

Drawings



Dirk the Idealist

Views From a Pond: The Dirk Willems Variations

IAN HUEBERT

Four years ago I started collecting books and publications that were central to my Mennonite experience. After graduating from Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas, my sense of place seemed at odds with the wider world that I now entered. I moved away from a Mennonite heritage that one could feel beneath one's feet; from the land where I was raised, in Henderson, Nebraska, and the Mennonite-affiliated college I attended, to one that solely occupied my memory. The distance from my upbringing to where I found myself stressed a relation to a heritage that, save for the occasional visit home or phone call, was on the verge of being lost. So I bought some books: Reinhild Kauenhoven Janzen and John M. Janzen's *Mennonite Furniture*; Ethel Abrahams' *Frakturmalen und Schönschreiben*; *Henderson Mennonites*; back issues of *Mennonite Life* (especially important was the January, 1965 issue containing essays on art by Robert Regier and Kenneth Hiebert; and Thieleman J. van Braght's *The Martyr's Mirror*, an illustrated account of Christian martyrdom from biblical times to the 17th century.

In the following years these books provided a point of reference that I returned to for stylistic, typographic, and contextual sources for artwork. They represent, for me, a loose canon that exemplifies my notion of a Mennonite-on-the-plains aesthetic. Elements within this heritage are defined by function and utility. The correlation of space to shelter was especially important, shelter being the structural element that 'housed' an image in relation to the visual plane. That is, the integrity of materials and their economy, the form that generates narrative, the shape that dictates content. All of this is conducive to the examination of local form and, ultimately, conducive to a sense of regionalism, a Petri dish that telescopes the universal into something the size of a flattened crabapple.

While I always worked outside of these books, I wanted to have a project that was a direct response to this material of biographical origin as well as grounds for something that would surpass nostalgia: hammering the historical images into the context of now. The images had to be universal, making the *Martyr's Mirror* a suitable choice, since when has death and the virtues of mortality not been, at



Dirk the Manual



Dirk the Missionary

some time, at the threshold of everyone's mind? While the breadth of Jan Luyken's etchings provided more than enough material, the image of Dirk Willems rescuing his captor from the icy throes of the frozen pond, remains central to the rest of the book.

Willems, a Dutch Anabaptist, was imprisoned in 1569 for his religious affiliations and he later escaped, fleeing a thief catcher over a frozen pond. Willems made it across but his captor fell through and was rescued by Dirk, who was then recaptured. Upon his rescue, the thief catcher pled for Dirk's freedom but Willems was nevertheless imprisoned, and later burned at the stake. This demonstration of compassion butted to adversity is fundamental to Mennonite doctrine and Jan Luyken's engraving provides an exemplary image that is essential to the Anabaptist lexicon, its frequent use causing it to ascend into the realms of iconography.

Yet within the Mennonite faith, religious icons have always been held at arm's length, dating back to the iconoclasm of the 16th century and exemplified in the Mennonite tradition of simple living. The image of Dirk Willems strikes a certain chord concerning Anabaptist core beliefs. Defacing the image might be seen as a conflict with what it represents. Conversely, however, defacing the image suppresses the dogmatic safeness that traditions accrue over time. The defaming is an acknowledgement of iconoclasm: by not making these variations, the original image may thus be seen as all the more sacred. By breaking the order, the drawings that follow seek not to defame the image in a negative way, nor worship the image by leaving it alone: instead they provide a new function for the image by adapting existing vocabulary, acknowledging its historical context while simultaneously creating a new present context.

While not an engraving like the original, the pen and ink drawings provide a good representation of the Luyken technique while at the same time employing technology that was available at the time the originals were created. This integrity of materials acts as a vehicle for meaning, showing an existential decision making process at work where every aspect is taken into consideration, including the frames in which the drawings are housed: They are faux-wood grained, a nod to traditional Mennonite furniture, where elegant veneers were painted over more economic building materials such as pine. The variation of situations proves arbitrary, the deduction of possibilities concerning Dirk Willems gives the viewer full



Dirk the Patriot



Dirk the Farmer

reign to interpret and devise more. As there are several variations presented, the images can be seen individually or sequentially, the later providing space in between the physical manifestations, where the mind has plenty of room to roam.

With the *Views From a Pond* series, the old is the new and the new plays the intended roles of the old. It is not sacred. It should not be exalted but rather looked at, plain and simple.

What *Might* Dirk Have Done?

KEVIN ENNS-REMPEL

Few stories in Anabaptist-Mennonite history hold more significance than that of Dirk Willems. In 1569 Dirk, a Dutch Anabaptist, was convicted by local authorities for his “heretical” beliefs and sentenced to death. Before the sentence could be carried out, Dirk escaped from jail. Running from his captors, he crossed a thinly frozen pond. After safely reaching the other side, however, Dirk realized that his pursuer had fallen through the ice and was in danger of drowning. Defying all normal human impulses, he ventured back onto the ice and rescued the man who intended to arrest him. For his selfless act, Dirk was indeed arrested, returned to jail, and burned at the stake on 16 May 1569.

