

A Catholic Priest's Account of the Mennonites of Manitoba in 1883: Father Bitsche on the Mennonites

Ingrid Riesen, *Winnipeg, Manitoba*
James Urry, *Victoria University of Wellington*

The Mennonites who came to Manitoba from Russia in the 1870s did not settle an empty land. They entered a region exploited for thousands of years by Indian tribes and in more recent times by French-speaking Métis.¹ Although a few English-language reports of early Mennonite settlement are well known, accounts in French are rare.² However, in 1883 a Manitoban Catholic priest, Father Jean-Théobald Bitsche, wrote an account of the Mennonites (*Étude historique sur les Mennonites*) which includes extensive sections on the Manitoba Mennonites dealing mainly with those on the West Reserve. His “studies” were published in a series of articles between December 1883 and January 1884 in the French-language newspaper *Le Manitoba*.³ As far as we are aware, the existence of this account has not been noticed previously in the Mennonite literature.⁴ The account, nevertheless, is an informed analysis of Mennonite faith and history by an educated Catholic priest and provides an outsider’s view of Mennonite life in Manitoba less than a decade after the first Mennonites from southern Russia began to settle the prairie. In this article we will present a translation of most of Father Bitsche’s text on the Mennonites of Manitoba, after

first presenting background information on the author, the newspaper in which his account appeared and a summary of his views on Mennonite origins, history and beliefs.

Father Bitsche

Father Bitsche was born in 1829 in Nieder-Burnhaupt in the diocese of Strasbourg, Alsace, and was ordained a priest in 1854. After studies in Rome he was appointed to a parish in Alsace. He probably learnt to speak both French and German as a child growing up in this border area of Europe and obviously also knew Latin, Italian and English from his studies for the priesthood. These linguistic skills were to serve him well on the Canadian prairies, where he served Catholic settlers from Germany, Poland and Bohemia.

A missionary of the Society of the Precious Blood, Father Bitsche left Europe for North America in the 1870s.⁵ He worked first in Formosa, Ontario, preaching to Alsatian immigrants, and it was while here that he learned of the new settlements of Catholic Germans being established in western Canada. In 1879 he journeyed to Manitoba in the company of prospective colonists.⁶ In Manitoba he founded St Léon, the oldest parish in the Pembina Hills and became its first priest in 1880-81, overseeing the building of a church and rectory.⁷ According to one account he was a “colonizing priest and a zealous missionary” and attracted a number of new German-speaking Alsatian families to the area.⁸ Some came from Ontario; others were recruited from Europe. Bitsche apparently arranged land grants for them. One account noted there were about forty families of German descent in the Parish.⁹

By all accounts Father Bitsche was an energetic and enterprising man. Fluent in a number of languages he could minister to Catholics from German-speaking and other backgrounds. In addition to his duties in St Léon, in 1883 he also helped found the neighbouring parishes of Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes and St. Alphonse, which he served until 1885. He also said mass in several villages in the region including Notre Dame, Somerset, Plum Coulee, St. Peter and elsewhere. He also visited German Catholics in more distant areas of Manitoba and the Northwest Territories and was greatly admired for his ability to speak German — the only priest in the diocese who was able to do so. As a highly educated priest he encouraged the establishment of schools and for a period served as acting superintendent of schools in the region. In 1879 the colonists named the Theobald School after him. But all this activity took its toll and he died in 1892, according to one account weakened by “the miseries and attitude of his parishioners.”¹⁰ The Catholic authorities were much concerned by his death as they did not have another skilled priest to minister to German-speaking Catholic immigrants in Manitoba.

The Newspaper *Le Manitoba*

What exactly stimulated Father Bitsche to write an extensive article on the Mennonites is unclear, but his articles were probably intended to inform the largely French-speaking Catholic readers of the newspaper *Le Manitoba* about these non-English, non-Catholic settlers. *Le Manitoba* had replaced another weekly French language paper, *Le Métis*, in 1881.¹¹ *Le Métis*, published since 1871, circulated widely among the French-speaking Métis people of western Canada. Founded by Joseph Royal, a Franco-Manitoban politician and French Canadian nationalist, *Le Métis* had demanded respect for civil liberties, religious and political freedom and defended the rights of the Métis people, as decreed by the Manitoba Act of 1870. In 1879, a new editor, Alphonse A.C. Larivière, was appointed and in 1881 he established *Le Manitoba* to replace *Le Métis*. Although Larivière continued to stress the unity of French Catholics in Manitoba and the Northwest, the new paper addressed a wider readership than *Le Métis*. The francophone readers of *Le Manitoba* were more interested in national and international affairs than the readers of *Le Métis*. The Métis, having been dispersed throughout the Northwest, no longer enjoyed political and social influence in the Red River region. The new editor had connections with French publishers in Upper Canada (Quebec) and immigrants from that region also increased the intellectual tone and content of the paper.

