

# CANADIAN MENNONITE LITERATURE

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**B**EFORE DISCUSSING the literature of the Canadian Mennonites a short historical sketch of Mennonitism is in order. The Mennonites belong to the radical wing of Protestantism who went beyond Luther in stressing their emancipation from Rome, for they emphasized a personal free will and regarded the unadulterated discipleship of Jesus as their overriding concern. Infant baptism, taking of the oath, and the bearing of arms for military service were repudiated firmly from the very beginning. By taking literally Christ's words in the Sermon on the Mount, "Swear not at all", they refused to take any oath, even a civil oath. Christ's words: "Love your enemies" and "Resist not evil", and the Fifth Commandment, formed the basis of their principle of non-resistance. For their practice of adult baptism they became known as Anabaptists. The right not to swear an oath or take up arms was granted to the Anabaptists by the governmental leaders of all the countries to which they migrated. But these privileges were subsequently always withdrawn.

One of the outstanding leaders of the Anabaptist movement in the Netherlands was Menno Simons. Born in 1496 in a Frisian village, he became a Roman Catholic priest, but renounced his faith in 1536 to assume leadership of an Anabaptist congregation. He became their first elder. When the Counter-Reformation under the Duke of Alba (1544-1572) forced him and many of his followers to flee the country, they found a haven and new fields for their missionary zeal in the more tolerant principalities of Northeast Germany. From there the movement spread rapidly; the time for religious independence from Rome had come and many sensed and heeded this spirit. Eventually even Anabaptist congregations having no direct connection with Menno's movement became known as

Mennonites, a generic term used today as synonymous with Anabaptists of a pacifist orientation.

It was in the Vistula delta, in the Danzig triangle along the Vistula and Nogat rivers, that the Mennonite movement achieved an ethnic identity, a *Gemeinschaft*. There they consolidated their religious and economic community. Towards the end of the 18th century their prosperity and established way of life was threatened once again; land acquisition was restricted and pressure to do military service was exerted on Mennonite young men.

When Catherine II succeeded to the Russian throne in 1763 she published a manifesto in Western Europe inducing foreign settlers to colonize the unoccupied agricultural lands of her domain. These lands had been bought with a price; she had cleared them of Turkish domination. Agriculture was central to her plan for the stability of this area and for national prosperity, so she sought model farmers who would work the land with perseverance. The offer she extended was generous and attractive — free land, religious toleration, exemption from military duty and taxation and freedom in establishing educational and social institutions. A delegate group of Mennonite explorers set out to appraise the situation and having reached accord they agreed to settle on the Russian steppes. In 1789 the first families arrived in Chortitza on the Dnejpr, which became the initial settlement of the Mennonites in Russia. By 1914 Mennonite villages numbering over 200, with a combined population of approximately 100,000, had spread far into south and east Russia. When the privileges originally granted the Mennonites in Russia were jeopardized, the first migration to Canada was undertaken during the years 1874-78. Subsequent migrations followed in the 1920's after Communism stifled religious freedom and free enterprise in Russia. After the Second World War many other Mennonites, evacuated by the German thrust of 1941-43, gradually found their way to their fellows in the New World. The Mennonite emigration to America is over. There are in the world today some 500,000 Mennonites. In the province of Manitoba, where they have settled most densely, some 55,000 have established new homes. Of these at least 15,000 live in Winnipeg, which is the largest concentration of Mennonitism in existence today.

MENNONITES have from their beginnings, four and a half centuries ago, existed chiefly on a fare of Bible and Bread. They were almost ready, it would seem, to ply the pen after having become a *Gemeinschaft*, a self-conscious community in the Vistula triangle. But then the time came to pull up

and pitch anew in the Russian Steppes. Here the successive *Tod, Not, Brot*, (Death, Distress, Prosperity) generations ran out of time again. There were literary attempts but progress was slight.

The emigration to Canada, the departure from the Ukrainian steppes which were to have been their home "for all time", again threw the reflective mind into much disarray and consternation. True, the Russian Revolution with subsequent famine and privation inspired and even forced many to write about their experiences. But how? The Mennonite artist, expressing himself in a German language which had never received sustenance from the German literary soil proper, encountered the same difficulty as before in Russia: to identify himself with a country not completely native to his formative years. Such identification requires time, more than time: it demands a critical yet compassionate, mature yet flexible and receptive audience. This audience was rarely there, and if it was, it demanded literal and not imagined truths in novels, and like most self-conscious groups whose existence has often been threatened, it was disposed to accept only literature that favourably portrayed the Mennonite world. In short, what Mennonite reading public there was wanted to be treated to *realia*, a reflection no doubt of their modest literalist biblical fare. Their literary fancy is so impoverished that it must be assumed that, unbeknown to them, their biblical fare not only gave sustenance to their faith but also ample nourishment to the demands of imagination and fancy.

