

Book Review

California Mennonites

by Brian Froese

Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2015. 334 pages; ill.

Reviewed by Valerie G. Rempel

Brian Froese's recent book, *California Mennonites*, takes the reader from the heady days of the gold rush to the intensity of the Farm Workers Movement in an effort to explore the "fluidity" of Mennonite identity in The Golden State. The book, published as part of the Young Center Books in Anabaptist & Pietist Studies, makes an important contribution to our growing understanding of the diversity of Mennonite experience in North America.

Mennonites came West for multiple reasons: in search of better health and to escape religious persecution, economic dislocation or the ravages of the American dust bowl. While frequently rooting their journey in biblical images of God's providence, they also

"...early migrants sought to root themselves in a story of God's providence while also laying claim to some part of the California story."

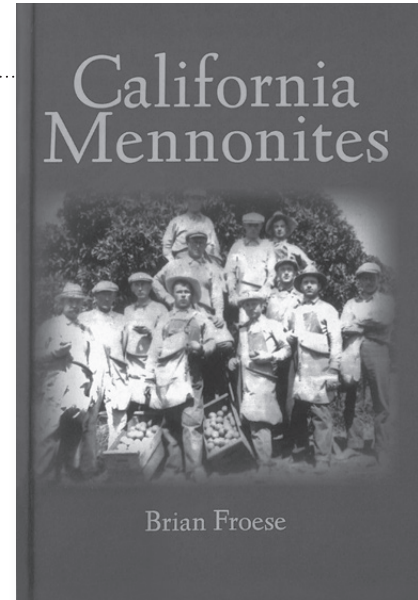
embraced elements of the California story, moving quickly beyond their agrarian roots to embrace urbanization and professionalism.

The book's primary focus is on the middle decades of the twentieth century which serve, Froese points out, as a kind of cultural watershed in American religious life. Froese is particularly interested in the contradictions of the Mennonite experience in California. These appear, for example, in the responses to World War II where Mennonites worked across

denominational boundaries to support the development of Civilian Public Service Camps and then debated amongst themselves the question of what was appropriate American patriotism. Similarly, Mennonites responded to significant social need by developing mental health institutions, but then embraced secular psychiatric approaches while resisting distinctly religious care. The establishment of Pacific Bible Institute and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary illustrated mixed impulses as they sought to navigate fundamentalist impulses while retaining elements of Anabaptist thought and practice. What is unique to the California story, Froese argues, is the way Mennonites negotiated competing leanings to

produce a kind of "hybrid Mennonite" that both accommodated and resisted the larger culture.

Mennonites from other parts of the U.S. and Canada were bemused by these hybrid Mennonites whose political and religious practices seemed so different. This was especially evident in the conflict around the United Farm Workers movement which exposed tensions between Mennonite landowners and migrant workers and with it, tensions between eastern and western Men-



nonites. In California, Froese suggests, "race, labor-intensive capitalist agriculture, and conservative evangelical religion" were all shaping the Mennonite experience in ways that seemed foreign to those outside of California, creating "fissures" in Mennonite identity that were increasingly "racial, economic and geographic," not simply theological.

According to Froese, Mennonites in California did not simply duplicate the communities they had left behind, although they did create a network of institutions similar to those in other places. Froese makes much of this tendency toward organization, from women's societies to relief work, but it is not always clear how this differed from the organizational tendencies at work throughout the Mennonite world. Still, this is a small quibble with what is an insightful study of the California Mennonite story.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Valerie Rempel is Associate Dean of Fresno Pacific University Biblical Seminary, where she is also Associate Professor of the J.B. Toews Chair of History/Theology. She teaches courses in history and theology.