

## fiction and mennonite life

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“I’ve lived here for three months, and I don’t really know; who is a Mennonite?” Rozia Tantamont, who has come to the Wapiti, Manitoba, Mennonite community to teach in the grade school, asks Thomas Wiens, the young Mennonite hero of Rudy Wiebe’s novel *Peace Shall Destroy Many*.<sup>1</sup> Many of us who have been trying to answer her question with more tenacity are still as puzzled as she was and like Thomas, as unable to give a satisfactory answer: “I doubt you’ll get an answer in Wapiti—or anywhere. Some say only church members are Mennonites, others that we’re actually a race of people.”<sup>2</sup> To catch the life and character of any group, no matter how homogeneous, is, as Kant says of philosophy, “eine unendliche Aufgabe.” Mennonites are not homogeneous,<sup>3</sup> not even the Russo-Germans upon whom this paper will focus. These followers of the radical reformer Menno Simons in Holland moved to Prussia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, to Russia upon the invitation of Catherine the Great in 1786 and to the Prairie States and Provinces in the 1870’s and 1920’s. Each move was made to maintain their religious convictions.

The Mennonites themselves have been preoccupied with Rozia’s question, especially in the last forty years since the publication of the *Mennonite Quarterly Review*<sup>4</sup> in 1927 and *Mennonite Life*<sup>5</sup> in 1946. They have attempted to discover themselves through many books and articles on Mennonite history, sociology and thought.

All of these methods are important, but I would like here to explore Mennonite life and character as they appear in fiction. Several difficulties immediately arise. The Mennonite with his concern for plain speech and simplicity of life has not often turned to fiction to express his character. While over one hundred novels about American Mennonites have been published, most of them are juveniles or faintly disguised tracts.<sup>6</sup> No important American novelist has ever used a Mennonite as a

major character.<sup>7</sup> Few short stories have appeared in *Mennonite Life* or elsewhere.<sup>8</sup>

There is, then, not much good material available. But this is not primarily a study of the literary value of Mennonite fiction but of the relevant and unique way in which it comments on and helps us to understand the society it refracts, though not necessarily reflects. Fiction, both good and bad, does tell us something worth knowing about the distinguishing characteristics strongly marking Russo-German Mennonite culture that is different from what a historical or sociological study can reveal. Even when fiction tells us nothing new in a simple direct discursive account, it can nevertheless show us what we may have known but have never before felt about life and character.

I wish to focus on six novels dealing with the Russo-German Mennonites, whose culture I know best.<sup>9</sup> These novels fall into three divisions: Peter Epp's *Eine Mutter* (1932) and Arnold Dyck's *Verloren in der Steppe* (1944) dealing with the Mennonites in Russia, 1844-1924; Gordon Friesen's *Flamethrowers* (1932) and Otto Schrag's *The Locusts* (1943) dealing with Gnadenu, one of the earliest settlements in Kansas, 1874-1930; and Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962) and Warren Kliever's *The Violators* (1964) dealing with contemporary Mennonites attempting to save a part of their uniqueness in the face of an encroaching world, 1944-1960.<sup>10</sup>

The two German novels dealing with Mennonite life in Russia reveal much about the peculiar mores and folkways developed there, bringing to life the world "in which we find our potatoes and beans."<sup>11</sup> Arnold Dyck,<sup>12</sup> for example, helps us to see the simple and utilitarian rooms of the houses with the *Grosse Stube*, the *Eckstube* and the *Kleine Stube*, furnished with their *Ruhbank* and *Schlafbank*, and to understand how an imaginative Mennonite boy, lying on the *Schlafbank* on a winter afternoon, imagines the lengthening shadows on the wall to be a fish or a three-legged dog. Good social historians mention the Mennonite foods which Hans eats—*Zwieback*, *Rollkuchen*, *Warenike*, *Pfeffernuessen* and *Porzelchen*,—but are unable to evoke the feeling he has smelling them, seeing them glistening in the frying fat, savoring them in his imagination when they are still so hot that he can only take very small bites and then being told to wait until meal time before he can have another.