This very limited literary background may explain why the world of fantasy, for example, is rare in Mennonite literature. Life was simple and sober; hard work and honest living produced prosperity which in turn was interpreted as a manifestation of God's bountiful blessings. They lived Max Weber's Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism, centuries before he so pointedly described it. The great, oftentimes unique, accomplishments of the Mennonites in every country where they settled were limited to success in the agricultural and enterprising area and were never matched by their literary endeavours.

There was one very notable exception to the dearth in Mennonite letters: Hans Harder. He was born in 1903 in the remote Mennonite colony of Samara on the Volga. It was Harder's luck that he wrote his numerous novels in Germany where the intellectual climate was diversified, mature and discerning enough to absorb his powerful artistry. Making his home in West Prussia after World War I he has written *Das Dorf an der Volga*, *Das Sibirische Tor*, *Klim*, *Die Hungerbrueder* and *Die Muschel*. Harder writes about his lost homeland, about death and graveyards. Harder understands what Schiller's "*fernende*

*Erinnerung*" (receding memory) means and he is warm and autobiographical yet not sentimental, maudlin, or confessional. In Canada, as in the Mennonite settlements of Russia, we venture to say, he would have been isolated or hounded out of the community, sharing the fate of other Mennonite writers of less ability.

It was this suspicion of things imaginary and novel that much occupied J. H. Janzen's mind in his exposition of Mennonite literature in *Mennonite Life*, January 1946.<sup>1</sup> Reflecting on the situation past and present of Russo-Canadian Mennonites, Janzen writes, "Mennonitism was regarded in certain respects as a terra sancta on which the jugglery of belles-lettres dared not appear. That Mennonites would write in this genre was simply sin. After all, one could not treat Mennonitism that way."

It is difficult to imagine the honest lay minister and writer Janzen posing much of a threat to any community of interests, religious or ethnic. And yet the events that caused him pained surprise on publishing his first story shortly after the turn of this century are to this day sadly typical of Mennonite reactions to their writers. Janzen says:

Before the appearance of my book (1910), I had published a story in Kroeker's Familienkalender in the style of a diary, in which, awkward as I was at the time, I had not sufficiently masked the individuals who served as my characters, and they recognized themselves and became furiously angry at me. I had to ask their pardon, and it was no easy task to receive their forgiveness. I thought I had defended them, but they felt that they had been exposed at the rack, and the injustice which had been done they considered a sin unto death. Later I became more clever, and if occasionally someone felt offended, he would not know where to send me to beg for pardon, so that I was henceforth spared that unpleasant task.

In Canada, Janzen and two fellow "poets", M. Fast and G. Loewen, organized a "Hainbund" (league of young poets) for the purpose of exchanging poetry and criticisms. Loewen's poems were published in a modest volume called *Feldblumen*, and Janzen published his own products of the field and pen by the dozen, mainly in mimeographed form. Later poetry was much along these lines, such as G. A. Peter's *Blumen am Wegrand* (Wayside Flowers). All this led the Germanist Hermann Boeschstein<sup>2</sup> to observe that Mennonite poetic writing was "blatantly dilettante". It is a sadly true commentary. These poems are Romanticism re-visited, heavily dependent on Goethe and Eichendorff for theme, turns of phrase and style.

Janzen ends his hopeful exposition with a hearty "Vivat! Crescat! Floreat!" to the future belles lettres of "our own", but the echo to the valiant cry failed to

resound. And yet Janzen's first novel *Denn meine Augen haben Deinen Heiland gesehen*, (Halbstadt, Russia: Raduga, 1911) was a breakthrough, not so much for its content but because it was a beginning. It was the first book in which a Mennonite wrote about the common Mennonite life in the form of fiction. In the *Mennonite Life* of July 1951 Arnold Dyck describes just what an overwhelming breakthrough Janzen's effort actually meant. What lasting impression it left on Dyck's mind or to what extent it motivated him to start writing is a matter of speculation. In any event, Dyck in the Thirties suddenly became the only Mennonite writer of note in both the High and Low German languages in Canada. Much of what he has written is *Heimatsdichtung* and was treated and read as such.<sup>3</sup>

