

**VOICES FROM OUR PAST:
THE POLYPHONIC HISTORY OF P.M. FRIESEN**

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In proposing to say something about the style and form of an historical work such as that before us, it seems to me advisable to be clear at the outset about how such terms are to be used. Far from thinking of them as peripheral, it is my contention that they may be of critical importance in assessing the meaning and value of Friesen's history. Professional historians will, I think, agree with Friesen that the printed original (and its translation as well) does not constitute a finished historical analysis and consequently that, as a history, it is *formally* problematic. At the same time there can be little doubt of the singular importance of this work in its particular vantage point in Mennonite history and historiography, despite the attendant problems. It follows that a serious approach to understanding and interpreting the work will have to address itself to some formal questions in order to gain an adequate perception of its meaning.

I propose to use the terms form and style very simply: style describes the HOW as against the WHAT of a statement; it is the way something is said, the voice of the speaker. However, we have, as we all know, many voices in this book—a veritable host of witnesses—most of which have been preserved in their original flavor by the author in addition to—and often distinctly different from—his own voice. The work as a whole is a complex structure in which these voices are assembled somewhat like a chorus at rehearsal—harmonious passages frequently offset by stray notes and at times by strident cacophanes. For these larger structures I will use the term: form. Thus we may refer to the whole as an amalgum of individual voices combined in what may fairly be called a polyphonic structure, of which the conductor is P.M. Friesen himself.

In his foreword, entitled "Geschichte einer Geschichte" (the story of a history), Friesen points out the passages in

his book which are most distinctly his own personal voice, recording his position on questions like the M.B. Church founding (165), baptism (256), the *Allianz* (447), religious freedom and propaganda (528), education (600) and the like.¹ These passages, scattered throughout the book, are framed by the Preface itself and the Conclusion. In some ways they are the core of the book, coming as close to the historian's own judgement as one is likely to, so much so, that one might even be tempted to excerpt these passages and construct from them an approximation of the finished analysis Friesen might have written. Indeed, we find here his interpretation of what he considered key events and questions in Russian Mennonite history. However enticing this notion might be, that would be in effect to deny his part in the rest of the volume, and while this may indeed be more difficult to assess, we must not lose sight of the fact that the bulky remainder—his selection from statistics, institutional accounts, pamphlets, letters, diaries or whatever—constitutes, however indirectly and perhaps however unsuccessfully, *his* account, *his* interpretation as well. At this point a formidable formal problem arises, since we are often not in a position to judge just what Friesen actually did with the source materials before him, despite his obviously sincere statement: "I have been at pains conscientiously to cite all the sources" (vi). His massive torso includes obvious quotations of complete documents, like Wuest's *Antrittspredigt*, but also many partial quotations and varying degrees of strict and free paraphrase. Since in many cases the documents are no longer extant it is impossible to assess how close our text is to the original—and of course, the basis of his selection from all those available to him. This is not to fault Friesen, who was only following accepted 19th century practise, especially with regard to critical apparatus, but the fact of the matter appears to be that in many parts of the text the reader is presented with material that is, strictly speaking, neither the original document nor a finished analysis, a fact that puts the text under a kind of proto-interpretation, since we are obviously guided by Friesen's choice in the materials he presents. Since these are often most concrete (that is, subjective, personal accounts of real or perceived human

situations), the reader is inclined to suspend his disbelief and to empathize with the 'story'—almost more the response to a novel than to historical record. Because of this, and because of Friesen's obvious attempts to overcome his own subjectivity and to 'be fair', the reader is disarmed and unlikely to read critically.