A four-page weekly publication, *Le Manitoba* reflected Conservative Party leanings, both provincially and federally and regularly contained articles on politics, agriculture and economics. The attempts by Anglophone immigrants from Ontario to ignore the rights of the Métis according to the Manitoba Act, provoked a strong reaction among members of the remaining francophone community. This is reflected in the paper which published articles strongly defending the rights and privileges of the French in Manitoba. It also reported in great detail the Riel Rebellions and issues surrounding the Manitoba schools question. Until 1901, it was published by the *Compagnie canadienne de publication*, but after competition from other newspapers, the paper ceased publication in 1925.

Bitsche's Account of Mennonite Origins, History and Religious Doctrines

It is obvious that before he wrote his article Bitsche went to considerable effort to understand the Mennonites' background. His description of their history and beliefs show clearly that he had read widely on their origin, past and doctrines. The account reflects both his education and a surprisingly open mind. He was, after all, dealing with a religious group once severely condemned and persecuted by the Catholic authorities in Europe who no doubt were still viewed with suspicion by lay Catholics and the church hierarchy in Canada.

According to Bitsche, the heresy of Martin Luther, whose translation of the Bible for the common people had given them the false impression that they possessed the status of priests, created the “fruits of disorder and blood” which, combined with the peasants’ revolt, gave birth to the Anabaptists and “later their daughter, the Mennonite sect.”¹² The “free and individual interpretation of the Bible” led to a “spirit of disorder” and the Anabaptists “abandoned themselves to every excess” which, through the involvement of Thomas Müntzer in the peasants’ uprising and the attempt by Anabaptists to establish the kingdom at Münster, revealed the movement’s “audacious fanaticism.” This extremism resulted in the persecution and banishment of Anabaptists by both Catholics and Lutherans. Bitsche then noted that less extreme leaders emerged, including Menno Simons, a priest, who attempted to unite the scattered Anabaptists. He argued that Menno attempted to introduce “more humane sentiments” than earlier leaders and to remove extreme doctrines “proposing his opinions in less revolting terms.” However, in a back-handed compliment Bitsche noted that “Menno possessed precisely enough knowledge to make him famous among his new brethren, but to earn him the reproach of ignorance everywhere else.” Bitsche argued that modern Mennonites “denied their Anabaptist ancestors;” some claimed they “dated back to the first Christians” or that their beliefs were based on doctrines in Holy Scripture while others alleged they were descendants of less extreme first Anabaptists.¹³ Bitsche admitted that Mennonites were different from earlier Anabaptists in many ways: they had abandoned fanaticism and strange revelations and had established a ministry, even if most of the ministers were uneducated and “barely distinguishable from the other believers.”¹⁴ As a Catholic priest, Bitsche obviously had difficulty understanding a religious organisation that lacked a religious hierarchy and a centralized authority.

In order to examine Mennonite doctrines and beliefs, Bitsche relied heavily on a 1837 Mennonite confession of faith. This confession of faith was undoubtedly the *Glaubensbekenntniss der Mennoniten in Preussen*, published in Elbing in 1836 and 1837. This had been reprinted in Russia in 1870 and 1874,¹⁵ shortly before the Mennonite emigration to Canada and was popular with the conservative immigrant groups which settled in Manitoba. Utilising the confession, Bitsche noted Mennonite principles relating to non-resistance, separation from the state and refusal to take the oath. Excommunication was maintained among Mennonites in “all its rigour” and those who married outside “the sect” were “mercilessly excommunicated.” Schisms produced endless divisions among Mennonites and Bitsche provided examples from Mennonite history which indicate he must either have had access to one of the early writings on the history of the group, or to an extensive encyclopedia article. This is also apparent in his brief discussion of Mennonite origins and their settlement in Russia. He noted how the colonists in Russia had prospered and quoted extensively from a favourable description written in 1872/73 by the Scottish traveller David Mackenzie Wallace, whose account only recently had appeared in print.¹⁶ In

spite of this prosperity the threat of military service forced Mennonites to emigrate “in order to find, in a new country, the freedom to live according to the dictates of their sect.”¹⁷

