

# Many Voices, One Story?: Accounting for Diversity in Canadian Mennonite History

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There is, I am told, one thing that even God cannot do. He cannot change the past. For that he needs the historians.

The primary purpose of this symposium, as I understand it, is to review critically the three-volume history of Mennonites in Canada, and particularly my recently published work dealing with the period from 1939 to 1970.<sup>1</sup> The second major objective is to discuss the direction which future Mennonite historical research and writing should or might take.<sup>2</sup>

My work is certainly not the last word on any subject. I hope, however, that it will serve as a catalyst leading to further, more detailed, perhaps different and better historical research and writing. In spite of its intimidating size, my book really provides only a general outline of the complex and diverse experiences of Canadian Mennonites after 1939. I tried to provide some supporting detail, but much more can, and no doubt will, be said and written about a period in which our people experienced exceptionally rapid change.

The Mennonite story which I have written is really a merging of hundreds of thousands of stories or voices. Every Canadian Mennonite, each family, congregation or community, and every migration group has its own story.<sup>3</sup> And a reading of the numerous biographies, autobiographies, congregational and

institutional histories, or of the extensive primary documentation in our libraries and archives, does not immediately indicate how all these voices can be blended into a common history. The available materials, in fact, seem, at least on first reading, to point in every possible direction. Perhaps it is unjustified arrogance, but historians try very hard to create some order out of the often unordered and unstructured evidence available to them. Some of the most intense discussions by the authors and members of reading committees in the writing of the three volumes of *Mennonites in Canada* focused on the main themes or interpretations of each volume. There were divergent views, but eventually separation was identified as the main theme of volume I. Canadian Mennonites, it was argued in that volume, wanted to establish their own rural communities and congregations, separated as much as possible from the rest of Canadian society. That separation was never complete, and when looking for the appropriate sub-title it was suggested that it would be most accurate to say this was the history of an “almost” separate people or of a people who sought but never quite achieved separation.<sup>4</sup> Separation, real or hoped for, thus became the central theme and provided the conceptual framework for that volume.

The main theme and sub-title of the second volume, covering the period from 1920 to 1940 is “A People’s Struggle for Survival.” Mennonites already living in Canada in 1920 struggled to survive as communities of faith separated from the outside world, while those migrating from the Soviet Union to Canada in the 1920s had seen their cherished communities and churches destroyed. For them the struggle for survival amidst the turmoil of revolution, civil war and collectivization in the 1920s, and a disastrous economic depression in the 1930s, was more basic and desperate. Survival, individually, as communities, and as a people, was the theme around which the information and interpretations in Volume 2 were arranged.

The search for a central or unifying theme for volume 3 was, for me, the most difficult aspect of the work. In all the earlier work I had done, other historians had already established basic conceptual frameworks or interpretive models. My work in part confirmed, in part altered, and in part filled in details related to the conceptual frameworks developed by others. That was not the case when dealing with recent Canadian Mennonite history. As already indicated, recent Canadian Mennonite history seemed to point in many different directions, while much of the theoretical literature in ethnic studies and in non-Mennonite church and religious histories seemed inappropriate. Indeed, in some of the theoretical literature the Mennonites are identified as notable exceptions to the general interpretations offered.<sup>5</sup>

Before Frank Epp’s illness and death we talked of writing four, not three, volumes. Volume three, as then envisioned, would take the story from 1940 either to 1960, or to the creation of MCC Canada in 1963, or to the Canadian Centennial of 1967. We thought of a title something like “Becoming Canadian.” Volume 4 would cover the period from either 1960, 1963, or 1967, to the

bi-centennial of Mennonites in Canada which was celebrated in 1986. We thought the central theme of that volume might be "The End of Separation."<sup>6</sup>

That plan was not implemented. Instead, it was decided to extend the time period and to make Volume 3 the last one in the series. One reason for these decisions was the fact that we could find no single decisive date, but rather a series of events spread over seven or eight years, marking a change or a turning point in post-World War II Canadian Mennonite history. It was also thought to be much more difficult to interpret recent controversial events in which we as authors, and particularly Frank, had been directly involved.

