

Mainstreaming Mennonites: T.D. Regehr, Group Identity and Ethnic Studies

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The most efficacious way to understand Professor Regehr's *Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed* is to read the "Personal Prologue." Resonant and honest, the Prologue epitomizes the book. It is, of course, nothing more than conventional wisdom to assert that history is autobiography, but surely some history is more autobiographical than other history. "I am a part," Regehr writes at the outset, "of [the Mennonite] story" from 1939 to 1970. Growing up in the war and post-war years, he was acculturated to the rural, sectarian and pacifist values that then characterized Mennonite society. But as a young man, Regehr confides, he experienced a crisis in faith, and his scepticism increased in the university, where he achieved new perspectives on Anabaptist theology. Working in the city, Regehr discovered both opportunities which he would not have enjoyed in Coaldale and an "approach to religion [which] was open, tolerant, holistic and easy-going." This modern, urban faith has allowed him to practise "holistic Christian discipleship." So Ted Regehr has accommodated to late twentieth century Canadian society, but he was not assimilated by it. Professor Regehr is too fine an historian, and presumably too good a Christian, not to be troubled by the entailments of accommodation, and from time to time his anguished ambivalence comes through. Still, all in all, Regehr is confident in his transformed identity and thus optimistic about his

place, and that of his community, at the centre of Canadian society. In other words, Ted Regehr is every inch the modern Mennonite.

How does Professor Regehr's vision of Mennonite transformation inform Canadian ethnic studies? I propose to answer the question in three ways. First I want to locate the book in the general field. Then I will discuss what Regehr does, and a fine job it is. Third, however fine the book may be, I intend to make some observations on how it could have been made more useful for the field.

Today ethnic studies are well established in Canada. Indeed with conferences, journals, endowed chairs, undergraduate majors and a plethora of MA and PhD theses, the field has taken on industrial proportions. For that reason, it is not always easy to remember that this work is a relatively recent phenomenon. Even though charter groups have been celebrating their role in Canadian society since the nineteenth century, ethnic studies, in the present form, only emerged in the late 1960s. The incompatible imperatives of the Quiet Revolution and the Canadian Centennial legitimized the field as serious scholarship. Official anxieties generated academic opportunities in a typically Canadian dichotomy. The Québécois threat to the viability of the Canadian state produced the Royal-Commission on Bi-Lingualism and Bi-Culturalism. Just in time for the celebration of the nation's centennial, the Commission discovered that peculiar Canadian phenomenon the "ethnic." Then Pierre Trudeau, his eye ever on the main chance in the politics of French-English relations, implemented the policy of official multiculturalism to distract the charter groups from their pre-occupations, each with the other.

Multiculturalism recognized and promoted ethnic diversity, so long as each group asserted its identity in ways prescribed by the state. Substantial federal funding encouraged ethnic groups to celebrate approved cultural forms so that they would not pursue their own political agendas.¹ In its heyday the strategy occupied most groups, or at least their respective elites, who developed a broad range of cultural programs. Like folk-dancing and egg-painting, roots searching was considered sufficiently benign to enjoy official approbation. Thus, a great deal of public money was spent on ethnic history and group studies, much of it badly.

The Generation Series, run by the Department of the Secretary of State, was the first manifestation of officially promoted ethnic studies. However noble its purpose, the series of some twenty group-specific monographs was poorly conceptualized and poorly executed. Like it or not some groups because of their size or their time here have made a greater contribution to the development of Canada than others. So it just did not make sense to allot the same space to, for example, Arabs and Scots. In addition much of the research was at best conventional and, at times, shoddy. A few of the books are basically sound, for example the work of Dreiszigen and his colleagues on the Hungarians.² But for the most part, the Generation series was a failure. This is the more regrettable because, instead of inaugurating a new ethnic history, the opportunity was squandered on pedestrian and filiopietistic bromides.

But fortunately the official promotion of ethnic studies had a second manifestation, which was very different. That second manifestation can be properly called "new ethnic history." Robert Harney was its brilliant and iconoclastic Godfather. Recognizing that, as a result of federal multiculturalism, the Ontario government was under pressure, especially in cosmopolitan Toronto, to do something for the ethnics, he hijacked the response. Harney accomplished this by the elegant expedient of dealing with the pols, cutting out the cultural bureaucrats, and controlling the money himself in the Multicultural History Society of Ontario. At the Society, Harney's mission was to replace ethnic groups' "self dis-esteem" with a full and informed appreciation of their Canadian experience. This was to be achieved by a new kind of history. Shaped by French and British social history, which was also transforming urban and working-class studies, Society-sponsored research focussed on common folk and employed explanation forms which avoided an institutional pre-occupation, explaining instead how culture conditioned relations between immigrants and Canadian society.