Bitsche and the Mennonites of Manitoba

Bitsche obviously had personal knowledge of and contact with Mennonite settlers in Manitoba. A year before his article on the Mennonites appeared in *Le Manitoba*, he published, in the same newspaper, an account of his arrival in Manitoba in 1879 and his journey from Emerson to Saint Léon. Crossing to the left bank of the Red River he reported that he had passed an old Hudson’s Bay Company fort built of logs and had taken the road which led across “virgin prairie” to the Mennonite village of Neuanlage, newly founded with “five half-finished houses”, and sixteen miles from West Lynne. Further on he encountered more established Mennonite settlements with “sizeable crops although much smaller than they currently have.” He reported how the Mennonites gave their villages “very pretty names” noting particularly Reinland (“the capital”), Blumenort, Rosenau, Rosengarten and Rosenfeld. “The Mennonite colony” he concluded “stops at the foot of the Pembina Hills.”¹⁸

Father Bitsche therefore encountered West Reserve Mennonites before even reaching his own parishioners and, as he indicates in his account, later made further contact with them. From his account it is clear that he inspected the meeting house at Reinland and discussed various matters with individual Mennonites, a task no doubt greatly facilitated by his fluency in German. The account also reveals that Bitsche was intrigued by the Mennonite settlers. On theological grounds there was much to disagree with, but their simple faith and pragmatic approach to life appears to have attracted him. It is interesting that while noting the anarchy of their Anabaptist ancestors, to Bitsche the Mennonites of Manitoba appeared an orderly and cooperative people; while unlike Catholics they lacked the authority of a hierarchical church, they appeared to recognize and obey their own leaders. Given what we know of his troubles with his own parishioners, there is more than a hint of admiration and even envy in Bitsche’s account. At best he remained highly ambiguous towards the Mennonites, although in his final sections he found them wanting in human spirit and believed their community life doomed in a land of individual freedom. But then he was a priest of the Holy Roman Catholic Church. What follows is a translation of those sections of Bitsche’s account dealing with the Mennonites in Manitoba. We have edited some parts of the text and reordered three sections. The sections are as Bitsche headed them.

The Mennonites of Manitoba (1883)

by Father Jean-Théobald Bitsche

In areas newly opened to colonisation immigrants seem to like to group themselves as much as possible according to their nationality, first and foremost in order more easily to practise their religion, but also because, even in a foreign country, they have a natural predilection for their former compatriots. However, this does not prevent different groups from mutually supporting each other and from blending together to form, in a short time, a single nation.

Nevertheless, in the province of Manitoba, we see an exception to this rule. There is a people here which keep to themselves, which live only for themselves, and which, as much as possible, avoid contact with others. They have their own government, and their own religion which mercilessly banishes from its bosom those of its own who seek to unite themselves more intimately with outsiders.¹⁹ This people are the Mennonites.

Upon seeing the singularity of these people, one seeks naturally to know them better. On arrival in this country, the name Mennonite was barely known to me, but having often come into contact with them, I wanted to study their customs and their religious doctrines. As my curiosity could not be satisfied by what they told me themselves, I began to read the works of writers who deal with different Protestant sects. In this manner I was able to procure a more precise, if incomplete, knowledge of these people. It is the fruit of this research that I want to share with the public. If, by chance, some inaccuracies should have slipped into my work, I am ready to correct them as soon as I will be able to convince myself of them....²⁰

At this point Bitsche presented his general introduction to Mennonite origins and history discussed above.

