

Brian Froese, *California Mennonites*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015. Pp. xxiii + 334. Hardcover, \$49.95 USD.

California Mennonites is a story of political, social, and cultural integration above all else. In California, Mennonites have played an expanded role beyond the clichéd expectations of ethno-religious pacifist agrarians who spurned technology and political activism. But Froese also addresses a historical lacuna of Mennonites west of the Rockies for they have been too few in number to have received adequate attention in neither the histories of California nor those of Mennonite communities.

Still, the Mennonite experience in California is distinctive enough to create specific nuances worth exploration. With its beautiful and winterless climate, the state obtained a mythological quality among Mennonites, especially with regard to its reputed ability to heal any illnesses. Mennonite descriptions of California teem with biblical imagery of bucolic gardens and sanctuary; indeed a land flowing with milk and honey beckoned Mennonites to California. Other unique features of Mennonite settlement in California include the preeminence of Mennonite Brethren influence, the urbanization process and rise of a professional class, the impact of evangelicalism, and the strategic re-appropriation of Anabaptist ideologies in the mid-twentieth century.

Froese argues that Mennonites emerged from alternative service during World War II determined to maintain a society-changing activism while simultaneously harboring a burgeoning attachment to the state. In this instance, Mennonites reacted to the potential disaster of the American war effort and conscription by sheltering in place rather than migrating. Froese convincingly puts a lie to the fable that “agrarian sectarians resisted social change” by exploring Mennonite social relief efforts through educational and mental health facilities and a mission against domestic and global poverty.

The book’s twelve chapters focus primarily on the era 1890 to 1975 with a brief epilogue considering the twenty-first century. With the exception of a few intrepid Mennonites seeking gold in the 1850s, the story of Mennonites in California begins with migration efforts in the 1890s. Chapter 1 is an overview of the ebb and flow of Mennonite life in central California and the establishment of Mennonite church-based communities. Chapters 2 and 3 consider notions of urban and natural spaces. Chapter 4 explores ‘insider and outsider’ status in California through the issues of Pentecostal

revivalism, while Chapter 5 considers race and religious identity, and Chapter 6 gendered experiences. Chapters 7 through 10 explore Mennonite alternative military service and the impacts this service had on creating Mennonite educational, mental health, and mission institutions. Chapter 11 is a fabulous exploration of various ways Mennonites constructed ideas of California throughout the Diaspora. Well-timed and chosen illustrations are appreciated and influential throughout the monograph. Froese does an impressive job of maintaining a coherent report while navigating the tangled webs of similar names and the abundance of acronyms common amongst the fractious Mennonites groups.

Perhaps a comparison between Mennonites and other migrant groups would help triangulate the uniqueness of Mennonite tactics of self-directed integration into California society. Froese makes clear that Mennonites adapted to urbanization, pluralism, and professionalism with an eye toward maintaining a unique identity, inventing charitable organizations, and educational and health institutions as a way to interact with the greater society and effect change rather than isolate themselves. These organizations, whether overt or subtle in proclaiming their Mennonite identities, were always cognizant of their unique dilemma of being in the world but not of the world. The crushing weight of American cultural hegemony is difficult to endure and the Mennonites did an impressive job of handling this pressure.

A few questions might have been explored in greater detail. How did other groups use similar tactics to protect their ethnic identities and moral/spiritual egos? Did the local Californians see these Mennonite enterprises as 'outsider' or 'insider' influences? Finally, the experiences of Mennonite children would represent a fascinating complement to the skillful and thorough treatment Froese gives to Mennonite settlement in California.

But these minor quibbles aside, the book is consistently impressive in its anticipation of critiques and addresses any concerns in a timely and eloquent fashion. Froese speaks into the void of scholarship both of Mennonite history and American history concerning Mennonites in California in a clear and convincing manner, providing an invaluable service to both fields and dropping the gauntlet to those willing to explore the other great gaps of the Mennonite experience in America: Texas and Florida.

Steven Dueck
University of Manitoba