

# Book Reviews

*Hymnal. A Workshop Book.* Published by Churches in the Believers Church Tradition (Brethren Press, Faith and Life Press: Mennonite Publishing House, 1992).

At a time in the history of the Mennonite church when some believe that hymn books are a thing of the past and should be “dispensed with” in favor of overhead projections and choruses it may be well to consider briefly the appearance of a substantial new hymn book and its prospects.

The Anabaptist movement began to an accompaniment of hymns, some written by early martyrs and some about them, some in dungeons and prisons. They are our earliest literature, telling us in experiential language why and how our forebears chose the path they did. In later centuries great efforts were put into the collection of musical literature, for example in Russia and the Soviet Union, when words and music were laboriously copied by hand (in *Ziffern*) along with other religious literature. In Germany whole congregations broke away from the state church and became separatists when a new hymn book was imposed on them which included “rationalistic” songs. Nowadays, some congregations appear to feel that song books get in the way, preventing the clapping of hands and other gestures that might be part of their worship.

In view of such developments it is understandable to see, on the other hand, a retrenchment and reluctance to accept a new hymn book which presumably will try to respond to new realities. This and other concerns have no doubt occupied the committee which labored for eight years to produce the book which is now being introduced to local congregations. This reviewer attended a service at which Marilyn Houser-Hamm, one of the editors, put the congregation through the paces and rhythms of this book, demonstrating its range and depth. Not only does it introduce church members to some new musical flavors (for ex. Spanish), but it

also reaches back to several of the rich Russian harmonies (chants), while maintaining a strong collection of the mainline hymns and *Kernlieder* to which we are accustomed.

Without venturing any detailed judgement, either on musicological or historical grounds, it may be surmised that the selection is extensive enough to be inclusive of the good and best, and the hope expressed that it will be allowed to serve as the rich repository that it is and help to keep alive and rekindle important spiritual links with our past and with each other.

Victor G. Doerksen  
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Walter Klaassen, "*The Days of Our Years.*" *A History of the Eigenheim Mennonite Church Community: 1892-1992* (Rosthern, Sask.: Eigenheim Mennonite Church, 1992). Hardcover, 312 pp.

After *Days of Our Years* congregational histories will be measured against Walter Klaassen's book. This congregational history is a model of the best historical writing. It is well researched in every detail yet comprehensive in scope. It is focussed yet cast against the wider background of Canadian history. The author is objectively sympathetic toward his subject and the people he portrays, yet he is critical, even prophetic, in his analysis of congregational failings and human foibles.

In this history Klaassen has done what no other Mennonite congregational historian has ever dared to do. He begins by placing Eigenheim and its geographical location within the immense Canadian plains, explaining how these plains were fashioned over millions of years from pre-historic geological conditions to the present grain belt of the Canadian West. The author then dwells on the native people who had lived here "for at least 300 generations as compared to our three" (p. 2). Klaassen observes: "It is our human and certainly our Christian obligation to acknowledge our debt to them" (p. 2).

In reflecting on the religious faith of the native people, the author expresses tolerance and charity. "The Sun Dance was for the Cree what the Lord's Supper is for Christians....God was worshipped therefore, not only by our ancestors in Europe, but also, before we came, on the very ground on which our church now stands. Our worship of the One God is therefore in continuity not only with our Mennonite and Catholic past, but also with that of the native people who were here before us" (p. 6).

This is not a narrowly-written congregational history. The fourteen chapters deal with the early beginnings of the Mennonite community in Saskatchewan, the

social and economic difficulties of the pioneers, the organization and development of congregational life, the good and the bad years, including the Depression of the 1930s, politics, the periods of wars, and the more recent "changing times." By means of text and numerous well-produced photographs, we witness the joys and sorrows of the Eigenheim congregation and community, including funerals, weddings and many other events.

Klaassen, who himself was a member of the Eigenheim congregation, is not afraid to express criticism where he deems it necessary. The "women in the church" issue, for example, is dealt with frankly and honestly. The author observes: "The non-existence to which women were assigned in Eigenheim meant that at least half of the potential for the spirituality and work of the church was deliberately condemned to nothingness or at best consigned to a ghetto. It was an impoverishment for the church which we have recognized only relatively recently" (p.115).