[The Settlement of the Mennonites in Manitoba]

When the government of Canada took possession of the immense English Northwest Territory, it subsequently made a great effort to populate it with colonists. Proposals had been made to the Russian Mennonites by the Canadian government and they concluded an agreement with them of which I have been unable to procure a copy.²¹ But the conditions accorded to the Mennonites were certainly extremely favourable. Besides other favours, the government granted them two vast reserves, extremely fertile and perfectly well suited for trade, one east of the Red River, in the vicinity of Winnipeg [the East Reserve], and the other west of the Red River, adjacent to Dakota and in the neighbourhood of Emerson [the West Reserve]. It also granted them the privilege of living together

in villages, although the other settlers are obliged to live individually on their own homesteads, despite the protestations of many.²²

The first Mennonites arrived in the country in 1874; I was not able to note their number. Here are the statistics for the arrival of the Mennonites in the years: 1875–3,258; 1876–1,358; 1877–183; 1878–323; 1879–248. For the following years, the report of Ottawa's Minister of Agriculture does not mention Mennonite immigration; it is, however, certain that a number more have arrived since 1879. The number of Mennonites in the various municipalities of Manitoba at the time of the general census of 1881 was Morris East (295); Sainte-Agathe (1,068); Laverandrye (1,011); Dufferin South (3,431); Morris West (1,946); Other places (7); total: 7,776.

The majority of Mennonites are of German origin; there are also many who are descended from former Dutch families and a small number whose names belong to other nationalities. Their language, which is a mix of different German dialects, is quite difficult to understand for those who speak only the classical High German of Germany; however, as nearly all Mennonites know how to read and write, and as they often read the Bible and other religious books, they can express themselves easily in a more intelligible German. Some speak Russian quite well, and many, especially the young people, are devoting themselves to the study of English, which many already speak with ease.²³

Mennonite Villages

The Mennonites are nearly all settled in villages; very few live in isolation on their own land. These villages, which are extremely numerous, are composed of between 20 and 40 families. This is how they proceed with their establishment: when there is a question of forming a new village, their leaders choose a site which seems appropriate. First they make an extremely long road. Then, on either side, they divide the land into lots a little more than 200 feet wide and 200 feet long, although the length varies depending on the nature of the terrain.

Every Mennonite who wants to establish himself in this new village and who is of the requisite age to take up a homestead receives his lot with the order to register a quarter section in his name, which the government provides for his homestead. The new colonists then construct their homes in a symmetrical order on the lots they were assigned in the division of the land. Houses are invariably put up at a certain distance from the road; they have only one story, a very steep roof and are nearly always covered with thatch. The floor of the house consists almost invariably of bare earth, and the houses are almost all built of tree trunks. They are very warm, well maintained, generally clean and furnished with great simplicity and many are even very comfortable. Inside one can see warm feather beds, cupboards of Russian origin and benches which serve at once as seats, cupboards and bedsteads. A large stove of brick or earth is located in the middle

of the house and maintains an even heat, night and day. These stoves are usually heated with straw or dry manure; the latter invariably spreads far and wide an odour often disagreeable to strangers. Mennonites are lovers of bright colours, and therefore their doors, windows and furniture are usually painted in a very garish red or blue.²⁴

One often finds many families in the same house, since children stay with their parents until they have the means to construct a home on their own lot.

Next to the house is usually a much larger building which serves as a stable, a threshing floor, a granary or hayloft and a shed. The stables are well built and maintained. In the buildings one generally finds all the equipment and tools necessary for the good operation of a farm. In front of the buildings, there is a large garden carefully planted with trees, flowers and vegetables. The garden is surrounded by a wooden fence of varied styles according to the taste and means of each owner. The rest of the lot is used for cultivation.

Mennonites do not farm their own homestead land, but lots of land assigned to them by their leaders. Even the hay fields are divided into lots. A portion of the land in a village is reserved for pasture, to which every day a shepherd leads the local flocks and herds. The Mennonite system of land usage evidently recalls the principle of community of goods of which their forefathers the Anabaptists once preached, but which they themselves do not mention in their confession of faith.²⁵

If this way of establishing themselves has advantages for Mennonites, subsequently it will cause them great difficulties. Suppose some of them accumulate debts and are obliged to sell, or that one or another wants to establish himself on his own land, or that a certain number separate from their religious community to join another? Doubtless with time this will happen, and everyone can imagine what the predicament of these men, whose interests are so intimately tied to one another, will be. From the outset many have recognized the danger and would have preferred to establish themselves immediately on their own land, but were required to obey the will of their leaders at risk of regretting it later.²⁶

All the villages have German names, which are very well chosen. Here are a few of them with their translations: Blumenort—place of flowers; Blumenfeld—field of flowers; Blumengarten—garden of flowers; Rosengarten—garden of roses; Rosenan [Rosenau]—place of roses; Reinland—clean country, etc....

