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Global Mennonite Faith, Farms, and Modernities: Reflections on *Mennonite Farmers*

BRIAN FROESE

Royden Loewen's personal bibliography demonstrates his expansive view of Mennonite and agricultural history. From the start with his big book, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition, 1874-1983* (1983),¹ about a small town in southern Manitoba, to his general moving between transnational history of Mennonites in Manitoba and Nebraska, to Mennonites moving back and forth between Canada and points south in the western hemisphere, to now, finally circling the globe. It is a natural progression of his interests and skills as a historian and writer, and whether it is a small town or the world, he has made place central to the Mennonite story.

As much as we are taught not to judge a book by its cover, I confess, they draw me in. So it is with the cover of this book. A photograph of two Mennonite men, their tractors' steel wheels deep in the Bolivian soil. For a book about farming, soil, land, and place, the majority of the photograph is filled with sky, reminding us of how small and tethered even global spaces are.

Mennonites have long been farmers, and until now, that has not been treated in a global context. Loewen has produced an ambitious book on Mennonite farming in seven different locations around the world: the Netherlands, United States, Canada, Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Russia, and Bolivia. It is a book that is spaciouly written despite being filled with a constellation of seven microhistories.

Anticipating critical reaction, Loewen acknowledges he does not have expert knowledge of each of these locations, but he assembled an impressive team of young scholars with appropriate historical and linguistic backgrounds to do interviews, held a round of seminars to consider how to work with the broad contours of Mennonite, environmental, and agricultural histories, and Loewen himself visited most of the places prior to the project, gaining some familiarity with each location. He came to this project primarily as a scholar, but also as a farmer. Armed with theoretical backing, a methodological foundation, and the credentials as a Mennonite scholar and farmer, it was time to tell seven stories, from the ground up, over the twentieth century.

Loewen argues that localized Mennonite engagement with the environment always takes place in a global context, however, the connections between the local and global are different everywhere. Moreover, whether in the Global North or South and having experienced modernity in vastly different ways, Loewen maintains that Mennonite farmers “tended to it as a place, holistically...they never just farmed *in* a place; they farmed the place” (13).

The enormous challenge then is how to coherently research and tell this seven-part global history. He sketches this process out in a helpful introduction where the project is theoretically grounded by such global environmental scholars as J. R. McNeill, who argued for the unevenness of such histories in different places at the same time. Loewen produces case studies of his seven locations for which literary and oral history sources are comparatively explored. A particular strength of the book is in his finding a way to have the voices of people on the ground heard on issues of religious faith, daily life, and the challenges both local and global in the twentieth century.

Over the course of eight chapters, Loewen demonstrates not only that there was significant change at different rates in different places, but also that none of the stories are simple. An interconnected global history of time and space is traced from the Netherlands during the Reformation to migrations in Europe on account of persecutions and government enticement, then across the Atlantic to North America, and then further migrations to Central and South America. Also flowing from the Dutch experience were missionaries to Indonesia and from the United States to Zimbabwe. Loewen organizes his examination thematically on topics of agricultural change, daily religious faith, gender, state power, climate change, and global connections.

He argues that regardless of theme, common religious linkage, and vocation, the local is key, even in a globalized world. The impact of global agriculture is uneven and works to the benefit of some more than others, but even in difficult circumstances local conditions provide opportunities for agency to farm, to some extent, on one's terms. Among Loewen's most revealing claims is that the Mennonite experience, observed through farming, is divided between traditionalists and the assimilated. Mennonites in different ways accommodated to their contexts, making clear that there is no singular Mennonite world.

Loewen's book then makes its own seven points of contact for readers in history, religious, environmental, agricultural, gender, class,

racial, and geographical studies all without academic jargon in an engaging prose. He confirms, as J. R. McNeill described in *Something New Under the Sun*, the twentieth century was a “peculiar century.”² Here is where Loewen’s book points to places that could deepen and sharpen areas of inquiry. He describes what seems to be the odd lack of Mennonite theological or religious thinking on nature and the environment (116-117). Why might this be the case until the last twenty years? Could it be that a long standing involvement in farming was such a constitutive part of life it did not provoke much self-reflection in contrast to the drama and trauma that came with life changing events such as some of their migrations? Or did Mennonites need the relative nonviolent context of life post-war up to the 1970s to stimulate in them a more explicit articulation of their religious convictions and nonviolent practices?

