The Confessions of Rudy Wiebe: Re-positioning the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Event of 1962–63

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> "The problem with writer longevity can be a complicating, even contradictory, oeuvre. Hopefully."
>
> - Rudy Wiebe, "With the Flow"

For historians of Mennonite literature, the term "Mennonite Brethren" entered the lexicon in the wake of what we can call "the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* event" of 1962-63: the high drama among Mennonite Brethren that occurred during the period encompassing the publication of Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in October 1962 and the strong reactions to it in 1963. Both institutionally and informally, a number of Mennonite Brethren (although not nearly all) reacted forcefully against Wiebe as writer of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and also as editor (from January 1962 to June 1963) of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*. The Mennonite Brethren (MB) denomination, even among its own members, became widely known for its willingness, as Al Reimer

has put it in his *Mennonite Literary Voices*, to accuse Wiebe, their fellow MB, of the "betrayal" of his people: "he has been vilified, ostracized, branded as a heretic, and cruelly misinterpreted by Mennonites who often did not even bother reading his novels." Reimer captured the flavour of that historical moment in 1963 as the "tide of hysterical vituperation that forced [Wiebe] to resign as editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*" (Reimer 66), just when, as editor, Wiebe (to use his own words) was becoming "a 'presence' in every Mennonite Brethren household in Canada" (Wiebe, "Hold" 46).

Wiebe himself reinforced the view that the church had conspired against him during what he has called the "uproar" of the day ("Afterword" 294), betraying him even as it felt he had betrayed it. In a couple of key essays, published in 1987 and 2001, he let stand what had already become, and remains to this day, the dominant narrative surrounding "the event": that without much mercy or grace the MB denomination in Canada – including pastors and senior-ranking officials, apparently driven by distressed parishioners – abandoned the high-profile and controversial Wiebe after having been panicked by what they took to be the negative impact of his novel on the rank-and-file of their carefully-monitored denomination as it awkwardly groped its way into "the sixties." That he was already controversial as editor of the *Herald* only increased the bias against him. With the arrival of his novel, Wiebe was seen as unfairly representing the closely regulated and fairly homogeneous society to the broader world in ways, senior leaders thought, that made church members seem undesirable as Canadian citizens. Church officials were anxious enough about how the denomination – not least its young people – would navigate the contemporary world. The novel arrived at a time when the church, often with considerable uneasiness, was giving up its cherished German language and turning to English as the language of its Sunday services; at the same time the church was trying to block out the "English" world that threatened to enter its domestic spaces via television.

So fully has the vivid imagery of the 1963 ousting – and apparent exiling – of Wiebe been assimilated as a trope within the Mennonite literary community, that writers and critics and other readers have developed a perception that the MB community of the day was devoid of cultural resources ready to absorb and appreciate and applaud the arrival of that first novel. This (exaggerated) perception has limited our capacity to identify and appreciate the range of intellectual liveliness within the denomination at the time of its crisis with Wiebe. Further, this

perception has created a false and too-narrow view of Wiebe himself, who at the time was writing very much as an MB artist and intellectual and reformer steeped within his religious tradition, and within a cohort of like-minded thinkers.

But things have begun to change in how we can understand Wiebe's denominational setting. In my recent "Re-framing" essay, for example, I have pointed to a more nuanced view of the cultural environment in which "the event" transpired. More dramatically, Wiebe – astonishingly, it seems to me – has recently modified his own views of that world. In his 2016 essay – the third in a sequence of personal reflections on the event that includes his essays of 1987 and 2001 – he has shifted his direction and tone, significantly adjusting his earlier descriptions of the church's behavior toward him. He seems in this essay to be saying that those years, 1962 to 1963, were more complicated and contradictory than he had allowed. Those years lay in the thick of MB culture wars of the late 1950s and early 1960s that even he could barely comprehend at the time. Those conflicts belonged to a religiously charged political discourse in which things were heavy with meaning even when they were unspoken. It was as though "the bare truth" could not be uttered openly, as Wiebe put it privately to a friend in April 1963. He felt, he admitted, that he had "only a faint idea of what has actually taken place," and concluded philosophically that "only time will open up all the areas of pain that are still possible" (RW to CB, 19 Apr. 1963). But now, in his 2016 essay, he seems prepared to understand that complicated historical phase in more nuanced ways.

