

Gender and Mennonites: A Response to Mennonites in Canada, 1939-1970: A People Transformed.

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As a historian for Canada's national historic sites, I am often reminded of the need to revisit and rewrite history from time to time. The historic sites programme, dating from the 1920s, commemorates "nationally significant" people, places and events by preserving cultural resources and presenting interpretive storylines. In recent evaluations various "imbalances" in the commemoration programme have been identified. We are no longer comfortable with celebrating proud episodes in nation building, because it turns out to be a history pretty well exclusively of the dominant society. It has resulted in what today appears to be an obvious "over-representation" of the stories of European military and economic conquest, leaving glaring "gaps" elsewhere, such as the history of Aboriginal peoples, cultural communities, and women's history.

"Writing women back into the story" has become the prevailing approach in our academic historical profession, a consciousness that has caught on slowly and after considerable flogging by feminists and women's studies departments. Today it is basically a requirement, and to neglect it is to invite

easy criticism. I came to Ted Regehr's book with heightened expectation because of the fly-leaf which states: "Regehr balances a detailed institutional analysis with numerous insights into the lives of ordinary people, stressing the role and problems of women in what has been essentially a patriarchal society." Regehr *has* included aspects of women's experience in his account. When comparing volume three to the first two volumes in this series, I think it must be said that he has achieved an inclusion that was not even attempted in the earlier volumes. A contributing factor to this change was the inclusion of women on the reading committee. Another factor was the growing available scholarship in very recent years.

The index to the new volume gives quick reference to those areas where women are mentioned. Besides individual women's names in the list, references are collected under the keyword "gender roles." A quick look at it confirmed what I noticed when I read the book, namely, that almost all mention of women is in the first half, leaving only a few scattered references in the second half. But in that first half of the book there are some strong passages on Mennonite rural social organization, on the voluntary service efforts of women during the second world war, on the domestic service which so many of the young women entered, on the horrific experiences of refugee women in Europe after the war, and on the women's transition to residence in city suburbs. For this research Regehr has drawn on recent studies by Marlene Epp, Royden Loewen, Gloria Redekop, Lorraine Roth and others.¹

Attention is given to women mostly in the form of noting various contributions. For instance, credit is given to the thousands of women who worked as domestic servants in the '40s and '50s. They were "trailblazers" for their families and communities, leading the urban migration. Specific female artists, musicians and missionaries are named, and church women's groups are noted for their contributions in relief work. Far less attention, however, was given to charting the broad changes and developments for Mennonite women over these decades. Was there any significant debate during these 30 years about the changing roles of Mennonite women in family, church and society? Was this an issue to anyone?

And in all the change described in Regehr's book, I still have to wonder, "are Mennonite women a people transformed?" How did that transformation occur? This book is a well formulated discussion of how churches, institutions, male leaders, and denominations fared, but less how women, female children, and families managed in this period of transition. This is an ambitious work, covering a broad span of time and topics. I'm not suggesting that it should also have been a comprehensive history of Mennonite women. But when describing sweeping changes over time, it is well to remember that the basic social unit of a functioning society is the family and the web of kin relationships of extended families.

Historical accounts are timepieces. In the appended bibliographic essay Regehr makes his disclaimer—"I have no doubt that some of my younger

colleagues, and certainly some graduate students, will find my methods, sources, and interpretations too conventional" (541). I think this was an important recognition that the next generation will write a substantially different history, just as this one is substantially different from those of the previous generation. For instance, Regehr was clearly unconstrained by the attitude prevailing in the 1960s that anything shameful or unflattering about the "brotherhood" is best left unmentioned! So, his sharp and often critical analysis of events and trends in Mennonite life make this a book that may well be a "radical" one to my father and, simultaneously, a pretty conventional book to me—one with many excellent insights and well-supported grand themes—but fairly "conventional" in the sources and methodology used and in the questions asked.

