



Royden Loewen. *Mennonite Farmers: A Global History of Place and Sustainability.* Young Center Books in Anabaptist and Pietist Studies. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2021. 348 pp. \$52.00, paper, ISBN 978-1-4214-4203-7.

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Leo Chu on Royden Loewen, *Mennonite Farmers*

Interests in Mennonite communities have brought together historians of science, environment, and agriculture in the past decade. While earlier studies emphasize how these communities keep their doctrines of pacifism and simple living through transnational migration, recent studies try to approach the dynamic relations between settlement and mobility by attending to the networks, knowledge, and practices of Mennonite farmers, along with their impacts on the environment and society. Royden Loewen's *Mennonite Farmers* is a remarkable attempt to advance this scholarship. By tracing Mennonite farmers across seven different places, Loewen uses religion as a common thread between these communities and examines their responses to state power, uneven relations, and a changing climate that increasingly questions the sustainability of their agricultural practices.

The first two chapters trace the origin of individual Mennonite communities. Chapter 1 begins with the Friesian Mennonites and their migration to North America (Manitoba and Iowa) and Siberia between the mid-nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Chapter 2 documents a second

wave of migration from the late nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century in which missionaries and settlers traveled to the global South via colonial and postcolonial networks. These included Dutch Mennonites in Java, Indonesia; American Mennonites in Matabeleland, Zimbabwe; and Canadian Mennonites in the eastern lowlands of Bolivia. Notably, as Loewen keenly points out, farming did not automatically mean moral virtue to the Mennonites. In the formative period of Friesian Mennonites, for example, the for-profit nature of Dutch farming in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries that involved aggressive land reclamation and engineering suggested that "rural connections were no guarantor of Menno Simon's emphasis on simplicity and humility" (p. 20). Indeed, the reasons behind Mennonites' success in settling in various countries was not only their religious values but also the governments' belief in their agrarian capabilities. The book then explores the increasing heterogeneity and dynamic adaptation of the Mennonite faith amid the contested relationships between the communities, the state, and the environment.

Chapters 3 through 6 chart the multiple themes in Mennonite participation in, and responses to, the modernization of agriculture and the expansion of state power. Chapter 3 summarizes how Mennonites became key actors in the “Green Revolution” in the mid-twentieth century through the promotion of large-scale monoculture, high-yielding varieties, and agricultural machineries. Chapter 4 addresses how Mennonites reconciled their identity as pious farmers and their roles in transforming the relationship between land and people. Crucially, while American, Canadian, and European Mennonites expressed readily a desire to restore the harmony with nature through their faith, Mennonites in Africa and Asia, especially the local converts, had a more complicated feeling toward the religious organization. Ndebele Mennonites in Matabeleland reflected that early missionaries’ “focus on personal piety, nonviolence, and rural isolation” had avoided “issues of land justice,” and that the replacement of traditional beliefs with Christianity had made people “separated from both the land nature” (p. 113). Javanese Mennonites similarly expressed their critical stance toward Dutch colonialism and strived to adapt “the reverence for a monotheistic creator” to “an environmental mysticism of Javanese origin” (p. 133).

Chapter 5 adds gender to the analysis, illustrating the division and solidarity between Mennonite women in their religious and agricultural practices. Again, such differential experiences became more acute in former colonies: affiliation with white missionaries in the past and landownership in the present granted some women more power than others, and women from poor backgrounds have articulated in the interview these multiple layers of marginalization based on gender, race, and class. Chapter 6 extends issues of power relations to the Mennonites’ ambivalent relationship with the state, which played a key role in their settlements by granting lands and exemption from military service. Most Mennonites therefore tolerated, and even welcomed, state power as

long as it did not interfere with their faith and its intervention in agriculture—such as environmental and market regulation—remained modest. An exception was Siberia, where a repressive state plagued the community for seven decades. While persecution of Mennonite religion and pacifism abated by the 1950s, the collectivized, planned agriculture kept disrupting their economic autonomy. Nevertheless, Siberian Mennonites managed to coexist with the state by demonstrating their agricultural prowess when conditions were favorable. This impressive resilience reflects the remarkable community solidarity despite, and perhaps also because of, extreme state repression.

The last two chapters situate these historical lessons in the contemporary climate crises. Northern American Mennonites are skeptical about climate change, considering their experience of past harsh weather adequate to tackle future unpredictability. Friesian Mennonites agree that better technology is needed to tackle the challenges but detest urban environmentalists’ impacts on agricultural policies. Ndebele Mennonites see climate change as part of the catastrophe brought by human greed in postindependence Zimbabwe and believe technology adaptation alone is futile. The case of Bolivian Mennonites is particularly interesting for the “regret” Loewen notes in the interviews. Arriving in the lowlands in the 1960s, Mennonites cleared the rainforest and helped the state fulfill its developmentalist vision through soybean farming and cattle ranching. However, by 1990 a series of draught and crop failures prompted them to question their reliance on heavy machinery and agrochemicals. In contrast, Canadian and American Mennonites were rather proud of their role in “feeding the world” and disseminating agricultural technology. As Loewen nicely summarizes, the root of these different self-perceptions and worldviews is less a simple North-South divide than the divergent experiences between “farmers financially secure enough to ‘play’ the global markets and simultaneously ‘reform’ global agriculture” and “those who have struggled to survive on the

land within dramatic, globally ordered, often post-colonial social change” (p. 263).

By analyzing the economic, political, and technological factors underlying these heterogeneous understandings of land and religion, *Mennonite Farmers* has expanded the scholarship of not only the comparative study of Mennonite communities but also the cross-fertilization between environmental and agricultural history. Its utilization of a wide range of sources from personal memoirs to farm diaries to interviews sheds light on how different generations of Mennonites cultivated their relations with the land and each other. The ambition to bring together several Mennonite communities in each chapter nonetheless makes it sometimes difficult to trace the actors scattered in different parts of the book, and each chapter tends to cover nearly a century of transformation for a community while leaving out wider historical contexts. *Mennonite Farmers* therefore best serves as an expansive introduction and a companion volume to monographs dedicated to individual Mennonite communities. Situated in the current literature of religion and environmental studies, this book delineates how the experiences of Mennonites resonate with the debates about agency and scale in the Anthropocene, when the idea of nature, in Christian and other tradition, demands urgent reevaluation and reconceptualization.

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