Marriage and Family²⁷

The peace and happiness of families depends very much on the idea one has of marriage. Although Mennonites do not recognize marriage as a sacrament, they nonetheless preach its indissolubility, its purity and that it is an institution established by God²⁸... People who desire to contract a marriage must not be too closely related, must profess the same faith and practise the same religion; he

who prefers to remain single does well according to the Apostle Paul, if he does it with Christian freedom, because God forces no one into marriage or into celibacy. But if a member of the community marries outside it, it is viewed as a violation of his vows and as a voluntary separation from the community. The Mennonite catechism strongly recommends that Mennonites care for their children and supervise their good education; it is required of children to respect and to love their parents, to obey them and to help them with their needs.

Agriculture and Trades

Mennonites are an agricultural people. They have no other trades except those which are absolutely necessary. As farmers they certainly do not deserve being held up as models for nowhere does one find more weeds than in their crops. It is, after all, a known fact that because of their poor system of ploughing, they harvest far fewer bushels to the hectare than their neighbours.²⁹ They succeed reasonably well in animal rearing. Their animals, which are not first class, have a reasonable appearance. For several years the Mennonites have had a real mania for horses; everyone wants to outdo his neighbour, to the point that many of them have contracted great debts. A fairly intelligent Mennonite told me that "horses and machines will be the ruination of our families".

Civil Government of the Mennonites

Here Bitsche quotes from the 1837 Confession of Faith on the requirement of Mennonites to recognise and obey the civil authorities, pay their taxes and act according to God's will.

This doctrine of the Mennonites on civil authority easily explains the manner of their actions in Manitoba. When it is a question of voting for members of Parliament or municipal councillors, one never sees them seek to hold a post, or to cast their votes; on the other hand, they are quick to do what is required of them. However, one must not believe that there is no government among them. On the contrary, they have such a well organized system of authority that they could serve as a model to many others who think themselves more adept than the Mennonites. Each village has its Schultz (mayor), a certain number of villages together have an Ober Schultz (chief mayor), which in English is ironically referred to as a Kaiser, in memory of the Tsar or emperor of the Russians. All these magistrates are elected by majority; everything, the duration of their term in office, their rights and their responsibilities, is clearly defined. They form the government of the people. The Mennonites never appeal to external courts; they have their own tribunals, their own judges and fare no worse than their neighbours. It is strongly stressed upon all these dignitaries that they must be just, impartial and above all seek the public good and not their own advantage.³⁰

Church, Service and Spiritual Government

Once again, Bitsche quotes extensively on these matters from the Confession of Faith.

The sacred ministers of the Mennonites are elders (Aelteste), preachers (prédicateurs) and deacons (diacres).³¹ These dignitaries must be chosen by the community. Preference is given not to the most knowledgeable but to those who have good witness, the spirit of God and a zeal for the salvation of souls. Those elected are then raised to their new office by the laying on of hands by the elders. They must instruct the people by teaching them the word of God as it is found in the Holy Scriptures.³²

Mennonites reject ecclesiastical tradition, the writings of the Church [i.e. Catholic] Fathers and the decisions of [earlier Church and Catholic] councils.³³ For Mennonites the Holy Scripture is the only rule of faith and, despite their profound ignorance, each believes he better fathoms the meaning of Scripture than the most learned doctors. This is how their confession of faith deals with the subject. Since we know that the Holy Scripture is the work of God and the manifestation of His holy will, it must also be our rule, according to which we must organize our laws and our ways of living. On the other hand, we consider that all human writings, however beautiful they may seem, be false and worthless; this also applies to the writings in the tradition of the Church fathers, however convincing they may appear. These writings and these traditions must always be compared with Scripture to see whether they should be accepted or rejected.

[Outside the Mennonite world,] the most knowledgeable theologians spend years reflecting on Scripture and carefully consult the works of their predecessors, but despite all their efforts they have to admit that they have been unable to plumb the depths of God's Word. But these simple Mennonite peasants, who barely know how to read, claim that they alone are capable of explaining Scripture and determining its true meaning. Do we not hear in these claims the voices of those visionary Anabaptists who, by their eccentric sermons, became the laughing stock of the public? The Mennonites of Manitoba have many churches on both the right and left sides of the Red River.³⁴ These churches are of an extraordinary simplicity.³⁵ Thus the one situated in their capital of Reinland is a long building made of tree trunks, with a very steep roof covered by thatch.

