

2012 SAWATSKY LECTURE

Mightier than the Sword: *Martyrs Mirror* in the New World

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The Unreadable Book

Even now, I can hardly bear to open it. I know too much and too little about the big book that always leaves me feeling small. Unable to get past the title page, I once wrote a paper for a graduate seminar that traced the evolution of the Dutch printer's mark and motto that appeared on the title pages of numerous German editions published in North America, without ever opening my own copy of the 16th printing of the second English edition, inscribed as a 28th birthday gift from my parents in 1990.¹ To be fair, I must say that I asked for it. They wouldn't have thought to give it to me otherwise, and that difference—my deliberate quest, compared to the fact that they already owned one that came from I-don't-know-where—says something about the way martyr memory works in our Mennonite community.

For as long as I can remember, it was the biggest book on our shelves, among novels, a complete set of Bible commentaries, and other useful non-fictions such as car repair manuals, gardening references, and edifying biographies. As hard to handle as an unabridged dictionary, impossible to read in bed, the tome like a tomb for the dying and dead and not yet resurrected, intimidated me with its many pages of double-columned type with red ink splatterings on the page ends that, as a kid, I believed to be the actual blood of the martyrs. Former Herald Press publisher Levi Miller recently assured me that this is not the case; those marks are added to hide dust that collects on the ends of books that stand long on the shelf, unopened.

Recognizing that *Martyrs Mirror* now functions mostly as a treasured, if unread, object in mainstream Mennonite culture, Miller and others at Herald Press published a new gift edition in 2002. They chose to retain the

¹ Julia Kasdorf, "Work and Hope": Tradition and Translation of an Anabaptist Adam," *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 69 (1994): 178-204.

red splatterings at an additional production cost of about \$1 per copy. Dutch immigrant Jan Gleysteen designed a new dust jacket and the handsome, fake leather binding embossed with “a rose among thorns,” the symbol of martyrdom that early Christians used to refer to the persecuted Church, and that *Martyrs Mirror* writers later used to refer to Anabaptists.² Dreadful torture and death symbolized by a thing of beauty—like the big book itself.

As a grown-up, I still find that book unbearable, but now for other reasons. Its strident biases alarm me: the Catholic Church called “the whore of Babylon,” for instance, centuries after John, writing the book of Revelation, used that phrase to refer to Roman persecution. And then there are the haunting engravings created by Jan Luyken, a poet who illustrated books to make a living. Those pictures made me think I already knew what the book was about, the way Americans assume they know what happens in *Moby Dick* without ever reading it: hangings, stonings, crucifixions, decapitations, burnings at the stake, burials alive, drowning, torture by means of hot tongs and brands, racks, thumb screws, or tongue screws to prevent the faithful from “giving good witness.” As the martyrs sang or spoke and sometimes forgave their executioners, their speeches and songs made their deaths meaningful. From early times, testimony was the primary definition of the word “martyrdom,” torture and death merely secondary means.

Countless acts of articulation are contained in the book big: consider all the letters, records of court testimony (sometimes quite witty and belligerent), observers’ eyewitness accounts, or the editor’s own shrill arguments. All that language feels contradictory to the way we lived when I was young. Back then, my parents—who had grown up in Amish and Mennonite farm homes in Central Pennsylvania, but who were no longer farmers themselves—were not especially vocal. They didn’t protest or vote or write letters to newspapers or lawmakers or otherwise publically bear witness to their convictions about matters like the war in Viet Nam, which

² Levi Miller, e-mail message to author, May 6, 2010. In the late 1990s, Herald Press bound the book in soft cover to market it at a much lower cost to those who buy the book to read rather than revere, but that decision proved unwise from a financial standpoint. According to Miller, the 2002 luxury edition was not prompted by post-9/11 militarization. Reflecting on his motivation for the enrichments on the new printing, he wrote, “I always considered the *Martyrs Mirror* ... our signature book as a Mennonite publisher and deserving all the attention we could afford.”

they absolutely opposed. If our copy of *Martyrs Mirror* had anything to do with their attitude toward militarization or their disengagement from public life, that also went unsaid. Yet I have come to believe that the big book—or more precisely, the memory it fostered and still fosters—strongly influenced our home and the homes of other Mennonites like us.

How does a book that I don't recall ever seeing anyone read, a book I find almost unreadable myself, convey so much meaning? How does an unread text inspire imagination and shape behavior?

As I investigate these questions, I will trace a relationship between the printing of *Martyrs Mirror* and American Mennonites' experience with war. My primary interest is not the history of the book or the ways Mennonites have changed their views with regard to pacifism and engagement with the state. Rather, the relationship between war and the book creates the shape of a story onto which I can begin to map some ideologies of sacrifice and self-denial that are grounded in cultural memory and the function of *Martyrs Mirror* in creating that memory.

I deliberately choose a word from political, not spiritual, discourse—"ideology"—to name the set of ideas that shape expectations, actions, and goals, and that get reproduced within the group as normative, just "common sense." Typically ideology is invisible, necessarily unconscious. When the group espouses a minority position, however, its difference is exposed, its ideology rendered explicit for both the dominant context and the indigenous faithful. At the point of contact with the dominant world view, ideological difference becomes evident and signifies—even clarifies—identity: "just what we do" escalates into "what it means to be us." The implicit becomes explicit, the underlying becomes the immediate, and this shift is often fraught with conflict and feeling, failures of speech and argument. One example of the way implicit ideology become explicit and engendered controversy occurred in 2010, when Goshen College, a Mennonite educational institution in the United States, suddenly had to explain why it had never played the national anthem or raised the American flag at athletic events when asked to do so by non-Mennonite student baseball players.

Many Christians embrace a commitment to nonviolence as the way of faith, but I am curious about the specific ways *Martyrs Mirror* has been used to promote ideologies not simply of *nonviolence* (by which I mean the term

that gets translated from the title of *Martyrs Mirror* as “defenseless”—those who refuse to use weapons and inevitably find themselves at odds with civil authority), but also *nonresistance*, which I use to mean a more general ethic of non-engagement or passive resistance. Nonresistance I also associate with an attitude of self-denial or retreat, a stance that may result in a failure to put forth one’s own interests in social or other contexts. It has become necessary for me to try to understand these ideologies of sacrifice, because I have reached a place in life where I find I must think differently about self-denial if I am going to be able to keep thinking or talking at all.

