

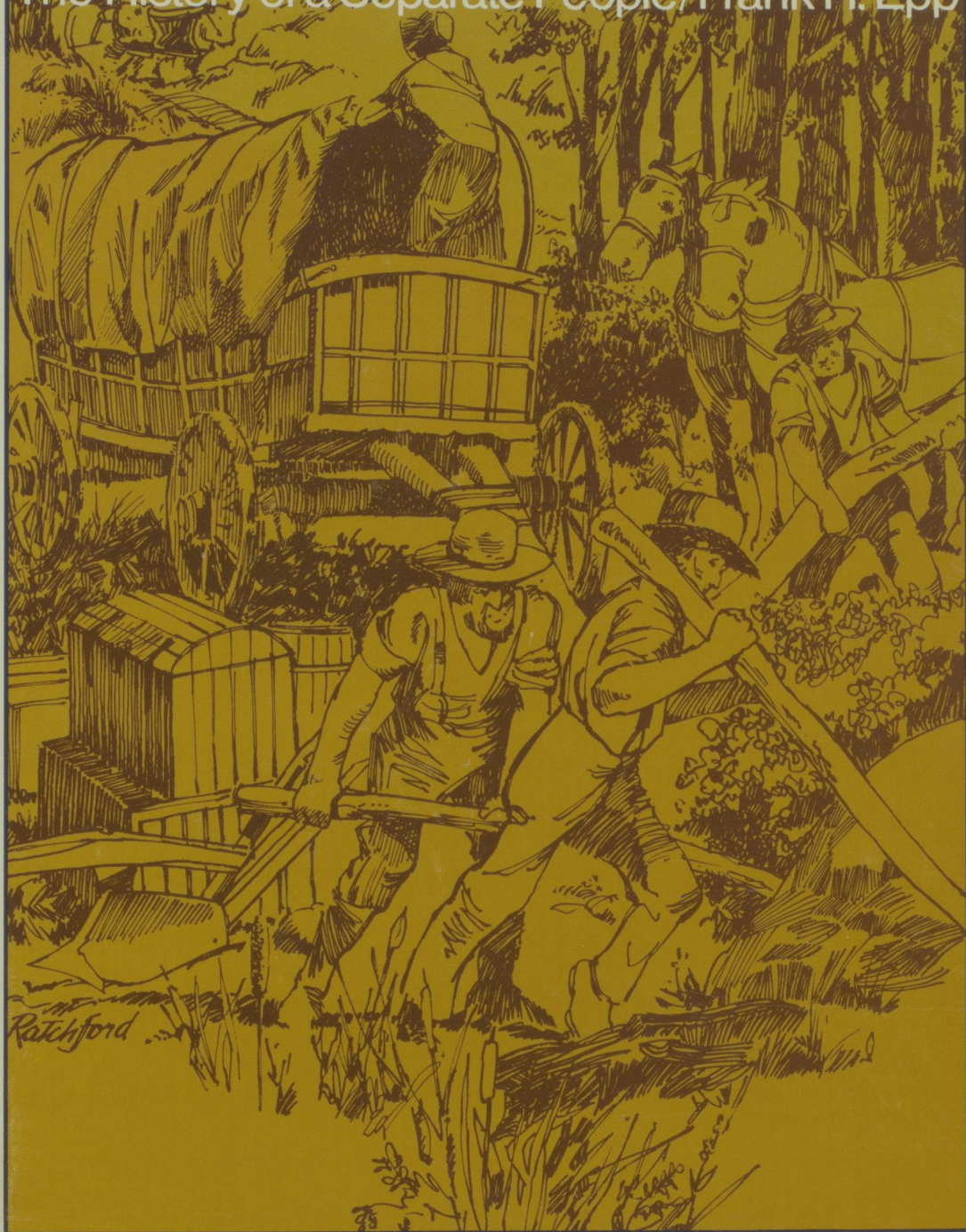
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MENNONITES IN CANADA

1786
1920

The History of a Separate People / Frank H. Epp



Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People

A comprehensive history of a hardy and independent people, this is the first account to examine the Canadian Mennonite without regard to geographical, chronological or denominational limitations. With Dr. Epp's work we can also learn something of what it is to be Canadian, for in any study of minority groups, light is inevitably shed not only on the minority itself but on its context. Certainly it is true that the rich soil of Canada's cultural landscape owes everything to the diverse roots of its past and present settlers.

Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920 traces the long and arduous search for a Mennonite identity. From their Anabaptist origins and the persecutions of sixteenth-century Europe, to the pioneering days in British North America and the crucial point in 1920 when they were legally barred from entry into Canada, the experience of Canadian Mennonites has been rife with external domination and internal fragmentation. This is a story of struggle.

Original drawings by Douglas Ratchford complement beautifully the lucid prose of Dr. Epp. This is a highly readable book about a fascinating people and their determination to maintain a unique way of life.

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Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920

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The History of a Separate People

Frank H. Epp

Illustrations by Douglas Ratchford

Macmillan of Canada
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Toronto, Canada

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Frank H. Epp
 Conrad Grebel College
 University of Waterloo
 Ontario, Canada
 July 1, 1974

Foreword

CANADIAN IMMIGRANTS were seldom a very fashionable-looking crowd. On arrival in their country of adoption peoples in search of better economic opportunities or refugees from political, religious, or social harassment often appeared as less than desirable citizens. If the new arrivals had obvious peculiarities or idiosyncrasies their arrival could lead to protests and deputations urging their immediate return to the country of origin. They were, at least initially, a separate people in a new country.

Some immigrants tried hard to fit themselves into the Canadian style of life. They learned the language and imitated the habits and culture of their adopted country as quickly as possible. Others came because they wanted to preserve a distinctive way of life, and saw the isolation of the rural Canadian frontier as an ideal setting in which to do this. If such people were prepared to render important pioneering work on the unsettled and under-developed agricultural frontiers of British North America most Canadians and their governments were happy to see them come

and quite willing to tolerate a harmless, if sometimes rather peculiar, way of life.

Among the many somewhat strange and separate immigrants who came to Canada there were many Mennonites. They were descendants of a radical wing of the reformation, believing in the complete separation of church and state, and in the heinousness of all war, killing, and any other actions not based on an ethic of love and respect for human life. Bitter persecution had also taught them the value of a simplistic, unobtrusive, abstemious, and often prosperous way of life, separated and isolated as much as possible from modern secular society.

The historical roots of these people lay in Europe. Their experiences and the insights and habits of life derived from those experiences conditioned and influenced their response to the Canadian frontier experience. A history of the Mennonites in Canada must therefore begin with an identification and explanation of the European background of these people. The attempt to create a separate community and way of life has been identified by the author of this book as one of the dominant themes in that background, and also in the Canadian Mennonite experience.

A separate life style is not easy to maintain. It is constantly threatened by a wide range of assimilationist pressures from the larger surrounding society, and undermined by internal pressures and fragmentation. For the Mennonite people very serious internal difficulties often developed as the basic purposes of their separatist aspirations were questioned from within and without. The founders of the movement had generally been motivated by radical and reformist attitudes, and these attitudes and insights gave the movement much of its vitality. Yet later generations often fastened on very specific forms and details of the early movement and insisted that these be preserved as an integral part of a distinctive Mennonite way of life. The result was severe internal fragmentation as disputes raged between those intent on preserving the forms of a tradition which had been radical centuries earlier, and those who demanded a continuing radicalism and reform. These disputes tended to drive some factions further into isolation, while others succumbed to assimilation.

The continuing attempts of many Mennonites to maintain a separate identity and, to a lesser extent, a separate way of life have much in common with the experiences of other Canadian minority groups. Despite the problems of external assimilationist pressures and internal fragmentation, however, there remains a

deep conviction that the faith and culture of these various distinctive groups are worthy of preservation in Canada. Recently the Canadian government has established a ministry and a program of multiculturalism. The objective is to encourage Canadians of different ethno-cultural traditions to preserve and share their ancestral heritage for the benefit and enrichment of all. "Canada," according to a recent government announcement, "is a nation of many cultures. Our citizens come from almost every country in the world, bringing with them the cultures of almost every major world civilization. This cultural diversity offers all Canadians a great variety of human experience . . . the opportunity to share other ideas, understand various philosophies, to appreciate new art and literary forms." This book was written with the hope that all interested Canadians might benefit from and be enriched by a better understanding of the Mennonite culture, faith, and history.

