

Samuel J. Steiner, *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario*, Herald, Harrisonburg, VA, 2015. 872 pp. \$88.68. ISBN: 9780836199086.

*In Search of Promised Lands* is the forty-eighth volume in the Studies in Anabaptist Mennonite History series, sponsored by the Mennonite Historical Society and initiated by Harold S. Bender. Encyclopedic in scope, Steiner's book is the result of years of research in his position as archivist at Conrad Grebel University College. At well over 800 pages in length, the volume is certainly the leading work on the topic, surpassing *A Brief History of Mennonites in Ontario* (1935) by Lewis J. Burkholder, and the more recent and less geographically specific series *Mennonites in Canada*.<sup>7</sup>

In the preface, Steiner states that his method is neither social history nor intellectual history but rather religious history, as the subtitle indicates (18). This methodology is evident not so much by any confessional language or apologetic tone but by the collection of stories chosen to represent the historical trajectory of Mennonites in Ontario. Taking a chronological approach in its sixteen detailed chapters, the book tracks the history of Mennonite groups in Ontario from the 1680s to the present day. The comprehensive nature of the book makes summary in this space difficult, and so a list of highlights will have to suffice.

Throughout the first few chapters, Steiner captures the early movements of the Mennonites and Amish and covers Mennonite-Aboriginal relations, mentioning that "Mennonite economic development deprived the aboriginals of access to their traditional lands and resources" (73). Although he doesn't reflect upon this historical fact in detail, it is reassuring to see Mennonite complicity in colonialism reflected in an authoritative history text. In the early chapters, Steiner also explores other inter-cultural relations and includes a section on the beginnings of women in ministry in the 1870s (138–39). Further notable themes include the history of David Martin Mennonites in the Wellesley area (184–87), the Russian Mennonite immigration experience, and a brief section on the Plymouth Brethren.

As the book begins to turn its eye closer to the present day, events and names may become more familiar to the reader. Steiner covers the experience of nonresistant Ontario Mennonites during World War II, charts the beginnings of several Mennonite educational institutions, and describes the negotiation of separation and assimilation in Ontario Mennonite life. Importantly, chapter 12, "Identity Preservation through Institutions, 1945–70s," provides helpful and interesting historical

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<sup>7</sup> Lewis J. Burkholder, *A Brief History of the Mennonites in Ontario* (Toronto: Livingstone, 1935); Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1786–1920: The History of a Separate People* (Altona, MB: Mennonite Historical Society of Canada, 1974); Frank H. Epp, *Mennonites in Canada, 1920–1940: A People's Struggle for Survival* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1982); T. D. Regehr, *Mennonites in Canada, 1939–1970: A People Transformed* (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 1996).

snapshots of Mennonite institutions, including retirement homes, historical societies, credit unions, and camps as well as Conrad Grebel College and Mennonite Central Committee Ontario. Moving even closer to the present, the concluding chapters address ways in which Mennonites have assimilated into the cultural milieu of Ontario, touching on much more contemporary theological issues (homosexuality, Jesus, and Salvation), and the recent histories of Mennonite institutions such as Rockway Mennonite Collegiate and Conrad Grebel University College.

In reflecting upon the book, I found that *In Search of Promised Lands* intersected with my own context and perspective in both helpful and problematic ways. On one hand, I valued the opportunity to learn more about the history of my ancestors. Steiner's narrative focus allowed me to see continuities and connections that I would never have had the chance to learn about otherwise. On the other hand, I found the overarching narrative of providence troublesome, even though Steiner works descriptively and does not appear to directly endorse the self-understanding of settler Mennonites as people bound for a promised land. Perhaps it is my philosophical bias, but I found myself looking for more methodological and historiographical reflection in the book. For example, Steiner's fascinating description of how Ontario did not contain all of the economic promise expected makes me wonder how Mennonites have understood God's promise—is providence economic, spiritual, social, all three, or something else? Given that the title of the book suggests that Ontario was or is a Promised Land for Mennonites, the book does little to engage with the possibility that the land (particularly the Haldimand tract) could well have been promised to someone else....This raises a larger question about the role of a historical book: should history be written as a collection of facts, dates, and stories alone; or should historical writing be required to justify what it values?

In conclusion, *In Search of Promised Lands* is both comprehensive and accessible, although its comprehensiveness may be a barrier to continuous reading. Both scholars and individuals interested in Mennonites will doubtless find the book to be a valuable resource and reference work. Reservations aside, as historical reflection on Mennonite groups continues, Steiner's proposed spectrum "from traditionalist withdrawal to conservative boundary maintenance to evangelical renewal to progressive assimilation" should serve as a helpful framework for further research and thought (15).

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Alan Kreider, *The Patient Ferment of the Early Church: The Improbable Rise of Christianity in the Roman Empire*, Baker Academic, Grand Rapids, MI, 2016. 336 pp. \$26.99. ISBN: 9780801048494.