Harney did some excellent work himself, but he conceived his role more as a catalyst. He encouraged people to explore their own experience where it had actually occurred in the streets, on farms, at church and so on. This resulted in a monumental oral history collection. As a second strategy, Harney attracted talented and dedicated graduate students to the Society. Of the communities, fluent in their languages, these young historians, and a few older hangers-on, began to provide informed and useful insights into the lives of the people who, after all, represent the majority in Canadian society.

Where does Professor Regehr fit in this scene? I think it is necessary to remember that the book is the third and, probably the last period-specific, volume in a series. That series, *Mennonites in Canada*, originated amidst all the hand-wringing and hoopla that I have described. But like the community it was to portray, the series was in the world of official multiculturalism, but not of it. Even though its goals coincided with those purported by federal programs, *Mennonites in Canada* was conceptualized for and sponsored by the community. Given the outcome of the Generation series, this was certainly a case where Mennonites' reticence with regard to the state served them well. In fact Frank Epp was among the first to blow the whistle on official multiculturalism. In 1978, when I, for example, was still pre-occupied with my next application for Secretary of State funding, he warned that the policy was "a wolf in sheep's clothing" for Mennonites.³

But Epp was not prepared to practise new ethnic history, either. In the summer of 1983, Harney invited me to meet with Epp to discuss volume three of *Mennonites in Canada*. At the meeting, which was one of several, Harney with some help from me urged Epp to consider new directions for the series. The burden of our pitch was that the next stage of the work should be based on oral history and micro-studies. Epp, clearly well-informed about what was going on in the less traditional work of the field, heard us out. Then he

explained firmly that the Mennonite Historical Society expected him to serve two basic purposes—he was to write an official history with a pan-Canadian focus.

Not surprisingly, then, Professor Regehr's book is in my opinion best located between the old-fashioned, national paeans and new ethnic scholarship. In fact that is how Regehr understands Mennonites, located between an old world and a new way. Thus the book matches the community for which it was written. Like Mennonites, it is sound and honest. There is none of the slipshod scholarship that too often impeaches ethnic history. Instead Regehr has based his work on impeccable research and rendered his judgement with admirable objectivity. Nor is there any of the filio-pietism that trivializes the genre. The habit of honest introspection, that has produced so much fine Mennonite scholarship, pervades the book. And, like the community, Regehr's book is essentially introverted and traditional.

The theme of transformation unifies the book. The realities of war—changes in agriculture, alternate service and even enlistment in the military—broke down traditional rural isolation and modified Mennonite perspectives on the larger Canadian society. Structural imperatives intensified the process, as mechanization and rationalization destroyed the viability of traditional agriculture and drove Mennonites off the land. Regehr explains, however, that pull was as much at work as push in this transforming migration. Mennonites became "a prosperous people" as they became urban. Working in business and the professions, Mennonites were increasingly integrated into the consumer economy and acculturated to normative values. Life in cities led "to redefinitions of Mennonite articles of faith and to modifications of their way of life." The formulation of limited change is fundamentally important to Regehr's analysis. Throughout the book he insists that accommodation to Canadian society did not entail assimilation for Mennonites. "In spite of the massive changes that they had undergone," Regehr writes in his evocative conclusion, "their holistic theology remained relevant and redemptive."

Regehr supports his analysis with insightful chapters on education, the arts and missions, both at home and abroad. As much as anything, these discussions are persuasive because they coincide well with informed perceptions of the community. His elaboration of the occupations that have come to epitomize the new Mennonite position in Canadian society is a case in print. Using both quantitative data and anecdotal evidence Regehr demonstrates that Mennonite business people and professionals make "no distinction between secular and sacred matters." Reimer Express' corporate strategy appears to be as effective as it is unusual. And the data indicating that urban professionals have a stronger commitment to holistic Christianity than their rural co-religionists are impressive.

Regehr makes it clear throughout the book that he believes this successful accommodation was facilitated by enlightened federal government policies. Because official suspicion had been replaced by approbation, Mennonites

were “comfortable” by the sixties. This did not come without a price. Regehr squirms when admitting that ambivalence on Canadian peace-keeping produced only silence at home but easy shots on Vietnam. Still he apparently delights in the state approval Mennonites had come to enjoy by 1967. The pragmatism which this theme reflects derives, of course, from historical experience, especially twentieth century tragedies in Russia and Ukraine. It would be presumptuous of me to comment on the long-term implications for the community of official approbation. I am concerned, however, with the broader implications of Regehr’s theme. This book, precisely because it is good, is going to be read more broadly than most such studies. It would be regrettable if the Mennonite experience came to be considered conventional. Regehr really does not support the case, but if state policies did, in fact, facilitate upward social mobility for Mennonites, they were unusual if not unique. The most troubling aspect of the book, the theme, reflects the Mennonite habit of deference with a vengeance.