After Frank's death I began work on volume 3 with the "End of Separation" conceptual framework. I thought the central theme of post-World War II Mennonite history would be assimilation which took different paths, and along which various Mennonite groups moved at different speeds. The result, for all but the most traditional Mennonite groups was the loss of the most obvious and distinguishing aspects of a common Mennonite identity, and the end of unique Mennonite religious and secular aspirations which were significantly different from those of other Canadians.

Early in the course of my research, but not related to that research, my wife and I visited the Middle East. The delta or estuary of the great Nile River is hundreds of miles wide. It has numerous constantly shifting sand bars and large densely settled islands. It is impossible to determine where the river ends and the Mediterranean begins. In some places the flow of the river is still discernible, but in others, which may be further upstream, the water is already salty with no discernible flow. That, I thought, provided a model for recent Canadian Mennonite history—gradual assimilation into the larger Canadian society through numerous channels, each of which for a time retained traces of the old Mennonite identity, but then became more diluted as it progressed downstream. So I tried to chart the particular channels through which the separation of different Mennonite groups from the outside world was ended.

All went reasonably well while I was working on the wartime and immediate post-war period, but it became increasingly difficult to fit Canadian Mennonite experiences of the late 1950s, and particularly those of the 1960s, into an assimilationist model. The end of separation through urbanization and integration into Canadian society was accompanied by a remarkable and dramatic, but also in some respects new, assertion of Mennonite values and identity, some of which had been neglected or forgotten in the old rural enclaves. The main outline of the story, it seemed to me, was not simply the end of separation, but rather one of transformation in which Canadian Mennonites accommodated themselves and became active participants in Canadian life, while not only retaining, but in many cases strengthening and redefining their own radical Anabaptist heritage. That became the conceptual framework around which Volume 3 of *Mennonites in Canada* was eventually written. It tells the story of a people transformed, focusing in part on the end of separation, but placing greater emphasis on the preservation and strengthening

of Anabaptist and Mennonite beliefs, values and practices which made it possible for the majority of Canadian Mennonites to leave their partially isolated rural communities without losing the most cherished aspects of their unique heritage as a people.

The writing of a comprehensive history of Mennonites in Canada began thirty years ago. In the intervening years Canadian historiography has changed significantly, but in a manner reminiscent of Stephen Leacock's noble knight who jumped on his horse and rode madly off in all directions. One commentator has noted that "Canadian historical inquiries are ramifying in a hundred directions at once, and there is no co-ordination among them."<sup>7</sup> Some general trends can, however, be identified. There has, for example, been much criticism of works which focus on the life and times of the elite, influential and powerful members of society, but say little or nothing about the experiences, suffering and hardships of the poor, the downtrodden, and simply the great majority of undistinguished ordinary people. Too much history, it has been charged, is written "from the top down." More should be written about the accomplishments, aspirations, problems and experiences of those at the bottom of society.<sup>8</sup> Those trying to do this sometimes refer to their work as new history or new social history. They have found that most of the available traditional library, archival and documentary sources were created for and used mainly by elites. New and different, non-conventional sources, such as oral interviews, diaries and letters of ordinary people, provide different insights than documents of state, institutional records, and the papers of elites.

With the help of evidence from non-conventional sources the new social historians seek to explain how historical events were experienced and understood by the underprivileged, the oppressed, the poor and exploited, and simply ordinary people. The new social historians are also keenly interested in, and try to explain, why and how the poor and oppressed are kept in their subordinate positions and how the elites safeguard their privileged positions. Oppression and exploitation are the most important themes in much of their writing. Four factors have been identified as being especially important and effective instruments of oppression and exploitation. These are class, gender, race and ethnicity.<sup>9</sup>