Indeed, it is the point of view of Hans that makes it possible for Dyck to express what it meant to be a Russian Mennonite boy with more immediacy than research, which depends on a disinterested, objective point of view. Mennonite culture is seen through the eyes of a curious, sometimes mischievous boy who notices the rising and the setting of the sun, enjoys the fragrance of the fruit trees in bloom, plays with the little chickens but dislikes the larger ones because their ubiquitous droppings, when they get between his toes, irritate him to the point where he has to wash them, but who, on the other hand, is not dismayed by the smell of

the little pigs with whom he also plays and whose odor attaches itself to him.

Hans is not only a sensitive observer, responsive to beauty, but also an imaginative one with a rich inner life. A reflective boy, wondering about who he is and who the Mennonites are, Hans considers why the Mennonites have not been the subject of any of the books or pictures he had seen in Jekaterinsslaw. They had all portrayed something great or far away, never life in the village of Hochfeld. He wonders if it is forbidden to draw such a picture or if the subject is so unimportant that it is not worth painting. He concludes rather that no painter or writer is aware that such villages exist. Considering the possibility of becoming an artist—"Ein ganz bedeutender natuerlich" (a famous one, naturally)—he envisions painting a picture of himself riding the horses in front of a cultivator in a cornfield so that others may know that there are hard-working Mennonite boys like himself. Through Hans we see the dreaming, yearning, idyllic side of the Mennonite character.

Peter Epp<sup>13</sup> offers a less idyllic view. Like Dyck he uses a distinct point of view, that of a sane, sensitive, experienced and alert older woman, able to look both backward to the event narrated and forward to its outcome. The past and the present become fused: "da war gestern und heute eines geworden; und so verbindet sich mir Fernes und Nahes, Vergangenes und Gegenwärtiges zu einem Bilde" (And so for me far and near, past and present are fused into one picture). The story is sometimes a "Durcheinander," a disorder, just as felt life is more of a disorder, a simultaneousness, than a carefully delineated aspect of a problem, and Agatha's thoughts move "von einem zum andern, mit zurueck in die Vergangenheit oder ahnend voraus in die Zukunft" (from one thing to another, far back into the past or looking ahead into the future). Yet the novel itself has a unity, though not a logical one.

*Eine Mutter*, more than *Verloren*, details the history of the Mennonites in Russia; Agatha's reminiscences cover the period from 1844 to 1924, when the Mennonites developed well-established patterns of life in autonomous villages, experienced the upheaval of the migration to America in the 1870's, established industries, developed education, lived through World War I, suffered persecution during the Russian revolution, starved during the famine, saw the disintegration of their village life and in the 1920's witnessed the second great emigration to Canada and the United States.<sup>14</sup>

But Epp like Dyck does more than tell us what the Mennonites were before they became what they will presently cease to be,<sup>15</sup> revealing their foreboding that a chapter in Mennonite history was ending, and depicting what it meant to be a Mennonite in that time and place.

*Eine Mutter*, through a distinct yet representative Mennonite angle of vision, shows them baking Zwieback and cultivating corn, singing hymns and beating their wives. Indeed we not only see Mennonite life

and character through Agatha's eyes; she is herself the voice of at least one kind of Mennonite character.

Her distrust of reading and of secular education reflects one kind of Mennonite attitude, her fear of the non-Mennonite world another kind. Her refusal to accompany her grandchildren through their factory and her reminder to them when they disparage the farm that "Wir duerfen nicht ohne Ehrfurcht von der Erde sprechen, die aus Gottes Schoepferhand hervorgegangen ist, die uns im letzten Grunde alle kleidet and naehrt" (We dare not speak without reverence of the earth which came from God's creative hand and which in the final analysis clothes and nourishes us all, p. 266) catches in one short glimpse more of the Mennonites' distrust of urbanization than any sociological study could.

Both novels with Russian backgrounds are much more than an accurate reflection of Mennonite culture and history; they also exhibit the Mennonite's inner life, his shapeless, capricious, discontinuous, essentially nameless feelings buried in his soul's subterranean depth until a novelist gives them shape and form, continuity, meaning and richness. Without such knowledge the character of a people cannot be completely understood.

It is not hard to see how Epp's and Dyck's novels, written by sympathetic and knowledgeable observers, can tell us artistically something about Mennonite culture. But can novelists whose representation of Mennonite culture is inaccurate, even perverse, also reveal something of Mennonite character?

