

A Retirement Tribute to Dr. Marlene Epp

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The co-directors of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg have asked me to pen a tribute to Dr. Marlene Epp upon her recent retirement as Professor of History and Peace and Conflict Studies at Conrad Grebel University College. It is a task I take on gladly as Marlene, despite the long distance between Ontario and Manitoba, has been a tremendous support to the Mennonite Studies program in Winnipeg. She has participated in many conferences—from forums on the “Soviet Inferno” and “EnGendering the Past” in the late 1990s, to the 2018



“A People of Diversity” conference, at which she presented the keynote address, “Cookbook as Metaphor.” There were other conferences in between, including the 2010 “Germans of Siberia” conference, a collaborative effort at Omsk, and one of the most insightful of all these conferences, the “Ex-Mennonite/Near Mennonite” event in 2014. She served on the planning committees of a number of these conferences and invited our collaboration on the “Family and Sexuality” conference at Grebel in 2007. Of course, all this means she also published papers in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, served

often as adjudicator for such papers, and provided insightful guidance as a member of the Divergent Voices of Canadian Mennonite committee that vetted MCC funding for a number of these conferences.

Marlene has not only been a support to our program, but has also shaped the way we, as Mennonite historians, have considered our craft. As a professor of Mennonite and peace history, rooted at a Mennonite college enmeshed in the program at the University of Waterloo, a leading Canadian university, Marlene held a position from which she could shape Mennonite historiography. Not only was her work invariably well researched and lucidly presented, it was also innovative. Indeed, she was one of the “youngsters” in the 1980s and ’90s, a generation restless to test out the promise of social history to counter the institutional and theological insights of earlier generations of historians. One of her very first full-length published articles, “The Mennonite Girls’ Home of Winnipeg,” published in *JMS* in 1988, put women’s history on the agenda in a bold way, while another early piece, “Canadian Women as COs in World War II,” added the distinct layer of gender as culturally constructed and, in particular, as interwoven with the Mennonite commitment to peace in an assimilating world.

Marlene’s first monograph, *Women without Men*, published in 2000, not only expounded on these themes but even more explicitly theorized our understanding of Mennonite gendered history, especially as it related to ideas of power and materiality. It further showed that historical enquiry and justice were linked, especially as regards the vulnerability of refugees in the fog of war. Along the way, Marlene extended her gendered analysis to other sectors of Mennonite history. The 1999 piece “Heroes or Yellow-Bellies?” for example, introduced the malleability of masculinity among conscientious objectors in a militaristic society. Then the 2001 piece “Pioneers, Refugees, Exiles, and Transnationals” allowed us to see the process of gendered construction among four disparate groups of women. These strands were expanded on in her second monograph, *Mennonite Women in Canada*, published in 2008. Judged by the fact that it was the most popular book in the University of Manitoba’s Studies in Immigration and Culture series, the book made a significant impact. Certainly many readers appreciated Marlene’s mission to address a gaping hole in Canadian Mennonite history, namely that of women, and her ambition to report on the diversity of everyday experience in the breadth of the Canadian Mennonite world. But this work, as other pieces, exuded theoretical insight, including the idea of boundary crossings between sectarian purpose and larger social forces.

Marlene's contribution to Mennonite history was also marked by the ironic twist that much of it was actually not meant for Mennonites. Indeed, her evolving work increasingly intersected with the wider Canadian historiography, allowing for sustained cross-fertilization. Her key role as editor of two other book-length works, *Sisters or Strangers?* in 2006 and *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics* in 2012, for example, allowed Marlene to not only share the story of the material conditions of Mennonite women—whether as cooks, mothers, or midwives—with a wider readership of multicultural Canada, but also to be challenged by leading Canadian scholars whose ethnic and class backgrounds differed markedly from those of most Mennonites. This turn also took Marlene into ever more theoretical directions, be it in linguistic analysis as demonstrated in “The Semiotics of Zwieback” or in a growing sensitivity to issues of race and colonialism, as seen especially in her role as senior editor of the Canadian Historical Association's *Immigration and Ethnicity in Canada* booklet series.

Even as this broad engagement made its impact, Marlene demonstrated the necessity of reaching beyond the strict bounds of academia back to the local. In exemplary fashion Marlene has offered blogs on the topics of global refugees, inter-religious toleration, and gender equality, at the same time publishing shorter popular pieces for the *Ontario Mennonite History* newsletter.

Of course, beyond scholarship Marlene made an impact in administration and teaching, serving as academic dean at Grebel and as professor. Of particular note, Grebel's website quotes Marlene as stating that “every student has a story, . . . [a] life experience they bring to the classroom,” a worthy concern for both dean and teacher. In one of her recent blogs, Marlene references a family cottage in the heart of “Mennonite country” in rural Wellington County, a place of continued epiphany and “unlearning” even at this stage in her career. It seems we will be hearing more from Marlene in the future. In the meantime, here is a note of gratitude for the corpus of innovative and reflective work to date, a canon that has left a distinguished mark on a generation of Mennonite history.