

Introduction

Until relatively recently not many historians, either sacred or profane, have emerged from within the ranks of the Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. The 'splendid isolation' of such volumes as the *Hutterite Chronicle* and the *Martyrs' Mirror* only serve to accentuate this fact. Aside from the American Mennonites associated primarily with Goshen College and its affiliated Biblical Seminary in more recent years, only the Dutch Mennonites have a historical tradition of some note. Among the Mennonite Brethren there is — leaving the present generation out of consideration — only one historian worthy of the name: the teacher-theologian Peter Martin Friesen. He was a man of one book, a book twenty-five years in the making. That book was commissioned soon after the birth of the movement and, when it appeared, fulfilled much the same function as the other two mentioned above: it was an attempt to explain and justify a new Mennonite church as well as to recount the stories of its 'martyrs'. Yet there is a difference. The first two were attempts to justify the Anabaptist-Mennonite movement against the aspersion of the enemy without; Friesen's study wished to justify the existence of the Mennonite Brethren Church to the enemy within — the larger Mennonite society in Russia from which it emerged.

When Friesen completed the book in 1911 he had no way of knowing what the future held in store for the Mennonites of Russia. He could not know that the Russian Revolution — a mere six years away — together with the subsequent Mennonite emigration and the closing of the Russian archives to Western scholars (hiding what documentary evidence had not been destroyed during the revolutionary turmoil and subsequent dislocation of thousands of Mennonites) would place his book in a unique position. For while the *Hutterite Chronicle* and the *Martyrs' Mirror* have, over the years, been supplemented with the volumes of the *Quellen zur Geschichte der Täufer* as well as other collections of source materials and a growing number of scholarly monographs based upon

archival research in Europe, the corrections and further studies that Friesen himself called for in the introduction to his history have been made very difficult, if not completely impossible. Thus all studies of the Russian Mennonites — and especially those relating to the Mennonite Brethren — must rely heavily on Friesen.

Having said this, one feels compelled to ask why the break with the larger Mennonite community in Russia did not evoke a counter-response to Friesen, indeed, why so few people have concerned themselves with the study of the event at all. It is even doubtful that Friesen would have written on the subject had he not initially been commissioned to do so by the fledgling M B Church. Have Mennonites, until the very recent past, not been interested in their own history? Have they perhaps been afraid to look at that past for fear that it might rattle some of their pet assumptions about themselves? Friesen thought so. And so does David Rempel, the best contemporary authority on the Mennonite experience in Russia, who remarked in a letter to the editor of this volume: "My general acquaintanceship with Russian Mennonite writings on any important aspect of their long sojourn in that empire, and my experience in practice with different groups of members of our brotherhood on somewhat controversial issues of our life in that country, have unfortunately led me to the conclusion that too many of our people prefer to hear or to read about that experience not so much as the event actually occurred but as they wished to have it happen."

Aside from this desire to believe, perhaps even determination to believe, pious myths about our past rather than confront the real story, there is one other reason for this phenomenon that comes to mind. With the exception of those who, like the Dutch, have remained in the land of their birth, Mennonites have, nearly the world over, been a pilgrim people in search of the promised land. This is especially true of those who left the Netherlands for Prussia and Poland during the years of persecution following the Reformation. Concerned primarily to protect life and limb by avoiding the snare of the heresy hunter — and in the process eke out an existence — they hardly had either the time or the opportunity, never mind the interest, to reflect,

profoundly or otherwise, upon the meaning of their pilgrimage. Never far removed from persecution during the first two hundred years of their existence, they kept a low profile and eventually came to be known as the 'quiet in the land', a description we used to be proud of. And because they were not overly eager to be educated in the schools of their persecutors, they developed an antipathy toward education generally and tended, unlike the leaders of the original movement, not to produce educated leaders.

