

Women in Canadian Mennonite History: Uncovering the “Underside”

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The topic of my paper, “The Changing Roles of Canadian Mennonite Women,” suggests an assumption that women’s roles have indeed changed. Yet, an assumption which should not be made is that women’s roles of the past were always inferior while today’s women are in every way ahead of their mothers. A close examination may show that for every few steps towards greater emancipation, there is always a small shuffle backwards. In this paper I will very generally sketch some of the ways in which Canadian Mennonite women have experienced a change in their roles in the 20th century, in the context of the changing roles of women in Canadian society at large. At the outset I will briefly describe the nature of women’s history in order to help us understand why we should study Canadian Mennonite women at all.

The Why and How of Women’s History

Women’s history as a separate field emerged along with the increased interest in social history of the past two decades and was given impetus by the feminist movement which introduced the element of women’s studies into all disciplines. To undertake women’s history means to explore a dimension of past events which has been neglected in traditional historical research and writing. This involves the recognition that history has not only an objective, academic purpose, but that to understand the history of any group is important for their own sense of self. Historians Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice say that “The sense of self depends on having a sense of one’s past. To the extent that modern women have been denied, in the historical canon, all but the faintest glimpses of their own history, they are like victims of amnesia.”¹

The absence of women in history demonstrates that history presents

a problem in sampling, that no history is completely comprehensive, and that until recently, most of history has been written by the dominant and powerful groups of society and thus represents the interests and biases of those groups. The activities and influences of women in the context of the past represent what Elise Boulding calls "the underside of history,"² the unrecorded and the little told.

One can think of women's history in a number of ways. It can be a re-interpretation of history from the female perspective — a study of the wars, the institutions, the migrations, and the political affairs from the vantage of the secondary actors and the hidden observers. Ruth Unrau, author of *Encircled*, says that women were not absent when history was being made, despite what the record may imply. "She was there when the church divided, she was there when a conference had its first meeting. While they prepared food for the church leaders, women listened and made judgments."³ Exploring these backroom judgments provides a fuller understanding and allows us to examine the "underside" dimensions of well-known events.

Women's history can also seek to discover and describe the spheres of activity that have traditionally been unique to women. This approach recognizes that men and women have historically predominated in separate and specific activities⁴ and that the importance of women's sphere, the household, has been underestimated in the writing of history.⁵ Using this method, topics such as the domestic arts, childbirth and childrearing, female networks, and women's sexuality and reproductive life are given more visibility and become worthy of academic study. The rituals and traditions of "women's culture" as it has been termed, "help assign a distinctive texture to female experience, and give women a particular past that cannot be presumed to mirror the portion of male reality that most historians have chosen to highlight."⁶ Both approaches to women's history are valuable in the search to uncover the underside.

The search for women in history is not without some unique obstacles to overcome. Initially, women seem invisible in the making of history but this is because their insights or accomplishments usually went officially unrecorded. An obvious problem in locating primary written source material is that archival holdings are rarely catalogued under women's history or related topics. The personal papers of women — the few that exist or have been considered worthy of preservation — such as correspondence, diaries, and journals are generally found in family collections under the husband's name and organized according to subject matter relating to his significance. A step towards overcoming this problem is a broadening of the definition of what constitutes an historical source. The use of "recipes, songs, cooking and cleaning equipment, handwork, wearing apparel and photographs" have been suggested as aids in serious analyses of women's position in any given society.⁷

A significant impediment to women's historiography is what might be termed the "great man" approach to history, which considers "the powerful and the organized" the only actors worthy of attention.⁸ Such a slant towards the ideas and activities of a community's leaders results in an injustice not only to women but also to the men who were not leaders of institutions and organizations. Mennonite history has also commonly followed this tendency, which is ironic in a history about a "priesthood of all believers." To focus on leaders is not entirely misleading, because often personalities, leadership struggles and individual initiatives have indeed been more formative in history than any other factor. But equally often we have "canonized" our institutional leaders, interpreting certain events and eras only through them, thereby neglecting the numerous less prominent persons who, individually or collectively, shaped the movement of time.

Katie Funk Wiebe expressed the concern that "our cultural heritage has reinforced the idea that greatness belongs to officialdom" and thus in the writing of Mennonite history, lay persons are rarely mentioned and "women become a diffused segment of the mass of humanity which has no definitive characteristics."⁹ Women, in particular, are overlooked in the "great man" approach, because, as wives, sisters and mothers, they were rarely in the public sphere and consequently, "their stories [are] omitted or given glancing notice."¹⁰

Not all women are totally absent, but as one historian of women has observed, studies of women tend to portray their subjects as "heroines or saints," whose every deed was admirable and altruistic and who, when placed on such a pedestal, seem isolated and out of context with little relationship to their society.¹¹ They are put into the mold established by the great man approach.¹²

Another problem in doing history about Mennonite women, a dilemma which exists for all women, is that when we do find women in the historical record, they are often described in terms of the influence they have exerted on men or the support which they have provided. This prevailing approach clings to the "cliché", as it has been called,¹³ that behind every successful, accomplished man in history is a long-suffering, hard-working, patient woman. This assumes that women are content in their role as influencer and have no qualities or gifts of their own meriting discussion. Furthermore, it is frequently an inaccurate picture of how they perceive themselves.