Following Elizabeth Castelli’s work on early Christian martyr accounts, I use theories of memory and the creation of culture to discuss the function that the big book has played in Mennonite communities.³ Like Castelli, I am interested in the text’s significance for the writers and communities that produced it, and especially the meanings it grants to subsequent generations. In other words, I am curious about *what* the big book has come to mean, and *how* those meanings have come to dictate behaviors initially related to nonviolence, and then to self-sacrifice or self-denial.

Thieleman Janz van Braght well understood the work of memory and the making of culture. He compiled *Martyrs Mirror* from earlier sources at a time when national identity in the Dutch republic was constructed, in part, by offering to schoolchildren the gruesomely illustrated history of the Spanish occupation of the Netherlands, *Mirror for the Young or the Spanish Tyranny*.⁴ To this day, Dirk Willems is remembered in the Netherlands not so much as an Anabaptist martyr but as a hero who resisted Spanish rule.⁵ For all religious denominations, martyrologies were popular ways of establishing religious identity in the 17th century. The two metaphors he chose for the title of his compendium of many previously-published narratives signal the ideological intent of his project and point to the sorts of cultural production that Castelli theorizes: “The Bloody Theatre” announces that the book is a site where we can view the martyr spectacles eternally. This is an exclusive

³ Elizabeth Castelli, *Martyrdom and Memory: Early Christian Culture Making* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2004).

⁴ Daniel Mostaert, *Spiegel der Jeugd of Spaanse Tyrannie* (Amsterdam, 1620) cited in Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York: Random House, 1987), 53.

⁵ Mary Sprunger made this point in a public response to this paper at Eastern Mennonite University, Harrisonburg, Virginia, November 8, 2012.

stage reserved only for those martyrs who were “defenseless” (nonviolent) and baptized as adults, the non-negotiable distinctives that Van Braght sought to establish as marks of the truest, yet minor strands in Christianity, from the time of Jesus until 1660.

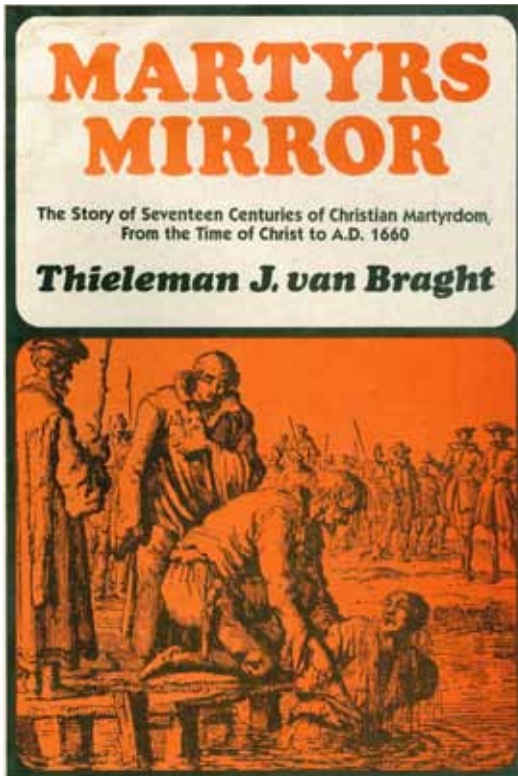
In the 17th century, the term “mirror” was commonly used in the titles of instruction books or manuals. A casual glance of titles held in the British Library calls up these examples: *The Catholic Mirror or a Looking Glass for Protestants whereby they can see the errors of their church . . .* (Paris, 1662) and *The Cloud of Witnesses; or, the Sufferers Mirrour, made up of the swanlike-songs and other choice passages of several martyrs and confessors to the sixteenth century . . .* (London, 1670). Thus, it is not so much that we should expect to see ourselves in the “mirror,” cast in the role of the faithful giving good witness, but that this book and others like it will show us images that aim to train us toward an identity shaped by the memory the book maintains.

By means of memory and imagination, young minister Van Braght sought to remind Mennonites living in the Dutch Golden Age of their martyr heritage, even as they were busy buying and selling opulent homes and gardens, wearing fashionable clothing sewn from expensive imported cloth, and hosting lavish banquets. You can almost see him wringing his hands as he contrasts the self-indulgent lifestyles of his contemporaries with the self-denial of the martyrs:

O how different is this [current age] from the life of a true Christian, who has forsaken himself and his lusts. How great the step that is between their world and that of the holy martyrs, who delivered up, not only their carnal desires, but also their bodies and lives, unto death for the Lord’s sake!⁶

(“How will they give up their lives, when they can’t even spare their hot tubs?” could be the contemporary paraphrase.) Van Braght associates Christian martyrdom with a life-style of self-denial. Where our treasures lie, our hearts will surely be, and simplicity is a virtue, but is the martyr’s sacrifice

⁶ Thieleman J. van Braght, ed. *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians Who Baptized Only Upon Confession of Faith, and Who Suffered and Died for the Testimony of Jesus, Their Savior, From the Time of Christ to the Year A.D. 1660* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 10.



analogous to refraining from conspicuous consumption? A relationship between these different kinds of sacrifice is long and deep, and, I think, often conflated in the ideologies that stem from memory associated with *Martyrs Mirror*.

Did an ethic of “more-with-less” austerity select grocery bag paper for the dust jacket on the mid-twentieth century *Martyrs Mirror* we had at home? Consider what can be gathered from just its cover. (See image at left.) Here we have the engraving of a drowning in the typically scripted sacrificial scene: a Catholic priest stands on the dock, on hand in case the

heretic sees the errors of his ways; his eyes are closed in prayer or disdain. Although he clutches a cross to his heart, he remains blind to the fact that this martyr follows the true way of Christ. A civil official stands beside him in a rich robe and hat, wielding the knotty rod of judgment: church and state stand in cahoots, not to be trusted by us. Behind a pair of dandies dressed in rich doublets is the crowd of gawkers. Indeed, there must always be a crowd for this spectacle to be effective from any side’s point of view—either the martyr giving good witness or the authorities setting an example for the rest.⁷

⁷ John S. Oyer and Robert S. Kreider make this and other observations about the reception of the big book in their very readable compilation of engravings and narratives, *Mirror of the Martyrs* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1990), 13.



