

Book Reviews

History and Social Science Reviews

Royden Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers: A Global History of Place and Sustainability*. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021. Pp. x + 336. Softcover, \$31.95.

Royden Loewen's *Mennonite Farmers* is a global environmental history of seven Mennonite farming communities in the Netherlands, United States, Canada, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Russia, and Bolivia. He argues that local histories, adaptations to modernization, and contemporary practices of Mennonite farming communities provide insight into the impact of agricultural development around the world. He does this by combining oral history and comparative analysis to see how planetary phenomena manifests in small agrarian collectives as well as how each one uniquely responds. Local culture, colonial context, and particularity of place form the interpretive matrix as the basis of comparison. Loewen's history also has a normative component as he draws together these stories to address the question "how can we steward the earth, enjoy our roles as cohabitants of it, and continue eating in health-giving ways?" (12). The answer lies in the way this narrative gives meaning to the idea of sustainability.

The first two chapters give an overview of the seven communities. Chapter 1 focuses on Northern jurisdictions: Friesland, Iowa, Manitoba, and Siberia. Environmental adaptation here has been for more than just maintaining the community's faith and sustenance over time, it has also been the way they merged their religious aspirations with the state's political aims; Mennonite purposes and the

state's colonial objectives fit hand in glove. Chapter 2 turns to the South: Java, Matabeleland, and Santa Cruz. The colonial dynamics here have very different legal contexts. "In none of the three places in the Global South was agriculture directly controlled by a colonial power" (47). Often the colonizer has had to trust local knowledge because of drastic ecological conditions.

Chapter 3 tracks the process of modernization through local changes in agriculture. Each community has moved at a different pace, in different ways. In Iowa, "Mennonites walked in lockstep" (80) along the pathway of industrial agriculture; in Matabeleland, "technological advancement was very slow and certainly inhibited" (113).

Chapter 4 articulates the connection between religion and land. Mennonites developed local cultures in each place but because they emerged from farming practices rather than theological ideas, the religious links between farmers and the land are found at the "local level" rather than universal "moralisms" (118). Thus, there is no one Mennonite way to link people and place through land-use practices.

Chapter 5 homes in on women's participation in farming, specifically how patriarchal forces shape their life on the land. Chapter 6 identifies the role of the state in farming communities. Political sensibilities and economic productivity generate attitudes toward the state far more than Mennonite faith or tradition.

Chapter 7 shows how farmers incorporate the language of climate change into their perspective on the land. It turns out that climate change denial has less to do with religious beliefs or lack of scientific sensibilities and far more to do with levels of economic vulnerability. Chapter 8 looks at how each community connects to global networks through migration patterns, exporting technological expertise, selling agricultural commodities, or receiving international aid.

Both the strength and weakness of the book shine through in its concluding suggestion that Mennonite farmers' "commitment to community" informs their ideas of sustainability (268). Loewen's insight, which addresses his guiding normative question quoted above, is that this commitment is demonstrated in the "value of circumscribed farm size and a celebration of restraint and contentment," which is expressed differently in each place. But because these Mennonites' faith is in the everyday routines of farming, agricultural communities as the social form for preserving tradition are tied to interactions of land use and food production. The upshot for readers is a pragmatic approach to local ecological problems by connecting faith and land based on both local landscape and traditions. This outcome brings me to one area under-analyzed in the book:

theories of religious environmentalism. The notion of stewardship that frames Loewen's history is itself the product of a particular faith tradition, one that takes root in Christian and settler contexts. As Loewen's own environmental history shows readers, even Mennonite commitments to community have developed in different religious and colonial conditions. These developments shaped both their faith and their agriculture, which means they shaped how Mennonites imagine and practice community. Nevertheless, the conclusion is salient for Mennonite environmentalists: just as community informs a Mennonite land ethic so too agriculture preserves faith—it's just that the idea of community itself as a religious commitment is also contingent on local contexts.

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Aileen E. Friesen, *Colonizing Russia's Promised Land: Orthodoxy and Community on the Siberian Steppe*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020. Pp. xiv + 224. Hardcover, \$68.

Aileen Friesen's book explores the contributions made by Russian Orthodox settlers to the cultural transformation of Siberia into an integrated part of the Russian empire in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (147). Between 1858 and 1911, the non-indigenous population of Siberia grew from over two million to over eight million (7). Friesen demonstrates the role that the Orthodox faith played amid this great demographic shift as settlers interacted with church and state authorities in the colonial enterprise.

The archival sources for this project include documents from the files of the Holy Synod and the office of its chief procurator, the files of the Siberian Railway Committee and the Resettlement Administration, the Omsk diocesan consistory papers, and the personal papers of Ioann Vostorgov, an archpriest who actively promoted the strengthening of Orthodox communities in Siberia. The published materials also draw from the imperial centre and the periphery, including Orthodox journals on missionary work and the *Omsk Diocesan News*. In her analysis of all these sources, the author seeks to illuminate the "voices of settlers" (11).

In the first chapter, Friesen identifies a shift in the Russian Orthodox Church's mission as it "transitioned from converting local indigenous populations to being preoccupied with the religious