the Pembina Hills. Arriving at the picnic site the boys discovered a nest of snakes. With the sticks and stones readily available the children at once did their best to exterminate the reptiles. Grove, however, jumped into the midst of the serpents and shouted: "Hit me, don't kill the snakes." I like to think Grove abhorred the very thought of killing men, women and children, even horses, etc., on both sides of World War I. Life to him was too valuable, too sacred to be wantonly destroyed.

Siemens: Were there any noticeable features of accent in Grove's English speech? German, perhaps?

Brown: Yes, Grove spoke English with an accent. But it was not a

German accent. It was a British accent. It was not the Cockney accent of London. I would call it the English country accent, and it really was only a slight accent, not like the accent of the Manitoba Mennonite farmers. It was really a pleasant accent for Mennonite ears.

Siemens: Do you personally think Grove's works will live? And if so, why?

Brown: Who can foretell the future? But I do believe as long as we have some measure of rural life in western Canada, Canadians will be interested in reading about the more primitive conditions that prevailed during the twentieth century. Prior to Grove's era the dog and ox provided transportation. When the horse, car and plane have been superseded, today's lifestyle may well evoke hilarity. Are Grove's books read, bought as much today as in his day? Have schools prescribed them as required reading? Such things tend to come and go in waves. Have them translated into Chinese, etc. and watch the demand increase!

Grove described life as it is. That is always interesting. The range of subject matter of Grove's books is so wide his reading public may well be unlimited.

***Editor's note:**

In publishing this interview of reminiscences about Frederick Philip Grove by Peter Brown the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* is putting on the record information about Grove's life and work in a chiefly Mennonite community. In view of the radical re-orientation of Grove studies since the discovery of the "European Years" by Douglas Spettigue, some of these contents will appear dated since much more is now known about Grove's German past as Felix Paul Greve. That we recognize this in hindsight does not detract from the documentary value of these statements by Grove's former student, Peter Brown.