We are among them too, of course, gawking with them, gawking at them, gawking at the executioner and his victim, who hold one another in a final gaze, almost intimate. If I were to open the book and search to page 1,090, I would find the story of this man, Mattheus Mair, the final moment of his life in 1592 captured by a Jan Luyken engraving (see above), described this way:

Now when the executioner had thrust brother Mattheus into the water, he drew him out again three or four times, and each time asked him whether he would recant. But he always said, “no,” as long as he was able to speak; hence he was drowned, on the twenty-ninth day of the month of July, through the power of God steadfastly persevering in the faith.

He always said “no,” as long as he was able to speak. That’s the line that sticks in my mind, plain-spoken and unequivocal. Enduring a torture

similar to water-boarding—not long ago sanctioned by American president George W. Bush—Brother Mattheus always said “no” as long as he was able to speak. “Through the power of God,” the text says, he remained stubborn in his resistance, refusing to deny his truth, nonviolent yet steadfast unto death. As long as he could speak, he resisted, and that resistance made his “good witness.”

Book of refusals.

Book of good witness.

Book of excess.

Book of denials.

Book that speaks for silent people.

Book forever saying “no.”

What is the meaning of that kind of hero?

Some Other Kinds of Heroes

The story of the translation and publication of the Dutch *Martyrs Mirror* in colonial North America has been told many times. In the early 1740s, fearing that war between England and France would conscript their sons, Mennonite leaders in Pennsylvania petitioned the continental Assembly for military exemption on the basis of their religious beliefs. The Assembly deferred their request because they did not have authority to rule on the matter; instead, they told the Mennonites to appeal to the Royal Majesty of Great Britain. In a 1745 letter to their Dutch Mennonite brethren, the Americans described their response to that suggestion with a humble nonresistance that nearly lapses into voicelessness:

. . . we find ourselves powerless, weak and incapable of seeking such a matter in our littleness at such a court and high power, and in this case see no course before us but to entrust it to the one eternal and almighty God, who has hitherto graciously protected our province from all hostile attacks, so that we can

still live in peace.⁸

The letter was signed by six leaders from the Skippack area, immigrants or the children of immigrants who claimed to blame themselves for the vulnerable state of their affairs: “We acknowledge our misstep in coming to so distant a land without sufficient assurance concerning freedom of conscience.”⁹

This language no doubt reflects epistolary style of the time, but I am struck by the flat refusal even to attempt negotiation. Instead of petitioning the crown, the leaders determined that the big book would help their cause; rather than attempt to change public policy, they retreated to publish *Martyrs Mirror*. A German translation was needed, they explained, so that “our posterity may have before their eyes the traces of those loyal witnesses of the truth, who walked in the way of truth and have given their lives for it.” The Ephrata edition was thus central to the Mennonite leaders’ efforts to “make every preparation for steadfast constancy in our faith,” that is, to reinforce an ideology of nonviolence in the New World.¹⁰

The Ephrata *Martyrs Mirror* was fully translated and printed in three years by the community of Seventh Day Baptist Brethren on the frontier at Ephrata, Pennsylvania. At more than 1,500 pages, it was the largest book produced in colonial America. The brothers made their own ink and paper with rags gathered from as far away as Philadelphia. They imported type from Germany but also had to cast some themselves.¹¹ About 1,300 copies were finally completed, and the first was finished six years before the Seven Years’ War reached the colony. Thereafter, we can trace a relationship between the printing of the big book in the United States and the nation’s military history. The book also served an identity-keeping function in Canada. Mennonite farmers carried copies of it to Waterloo County, Ontario, in the late 18th and early 19th century, in a migration that has been regarded as a nonresistant

⁸ Richard K. MacMaster with Samuel L. Horst and Robert F. Ullé, *Conscience in Crisis: Mennonites and Other Peace Churches in America, 1739-1789: Interpretation and Documents* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1979), 85.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ John Hruschka, *How Books Came to America: The Rise of the American Book Trade* (State College, PA: Penn State Univ. Press, 2012), 37-48.

response to the American Revolution.

The urgent motivation for the Ephrata edition continued to shape later understandings of the book's publication. Mennonite leader J. C. Wenger, a native son of that early Skippack community, observed that the 1814 German edition was said to have been prompted by the War of 1812—a war that was fought entirely with American volunteers—but he could find no real evidence to support that tradition.¹² The first English edition, printed in Lancaster County in 1837, was more likely a reflection of changes in language use and the publishers' hopeful, if doomed, financial speculations. The notion that no North American Mennonite library could be complete without the big book probably drove the printings of both English and German editions through the 19th century.¹³ (In Pennsylvania and Elkhart, Indiana, *Martyrs Mirror* was one in a group of several Anabaptist texts published because they were believed to represent core Mennonite beliefs.)

After the Civil War, the Mennonite Publishing Company at Elkhart issued a new English edition translated from the 1660 Dutch original. The preface, probably written by publisher John F. Funk, states an ideological purpose that echoes Van Braght's rationale: that the representations of “unfaltering endurance under the severest persecution are powerful incentives” to “live a more consecrated life, to practice greater self-denial, to live more separated from the world, and to show a greater zeal in the work of the Lord and the salvation of souls.”¹⁴ The phrases “separation from the world” and “self-denial” suggest personal and communal positions of withdrawal and sacrifice appropriate to a time when Mennonite life was

¹² J. C. Wenger, *History of the Mennonites of the Franconia Conference* (Telford, PA: Franconia Mennonite Historical Society, 1937), 62.

¹³ In the Ontario Mennonite community, approximately 20 Ephrata editions remain, and approximately 160 1814 English editions are known to have survived. In addition, a number of the 1780 Pirmasens edition, a reprint of the Ephrata edition produced in the Palatinate, came directly to Ontario with Amish immigrants from Europe. During the 19th century, for Pennsylvania Mennonites, the choice to move to Canada was similar to a choice to move to Ohio or Indiana, largely determined by the availability of inexpensive land. Migrations across the border were not uncommon. Religious identity—as a historically German-speaking peace church—rather than national identity was primary, and *Martyrs Mirror* served as an expression of that identity. Phone conversation with Sam Steiner, February 16, 2012.