A glaring difficulty in doing research on Mennonite women is that until recently, women were identified primarily by their husband's name. In periodicals, letters, even the official record of women's organizations, women are referred to as Mrs. Menno Snyder or Sister Ben Janzen. A 1952 example of this is as follows: "Among our women who are attending the World Conference in Basel, Switzerland, are Sisters Allen

Erb, Anson Horner, Paul Mininger, Amra Hostetler, Raymond Wenger, John Alger, Nelson Kauffman."¹⁴ Thus, if one wants to find out about a particular woman, one must first find out about her husband.

Promoting women's history, and the study of women generally, is impeded also by the hesitancy of many Mennonite women to be associated with what might be perceived as a "Women's Lib cause." Their conditioned modesty, humility, self-denial and obedience often prevents a wholehearted and assertive embrace of issues that concern injustices which are very personal.¹⁵ Sharon Klingelsmith agrees that the lack of work done on the history of Mennonite women can be attributed partly to the fact that "Mennonites have been a quiet people and the women among them have been an even quieter group."¹⁶ The traditional rejection of trends that were of the world further reinforces the hesitancy to join a feminist bandwagon. One woman, expressing her fear of speaking up, demonstrates this prevalent quality of under-confidence. She says:

. . . occasionally there are issues that I feel so strongly about that I really wish that people wouldn't think I was queer when I do feel I have to express them. And right away they think you're bossy or a dominant kind of woman, that there's something wrong with you if you feel compelled to express your opinion.¹⁷

A final and obvious pitfall in doing research on any Mennonite-related theme is the diversity of Mennonites themselves. In this paper, I will attempt neither to limit myself to one grouping of Mennonites nor to representing the experiences of them all. For the most part, my discussion draws from the Ontario Swiss Mennonite experience. Groups which have been neglected, primarily because sources are less accessible, include the conservative groups of both Swiss and Russian backgrounds.

Despite the above-mentioned obstacles, there is a growing Mennonite women's historiography. Three collections of women's biography have been published to date, beginning with Mary Lou Cummings *Full Circle: Stories of Mennonite Women* in 1978, followed by Elaine Sommers Rich *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1783-1983* in 1983, and Ruth Unrau's *Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women* in 1986. Currently in preparation is a collection of stories about Ontario Swiss Mennonite women. One hopes that this trend will continue and that more research and writing will take place that not only provides isolated and anecdotal stories of women but also interpretive studies which consider women's overall contribution to the history.

The roles of Mennonite women in Canada have not changed in a progressive linear manner, from a state of low status and inequality, steadily gaining ground to reach a point of higher status and greater equality as one might say exists now. Rather, their roles have changed in waves (a common term in feminist theory), ebbing and flowing, with a

few steps forwards, then a few steps back, in some decades progressing, in others regressing. These waves can generally be compared to historical changes in society at large and are not primarily due to internal factors unique to the Mennonites. One can see where women in secular society have achieved greater visibility, so too have Mennonite women advanced. When society has entered a more conservative phase, and the pace of change in women's roles slows down, then Mennonite women also experience setbacks. Thus, it is important to study the history of Canadian Mennonite women not in isolation but within the context of the culture around them. This applies also to Mennonites generally, but is a particularly helpful tool when the underside of one cultural group has more in common with the underside of another group than with the dominant elements of their own group.¹⁸ That is, at times Mennonite women may have more of a common perspective with non-Mennonite women than with Mennonite men.

Mennonite women have gained in status and opportunity at those times when it had been advantageous to the community or when unusual circumstances necessitated a departure from norms of behaviour. Several examinations of the early Anabaptists concluded that the women were equal participants in disseminating the new-found faith — as preachers, martyrs and prophets — and suggested that the survival of the Anabaptist community made it imperative that women speak out.¹⁹ More recent research suggests that this conclusion was exaggerated, that Anabaptist women were subordinate in their roles.²⁰ There is little evidence in the historical record that confirms either theory. Nevertheless, it seems likely that views of women and their roles altered from what they had been prior to the shakeup of the Reformation.

The First Half-Century

The late 19th century and the first two decades of the 20th were a time of opening doors for women, both in the church and outside of it. This period witnessed a tremendous growth in the public activity of women — the suffragists got their start in Canada and reform-minded, middle-class movements were often spear-headed by women in response to the effects of industrial capitalism, urbanization, immigration and other social changes which characterized entry into the modern era.²¹ Most mainline Protestant churches had women's missionary societies forming in the latter half of the 19th century as a reaction to social decay seen at home but also in response to the modern missionary movement which was part of the spiritual awakening occurring at the time.²² The growth of women's organizations reflected the desire of women, and society's need for them, to move from the domestic sphere alone to active participation in society.

Not coincidentally, there was a surge of women's activity in the Mennonite church²³ at the turn of the century, largely due to new channels of involvement opened up by the church as a whole. The introduction of Christian education in the form of Sunday School, and the increased missionary and evangelistic outreach, meant that women could now hold positions as Sunday School teachers, missionaries, deaconesses, writers for religious periodicals, and activities in women's missionary societies.²⁴ The creation of administrative and educational institutions provided an arena for this. Elaine Sommers Rich says that it was not unusual for women to give the Sunday morning message during the first two decades of the 20th century,²⁵ particularly missionary women home on furlough.