The 1987 and 2001 Essays

"The Skull in the Swamp," the first of Wiebe's essays reflecting on this period, was a powerful meditation based on Wiebe's presentation to a St. John's College (University of Manitoba) audience in 1987, on the 25th anniversary of the appearance of his novel. In that essay – after first examining little-known stepping-stones, early short-story exercises, that were all part of his trial-and-error movement toward his eventual 1962 novel – Wiebe focused on what Reimer has called the "traumatic" eruptions that occurred when the MB church leadership came into conflict with him (Reimer 66). Wiebe's approach in that essay underscored literary historians' sense that, with his first novel, he should be understood as a Joycean artist operating in exile outside the hostile regions of the religious community represented in that work. He

summed up the period of its creation by stating, simply, "I lived inside my head" ("Skull" 14).

But as I observe below, Wiebe was living also among his religious kin. To be sure, let me mention here that even in this 1987 essay he came close to hinting that positive forces, alongside the negative, were alive and well in his MB world. For example, he alluded to a letter of support from a friend in Elkhart, Indiana. Written in April 1963, right after he had resigned from his editorship, it came from what Wiebe (playing on his observation, earlier in the essay, that he was no "theologian," never mind what his Toronto publisher McClelland and Stewart [M&S] insisted on putting on the dustjacket of the novel) called a "true theologian." The unnamed letter writer, concerned about Wiebe's willingness to remain in the church, delicately alerted Wiebe to the temptation either to "justify" himself in the face of his critics or to become "bitter and resentful" toward his critics. He wished for Wiebe "the grace to retain [his] own personal integrity, realizing that what is true need not be defended, and that sometimes it is better to let 'error' live than love die" ("Skull" 17). Today we learn from the archive that the writer of those uncommon words of wisdom and encouragement was himself an MB, and Saskatchewan-born like Wiebe. It was Clarence Bauman, a professor of theology and ethics at the Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Let me briefly note here that Wiebe – moved by and grateful for Bauman's eloquent gesture – wrote him right back (as the archive reveals), in the immediate wake of the intense pressure placed on him in Canada. He thanked Bauman for not "writ[ing] down" his actions to "a 'lack of spirituality,' the way, I'm afraid, a number of leading men [in the MB church] do." But his "many disappointments" notwithstanding, Wiebe insisted to Bauman that he was prepared to remain in the church. Further, he declared he would struggle to find ways to express forgiveness in a world that, on the evidence available to him, had betrayed his trust in its goodness and good sense. He also confided that had the MB church's objections to him been restricted to his controversial approach as editor – and not been complicated and intensified by its reactions to his novel – those objections could have been resolved. He felt that most members of the Publications Committee that oversaw his role as editor felt that his position would have survived without the bedeviling impact of the novel (RW to CB, 19 April 1963).

In that 1987 essay, another example of Wiebe giving readers a peek of positive forces operating all around him, lay in his reference to the seventy friends who threw a surprise farewell for

him and his wife Tena in Winnipeg in June 1963 ("Skull" 19). As Abram Friesen (retired history professor, University of California, Santa Barbara) confirmed in private conversation with me in 2015, he and many other Mennonite Brethren rallied round Wiebe in a show of support: a "large group" sponsored a banquet, "a marvelous evening" for Rudy and his wife Tena, when they and their two pre-school children were preparing to leave Winnipeg for Goshen College in Indiana, where in May he had accepted a teaching position.

The second essay was the 2001 "Afterword" to the Vintage Canada edition of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Here – in what is a shorter piece – Wiebe echoed his 1987 stance concerning the strong opposition to him by his religious kin during 1962-63. The "negative outcry won the day," he noted, but he was hinting too that the victory of his opponents, however painful, was provisional. He briefly signaled that not all was as bad as it might have seemed back in 1962 and 1963: there already had begun to exist, he stated, a cohort of sympathetic readers for whom any denominational controversy "was [really] largely behind the times even while it happened" ("Afterword" 295).