This aspect of the book may derive from its function as official history. Certainly that function has defined its focus and methodology. This is institutional history, about churches, doctrine and pastors. Regehr works hard to enumerate fully congregational developments and sectarian disputes across Canada. This is a necessary record for the community, and the book makes it useable by sorting out the complex and shifting realities of Mennonite institutional life. Even though the focus may become tedious at times, it nonetheless discharges a basic responsibility of the genre.

But I am more interested in what the institutional focus seems to say about Regehr’s conceptualization of Mennonites. In the “Personal Prologue,” he claims quasi-outsider status because he is neither a pastor nor church leader—that makes for a rather exclusive group of insiders! The perception seems to define Regehr’s conceptualization of group structure—it appears exclusive and hierarchical. This is puzzling because, in fact, his own vision of the modern Mennonite community seems to make such a conceptualization obsolete. Surely power is now shared. Have not countervailing foci, both formal and informal—Menno Simons College, the Steinbach Automobile Dealer’s Association, the southern Manitoba literati—long since evolved to condition community behaviour? Yet the book discusses virtually every issue in terms of churches and pastors. Take adolescent sexuality as an example—I know that many of my Mennonite friends found the Reverend Janzen’s pamphlet less helpful than the lingerie section of Eaton’s catalogue.

Similarly the imperatives of institutional history, focussing on a small, vocal elite who function as arbiters and guardians of culture, entail for Regehr an exclusive definition of identity. The books’ Mennonites are characterized by orthodoxy, church membership and actualization of Anabaptist values. There is nothing intrinsically wrong with such a conceptualization of identity. It does, however, appear to me overly restricted. On the one hand, there were before 1970, as there are today, many urban and rural Canadians who, even

though not observant, used the ascription Mennonite and practised the groups's aesthetic cultural forms. On the other, some Mennonites eschewed cities, lived in *Plaut Dietsch* and deplored the worldliness of the mainstream.

The Mennonite Historical Society, or at least a majority in it, may well want both an exclusive definition of identity and institutional history. But I suspect that is not what my Mennonite students want. I am confident that is not what most academic historians can use. And I insist that is not what Canadians need. In his "Bibliographical Essay," Regehr demonstrates that he knows new ethnic history is more inclusive both in methodology and focus. Nonetheless, I would like to wind up by making some comments on the book from that perspective.

In my opinion, the book's insights could have been enhanced by a more current understanding of ethnicity. Early on Regehr cites E.K. Francis to explain accommodation. Francis' study employed a concept of ethnicity which had emerged in the 1930's. Formulated by the American charter group, the concept defined ethnicity as a cluster of cultural attributes which characterized the "uprooted" immigrant and which "marginalized" him until he was assimilated. Recently historians and sociologists have abandoned the concept of "the marginal man." Instead they have explained ethnicity as dynamic, as the strategy which immigrant groups employ to maximize their collective advantage in new societies. Because ethnicity is a medium of power, its use can often be situational and group boundaries can often be ragged and porous at the edges. In other words, ethnicity has come to be considered instrumental.⁴

This changed understanding of ethnicity has informed many recent studies. The application often entails borrowing across group or disciplinary boundaries. Professor Regehr has not done much of that. I know we all have a natural tendency to consider our own group unique, but an analysis based on other group experience can yield useful perspectives. For example, Regehr explains that at war's end a landless class began the migration to cities, though he does not examine who the migrants were. In fact, *Russlaender*, who had less stake in rural areas, were more likely to move to cities.⁵ Might this be the basis of a hypothesis on accommodation? In Russia this sub-group had already employed the strategy of accommodation successfully.⁶ After the war, these migrants, their earlier *Volkish* ways now non-viable, needed an identity quickly. Why would they not fall back on a strategy that had previously worked in dealing with another modern state? So *Russlaender* experience may well have been a principal conditioner of accommodation to Canadian society and, thus, shaped the modern Mennonite. The formulation even explains the stronger urban commitment to holistic Christianity which Regehr appears to consider remarkable. Already engaged in accommodation, politically astute urban professionals realized that the Anabaptist dimension of Mennonite identity fit well with Canadian internationalism. The match produced enhanced status and authority for the community.

New ethnic history is also more inclusive in focus; in fact it has been described as popular rather than national history. Regehr's institutional focus is, in my opinion, least appropriate in his discussion of community formation in cities. He does a good job of describing Mennonite anxieties about urban evils. But then he examines urbanization primarily in terms of factional competition, congregational foundations and so on. There is no discussion of settlement patterns, strategic networks or group boundaries; the book only reports that Mennonites "acquired homes in good, solid middle-class, suburbs."