Women's place was still seen by society primarily as wife, mother, and caretaker of the home, but it was recognized that her "mothering" qualities could also be applied to the areas of mission work, teaching, and nursing.²⁶ This attitude was not unlike that of the suffragists, who demanded access to the vote for the purpose of preserving morality in society, defending the sanctity of the family, and bringing to bear on society female virtue and civility.²⁷ It was felt that women could best do some of the nurturing of children required in Sunday School, that they had qualities of caregiver and servant needed in mission work and particularly in overseas missions, if one wanted to evangelize both male and female nonbelievers, then a female presence was certainly going to be helpful.²⁸

The first organized Mennonite women's group in Canada — a sewing circle — was formed by Ontario Swiss women in 1908, taking their cue from their sisters south of the border who began organizing in the 1890s. This was only the beginning of women's work in a formal, organized sense, because prior to the formation of women's societies, women met regularly to socialize and sew together, often to make garments for needy families in their local community. In the Ontario setting, it's significant that Mennonite and Amish women's societies formally organized together as a district in 1917, some years before their two conferences began to cooperate officially.²⁹

Separate organizations for women did not come into existence without some opposition. One woman, reminiscing years later about the origins of the sewing circles, spoke about the odds against which the early leaders struggled, that "many people were at first suspicious" and that "support was meagre."³⁰ Another woman recalled that "discouragements were many and opposition strong,"³¹ the latter particularly from male church leaders who perceived the women's organized missionary interests as a challenge to the work of conference mission boards.

These tensions climaxed in the late 1920s with the now well-documented "takeover"³² of the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society by

the Mennonite Board of Missions and Charities of the Mennonite Church.³³ Though the church leaders recognized the value of women's sewing work, because it was "distinctly women's work," they felt that the involvement of the women's groups in the support of missionaries would have a divisive influence in the church.³⁴ The women involved acquiesced without much struggle — they had little experience with institutional conflict — but their correspondence shows outward indignation, and "inwardly they wept."³⁵

The General Conference women's societies, formally organized in 1917, did not experience completely clear sailing at the beginning either. Though they were not directly opposed by their conference, it was an uphill battle to gain sincere recognition and acceptance from the hierarchy.³⁶

Though these events occurred in the United States, tremors of the controversy were felt in Canada, as the women's groups of the Ontario and Alberta-Saskatchewan conferences had ties with their American counterparts and the president of the Mennonite Women's Missionary Society at the time of the takeover was a Canadian, Mary Nahrgang Cressman. Ontario ministers were said to be frequently more supportive of the women's cause than they were south of the border.³⁷

This act of pulling the rug from under the feet of the women's organization reflected the fact, as Jim Juhnke has observed, that in the 1920s the pace of change slowed in the opening of opportunities to women.³⁸ This period has been described as a Repression,³⁹ a time when the blossoming for women which had occurred at the beginning of the century experienced a setback as authoritarianism crept into the church and society, possibly resulting from post-war caution and the attempt by more conservative elements in society and the church to put the reins on the progressive changes underway.⁴⁰

For women in the Mennonite Church this meant, in part, being subjected to a restrictive dress code formulated by a committee of men. The question of modest, nonconforming dress had long been addressed by Mennonites but it was not until the 1920s that specific standards on women's headgear were decided upon and regulated.⁴¹ Dress regulations, which included the wearing of the plain coat for the men, generally affected the women most and particularly prescriptive headgear was always more of an issue. Frank Epp in Volume 2 of *Mennonites in Canada* observed that "women were understandably resentful of a standard that was applied more stringently to them than to the men. The latter were hard-pressed to justify this discrepancy."⁴²

The devotional head covering was considered to be symbolic of a God-given and natural order in which women were secondary to men. Oscar Burkholder, an Ontario minister, in 1930 said that women who refused to wear the head covering were "usurping man's position and

power" and "scorning her God-given position of motherhood." His condemnation of women's "agitation for equality according to male standards"⁴³ seemed a clear response to the trend, both within the Mennonite constituency and society at large, towards a higher profile for women outside the home.

The wearing of regulation headgear by women was one of the issues at the heart of a controversial church split in Kitchener in the mid-1920s, when the Stirling Avenue congregation came into being, but nowhere in chronicles of this event do we find the perspective of the women involved. They were essentially scapegoats caught in the middle of personality conflicts and power struggles between the authority of the traditionalists and the resistance of the modernists.⁴⁴ The head covering became for several decades a constant reminder to women that their roles particularly in the church were limited and that humility and submission were required to both God and men.

These difficulties were not exclusive to Swiss Mennonite women. In some Russian Mennonite churches in the west, an unspoken rule existed that once a woman married, she had to start wearing a hat to church.⁴⁵ This practice seems to reflect her relationship with man much more than her relationship with God.

World War II and On

The 1940s and 1950s brought many changes, some which created new opportunities for women, while others inhibited their progress. For Mennonites, World War II and its aftermath meant upheaval in the community and the church, and within this turmoil women found themselves undertaking new tasks and bearing responsibilities demanded by the times. The following decade, the 1950s, brought prosperity and stability to society, and to the Mennonites, and as is often the case during more settled times, the status quo predominated over radical change and progress for women levelled off.

For Canadian society, involved in a costly world war, women suddenly were recognized as a major resource. During World War II, Canadian women entered both the armed forces and the public workforce in unprecedented numbers. Approximately 50,000 women, or 2% of the female population aged 16-45, entered the various services open to women in the armed forces.⁴⁶ As well, they temporarily left the home to work fullforce in voluntary organizations, probably their greatest contribution to the war effort.