Indeed, the fierceness of the opposition against Wiebe had been a measure of the credibility and viability of what was an already-established direction among both intellectual and rank-and-file MB thinkers. As Wiebe scholar W.J. Keith has argued, the broad voice of which Wiebe was a part had long been present within the church: "the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* controversy only brought to a head disagreements . . . festering for some time" (Keith 131, note 8). In many respects, Wiebe's novel was a catalyst for giving shape to multiple pressures, whether from people for him or against him. Strong opinion about his novel was galvanized, he thought in early February 1963, into "fairly equal groups of avidly for or avidly against, with not too many straddling the middle" (RW to DW, 5 Feb. 1963).

The 2016 Essay

The sea-change that we find in Wiebe's analysis in the most recent of the three essays invites us to develop a new understanding of the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* event. In this 2016 essay – first presented in 2012 – he intimated that there had been an at least implicitly "conversational" rather than an exclusively "confrontational" space within what subsequently would become his conflicted MB world of 1962-63.

We might pause to note that before and after (and even during) the period of his difficulties Wiebe maintained a thoughtful, practical, and, in effect, "conversational", that is, sensitive and open, approach to his religious fellows. For example: as he himself pointed out in this 2016 essay, in May 1963 he quietly rejected efforts by M&S to have him appear on Pierre Berton's popular national public-affairs television show, the CBC's *Close-Up*, to discuss the controversy surrounding his novel. He declined out of deference to those of his fellow religionists who would be offended by the risk of his fanning further – and further making public – the flames of the MB debate. And never mind that the MB conference (as we noted above) opposed the presence of television in the home ("Hold" 50). I can add a further example here (that I take from the evidence of the M&S archive): Wiebe quietly carried out another act of forethought toward his co-religionists in February 1962. In a behind-the-scenes gesture, Wiebe, determinedly negotiating with his publisher, shielded MB readers from humiliation by pressing M&S to withdraw from the dustjacket its use of the word "hate" to describe the community of the novel: "I do not believe that there is any hate, . . . at least not in the minds of those who call themselves Christians – and these are, after all, the ones about whom the story turns" (RW to CP, 14 Feb. 1962; see also Tiessen, "Double" 80).

Titled "Hold Your Peace," this third essay appeared in the imposing 2016 volume of Wiebe's essays suggestively called *Where The Truth Lies*. It was based on a presentation – hosted by the Mennonite Historical Society of British Columbia, meeting for the occasion at Emmanuel Mennonite Church in Abbotsford – that Wiebe made to an appreciative crowd of nearly 400 people on the 50th anniversary of the novel. Here Wiebe, probably for the first time in such a prominent forum, turned things around by testifying to vivid intimations of support from top echelons of the MB community where earlier he had reported only opposition. For years, it seems he necessarily had to estrange himself from large swaths of his earlier MB world, to sustain a long struggle to discover who he was as a writer, even avoiding the very word "Mennonite" in what is arguably his very "Mennonite" second novel, *First and Vital Candle* (1966). And, too, during the first decade after the "event," the MB world – with a few exceptions, as we shall see – kept its distance from him. Further – as Hildi Froese Tiessen has suggested to me in conversation – Wiebe might even have been swept up by the widening response to his first novel among younger Mennonite writers who came to rely on his romantic identity as the alienated Joycean artist (also, see note 1 above).

Wiebe now admitted that his negative views of the criticisms that had seemed to betray him had been based on flawed presuppositions and skewed perceptions: for example, that what he too simple-mindedly had taken to be uniquely MB efficiencies to rid the denomination of him as the trouble-making editor of the *Herald* – "when they forced my hand" – were not at all restricted to "classic MB politics" ("Hold" 47, 61). Rather – speaking now as a statesman with experience of the world – he admitted that the church's methods had not really been all that exceptional, but quite common in many situations: "standard political tactics everywhere" ("Hold" 61). So he retracted his criticism of what he now called that "largely venerable, German speaking leadership" ("Hold" 46). Or, to take a second example from his 2016 essay, he admitted now that he had been overly persistent in pin-pointing his Mennonite characters as evil doers: neither Deacon Peter Block nor any other Mennonites had a corner on "racist superiority." "Think," he said, citing the British Empire, of the "deeply Christian" but "ruthlessly brutal" behaviour of others ("Hold" 54). Perhaps these two sets of observations about the Mennonite Brethren were ironic or ambiguous; nonetheless, both were gestures carrying him beyond a single-minded parochialism of the kind that had once entrapped him. And in the process of disclosure Wiebe was enabling and enacting a more complex public self-identity, and a more nuanced relation with his audience.