¹⁴ John F. Funk, Preface to Thieleman J. van Braght, *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians...* (Elkhart, IN: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1886).

rapidly changing as industrialization and the railroad had finally reached rural areas. Christians practiced self-denial and separation by living more simply than their worldly neighbors. It was no longer necessary to bear witness to the world through the public loss of their own lives.

This all changed with the First World War, when Mennonites and other pacifists faced conscription in a highly charged, popular conflict, with no clear governmental provisions for conscientious objection. Melanie Springer Mock, in a study of the diaries of Mennonite conscientious objectors (COs) from this era, finds that militarized mainstream America used the language of Christian martyrdom to describe the sacrifices of soldiers serving in European trenches. At the same time, harassed Mennonite conscientious objectors identified with their own history of Anabaptist suffering in a contest of dueling martyrs.¹⁵ In 1917, for instance, the Mennonite weekly newspaper *Gospel Herald* praised the “martyr spirit” of COs who refused non-combatant service, although they stood to face “persecution, even death” in army training camps and federal prisons. The piece concluded that “This is a good time to read the story of how many of our fathers went to the stake rather than compromise their faith.”¹⁶

Gospel Herald editor Daniel Kauffman and Aaron Loucks, General Manager of the Mennonite Publishing Company, led the “old” Mennonite response to conscription from Scottdale, Pennsylvania. Loucks met with Secretary of War Baker in Washington and passed on information and advice through *Gospel Herald*.¹⁷

The same 1917 issue of *Gospel Herald* reprinted an opinion piece by C. B. Schmidt that had appeared in the *Kansas Evening Republican* which dramatized the martyr/soldier comparison, noting that the Anabaptist commitment to nonviolence was punished with martyrdom in Europe long ago, and that Mennonites now faced similar persecution:

[The Mennonites’] early history has been written in blood,
because of their abhorrence of strife and bloodshed. Their

¹⁵ Melanie Springer Mock, *Writing Peace: The Unheard Voices of Great War Mennonite Objectors* (Telford, PA: Pandora Press US and Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 2003), 124-27.

¹⁶ “The Martyrs’ Spirit,” *Gospel Herald* (November 8, 1917): 585.

¹⁷ James C. Juhnke, *Vision, Doctrine, War: Mennonite Identity and Organization in America, 1890-1930* (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1989): 214.

steadfastness and their very single-mindedness has produced among them thousands of martyrs, heroes, infinitely more heroic than the greatest soldiers of history.¹⁸

The message here is unmistakable: my nonresistant hero is better than your soldier hero! The glorified martyr functions in opposition to the decorated warrior in Mennonite imagination: a figure of heroic, masculine virtue defined by self-sacrifice.

An explicit comparison between Christian martyrs and soldiers is firmly grounded in church history and tradition since Roman times, according to L. Stephanie Cobb in *Dying to be Men*, her recent study of language and gender in those martyrologies. Drawing on the work of several other scholars of the second century, she clarifies one purpose of the early Christian writers: to depict martyrs who suffered torture and death not as victims, but as courageous, brave heroes; that is, not as barbarians, but as ideal Romans. Indeed, she finds in the language of the ancient texts that “authors appropriated cultural indicators of masculinity to challenge the perception of Christian weakness and victimization.”¹⁹ In the Greco-Roman world, virtue was associated with masculinity. Early Christian martyrs—whether they were men or women—were portrayed as paragons of the qualities ascribed to masculinity: courage, steadfastness, bravery, justice, and willingness to sacrifice their own lives. A “no pain, no gain” ethic of spiritual combat and triumph prevailed in these early representations, as martyrs resembled athletes, gladiators, and soldiers in the arena.

Cobb shows that men and women were equally associated with manly traits, but the female martyrs faced persecution as *both* virile heroes *and* virtuous women, who are cast back into positions of domestic femininity, described in the arena as beautiful, fertile (maternal), and modest.²⁰ (In other words, they did everything the men did, but they did it in high heels, nursing infants.) We see elements of this combination of idealized masculine and feminine qualities carried into women’s stories in the *Martyrs Mirror*.

Among them is the teacher Ursula of Essen (1570), racked twice, hanged and flogged, gagged on her way to the stake to keep her from “giving

¹⁸ C. B. Schmidt, “Mennonites and the War,” *Gospel Herald* (November 8, 1917): 589.

¹⁹ L. Stephanie Cobb, *Dying to be Men* (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 2009), 125.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 92-123.



good witness” (see above). According to the text, as she passed by the prison, Ursula heard her Anabaptist sisters shouting from their cell windows, encouraging her “to contend manfully.”²¹

The brief, unillustrated story of Christina Haring (1533) even more vividly portrays the ideal manly/womanly martyr who, captured while pregnant, “remained steadfast in faith.” She was released from prison until she gave birth, and “though she knew that she would be apprehended again, and might have escaped ten times, or even more, she did not flee, but boldly remained.” Haring perished by the sword, which, the text takes care to point out, “was not usually done with a woman”; she had “steadfastly” endured, and her body was burnt afterward.²² The final summary of her narrative is a fascinating mix of highly gendered ideals:

²¹ *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 844.

²² *Ibid.*, 441.

This courageous, heroic woman or sister in Christ, who forsook her husband, infant, house and home, and all temporal things, strengthened her womanly heart with such valiant manliness, and by the grace of God so armed herself in the faith, that she paid her vow unto the Lord, and joyfully went to meet Christ her bridegroom, with her lamp burning, and her light shining so that many were filled with astonishment.²³

Haring is courageous, heroic, valiant in manliness, armed, beholden to a Lord (like a knight), and a light to the world; at the same time, she is a woman, a sister, a womanly heart bereft of baby, house and home; she is a bride of Christ, and a faithful virgin (holding the lamplight)! This description, especially if it is read in relation to the early Christian genre, reveals not passive victimhood and self-denial but a wealth of metaphors suggestive of active resistance and articulate witness, however subject she must be to conventions of proper femininity. Her choice not to flee with her newborn baby—unlike Mary and Joseph who were led to Egypt with the baby Jesus—follows early Christian understandings of sacrifice and God’s providence.²⁴ It also demonstrates that she made a decision to face execution, and this choice determined that she would be remembered as a martyr. Haring chose and acted so that her tale becomes not one of self-denial or silence but of public resistance.