I would like to interject here that, like Ted Regehr, I also grew up in Coaldale, fortunately a little later than he did, when it was a somewhat kinder and gentler world. Coaldale really was not a Mennonite community at all, but a type of refugee village where incredibly stressed people tried to muster what it took to reclaim their lives. My very vivid impressions as a child were that if women were part of that "body" that was sometimes spoken of, they were definitely the fingernails, the tonsils or some other vestigial organ, not the heart, the head or the arms. If that was so clear to me as a child in the 1960s, how much more apparent it would have been to the women living, moving and coping with life at that time. Yet out of this context came some remarkable women—Nettie Berg, Helen Toews, and Margaret Enns—all of whom were women of great vision, "backbone" and adventure. As will happen when limitations are severe, these particular women all left Coaldale to become career-long missionaries in India and Africa. But for all those who lived their days within the contexts of these and other patriarchal, church-centered communities, a good question is "what did the women actually do with the gender-related expectations and boundaries?" Mennonitism, so much part of their definition and identity, was also so wrapped in the church and the connected institutions. These were all part of *public* life, which women were systematically restrained from entering. How then could they feel like full members in Mennonitism?

In actual healthy, kin-based, rural Mennonite communities such as could be found in southern Manitoba or in Ontario, Mennonitism had more to do with functioning, intertwined family-centered communities than with churches as institutions. In these communities private and public spheres overlapped considerably and were more equally valued, which was more conducive to providing men, women and children a connected and relatively satisfying "place." They were a vast departure from the larger society where the norm has become nucleated families and socially isolated individuals striving to succeed in their individualistic pursuits. Perhaps these "odd" communities are indicators of a lingering Mennonite identity at least as important as those more intellectualized indicators Regehr points out in the book.

The dichotomy repeatedly noted in the book is that of soul versus body, spiritual versus carnal. I would like to suggest that the dichotomy between private and public life is just as relevant and interesting. It is also, I believe, associated, because those groups that were most vulnerable to aggressive evangelism techniques, and who were most likely to adopt a philosophy of those spiritual/carnal dualities, were exactly those twentieth-century refugees who were grasping at regaining stability, creating a Mennonitism wrapped in institutions and control, leaving women on the fringes. And these same groups have been leaders in embracing society's entrenched separation of the public and private realms. Countless Mennonite women across Canada, if asked, can tell of the vigorous efforts made only a few decades ago to exclude women from Mennonite public life—church leadership, business meetings, committees, boards, and conferences. This is not to say that women did not find ways to influence or contribute in important ways. But many aspects of participation were treated as trespass on a male domain.

A gender theory construct is helpful in outlining this social phenomenon. In broad terms the public world can be described as the masculine world; the private one, the feminine world. These two spheres provide codes of behaviour. Men depart from the home to undertake economic activities in a public work place and to make the political decisions that run the country. Women remain in the home to accomplish emotional tasks in private. Men are competitive, while women are nurturing. Men work at politics, women organize the family. Accommodation to Canadian society involved the willingness of many Mennonite groups to adopt the larger society's reverence for individual pursuit and personal achievement in the public realm, to the neglect of family and community. Such values directly threatened much of what was distinctive about Mennonites—their communal villages and other group settlements, their many "co-op" institutions, their national church conferences linking scattered congregations—and encouraged fragmentation and sectarianism to the degree where it is remarkably brave for an author to make any generalizations at all about Mennonites.

Regehr's study attempts to cover the broad thresholds, struggles and steps towards a large-scale "transformation" in Canadian Mennonite life from the 1940s to 1970s. Many readers, I believe, will expect him to deal more intensively with the unique accommodations of women and families in this period. Instead, women are mostly lumped in with "the community" as if there was a fairly even and homogeneous response. Perhaps not separating women out is an attempt at a type of inclusion where we are to assume generalized participation and power in the shaping of events. But this is to ignore the fact that gender inevitably influences our experiences, our perceptions, our status, place, and roles in a community. And to talk about such topics as the raising and education of children, or attitudes towards sexuality begs one to differentiate between male and female experiences and responses. For instance, in describing the entry into professions and business it is never overtly stated that

it was largely the men who were making this change from farming to the professions. What were the women doing while these men took on wage labour, got their degrees, or started up the businesses? There is little more than LaVerna Klippenstein's quote on the vacuousness of suburban housework to indicate what was replacing farming for married women at the time.