To compensate for the depleted reserve of male civilian labour, the Canadian government launched a campaign to lure women out of the home and into the public workforce, a plan which at its peak in 1944 saw about 1,077,000 Canadian women in full-time paid employment, an increase from 638,000 at the outset of the war in 1939.⁴⁷ These were

frequently in traditionally male jobs such as agriculture and ship-building. What seemed to be an emancipation of women's roles, however, was temporary and it was understood that once the crisis was over, women would respond to the "normal urge towards marriage, and home, and family life"⁴⁸ and vacate jobs needed by returning servicemen. Ruth Pierson, a historian of Canadian women during the war, concludes: "Women's increased job opportunities during the war were not a recognition of their right to work, but rather because women were a convenient source of labour both for private industry and public service."⁴⁹

Following the war and into the 1950s, emphasis was placed on re-establishing families and households.⁵⁰ For women, this meant marrying, staying home, having babies, and living out the "postwar dream of domesticity." One writer described the 1950s as a period of "stifling domesticity" when "homemaking was magnified so that it appeared to demand a woman's entire waking attention."⁵¹

But where do Mennonite women fit into all this? Being a nonresistant people, Mennonites experienced the war years differently from the majority of Canadians. Thus far research has concentrated on the struggle for military exemption and creation of alternative service for the men, and so we learn about their attitudes and activities to the exclusion of the women in the community. Katie Funk Wiebe has said: "Because the destiny of the Mennonites revolved around the way sons were involved in [conscientious objection] and not the way women experienced the truth of scripture, women's contribution was not as significant."⁵²

Obviously, Mennonite women would not have entered either the armed forces or the industrial workforce to the same extent as Canadian women generally, although some 55 Mennonite names appear in records of women serving with the armed forces.⁵³ Yet, in similar ways that other Canadian women took on new roles to aid the war effort, Mennonite women were also faced with new challenges and tasks to aid the non-resistant effort. One woman described the material assistance and moral support given to COs in camps and said: "We are representing a common cause and stand for the same principles . . . United we stand, divided we fall."⁵⁴

They also experienced the hardships which occasionally resulted from the wartime activities of the menfolk. Catherine Schulz wrote in her diary that during World War II, when her husband, Bishop David Schulz, was often on the road, her responsibility was "to keep everything organized at home."⁵⁵ This sounds like an understatement of what must have been no small task for the wife of a church bishop in the days of large families and labour-intensive household work.

Economic difficulties also occurred. The small remuneration received by conscientious objectors sometimes created hardship for their families, particularly when alternative service terms were extended for

the duration of the war. Minus the support of a father, son, or husband, some households had difficulty staying afloat. One Rosthern-district woman warned the authorities that "unless my son is permitted to return [home] for the term suggested [3 months], it will have the effect of wrecking the health of myself and my children."⁵⁶ Mennonite women, at least in Ontario, entered the public workforce in greater numbers, probably more in the service sector such as domestic labour than in industry, possibly taking the places of women who moved into new jobs in war industries.⁵⁷

Where the talents and contributions of Mennonite women became most obvious was in the volunteer sector, in relief for war sufferers through the work of women's organizations. Gladys Goering suggests that the 1940s and 1950s were a "golden era" for women's organizations.⁵⁸ It was during this time that existing groups grew and broadened their activities and many new groups were formed particularly among more recent Mennonite arrivals in western Canada. World War II and the post-war increase in overseas missions accelerated the demands for overseas material aid, and the church and relief agencies of the Mennonites such as Mennonite Central Committee soon realized the potential in the helping hands of Mennonite women and capitalized on their ability to sew, knit, can, bundle and raise funds at a grassroots level. One woman remarked in the early 1950s that as new churches were built and older ones remodelled, the plans would often include a sewing room. She interpreted this as increased recognition that women's work filled a valuable place in the church program.⁵⁹

During the 1940s and 1950s, MCC published a monthly women's activities newsletter, which was sent to women's groups to distribute information about relief needs overseas. In Ontario in 1939 one woman had the idea to unite the women's activities of the nonresistant churches in the district, and as a result, the Nonresistant Relief Sewing Committee was organized and within a year they had collected a large amount of clothing to ship overseas. Thousands of dollars worth of clothing and food was sent overseas during and immediately following the war.

Close ties developed between women's groups and overseas mission workers such as John Coffman, MCC worker in England. He sent lengthy letters to the Ontario Mennonite women's organization, outlining exactly what types of clothing were needed and what was unsuitable, often including detailed diagrams with precise measurements for clothing patterns, and relating stories of how the shipments had been received. Women thus performed their version of alternative service by organizing themselves and providing material relief to war sufferers abroad.

Also in Ontario, a "cutting room" was established in 1942 to facilitate the production of clothing for overseas relief. Rather than collect

ready-made garments to ship, which were sometimes inappropriate in style and fabric to the country where they were sent, a more suitable approach was to have a central depot which chose patterns, bought wholesale fabric in large quantity, and which was then sold to women's groups to sew up. This venture required administrative skills and business sense; the fact that it remains in operation today is evidence of its success.

The centralization of clothing collection in this way was part of a general shift, largely on the urgings of overseas workers, toward raising money at home to be forwarded for the purchase of goods, rather than sending the goods themselves. Though this switch in emphasis made practical sense, particularly from the viewpoint of those receiving help, it de-personalized somewhat the role of women in relief work. As one woman said, it created "a certain emptiness" because much of the satisfaction derived from the work was in the sewing of seams and mending of tears.⁶⁰

For many women, the sewing done in the context of women's groups was, and is, a form of ministry, one of the few avenues in the church for a woman to visibly exercise her spirituality and desire to "minister." One woman described her involvement in sewing circle as "a much needed outlet for . . . pentup spiritual emotions" which could not be expressed in a formal church setting.⁶¹ As another woman put it, "Our faithful women who toil and sacrifice in the home or in a sewing circle group have the opportunity of giving the Master's touch of love through the garments they send forth."⁶² Women sewing for relief were not only sending articles of clothing, but were sending love and redemption to those who experienced hardship. They were performing a unique priestly function. Another woman viewed the goal of her sewing circle as not "social and physical betterment alone but the winning of people for Christ and the Church."⁶³ In this way they could fulfill their desire to be ministers.