Otto Schrag<sup>16</sup> for example, is often wrong about Gnadenu, the village which the Russo-Germans settled in 1874 and in which his story is set. Gnadenu was neither in a valley nor in McPherson County, Kansas, and those who lived there never saw the sun setting behind the Rocky Mountains or traded in Atchison. Nor did European cornflowers or poppies grow there, but sunflowers, and there was no casual talk of wheat ripening in the fall or of plowing eighteen inches deep. But these inaccuracies are not as damaging as Schrag's failure to present with verisimilitude a viable community in which his characters develop.

Nor do the characters come to life. Martin Miller, the leader of the Mennonites, is, Schrag tells us, stubborn, industrious, stern, curt and determined to do the right. Many Mennonite pioneers would fit this description, but since Schrag does not show us these attributes, his characterization has little more force than a discursive essay.

When Schrag describes the Mennonites as alike as "pebbles that have rolled down a stream from source to mouth; at the end of their . . . journey almost indistinguishable the one from the other, all cracks and wrinkles having vanished" (19), it is not so important that he is wrong as that he has failed to evoke this sameness in the novel.

On the other hand, when the Mennonites, after a particularly difficult day in fighting the grasshoppers which have invaded Gnadenu, conclude

that "no one was any longer to be master over the things he owned, and that the strength of all would be employed to save a little for all" (362), the decision grows out of the plot and exemplifies the Mennonite concern for mutual aid, even though the method Schrag describes was never used in Gnadenu. Later when they are convinced, even after weeks of apparently hopeless struggle, that "it would take more than these evil-smelling beasts to drive Mennonites from their land" (338), the Mennonites' love for the land is more vividly conveyed by the fictional than by a historical statement.

The problem becomes much more complicated in Gordon Friesen's *Flamethrowers*,<sup>17</sup> which also takes place in pioneer Gnadenu, but which he calls Blumenhof. Friesen is preoccupied with the perverse in Mennonite character. Isaac Liese, the spiritual leader of the Mennonites, a sex-hungry, seventy-year-old man, lusts almost beyond control for Theresa Franzman and thinks even while he sits in church of the comforts of a soft breast. The main purpose of the avaricious Gottlieb Crafthold is to acquire by fair means or foul (the latter gives him more pleasure) every possible acre of land. Other individual Mennonites are just as despicable, deceitful and degenerate.

As a congregation the Mennonites are just as repulsive. Friesen describes the air of dismal hopelessness which hung over all just before they enter the church. These people who profess a close companionship with the Creator of all life for whom their ancestors had waded through blood had about them "an atmosphere of exhausted and irrecoverable mankind. . . . Their clothes, their tones of speech, their few actions, their faces and hands, showed nothing of a love . . . of creation, but rather a sour, total disinterest, a mistrust of life, and a decision, as though in spite, to live it as dully as possible" (213).

Yet even this drabness is helpful in understanding Mennonite character, though it probably ought not to be considered typical. Just as Faulkner's violent and degenerate characters do not reflect the conventionally cheerful and moral Americans most of us know, yet illumine some often ignored dark corners of American character, so Friesen's characters make us more conscious of not uncommon Mennonite selfishness, greed and cruelty. Not many Mennonite communities have a Susie Gunstan with her ugly thigh wound which her mother showed with pride to her friends and which many mothers used to scare little boys into conversion. But there were attempts to think of conversion as a fire escape from hell, and we can sympathize with Peter's revulsion and rejection of the church when this and other equally inhumane methods were used to convince him to become a member.

Reading *Flamethrowers* I am aware that the novel is badly conceived, that Blumenhof is only vaguely realized and that it is not peopled by men and women who act in accord with the world which the author has created, that his grotesque characters fail in balance to embody his

announced theme of man's inhumanity to man and that Friesen's lack of aesthetic distance makes us more aware of his anger and rebellion than of Peter's. Yet that very anger which burns through almost every page and distorts both Blumenhof and its people illuminates Friesen's intolerance and scorn for his Mennonite background with more immediacy and effect than a biographical statement would. To understand an ethnic group one needs to experience the anger of its defectors. I know of no other such reaction anywhere; Mennonite defectors have never been very vocal.