There is no ornament or religious symbol to be seen on the outside. During the week, the shutters of the windows and doors are carefully closed so that no profane eye might penetrate its mysteries. The only ornament I discovered around the church were certain plants whose seeds Mennonites had brought from Russia and from which they make brooms.³⁶

The inhabitants of neighbouring villages meet each Sunday in these churches to attend services. The service begins with a hymn sung in a very whimpering tone. Then the elder or one of the preachers gives a sermon in an evangelical tone. Everything is concluded with more hymns. From time to time, they

distribute Communion, that is to say bread, which they eat in memory of the passion of Jesus Christ. The Mennonites are not lovers of prayer: God, they say, knows our needs; he does not need us to let him know of them with numerous prayers. Preach, preach, they add; it is the word of God which gives life. In good Catholic families, and even in many Protestant homes, the day is begun and finished with a prayer said in common. Mennonites do not believe in such things.³⁷

Discipline and Excommunication

On matters of discipline, the Mennonites are very severe. *Here Bitsche quotes from the Confession of Faith.* The more or less great rigour of this discipline depends upon the text cited by the authority, because it is he who ultimately judges and decides if a deed is scandalous or not. However, one must not believe that Mennonites condemn a sinner for a single infraction. Far from it, because it is only after a third admonition, if they remain impenitent, that they may be excluded from the community. But what makes this discipline harsh in practice is that Mennonites see as a very grave sin anything which goes against the intolerant spirit of their sect. Thus, in one of their villages a few years ago some young people tried to sing hymns in harmony. Our saints [ie. the Mennonites] were so alarmed by this profane act, that the guilty were ordered to stop their singing immediately if they did not want to be excommunicated.³⁸

Forgiveness of Insult, Injury, War and Oath

Bitsche quotes from the Confession of Faith on these issues and then notes: It would be very desirable if all Mennonites punctiliously observed the points of their confession of faith. They would be better off themselves, as would those who do business with them. Then one would no longer see discord in many families, the very frequent disputes between neighbours and the divisions which spring up between them from time to time. Merchants would also no longer need to take them to court in order to get paid.³⁹

Schools

Nearly all Mennonites know how to read and write and insist that their children also learn these skills. Each village has its school and a teacher, who is usually a simple worker. For many years they did not want to take any money from the government to support their schools, in order to stay independent of

outside interference. But since the Department of Education named as inspector of their schools one of their number, a Jacob Friesen, many villages have registered their schools with the government.⁴⁰

[At this point Bitsche quotes from the report of the Manitoba Superintendent of Schools (Protestant section) for the years 1882 to 1883, including his statement that the Mennonite "teachers are enthusiastic and intelligent."]

As I have had occasion to visit many of their schools, I can only confirm the Superintendent's report. I will only add that most of their classical works could be better chosen, and that their teachers, though willing enough, leave much to be desired from the point of view of their knowledge.⁴¹

Customs, Habits and Morals

Mennonites are generally hardworking and serious. They are extremely distrustful of and reserved with strangers. However, when you speak their language and show them kindness, they become more communicative. On the other hand, when you deal with them arrogantly or scornfully, you will definitely feel their resentment. For this reason alone, more than one magistrate has lost the support of all of them. The traveller is painfully impressed by the doleful air which reigns over their villages. You never see the joyous festivals so common among other Germans; you never hear happy songs either or that harmonious music other Germans love so much. The barking of a dog or the crowing of a cock or even the discordant sounds of the shepherd's bugle are the only things which interrupt the heavy silence. This sadness is so much a feature of the Mennonites that even in their dealings with family there is an indefinable feeling of sorrow and fear. The cause of all this must be sought in their religious discipline, which views as a great crime anything which resembles gaiety or even the pleasures of life.