The three volumes of Mennonites in Canada, as outlined above, are obviously not focused primarily on class, gender, race and ethnicity as instruments of oppression and exploitation.<sup>10</sup> On the basis of the evidence available to me it seemed clear that the themes of oppression and exploitation fit neither the experiences of Canadian Mennonite elites nor those of ordinary Mennonites. Those themes, and more generally the approaches of the new social historians are, according to one thoughtful commentator, "more likely to raise painful questions of guilt and grievance rather than provide positive perspectives on the major currents of national life."<sup>11</sup>

The main themes of all three volumes of *Mennonites in Canada*, were admittedly enunciated most clearly by individuals, often younger people, who

rose to leadership positions in the late 1950s and in the 1960s. These were the people who redefined, reinterpreted and tried to apply historic Anabaptist and Mennonite ideals and values to new urban and professional environments. They sometimes faced stiff opposition, often from leaders intent on preserving separatist rural ideals, but eventually many of their views were more widely accepted.

A valid criticism of most older histories is that they pay too little attention to the experiences of ordinary people. That was a concern I tried to address.<sup>12</sup> Scattered throughout the book are stories of ordinary people, the most obvious being the eight short stories of Mennonite young men who entered alternative or military service during the war. Similarly, the story of what seemed to be a typical Mennonite refugee family, and the reminiscences of an undistinguished missionary, were included in an effort to ensure that the voices of ordinary people were heard, not only those of the leaders. Special efforts were also made to include the lives of neglected groups. Thus, while trying not to ghettoize the discussion of women, more detailed accounts of their activities and experiences are included. Similarly, in the discussion of Mennonite young people's responses to evangelistic campaigns, I tried to include both the stories of those who had positive life-altering experiences, and those who experienced those campaigns as emotional and spiritual abuse.<sup>13</sup>

Arguably, not enough material dealing with often neglected groups is included in the book. There should be more detailed studies, but constraints of space and the imperative of effectively presenting a central theme, made the inclusion of additional material on neglected groups, or the elimination of material on the elites, difficult. The primary objective was to offer a coherent and carefully documented general interpretation of the Canadian Mennonite experience. Material directly relevant to that primary objective was given priority over more detailed material related to neglected groups, subordinate themes, and tangential topics. Other scholars will now review, evaluate, and test the general conceptual framework. There will, I hope, be many new studies, including those by new social historians, which will fill in gaps and correct errors and omissions.

The neglect or inadequate coverage of ordinary people's voices—the poor, the exploited and the oppressed—is only one of the problems associated with the writing of history within a broad conceptual framework. In numerous instances the individual stories are only told in an incomplete form. Very few individual, congregational, institutional or group stories are told in their entirety. Bits and pieces, and occasionally larger portions of individual stories, are fitted into the larger story or interpretation of the book. Thus, problems in one congregation may be used to illustrate an aspect of leadership problems with which most Mennonite congregations had to deal. Likewise the success of a few entrepreneurs is cited as evidence supporting general statements about the flowering of Mennonite urban entrepreneurship. The book is not, however, an encyclopedia. Those looking in the index for information on specific

leaders, congregations or events, will not find it a comprehensive reference to personal or institutional biographies. Attempts to do that inevitably took me off on tangents which seriously disrupted the flow of the main story line and took me outside the main interpretive framework of the book. There is consequently some significant distortion and unfairness. A leader playing a central role in a controversial incident may only be mentioned in that context, and therefore appear better or worse than the record of his entire career might suggest. Similarly, a congregation in which a particular issue created serious difficulties is likely to be viewed differently if only that issue is reported than if one were to write the entire history of that congregation. To illustrate, let me cite a few specific examples. Dr. Gerhard Lohrenz of Winnipeg was a highly respected Mennonite pastor, teacher and leader. But he was also involved in at least two incidents where he took a position which now seems narrow and intolerant. Similarly, Rev. John G. Rempel, long-time Rosthern Bible School teacher, preacher and conference leader, wrote and published several acrimonious and controversial articles which his brother insisted were some of the silliest things John G. Rempel ever wrote. Those unfortunate events marked important developments in the Mennonite community, and are covered in detail, but readers are likely to garner a more negative impression of those two men than if one were to survey their entire life's work. It will probably take a full-scale biography to balance any unfair portrayal in my book of these two and, no doubt, of many other individuals whose involvement in specific incidents is mentioned without extensive and detailed biographical information.