"In the depths of every heart," Nathaniel Hawthorne tells us, "there is a tomb and a dungeon, though the lights, the music, and revelry above may cause us to forget their existence, and the buried ones, or prisoners whom they hide."<sup>18</sup> Rudy Wiebe and Warren Kliewer are much more successful than Friesen in showing not only to the Mennonite but to all of us that tomb and dungeon.

Wiebe<sup>19</sup> is concerned with the "wells of depravity" which yawn in Thomas Wiens' "empty self" (227). Naive, innocent and uncritical of the Mennonites and himself at the beginning, Thomas discovers that sin does not come primarily, as his church mistakenly thought, from the outside world which it has attempted to shut out by settling in the forest and brush far from other communities, but that the staggering freight of human depravity is inside of him just as it is inside the Mennonite community and inside the ostensibly good leader of the Wapiti Mennonites, Deacon Block.<sup>20</sup>

Even the traditional Mennonite teaching of nonresistance, based upon love to God and man, is no guarantee that the best of Mennonites cannot be guilty of hatred and violence. Thomas' faith in nonresistance is tested by World War II and by his expectation of being drafted to fight a brutal war. No brush or forest can shut out the violence; his radio which leaps over the isolating forest brings it into his room every night.

Rozia Tantamont, the pretty, young, sensual schoolteacher who brings the values of the outside world into Wapiti, further challenges Thomas' values and makes him poignantly aware of the thorny problems of the Mennonite pacifist in a century when distance has been annihilated and when the events in Europe and Asia affect the Wapiti Mennonites.

Moreover, Hank Unger, a church member home on furlough from the Canadian Air Force, has completely rejected the pacifist position, enjoys killing Germans and taunts Thomas for his ineffective and outdated views. Thomas is critical of Hank, but he discovers that the violence which he had relegated to the outside world and to the war is also present in Wapiti, for both he and his friends fight with Hank Unger over Rozia after the school Christmas program on Christmas eve.

On the way home Thomas, ashamed of the defection of the Mennonites from their faith in love and even more ashamed of the blow he had

used to thwart one of the Unger brothers, reflects on the play presented by the school. It had ended with the tired Wise Men at an old barn in Bethlehem where one of the Shepherds (played by a halfbreed child whom he had taught in a mission Sunday School class) assured them that they had come to the end of their journey.

Thomas is not sure that he has come to the end of his quest, however. He wonders if he could find answers for the evil in his heart and in Wapiti and for the brutal war in Europe at the barn in Bethlehem. Thomas is not sure, and this ambiguity is one of the strengths of the novel.

Warren Kliewer<sup>21</sup> also shows the futile efforts of a Mennonite community to maintain a pure life and doctrine by separation from the rest of the world and the effect such futile and deceptive hopes have upon character. Like Wapiti, Waldheim is a vividly realized place, separated from the rest of the world by a dense forest and by an ungraded, winding, almost inaccessible dirt road. Waldheim exerts every effort to avoid contact with the wickedness of the outside world and with those non-German elements which have moved into it. The village has no hotel and the railroad rarely leaves a passenger. When the depot burns it is not rebuilt. The church substitutes for the depot, resulting, ironically, in evil penetrating the church.

Even more than *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, *The Violators* demonstrates that isolation from the outside world does not keep evil out. The intrusion of the world into Waldheim is symbolized by the whistle of the train which seems to "split the wall of the church" and the pounding of the train's driving wheel which causes the church "to tremble and shake and . . . rock" (78).

The outside world, furthermore, is being quietly, though unknowingly, accepted by the Mennonites. When the Canadian Broadcasting Company places an ultra-high-frequency television tower with two of its legs in the back yard of the parsonage, the Mennonites first ignore it as evil, for television will bring into Waldheim such evils as "card-playing, drinking, dancing, and Sunday baseball." But later they domesticate the tower by using its legs as wash line poles, by planting flowers and ivy around it, by holding the meetings of the ladies aid society there and finally by performing a wedding in its shade when the church gets too hot. The church has inadvertently and accidentally come to terms with the symbol of all the Germans' hate and fear in the outside world. Even the English language can no longer isolate the Germans, for English has intruded into the hymnal, which includes fifteen English hymns, one of which is sung every month, and it is rumored that one of the younger members owns and reads from an English Bible.

