

Royden Loewen. *Village among Nations: "Canadian" Mennonites in a Transnational World, 1916-2006*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013.

Scholars who write about Mennonites, and Mennonites themselves, frequently identify and self-identify with reference to a nation-state, as a way of differentiating a huge diversity in historical experience and geographic location: as in Russian Mennonite, Indonesian Mennonite, Congolese Mennonite, Canadian Mennonite, for instance. But certain Mennonite groupings, largely because of their persistent transnationality, do not develop—and actually reject—a sense of national belonging. In this fascinating and important study, historian Royden Loewen analyzes the Low German Mennonites of the Americas, whose ongoing movement between north and south over nearly 100 years is unprecedented in global migration history. Loewen, who holds the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg, proposes that these Canadian-descendant Mennonites have created, or “imagined” (with reference to, but unlike, Benedict Anderson’s well-known work), a “transnational village” that exists “among nations” but is not tied to any one nation-state.

The story begins in Canada in the early 20th century, as traditionalist Mennonites in Manitoba and Saskatchewan see their relationship with the nation begin to erode, particularly with regard to public education laws enacted in 1916. Disillusionment with Canada as a utopia for religious freedom prompts 8,000 Mennonites to emigrate to Mexico and Paraguay. This story is fairly well known in the annals of Mennonite history; what follows is less understood, at least by North Americans. The word ‘Canadian’ in the book’s title gestures to the starting point of what becomes a diasporic epic, but it also indicates an ongoing relationship—one that combines longing, nostalgia and antipathy—that Mennonites in Mexico and Latin America maintain with their homeland, and that is expressed poignantly in letters published in their transnational press.

The book’s eight chapters follow the sojourners as they scatter in three directions over three generations: first, those who remain in the environs of the settlements established in northern Mexico and the Paraguayan Chaco in the early 1920s; second, those who moved further south in Mexico and to British Honduras (now Belize), Bolivia, Argentina, and elsewhere in

Paraguay; and third, those who opted to 'return' to Canada beginning in the 1950s. This dispersion was not one-directional, however, as many families developed a pattern of moving back and forth across borders in response to the seasons of agriculture and employment opportunities more broadly, citizenship laws, extended family relations, and the fissures of church life.

Loewen's usage of the idea and reality of a village to shape this study is creative and thought-provoking. The book breaks new ground by pushing us to think about Mennonites, and indeed other groupings of people with shared characteristics, in ways that go beyond the common ethnic or national or religious categories. While the village presented here is 'ethno-religious' in identity, it is also essentially about "kinship networks, common codes of conduct, folklore, even gossip, and shared ways of making a livelihood" (231). Though the approximately 250,000 Mennonites are scattered over tens of thousands of miles, their village exists through remarkable connections maintained by letters, newspapers, and travel.

Loewen's study confirms that while the Low German Mennonites might be considered traditionalist or conservative, they are not static. Rather, they are perhaps more dynamic than so-called modern Mennonites, in that they are literally in constant movement as they seek ever more satisfying places to transplant their village identities, and are always evaluating whether to move towards greater alignment with modernity or towards a deepened nonconformity vis-à-vis whatever nation-state they choose to settle within.

*Village among Nations* is theoretically sophisticated and will be inspirational to students and scholars of transnationality, migration and diaspora, religious and ethnic identity, memory, and nationalism. It is also full of engaging personal stories. Group identity does not happen void of personal choices, individual personality, familial negotiation, and pure happenstance. Accordingly, Loewen is careful to present his concept of village formation through the myriad experiences of men, women, and even children living in diverse spaces from Bolivia to British Columbia. The numerous personal stories are among multifarious sources used, such as oral histories, diaries/memoirs, transnational newspapers, local histories, and ethnographic studies done by other scholars. *Village among Nations* offers a sympathetic glimpse into the complex lives of a little-understood community while also presenting a fresh analysis of how Mennonites are

living out their economic and religious aspirations 'in the world' but not 'of the nation'.

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