Conclusion

In this study I have sought, above all, accuracy of fact and moderation of expression. It is for this reason that I have avoided citing facts and opinions of doctrine which would have shed an odious light on these people and also on some points of doctrine professed by them, but not mentioned in their own laws. As for the Mennonites of Manitoba, I think that in a very few years great divisions will rise among them. This is because it will be impossible for them to live surrounded by free men, who are definitely superior to them, without being drawn by their example to a wider perspective and a life less regimented by their leaders.

St Léon, 25 November, 1883

Notes

All translations from the French are by Ingrid Riesen. We would like to thank John Dyck and Professor Adolf Ens for their advice on early Manitoba Mennonites and Dr Theresa Sawicka for her assistance with Catholic issues.

¹ See Leo Driedger, "Native rebellion and Mennonite invasion: an examination of two Canadian river valleys," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* (henceforth *MQR*) 46, 1972, 290-300, Lawrence Klippenstein, "Manitoba Métis and Mennonite immigrants: first contacts," *MQR* 48, 1974, 476-88, Alvina Block, "Métis, Mennonites, and land in Manitoba," *Mennonite Historian*, 21, 1995, 1-2. For a map showing the location of Indian, Métis and Mennonite reserves and trails in 1875 see Gerhard John Ens, *Volost and Municipality: the Rural Municipality of Rhineland 1884-1984* (Altona: R. M. of Rhineland, 1984), 12.

² Rev. Pere [Jean-Théobald] Bitsche, "Étude Historique sur les Mennonites." *Le Manitoba* [henceforth *LM*], 13, 1 December 1883- 10 January 1884.

³ The most quoted account is that by the visiting Governor-General of Canada and his wife, Lord and Lady Dufferin: see E. K. Francis, *In Search of Utopia: the Mennonites in Manitoba* (Altona: D. W. Friesen, 1955), 78-79; F. H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1974), 218. Less well known is the account by another Governor General, the Marquis of Lorne, in the early 1880s and published as *Canadian Pictures Drawn with Pen and Pencil* (London: the Religious Tract Society, [1883?]), 13 8-140.

⁴ Bitsche's account is not mentioned by E. K. Francis in his bibliographical survey of sources on Manitoban Mennonites, "A Bibliography on the Mennonites of Manitoba," *MQR*, 27, 1953, 237-248, nor in his later major account, *In search of Utopia*.

⁵ The Society of the Precious Blood was a missionary order established in Europe in the nineteenth century which was particularly active among German-speaking immigrants in the mid-west of the United States from the 1840s onwards. See P.J. Knapke, "Precious Blood, Society of," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, 11, 708-09.

⁶ His death notice in *Le Manitoba* (21(24) 23 March 1892, 3) claims he arrived in 1878 as does Antoine Gaborieau (Notre-Dame-de-Lourdes (Manitoba) 1891-1990: un siecle d'histoire, Comite des fetes du centenaire, 1990), although his own account published in 1882 (see note 9 below) suggests the date was 1879.

⁷ Marie-Anna. A. Roy, *La Montagne Pembina au temps des colons* (Winnipeg: Canadian Publishers, 1970), 18-29; Yvette Brandt, *A History of the Municipality of Lorne* (Altona: D. W. Friesen and the Municipality of Lorne, Somerset MB, 1980), 106-12.

⁸ Le Montagnard. Saint Léon: Gravissons les Collines, October 1978-December 1979.

⁹ Brandt, *A History of the Municipality of Lorne*, 107.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 111.

¹¹ See the introduction by Annette Saint-Pierre to the *Index du journal Le Manitoba, 1881-1925* (St Boniface: College Universitaire de Saint Boniface, 1982).

¹² *LM* 13 (20), 1 Dec. 1883, 2.

¹³ *LM* 13 (21) 4 Dec. 1883, 2; 13(22) 6 Dec. 1883, 2.

¹⁴ *LM* 13 (23) 11 Dec. 1883, 2.

¹⁵ "Confessions of Faith," *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 1, 684.

¹⁶ D. Mackenzie Wallace, *Russia*. London: Cassell, 1877; the original description of the Mennonites appeared in volume 2, 100-03.

¹⁷ *LM* 13 (24) 13 Dec. 1883, 4.

¹⁸ J-T. Bitsch in *Le Manitoba* (from now on *LM*), 40, 1882, 3; see also Roy, *La Montagne Pembina*, 18.

¹⁹ This may refer to the Reinlander Mennonites banning members on the West Reserve quite soon after settlement.