It remained for "outsiders", — non-Mennonites — to discover a new dimension to Dyck's artistry. In a perceptive and extremely well written article on A. Dyck's *Bildungsroman*, *Verloren in der Steppe*, Michael Hadley,<sup>4</sup> was quick to realize that *Verloren in der Steppe* was much more than "merely a piece of Mennonite writing". He observes that "it is this type of bland reasoning that has militated against the novel's being recognized as part of the broader German tradition. While the work admittedly has its own distinctive character and 'mystique' it takes its rightful place in a genre peculiar to German literature, namely that of the Bildungsroman." Walter Schmiedehaus, the writer, apothecary and German Consul in Chihuahua, Mexico, stylistically and genetically akin to author Theodor Fontane, was also quick to realize Dyck's art, observing: "Wer auch nur ein einziges Buch von Arnold Dyck gelesen hat, der weiss, dass aus jeder Zeile ein Sanger seines Volkes, ein Heimatdichter spricht". (One need read only a single work of A. Dyck's to know that in his every sentence speaks a poet of his people.)<sup>5</sup>

Dyck edited the *Mennonitische Warte* in the 30's and early 40's, the only respectable Mennonite journal in which budding artistry was given even a fair chance of expression. In the light of what has already been said it will come as no surprise that the *Warte* was soon defunct. Another no less valiant effort was Victor Peters' *Mennonitische Lehrerzeitung* in the late 40's and early 50's. It suffered the same sad fate. The churches, i.e. the Mennonite establishment, felt threatened and granted no support, financial or moral, while other support was insular and fragmentary; another manifestation that the field of Mennonite belles-lettres was still in its infancy.

Dyck has written equally successfully in the Low German vernacular and his portrayals of the comic characters Koop and Bua will probably outlive all other

Canadian Mennonite writings in German. In his best short story in the dialect, *Twee Breew* (Two Letters), Dyck has fully utilized Low German as a vehicle of respectable literary art. There is masterful dialogue and description: the physical setting of a blizzard, admirably and powerfully depicted, is set against a lonely woman's inner struggle for hope, formerly in the Steppes in Russia, now in the Canadian Prairie, drawn with sensitivity and sympathy. The two conflicts are developed separately but concomitantly, until they merge with all the pathos and inevitability of great tragedy.

A Mennonite poet who developed into maturity rather late in life is Gerhard Wiens, now residing in Oklahoma but formerly a teacher in Manitoba. When in 1967 the C.B.C. ran a series of broadcasts on ethnic poetry other than English and French, they commissioned me to gather representative Mennonite poetry. Everything else suggested was refused as too "doggerel", but Wiens' poems, "His Willow Tree" and "The Farmer's Son", were immediately regarded even in translation as poetry of note. Of the other Mennonites who have put their pen to the test Gerhard Friesen (pseud Fritz Senn) and Abraham Johann Friesen (pseud Karlo) must be rated as the best. Both wrote in *Die Warte* and in the *Mennonitische Welt*.

An anthology of Low German, English and High German Poetry by J. W. Goerzen<sup>6</sup> was published in 1967 on the occasion of Canada's Centennial. The doggerel quality of Goerzen's poetry is matched only by his genuine sincerity. Goerzen is a romantic rhymer and his innumerable Odes to the Moon are directly, sometimes literally, dependent on Goethe and Eichendorff. This kind of imitation resulted in obvious caricatures.

THE PERIOD OF GERMAN-CANADIAN LITERARY EFFORTS seems to be over. Young Mennonites, studying and dabbling in both High and Low German, think and express themselves, in the main, in English. Some — but they can be quickly counted — realize well that when a system, an institution or a language and the way of life it represents are doomed, then the flame of devotion may flare wider and higher and burn for a moment with exceptional intensity. But man, particularly North American man, lives rarely by nostalgia.

Before mention is made of the flicker of hope in contemporary Mennonite writing, a brief reference must be made to the writing of Mennonites other than the German-Russian-Canadian Mennonites, and to literature that is marginally attributable to the Mennonite people.

