A Fifty-Year Retrospective of Mennonite Historical Society of Canada

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The 1960s were a pivotal decade of broadening Canadian Mennonite perspectives. In 1963, Canadian Mennonites hosted the Mennonite World Conference in Kitchener, Ontario. That prompted careful reflections on the appropriate stories, experiences and exhibits which would introduce Canadian Mennonites to the global Mennonite world. What was needed, but not available, was a work which tied together the various strands of Canadian Mennonite experiences, beliefs and identities. Also in 1963, numerous denominational Mennonite mutual aid, wartime alternative service and relief, colonization and resettlement organizations were merged to form Mennonite Central Committee Canada. Each agency had its own unique institutional memories, but now it was time to gain a greater understanding of shared values, ideals and practices. Canadian Mennonites were also significantly influenced by national developments. The various celebrations marking the hundredth anniversary of the Canadian confederation and Montreal's Expo 67 generated patriotic enthusiasm and enticed many western Canadians to make a trip to Ottawa, Montreal and other points east. A new flag was adopted, and the federal government's multicultural policies promoted inclusive recognition and respect of Canada's cultural, ethnic, linguistic and religious diversity. Canadians seemed willing to give credence, and perhaps even provide limited

funding, for those willing and able to tell the Canadian Mennonite story.

Early Initiatives

In response to these, and perhaps other challenges, the small Mennonite Historical Societies of Ontario and Manitoba struck a Joint Committee to explore the possibilities of writing a modest one-volume history of Mennonites in Canada. The three key members of that joint committee with whom I subsequently interacted extensively were J. Winfield Fretz, Ontario, Ted Friesen, Manitoba, and Frank Epp, the suggested author of the book.

Shortly after the committee was established Frank Epp contacted his cousin, Abe Willms, Head of the Public Archives Records Centre, and me, Head of the Government Records Section at the Public Archives of Canada. Where, previously, Mennonite historians had relied mainly on Mennonite church, conference, community, family and personal papers, Frank asked us to identify relevant government records and manuscript collections pertaining to Mennonites. Our responses were sufficiently encouraging that Frank and his wife, Helen, accepted a call to become part-time pastors of the small Ottawa Mennonite Fellowship so they could be closer to those archival collections.

The small Joint Committee was also encouraged to broaden the base of support. That happened in several ways. MCC Canada, from the beginning, provided very strong support, including generous financial assistance. All the Mennonite conferences were to be invited and interested persons in the provinces further west were encouraged to established Mennonite historical societies similar to those in Ontario and Manitoba. The new provincial Mennonite historical societies then joined those in Ontario and Manitoba to form the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada (MHSC).

Drafting a constitution for the new national society was very challenging. What constitutional framework could accommodate the provincial societies, several of whom could still make, at best, only nominal financial contributions, MCC Canada which had other priorities but provided generous funding, the various conferences where there was a wide range of participation and support, other smaller or local societies and interested individuals. What accommodation could be made to avoid conflicts with the funding, programming and promotional agendas of other organizations, notably the Mennonite Heritage Village Museum in Steinbach,

Manitoba. I was asked and, being young and foolish, agreed to chair the constitution committee.

There was evidence of much good will by all, but I soon got into serious trouble. At an early annual meeting no consensus could be reached. By late afternoon some delegates with reservations for late afternoon flights home had to leave the meeting. Fortunately wiser men, notably Ted Friesen and Winfield Fretz, suggested a strategy which allowed the work of the society to continue without benefit of a constitution. That left time for further deliberations.

Volume One of the *Mennonites in Canada* Series.

As work on the *Mennonites in Canada* history project proceeded, Frank Epp suggested the appointment of a reading committee consisting of knowledgeable academics and older Mennonite writers, conference, church and community leaders. He asked me to serve as chairperson.

I did not know what to expect from the older church and conference leaders. One sceptic expressed the fear that these older leaders would try to censor what could be included, or ensure that their people received adequate favourable coverage. That simply did not happen even though the history would be written in English when some were still trying very hard to preserve and nurture the German language. Then there was the fact that the author was trained at a secular graduate school where, unlike the emphasis in Russian or North American secondary schools, Bible Schools and Bible Colleges, students were encouraged to subject everything, even matters of faith, to critical scrutiny. And evidence was to be gathered not only from Mennonite but also from governmental and other non-Mennonite sources. What if some unexpected bad things – perhaps the discrediting of a revered leader – were revealed in those non-Mennonite sources? And then there was the decision to place the manuscript with a non-Mennonite secular publishing firm rather than a trusted Mennonite publisher. All of this indicated that a younger generation was driving the new historical enterprise. Older members of the reading committee were, nevertheless, strongly supportive, offering informed and constructive criticism and asking searching questions in non-confrontational ways. I therefore regard it as a great privilege that I got to know and gain a greater appreciation of the contributions by those older members. Several shared candidly their struggles when new circumstances and insights led them to accept what, earlier in their

ministry, they had denounced. The reading committee for volume one thus engaged in successful inter-generational work.

The reading committee was also inter-Mennonite since each of the conferences were invited to name a participant. Specific issues and problems encountered by members of various Mennonite groups differed in detail, but were often rooted in similar fundamental concerns and convictions. I'll cite just one example. In the early years the various Mennonite groups were all concerned about what was generally referred to as worldliness but focused on different issues. Dress codes, technological innovations, secular education, entertainment, evangelistic strategies, forms of abstinence, and participation in co-operative community initiatives with non-Mennonites were problematic in different ways for various Mennonite groups. These were often regarded as markers of a separate Christian Mennonite identity, but there seemed to be pressure everywhere to modify or abandon them.