The example of this type of heroic, public martyr was enlisted by Mennonite leaders during the middle of the 20th century to oppose another swell of public support for military service and sacrifice. In 1938, the Mennonite Publishing Company released another English edition of *Martyrs Mirror*. Ten years later, Gerald C. Studer wrote:

[The *Martyrs Mirrors*] were published with the intention that such stories of heroism would inspire the reader to maintain the faith by a similar courage. In this way they would serve as a means of uplift in days of affliction.²⁵

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ I thank Peter Dula for making the association between Mary and Christina Haring. E-mail to author, Dec. 28, 2012.

²⁵ Gerald C. Studer, “A History of the *Martyrs’ Mirror*,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 22, No. 3 (1948): 171.

That sentence from Studer's history of *Martyrs Mirror*, published in the *Mennonite Quarterly Review* in 1948, referred to the early editions, which were printed not so much in "days of affliction" as in days of prosperity in the Netherlands. The "days of affliction" more accurately described Studer's own context in the wake of World War II. Instead of pointing to the explicit teachings of Jesus, instead of saying we refrain from violence because the sword is not the way of Christ, Studer says something else. These are "stories of heroism"; tales of "courage" and of the "steadfastness" of figures like Mattheus Mair, water-boarded until death, or Christina Haring, beheaded like a man. These heroic, mythic martyr tales will inspire pacifist warriors who pledge allegiance to the Anabaptist example and follow its ethic of nonviolence at any cost.

In a similar spirit, J.C. Wenger, in a new preface to the fifth printing of the second English edition of *Martyrs Mirror*, observed that the World Wars had tested Mennonite nonviolence more than any time since the 16th century. The 1950 Cold War printing was a "vigorous effort" to win the hearts and minds of young Mennonites. In Wenger's words, "The pressures of the contemporary culture upon the group to surrender this historic [peace] principle are strong. It is evident that vigorous efforts must be made to capture the loyalty of our youth if the Biblical doctrine of nonresistance is to be preserved."²⁶

But by 1950 that horse was already out of the stable. In 1940 the Selective Service and Training Act established favorable provisions for conscientious objectors, largely through the lobbying efforts of Quaker leaders, but also through the assistance of other historic peace churches and peace-minded groups.²⁷ Nonetheless, from 1940 until 1947 more American Mennonite men enlisted in some form of military service (including noncombatant assignments) than chose the conscientious objector's alternative.²⁸

Negotiation had changed public policy, but it remained for Mennonite leaders to convince individual young men that nonresistance was an

²⁶ J. C. Wenger, Preface to Thieleman J. van Braght, ed. *The Bloody Theatre or Martyrs Mirror of the Defenseless Christians...* (Scottsdale, PA: Mennonite Publishing Company, 1950), 62.

²⁷ Paul Toews, *Mennonites in American Society, 1930-1970: Modernity and the Persistence of Religious Community* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1996), 134.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 173.

attractive choice. What kind of hero could compete with the glamour of fly boys with cartoon pin-ups painted on the noses of their bombers? Or, for the bookish ones, what rationale could contend with just-war arguments for personal and national sacrifice in the face of European fascism?

Enter Dirk Willems (1569), most familiar of all Anabaptist martyrs! (Some of us just call him “Dirk.”) During the dark days of Spanish rule in the Netherlands, Dirk was caught, tried, convicted, and imprisoned for being an Anabaptist. Significantly, he managed to escape from his prison in the palace, rather than accept the providence of sacrifice like Christina Haring. As he fled, he was spotted and chased by a thief catcher. Dirk ran, weightless as an angel, across a frozen body of water, but his pursuer broke through and cried for help. Dirk stopped running, turned back, drew the man from the icy water, and thereby saved his life.

In gratitude, the thief catcher argued for Dirk’s release, but upon being reminded of his oath of duty suddenly turned and recaptured the Anabaptist in a dark reversal of Dirk’s rescue. Dirk’s execution was a bungled affair, with stiff winds driving the flames away from his torso, so his shrill screams at the stake could be heard all the way to the next town. According to *Martyrs Mirror*, Dirk’s deed and execution served “an instructive example to all pious Christians of this time, and to the everlasting disgrace of the tyrannous papists.”²⁹

Dirk Willems, indelible icon of compassion and sacrifice, pragmatist who fled persecution, good Samaritan who rescued his persecutor and thereby triumphed by means of “everlasting” shame and disgrace of the Spanish Catholics. Patron saint of the helpful and morally superior. Dirk the doer, like busy Martha, whose way the Savior did not call the better way. Dirk, who like a mule pulled a man out of the moat, and then screamed at the stake like a beast.

Oh, what would Dirk have said if we could have heard his words?

As far as I can tell with the help of Amish historian and publisher David Luthy, Dirk Willems first appeared in print outside *Martyrs Mirror* in 1940, in J. C. Wenger’s book, *Glimpses of Mennonite History*. In ’42 he turned up in John Horsch’s volume *Mennonites in Europe*. Thereafter, instances of print replication gradually increase until the 1980s and ’90s, when Dirk’s

²⁹ *Martyrs Mirror* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 1998), 741.

multiplication exceeds even the birth rate of Old Order communities. It appears that the trend is holding; by 2011 Luthy, who has long tracked Dirk's appearances, counted 350 instances of the Willems image or deed in print, according to his fascinating and richly illustrated book on the topic.³⁰

Luthy doesn't speculate about what might have caused Dirk's surge in popularity in recent years beyond noting something of a "snowball effect." We do know that Luthy inserted the Lykens engraving of Dirk onto the title page of Pathway Publishing's German *Martyrs Mirror* in 1990 (but restored the Dutch printer's mark depicting a digging Adam on a later printing). Luthy also served as an advisor for the 2002 English edition, which features Dirk Willems instead of Mattheus Mair on its dust jacket. Luthy maintains a collection of more than 400 material replications and interpretations of the engraving at the Heritage Historical Library, an Old Order Amish archive in Aylmer, Ontario.