Lohrenz and Rempel were influential leaders who sounded somewhat discordant notes in the situations described in the book. There were also, in virtually all the events described, discordant minority voices. Even where it can be demonstrated that congregations and communities moved in a specific direction, a good historian still has an obligation to ensure that all voices are heard and that people who read the book can say that their position was adequately and properly explained.

One of the minority voices came from the leaders and members of Mennonite groups which rejected the accommodations made by the majority, and clung tenaciously to the old ways. Some of these groups, most notably the Old Order Amish, have been the subject of numerous academic or scholarly studies. Indeed, the scholarly research and writing devoted to the Old Order Amish now fills many library shelves, and in the last several years an impressive number of new works have been published. In Canada David Luthey has created a marvellous library in Aylmer, Ontario. The materials he has gathered, and his wise counsel, provide unique insights into one of the most successful Anabaptist groups which rejected accommodation with or assimilation into the mainstream of Canadian life.

Some of the other traditional and conserving Canadian Mennonite groups are not as well served. Far from finding sympathetic interpreters in other

Mennonite groups, these people have often been the object of uninvited Mennonite evangelistic activities which they regard as subversive. They lack a coherent theology of change, and have no well developed arguments to support their resistance to change. Most rejected or never acquired the basic linguistic and theological tools needed to explain and defend their position in ways that make sense to academics. The "wisdom of the world" is not for them. That makes it very difficult for us to appreciate their faith and lifestyles, both of which defy the logical ways in which most Mennonites govern their lives, congregations and communities. The matter is especially troublesome if, as with those Mennonites returning to Canada from Mexico, people sorrowfully admit that the old ways, attitudes and beliefs have not met their expectations, and that the leaders lack the capacity to deal redemptively with seemingly unavoidable change. In my writing I tried to avoid harsh judgements, but will not be surprised if some feel they are not well served in the book.

Discussion of groups who abandoned all or some aspects of Anabaptist and Mennonite faith and life was also problematic. In many cases these were not people who forsook the Christian faith. Far from it. Many felt that the Anabaptist and Mennonite faith had become so encrusted with legalistic forms and practices that the essence of the faith was lost. In their quest for spiritual renewal some found in North American evangelicalism an emotional, life-altering conversion experience that seemed more meaningful than an ongoing Christian discipleship within traditional Mennonite communities. But some of the evangelicals had little understanding of historic Anabaptist insistence that the radical discipleship of Jesus teachings should be applied to situations of military conflict, or to the more oppressive and exploitative aspects of capitalism and free enterprise, especially when faced with the threat of atheistic communism. For some Mennonites who embraced evangelicalism, as for the conserving groups, rational discussion seemed irrelevant. The evangelistic conversion of as many people as possible, rather than the more rigorous demands of ongoing Christian discipleship, were emphasized. That resulted in some acrimonious debates between leaders committed to concepts of Anabaptist and Mennonite discipleship, particularly in situations of military and economic conflict, and those defending fundamentalist and evangelical positions. Clearly, neither side was entirely right or entirely wrong, but the conceptual framework of the book made it necessary first to try to define historic beliefs, and then to discuss their relevance to the new situations in which Canadian Mennonites found themselves. The subsequent, often spiritually rich, experiences of those who abandoned historic Mennonite insights are not discussed in my book. The focus is on those who found the Anabaptist and Mennonite heritage relevant in changing circumstances.

In recent years several highly respected historians, especially the late George Rawlyk, have begun to interpret and serve as intermediaries between scholars and North American evangelicals.<sup>14</sup> Some exclude from their definitions of evangelicalism the noisier, more uncouth, anti-intellectual, and hate-

mongering elements in North American Fundamentalism.<sup>15</sup> I tried to include these interpretations, but that was not the book's primary focus. Some will disagree with my focus, and perhaps find fault with a work which basically views evangelicalism from an Anabaptist and Mennonite perspective.

