

Jacob E. Peters, Adolf Ens and Eleanor Chornoboy, eds., *The Outsiders' Gaze: Life and Labour on the Mennonite West Reserve 1874-1922*. Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015. Pp. x + 198. Softcover. \$30.00.

*The Outsider's Gaze* presents the reader with a valuable compilation of twenty-two reports and ten newspaper articles about the Mennonites of the West Reserve, Manitoba. All but one of these pieces date from 1876-1922, thus capturing the first immigrants and the following two generations. Published by the Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, the volume is a great help to researchers and casual history readers alike, who would otherwise struggle to track down these various and sometimes obscure pieces. Perhaps at some date in the future a similar volume about the East Reserve could be produced.

The reports tend to provide a general history of Mennonites and the economic standing of the community. In this regard they are

more or less accurate, but should not be taken at face value, as the reporters were sometimes using second-hand knowledge. Details emerge, however, that open our eyes to the practical, everyday issues of life on the prairies for recent immigrants.

The earlier reports may have doubled as immigration propaganda. A particularly rosy picture of farming and hunting life was provided by Englishman and immigration agent John Down in 1877: "In fact all [Mennonites] are quite satisfied, and appear to be the most happy set of people it has been my lot to meet." Maybe.

Far more intriguing are the impressions of reporters as they wander through the Reserve and meet or stay with Mennonite hosts. These reports are mostly quite positive, and run counter to some negative perceptions of Mennonites by their English settler neighbours, such as an accusation of being "slovenly in their habits" (44), or decrying the "filthiness of their domestic habits" (59). In another account, by Montreal newspaper reporter David Cur-ray, it is noted that, "As a race, they are thrifty and industrious, but their neighbours say the women do most of the work. An open ditch about a mile in length, beautifully dug...was said to be all women's work" (50). True or not, if this was the understanding of English settlers, who believed at the time that a woman's sphere of work was inside the home, then it was an insult indeed.

But these perceptions of the "neighbours" are countered by the reporters' polite accounts. W. Fraser Rae, travel writer, claims that Mennonite dwellings were "cosy" and that "everyone in sound health is obliged to labour with his hands", and thus "no distinction of sex is made when a field has to be weeded, a house plastered, seed sown or cattle tended" (63).

One of the finest of the essays was written by Ella Cora Hind, who was a keen newspaper correspondent, feminist and agricultural journalist for the *Manitoba Free Press*. She took an interest in rural women's lives and voiced their concerns in many columns, including in the debate over women's voting and property rights. Her sympathetic account of a Mennonite home provides astonishing detail that will be of interest to any student of Mennonite material culture. She also addresses the lives of Mennonite women, the establishment of public schools and breeding stock (for which she held a lifelong interest).

The details that emerge in a careful reading of the reports provide the reader with valuable insights into a culture that was in the midst of transformation. Accounts of street village abandonment, new Mennonite business enterprises, and changing clothing styles all speak to a society straddling a period characterized by the loss

of generations of experience from the “old country,” and the acquisition of tools useful in the new “open” society of the Canadian west.

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