While Canadian women were mobilizing to provide relief for war sufferers, the recipients of that relief were also playing a significant role in the making of history. The post-war period saw some 8,000 Mennonites immigrate to Canada, mostly from war-torn Europe. The majority of these were individuals who had fled Russia with the retreating German army, and at the end of the war were destitute and homeless in Europe. A large portion of these were women who had lost husbands and fathers through unknown dispersion in the USSR. Among Mennonite immigrants to Canada between the years 1947 and 1952, there were 1,077 women whose husbands were either dead or missing compared to only 177 men whose wives were dead or missing.⁶⁴ One church reported that among its new immigrant members from 1947-50, there were 78 women over 15 years of age and only 37 men. In 1962 there were still 37 families without a male head.⁶⁵

Many of these refugee women came to Canada not knowing, some of them never knowing, whether their husbands were dead or alive. They had to establish new lives for themselves and their children, which often meant remarrying. This presented a problem for many churches, and in 1947 the General Conference Mennonite Church came to the conclusion that it was impossible to permit remarriage as long as it was uncertain whether the partner had died or not. The Mennonite Brethren took the same position.⁶⁶ Two years later, the Conference of Mennonites in Canada ministers' conference decided that those who chose to remarry could not be received as members into the church, though they also could not be refused communion, if they chose to partake of it.⁶⁷ Obviously this caused problems for many women who would have had difficulty obtaining economic security without a male partner. Single women often availed themselves of the services of the Mennonite girls' home established by General Conference Mennonites and Mennonite Brethren in western Canadian cities.

The story of Susanna and Tina Toews, told in the book *Trek to Freedom*,⁶⁸ is one example of the courageous acts performed by women in unusually harsh circumstances. These two middle-aged sisters departed from their home in Russia in 1943 with the German army and began a two and a half year journey through the Ukraine, Poland, and Germany to Holland, with the Russian army constantly at their heels. At one point in their trek they travelled with two 75-year old grandmothers, a 19-year old girl and three small children. Many of the refugee women added to their home responsibilities by taking on the care of children not their own, often orphans.⁶⁹

Among the displaced persons in Europe were unmarried women with illegitimate children, frequently victims of rape by soldiers or bandits, a not uncommon occurrence in Mennonite history but usually unmentioned because of the nature of the crime. Initially these children were deemed inadmissible to Canada under the "close relative scheme" offered by the Canadian government. J. J. Thiessen, of the Colonization Board, made several appeals on behalf of the "unfortunate girls," guaranteeing that the Mennonites in Canada would provide the "rehabilitation" needed by these "war casualties."⁷⁰ Eventually the government did make allowance for several special cases.

Though the gifts and creative resources of Mennonite women were summoned to meet the crisis situations created by the war and the years immediately following, this does not necessarily suggest that basic attitudes towards women changed at all. The potential for leadership and vision exhibited by women during the war was probably not recognized as having long-term benefit for the church.

Women were broadening their activities in the church within the context of women's organizations, and in the decade following the war

were entering the workforce, the professions and higher education in greater numbers than before. Yet, conservative reactions were quick to surface as Mennonite women began to modernize.

A Birth Control Committee, all-male, was established by the Mennonite Conference of Ontario in 1944, probably suspecting, and rightly so, that the use of contraception was a factor in the decreasing family size among their constituents.⁷¹ Their arguments against the practise — an evil greater than gluttony, drunkenness, self-abuse, and prostitution⁷² — were based in spiritual and nonconformist ideals, but also exhibited a naivety about the risks to health and lives which women took in bearing so many children, as was the case for Mennonite women in former year.

This is but one example of an all-male committee making resolutions on the affairs of women, usually only after women have already acted of their own accord. In 1956–57 a debate was held by the Association of Mennonite University Students on the topic “Resolved, that Mennonite women assume a more active role in society.” Yet it was only that year when the Association deleted “male” from the membership clause.⁷³ They were beginning to recognize that women had already entered higher education in substantial numbers. Perhaps they were also recognizing that women were already taking a more active role in society, whether the men had anything to say about it or not.

Though in some circles, women were not discouraged from entering the workforce or getting some post-secondary education, the home was still seen as the sphere where a woman could best utilize her talents. Marriage was still her primary goal as she entered adulthood and caring for her family the main goal, as we see in the *Canadian Mennonite's* column of the late 1950s, “Conversation with wives” and “Conversation with Mothers,” or the radio broadcast for women, “Heart to Heart,” which originated in the U.S.A. A profession such as nursing was considered acceptable for women in part because it was “wonderful discipline and training for a homemaker.”⁷⁴ J. A. Toews emphasized the significance of women to the promotion of missions, because “they are the ones who will through the home provide the main motivation for missions in their influence on others.”⁷⁵ Teaching also was acceptable because of its nurturing characteristics; one Mennonite minister said female teachers are “no worse than men,” but they did not stay in the profession for “well-known reasons.”⁷⁶