In 1789 these Mennonites began all over again, this time in Russia. They repeated that experience in Canada and the United States in the 1870s, the 1920s and the 1940s. Still others have repeated it in South America and more recently in Germany. There was thus little leisure in between to develop a strong sense of historical continuity when discontinuity and hardship appeared to be the order of the day. Nevertheless, the Russian Mennonites did develop their own school system from which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, a number of exceptional students emerged who continued their studies abroad, either in the universities of Germany or Switzerland. However, the Russian Mennonite schools, to which these students more often than not returned to teach after their stay abroad, usually served practical rather than philosophical ends. Under these conditions, had the M B Church not commissioned Friesen to write his history not even he would have shouldered the task. Given the intellectual climate among the Russian Mennonites, then, Friesen's study is all the more remarkable, written as it was under very adverse conditions.

Initially, Friesen was concerned — as were those who commissioned the study — to trace the origins and growth of the M B Church. As the project grew, however, he broadened the scope of his study to include the whole of Russian Mennonitism. Even so, the original preoccupation with origins remained a primary focus. For the historian, the search for origins is always problematical, for it tends to give him tunnel vision. Much as the sands in an hourglass must filter through a narrow passageway in order to measure time, the search for origins all too often becomes the focus of the study through which every other event is

seen. Neither the history before nor the history after that event is seen on its own terms. Such a search can, and in P.M. Friesen does, have a distorting effect upon the interpretation of the evidence.

The essays included in this volume were originally written for and presented at the P.M. Friesen Symposium held in Fresno on May 4-6, 1978, under the auspices of the Center for Mennonite Brethren Studies and the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary to mark the publication of the translation of Friesen's history. They therefore quite naturally center around that work and the issues mentioned above: the setting of the historical events in Russia; the problem of origins; some of the salient issues raised by the book; and the historian himself. The first section was originally to have contained two essays: one by John B. Toews of Calgary on the Mennonite intellectual world from which the M B Church and P.M. Friesen both emerged; the second by David Rempel on the influence of economic and social structures on the religious life of the Russian Mennonites between 1840 and 1870. Without looking at the problem of origins directly, they were to set the stage for the events that transpired during those crucial thirty years. But due to ill health, Professor Rempel was subsequently unable to prepare and present his paper. The symposium was, and this volume is, the poorer for it, especially in light of the lengthy letter sent by Professor Rempel to the editor accepting the assignment and laying out *in extenso* his preliminary views on the topic.

The second group of essays deals with kinship patterns and leadership among the founding fathers of the M.B. Church and raises some intriguing questions. Based on the extensive genealogical research of Alan Peters, the first essay calls us to consider an aspect of the origins of the M.B. Church seldom if ever broached before, and certainly not given any consideration by Friesen. The second essay deals with Johann Claassen, without a doubt the most important single personality amongst the founding fathers. Based upon a book by the same name just recently published, this short biographical sketch reminds us of the importance of individuals in the birth of any movement, but especially in that of the early M.B. Church.

The third section is devoted to Friesen the historian as well as more directly to one of the central issues raised by his study: the question of the origins of the Mennonite Brethren Church. Needless to say, every historian, no matter how hard he attempts to remain objective, or as Friesen put it, "to write truth as the Bible did of David", puts a little of himself into his work. These essays, therefore, seek to help us understand Friesen's history better by illuminating the man and his presupposition, his style and the problems he confronted as well as the central issue he dealt with.

In the final part the authors attempt to use Friesen to help us understand ourselves better in the present. The first essay centers around the problem of language, specifically the linguistic accommodation or non-accommodation of a peregrinating minority group to the dominant language-culture of the country in which they live. The second has to do with the importance of Friesen's history for our theological self-understanding, clearly the most important issue of all. Indeed, in one way or another, all of the essays are concerned with this problem; J.B. Toews' essay, however, more specifically than all the others. And it is only fitting that he should have the last word in this book. After all, he was the moving force behind both the translation and the symposium.

The purpose of this book, then, as that of the translation of Friesen's history which preceded it, is to help us become more aware of our heritage, indeed, to awaken within each one of us historical consciousness. We are not a people living in a vacuum; we are historical beings, whether we like it or not. And if we truly believe — as we profess on many occasions — that God has been at work in our history, should we not be much more concerned to know it the way it really happened — as much as that is possible — than we are at present? For our continuing disregard of that history is clearer testimony than we care to admit that we do not really believe that it has any meaning at all.

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