One concern expressed repeatedly as the *Mennonites in Canada* series proceeded, was that all Mennonite and Brethren in Christ groups should receive attention. The story of those Russian Mennonites who came to Canada in the 1920s is more dramatic and tragic than that of the Swiss Mennonites, and the character of the Russian Mennonites sometimes described as more aggressive, perhaps even arrogant. Both Frank Epp and I are descendants of the immigrants of the 1920s, and we naturally have a special interest in the experiences of our people. Frank Epp's years at Conrad Grebel College, and my sabbatical year spent there, in the midst of the Swiss Mennonite communities, gave us greater understanding of their experiences, and both of us benefitted from corrections of error and admonitions for balance from Swiss Mennonite members on the Reading Committee.

There were similar concerns by members of the smaller Mennonite conferences, and by others arguing that the Brethren in Christ and the Hutterites should be included in the book. It is clear that each group's story could not be told. Their shared experiences with others was noted, as were notable unique developments in each group. But while the smaller conferences and groups are not ignored, they have not been given equal billing with the larger groups. Most of those groups have their own denominational histories. I hope my work provides enough information to show how each of the smaller groups fits into the larger Canadian Mennonite picture, but the details of their histories could not be included. Even the larger groups and conferences will find that the attention given them does not obviate the need for more detailed, and perhaps more introspectionist, histories.

Among the various inter-Mennonite agencies MCC and MCC (Canada) receive much more attention than the others. In part that is due to my assessment that they were, in fact, very important to a wide spectrum of Canadian Mennonites, and in part because MCC was most directly involved in intense debates that reflected the core of the ongoing Canadian Mennonite identity and witness.

I have tried to set a framework, or to trace the broad outlines of recent Canadian Mennonite history. As in the construction industry, it is difficult to build a house before a foundation is laid and the walls and the roof are framed. After that much detailed and finishing work is needed. I hope this symposium will test and evaluate the broad conceptual framework of the work, perhaps suggest necessary modifications, and then focus on the extensive detailed and finishing work that still needs to be done.

There is one specific question which I hope can be addressed at this symposium. When the project of writing a history of Mennonites in Canada was first suggested, the vision was for a one-volume historical overview



suitable for use as a college-level textbook. It became clear that given the many unexplored or poorly covered aspects of Canadian Mennonite history, more detailed work was needed. Since then many have suggested that after Volume 3 an update and single-volume condensation of the the three volume series should be undertaken. The University of Toronto Press is interested in publishing such a book, and I hope it will be possible to discuss whether this project should be pursued, and if so, how such a book should be prepared.

All historical work is fragmentary and incomplete. Historians, in the words of the Apostle Paul, only see as through a glass darkly. They cannot see the whole picture, and sometimes they get even the more obvious and visible things wrong. Unlike God, who knows and understands the whole scope of history perfectly and therefore cannot change it, the best we historians can do is present our incomplete and imperfect knowledge and understanding of the past, based on the best evidence we can find, with the hope that our critics will be rigorously honest, but also kind and understanding.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974); *Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1982); T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 1996).

<sup>2</sup> After the publication of Volume 2 a special scholarly conference was convened at St. Michael's College, University of Toronto, supported by the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, the Multicultural History Society of Ontario and the Ethnic and Immigration Studies Program at the University of Toronto. Academics from various disciplines were invited to report on the state of Mennonite Studies in their area of specialization. I, together with Frank Epp, had the privilege of assisting in the organization of this conference, and in the subsequent editing of the papers which were published in the first issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* (Vol. 1, 1983). Those papers were presented as "an introduction to what we hope will be an exciting new phase of scholarly work in Mennonite Studies." T.D. Regehr, "Introduction," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983), 9.

