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Sustaining a Simple Life

ANDREW WATSON

In 2014, researcher John Eicher interviewed Marlin Miller as part of Royden Loewen's ambitious and magisterial project to understand twentieth century Mennonite farm communities at "Seven Points on Earth." Miller lives in Washington County, Iowa as a member of the Beachy Amish congregation, and he is a climate change denier. Such matters, he believes, are in "God's hands." Yet, towards the end of Loewen's book based on this project, Miller also provides a clear pronouncement about the relationship between religious faith, life as a farmer, and what it means to be sustainable. According to Miller, "whether you're Amish, Mennonite, or whatever, or even non-believers," farmers "should care for the land as if it was God's. Leave it better than it was when we got hold of it" (224). Indeed, as Loewen argues, the Mennonite farmers from around the world featured in his study "aimed to farm sustainably" (13). Throughout the twentieth century, to farm sustainably has been the approach Mennonites have taken to survive global forces they could not control, particularly "the arrival of modern agriculture and its remaking of community and environment" (2). In this sense, then, Loewen's book explores not only the colossal pressures to change experienced by farmers in seven countries, but simultaneously the impact of those changes on what it has meant to be Mennonite. But that's only the half of it, because as Loewen demonstrates, to farm sustainably is an active, conscious, and deliberate effort on the part of Mennonites to resist global-scale processes that have worked to homogenize agriculture by practicing their faith in particularly local forms of farm life. By asking what makes for a sustainable farm life, Loewen explores key tenets of Mennonite life. And ~~by asking~~ what makes for a sustainable Mennonite life, he considers the central features of farm life.

Frustratingly, for a book with sustainability in the title, Loewen does not provide a definition of the term, and only comes to what he thinks it means to farm sustainably in the last two pages. Like many before him, Loewen points out that "*Sustainability* is, of course, a complex term [emphasis in original]" (268). The very next sentence provides a critical framing for the book. Regarding agriculture, Loewen writes that sustainability "can mean an environment's ability

to sustain life, a system of production that seeks equitable relationships, and a religiously ordered community's link to a common life-giving spirituality." Throughout the book, Loewen suggests that the most sustainable features of Mennonite farming equate with "a simple way of life," which serves as a heuristic term to articulate his focus on how the identity of the Mennonite farmer has changed over time and from place to place. Indeed, a simple life is a central tenet of Mennonite faith, along with nonviolence, communitarianism, and humility. Taken together, Loewen insists, these tenets "marked the very cultural requirements for a truly sustainable rural life" (6). The trouble is that there is no such thing as a truly sustainable rural life, nor any sustainable life for that matter. As I have written in my own work on sustainability and rural identity, sustainability is always a process, never a condition. It is the *potential* to maintain an identity and a way of life. And it is always comparative; "nothing is completely sustainable, only more or less sustainable."[1] For Loewen, the focus on living a simple life attains analytical power, because it reflects the malleability of the Mennonite farmer identity, which communities adjusted to accommodate pressures of change beyond their control.

It might be stating the obvious to point out that the Mennonite farmer identity is primarily comprised of religious faith and a livelihood working the land in a particular place. What is less obvious, but becomes apparent through the comparative lens offered by Loewen, is that, over the course of the twentieth century, significant contradictions emerged in the synergy between Mennonite faith and farming. Those contradictions became more pronounced over time as modern agriculture became embroiled in entrenched global inequalities between financially secure and technologically advanced farmers in the Global North and politically unstable and economically impoverished farmers in the Global South. The result has been to alter the reference points of what a simple life entails. In both faith and farming, what counts as a simple life is relative to the context; a simple life at the start and end of the twentieth century, or in the Global North versus the Global South, looks very different despite the fact that all Mennonite farmers seemed to share an insistence on living one. Central to this contradiction is the role of science and technology. Loewen is not specific about the contradictions between the theological and scientific for Mennonite farmers, or what the implications are for evaluating what it means to farm sustainably. However, in each of the

cases explored in the book, it is clear that the tension complicates the choice to live a simple life.

Loewen's work synthesizing the evidence of Mennonite farm life in seven communities around the world over the course of the twentieth century demonstrates that there is no single typology for evaluating the sustainability of a simple life. Despite the myriad global pressures to homogenize agriculture, the evidence, like the lived experiences it reveals, is always of a particular place. The contradictions between Mennonite faith and farming, which lie at the heart of the common — and always unfinished — pursuit of a simple life, are found in the context of places that are distinct from one another. As Loewen argues, Mennonites who advocated for and practiced a deliberate land ethic were "more often the exceptions in the history of Mennonites and 'a sustainable world' rather than the representatives of it" (117). If each community had been examined in isolation, each as its own closed system, the contradictions between faith and farming would have been less apparent and meaningful. When Loewen places each in a comparative global framework, the contradictions that arise when people adjust their faith to accommodate the context of place emerge as the key to evaluating the sustainability of a simple life. According to Loewen, Mennonite "faith has opened debate on appropriate levels of technology, the meaning of profit and success, and the definition of sustainable agriculture" (7).

