

Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario*. Harrisonburg, VA/Kitchener, ON: Herald Press, 2015. Pp. 877. Hardcover, \$69.99 USD.

There is probably no region of North America where Mennonites exhibit more diversity in theology, ethnicity, and culture than Ontario. In this expansive volume, the first comprehensive history of Ontario Mennonites since Lawrence Burkholder's *A Brief History of the Mennonites of Ontario* was published in 1935, Sam Steiner provides an account of increasing complexity over more than two centuries as successive waves of immigration brought to the province Mennonites and Amish of varied backgrounds, and as conflict and division over doctrine and religious practice multiplied church groupings. Steiner brings cohesion to this multifaceted story with the metaphor of the search for "promised lands," which he extracts as a theme shared by the many strands of Ontario Mennonite history. For Steiner, these "lands" are not only the geographic territory that offered economic opportunity and security, but also new theological spaces that took believers in different directions to find greater spiritual fulfillment.

This book is called a religious history, a capacious designation that in this case reflects its primary focus on ecclesial change and the ways Amish and Mennonites engaged as church members with the larger society. Steiner prefaces his text with an almost apologetic declaration that he is not a trained academic, one who might be inclined toward a social or intellectual history approach; however, his writing demonstrates a keen awareness of the broader social and cultural context for the developments he addresses. Steiner's long career as archivist at Conrad Grebel College and

years of experience as managing editor of the *Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia Online* are evident in how he arrays stories and details from a vast collection of primary and secondary sources to support his careful synthesis.

An important theme of this work is the transformation of Mennonite belief and practices that was induced through contact with other Christian groups and religious movements. Significant influences from outside the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition included forms of Pietism, Wesleyan holiness teaching, fundamentalism, Pentecostalism, and the charismatic renewal movement. Steiner stresses the attraction of the idea of assurance of salvation, which was key to the theology of Pietism. He devotes a substantial portion of the first chapter to describing four German-speaking pietistic renewal movements that influenced Mennonites in Pennsylvania toward a more individually oriented, conversion-focused faith. This influence would be brought to Canada, where religious ferment in the 1830s and 1840s resulted in the creation of new Mennonite groups and church divisions, including the formation in 1883 of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, and the 1889 division of the Old Order Mennonites from the Mennonite Church of Canada. By the turn of the century pietistic renewal had influenced all Mennonite groups except the Old Orders and the Amish.

Steiner's narrative of the twentieth century underscores the growing theological and cultural distance between Mennonite groups. Groups that had accepted aspects of pietistic renewal followed the model of nearby Protestant denominations and adopted Sunday schools, English gospel hymns, home and foreign missions, and women's service organizations. These same groups were attracted to fundamentalism in the years before and after the First World War. After the war this fundamentalist orientation in combination with holiness teaching motivated a renewed emphasis on nonconformity to the world, as expressed especially through women's dress, in the relatively assimilated Mennonite Conference of Ontario. The theological trajectory of the Mennonite Brethren in Christ ultimately took this large group out of the land of Mennonite identity altogether when it became the United Missionary Church in 1947. Further diversity was introduced with the arrival of *Kirchliche*, Mennonite Brethren, and *Allianzgemeinde* Mennonites from the Soviet Union in the 1920s, followed by more refugees from Europe after the Second World War, a steady stream of Low German Mennonite migrants mainly from Mexico that began in the 1950s, and refugee communities from Southeast Asia and Central America who joined or formed their own Mennonite congregations.

Steiner introduces a fourfold typology to classify the categories of Mennonite groups he sees prevalent from the 1970s to the present. These are Old Order, Separatist Conservative, Evangelical Conservative, and Assimilated Mennonite. The middle two categories comprise some two dozen groups, including a great number of Low German Mennonites (who now make up at least 25 percent of Ontario Mennonites). Both categories represent groups that have adopted an evangelical and often fundamentalist theology and are active in mission outreach, but the Separatist Conservatives emphasize the necessity of remaining visibly apart from the world while the Evangelical Conservatives do not.

The vastness of this history defies brief summary. Chapters on the world wars describe how Mennonites were compelled to cooperate to defend their pacifist stance, the first time with considerable difficulty. Attention is given to Old Order Mennonite strategies of nonconformity and efforts to resist government social programs and regulations that were perceived to compromise their sense of community. Other chapters deal with the flurry of Mennonite institution-building in the quarter century after the Second World War, which Steiner interprets as a strategy of identity preservation by the more assimilated Mennonite groups, and some of the challenges these institutions have faced more recently. Changes in congregational life, worship practice, and theology, following the example of other Protestant churches, are discussed. Steiner also addresses with sensitivity and directness a number of controversies, such as the physical and cultural abuses perpetrated at a Mennonite-run Aboriginal residential school.

Steiner concludes his narrative with some limited speculation about the future of Ontario Mennonite identity. With more than thirty Mennonite church groups by 2012, he asks if there remains a "Mennonite core" around which to unite (582). He finds that a basic set of propositions still hold, including belief in adult baptism, the value of a sense of separation from "the world," and the call to peace and discipleship, but beyond this he sees a degree of fragmentation and divergence that is likely to continue. He anticipates that within the next generation some evangelical groups will abandon their Mennonite name, and that there will be a slow decline among "progressive" Assimilated Mennonites; by contrast he predicts that Old Order groups, with their large families and high rates of church adherence, will flourish as long as they can find the means to support their more separatist, rural existence.

This is an assiduously researched book, as its extensive and valuable endnotes reveal. Written with clarity, it finds room in a complicated narrative for the personal stories of the women and

men who were involved. It will be the definitive reference on Ontario Mennonite history.

Jeremy Wiebe
University of Waterloo