The story itself, first published in the *Martyr’s Mirror* in 1660, was elevated to almost iconic status through the work of Dutch artist Jan van Luyken, whose etching of the event was printed in the 1685 edition of the *Martyr’s Mirror*, and still appears in editions published today. This image of Dirk Willems extending his arms to the desperate man in the frozen pond has become perhaps the most enduring image within the Mennonite tradition of what it means to follow Christ no matter what the cost.

Those familiar with the story have probably occasionally asked themselves, “what would I have done if I had been Dirk Willems?” The question usually is posed as a rhetorical one, since few of us truly expect ever to face such a life-or-death decision. Yet all of us *are* faced regularly with decisions similar to the one



Dirk the Escapist



Dirk - Cat and Mouse

Dirk faced—though, admittedly, usually with much less personal risk. The appropriate question is not so much how we might behave when faced with the threat of execution, but simply how we behave when faced by the “other.” How do we respond to those who wish us ill, who threaten our way of life, who have a belief system different than our own, who make us uncomfortable, or who are so much like us that we can hardly stand the tiny differences that separate us?

Sometimes our responses are motivated by good intentions that nonetheless fail to address the real issue. With “Dirk the Idealist,” we imagine that just thinking hard enough about the situation will somehow function as a substitute for real action. Surely our genuine concern by itself must count for something! Or we might spend so much time learning how to respond in the right way that we never get around to doing the thing we’re reading about (“Dirk the Manual”). In still other cases we offer superficial “help” that doesn’t even begin to address the actual need, like Dirks’s electric heater to warm the man in the icy water (to say nothing of what would happen if he actually touched that heater while immersed in the pond!)

In still other cases, our failures are even more complete. “Dirk the Patriot” willingly allows military force to act on his behalf and thereby take care of the problem, even while he averts his eyes. As long as we don’t pull the trigger ourselves, we can tell ourselves we aren’t really responsible. “Dirk the Escapist,” meanwhile, has done perhaps the most understandable thing of all—just kept running after he reached the far shore and left the “other” to fend for himself.

And yet, we haven’t always failed to do the right thing, as Huebert reminds us in “Dirk the Farmer.” While the context of this illustration might strike some as simply odd, it effectively evokes the ways in which traditionally rural and practical Mennonites have used the tools most easily available to them to meet human need in concrete ways. Whether creating agricultural programs in the Third World with Mennonite Central Committee or cleaning up neighborhoods with shovels and wheelbarrows after the most recent natural disaster, Mennonites have often shown a knack for helping in times and places of great need.

But what of Tom and Jerry? At first glance, this one seems to be nothing but an exercise in the absurd. When we think of the symbolic connection between that animated cat and mouse, however—an ongoing and close relationship sometimes

characterized by goodwill, but more often by a mutual and amazingly creative death-wish—we catch a glimpse of how we sometimes save our worst behavior for those with whom we actually share much in common. Mennonite history (and that of most denominational traditions) is replete with such relationships, in which we spend far too much energy trying to find ways of setting ourselves apart from others who in so many ways are almost identical to us.

Iconic images are immensely valuable when used in the way they were intended. At the same time, their repeated use can dilute the value of those icons simply due to overwhelming familiarity. In the act of picking them up, turning them inside-out, and shaking them around, however, we can be reminded of what the image really was intended to communicate. Ian Huebert, with his variations on the story, has helped us do that with Dirk Willems and the icy pond.

Mirror for Reluctant Martyrs

JOHN BLOSSER

One of the finer bits of Menno-humor since Emerson L. Leshner's Muppy Manual, Ian Huebert's skillful Dirk Willems parodies thrust a well-polished mirror into our comfy little Mennonite mugs. Mr. Huebert takes delicious aim at numerous salient paradoxes inherent to contemporary North American Mennonite life. Employing Jan Luken's iconic image of Dirk from the Martyr's Mirror etchings, Huebert supplants the earlier vision of noble righteousness with delightfully self-effacing jibs that reference the prevailing taste of "The Faithful" for the status quo. His quotes in fact drink from the same moralizing stream of early eighteenth century English artist William Hogarth (Seven Deadly Sins) while winking at us through Disneyesque humor-form. He incidentally follows the earlier inventions of others, including Toronto designer Glenn Fretz's Dirk reaching his distressed pursuer with a sizable M.C.C. logo, and the cover image of Steven Nolt's and Craig Haas' The Mennonite Starter Kit featuring Dirk with a baseball glove (Haas' creation).

Speaking fluent Lukenese (seventeenth century "Dutch" etching), Huebert ably parodies a spectrum familiar foibles of the "Quiet in the Land." His sharp pencil (pen in this case) illustrates the traditional Mennonite preference for pragmatism, our recent appropriation of the intellectual, our mindlessly enthusiastic embrace of popular self-help manuals (delivered in the drop and run technique), and even our increasing comfort with police protection. Though humorous, his illustrations draw a well-focused reflection of our contemporary Anabaptist aberrations, warts and all.

Arguably, Huebert might better have spared us the obvious, "Tom and Jerry 'Dirk'" (we get it anyway!), but his aw-shucks Menno-charm is indeed well-crafted and deserves a wider audience within and without the fold.