Indeed, the book Friesen has written in some ways reminds one of the typical 19th century biography—packed with details and drawing upon many sources like letters, memoirs and the like—more than history. Perhaps this is what P.M. Friesen meant by "innere Geschichte", in his prologue to Chapter D, where he writes:

Since the dear brethren in America have had the courage to publish the documentary history of the "external" events surrounding the establishment of the M.B. Church, and since the author was commissioned to write the "inner" history of the M.B. Church

The mass of material available for an "inner" history, both with regard to its light and dark aspects, is so surprisingly large

A great number of letters, documents, diaries, reports," "memoirs," etc. are available These letters — as accurate as photographs — of persons who, differing in their persuasions, were involved in the brethren movement, characterize that movement [the "inner history] much better than even the official documents. (201/2)

In any case, the sources quoted are not what we would consider the 'usual' ones for an institutional history. For although Friesen does use official minutes recording institutional decisions and that kind of documentation, what stand out in the mind are not so much these evidences, as those others that are about and by people. Friesen allows his many witnesses to address the reader—often directly—and this in the form of personal reminiscences, letters and other 'personal' documents. And so, although a chronicle is told, this is literally done by means of many voices—a phenomenon most interesting from the vantage point of style (and most problematic for a

translation!) and one that raises the question: What *are* the voices of our past? Or, to paraphrase Rudy Wiebe: Where are the voices coming from?

In deciding to place *people* into the centre of his book rather than events primarily (or institutions) Friesen took great difficulties upon himself. He was aware of this, especially in view of the fact that he was writing *Zeitgeschichte* ("To write contemporary history is a difficult task for one's psyche!") and that many of the protagonists would be alive—and of course he himself was both protagonist and author! Still, Friesen was in good company in making this decision, for Gottfried Arnold had made the same choice. In the Foreword to his monumental *Kirchen- und Ketzler Historie* Arnold says:

As regards method . . . I have considered that one most useful according to which in each age first of all those authors, teachers and persons are presented by whom history was made and by whom the consequent comedies or tragedies were enacted, as it were, so that knowledge of the same might cast light on the ensuing body of material. (Foreword)²

Friesen does not face his task with the equanimity of distance and obviously cannot contemplate the story of his brothers quite as a divine comedy, but he does place the chief characters—those about whose experiences and convictions the events took shape—before us in a very concrete way. It is through understanding them that we will understand the events. Since these events are our history, it is through understanding them (the characters) that we will come nearer to understanding ourselves.

In the following I would like to discuss several instances which may be considered examples of the way in which this history is shaped. First I will say something about Friesen's own style, his voice, that is, and how it comes through in translation. Then I will take the case of 'Pfarrer' Wuest and try to show how Friesen conveys influential voices of the past through him. Finally I would like to advance some comments on the use of this kind of history in the light of its style and form.

In his tract, "Konfession oder Sekte" of 1914, P.M. Friesen refers to his natural disposition as "meine grosse

Lebensplage" (the bane of my life) (p. 4). There is no doubt that Friesen was a man of spirit, as well as a spiritual man, and that it was in his nature to become involved in the questions of the day to the point of controversy—hardly the detachment one might ordinarily presuppose in a disciplined historian. (Of course anyone who knows historians doubts there is such a thing as a dispassionate historian!) Friesen's temperament shows itself everywhere, from the battles and skirmishes he was involved in right down to the exclamation and question marks, often together, which crowd his manuscript pages. His parentheses are often neither more or less than outbursts of indignation or shouts of joy, as are many footnotes. (All the more shame that these notes have been relegated to the end of the translated book!). While P.M. Friesen may not be considered a German stylist of note, there is a certain force in his language and the reader will encounter moments of eloquence. I think that some of these have been captured in translation as well. By and large, he is somewhat inclined to become bogged down in the potential obscurity of German syntax, and although this too is understandable in terms of his efforts to pit divergent viewpoints against one another in the interests of fairness—thus the many adversative clauses—the result is too often a loss of focus and ultimately of meaning. The translation has had to wrestle with this phenomenon, and I would venture to suggest that an uninitiated reader will find much of the English text difficult, while someone who knows the original will welcome the relative clarity of the translation. Still, when all is said and done, the voice of P.M. Friesen projects conscience and conviction in ringing tones, and although he is actually wrong in assuming responsibility for all of the points of view (*Anschauungen*, VIII) in his book, certainly for those quoted directly and at length, there can be no doubt about the grave sense of responsibility which characterizes his approach to his task as a historian, and consequently his style.

