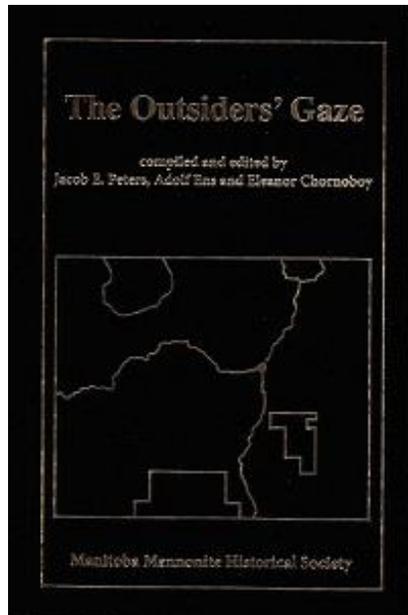


*The Outsiders' Gaze*. Compiled and edited by Jacob E. Peters, Adolf Ens and Eleanor Chornoboy. Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Historical Society, 2015. 198 pp.

Book review by Robert Martens



*In '75 the few settlers at Pembina Mountain fondly hoped that in the course of fifteen or twenty years this plain would become settled, notwithstanding the absence of timber. Before the summer was over, a large line of camp fires, extending for miles and miles, announced one evening to the lonely settlers that six thousand Mennonites had located on seventeen townships. (Jeff Gee qtd 162)*

To the “outside world,” these settlers were a strange bunch. Between 1874 and 1880 about seven thousand Mennonites left their Russian homes and immigrated to Manitoba. These Mennonites were from the “conservative” wing, isolationist, determined to hold on to their traditions of village, church, nonresistance, farming, and separation from the powers that be. These immigrants, the “Old Colony” Mennonites, immigrated to Manitoba with government guarantees of nonconscription into the military; limited but strong self-governance on administration and education; and the right not to take the oath. They initially settled into villages based on their own Russian model: a long main street with narrow properties, and with large assigned farming properties in the area surrounding the immediate village. They were a strange bunch indeed to “outsiders”: these Mennonites were reclusive but talkative, niggardly but generous – and yet they soon thrived in treeless areas of Manitoba once considered of limited worth.

The editors of *The Outsiders' Gaze* have compiled an intriguing set of documents written by “outsiders,” individuals from outside the Mennonite settlements who were trying to understand this insular German-speaking horde. Some of these writers have a good understanding of Mennonite history and culture; others are wildly misinformed, sometimes bigoted. All but one of these documents were written between 1874 and 1922. On the latter date, a new stream of Mennonites, this one very different, fled Russia for Canada; thousands of these Russian refugees arrived in the Prairies just as many of the Old Colony were preparing to leave Manitoba for a more independent way of life in places such as Mexico.

The points of view in this book regarding this odd group of settlers range widely. The reclusive nature of the Old Colony Mennonites was a huge roadblock to understanding; even John F. Funk, editor of the *Herald of Truth*, speaks of his fellow-Mennonites almost as though they were an alien race. Three general perspectives, however, predominate in this book:

1. These immigrants are filthy, ignorant and stingy. “[T]hough the villages look fairly neat, on closer inspection the Mennonites do not give a great impression of cleanliness, and however pious they may be, do not carry out the next maxim to Godliness” (*Manitoba Free Press* 49-50). These perceptions may be due to the primitive and harsh conditions of Mennonite life in the early years.

2. The Old Colony are romanticized as bearers of honest tradition. “Their business integrity is of a very high order. In fact this is so generally recognized that banks are eager for their paper, and loan companies place them high on the list of desirable borrowers” (E. Cora Hind 107). This same writer, a feminist who petitioned Ottawa for the female vote, describes Mennonite homes in rapturous terms.

3. These Mennonites are excellent foreign settlers but need to be assimilated to a progressive society. “[A] young Mennonite wearing good Canadian clothing and speaking good English readily, is, in person, no way distinctive from his fellow of British heritage. This is as it should be” (J. F. Galbraith 138). From this perspective, the breaking down of the Mennonite village system and the conversion to individual section farming can only be a good thing – and, naturally, the assimilation of Mennonite children into public schools is entirely desirable.

*The Outsiders’ Gaze* contains opinions (and some intriguing stories) so divergent that the book might best be described by quoting the writers themselves. Here are a few excerpts:

“All innovations such as choirs, organs, and fervent preaching were frowned upon. Sermons of prodigious length were read monotonously in ‘high German’ from manuscripts, but the uncomfortable, backless, wooden seats warded off drowsiness.” (C. A. Dawson 8)

“In fact all are quite satisfied, and appear to be the most happy set of people it has been my lot to meet. They are very kind and sociable, and will make good neighbours to those who settle next to them.” (J. W. Down 23)

“The Mennonite German is a barbarous dialect; it has not been improved by ninety years’ sojourn in Russia. But it served as a medium of communication. ... The Mennonites are, almost without exception, well-to-do people. What is the mysterious connection between the doctrine of non-resistance and worldly prosperity? Why do they always go together?” (Henry J. Van Dyck 40, 41)

“I have been informed that the older Mennonites look with disfavor on their younger brethren and sisters, for hiring out with Canadians, and means are being used to prevent it as much as possible. The old folk have a rather sad expression of countenance, but the young people are about as jolly and laugh as heartily as most other young folk do.” (David Currie 46)

“As a race, they are thrifty and industrious, but their neighbours say the women do most of the work.” (*Manitoba Free Press* 50)

“They are temperate; but they are not water drinkers on principle. They relish a glass of whiskey and still more a glass of brandy if they can enjoy it without payment.” (W. Fraser Rae 64)

“Mennonites reject ecclesiastical tradition, the writings of the Church Fathers and the decisions of councils. For Mennonites the Holy Scripture is the only rule of faith and, despite their profound ignorance, each believes they better fathom the meaning of Scripture than the most learned doctors.” (Fr. Jean-Théobald Bitsche 73)

“When once settled, they remain, and look upon the place as their home, working the land with the best intention of making the best of it, without any idea of selling and moving on should an opportunity occur of turning their holdings into cash, and thus restlessly seeking a new home almost before they had become established in their old one.” (W. Henry Barneby 83)

“The Mennonite women do not take any active part in public affairs. In domestic concerns, they are supreme. If there is any final authority required the woman is most emphatically the head of the house.” (E. Cora Hind 104)

“Still, it is a remarkable fact that amidst that capitalist civilisation some twenty thousand men should continue to live, and to thrive, under a system of partial communism and passive

resistance to the State which they have maintained for more than three hundred years against all persecutions.” (Peter Kropotkin 114)

“One aim of Mennonite life, it seems, is to keep its people loyal to the soil. And that is a fundamental thing in these days of farm-need. ... It is a Mennonite custom to have coffee and bread-and-butter and perhaps jam, every afternoon at four o’clock. The men leave off ploughing and come in from the fields for their cup of this refreshing hot drink. ... I fear that all our Canadian farmers are not so well looked after by their wives in the cold autumn afternoons at the ploughing! The coffee is ground fresh in the little mill over the stove at every making – a pointer for any who wish to adopt this custom.” (Victoria Hayward 194-5)

*The Outsiders’ Gaze* is available for purchase online, or can be accessed in the MHSBC library.