On the academic side, the reading committee was clearly inter-disciplinary with historians comparing notes with theologians, economists, sociologists, geographers, creative writers and poets. The inter-disciplinary approach was further strengthened when, after the publication of the first volume, multi-cultural funding was obtained to bring together, at St. Micheal's College of the University of Toronto, academics reporting on the state of Mennonite Studies in each of their disciplines. Those papers were subsequently published in the first issue of the now highly respected Journal of Mennonite Studies.

It was, at least for me, an exceptionally rewarding experience to share ideas, insights and information relevant to the history of Mennonites in Canada with members of such a diverse inter-generational, inter-Mennonite, and inter-disciplinary reading committee.

The most vigorously debated issue, particularly with reference to volumes one and three was whether there was a unifying theme tying together the various strands of Mennonite history. Frank Epp's early chapters focused quite explicitly on the theme of separation in early Anabaptist and Mennonite history and that eventually became the book's subtitle. *The History of a Separate People.* As the work proceeded, however, both the obvious markers of separation and "worldliness," were modified or abandoned. It became clear that Mennonite separation was never complete, and it underwent rapid erosion, even before 1920.

In retrospect, and in light of the context of the 1960s and early 1970s when the first volume was written, I think the review written by Senator Paul Yuzik, one of Canada's ardent promoters of multi-

culturalism, describes volume I better than the book's sub-title. He wrote: "Thanks to the growing interest of the Canadian people stemming from the recognition and implementation of an official multiculturalism policy, and thanks to the scholarship of such able men as Professor Epp. There is a growing appreciation of Mennonite Canadian co-builders of the new Canada now emerging." Were Canadian Mennonites a separate people before 1920? or were they co-builders of a multicultural Canada? Volume One, in my opinion, added much colour and structure to the Mennonite patch or patches firmly stitched into the Canadian multicultural mosaic.

Creating Volumes Two and Three

The dominant theme and hence the subtitle of Volume Two was easier to define. The desperate plight of Mennonites in Russia, including those who were able to emigrate to Canada, and the economic disaster of the Great Depression of the 1930s made the 1920s and 1930s a time when Mennonites were engaged in a difficult struggle for survival.

After the publication of Volume Two, Frank Epp and I talked of working together on the third and possibly a fourth volume. A possible title for the third volume was "The End of Separation." But that seemed to be too negative. If, indeed, a salient feature of Mennonite life ended, what followed?

My earliest approach after accepting responsibility for the writing of Volume Three in 1986 after Frank Epp's death, could be compared to that of Stephen Leacock's noble knight who, in a burst of enthusiasm, jumped on his horse and rode madly off in all directions. And I can assure you that archival and library research and computers can take anyone in even more directions than a horse.

In the search for direction, I benefitted greatly from responses by members of the reading committee chaired by Sam Steiner. I was also able to test some of my ideas at conference presentations and in journal and periodical publications. I also had the benefit of research assistance, notably by Marlene Epp and Paul Regehr, and the unwavering support of directors and members of the MHSC. The spectacular launchings of the book by the national and provincial societies, two with lieutenant governors in attendance, were, at least for me, the high-water mark of a shared endeavour.

The wartime experiences were critically important for the theme of Volume Three. When the war broke out, the majority of Canadian Mennonites still lived in rural agricultural communities with many small, mixed, labour intensive farms. During, and more

rapidly after the war, mechanization drastically reduced manual labour requirements and increased the capital costs of farming operations. I am old enough to have pitched grain bundles with a twenty member threshing crew, but later, on a summer job, I also operated a large combine which harvested grain in wide 40 foot swaths more quickly than any twenty member threshing crew. Our twenty-three-acre family farm was much too small and too diverse to justify the purchase of any of the new machinery, so it took weeks of hard work by all available family members to harvest what a new sugar beet topper could harvest in a day. Mechanization also made the dairy, poultry, livestock and haying operations of our small mixed farm obsolete.

A special task force was commissioned by the Mennonite Central Committee to devise strategies for new agricultural settlements for returning alternative service workers and other Mennonite young people. It offered no viable plan of action. Instead, Canadian Mennonites whose ancestors had sought religious freedom and a livelihood on a succession of open agricultural frontiers began to move back into the cities in search of gainful employment, business, educational and professional opportunities. On the dust cover of one of his books Walter Quiring had a picture of a migrant family in a horse-drawn buggy leaving for an open frontier. With Quiring's permission I used that image, but showed the migrant returning to the city to illustrate the dominant theme of the book.

At the 1996 conference at the University of Winnipeg where academics reviewed Volume Three, Ross McCormack chose as the title of his presentation, "Mainstreaming Mennonites." The transition from a rural agricultural orientation to accommodation in a mechanized, industrialized, urban, secular environment changed and weakened some, but strengthening other, aspects of a Canadian Anabaptist/Mennonite identify. Thus, the foci of Mennonite historiography have shifted from separateness to a place in a multi-cultural Canadian mosaic to participation in the mainstreams of many aspects of Canadian life.

Divergent Voices in a Global Context

The Divergent Voices and Transnational Studies today advance the discussion in numerous ways. First, thanks to advances in digital technology and social media, these studies give voice and credence to people whose stories were not well documented in tra-

ditional archives, or were ignored by older historians because they did not fit their interpretive frameworks.

The more recent historical writing is also global. The work of older histories had a more parochial or nationalist orientation. I congratulate the. younger generation of historians who are enriching our historiography by including in their work information and insights based on social media and globalization perspectives, and look forward to the new work to be highlighted in this fiftieth anniversary conference of MHSC.

In conclusion, I simply want to congratulate all those who, over the span of fifty years, have built MHSC into a strong and vibrant organization which few of us could have even imagined in 1968.