In a section titled "Eigenheim and the World" (pp. 178-81), the author shows how this small church and community supported and participated in various mutual aid projects and organizations, including Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Mennonite Disaster Service (MDS), and such causes as helping refugees from war-torn Central America.

The Eigenheim Mennonite Church, which last year celebrated its hundredth anniversary, is to be commended not only for commissioning one of its distinguished sons to write their history but also for giving him a free hand to write and interpret the story according to his best insights. Also, the Church is to be congratulated for sparing no expense to produce a most beautiful book. This is not just Eigenheim's story. It is in many ways the story of Mennonites throughout western Canada.

Harry Loewen  
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Harry Loewen, *No Permanent City. Stories from Mennonite History and Life* (Waterloo/Scottdale: Herald Press, 1993). Paperback, 224 pp., \$12.50.

Professor Harry Loewen, the founding holder of the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, has told many a Mennonite tale as part of his vocation at the university and in the wider community. In this attractive paperback he now makes forty-five stories from Mennonite history available to an even wider audience. This readership will appreciate the fact that Harry Loewen presents himself here in the first place as a story teller, and not primarily as a historian or scholar, and that the stories, taken from a number of sources, are all told in a

simple—if anything then somewhat understated—style, free both of footnotes and purple passages. The sources are listed at the back of the book, and Loewen usually indicates at the outset whether he is telling his own tale or that of another.

With the whole historic and geographic range to choose from, Loewen has selected a representative sampling which in its own way takes the reader through the story, if not the history, of the Mennonite tradition. Some of the tales have been well-known, but readers will generally not be familiar with most of these vignettes, which depict the life experiences of Mennonite people from the Reformation time to our own. The volume follows a more or less chronological course, beginning in Zollikon, Switzerland, in 1525 with the disruptive Georg Blaurock and the first baptismal service, and continuing with the story of the emergence of Menno Simons as a leader of the Dutch Anabaptist movement. But the stories do not stay only with “leaders”; we are introduced to a host of lesser known figures whose experiences contribute to the larger story.

These narratives are less “stories” in a literary sense of the word, than episodic recapitulations of events which have been the object of historical study for some time and about which there are sometimes points of controversy. Loewen is not concerned here with fine points of historiography though, which is just as well in a popular book of this kind, but this choice does entail considerable shortcuts through the historical landscape. In the circumstances this is a wise choice, which prevents any of the narratives from bogging down in disputed questions or simply in the detail of history.

Many of these texts are in fact vignettes, some of them very short, of Mennonite life, whether in the sixteenth or twentieth centuries, and it is instructive for the reader to see how much things stay the same in spite of the passage of time. The early tale, “The Little Swan of Emden,” deals with marital problems; others with the several sides of the question of refusal of military service, and the ban, to name just several examples. And though the locales shift from the Low Countries to Prussia and Russia, from Switzerland to the Palatinate and the New World, the stories have many common themes which exemplify the common denominators of the Anabaptist tradition. Of course the historian Harry Loewen, who is interested in these commonalities, has something to do with the fact that such themes weave their way as leitmotifs throughout this collection. The teacher Harry Loewen from time to time comments on lessons learned or not learned.

By publishing this volume in an inexpensive though attractive, illustrated paperback format (Canadian \$12.50), Herald Press has made this rich assortment of life vignettes available to a wide audience. Harry Loewen has succeeded here in presenting highly digestible chunks of Mennonite history in a format which imparts a great deal of information and insight—some sad, some humorous and often thought-provoking—for the enrichment of the reader.

Victor G. Doerksen  
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*A Mennonite in Russia. The Diaries of Jacob D. Epp 1851-1880.* Translated and edited by Harvey L. Dyck (Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 1991). Hardcover, 456 pp., \$60.00.

In recent years our knowledge of the Russian Mennonites has been enhanced by the publication of diaries and letters written by ordinary Russian Mennonites. Thus Dietrich Neufeld's journal *A Russian Dance of Death*, translated by Al Reimer, portrays vividly and starkly the terror Mennonites experienced after World War I, and *Letters from Susan: A Woman's View of the Russian Mennonite Experience (1928 -1941)*, translated by John B. Toews, shows how a perceptive young woman viewed the crumbling Mennonite world around her.