In addition to the argument which he makes throughout his book and the large blocks of primary or nearly primary material which he presents, P.M. Friesen has himself given many short sketches, which have a kind of life of their own within the larger form, both of individuals and of situations, some of which are unforgettable. Readers will

recall a delightful passage, strongly reminiscent of Arnold Dyck, which tells of how life on the land had once been. "Jetzt und Einst", based on Kroekers *Familienkalender* and on the author's own memories (#65), tells of how the children of a previous generation worked in the fields and grew up to become the "Ehrsame Ohm Heinrich Janzen" and "Mumke Niefeldsche"—an idyllic tale told with much nostalgia, but also with didactic irony and the good humor of love and acceptance. I have not established the degree to which this is excerpted from the *Kalender*, but it appears to be largely Friesen's own creation. Unfortunately, there are few passages which capture the flavor of the earlier Russian period as graphically.

My own favorite among the many portraits—this one a miniature—is the description of the teacher A.A. Neufeld, about whom the author says:

... we have never been able to think of him in any other way but to be reminded of the Savior's words: "Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness . . ." and of the expression of a great Christian: "Blessed are those who are homesick, for they shall arrive at home." (760)

Neufeld, a friend of Friesen's who had died at the age of 47 in 1909, is portrayed as a figure with the kind of potential which was to show itself in that last pre-revolutionary generation and which was so promising a sign to the author. A contemporary reader will likely be jarred by the juxtaposition, in the description, of Jesus and Jung-Stilling, a popular religious author of the later 18th century. In both these examples, however, Friesen has named important sources for the kind of life that characterized the Russian Mennonite of the 19th century. In the first, idyllic passage, the books are named which are found in even the humblest home and which provide the spiritual sustenance which turns a prankish lad into a church elder: Menno's *Fundamentbuch*, *Die Wandelnde Seele*, *Hofackers Sermons* and the *Gesangbuch*. In the second example the two *Seligpreisungen* are more than curious. The first, not the most popular, though perhaps most needful from the

Sermon on the Mount—indicating idealism and perhaps even a sense of social justice (?); the second, taken from the influential novel *Heimweh oder der Schluessel zu demselben*—the nature of whose influence I will comment upon later.

At this point it may suffice to say that it lies in the nature of Friesen's style—moving at times very intuitively I feel—to name names and sources without including them specifically in his argument, so that they become a part of the many concrete images and distinct voices that we see and hear. Much of the value of his incomplete incorporation of facts and influences is in the result that the reader is left to sort these things out for himself, which can be a very beneficial process.

Of all the major and minor figures in the book I have chosen one related to my own area of particular interest, and although he is not even a Mennonite (here P.M. Friesen would insert both an exclamation point and a question mark) there is no doubt that the author considered Eduard Wuest to be of very great significance for Mennonite history. P.M. Friesen does incorporate the figure of Wuest in an argument about the state of the Mennonite church and its need for revitalisation. (This too is done very concretely, using the imagery of the "impoverished" house of Menno, to which Wuest brought "vital air, warmth, food and drink" (p. 212). Friesen also talks about the teachings of Wuest, but he does not describe the variety and mix of influences that came to the Russian colonies through Wuest, Jung-Stilling and others and which, as Friesen himself documents, left their mark on the whole brotherhood and especially on the M.B. Church. By the manner of his depiction, that is by putting Wuest before us in a very concrete fashion, Friesen does, however, give us many indications about these influences, and I would like to suggest some that would reward further study.

