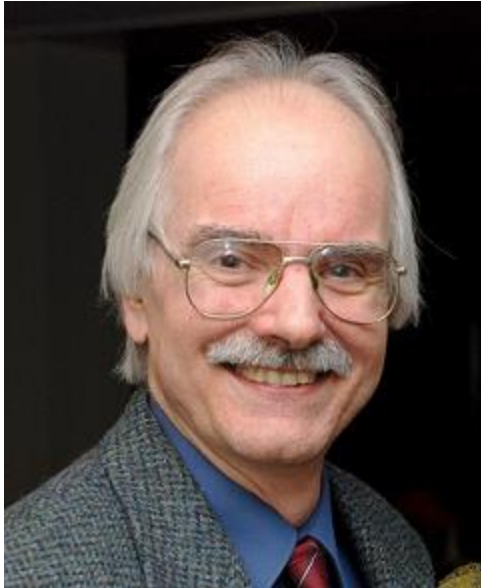


Samuel J. Steiner. *In Search of Promised Lands: A Religious History of Mennonites in Ontario*.
Harrisonburg & Kitchener: Herald Press, 2015. 587 pp. + notes (877 pp.)

Book review by Robert Martens



As a young American, Sam Steiner turned against his Mennonite heritage, became involved in radical politics, and evaded the draft by fleeing to Canada. His life took a different trajectory in Ontario, where he rediscovered the Anabaptist/Mennonite faith and enjoyed a long career as archivist for the Mennonite Historical Society of Ontario. Steiner's massive history of Ontario Mennonites, *In Search of Promised Lands*, seems to reflect these two very different phases of his life. The "young radical Steiner" is interested in the social movements and ethics of Mennonite church life, while the "archivist Steiner" is absorbed in a multitude of historical detail. The resulting book is so thorough that another history of Ontario Mennonites may not be needed for many years to come.

For BC Mennonites accustomed to the Russian story, the history of the far more diverse Mennonites in eastern North America may seem almost alien. The first Mennonite settlers in North America, writes Steiner, were well-to-do Dutch-speaking Germans attracted by William Penn's invitation in 1683 to settle in the New World. They were followed by Swiss Mennonites whose unity had been ruptured by the reforming Amish. North American Mennonites soon prospered and grew in numbers, even though many of their young were leaving the church. With occasional exceptions, life on the east coast was generally peaceful. Some Mennonites were influenced by a kind of Pietism that prioritized emotional conversion experiences over the humility of life in community. The ensuing conflicts between this new individualistic religion and traditionalist "separatist" groupings – as Steiner calls them – would continue to haunt Mennonites for hundreds of years.

The American Revolutionary War and political pressure on Mennonites to participate in the militia finally convinced some that it was time to leave. The first confirmed Mennonite settlement in Ontario happened in the Vineland area in 1786. They were followed by a stream of Mennonite settlers, travelling by horse and wagon to hoped-for "promised lands." Some of their villages and churches were built on land owned by Mohawk Joseph Brant (Thayendanegea). He was treated shabbily by the British authorities, leaving a bitter legacy that persists to this day. Mennonites also lived through the War of 1812; they resisted being implicated in violence but many profited from the conflict.

Until that time, Mennonites had been relatively ecumenical, and had cooperated quite easily with other faith groups. In Ontario, after the pioneering era was over, this changed. Evangelical groups won many of them over: "The religious condition of these people is indeed wretched," wrote Wilhelm Orwig of the Evangelical Association, a Pietist grouping that included some Mennonites. "Their religion mostly consists in the observance of some rites and plain dress" (qtd 97). The Mennonite "wars" that followed often turned vicious, and a plethora of different groupings emerged, including the Reforming Mennonites, some of whom were exclusionary to the point that they covered their ears during the sermon of a minister from

outside their circles. Quarrels often revolved around personal rivalries, but Steiner cautions against dismissing the concerns of Mennonite separatists as trivial. Separatist opposition to Sunday school, for example, emerged from a concern that hierarchy was being challenged, that Mennonite principles such as peace were being usurped by mainstream evangelical concerns, and that a new religious individualism was winning the day. The ideology of modernism was indeed a challenge to traditionalist notions of community.