Given the group's English capacity and male occupational patterns, Mennonite wives and mothers may well have been more important than other immigrant women in urban acculturation. How did they facilitate accommodation in the cities? The book provides no insights. Its treatment of women is going to generate a good deal of discussion, but I do not intend to take up that conventional cudgel here. Instead I intend to remind Professor Regehr that when one writes an important book, it is impossible to win. In my view, by subordinating important social issues to institutional development, he has been obliged to accept feminist analysis of suburban life uncritically. Perhaps in an attempt to be politically correct, he too quickly dismissed the new material well-being that women experienced as a vacuous and shoddy *Schlaraffenland*. Once Mennonite women had finally settled in three bed-room bungalows with L-shaped living-dining room which signified the upward social mobility that the group pursued in the 50's and 60's, precisely those conversations about crabgrass and garden tools or playgrounds and skating rinks which Regehr considers trivial were fundamentally important to mainstreaming Mennonites. And if the women were similar to their counterparts in comparable groups, they enjoyed the relief from an earlier drudgery and seldom aspired to follow the lead of June Caldwells or Doris Andersons. In fact recent scholarship on the political attitudes of Mennonite women appears to indicate that Regehr's condescension was anachronistic.⁷

To conclude, I wish to return to where I began, Professor Regehr's "Personal Prologue." There, with becoming honesty, he allows that the "story" originates in his "particular experiences and insights." That is what makes this a fine book, a book in which a people of the book can take pride. Ted Regehr's experience and values have informed the research, shaped the analysis and enriched the narrative. Even though at times Ted Regehr gets in the way, that is only because, of course, his experience could not have been universal, nor his values normative. And that is to say nothing more than what is true of any historian, let alone one who is part of his subject. Ultimately the book has authority. The authority derives from its effective elaboration of a plausible theme. Clearly there are modern Mennonites in Canada. For the outsider, who has known Mennonites, however incompletely, the book explains their advent to status and authority well. Because of who he is, Professor Regehr has provided the definitive introduction to the cultured, upwardly mobile and

humane community that has become part of the Canadian mainstream.

Now, when the Mennonite Historical Society is planning the next volume in the series may be the time to consider an historical project that better reflects the community's position in the mainstream. Less traditional and exclusive research, which explores the day-to-day experience of the common folk in society would, it seems to me, enjoy a wider constituency. Thus, let me restate the advice that I helped Robert Harney give and that Gerald Friesen offered when Volume II was launched.⁸ In my opinion, and in the opinion of many of my colleagues, the next phase of the project should have two basic elements: micro-studies and oral history. First Royden Loewen has demonstrated the value of such work.⁹ Now the Society and the community should encourage more research by Dr. Loewen and other talented young scholars. Second the Society should inaugurate an oral history project conceptualized as ambitiously as resources allow. And in my view Mennonites, an educated people habituated to voluntarism, have greater resources than any other community. Why not make it a project of churches, schools and colleges? Would it not be beneficial for young people to honour elders by collecting their community's story? Would not the community be enriched by such a legacy? In Professor Regehr the community has an excellent scholar to direct such work. He knows the historical craft, and he knows the Mennonite community. It would be prodigal if Prof. Regehr did not build on his fine book.

Notes

¹ Karl Peter, "The Myth of Multiculturalism and Other Political Fables," *Ethnicity, Power and Politics in Canada*, Jorgen Dahlie and Tissa Fernando, eds. (Toronto: Methuen, 1981), 56-57.

² N.F. Dreiszigen, et.al., *Struggle and Hope* (Toronto, 1982).

³ Frank H. Epp, "Problems of Mennonite Identity: A Historical Study," *The Canadian Ethnic Mosaic: A Quest for Identity*, ed., Leo Driedger (Toronto, 1978), 291.

⁴ Peter Kivisto and Dag Blanck, *American Immigrants and Their Generations: Studies and Commentaries on the Hansen Thesis After Fifty Years* (Urbana: U. Illinois Press, 1990).

⁵ Leo Driedger and J.H. Kauffman, "Urbanization of Mennonites: Canadian and American Comparisons," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 56 (1982), 280-1.

⁶ James Urry, "Who are the Mennonites," *Archives Européennes de Sociologie* (1983), 246-7.

⁷ Janet Mancini Billson, "Keepers of the Culture: Attitudes Towards Woman's Liberation and the Women's Movement in Canada," *Women and Politics* (1994), 13-6.

⁸ Gerald Friesen, "A People's Struggle for Survival: A Review," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 1 (1983), 191-200.

⁹ Royden Loewen, *Family, Church and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and the New Worlds, 1850-1930* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 1993).