More conservative thinkers, however, rejected any signs of a trend away from “Church, Kitchen and Children.” Oscar Burkholder, for instance, suggested that perhaps some of the world’s troubles would be alleviated “If all married women would suddenly stay at home [and] make their homes a desirable place for their husbands and children.”⁷⁷

A significant step backwards occurred in 1957 when the Canadian Mennonite Brethren conference rescinded ordination for female mission-

aries and changed it to a commissioning.⁷⁸ Katie Funk Wiebe viewed this step as compatible with the general conservative stance of the secular world toward women's roles following World War II.⁷⁹ Another reason could have been the fact that it may have been acceptable to ordain women for an overseas mission station, therefore far away and out of sight, but as home missions became more popular, suddenly it became uncomfortable to have ordained women so close to home. Perhaps the ordination of women to a pulpit ministry would not be such a stumbling block now, if the practice had not undergone a reversal three decades previously.

The post-war urbanization trend, though a factor in the modernization process, did not itself lead to a further emancipation of women. Paul Redekop in a 1986 article, implies that patriarchy has existed in Mennonite communities largely because they are agriculturally based.⁸⁰ Thus one might assume that moving to the city would liberate the community from some of the vestiges of patriarchy. Though moving away from the rural setting increases the educational and employment opportunities for women, this in itself does not necessarily raise their significance to the community. Particularly for those women who remained caretakers of the home after the move to the city, emancipation may have actually regressed. In the setting of the family farm, the woman had well-defined economic roles and perceived herself, and was likely perceived by others, as an indispensable part of family production. She was in charge of much of the subsistence activity of the farm and in the reproduction of children to provide the hands that maintain the system.⁸¹ In ideological terms she may not have been considered an equal to her husband, but in terms of the division of labour she was. In this way she was less alienated than her counterpart in the city.

Recent Changes

The past two decades have witnessed a similar pattern of action and reaction. Without going into much detail, one can think of the 1960s and 1970s as a time when women's roles have been forced into transition mainly by the revitalized feminist movement. Though Mennonite women, along with their secular sisters, may have increased their visibility in higher education and the professions, and can be found more and more in employment outside the home, I would take issue with Paul Redekop's assertion that "Mennonite women appear to be on the forefront of the feminist revolution."⁸² Though many are critically examining their roles and attempting to change attitudes, the fact that they are acting within a close, church-oriented community means that they are frequently subject to the conservative or progressive whims of that community. Even though they are becoming more emancipated outside the

church, their roles within the church seem to be changing at a slower pace, particularly during the conservative mood of the 1980s. Today there are many women who have chosen not to become involved in traditional women's organizations, but neither are opportunities for church involvement increasing proportionately in areas such as administration and pulpit ministry.

From Peter Hamm's recently released *Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren*, we learn that only about 20% of Canadian MBs would like to see greater numbers of women elected to positions of leadership, such as committees and boards, and only 5.6% favour the ordination of women to the ministry.⁸³ Ontario Swiss Mennonites, generally more progressive in this respect, have been slow in making the actual match the ideal. Though three women will be ordained this summer (1987), adding to the four that currently exist, finding positions as a leading minister has proven to be difficult, and this is not because vacancies do not exist. Some churches simply declare themselves not ready for a female minister. Some women themselves fear that too much assertiveness on their part will "scare the young men away" from positions of leadership.⁸⁴ When a reasonable and sometimes equal number of women as men are found on church-related committees and boards, one sometimes hears rumblings that the balance has shifted too far. Reaction is often quick to surface when it becomes apparent that women are making gains in the church setting.

What one finally arrives at is a sense that women's roles have changed, to a greater extent at times when the Mennonite community and women in society are also in a state of flux, but tending to regress somewhat during times of community stability and status quo. What is most evident is that a substantial amount of research needs to be done. We need to understand the history of women's relief work and how it contributed to, and quite possibly was the foundation for, the larger and more bureaucratized relief activities of the Mennonite church. We need to examine the reproductive role of Mennonite women, because being pregnant, or preventing pregnancy, giving birth, and raising children consumed the better part of their adult years. For the World War II era, we will want to know how Mennonite women gave expression to their nonresistant convictions, or lack of them. We could also ask to what extent Mennonite women were caught up in the "feminine mystique" experienced by other Canadian women during the 1950s. The stories of post-World War II refugee women need to be told and a history of the Mennonite girls' homes written.

There is indeed an underside to Mennonite history. What lies there is a wealth of wisdom and talent, vision and courage, humour and pain. It is experience that Mennonites need to explore if they hope to approach an understanding of their past and a sense of self. The underside is waiting, no, demanding, to be uncovered.

Notes

¹Ruth Pierson and Alison Prentice, "Feminism and the Writing and Teaching of History," *Atlantis* 7, 2 (Spring 1982): 41.

²Elise Boulding, *The Underside of History: A View of Women Through Time* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1976).

³Ruth Unrau, *Encircled: Stories of Mennonite Women* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1986), p.6.

⁴Boulding, *The Underside of History* p.8.

⁵*Ibid.*, p.9.

⁶Veronica Strong-Boag and Anita Clair Fellman, Eds., *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women's History* (Toronto: Copp Clark Pitman Ltd., 1986), p.3.

⁷*Ibid.*, p.5.

⁸Susan Mann Trofimenkoff and Alison Prentice, eds., *The Neglected Majority: Essays in Canadian Women's History Vol. 1* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1977), p.8.