But much more poignantly, Wiebe spent considerable time in his 2016 essay bringing back into relationship with him two of the iconic leaders of the MB denomination whom he had earlier – even if he had not named them – excoriated: Rev. B.B. Janz (1877–1964), whom he knew well from his days growing up in Coaldale, Alberta; and Rev. H.H. Janzen (1901-75), whom Wiebe identified in his 1987 essay only as the minister "who had officiated at my wedding" ("Skull" 16).

In the two earlier essays, Wiebe had linked portions of Janz's and Janzen's letters to the rogues-galleries of nasty rebukes hurled his way by various letter writers. But now, in a far-reaching and (however belated) reconciliatory act, his recognition of a mellow richness in what he called his "church family" seized his imagination ("Hold" 61). He was now noticing again an expressive intimacy that he once knew – and that once knew him – and that had for over fifty years lain latent and submerged in his thinking. And, strikingly, he seemed now prepared to identify and accept, too, the legitimacy of Janz's and Janzen's anxieties about the problems they felt his novel had caused.

These men now became, in Wiebe's act of homage, honorable figures, "ministers in my church who were truly important in my life" ("Hold" 58; see also 59). He now acknowledged that these men, rising above any pettiness of the day, had clasped him warmly and embraced him unflinchingly in their letters back in 1963, even while with clarity and sorrow they shared with him their efforts to block his novel and mute its effects. Their concern was not only for "peace" in the denomination, but also for what they felt might be the novel's negative effects on others in Canada. The 86-year-old Janz in particular felt that Wiebe had put "the entire Mennonite community" – not just Mennonite Brethren but "all Mennonites" – in a compromised position in the eyes of mainline Canadian readers. Having all his life worked with governments and different Mennonite denominations in Russia, United States, and Canada – most notably as the brilliant architect of the migration of over 20,000 Mennonites to Canada from Russia during the mid-1920s – this church statesman expressed his worry that Wiebe was jeopardizing future immigration for Mennonites into Canada ("Hold" 59). A provocative point: after all, Mennonite immigration into Canada had not always been a sure thing, and, further, Mennonites (portrayed as less than exemplary in Wiebe's novel) had valued their pursuit of exemplary citizenship as a part of their identity and their success. In 1962 questions of their "service to their adopted country" appeared on the inside dust-jacket of Wiebe's book, where M&S intimated that Canadians held high expectations for them.

Wiebe, bringing his text to a pause when he presented it to the Abbotsford gathering, had decided to set the crowd up for his (re)introduction of these two men. Within the structure of "Hold Your Peace," Wiebe – teasing his audience, raising their anticipation – self-consciously prepared the stage for what he led them to expect would be some kind of dramatic revelation. Intervening in his own presentation with dramatic flourish, he playfully made a show of interjecting the word "but" into his text, signalling that something was about to be overturned; something was about to change. "But," he said, approaching the last pages of his essay, changing his tone, his focus, his pace: "There is a very large 'but' here, which the novelist must face. . . . But," he repeated a few lines further, " – let me [get on with] my 'but'" ("Hold" 58). Then, publically reading from their letters to him in a performance of daring intimacy, he revealed a warm MB spirit that he had long chosen to suppress or ignore. In demonstrating how these men reached out to him, how Janz had written Janzen about "our brother" Rudy Wiebe – "*gilt er doch als unser Bruder*" ("he is

known as our brother") ("Hold" 59) – he in effect invited his audience to join him in embracing these fathers of the church, in whom in 2012 he had found anew something deeply congenial to his own spirit and sensibility.