By his message and his manner (Friesen emphasizes *both*) this pietist Lutheran from Wuerttemberg focussed the spiritual malaise of the Mennonite communities and preached the radical cure of spiritual separation. At sundry times prior to Wuest's coming the influence of 'classical' Pietism had been transmitted to the Russian colonies by German and German-trained clergy and teachers, but the

voices that spoke through Wuest were, to a considerable extent, a more recent phenomenon, combining the already more idiosyncratic south German pietism of Bengel with impulses from Jacob Boehme, Swedenborg (via Oettinger) and the emphasis on dynamic preaching of the *Erweckungsbewegung*, Hofacker, Gustav Werner and the Methodists.³ These influences affect both theology and the religious life and practice. For the first, one may refer to the concentration on *Heilsgewissheit*,⁴ even more than *Wiedergeburt*, and an eschatological preoccupation.⁵ For the second, the formation of separated congregations (classical Pietism provided for *Stunden* within the orthodox framework), a new popular emphasis on church music and devotional literature may be mentioned. It is not beside the point to mention in this connection that the separatist movement in Wuerttemberg pietism was greatly fuelled by the introduction in the 1790's of a new hymnal which contained new *Aufklaerungslieder* and removed some others which were considered out of date.⁶ These separatist congregations were those most prone to leave Wuerttemberg in an eastward direction, especially in the famine years of 1817 and after. Although he doesn't discuss the question *per se*, Friesen shows us Wuest's attachment to singing and to Hillers, *Schaetzkaestlein*, for example, and the role it played in his ministry.⁷ In any case, to refer to Wuest simply in terms of Pietism as Adrian does,⁸ for example, is an oversimplification, and will not help us to understand the nature of the forces at work prior to the founding of the M.B. Church. In particular, Adrian's suggestion that Wuest's Pietism "reflects the spirit of Anabaptism" should be challenged on historical as well as theological grounds.

From what I have been able to ascertain about Wuest's preparation for his impressive ministry in the German and Mennonite colonies, it appears fair to conclude that, despite his theological training in Tuebingen, Wuest cannot be considered a theologian in the sense of having worked out a systematic and consistent theological program of his own. Rather, he was primarily—as even his enemies in Wuerttemberg described him—*ein geborener Volksredner*,⁹ who, because of the impact of his preaching, transmitted the various influences of his own background

and experience unwittingly¹⁰ and unintentionally, and some of the great unhappiness of his later life was in the realization that through his work things had been set in motion which he had not foreseen and of which he could not approve.

I would like to add a few words about Jung-Stilling, whose name, according to the index, is not explicitly mentioned in the book and whose influence is tangible nevertheless. Look up Jung-Stilling in the *Mennonite Encyclopedia* and he appears to be a popular, influential Pietist writer in whom Mennonite readers would be naturally interested. In the introduction to the novel *Heimweh*, there is material which would support such a notion: The Pfarrer, who reminds one of Wuest, has dared to bury a Mennonite woman in the churchyard and consequently suffers persecution from the Consistory. But when one reads further the fiction reveals itself as a typical 18th century *Geister- und Spukgeschichte* in the sentimental tradition. It is the story of a spiritual journey, but the similarity is more to the *Magic Flute* than *Pilgrims Progress*. The preoccupation with secret orders and mysterious goings-on is based on the teachings of Freemasonry¹¹ rather than Christ and the progress of the pilgrim Eugenius is in terms of a kind of wisdom characteristic of the 18th century enlightenment (a chief character is called 'Forscher') and the fascination with the East as the place of refuge (*Bergungsort*) takes up and popularizes vague theological notions about the end times and the rule of the Antichrist in Western Europe (France/Napoleon). Belk has expanded on this theme and its application in Mennonite history in his book, *The Great Trek*. The influence of Jung-Stilling's novel on a new, broader reading public has been documented in the physical relocation of whole communities to Palastine and southern Russia, and it is in the context of movements such as these, largely from Wuerttemberg, that we must see the influences that came upon the Mennonites from their German neighbor colonists. It would be worthwhile, I think, to explore how this kind of 'devotional' material influenced the literary tastes of our people, which appear to have kept to similar melodramatic themes.¹² All of this, too, belongs to the context of the appearance on the scene of 'Pastor' Wuest.