John D. Roth, Director of the Mennonite Historical Library, launched Dirk into cyberspace in March 1995, according to Luthy's book. In the summer of 2010 my Google Image search for "Dirk Willems" resulted in more than 1,500 hits; one morning in August 2012 as I prepared this manuscript, I got 258,000 hits, including one of a Chihuahua modeling a pet tee-shirt printed with Dirk's image and name. Even admitting that some of those hits are snapshots of contemporary people, it's clear that Willems and his long arm have gained iconic status around the world. (This is all the more ironic for an Anabaptist people who trace their origins to the iconoclasm of the Swiss Reformation.)

Among the numerous contemporary renditions, I select a few representative examples.

- Dirk wears a baseball glove and fields a grounder on the cover of a 1998 Good Books title, *The Mennonite Starter Kit: A Handy Guide for the Newly Mennonite*. Not insignificantly, humor in this book comes from making explicit various details of implicit, insider knowledge kept by North American Mennonites of European heritage.³¹

³⁰ David Luthy, *Dirk Willems: His Noble Deed Lives On* (Aylmer, ON: Heritage Historical Library, 2011).

³¹ J. Craig Hass and Steve Nolt, *The Mennonite Starter Kit* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 1998).

- Bulgarian iconographer Jivko Donkov created an Anabaptist icon of Dirk for Graber Designs of Goshen, Indiana about eight years ago. In 2007 Nancy R. Heisey, then-president of Mennonite World Conference, presented one of these icons to Pope Benedict XVI.³² Handmade copies in 12" x 16" are available for a purchase price of \$450, with proceeds benefitting the iconographer, Graber Designs, and the Historical Committee of the Mennonite Church.



- At considerably less expense, Scroll Publishing of Amberson, Pennsylvania, offers color posters and post cards based on a painting by Texas artist Lee Casbeer, with the inscription, “Love your enemies and bless them that curse you.”
- Dirk plays a supporting role in the 2004 motion picture *Pearl Diver*. A conservative Mennonite woman testifies at a legal hearing with the help of the engraving. The film’s plot turns on a modern enactment of Dirk’s dilemma in which she, as a child, must decide whether she will rescue her mother’s murderer

³² After her visit to the Vatican at the invitation of the Pontifical Council for Promoting Christian Unity, Heisey engaged in a lively debate with James Juhnke about the appropriateness of the gift, given the strong anti-Catholic rhetoric in the Willems story as recorded in *Martyrs Mirror*. She has since published an article about the experience, reflecting especially on the work of historians and the cultural significance of memory: “Remembering Dirk Willems: Memory and History in the Future of Ecumenical Relationships,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 47, no. 3 (Summer 2012): 355-75. Jivko Donkov illustration reproduced here with the kind permission of Graber Designs.

from a manure pit, or let him perish there and save her own life.³³

- In 2007, Mennonite Central Committee produced “Thermostat: How Can We Turn Toward Peace in Time of Fear?” in both English and Spanish, a DVD to instruct youth on war, peace and Christian conscience, which includes the “Onward Martyrdom Rap” by Cruz Cordero:

What was Dirk thinking?
 It was Christ on his mind.
 What was Dirk drinking?
 A special kind of wine,
 instrumental for the mental,
 giving sight to the blind,
 a living light that shines bright
 like the sunshine.

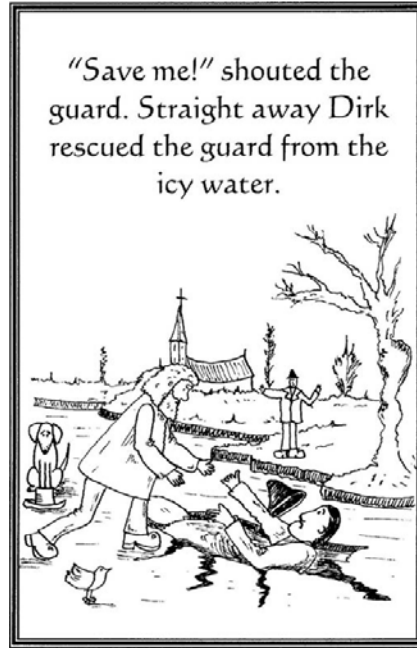
- During the summer of 2012, an image of Dirk’s rescue, along with a brief interpretation of the story, became the signature logo on a website designed to inform supporters and raise more than \$124,000 in legal defense funds for Ken Miller, a Beachy Amish-Mennonite minister from Stuarts Draft, Virginia. Miller was convicted of abetting international parental kidnapping in a case involving a same-sex union. He helped transport one of the former partners and her daughter, both disguised in plain dress, from the United States to Canada, and then on to Nicaragua. About 100 Beachy supporters sang hymns on the steps of the

³³ *Pearl Diver*. Director Sidney King. Monterey, CA, 2006. Before making *Pearl Diver*, filmmaker Sidney King created a documentary about Clayton Kratz, who is conventionally remembered as a Mennonite martyr after his disappearance while visiting Mennonites in the Ukraine who were caught between the White and Red Armies. According to the film, based on Kratz’s letters and other archival sources, the young man volunteered for this dangerous mission because he felt conflicted about all the soldiers who had sacrificed their lives in World War I.

courthouse after Miller's conviction, which carries a sentence of up to three years in prison.³⁴

- Karen Stallard, a story-teller and dramatist from East London, England, created a cartoon version of the tale, framed as “fat” jailer vs. “skinny” Dirk who follows the literal teachings of Jesus.³⁵

On the dust jacket of the current (2002) gift edition of *Martyrs Mirror*, Dirk, who fled persecution but turned to rescue his abuser, has replaced Matteus Mair, who just said no. Dirk—spontaneous, daring and improvisational—invites New World



Mennonites to ground their identity and sense of separation from the world in brave actions. Goshen College professor of Peace, Justice and Conflict Studies Joseph Liechty has concluded that “for many modern Mennonites the *Martyrs Mirror* is effectively the story of Dirk Willems saving his persecutor’s life, one of the few instances in which an Anabaptist had a chance to offer a concrete act of love to his or her enemy.”³⁶

If this is true, the big book has collapsed into only one story and one iconic image for many readers. I worry about what gets lost in that reduction.