There is one point here that I think needs clarification. In discussing the Amish relationship to the land, following David McConnell and Marilyn Lovess in their study of Amish and the environment, we read that while they see themselves as stewards of the earth, it is, at best an indirect consequence of their theology of simplicity. Indeed, the Amish reject any idea of spirituality ‘embedded in nature, ‘but they do teach ‘self-denial’ and possess a historical predisposition to ‘parochial ‘rural life, which simply entails a particular ‘resource dependence’ and closeness to nature. Where they have practiced a sustainable agriculture, it has not been as a result of religious practice per se (117-118).

Yet, is this not flowing precisely from their religious convictions? Just a few pages later, the Amish neighbours are described, citing Melvin Gingerich, a Mennonite historian from Iowa: “If the Mennonites associated faith with land, their Amish neighbours did so even more intentionally.” Here Amish simplicity, steel wheel tractors, the rejection of lightning rods, and a “yieldness to nature,” are described by Gingerich in tandem with a faith more intentional than the Mennonites (123-124). I certainly do appreciate how Loewen concludes this section by emphasizing that Mennonites in the same places are religiously, ethically, and agriculturally diverse.

Mennonite Farmers also offers a bird’s eye view of the advance of modernity in the agricultural context over the twentieth century, and part of that includes relations with the state and climate change. I

appreciated how throughout the book a topic such as state relations provides such a range of responses from the “lockstep” following of policies and technological advances to oppression and resistance. Such differences led me to wonder if some of these could be accounted for by differing levels of or commitment to religious beliefs. In fact, it should be asked, does such quick embrace of the state by some of the Mennonites have a religious component, as resistance did? If the spirituality of the Global South is highlighted in terms of land-based resistance, is there a faithfulness or spirituality in assimilation?

Loewen’s book can help us make sense of ongoing developments as well, including the recent Dutch government’s set of agricultural regulations and the ensuing farmers’ protests over perceived state intrusion and fear of the potential ruination of their livelihoods. For this book, the Dutch have a particular significance considering they are the starting point for the Mennonites who subsequently became the most secularized of all Mennonites in this study, and they needed significant state involvement to maximize harvests on their small territory. They were also the quickest to point out how the state can go too far in regulating agriculture in the name of the environment, especially from a government run mostly by urbanites with little rural experience.

As contemporary issues such as an expansive state and climate change evolve, the question of how state power and technology merge is important and especially intense. We learn in *Mennonite Farmers* that there is a strong faith in technology on the issue of climate change among assimilated Mennonites such as the Dutch and North Americans. However, technocratic optimism in the Global South is mixed in places such as Matabeleland (133). Yet in other places, there are other balances between spirituality and agricultural practice. In Java the interviewee left animism for Christianity entirely, though Loewen infers not everyone in the community agrees, with “some members being more accepting of pre-Christian ideas than others” (143).

As Loewen mentions early on, citing William Cronon’s, *Nature’s Metropolis*, Mennonite agriculturalists needed the city “on the eastern horizon” (123-124).³ Though staying distant enough from the dreaded cities earlier in the twentieth century, it was necessary for market access, goods, and transportation networks. As the steel wheels in Bolivia kept farms to a humble size and provided a brake on expansionist desires, travel distance from cities helped with agrarian piety while also acknowledging the importance of urban settings.

Although Loewen keeps the “villages” to seven in the book, and he gives good reasons for these seven, he provides motivation for other scholars to compare additional agricultural zones in the Mennonite global village. Move from Iowa to California’s San Joaquin Valley where agriculture, especially in the orchards, was labour intensive and often relied on migrant workers, a story that led to national boycotts of California produce during the 1960s and Cesar Chavez’s successful campaign to unionize migrant workers. It is a story that found some Mennonite farmers at odds with social-justice-oriented activist Mennonites and non-Mennonites alike.