It should be noteworthy that while the men in Coaldale were excommunicating its members for the pettiest of offenses, the women were sewing piles of quilts and packing food boxes for MCC to distribute overseas. In Winnipeg in the late '40s and early '50s, while the men on the Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute board were strong-arming about leadership decisions, the women in the "Unterstützungs Verein" (a women's school support group) were cleaning and painting the school. They formed a pledge system whereby a network of mothers agreed to pray for the school, the teachers, and the students. And they held fall suppers where the country women donated chickens that the city women cooked and served, raising a significant portion of the school's operating costs. Perhaps, however, they stepped a bit too far into the public realm, because one year the local ministers called an end to the women's successful fundraiser—and rather abruptly, fall-supper chickens already in hand!² A controlled, institutionalized approach was preferred, whereby all the money acquired and the tasks achieved by the women in their enthusiastic volunteer drives was instead gained by raising each student's tuition fees and hiring janitors and workmen. In both cases the differences in thinking and approach are striking. The men were getting position, policy and doctrine straight and expressing their power, while the women were quietly expressing through action what they really cared about.

My point is that these were not homogeneous units moving and working as grand entities within denominations or church conferences, but groups comprised of young and old, male and female, rich and poor. Sometimes they functioned as healthy communities of faith where all were allowed to participate. Sometimes they were just collections of broken people and fragmented families building great white churches on the stark prairies.

Throughout the book are what appear to be missed opportunities to expound on Mennonite gender relations. For instance, in the first mention of women, Regehr notes that in 1939 "the church was a brotherhood and rarely were women allowed to vote at church meetings." Further on we read, "Women were not expected to participate in the business meetings of their congregations, but developed their own women's organizations which were 'parallel church undertakings'". Later we read "Sunday schools opened new horizons, introduced new ideas and teaching methods, and provided a cherished avenue of service for many young people, particularly young women." Regarding new agricultural technology in the 1940s, we read that "family life was dramatically affected. With the new machines, field work became the responsibility of the men, while women looked after the children and the household.... Gender roles became more specialized. Men were breadwinners

and producers, while women became housekeepers, consumers, reproducers, and child nurturers.”

These are all important observations. I still think, however, that they beg the questions, “what were the implications of these changes?” and “how would the women involved describe these transitions?” The chapters on home and world missions, I thought should have included more overt highlighting of the many courageous women who served in this way. That commonly asked question, why women were freely encouraged to be church builders and spiritual leaders in third world countries, while back home on furlough they were not allowed to speak in church, never comes up! In Chapter 9 on the “nurture and training of youth” I thought there should have been more discussion on differences in how boys and girls were raised, treated, or educated. I also thought it should have been mentioned who was raising the children in the new context where fathers were apparently entering the individualistic world of urban wage labour, university education and professional employment that physically took them away from their children in unprecedented ways. The chapter on new leadership, I thought, presented another wonderful opportunity to mention whether any significant changes were happening in the role of women in the church.

Only a few women are profiled in the book beyond a sentence or two, one being Susie Brucks a missionary to Belgian Congo (356-8). On the whole, female characters are scant and not very interesting compared to the array of patriarchs, church leaders and men of influence that are described, especially in the second half of the book. They are described in ways I’ve heard all my life: with an “insider” kind of familiarity that assumes we all know who these men are. Male characters *have* character, and credentials: Frank C. Peters, is a “former teacher at the MBBC and an influential Ontario Mennonite Brethren” (268). Jacob Loewen is “the articulate and thoughtful Mennonite Brethren Missionary, anthropologist, and Bible translator” (380). John B. Toews is, compared to A.H. Unruh, “a much younger, administratively more talented, theologically and academically better qualified, and charismatic new leader” (261). There is a shadow here of older “Russlaender-style” histories where focus on leaders and patriarchs completely dominates the text!³

A recurring theme in this book is authoritarianism and power. With some distaste, Regehr exposes the world of spiritual coercion tactics in American evangelicalism, imperialism and colonialism in missions, power relations in church committee work, family compacts in national church committees, and intrigue in education institutions. It is a masculine world, a public world. In the end, I wonder if the descriptions of the accommodations whereby Mennonites apparently moved from the fringes to the mainstream of Canadian society while retaining essential elements of Anabaptism are largely the responses of members of those same “refugee villages” of the 1920s to ‘50s who never managed to mend their fragmented families or to rebuild healthy, functioning communities of faith, turning instead to urban life, professionalism, the

rearticulation of intellectual points of Anabaptism and an individualism, where public and private life are more deeply separated than ever. Why is it that so many women—and men—who find their way into that public, urban professional world are so separated from their families, their churches, and are in fact now “ex-Mennonites?” Regehr sees Mennonite identity as surviving the “accommodation” to mainstream Canadian life up to the 1970s. It is difficult to imagine how “Mennonitism” as an entity, however creatively defined, will survive if mainstream society’s present models of family and church life are adopted. Unless Mennonites survive in the cities as families and as communities of faith, will there be much other than assimilation to speak of in any future volume of “Mennonites in Canada?”