²⁰ *LM* 13 (20) Dec. 1883, 2.

²¹ This is an interesting comment given that the understanding on what exactly had been agreed by the Mennonites and the government differed in crucial aspects. See Adolf Ens, *Subjects or Citizens: The Mennonite experience in Canada, 1870-1925* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 1994).

²² The “protestations of many” probably reflects numerous complaints of settlers on the western edge of the West Reserve towards Mennonites. Adolf Ens has pointed out that the 1876 amendment to the Homestead Act permitted other settlers than Mennonites to form hamlets and this option was taken-up by some Icelanders. On the complex issue of differences on the issue of

homesteads and hamlets in Mennonite and official views of landholding, see Ens, *Subjects or citizens*, 35-38.

²³ *LM* 13(26) 18 Dec. 1883, 2.

²⁴ It has been suggested to us that the colours may merely reflect the availability of paint, or knowing Mennonites, of cheap paint! However, the wagons Mennonites manufactured in Russia were also colourfully painted, as were some chests, and the choice of colours may reflect some lost, peasant folk art tradition.

²⁵ In fact the structure of village settlement reestablished in Manitoba did not date back to Anabaptist times but only to the settlement of Mennonites in Russia after 1789.

²⁶ See note 22 above. Bitsche may be reporting rumours of discontent that do not appear in official documents at this time.

²⁷ *LM* 13 (27) 20 Dec. 1883, 2; this section originally was preceded by the section on “Civil Government” which has been moved below and came before that on “Forgiveness of insult...” which also has been repositioned by us.

²⁸ Bitsche actually uses the phrase “a divine institution” *LM* 13 (12) 10 Jan. 1884, 4.

²⁹ Manitoba newspapers often held the Mennonites out to be good cultivators of the soil so these comments may well represent the climate of local criticism and debate among the different immigrant farming groups. However, Adolf Ens points out that early municipal records do indicate a problem with weeds and methods of tillage that increased problems with soil erosion.

³⁰ *LM* 13 (11) 29 Dec. 1883, 8.

³¹ Earlier Bitsche had written of all Mennonites that “At the head of each church is an elder (Aelteste[r]), who has preachers (ie. bishops) and deacons to assist him. The elders, bishops and deacons are chosen from among the members of the sect, and since the Mennonites have no schools of higher training/colleges, these ministers ... are barely distinguishable from the other believers in terms of their knowledge.” *LM* 13 (23) 11 Dec. 1883, 2.

³² *LM* 13 (11) 29 Dec. 1883, 8.

³³ This comment reveals how important these things were to Catholics and how the understanding of faith by lay members was mediated by the clerical hierarchy rather than being available to all through a reading of the Bible.

³⁴ While there may have been other buildings operating as meeting houses, only two are known for certain from this period: one at Chortitz on the East Reserve and the other in Reinland which Bitsche describes in detail.

³⁵ Earlier Bitsche had remarked that “Mennonite churches are buildings without any architectural luxury, and also without any interior decoration,” *LM* 13 (23) 11 Dec. 1883, 2. This

plainness obviously contrasted strongly with the elaborate decoration found in Catholic churches, even those of immigrants to Manitoba.

³⁶The Reinland meeting house still stands although it no longer functions as a church.

³⁷*LM* 13(12), 10 Jan. 1884, 4; Bitsche here confuses the lack of open, spoken prayer with an absence of prayer and praying. The Mennonite tradition of silent prayer, both in services and at home, was obviously still strong at this period.

³⁸This is probably a reference to the case of the school teacher and later minister of the Bergthal Church, Jacob Hoeppner, who was excluded for teaching new hymns to his pupils; see Henry J. Gerbrandt, *Adventure in faith: the background in Europe and the development in Canada of the Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba*, Altona: The Bergthaler Mennonite Church of Manitoba/D. W. Friesen & Sons, 1970, 79-80.

³⁹Local English newspapers in Emerson and Morden from this period do mention cases of actions brought against Mennonites over matters of debt; we are grateful to John Dyck for this information.

⁴⁰In fact in 1883 out of a total of about 40 schools only 13 Mennonite schools had registered, *Ens, Subjects or citizens*, 65.

⁴¹*LM* 13 (12), 10 Jan. 1884, 4.