In these short stories, then, Kliewer portrays another aspect of Mennonite character: the effect of separation, which is not purity of character but an inability to make judgments when they are needed and a failure

to recognize that like everyone else the Germans of Waldheim live in an imperfect world and share in the general sinfulness.<sup>22</sup>

Both Wiebe and Kliever force the reader—both Mennonite and non-Mennonite—to look at Mennonite character again. They refuse to accept the usual stereotyped, cliché-ridden picture of Mennonites as bearded, frugal, hard-working, peace-loving, God-fearing people, reminding the reader that life and character, even of the plain people, are much more complex, intricate and ambivalent than the neat packages most of us wrap them in. Their fictions unwrap the neat packaging and reveal the chaotic maelstrom within. To the extent that they succeed, their fictions enrich our knowledge not only of the Mennonites, but also of all life and character.

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### footnotes

1. (Toronto, 1962), 178.

2. *Ibid.*, 178. As a defector from the Mennonite church, I still consider myself almost as much a Mennonite as a Methodist.

3. There are two basic racial elements in Mennonitism, both going back to the Reformation: the Swiss who are descendants of the Swiss Brethren, the followers of Conrad Grebel and others who felt that Zwingli had not gone far enough in effecting a complete reformation of the church and a restoration of New Testament Christianity; and the Dutch who were followers first of Obbe and Dirk Phillips and later of Menno Simons, a converted Catholic priest. Both groups held that the church must be purely voluntary, made up only of adults who confessed a faith in Jesus Christ after a confession of sin. Both groups eliminated infant baptism, insisted upon a strict separation of church and state, non-resistance, separation from the world and the simple life. The Swiss descendants came to America earlier, the first permanent settlement coming from Krefeld, Germany, to Germantown upon the invitation of William Penn in 1683. There are at least twenty-one denominations of Mennonites in the United States, ranging all the way from the General Conference Mennonites, who are almost indistinguishable from other American Protestant denominations, to the Amish and Hutterites with their unique habits.

4. Published by the Mennonite Historical Society of Goshen College, the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* concerns itself with scholarly articles in all disciplines, publishing articles on Mennonite life and thought. The journal has made a considerable impact upon church historians in the United States and abroad and has been in some measure responsible for the current interest in Anabaptist studies among church historians today.

5. Published by Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, *Mennonite Life* is an illustrated quarterly somewhat more popular in its appeal than MQR, but nevertheless scholarly. It publishes creative work as well as scholarly articles emphasizing an analysis of contemporary Mennonitism. Both of the quarterly journals rely heavily on and have been much concerned with the collection of source materials in both European and American Anabaptism, and both the historical libraries at Goshen and Bethel College have unexcelled—even in Europe—resources, much of which has never been tapped by scholars; both libraries, however, are used constantly by students in the field.

6. The most complete bibliography of Mennonite fiction is my "American Mennonite Fiction: A Contribution Toward a Bibliography," *Mennonite Life*, XXII (July, 1967), 131-133. I have excluded the juveniles from consideration in this paper.

7. German writers have made more extensive use of Mennonite materials than American writers. See Elizabeth Horsch Bender, "The Mennonites in German Literature," unpublished master's thesis (University of Minnesota, 1944), which details the use of the Mennonite theme by such writers as Grimmelhausen, Jung-Stilling, Stern, Riehl, Keller, Wildenbruch, Fontane, Sudermann and others.

8. In spite of the editor's encouragement to fiction writers, only eight short stories have appeared in its twenty-two volumes. Rudy Wiebe has published three short stories in Mennonite periodicals during this year.

9. I grew up in a Russo-German settlement near Fairview, Oklahoma, attended the Mennonite church and a parochial school there and later matriculated at Tabor College, Hillsboro, Kansas, supported by the Mennonite Brethren, almost all of whom are Russo-German. My grandfather, Jacob Becker, was one of the original founders of the Mennonite Brethren

branch of the church in Russia. I taught for two years at Bethel College, North Newton, Kansas, supported by the General Conference Mennonites. Many of the constituents of Bethel were Russo-German. I wrote my M.A. thesis at the University of Kansas on the "Russo-German Mennonite Theme in the American Novel," 1948.