Expand the agricultural story of women in southern Manitoba to the creation of Girls’ Homes in Winnipeg, or in British Columbia’s Fraser Valley and its fraught relationship with Vancouver early on, and it was young women who led the move into large urban settings as domestic workers to help pay off travel debts for the 1920s immigration. Here was an exchange where young women went to cities like Vancouver and Winnipeg, helped with the debts, acculturated to an urban sophisticated culture, complete with its dark side of abuse and assault at times, bringing news of city life back to rural Mennonite villages. They brought not only news, but new clothing and hair styles, new recipes and foods. Such is the significance of a book like *Mennonite Farmers*, as it draws the reader to consider further study.

I appreciated how Loewen keeps his historical narrative complicated. The missionaries in Java and Matabeleland who, while carriers of western global north patterns of religiosity, also through their religious convictions stood with the local farming communities who mixed in their own pre-Christian spirituality in resistance against full-blown capitalism taking over. Or the important experiences of Bolivian Mennonites traveling to the American Midwest to purchase castoff farm equipment to maintain their subversive anti-integrationist ideals as much as they could against a government that desired full-scale agricultural development, ironically, bringing in Mennonites who then sought rubberless tires and second-hand equipment, as the Midwestern Mennonites furthered their errand to help others modernize. This set of ironies is one of my favourite observations in the book.

On one hand it may be self-evident to repeat again and again that things happened differently in different places at different paces — what else can history be? As Loewen moves swiftly from a high-altitude bird’s eye view to on the ground itself, it remains like a progressive Canadian prairie story throughout. The binding together

of these stories seems to be the story of western modernity, its global reach, and state power. What makes Loewen's strategy helpful is that his comparisons are sharp. In a seeming following of Donald Worster's, *Rivers of Empire*, the accounting of Dutch farmers and the strong centralized intrusion of the government especially over water (how else can land reclamation occur?) that bends nature to the will of the state and technological application benefiting farmer and exporter alike has some Mennonite farmers chafing against it; but when compared with the strong centralized state of the Soviet Union and its outright oppression and heavy control over agriculture, where the results benefit very few (193).⁴ Strikingly, the former has the most secularized of Mennonites in the study and the latter one of the more subversive albeit private manifestations of lived religion.

Finally, the Mennonite Central Committee. The MCC has a long history in global agriculture from its inception in the 1920s sending tractors from the United States to Mennonites suffering under Stalin. Loewen does mention the MCC in showing how Friesland Mennonites even beat the MCC to providing aid to co-religionists in the Soviet Union. Not only has the MCC been involved in agriculture for a century now, but it is also global in its reach. Loewen mentions that such aid comes with a paternalistic conundrum from the rich and often white Global North who often saw their farming practices in Manitoba and Iowa as a model to uplift others in the Global South. In a book that already has covered so much terrain, and even brought us back to the fifteenth century devotionalist Thomas à Kempis, I hesitate to ask for more, but a global history of the MCC and the bureaucracy of compassion is needed (244-246).

A study such as *Mennonite Farmers* has in its value not only what Loewen has taught us about Mennonite farming in a global comparative way, but also as a model of future projects for others to pursue. At times the distance from the sky to the ground was quick, and by necessity larger historical forces were barely contextualized at all — including global game changers such as World War II and the Cold War. If this study of seven points on earth for farming reveals important convergences and divergences of experiences across the Global North and Global South, the far-reaching impact of such historical events is important in the advance of western modernity and state power.

Mennonite historiography has a rich depth and is currently expanding in geographic coverage and reinterpreting well-worn paths.

Loewen's study helps to keep the expansion growing responsibly and in a way that opens up possibilities for reinvigorating the field.

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Endnotes

- 1 Royden Loewen, *Blumenort: A Mennonite Community in Transition, 1874-1983* (Blumenort: Blumenort Mennonite Historical Society, 1983).
- 2 J.R. McNeill, *Something New Under the Sun*, 4.
- 3 William Cronon, *Nature's Metropolis: Chicago and the Great West* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992).
- 4 Donald Worster, *Rivers of Empire: Water, Aridity, and the Growth of the American West* (Oxford University Press, 1992).