

Book Reviews

History and Social Science Reviews

Steve Heinrichs and Esther Epp-Tiessen, eds., *Be It Resolved: Anabaptists & Partner Coalitions Advocate for Indigenous Justice, 1966–2020*. Winnipeg: Mennonite Central Committee Canada and Mennonite Church Canada, 2020. Pp. xv + 449. Softcover, free from CommonWord.

Be It Resolved is a primary source collection, an educational resource, a call to action for justice and reconciliation, a guide to contemplation and conversation, and a memorial of Anabaptist and Indigenous voices in time and place. There is a lot to absorb here, and for that reason alone it deserves a place on Mennonite bookshelves everywhere.

The volume, a co-publication of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Central Committee Canada, was ably edited by Steve Heinrichs and Esther Epp-Tiessen. Designer Matt Veith is to be commended for creating a visually invitational and tactile book; the reader literally feels the weight of over fifty years of primarily Canadian Mennonite testimonies and promises. This book could have easily been conceived of as a digital-only project, but perhaps then its call compelling Mennonites to “turn those words into works” (vi) would not have the same visceral impact.

The primary source material forming the bulk of the content is contextualized in several ways. The book opens with a poetic invocation to “breathe life and relations . . . into these fragile and holy words.” In an afterword, two Anabaptist leaders call for a “deeper

reconciliation” that can only happen once we (Mennonites) can understand how these documents have shown “both our deep and prayerful wrestling, as well as the profound ways we were shaped by a dominant culture” (405). A study and action guide, a scriptural index, and a reading list also support engagement with the text. Maskayko community leader and United Church minister Stan McKay is an apt choice to bring the foreword (“Forward Again”) because of his long engagement with Mennonite church institutions attempting to move away from “colonial assumptions that hold the broader Mennonite community captive” (ii).

Ninety documents arranged chronologically from 1966 to 2020 form the core of the book. Nearly each one is introduced individually by a brief context-setting note from the editors. To counter the preponderance of settler voices, contemporary quotes from Indigenous people are interleaved between the documents. The documents themselves, selected from Mennonite archives and the working files of Mennonite, Anabaptist, and ecumenical organizations, are in the form of conference resolutions, communiques, inquiry testimonies, advocacy letters, and position papers.

The collection focuses predominantly on the Canadian context, with Mennonite Church Canada (and its predecessor and related conferences) and Mennonite Central Committee Canada (and its related MCCs) forming more than two thirds of the sources. A smaller, third group of sources belong to ecumenical organizations of which Mennonite institutions have been a part, mainly Project North and its successors (Aboriginal Rights Coalition and KAIROS), and Christian Peacemaker Teams (or CPT, now Community Peacemaker Teams). As Ruth Plett observes in her introduction, these ecumenical partners have been necessary for “work best not done in isolation” (vii). The growing presence of ecumenical and shared statements in the chronological progression of the book perhaps speaks also to the fragmentation of a confident and “resolved” singular Mennonite witness on these matters (if indeed one ever existed).

The editors, despite the title, do not focus only on conference resolutions. They also present in their entirety lengthy and detailed documents such as submissions to Manitoba’s Aboriginal Justice Inquiry (1988) or an urgent communique from CPT on the situation at Esgenoôpetitj (Burnt Church) (2000). These documents take readers into the immediacy of the inquiry room or protest site as only primary sources can. The chronological (as opposed to thematic) presentation allows readers to reflect on changes over time, and to consider new perspectives on headline-grabbing crisis points in Indigenous-settler relations throughout the last half century.

Be It Resolved stimulates questions about audience, then and now. No doubt, many readers will be encountering these documents for the first time. Even the compilers, veteran Mennonite church workers, asked themselves “How didn’t we know this vital history, these sacred promises?” (vi). One of the most radical documents chosen for the book is a litany of confession spoken at the Conference of Mennonites in Canada sessions in 1970. The litany was prepared by Mennonite Pioneer Mission (now Indigenous Relations) staff and read in the presence of Indigenous representatives. Delegates were prompted to respond “Forgive us, Lord!” and “We are ashamed, Lord!” as the leader iterated reasons for penance (reasons that may also hold up fifty years later): for not listening to Indigenous voices, for judgmental attitudes and actions, for placing the program of missions above relationships, for siding with government and industry, for ignoring Indigenous histories, and for presuming that missionaries were the only carriers of God’s truth (17–19). The confession was first printed in 1970 in the conference organ (the *Bulletin*), but did Canadian Mennonites “back home” at the time read it and wrestle with its implications?

Will *Be It Resolved* be read today? The included study guide, if followed carefully, requires a significant commitment from the general reader. There are gaps in its presentation of the history of Indigenous-Mennonite encounter that are beyond the scope and format of this book to bridge. Yet *Be It Resolved* has the capacity to inspire both humility and curiosity (two qualities essential for contemplating the past), and goes beyond the origin stories of Indigenous-Mennonite encounter in “pioneer days” to acknowledge the presence of a living history that matters deeply, and is still unfolding.

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Leonard G. Friesen, *Mennonites in the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union: Through Much Tribulation*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2022. Pp. xviii + 401. Softcover, \$42.95.

Leonard Friesen’s latest monograph is an important contribution to Mennonite historiography. It is the first history to follow Mennonites from their initial steps in imperial Russia to the end of the Soviet Union. Friesen skillfully re-envisages Mennonite history “in light of