We should note that Wiebe decided to eulogize his first boss, H.F. Klassen, too, an acknowledgment of Klassen's having hired him and having taught him the ropes during his early days at the *Herald* in 1962. Wiebe even took the occasion to confess, now, that his days as editor were too often filled with "errors in judgment" ("Hold" 46). Extraordinarily, in this same essay, Wiebe announced that in 1963 this same Klassen participated in the delegation that approached the Winnipeg *Free Press* to block the planned serialization of *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in the newspaper's *Prairie Farmer* edition ("Hold" 46, 60)! But Wiebe seemed to be ready to let that pass now. He was enacting forgiveness of the kind – as he had confided to Bauman in 1963 – he felt he would be struggling to find. He even made Klassen one of the dedicatees of *Where The Truth Lies*.

If I can pause here to look back to Wiebe's first very public statement about his novel – a sudden burst of joy that came in January 1962 – it becomes easier for us to grasp what he was now remembering as a multi-layered and culturally resilient MB world that had lain all around him in 1962. I am thinking of his announcing his novel in the very first issue of the *Herald* – what supporters and detractors alike thought of as *das neue englische Konferenceblatt* (the new English-language conference magazine) – appearing on 19 January 1962 just weeks after he had signed his contract for it with M&S (with Jack Dueck – a dear MB friend and, like Wiebe, eventually an English professor at Goshen College – serving as his undoubtedly jubilant witness on that 27 November 1961). That January 1962 shout-out to the MB world exuded a sense of Wiebe's deep certitude that his MB "brotherhood" – surely filled with generous and open-minded individuals across Canada and with an expanding cohort of intellectuals, academics, professionals, and artists (particularly musicians) – was at one with him:

> **First Novel to be Published** / "Peace Shall Destroy Many," a novel about the Mennonites from Russia living in Western Canada, will be published in July [sic], 1962 by McClelland and Stewart of Toronto. The author, Rudy Wiebe of Winnipeg, is the newly-appointed editor of the Mennonite Brethren Herald. It is his first novel and one of the first written by a member of the Mennonite Brethren Church to be published by a non-religious publishing house.

> The novel was written while Br. Wiebe was doing graduate work in English at the University of Alberta. It deals realistically with the unique problems Canada presents to immigrants with strong religious convictions. How to express, in a practical way, the love of Christ to one's fellow men is a main theme of the work. What does it mean to be a 'peacemaker'?
>
> Br. Wiebe has had several short stories published. He has travelled extensively in Canada and spent a year in Germany on a Rotary International Fellowship." (emphasis in original; see also Tiessen, "Double" 82 n. 4)

As we can see, the hint of uninhibited rejoicing in January 1962 within the pages of the "brotherhood's" brand-new English-language magazine is unmistakable – though of course the imagined publication date of July 1962 was a bit optimistic, for the novel did not appear until October.

Also, four months after that announcement, in a spirit extending its mellow tone and playfully registering his sense of his growing prominence in the MB world, Wiebe wrote a jocular note to Claire Pratt, senior editor at M&S. Again we sense how fully he believed in lively and coherent support from his MB environment: "Since I am now the editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, whose readers, I am sure (!) will be avid readers of the book, I was wondering if I might have a copy as soon as possible to give to my book reviewer who is most anxious to do a review of it" (RW to CP, 23 May 1962; exclamation mark in original). Wiebe's words in that 1962 announcement to his MB public, as also his lightly-spoken words to Pratt, convey to us his unreserved faith that he felt he was writing "in community," that he felt his MB readers would know implicitly and intuitively that with their "brother" they shared a common task and purpose on this earth.

We might pause, also, to note that his "Hold Your Peace" essay distinguished itself too by recording none of the sharpness of tongue that I find in a piece Wiebe wrote in the *Canadian Mennonite* magazine (11 April 1963) for Mennonite readers after the publication of his novel. There he tersely chastised those seemingly myriad Mennonites – not least the MB English professor from the Mennonite Brethren Bible College who had just reviewed his book – who insisted on casting *Peace Shall Destroy Many* in reductive terms and narrow categories that led them to label it severely and unfairly as a failed religious document (see Tiessen, "Archival" 60–62).

After the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Event

Wiebe's claims of intimacy with and respect for eminent MB figures like Janzen and Janz as he had once known them – and his beckoning for us to imagine his place in a one-time conversational rather than confrontational environment with people such as them – openly invite us to look further at the communal dynamics operating in the MB sphere in which Wiebe worked during the years *before* publication of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, especially between 1958 and 1960.

