

Ben Nobbs-Thiessen

**Latin American Migration, Settler Colonialism,
and the Unfinished Business of Canadian
Mennonite Belonging**

For those Low-German speaking Mennonites who sought to live apart from the world and historically resisted conscription, national schooling, and political participation, David S. Koffman's "audacious" question was frequent and fraught across centuries of diasporic mobility.¹ In the 1870s, facing compulsory military service in the Russian Empire, Mennonite delegations traveled to the United States and the Dominion of Canada with that question on their lips. Their investigations on both sides of the 49th parallel did not produce a consensus. For the majority, opportunities in the Mennonite Commonwealth they had established over the preceding century in imperial Russia outweighed concerns about encroaching Russification.² Life there, particularly with the option of alternative service, offered a better home and would until the chaos of the Russian Revolution and Civil War prompted a new round of emigration in the 1920s.

Of those that elected to emigrate in the 1870s, a majority (10,000) opted for the United States. Canada's appeal for roughly 7,000 of the 1870s Mennonites is notable given the near universal tendency of other migrants (including Jewish migrants of the era) to overwhelmingly favor the US. Despite a challenging climate and scarce infrastructure, the Dominion's promises of block settlements, educational freedoms, and pacifist exemptions offered a better home for some Mennonites. In the US those options appeared tenuous. Letters to Russia as well as letters published in the newspaper *Die Mennonitische Rundschau* in the late 1800s, read by Mennonites on both sides of the border, are testament to the continued resonance of this question. Paens to Canada's promise were also issued in formal encounters between government officials and Mennonites. Elder Gerhard Wiebe recalled an 1877 visit by Lord Dufferin to the Mennonite reserves of southern Manitoba, when the governor general "concluded his speech by assuring us that it would go well with us if we remained the people we profess to be ... namely, peaceful agricultural people."³

Still, the question of Canada as a better home must invite a highly qualified response within the Mennonite diaspora. For whom? Four decades after Dufferin's visit, those same Mennonite communities would send delegates across the hemisphere as some now prepared to abandon Canada. Imposed English-language education confirmed the worst fears of those who, to quote Hasia Diner, were, "never utterly convinced that the robust opportunity structure they enjoyed would really persist."⁴ Unsuccessful in their petitions to circumvent provincial school laws, the "audacious" departure of 7,000 Mennonites for Latin America in the 1920s remains the largest group emigration in modern Canadian history.

Even with this outmigration, the Mennonite population continued to expand quickly. New waves of Mennonite migration from the Soviet Union in the 1920s and 1940s bolstered the majority of those 1870s descendants that had remained in Canada. These varied migrant waves carried distinct relationships to their Russian past and Canadian future. But each would continue in their particularistic but growing embrace

of national belonging. From construction empires and philanthropic endeavors to political participation, literary prominence, and academic engagement, Canadian Mennonites were increasingly present in arenas far beyond the inland agricultural enclaves of the 1870s.

As they prepared to celebrate their centennial in Canada in the 1970s, Mennonite belonging was evident in robust historical societies at the provincial and national level. Sometimes, this new generation of community and university-based historians framed their contribution as a Canadian alternative to US-centric Mennonite historical writing which, as with the “narratives constructed about American Jewish history have managed to ignore Canada.”⁵ Commemorative initiatives also included the establishment of museums, the unveiling of placards in the halls of government and even, in 1978, the creation of the very position I currently hold—a chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg as a joint product of a Mennonite donor family and the Canadian Multiculturalism Secretariat. Tentative diasporic engagements with official multiculturalism, which Jeffrey Veidlinger teases out in his contribution to *No Better Home?*, continued for Mennonites over the following decades and culminated in 2019 with a declaration of the second week of September as “Mennonite Heritage Week.”

The motion, brought forward by Mennonite MP Ed Fast, could be read as one, among many, indicators of what Morton Weinfeld refers to in *No Better Home?* as “full political participation.” Yet an alternative to this national narrative is readily available if one only looks south. A century since the 1920s emigration, roughly 250,000 Mennonites across Latin America are a rapidly growing affront to the claim that Canada offers a better home. As Koffman suggests, inclusion of other branches of the diaspora, particularly those with orthodox or traditionalist orientations, offer a much “murkier” response to the question of belonging.⁶ In the Mennonite case, the perspective from the south might have indeed read the very successes detailed in the previous paragraph as a form of capitulation while espousing a Mennonite version of the “brilliant and oft-repeated observation that what seems to be good for individual Jews might be bad for the community’s health.”⁷