³⁴ Erik Eckholm, “Sect Pastor is Convicted of Assisting in Abduction,” *New York Times*, August 15, 2012: www.nytimes.com/2012/08/15/us/pastor-kenneth-l-miller-convicted-in-parental-kidnapping-case.html. Miller was scheduled to be sentenced in March 2013; see his web site: <http://millercase.org/>.

³⁵ Karen Stallard, *The Illustrated Story of Dirk Willems*. The Anabaptist Network (in Britain and Ireland): <http://www.anabaptistnetwork.com/node/295>. Illustration reproduced here with the kind permission of the Anabaptist Network.

³⁶ Joseph Liechty, “Staying Mennonite: Why Martyrs Still Matter,” *Mennonite Life* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2007). www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/2007spring/liechty.php

We lose the “good witness” of strong speech, of thoughtful and articulate testimony. Instead, we get an ethic of action that is consistent with Mennonite practices through much of their North American history when quiet deeds and self-denial demonstrated faith. We get an iconic reminder of personal sacrifice and material aid, and we see that by such doing and helping, we can expect to get wrecked in the end, but this kind of death is virtuous and heroic. We lose the long letters and witty, willful court testimonies. We lose the example of those complicated manly women. Without the many stories of verbal resistance, I fear that we lose an essential check on the tendency toward acquiescence and passive submission that sometimes expresses itself as non-engagement and even anti-intellectualism in this tradition.

Of all Anabaptist martyrs, Dirk Willems is remembered not for his testimony but for his dramatic dilemma and heroic gesture. Dirk embodies both ideologies of sacrifice, early and late: classic martyrdom, by which I mean he was initially captured for being an Anabaptist, *and* the ethic of everyday self-denial, by which I mean that he abandoned self-interest to attend to the needs of another. Of course, I love the humanity of his turning on the ice when he hears the man’s cry. I love that Dirk is wide awake and immediately responsive to the material world. I love that he makes a choice. His self-denial is consistent with powerful lessons that Mennonites have been learning from martyr memory since at least 1660. But this learning should not go unexamined.³⁷

Book of bloodshed.

Book of uplift.

Book where men are men, and women are women *and* men, also.

³⁷ Dawn Ruth Nelson, former Mennonite peace worker in Ireland, found herself on service assignment without the resources to sustain her own work. She puts the problem this way: “I was inadequately prepared to look after myself, having only been schooled in self-denial.” Her book on Mennonite spirituality and cultural change connects the everyday ethic of self-sacrifice with martyr memory. She sees in the loss of traditional, located communities “a shift from a spirituality of separation from the world to a spirituality of separation from evil amid the world; from a spirituality focused on martyrdom to a spirituality of more hopeful participation in the word.” See *A Mennonite Woman: Exploring Spiritual Life and Identity* (Telford, PA: Cascadia, 2010), 88.

Book to comfort orphans whose mothers died for an idea.

Book of steadfast intent and botched execution.

Book of flesh turned to text.

Book of heroic surrender and shrieks at the stake.

Picture book that teaches us actions speak louder than words.

Story that makes me wonder what writing is for.

Icons and Iconoclasts

Since the 18th-century Ephrata edition, New World Mennonites have continuously printed *Martyrs Mirror* in both English and German, and many still keep it in their homes or congregational libraries.³⁸ The most conservative Anabaptist-derived groups read it the way they read the Bible, as a sacred text and a literal account of historical events. They see in the martyr stories a call to the faithful to separate themselves from the fallen world and follow the costly, narrow way. Now more than ever, James Lowery recently warned at a conference celebrating the 350th anniversary of the book's first printing of *Martyrs Mirror*, believers must heed Van Braght's warnings to the Mennonites of the Dutch Golden Age, for their sins are also the sins of contemporary North Americans.³⁹

For more worldly Mennonites, the book exerts influence whether anyone reads it or not—and most don't. It signifies a distinct, counter-cultural identity associated with peace.⁴⁰ As I have shown, the publication history of *Martyrs Mirror* doesn't precisely coincide with the nation's wars,

³⁸ The printing history of the big book is largely a New World story with two exceptions: in 1790 Amish Mennonites living in the German Palatinate printed 1,000 copies of the Ephrata translation at Primasens, and in 1853, Hansard Knollys Society printed an English edition in London, England.

³⁹ James W. Lowry, "Thieleman Jansz van Braght (1625-1664): A Preliminary Study of His Life and Thought," Plenary Session I, "*Martyrs Mirror: Reflections across Time*," Elizabethtown College, Elizabethtown, PA, June 8, 2010.

⁴⁰ For a more detailed typology of the ways various groups read the big book, see John D. Roth, "The Significance of the Martyr Story for Contemporary Anabaptists," *Brethren Life and Thought* 37 (Spring 1992): 97-106.



and yet American Mennonites tend to rally around the big book whenever the rest of the nation rallies around the flag, in wartime, which has become all the time in this century.⁴¹

For this reason, I have come to think of *Martyrs Mirror* as an important and potent totem of Mennonite identity. Early in the last century, sociologist Emile Durkheim defined “totem” as the emblem object or animal that becomes profoundly powerful because it represents the crisis that formed the group. The totem both represents the group and protects it by sustaining its identity and keeping its boundaries. For Christians, the cross is a totem that reminds us of the sacrificed body of Jesus, the crisis that created our community. *Martyrs Mirror* includes the cross (see above image), but the big book further defines a distinct sub-group founded through the sacrificed

⁴¹ I arrived at this idea with the help of Carolyn Marvin and David W. Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1999).

bodies of the faithful who died at the hands of other Christians in the 16th and 17th centuries.

According to Durkheim, blood sacrifice gives the totemic object its power: that people have died for this set of beliefs and ideas makes them precious and worth keeping. Under totem logic, the image of Dirk's long reach would not be potent without the memory of his gruesome execution. The totem myth not only creates and sustains community but also makes its memory sacred. The *Martyrs Mirror* totem transforms a several-hundred-year history of disordered violence and migration into a rational series of human sacrifices that engendered the group. It defines the boundaries of the group, constructs the ideology that sustains identity, and—most alarmingly—demands additional sacrifices to keep the group's identity strong.