Harvey L. Dyck's translation of the diaries of Jacob. D. Epp, farmer, lay minister, school teacher, village secretary, husband and father, introduces us to the Russian-Mennonite world as it existed in the nineteenth century. In the collective memory of Russian Mennonites and some of their writers this world has been depicted as whole, tranquil, beautiful and as "for ever summer." However, Epp's diaries portray an altogether different society, a society which was not only quite ordinary but also one filled with struggles, poverty, fear, as well as the joys and sorrow of daily living.

Epp's diaries overflow with details of life all around him. Family and village life, church and community activities, the rhythm of the seasons, weddings, births and dying—all are part of the diarist's experiences. Trips to markets, visits to other Mennonite settlements, a memorable steam voyage to the town of Odessa on the Black Sea occasionally break the routine of settlement life.

Within this humdrum existence there is evidence indicating that not all was well in this so-called Mennonite Commonwealth. There was community strife over landlessness. There was the disappointment, the demands and the hope of the poor among the Mennonites. There was religious dissent and division over church practices and the loss of traditional values and faith. There was anguish over moral problems, including sexual deviations and abuse. And there was the fear of those who felt that Russia was no longer a safe place for the followers of Menno. Some saw America as their future home. Epp did not emigrate, believing that his place was among his people in Russia whom he sought to serve to the end of his life. After Epp's death his family left for Saskatchewan, Canada.

Of special interest in this book is the description of the "Judenplan," some six Jewish settlements west of the Chortitza colony. Mennonite families were placed in these villages to model for the Jewish people the Mennonite way of life and farming. The Epps were one such "model." The reader thus gains valuable insights into Mennonite-Jewish relations and problems, something that has not been written about much before.

Harvey Dyck's extensive Introduction (pp. 3-74) provides a summary and analysis of Russian-Mennonite history. While the Mennonite historian will not find much new material here, the general reader will find this historical overview most helpful in understanding the forces that shaped and drove Epp's community.

Dyck's prose is flowing and clear, and his translation, rendered in a fine English idiom, is accurate and well written. The copious notes to the Introduction and the diaries are most helpful both to the general reader and to the scholar who wishes to delve deeper into Russian-Mennonite history. The book is richly illustrated with maps, black-and-white photographs, and water-color paintings by Cornelius Hildebrandt, Jacob Epp's former village pupil. There is a useful subject and name index.

The price at \$60.00 is no doubt steep, especially for college and university students. But libraries should not hesitate to purchase this valuable book. And for the Mennonite historian Dyck's translation is a must.

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Horst Gerlach, *Die Russlandmennoniten. Ein Volk unterwegs* (Kirchheimbolanden, Germany: 1992). Hardcover, 128 pp.

There is a need, especially because of the deprivation of educational and religious opportunities for Mennonites in the former Soviet Union, for a German language survey of the history of the Mennonites in Russia. Horst Gerlach has attempted to meet this need with this illustrated book. In his foreword he acknowledges that in this short book not everything could be treated thoroughly and that some things are covered in detail, others only in review and for several things nothing at all is said.

Gerlach has brought together accounts from various sources and some interpretive comments in a mixed topical and chronological order. He frequently connects longer extracts from previous publications such as memoirs and local histories. There are also digressions from the main Russian Mennonite story, for instance the account of their mission efforts leads to an extended description of the overseas missions of European Mennonites to which Russian Mennonites sent funds and missionaries.

The author's interest in the ties between the Russian Mennonites and Germany is obvious. He devotes considerable attention to the interaction during the occupation by Nazi Germany of the Ukraine and the subsequent flight westward. The author's perspective on this episode is reflected in the reference to Hitler's decision to invade the USSR. It is explained in passing as a strike to pre-empt Soviet plans to attack the Third Reich.

There are some factual errors, such as the inaccurate and incomplete list of Mennonite colleges in North America in the opening chapter, which adequate research would have prevented. Students of Anabaptist theology will be disappointed in the summary of Anabaptist tenets. These are qualified by remarks on the inconsistency with which they were practised over the centuries rather than properly described.

This book includes several photographs of historical interest and refers to German accounts which provide information from a German perspective on some experiences of the Russian Mennonites. Therein lies the usefulness of this volume.

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