⁹Katie Funk Wiebe, "To the Unknown Great," in *Mennonite Memories: Settling in Western Canada*, ed. Lawrence Klippenstein and Julius G. Toews (Winnipeg: Centennial Publications, 1977), p. 312.

¹⁰Katie Funk Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women: Images and Realities of the Early Years," *Mennonite Life* 36, 3 (Sept. 1981): 27.

¹¹Trofimenkoff and Prentice, *The Neglected Majority, Vol. 1*, p.8.

¹²Margaret W. Andrews describes a trend in women's history prior to the 1970s devoted to "Great Women." In this historiography, women were portrayed as superbeings — they were illustrious because they had succeeded in areas which were traditionally male yet in doing so had retained feminine qualities. See her article, "Attitudes in Canadian Women's History, 1945-1975," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (Summer 1977):69-78.

¹³Unrau, *Encircled*, p.6.

¹⁴*Missionary Sewing Circle Monthly*, Sept. 1952.

¹⁵This concept is expressed in a poignant article by Tina Hartzler entitled "Choosing to be Honest Rather than Good" in *Festival Quarterly* 13, 2 (Summer 1986) :7-9,18. She says: "Self-denial and self-sacrifice were the cardinal virtues of my life." See also a response to her article in a letter to the editor, *Festival Quarterly* 13, 3 (Fall 1986):6.

¹⁶Sharon Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite church, 1900-1930," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 54, 3(July 1980):163.

¹⁷Frank H. Epp interview with Hilda Born, 24 Jan. 1984.

¹⁸Strong-Boag and Fellman, *Rethinking Canada*, p.2.

¹⁹See for instance George H. Williams, *The Radical Reformation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1962); Roland H. Bainton, *Women of the Reformation*, a three-volume series (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971, 1973, 1977); H. S. Bender, "Women, Status of" *Mennonite Encyclopedia* Vol. 4 (Scottdale: Mennonite Publishing House, 1959); Herta Funk, ed. *Study Guide: Women in the Bible and Early Anabaptism* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1975).

²⁰See in particular M. Lucille Marr, "Anabaptist Women of the North: Peers in the Faith, Subordinates in Marriage," Unpublished research paper, University of Waterloo, n.d. (Forthcoming in *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, July 1987); also Joyce L. Irwin, *Womanhood in Radical Protestantism, 1525-1675* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 1979).

²¹See Linda Kealey, ed. *A Not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: The Women's Press, 1979).

²²See Wendy Mitchinson, "Canadian Women and Church Missionary Societies in the Nineteenth Century: A Step Towards Independence," *Atlantis* 2, 2(Spring 1977):57-75.

²³This could be seen primarily among Mennonite groups in the United States and among the Swiss in Ontario.

²⁴Jim Juhnke, "The Role of Women in the Mennonite Transition from Traditionalism to Denominationalism," *Mennonite Life* 41, 3(Sept. 1986):17.

²⁵Elaine Sommers Rich, *Mennonite Women: A Story of God's Faithfulness, 1683-1983* (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1983), p.97.

²⁶Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church," p.179.

²⁷See "Introduction" in Kealey, *A Not Unreasonable Claim*.

²⁸Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church," p. 167.

²⁹Margaret Loewen Reimer, *One Quilt, Many Pieces* (Waterloo: Mennonite Publishing Service, 1983), p.28.

³⁰*Missionary Sewing Circle Monthly*, Jan. 1952.

³¹*Missionary Sewing Circle Letter*, Jan. 1943.

³²The term is used by Elaine Sommers Rich in *Mennonite Women*.

³³An excellent account of the takeover is in Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church." See also Melvin Gingerich, "The Mennonite Women's Missionary Society," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 37, 2 (Apr. 1963):113-125, 3 (July 1963):214-233.

³⁴Rich, *Mennonite Women*, p.205.

³⁵*Ibid.*, p.229.

³⁶See Gladys V. Goering, *Women in Search of Mission: A History of the General Conference Mennonite Women's Organization* (Newton: Faith and Life Press, 1980).

³⁷Klingelsmith, "Women in the Mennonite Church," p.194.

³⁸Jim Juhnke, "The Role of Women in the Mennonite Transition from Traditionalism to Denominationalism," *Mennonite Life* 41, 3 (Sept. 1986):17.

³⁹Rich, *Mennonite Women*, p.228.

⁴⁰The post-WWI conservative shift and its effect on the feminist movement is described in Veronica Strong-Boag, "Canadian Feminism in the 1920s: The Case of Nellie L. McClung," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 12 (Summer 1977):58-68. The fear and instability created by the war caused renewed prejudice against women in education and employment and the longing for familiar institutions caused a re-emphasis on woman as wife, mother, and homemaker.

⁴¹Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), p.70.

⁴²*Ibid.*

⁴³Oscar Burkholder, "The Devotional Covering," *Gospel Herald* 23, 3 (17 Apr. 1930):67.

⁴⁴The historiography on the Stirling Ave. church split has often blamed the women themselves for causing the split, although they had no official voice in church policy.

⁴⁵Frank H. Epp interview with Hilda Born and Betty Klassen, 24 Jan. 1984.

⁴⁶Ruth Roach Pierson, *Canadian Women and the Second World War* (Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1983), p.8.

⁴⁷Ruth Pierson, "Women's Emancipation and the Recruitment of Women into the Canadian Labour Force in World War II," *Canadian Historical Association Historical Papers* (1976):165.

⁴⁸Pierson, *Canadian Women and the Second World War*, p.20.

⁴⁹*Ibid.*, p.25.