I think that it is the task of historians—religious, social and literary as well as ordinary garden variety historians—to inquire into the context and background of these elements that we have long taken for granted. There is a common misconception (one in which I have participated) that the modern evangelical message, or the Pietist message or, for that matter, the Anabaptist message, somehow come directly from the source, rather than through the mediation of human history. Much has been done to reconstruct the elements of Anabaptism in order to understand it. Much remains to be done to understand the circumstances in which the most diverse influences were absorbed by and left their mark upon our forefathers in Russia. P.M. Friesen himself shows awareness of these factors when, for example, in connection with the teacher Heinrich Heese I, he speaks of the new Pietism:

After all, Heese's kind of faith was also rooted in the warm-hearted, methodologically strongly emotional (in its extreme form, too sentimental) orthodoxy of that time [around 1840] which had begun, even then, to displace the cool, intellectual Protestant rationalism. The former is called the "new Pietism." (699)

And in tracing the influence of Wuest in figures like Bernhard Harder, who consciously emulated him, he speaks of "Wuest's faith in Christ and his style of preaching" (946) and on the later quotes witnesses who said: "That is exactly the way the mad Wuest does it" (948) or "He has said the truth, but why exaggerate so. . ." (948). In order to illustrate the power of Harder's preaching, Friesen quotes his long poems, (which unfortunately don't have this effect in translation—I will not judge the original) rather than other texts and thereby again emphasizes the stylistic nature of Harder's importance: To quote Friesen:

. . . as a figure of major importance, we would place him immediately behind our most important intellectual giant, Johann Cornies. His importance for the spiritual elevation of our fellowship, most immediately through his personal power as the creator of a new method of preaching, is extended into the entire "Brotherhood Movement." (945)

These varied references have been collected to illustrate Friesen's awareness of the importance of style and form in the impact of the Wuestian revitalization of the church. As I indicated earlier, this is not done by virtue of conscious analysis so much as simply by presentation of the figures themselves, Wuest, Harder, etc. in a very concrete way. An abstract analysis along traditional theological lines could I think miss a very crucial part of the historical phenomenon. As we know, traditional Pietism does not really constitute a new or different theology, but it is in the form, the practice, and in the emphases and preoccupations that the particular spirit reveals itself. And it is my point that Friesen's book, while not identifying and analysing all these elements, through *its* concrete form enables us to sense the influences and indeed, with some help, to "prove the spirits" as we attempt to come to terms with our spiritual heritage.

I grew up in the North End M.B. Church in Winnipeg, where I heard names like Spurgeon, Campbell Morgan, Jakob Kroeker, E. Sauer, names that indicate a recognizable, if not particularly Mennonite, religious tradition. My earlier glimpses of the 'Anabaptist Vision' introduced me to names like Grebel, Manz and Menno. There was always something splendid and faraway in those incredible characters and tales of heroism and martyrdom. Reading P.M. Friesen has been for me a very different kind of experience, for here I feel, like Friesen himself, that we are dealing, while not with *Zeitgeschichte*, very clearly with ourselves.

Friesen's history records the voices of our own past. I have concentrated on one group of elements that inform the voice of Wuest. It is a powerful voice, especially from the viewpoint of the M.B. Church. There are of course other voices. The imposing figures of Cornies and of August Lenzmann, the pioneering teachers Voth and Heese, the protagonists in the drama of the M.B. separation, the enterprising Johann Claassen, the retiring Heinrich Huebert, these and many others come to mind. There are the conservatives and the radicals, the 'joyous' and the legalistic—all of these amalgamated and presented by P.M. Friesen, himself a passionate partisan for the open brotherhood.

What is the use of such a history? Will the immense

trouble of translating this amorphous chronicle have been worth it? Let me give two answers:

1. Researchers, beyond those who have had access to the original, will be able to consult the interpretive collection of sources and to pursue further the many questions which it stimulates. For us to arrive at a useful account of how we became what we are, it will be necessary for questions about the social, political and cultural aspects of our people to be answered, as well as questions of historical theology.