One might think more about the totemic function of *Martyrs Mirror*, especially the cost of maintaining the totemic myth in places where literal martyrdom no longer threatens the faithful. Have Mennonites, a people committed to nonviolence, embedded an identity in the necessity of certain kinds of violence, including not only persecution and martyrdom but also exclusions, refusals, and dismissals of others in order to keep the community strong? Is esteem for martyr heroes much different from esteem for military heroes?

Certainly we are not alone in this fascination with costly sacrifice. In her last project, *Death and the Displacement of Beauty*, Grace Jantzen, the late philosopher of religion who was born into a Mennonite Brethren community in Saskatchewan, observed that an obsession with death dominates the Western imagination from Homeric times to the present. This culture of necrophilia is manifest in a culture's turning from the pursuit of beauty and newness and life to a focus on violence, war, and a preoccupation with worlds other than this one.⁴² Borrowing a strategy from Jantzen, I'd like to ask what would happen if we shifted the emphasis just a bit. Certainly, people died testifying for these beliefs, but is it not also true that they also chose and *lived* for them? I wonder whether death must give the totemic book its mythic power.

Considering what I know of my own family history from the 150 years of European persecution, I have reason to believe that more Swiss

⁴² Grace M. Jantzen, *Foundations of Violence* (New York: Routledge, 2004).

Anabaptists fled, hid in caves, promised to remain banished away in France but instead returned to their cows and wives in the mountains anyway, snuck around, lied, tricked the authorities, or emigrated up the Rhine, across the Atlantic, or east into Poland—than ever faced an executioner. Death and fear of it may drive the militarized state, but a belief in the resurrection of the body emboldened the earliest Christian martyrs to resist empire and speak their good witness defiantly, right there in the arena. I can only guess that a desire for life, and even prosperity, drove my ancestors to flee European persecution and make perilous journeys across the sea, and, once in the New World, to clear land, cross mountains, and cleave to beloved farmsteads.

What if we claimed survival—even flourishing—as the fortunate inheritance of New World Mennonites? How would things change if, instead of asking our children, “What are you willing to die for?” We asked them, “What are you willing to live for?” Or, “what new, beautiful and just thing can you conceive here and now in this New World?”

Book of remembrance more potent than weapons.

Book of obsession and repetition.

Book of blood and beginnings.

Book that shows us what bodies are for.

Book forever saying who we are.

Book that instructs us to speak up.

Afterword

A few years ago when Kirsten Beachy set out to gather pieces for *Tongue Screws and Testimonies*, a collection of contemporary writing engaged with *Martyrs Mirror*, she was surprised to find it quite easy to compile an anthology; in fact, some pieces had to be turned away.⁴³ Whether the result of the popularized forms of Anabaptist history and identity—such as the film *The Radicals*—or the consequence of sobering post-9/11 reconsiderations of martyrdom,

⁴³ Kirsten Beachy, *Tongue Screws and Testimonies* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald Press, 2010).

many Mennonite writers have come to grapple with the big book. Some of the pieces in Beachy's collection are earnest, but most are gently ironic or frankly irreverent, the work of people born after the Cold War who may be more interested in tugging at the corners of cultural memory than revisiting the suffering of historical heroes. These poems, and stories, and essays belong to a growing body of artistic responses to *Martyrs Mirror*, the work of writers and visual artists from Mennonite and other Anabaptist traditions who have grown up with the big book somewhere in their peripheral vision, and who are finding imaginative and intellectual ways to respond to it.

I count this essay among those efforts. It has been in the works for a long time, drafted during a residency at the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University and presented in a quite different form as a public lecture in April 2007 titled "Mirror of the Martyrs: *The Martyrs Mirror* (Thieleman J. van Braght, 1660) and its American Legacy." This work was part of a larger project, still in progress and supported by The Fetzer Institute, that I called *Sacrificial Figures* and described as a book-length collection of essays that will explore the historical, cultural, and personal meanings of sacrifice, especially as it is embodied in the roles of mother, martyr, and soldier.

In June 2010, after a week of work at the Mennonite Historical Library at Goshen, Indiana, I presented another version of this paper at *Martyrs Mirror: Reflections Across Time*, a conference at the Young Center for Anabaptist and Pietist Studies at Elizabethtown College in Elizabethtown, Pennsylvania. A still later version I offered as the Rod and Lorna Sawatsky Visiting Scholar at Conrad Grebel University College in February 2012, and again as part of the Justice Lectures at Eastern Mennonite University in November 2012. I am deeply grateful for these opportunities and audiences, which have helped to advance my thinking.

The length of time it has taken me to find even slightly different ways of thinking about the martyr legacy—ways that always seem obvious when I finally arrive at them—I take to be an indication of how deeply the martyr memory rests, whole, in collective and individual consciousness. Although I have not cited it in this text, my thoughts were also encouraged by Stephanie

Krehbiel's 2006 essay, "Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior," the nerve it hit, and the controversy it inspired in *Mennonite Life*.⁴⁴ May the conversation continue.

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RODNEY AND LORNA SAWATSKY VISITING SCHOLAR LECTURE

The Sawatsky Visiting Scholar Lecture was established in 2004 to honor Rod Sawatsky's leadership at Conrad Grebel University College, where he served as faculty member, Academic Dean (1974-89), and President (1989-94), and Lorna Sawatsky's many contributions to the College. Visiting Scholars are scholars, practitioners, and artists who have made a significant contribution in their field, reflect an ecumenical spirit, build bridges and foster reconciliation, and embody the complementary relationship between the College and the Church that is at the heart of the College's identity and mission. While on campus they teach classes, offer workshops, interact with faculty and students, and present a public Lecture. Visiting Scholars have included Ron Mathies, Reginald Bibby, Royden Loewen, Mary Oyer, Pakisa Tshimika, and Donald Kraybill.

⁴⁴ Stephanie Krehbiel, "Staying Alive: How Martyrdom Made Me a Warrior," *Mennonite Life* 61, no. 4 (December 2006). See also the response by Melvin Goering in that issue and numerous responses in the subsequent issue, *Mennonite Life* 62, no. 1 (Spring 2007): www.bethelks.edu/mennonitelife/.