Fourteen years have elapsed since that Toronto conference. Frank Epp died before he could complete the final volume in the series, and I was asked to do so. Much has changed in scholarly research and writing during the last 14 years. Scholars, again drawn from many disciplines, will examine what has been done, and recommend what should be done in the future. It seems appropriate that their findings will also be published in the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*.

<sup>3</sup> A substantial, but almost certainly incomplete, listing of the numerous published works pertaining to recent Mennonite history is given in the lengthy bibliography compiled in the writing of Volume 3. It was too long to be published in the book, but a copy has been deposited in the four major Mennonite archival and research institutions and is also available on the internet at [www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/mhsc.html](http://www.lib.uwaterloo.ca/mhsc.html).

<sup>4</sup> I chaired the Reading Committees for the first two volumes. The information given here is included in the correspondence and minutes of those committees, which will be deposited in the archives at Conrad Grebel College, University of Waterloo.

<sup>5</sup> Mennonite resistance to Canadian assimilative pressures before 1939, and the persistence of identifiable Mennonite values and ideals, particularly in poetry, literature and the arts, among those who accommodated themselves to Canadian society after 1939, differentiate the Mennonite experience from that of most other accommodated or assimilated Canadian ethnic groups.

<sup>6</sup> Copies of these proposals, prepared for granting agencies, are a part of my personal papers related to the Mennonite Historical Society and will be deposited with the Conrad Grebel College archives.

<sup>7</sup> As quoted in Carl Berger, *The Writing of Canadian History. Aspects of English-Canadian Historical Writing since 1900* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 1986), 259.

<sup>8</sup> Gertrude Himmelfarb, "Clio and the New History," *The New History and the Old: Critical Essays and Reappraisals* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard U. Press, 1987), 33-46.

<sup>9</sup> Carl Berger, "Traditions and the 'New' History," *The Writing of Canadian History*, Berger, 259-320.

<sup>10</sup> An example of an approach of this kind is provided in the review of my book by one of the graduate students at the University of Saskatchewan who has worked on documenting how the R.C.M.P. abused and exploited workers and students. (Steve Hewitt, "Focus on leaders," as reprinted in *Mennonite Reporter* 22:26 (1996), 9. He complains that there is "almost a complete lack of material on Mennonite women." Anyone reading the book, or other reviews of it, should recognize that, while I might perhaps have said more about the experiences of Mennonite women, they have certainly not been ignored. I have not, however, focussed specifically on the exploitation and oppression of Mennonite women. It is apparent that class and gender orthodoxy, not the actual content of the book, is Hewitt's main concern.

<sup>11</sup> Berger, "Traditions and the 'New' History," 320.

<sup>12</sup> It may be relevant to indicate immediately that the book which outlines the approach to historical inquiry which most closely approximates my own is G. R. Elton, *The Practice of History* (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1967), which, perhaps ironically, was published in the same year that I received my Ph. D. degree. As a graduate student I was influenced by Fritz Stern, ed., *The Varieties of History from Voltaire to the Present* (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), and Hans Meyerhoff, ed., *The Philosophy of History in Our Time* (New York, Anchor, 1959). I also share the very serious concerns about the "new" or "new social" history, expressed in Gertrude Himmelfarb's *The New History and the Old* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U. Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> At least one recent reviewer (Bob Birkinshaw, Trinity Western University, in his review published in *Mennonite Reporter* 22:26 (1996), 9, has interpreted my attempt to present both sides of this issue as biased, apparently because I indicated in my "Personal Prologue," that I had been a victim rather than a beneficiary. When writing the book I tried very hard to ensure that all the voices be presented honestly and fairly. That, of course, differs from the usual accounts which celebrate only the successes and triumphs of aggressive evangelistic campaigns.

<sup>14</sup> Dr. Rawlyk's major publications, and those of his associates, are listed in the Bibliography referred to above.

<sup>15</sup> The most obvious example of such selective treatment of Canadian evangelicals can be found in John G. Stackhouse, Jr., *Canadian Evangelicalism in the Twentieth Century: An Introduction to its Character* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 1993).