2. The second point is the one that I think follows more particularly from my own line of questioning. I believe that P.M. Friesen's book is a source for the Mennonite of today, that is, the average Mennonite educated enough to experience an identity crisis. Of these there are many. Not that I expect the book to be a best seller or indeed, that anyone would read it through from beginning to end (as some of us have done several times in the past year or two). Rather, I consider it an anthology in which the reader will find, no doubt by chance, unforgettable and compelling passages—most obviously in the short biographies, but also in the extensive letters and memoirs and even in sermons and other forbidding documents. He will find this fascinating because he will recognize himself in much of it. The patterns of thought and patterns of faith in which he has his being are prefigured there, or are shown in their formation. And many of the problems of those days, he will find, are still ours today—like the institutional separation within the Mennonite brotherhood. P.M. Friesen, who does not have all the answers, comments on these questions with passionate and tolerant wisdom.

In several places Friesen calls for a fuller biographical treatment of the characters whose voices he wished to preserve. He recognized, I think, the value of the kind of concrete record which enables a reader to empathize with, to become involved with his past. And I think that is the kind of history which P.M. Friesen wrote.

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FOOTNOTES

- 1 *The Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia (1789-1910)* Winnipeg, 1978. (Page references are to the German original throughout).
- 2 Cited from the edition of 1700 (Frankfurt/Main: Fritsch).
- 3 For detailed descriptions of Wuerttemberg developments see H. Hermelink, *Geschichte der evangelischen Kirche in in Wuerttemberg* (Stuttgart, 1949) and H. Lehmann, *Pietismus und weltliche Ordnung in Wuerttemberg vom 17. bis zum 20. Jahrhundert.* (Stuttgart, 1969). Cf. also J. Urry, *The Closed and the Open* (unpublished diss. Oxford, 1975), who distinguishes between the 'old' and the 'new' pietism (p. 561f.) and claims that emigrations to the east were of 'old' pietists unhappy with the 'new'.
- 4 The best example may be that of Wuest himself, for whom the key experience appears to have taken place a year after the successful launching of his evangelical ministry.
- 5 Wuerttemberg's strong interest in the end times, deriving from the influential Bengel, predates the Darbyist movement, which only reached Germany in the 1850's. 1836 was the date named by Bengel for the second coming, as a result of which the houses in the pietist community Kornthal were lightly constructed—an early example of built-in obsolescence. The houses still stand, however.
- 6 See Hermelink, p. 287f.
- 7 While still in Wuerttemberg, Wuest had been attacked because of his popular use of religious songs, particularly among school children.
- 8 In "Born of Anabaptism and Pietism", p. 5.
- 9 See *Wuest Akte*, Landeskirchliches Archiv Stuttgart, Bestand A 27, Bd. 3632, 30/Item 3. I would like to thank Herr Ott of the Archiv and Dr. Horst Quiring for their kind assistance in locating this previously unknown source.
- 10 Urry comes to the same conclusion: "Wuest spent the

last years of his life struggling to contain the forces he had unwittingly released." (p. 581).

- 11 G. Stecher, in *Jung-Stilling als Schriftsteller* (Palaestra CXX, Berlin, 1913) claims that Jung-Stilling was himself a freemason, although this information was not included in his autobiographical writings. In a chapter entitled "Stilling als Freimaurer" he cites a letter of Stilling's with the observation: "ich war gewöhnlicher Freimaurer." (p. 133).
- 12 The large question concerning the kind of language introduced to our people through these influences can only be hinted at here. The language of Pietism is a very different language from that used by Menno. It has much more in common with the *Empfindsamkeit* of the 18th century, to which it is related, both historically and in kind. Both deal with individual human experience in affective terms; the religious idiom, whether in sermons, songs or 'devotional' literature, is characterized by two features in particular: the inner life and this in terms of experience and feeling. Although the forms were brought to culmination in the songs of Zinzendorf, the pietist idiom has become codified to the point of having become a new orthodoxy, if not a Procrustean bed, for evangelical Christianity. In order to understand what happened to the Mennonite and especially the M.B. brotherhood, it would be well to pay close attention to the development of these linguistic forms, which, after all, bespeak the forms and patterns of religious experience.