For the Mennonite people of Canada this book has additional significance. It marks a departure from the old isolationism and an acceptance of the invitation to share with other Canadians the philosophy and history of Mennonite life in Canada. To many this may appear to be merely a further stage in the process of assimilation. It would be more correct, however, to view this book as a contribution to a true Canadian multiculturalism and a true religious pluralism.

The book also marks a significant advance in inter-Mennonite cooperation and understanding. It was written in part to commemorate the 450th anniversary of the movement itself, the approaching bicentennial of the arrival of Mennonite pioneers in Ontario, the sesquicentennial of the coming of the Amish, the centennial of the first immigration from Russia, and the 50th and 25th anniversaries of the other two major migrations of Mennonites from Europe to Canada. It tells the story of all the Canadian Mennonites and has received broad support from most of various Mennonite groups. It draws together the experiences of a people often separated not only from the larger Canadian society, but also from one another. It is not, however, written from a narrow or parochial point of view. National, provincial, and Mennonite archives have been searched for relevant documentary materials. The objective has been to tell the Canadian Mennonite story accurately, within its European, North American, and Canadian contexts.

This history tells us much about a particular Canadian minority group, defined by religion, and about the place and problems

of minorities generally. It also tells us about Canada as a nation in search of its own identity, which it appears is gradually emerging as a tolerant federation of other identities, all in some way unique.

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Prologue

THIS HISTORY of the Mennonite minority was begun in 1967, the year of the Canadian centennial. It was developed at a time when separatisms of one kind or another were rife, and it was completed just when multiculturalism, as a federal policy, was coming into its own. This was an unusually opportune time to reconstruct the history of a people whose character and experiences had been shaped so much by intolerance, by the crushing of dissent, and by the deliberate attempt of various national societies in which Mennonites found themselves to create cultural homogeneities. It was a time when the thematic framing of this history was helped along by the contemporary language. Concepts like counter-culture, minority groups and separation appeared rather easily in the literature of the day. Thus, without forcing them upon the material, they became readily usable for the shaping of a story which illustrates those ideas over a long period of time.

Mennonitism originated in Europe as an Anabaptist counter-culture, separatist in nature. The religious ideas which sparked

it led to an ecclesiastical separation. Like the Protestant Reformation everywhere, the rise of Anabaptism inevitably involved and affected European politics. In the case of the Anabaptists or Mennonites, their separatist, value-oriented theological ideas produced a reaction and backlash so intense that they reaped for themselves not a respectable, ecclesiastically identifiable sector in Europe, as did the Lutherans, but rather a bloody sociological separation in the form of the most bitter persecutions. Heretics they were called, and heretics they were. Their ideas were unconventional and dangerous, not necessarily because they were wrong, but quite possibly because they were right, at least partly so.

The theological separation and the sociological ostracism, involuntary for the most part, were followed in due course by a voluntary geographic isolation and by a rather willing cultural separation. As time went on, the separated Mennonite way of life acquired a separatist psychology as well as separate institutions for its constant undergirding. These in turn required a philosophical justification, which a latter-day theology of withdrawal from the world could provide. Thus the cycle of separation was completed as cause and effect followed each other. An inevitable by-product of the Mennonite experience was not only a sharp delineation between church and state, between sect and society, but also some equally sharp divisions within Mennonitism itself. These rather frequent internal fragmentations were multiplied by the rather frequent uprootings and migrations.

Yet, somehow a general Mennonite identity evolved and a Mennonite contribution to society was recorded. As so many separate seeds falling into the ground, the separate Mennonite peoples sprouted in the soils of various national societies and produced for those cultures some rather unique additives. In spite of separation, or perhaps because of it, the Mennonites became an unavoidable sector of the multicultural Canadian mosaic and an essential patch in the multi-coloured quilt of the Christian tradition.