Elsewhere, I recently made readers aware of supportive gestures expressed toward Wiebe, from people and institutions embedded in the MB ethos, immediately after the publication of his first novel. Those included, not least, strong American overtures that emerged from the contact between Wiebe and philosopher Delbert Wiens, a recent graduate of Yale Divinity School who was then professor at Tabor College, an MB school in Kansas (see Tiessen, "Re-framing" 92-102). Others, ordinary ministers and lay people – including Wiebe's soft-spoken and non-literary working-class father (Tiessen, "Re-framing" 92) – as well as urban-sophisticates, also responded receptively to Wiebe's language. They resisted the voices determined to "condemn" what he had written – those who, as Wiebe once said, "finally wrote (some after months of pressure from constituents about 'Wiebe's dirty book')" ("Hold" 51; "Skull" 16).

For example, a man named George Penner, the lay leader of a tiny MB church on the southern Saskatchewan prairie, was among the lesser-known leaders who supported Wiebe. Returning home in 1963 from MB meetings in Winnipeg of the kind that he liked to attend – where an ordinary churchman like himself could mingle and chat with pastors, missionaries, as well as Bible School and College professors – he revealed to his family that at these meetings conversations were filled with angry complaints about the story and characters in Wiebe's new book. "Slowly and thoughtfully" he reported to his family on what he had witnessed, and (according to his son Wes Penner, remembering that moment) concluded, "I think we need that kind of a book" (WP to PT, 5 Oct. 2017). We find another revelatory example in an intellectual like Victor Vogt, an avowed admirer of Wiebe from the MB community in Vancouver. It happened that Vogt was studying at Goshen Biblical Seminary on the Goshen College campus in 1962-63. And it was he – and not, as I had too-long naively speculated, some stroke of magic – who brought the administration at Goshen College and Wiebe into conversation in April 1963. No magic: just a couple

nudges from Victor Vogt that led to Wiebe's four-year teaching assignment (1963 to 1967) at Goshen College (DG to PT, 23 Aug. 2017; see also Tiessen, "Re-framing" 95, n 90).

An aside: it is telling to note here that for Tabor College, where Wiens and his MB colleagues talked about hiring Wiebe in 1963, Wiebe's bold expression of ideas for church reform symbolized exactly the kind of trouble-making they hoped he might bring to the MB world at Tabor and beyond. At Goshen in Indiana, a "Mennonite" but not an "MB" college, where the dean, Carl Kreider, did hire Wiebe, Wiebe's troubles – and his trouble-making – drew little attention. The difference in reaction reveals to us the extent to which the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* event belonged to a uniquely MB discourse of the day. It was a discourse involving identity and power, critique and transition; it operated forcefully in that historic and cultural moment (see Tiessen, "Re-framing" 95).

Before the *Peace Shall Destroy Many* Event

But more importantly here, it is finally to supportive elements within the MB landscape directly accessible to Wiebe during the late 1950s, well before the seemingly "inevitable explosion" – as Wiebe called it in 1987 – that accompanied the reception of his novel ("Skull" 16), that I want to draw attention. As I have suggested, Wiebe's fresh cues in his "Hold Your Peace" essay authorize our taking notice of those intellectual and spiritual sensibilities that were active within the MB ethos that Wiebe knew while he was busy creating his work.

We know, and as Keith (1981) observed, that there were critical and creative rumblings for denominational change well before 1962, manifest in areas such as a movement into "the world" by MB musicians who at the same time were active also in the church (Tiessen, "Re-framing" 88-90). Further, when Wiebe edited the *Herald* in 1962 to 1963, there were progressive voices speaking to a variety of concerns in readers' letters to the editor ("Hold" 47). We know, too, that the *Herald* carried Wiebe's own "sometimes critical (some said 'unspiritual') editorials" ("Skull" 15), deemed "unspiritual" in part because Wiebe did not adequately wrap them in conventional pieties. Emblematic of those progressive letters and editorials, and anticipating them by a few years, was what was stirring within a group of Mennonite Brethren in Edmonton. Edmonton is where Wiebe was based during the mid-1950s (when he was an undergraduate at the University of Alberta) and again

from 1958 to 1960 (when he was a graduate student). As it happens, too, it was to a later iteration of these very Mennonite Brethren in Edmonton that he would move his church membership permanently in 1967, right after his 1963 to 1967 Goshen sojourn.