⁵⁰Special war-time programs such as tax concessions for married working women and government-supported childcare were dropped.

⁵¹Yvonne Mathews-Lein, "How They Saw Us: Images of Women in National Film Board Films of the 1940's and 1950's" *Atlantis* 4, 2 (Spring 1979):26.

⁵²Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women," p.23.

⁵³Helen L. Epp, Unpublished research project on Mennonites in the Armed Forces, University of Waterloo, 1979.

⁵⁴Clara Snider to Workers of the Nonresistant Relief Sewing Organization, 16 Dec. 1942, John Coffman Letters, CGC Archives. A program existed in the United States called C.O.G.'s or C.O. Girls, designed for women who wanted to become involved in the nonresistant effort.

⁵⁵Quoted in LaVerna Klippenstein, "The Diary of Tina Schulz," *Mennonite Memories*, p.232.

⁵⁶Public Archives of Canada, RG 27, File 601.3 (12), vol. 1. Quoted in L.E. Westman, Chief Alternative Service Officer, to Allan M. Mitchell, Director, Employment Service and Unemployment Insurance Branch, 23 Aug. 1943. Many conscientious objectors, in making requests for leave from Alternative Service camps in order to work on the family farm, outlined situations where mothers and sisters were attempting to run the farm on their own.

⁵⁷Interview with Lorna Bergey and Florence Shantz, 20 Apr. 1987. There is little historical evidence to confirm this and is an area which requires additional research, particularly the extent to which Mennonite women entered the workforce during this period and what kind of jobs they were found in.

⁵⁸Goering, *Women in Search of Mission*, p.38.

⁵⁹*Missionary Sewing Circle Letter*, June 1952.

⁶⁰*MCC Women's Activities Letter* 50 (Feb. 1948).

- ⁶¹Elsie Neufeld, "Unity in Women's Work," *Canadian Mennonite*, 16 May 1958, p. 4.
- ⁶²MCC Women's Activities Letter 50 (Feb. 1948).
- ⁶³*Missionary Sewing Circle Monthly*, Jan. 1952.
- ⁶⁴Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus: The Rescue and Resettlement of the Russian Mennonites Since the Communist Revolution* (Altona: D.W. Friesen and Sons, Ltd., 1962), p.453.
- ⁶⁵A. Schroeder, "Post World War II Immigrants," in *Niagara United Mennonite Church: 25 Years (Niagara-on-the-Lake: Niagara United Mennonite Church, 1963)*, p.45.
- ⁶⁶Epp, *Mennonite Exodus*, p.453.
- ⁶⁷*Conference of Mennonites in Canada Yearbook (1949):10-11.*
- ⁶⁸Susanna Toews, *Trek To Freedom: The escape of two sisters from South Russia during World War II* (Winkler: Heritage Valley Publications, 1976). See also the story of Elfrieda Dyck, MCC relief worker among Mennonite refugees, in an essay by Marion Kenney Preheim, in *Something Meaningful for God*, Cornelius J. Dyck, ed. (Scottdale: Herald Press, 1981), pp.215-257.
- ⁶⁹Wiebe, "Mennonite Brethren Women," p.28.
- ⁷⁰PAC, RG 76, Vol. 855, File 554-22, PT.1, J. J. Thiessen, Chairman, Canadian Mennonite Board of Colonization, to A. L. Jolliffe, Director of Immigration, Dept. of Mines and Resources, 19 Sept. 1949 and 28 Sept. 1949.
- ⁷¹Interview with Lorna Bergery and Florence Shantz, 20 April 1987.
- ⁷²*Calendar of Appointments, Mennonite Church of Ontario (1945-46):40.*
- ⁷³"Assocation Decides to Admit Women Students," *Canadian Mennonite*, 30 Nov. 1956, p.11.
- ⁷⁴*Women's Missionary and Service Monthly* (June 1957).
- ⁷⁵"The Place of Women In Church Work Today," *Canadian Mennonite*, 18 Oct. 1957, p.1.
- ⁷⁶Gerhard Lohrenz, "Die Schule in Kanada — von uns aus gesehen," *Mennonitische Welt* (March 1951):4-5.
- ⁷⁷Oscar Burkholder, "Why Christian Married Women Work," *Gospel Herald* 48, 2(11 Jan. 1955):34.
- ⁷⁸*Yearbook of the 47th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America (1957):106.*
- ⁷⁹Katie Funk Wiebe, "The New Mennonite Brethren: In But Still Out?" Paper read at a conference on Dynamics of Faith and Culture in Mennonite Brethren History, Nov. 14-15, 1986, Winnipeg.
- ⁸⁰Paul Redekop, "The Mennonite Family in Tradition and Transition," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 4 (1986):83.
- ⁸¹Richard A. Wright, "A Comparative Analysis of Economic Roles Within the Family: Amish and Contemporary American Women," *International Journal of Sociology of the Family* 7:55-60. Much of the discussion along this line uses as example women in Old Order Mennonite or Amish communities or women in the pioneer setting. See for instance Sara Brooks Sundberg, "Farm Women on the Canadian Prairie Frontier: The Helpmate Image," in *Rethinking Canada*, pp.95-106.
- ⁸²Redekop, "The Mennonite Family in Tradition and Transition," p.85.
- ⁸³Peter M. Hamm, *Continuity and Change Among Canadian Mennonite Brethren* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1987):107.
- ⁸⁴Interveiw with Lorna Bergery and Florence Shantz, 20 Apr. 1987.