Historians make selections. Regehr has found that a deeper foray into the topic of gender relations is a tangential topic, a subordinate theme. I think this is an illustration of my point. He has chosen as most important those very public realms of Mennonite life which men have claimed and guarded—war-time service, economic developments, Mennonite churches and schools as institutions, the entry into the professions, the articulation of official stands on issues such as militarism and evangelicalism. Regehr’s book demonstrates that it is indeed difficult to include women’s story in spheres from which they were actually systematically excluded. It comes across as pinned on, contrived, incomplete.

Yet, I’m sure that with the movement described—from rural to urban life, from farming lifestyle to the lifestyle of suburban professionalism, from sectarianism and rigidity to greater inclusiveness and tolerance—some very significant changes must have happened in the relations between Mennonite women and men, changes in the roles women took on and the places they found in their churches, families and communities. The strongest section on women in the book is on the post-World War II refugee experience. Regehr mentions a “conspiracy of silence” regarding the darkest aspects of their experience which was the repeated rape and sexual abuse suffered by so many of them (97-8), and that the *immigrant women were marginalized by the churches who did not want to entrust “such women” with major roles in the church.* A broader conspiracy of silence needs to be recognized. Regehr writes courageously about many matters in Mennonite life that are unflattering, many of which have previously been “shoved under the carpet.” I believe that he quite deliberately left that other story under there, about Mennonite women and their accommodation to life in Canada, for someone else to tell.

Are the “private” realms of household, family, church basement and backhalls, where the majority of Mennonite women spent their time, too frivolous and insignificant to merit written attention? Absolutely not! Continuing Mennonite existence may actually depend on “re-valuing” those spheres, recognizing the importance of families and of communities of people linked—not only as individuals with common theology, ideology or custom—but with functional, effective ties. Since Mennonite women’s roles in the

decades discussed were largely in this private realm, history that is “gender-aware” requires new sources and methods. The book repeats a quote from a Mennonite periodical of one woman despairing that too many girls were looking forward to a business career. For each of those whose attitudes were chosen for publication in this way, there were many thousands of others, quieter, unrecorded voices that could speak volumes about the way things really were for women during that time. In the past 10 or 15 years, significant work has been done in collecting historical documentation on Mennonite women: photographs, correspondence, diaries and oral reminiscences. Continuing effort needs to be made to recover women’s voices and to let them mediate and comment upon the official historical canon.

Regehr has made an important contribution. It was not, however, in the area of Mennonite women’s history. While he has included references to women and shown awareness of some of the key issues and scholarship, he has fallen short of contributing substantial new research, analysis or understandings. For this we look to a new generation of scholars, of which Royden Loewen, Gloria Redekop, Marlene Epp, Lucille Marr and Ruth Derksen Siemens are only a few. As this revisiting and rewriting of history goes on, hopefully we will uncover a history that embraces the realities of the experiences of both men and women, as well as the gender relations that are an integral part of human societies.

Notes

¹ See Marlene Epp, “‘United We Stand, Divided We Fall,’: Canadian Women as COs in World War II,” *Mennonite Life* 48:3 (1993); Royden Loewen, *Family, Church, and Market: A Mennonite Community in the Old and New Worlds, 1850 - 1930* (Toronto: U. Toronto Press, 1993); Gloria Neufeld Redekop, *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women’s Societies in Canada* (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996); Lorraine Roth “Conscientious Objection: The Experiences of Some Mennonite Women During World War II,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 66 (1992), 539-45.

² *Mennonite Brethren Collegiate Institute Anniversary Book*, and personal communication, Mrs. G. Peters, November 1996.

³ This may be purely facetious. Yet, at least in the Canadian Mennonite historical tradition it may be noteworthy that so many of the best regional and community histories, family and genealogical studies have been written by “Canadian” Mennonite writers such as Peter Zacharias, J. Winfield Fretz, Royden Loewen and Delbert Plett; while in the broad-based, more institution-focussed Mennonite studies, historians of the twentieth-century immigrant groups, such as Frank H. Epp, John A. Toews, and A.H. Unruh, have been prominent.