10. Besides these six novels at least four others ought to be included in any list of novels dealing seriously with the Mennonite theme, though I am not concerned with them here: Marcus Bach, *The Dreamgate*, which is about the Hutterites, whose relationship with the Mennonites is clear but whose life and character are so different as to make them another problem entirely; Rudy Wiebe, *First and Vital Candle*, which does not deal with Mennonites though written by a Mennonite author; Helen Good Brenneman, *But Not Forsaken*; and Eunice Schellenberger, *Wings of Decision*.

11. Eliseo Vivas, *Creation and Discovery* (New York, 1955), 188.

12. The author of *Verloren in Der Steppe* (Winnipeg, Part I, 1944; Part II, 1945; Part III, 1946; Part IV, 1947; Part V, 1948) was born in Russia in 1889 and educated in the Mennonite schools there and in the colleges of Russia and Germany. After serving as a teacher in Russia, he migrated to Canada in 1923 where he has edited various Mennonite journals.

13. The author of *Eine Mutter* (Bluffton, Ohio, 1932) was born in Russian in 1888 and died in 1954. He was educated in Russia and Germany, receiving the Ph.D. in 1912 from the University of Basel, Switzerland. After teaching in Russia he migrated to the United States in 1924 where he taught at Bluffton College and the University of Ohio.

14. The novel mentions but does not treat extensively the problem of the young Mennonites in regard to their pacifism and their work in the forest service.

15. The definition of history is Carl Becker's.

16. Otto Schrag was born in Germany in 1902. Educated in Germany, he received his Ph.D. from the University of Heidelberg in 1933. In 1936 he left Germany for Luxemburg and in 1940 was captured by the Germans and sent to a concentration camp. Escaping in 1940, he came to the United States. I do not know if he is still alive, what his source for his Mennonite material in *The Locusts* was, or what he has done subsequent to the publication of the novel. He is not a Mennonite. *The Locusts* was written in German and translated by Richard Winston. It was published in New York in 1934.

17. (Caldwell, Idaho, 1936). Friesen was born in 1909 near Weatherford, Oklahoma. His parents both were born in the Gnadenu village which he describes. He apparently never joined the Mennonite church himself. His adult life was spent as a newspaper man and artist, and he is living in New York at this time.

18. The quote is from his short-story "The Haunted Mind."

19. Rudy Wiebe was born in Saskatchewan in 1934 and educated at the Mennonite High School in Coaldale, Alberta. Following his graduation from the University of Alberta, he studied for a year at the University of Tuebingen in West Germany. He was granted the M.A. from the University of Alberta in 1960. He has taught at Goshen College, Goshen, Indiana, and is now teaching creative writing at the University of Alberta, Canada.

20. One of the most vividly realized characters in Mennonite fiction, Deacon Block is neither a good man nor a villain. Under extreme provocation he has killed a man in Russia, and he has never recovered from the shock. Instead of confessing his sin and living with it, he has tried to atone by attempting to provide for his children and for other Mennonites an environment that will be an island of holiness in a sea of despair. For a fuller analysis of Deacon Block see my "Universal Values in Rudy Wiebe's *Peace Shall Destroy Many*," *Mennonite Life*, XX (October, 1965), 172-176.

21. Warren Kliewer was born in 1931 in Mountain Lake, Minnesota. He graduated from the University of Minnesota in 1953, from the University of Kansas with an M.A. in 1959 and from the University of Minnesota with an M.F.A. in 1966. He is an Associate Professor of English at Wichita State University, Wichita, Kansas. He has written two books of poems and a number of dramas which have been widely staged. For a fuller analysis of *The Violators* (Francetown, New Hampshire, 1964) see my introduction to the book and my article "The Mennonite Character in American Fiction," *Mennonite Life*, XXII (July, 1967), 123-130.

22. While Kliewer never calls the members of the German Church Mennonites, the resemblance is clear, though one should not look to the Germans for distinguishing marks which would make it possible to locate Waldheim on a map. Waldheim is much more, however, than a Mennonite village. It is any isolated village and its people are any who refuse to look beyond their narrow boundaries, refusing to see themselves as they really are, satisfied with an obviously false and idiotic picture of themselves.