The many Mennonite and Amish conferences of Ontario were changing rapidly as economic prosperity arrived in the late 1800s. English became the language of everyday discourse and of the church; urban missions proliferated; women's organizations sprang up, even as their autonomy was challenged by male leaders; and fundamentalism, behind the strong voices of American Reuben A. Torrey, editor of *The Fundamentals*, and Ontario leader John S. Coffman, infiltrated and then dominated some Mennonite conferences. In response, the separatist Old Order Mennonites formed in 1889.

And then the upheaval of the First World War temporarily united the quarrelling Mennonite factions. The peace witness, writes Steiner, had rarely been taught by Mennonites in previous decades, and the Great War caught them off guard. Thus it was that initially the various churches worked against each other until it was realized how much they needed to collaborate in order to protect their young men from the draft. S. F. Coffman eventually won the confidence of even the separatist orders and became the representative of peace concerns for all Ontario Mennonites. Since the Mennonites of eastern Canada were now speaking English, they did not experience the severe discrimination their German-speaking brothers and sisters endured in the West. Nevertheless, the Canadian government of the time was mindlessly patriotic, at one point disenfranchising Doukhobors and Mennonites. Ontario Mennonites responded by forming the Non-Resistant Relief Organization, intended to provide war relief to Canadian families and thus blunt the barrage of criticism levelled at them.

The end of the war brought a stream of Russian Mennonite refugees to Ontario, and it was like oil and water: the new arrivals had very different customs from those of North American Mennonites and the disputes that followed were common. Russian Mennonites also brought with them their own kind of divisiveness: the United Mennonites, Mennonite Brethren, and Allianz. Meanwhile, the struggle between assimilationists and separatists continued, the first emphasizing individuality and salvation; the latter, humility and community life.

It took the Second World War to engender some unity once again among Ontario Mennonites. Conferences were held, statements were issued, and representation made to government. The Non-Resistant Relief Organization was resurrected but its leadership was now aging and enervated; it soon gave way to the Mennonite Central Committee, which established an office in Kitchener in 1944. In 1940 the Brethren in Christ instigated an assembly at which the Conference of Historic Peace Churches was created. Quakers and Mennonites participated. In the end, however, twenty-five percent of young Mennonite men in Ontario enlisted in the armed forces.

After the war the old conflicts continued. Some churches, such as the Mennonite Brethren in Christ, left the Mennonite community completely. The more assimilated Mennonites built schools – such as Eden Christian College in Virgil and later, Conrad Grebel College in Waterloo – to “safeguard their young people from the world and to bolster the principle of nonconformity” (355). Credit unions were built, choirs were formed, and paid ministry became the norm. On the Old Order side of things, though, such innovations as family allowance

payments and the Canada Pension Plan were fiercely resisted. They were frequently represented before government officials by educated Mennonites from the assimilationist wing.

By the 1950s and over the following decades, thousands of Old Order Mennonites, descendants of those who had fled North America for Latin countries such as Mexico in order to retain their identity, flocked into Ontario. Most of these Low German speakers were simply seeking a better life for their families. They were targeted for conversion by evangelical Mennonites, and this was often bitterly resented. By 2011, 40,000 Low German speakers were living in Ontario, creating their own churches and bringing with them their own successes and failures. In the 1970s and 1980s, another stream of Mennonites was created when Asian refugees, aided and welcomed by Ontario Mennonites, decided to stay – perhaps out of gratitude – within the various Mennonite conferences.

Sam Steiner breaks down the Mennonite communities into four categories: Assimilated Mennonites, who have struggled to maintain their identity; Old Order, not at all frozen in time but adapting to the circumstances in order to preserve their communities; Separatist Conservatives, evangelical, but emphasizing dress codes and Mennonite values; and finally Evangelical Conservatives, usually fundamentalist and giving less priority to values such as the peace witness. Late in Steiner's book, a chart shows thirty-three different Mennonite groups in Ontario in 2012. The diversity is staggering – and sometimes bewildering. Though the mass of detail in this book may a bit overwhelming for some readers, Steiner has done a superb job of disentangling the facts and writing the story with simplicity and clarity.

In Search of Promised Lands can be purchased online or accessed at the MHSBC library.