It remains little known that in the Edmonton of the late 1950s Wiebe was in weekly conversation with that group of his co-religionists who had moved to the city or the university as professionals or students. They included some who had experienced the Coaldale MB church, the congregation that many assumed provided him with the primary models for his fictional characters ("Skull" 16). Thus, in 1958, precisely when the 23-year-old Wiebe was entering the MA program in English at the University of Alberta to become engaged with members of the graduate program there, he was simultaneously connecting with Mennonite Brethren determined to work toward the very kind of church renewal that he was urging in his novel and would later urge in the *Herald*. He was, in other words, among those Mennonite Brethren who refused to regard themselves as "a special people," as he later put it to Janz, people who could "afford to ignore the needs and the goodness of others, even if they were living right beside them" (RW to BJ, 20 Sept. 1963).

The Edmonton MB conversations were led by another graduate student, Peter Bargen. Bargen, an eloquent thinker and vigorous reformer (and soon to become prominent in the City of Edmonton as CEO), had been Wiebe's high-school principal and English teacher in Coaldale during the early 1950s. (In fact – as became known among participants in those conversations – he was the model for the Joseph Dueck figure in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.) Recalling Wiebe's iconoclastic ruminations about the church during the years 1958 to 1960, Bargen, writing to Hildi Froese Tiessen, described Wiebe as "a 'giant'" in helping to bring stimulating thought to their denominational table.

Not surprisingly, those conversations could not help but veer toward Wiebe's goings-on at the university, where he was working on his *Peace Shall Destroy Many* manuscript. Bargen – with a wink – hinted to Froese Tiessen that this MB group provided for Wiebe's work-in-progress a kind of collaborative oversight: "We gave him all our considered advice and told him exactly the way it should be done." But Bargen quickly admitted that his remark could be taken only so far: "Needless to say, Rudy being Rudy, he did it his way." But perhaps the sensibility of these people was more entwined with the novel than Bargen's droll jesting lets on. When the novel appeared in 1962, these Edmonton folk – who would transform their informal experiment into the more formal Lendrum MB

Church that same year – felt quite at home with it: "[T]here were few surprises," Bargen said, "except, maybe, the razor sharp cutting edge wielded by Rudy. It was a breath of fresh air! No sanitized presentation of reality here!" (PB to HFT, 4 July 2002).

Wiebe dedicated that first novel to "the scattered members of The Coffee Club." These were his fellow graduate students of 1958 to 1960, of course, but they were also, he has insisted, the people of that reform-minded MB group, what he has called "the Lendrum 'founding fathers' of 1958-60" (RW to PT, 4 Aug. 2013). Recently Wiebe further underscored his recognition of these behind-the-scenes collaborators (if I can call them that) by naming their long-time leader, Bargen, a dedicatee of his magisterial volume, *Collected Stories*.

Rudy Wiebe's 2016 enactments of affection for his communal affiliations among Mennonite Brethren of over a half-century before, coupled with (along with much else) his invigorating association with the MB group in Edmonton from 1958 to 1960 when he was writing his novel, encourage us to accept that he had once experienced energizing relationships among a wide range of his religious kin. Without sentimentality or vanity, he has testified to a one-time robust environment that animated the likes of a Bargen and others of the Edmonton "founding fathers," also a Janzen, a Janz, a Klassen and many more – including a Rudy Wiebe. Wiebe has imagined for us a long-ago MB society that for him made up a comprehensible and enlivening whole, filled with strengths and weaknesses. It was a world within which he had written in good faith, a world within which he could not have imagined the mechanics of betrayal that in 1963 were set in motion against him. That vanished world – the loss of which Wiebe has invited us to lament in his 2016 recollection – once provided a home for Wiebe, one in which he worked in "conversation," both implicit and explicit, with its many forceful elements. We see now with new clarity that with his first novel he was writing not only "of" or "to" or (as many have thought) "against" his MB community, but also, as I said earlier in this essay, "in" community. With his "Hold Your Peace" essay he has invited us to join him in a collaborative making of redemptive revisions to a key phase of Mennonite literary history.

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