In the Global North, where Mennonite communities enjoy government support or have otherwise accumulated enough wealth to comfortably support modern agricultural practices, farmers have adjusted their faith so that a simple life can still accommodate fossil-fuelled technologies and the science of chemical fertilizers and pesticides. In Washington County, Iowa, father and son farmers Gerald and Brent Yoder are "very conscious of their Mennonite affiliation and relate it to farmland." They exhibit what Loewen describes as a "religiously informed ethos" that is "guided by values of faith even in [their] cultivation practices" (124-125). They adjusted their faith so that they can claim that they are "better stewards of the land [today than in the past]" because they use no-till methods to protect the soil, while simultaneously justifying their use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides because "we don't know the effect," and criticizing organic farmers for "losing a lot of soil" by plowing. Protecting the soil and maintaining a close relationship to the land are central features of Mennonite faith and farming, and highlight the environmental dimensions of living

a simple life. But the tendency to frame certain aspects of industrial agriculture as God's work while dismissing the harmful consequences of others is a contradiction that Loewen does not explore any further.

In other cases, the contradictions between faith and farming bring into question the economic dimensions of equating a simple life with farming sustainably. In some places in the Global South, individual faith must be reconciled with the poverty of living a simple life without access to modern agricultural inputs. In Matopo, Matabeleland, Zimbabwe, farmers John Masuku and Alfred Gumpo must frame their faith in such a way as to accept that their simple life struggling to survive in "Zimbabwe's failed economy" means that places in the city, overseas, and in neighbouring South Africa have "become the place where Ndebele children disappear" to escape poverty (252). In Margorejo, on Java in Indonesia, despite the work he puts into caring for his animals and managing his land and crops, farmer Sukarman accepts that he must "surrender to God" and be "mindful to accept whatever occurs within nature as coming from God" (132).

What is common to Mennonite farmers in all seven places is that members in each community adjusted aspects of their faith to reflect the material realities of their environments, the pressures of global capitalism, and the introduction of new technologies that defined modern agriculture. Internally, adjustments to Mennonite faith may not have always been apparent to members of each community. But when conditions within each community are compared with one another, and their individual histories are compared over time, it becomes easier to recognize that the only way to evaluate what it means to farm sustainably is by understanding the contradictions between ideas and material realities at the local level.

What it meant to farm sustainably, or live a simple life, changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century, and farmers experienced those changes at different paces and with varying intensity depending on where and when they lived. Loewen and his impressive team of researchers collected oral histories from dozens of farmers in seven countries, and the interviews comprise the majority of the evidence for the book. Given the scale of the project, it is understandable that, to explore the histories of each of these places during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Loewen draws on a relatively limited number of written sources, including newspapers, state records, diaries, memoirs, local histories, mission reports, letter collections, sermons, and poetry. The reader never receives an even

or complete narrative of the twentieth century for any of the cases, which means that Loewen misses opportunities to explore how specific moments or events, such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War, forced Mennonites in multiple places to adjust their faith to accommodate global forces. For example, the relatively gradual and incremental process of embracing new technologies would appear to have almost imperceptibly undermined the capacity to live a simple life in Iowa, while the abrupt pressures of turning those technologies towards wartime food production presumably placed Mennonites living in the United States in an even more immediate moral quandary that acutely compromised aspects of their nonviolent faith. Some changes presented sudden and significant challenges to Mennonite faith, while others might more easily have been accepted because of how subtly they required adjustments. The limited source based for each case study makes this type of analysis difficult.

Although Loewen frames his study around the relationship between faith and farming, there are many places throughout the book where it seems that farmers did not think much about faith when they contended with changes to their way of life during the twentieth century. Part of the issue here is that, as Loewen points out, the sources "refrain from making a case for a specifically 'Mennonite' approach to the land" (118). Indeed, the stories of these Mennonite farmers "possess no single Anabaptist vision regarding farmland, no common extension of nonviolence to the land" (143). Instead, despite the local dynamism of religion, "their very interaction with nature itself, as food producers, has meant that the Mennonite farmers of these seven communities shared a common story" (7). In this sense, the story that Mennonite farmers share in common with each other also happens to be what all farmers share in common. Sometimes, the book veers off into describing challenges and experiences of farming, but not necessarily *Mennonite* farming. In the 1960s, when the Old Colony Mennonites immigrated to the Riva Palacio settlement in Bolivia, "The construction of an agrarian community in the bush was nothing less than a religious imperative" (71). But Loewen does not provide the evidence to explain what made the process of colonization and transforming this particular rural environment into farmland any different from other examples carried out by non-Mennonites. It is not clear how non-Mennonite farmers would have reacted any differently from the people featured in these case studies when repressive regimes curtailed freedoms and usurped property rights, or when ambitious government policies incentivized technol-

ogies of the Green Revolution at the expense of local economies and environments, or when flooding and drought caused by climate change destroyed crops and put households in peril. The tendency to focus on the practical and material dimensions of farming sustainably instead of the ideals that inform doing so is not an issue specific to Mennonites, but it does point to the ways in which religion, even for humble and deliberate Mennonites, has been slowly, consistently eroded over the course of the twentieth century.

Loewen's remarkable study of Mennonite farm communities around the world does not provide answers about what makes rural life sustainable for religious people. Rather, it reveals that universal categories, such as global or planetary, sustainable or salvation, have no meaning unless they are fixed in particular places. Recognizing shared patterns and experiences provides substance to universal categories, but it also helps us to arrive at the conclusion that there are no absolutes, no optimum conditions that will address global inequities or problems of planetary boundaries. There is no sustainable, and there is no salvation.

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Endnote

1 Andrew Watson, *Making Muskoka: Tourism, Rural Identity, and Sustainability, 1870-1920* (Vancouver, UBC Press, 2022), 12.