The novels by B. Mabel Dunham, of Kitchener, Ont., herself a descendant of Mennonites, are warmly sympathetic treatments of the early Mennonite settlers of that area. *The Trail of the Conestoga* (1924) deals with the immigrants to Waterloo County, Ontario, from Pennsylvania, and their early settlement in Canada. *Toward Sodom* (1927) portrays the religious problems created later in the same settlement by isolation from and nonconformity to the world and the consequent loss of many young people to other creeds and faiths; Miss Dunham's point that the trend towards the city ("Sodom") is fatal to Mennonitism has proved all too true. Her *Kristli's Trees* (1948), also dealing with Mennonites in Ontario, is a charming novel for adolescents. Her last novel *Grand River* (1945) is a more descriptive and historical account of the settlement of this section of Ontario, and refers to the Mennonite contribution to the total development of the province.

Frederick Philip Grove, who taught at Winkler, Manitoba, some 50 years ago and married Katherine Wiens, a Mennonite, touches on Manitoba Mennonite life in his novels *Our Daily Bread* (1929) and *In Search of Myself* (1946), again a form of Bildungsroman. To what extent Paul Hiebert's sketches in *Sarah Binks* (1947) can be called Mennonite literature is debatable, although they amply demonstrate a frustration with the quality of Mennonite High German, while lampooning literary studies and literary societies.

In the 60's the young Mennonite writer, Rudy Wiebe wrote two novels, *Peace Shall Destroy Many* and *First and Vital Candle*, and several short stories. When Wiebe's first novel appeared, the Mennonite community sustained a severe and trying shock. His readers were pained, indeed angered, at the thought that the world would see them in a negative light, and Wiebe was soon given a one-way ticket out of Winnipeg, where he was editing a church paper at the time. Wiebe is unquestionably an artist of note and when he sticks to his business of writing he can cause the dormant chords in the discriminating Mennonite reader to vibrate.

His second novel *First and Vital Candle* is removed from the Mennonite plot. It lacks the convincing tone of its predecessor; indeed it is inhibited and stultified. Wiebe's proselytizing theology and his lack of a genuine encounter with life invariably get in his way, and the tense effort to reconcile his ideological baggage with his artistic intentions results in two-fold damage: the theological argument is shoddy and his writing is not convincing. If Wiebe ever resolves the problem of harmonizing Christianity with life and living he may achieve a real literary breakthrough.

It may just be that the long overdue definitive Canadian Mennonite novel will be produced by one of the writers of the present generation. The questions implied in this statement are obvious: what would constitute a definitive Canadian-Mennonite novel, and how could it come about?

It must of necessity be a work by an artist who is engaged without being involved, an artist who is righteously indignant without being blinded; it must be written by an artist who refuses to confuse humility with ignorance, who is unwilling to accept that a Mennonite's material success is necessarily a manifestation of God's bountiful blessings while his opposite's possessions are spoiled fruits from the tree of avarice, who tolerates without being indifferent, and who knows, understands and accepts that some Mennonite ventures have been trips rather than pilgrimages and that there are mysteries in life not necessarily attributable to God's intervention in history. The novel must be a contestation between the individual and his community, an honest and serious acceptance of both self and the world. Only by such a synthesis can the novel we are imagining be written. The young generation of Mennonites is no longer so mortally afraid as its predecessors of being victimized and ostracized. And so there is hope.

FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> J. H. Janzen, "The literature of the Russo-Canadian Mennonites", *Mennonite Life*, North Newton, Kansas, U.S.A., Jan. 1946.
- <sup>2</sup> Hermann Boeschstein: "Canada in German Literature", Seminar. *A Journal of Germanic Studies*, Toronto, Vol. III, No. 1, Spring 1967.
- <sup>3</sup> *Mennonite Life* articles in 1959 on the occasion of Dyck's 70th birthday and in April & July 1969 on his 80th birthday. Also: Elizabeth Peters: *The Poet Arnold Dyck*, M.A. Thesis, University of Manitoba, 1968.
- <sup>4</sup> Michael L. Hadley, "Arnold Dyck: Verloren in der Steppe, A Mennonite Bildungsroman", *Can. Ethnic Studies Journal*, Calgary, 1970.
- <sup>5</sup> Walter Schmiedehaus, "Der Schriftsteller Arnold Dyck", *Mennonitische Welt*, Winnipeg, Manitoba, January 1952, p. 8.
- <sup>6</sup> J. W. Goerzen, *German Heritage, Canadian Lyrics in Three Languages*. Edmonton, the author 1967.