Werner Toews, *Sketches from Siberia: The Life of Jacob D. Sudermann*. Self-published, 2018. Pp. 153. Softcover, $29.95.

The book *Sketches from Siberia*, by Werner Toews, follows the life of Jacob Sudermann, a talented painter and architect who was sent to the Soviet Gulag. As the seventh son of a wealthy landowner, Jacob had an abundance of opportunities, including attending school in Ekaterinoslav and university in Switzerland before continuing his studies in St. Petersburg. With the uncertainty of the war, Jacob decided to pursue his backup vocation as a teacher, returning to Chortitza to work at the Zentralschule.

After the upheaval of the First World War and the chaos of the Civil War, Jacob returned to teaching. He settled in Osterwick for a short spell and then moved back to Chortitza for a job teaching physics and drawing at the teachers' college. Under the new Soviet state, Jacob found himself in a difficult predicament, which the secret police (OGPU) quickly exploited. As the son of a former landowner, he had a tainted social background; yet he had to make a living now that the family fortunes had fallen. Therefore, it is not surprising that the OGPU chose to pressure him to become their informant in the school. Jacob attempted to circumvent these circumstances by keeping his report positive about the school and his colleagues. To extricate himself from this dilemma, Jacob left the college to teach in Dnipropetrovsk. He eventually returned to Chortitza to teach again, only to be arrested in 1933. After being held for five months at the Zaporozh'e prison, Jacob was released, only to be re-arrested at the beginning of 1934 and sentenced to five years in the Gulag for a fictitious plot to explode the Dnepro hydroelectric dam.

In the first part of the book, Toews provides a general overview of Jacob's life; the second half consists of letters that Jacob wrote to his brother Heinrich from the Baikal-Amur Corrective Labour Camp in Siberia from 1934 to 1937. The letters, originally written in Russian, were translated to German and then English. Jacob preferred letters in the Russian language, as they stayed for shorter periods of time with the censor. In these letters from the Gulag, he gives only small glimpses of his life as a prisoner: his hopes for a reduction in his sentence, his struggles with his health, his successes and failures in relation to his work. While he does not reveal too much of his circumstances, Jacob offered his opinion on family matters and inquired about the people he left behind in Ukraine.

A strength of this book is the reproduction of Jacob's exquisite sketches, paintings, and photographs. Before his arrest, Jacob

produced detailed water-coloured landscapes of south Ukraine as well as photographing family members and the Chortitza Mennonite Church. Even after his exile to the Gulag, Jacob continued to send his family paintings and sketches based on his memories of home and his new surroundings at the camp.

Toews's retelling of Jacob's story fits into a tradition within Mennonite historiography of producing microhistories featuring translated letters. Like other Mennonite letter collections from the Gulag, the writings of Jacob Sudermann reveal the familial connections that survived the arrest and deportation of loved ones. Toews's book adds a valuable contribution to this literature.

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David Moon, *The American Steppes: The Unexpected Russian Roots of Great Plains Agriculture, 1870s–1930s*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020. Pp. 432. Hardcover, $137.95.

The thesis of this book lies in the single word "unexpected" in its subtitle. David Moon is a leading environmental historian from the University of York in the United Kingdom and he brings his expertise in Russian agricultural history, most recently apparent in his *The Plough that Broke the Steppe*, across the ocean to the United States. His argument is simply that the scientific community in Russia was far further advanced and sophisticated than a casual understanding of the development of agronomy might suggest and that it was much more instrumental in shaping the United States Department of Agriculture's policies than a US-centric perspective of the world would indicate. Indeed, the concept "transnational" (even though he refers to the simple word "transfer") aptly applies to this agricultural history, an indication that much of it is still packaged in decidedly nation-centric perspectives. Here is a double surprise: first, a corpus of Russian experts, most notably the famous Vasilii Dokuchaev, produced a sophisticated understanding of soil science, one which cast soil as linked to its parent materials in the various zones underneath the top soil, and then shaped over millennia by other factors of climate, organic material, precipitation, sunlight, etc.; second, that the US, despite its intersecting axis of rising temperatures from north to south and decreased precipitation rates from east to west, making it different from Russia with its more