Historian Royden Loewen has referred to this as the “competing cosmologies” of Mennonites in Canada and Latin America.⁸ A further caveat is also necessary. These opposing camps were incredibly porous. Mennonites on both sides of the north-south divide engaged in a constant “calculus” of departure and return in regard to what constituted a better home. This is evident in tens of thousands of “returnees” to Canada from Mexico and elsewhere; new departures from Canada to Latin America (even a notable but small current in the context of recent pandemic mandates); and individuals and families who moved south or north not once, but often multiple times and for a multitude of reasons.⁹

The ongoing history of Mennonite migration to Latin America is only one element that unsettles the question of Canadian belonging. It is furthermore a common one in Mennonite historiography that has often been guided by the twin themes of negotiation with state authorities and divisions brought on by questions of accommodation. More immediate and troubling is Koffman's acknowledgement that diasporic dispersal is always intertwined with displacement and that "seeing the particulars of Canadian minority histories through the lens of Indigenous settler relations poses some serious challenges to these groups' historical narratives."¹⁰ In much historical writing, including until recently in Mennonite Studies, such challenges have often gone unaddressed because of a trend to view immigration history as a separate sub-field from Indigenous history (in terms of themes, methods, sources). In the process, as Yolande Cohen writes, a "settler's aspect has been replaced by a migrant one."¹¹ In the face of this erasure, to the question, "no better home?" we must counter not simply "for whom" but also "at whose expense?"

Koffman's subsequent exploration of the points of encounter (direct, structural, metaphorical) between Jewish migrants and Indigenous peoples offers both divergences and intersections with Mennonite roles in settler colonialism. He rightly highlights the need to "disaggregate the immigrant/settler/guest populations and their respective encounters with Turtle Island's first peoples."¹² In Canada, Mennonite settlement was unthinkable outside of the context of Indigenous dispossession. Indeed, the 1870s migrants discussed above were the first major block settlement on Treaty 1 territory in the newly created province of Manitoba. This should lead us to exactly the sort of critical re-interpretation of Lord Dufferin's 1877 celebratory speech offered by historian Shelisa Klassen who reminds us, in a nuanced analysis of media coverage of the era, of the Mennonite role in constructing a benign settler myth from a history of violent dispossession in Manitoba.¹³ Jewish migrants, though interacting with Indigenous peoples earlier than Mennonites in their roles as merchants along "capitalism's cutting edge"—also joined the post-1872 wave of settler agriculture on the prairies.¹⁴ In that respect, each group could be characterized in the words of scholar Reina Neufeldt, as "obedient subjects, good to their word as conscripts who, by and large, enfolded within the settler colonial order from which they materially benefitted."¹⁵ Despite this, a telling absence is evident in Mennonite primary sources of the era, as in the Jewish memoirs of Isa Milman referenced by Koffman. Each were largely characterized by "silence" in which Indigenous histories were "hardly mentioned" or reduced to a footnote.¹⁶

In the ensuing years, as structures of Canadian settler colonialism deepened, Mennonites would take on new roles in relationship to Indigenous peoples. Given their isolationist tendencies, Canadian Mennonites were slower to embrace missionary work than their counterparts in the US. There, General Conference missionaries were already active on Arapaho and Cheyenne reservations in the 1880s. Their work extended to translation and, in the case of H.R. Voth, an 1870s Russian Mennonite

migrant to Kansas who corresponded with Franz Boas, this included a role as a trader/collector/photographer. His controversial work linked Arapaho and Hopi missions to museums (notably the Field Museum in Chicago).¹⁷

In Canada, by contrast, belated missionary work was a product of mid-twentieth century notions of witness, outreach, and a growing evangelicalism. The Bergthall church of Manitoba (representing Mennonites who decided against emigration to Latin America in the 1920s) began a Mennonite Pioneer Mission in the late 1940s (later Native Ministries under the umbrella of the Conference of Mennonites in Canada). Operating primarily in northern Manitoba Anishinaabe and Cree communities it was followed by other Mennonite missions across the country. In the 1950s, young Mennonite volunteers with the Mennonite Central Committee (an inter-church relief agency) were encountering Indigenous patients in summer service work at Clearwater Lake—a racially-segregated tuberculosis sanatorium in The Pas, Manitoba linked to the residential school system.¹⁸ By the early 1960s, Mennonites operated residential schools of their own in northwestern Ontario as well as an Indigenous boarding school in Saskatchewan.

As these examples indicate, Mennonite outreach was often steeped in paternalism and at times aligned with the state's assimilationist policies of cultural genocide. This perspective began to shift in the following decades. Like some Jewish advocates, certain Mennonites followed an anthropologically informed path to activism that moved from ethnocentrism to "cultural pluralism and anti-racism."¹⁹ They also openly critiqued state policy. While the Jewish Labour Committee and the Canadian Jewish Congress became active in anti-discrimination work with Indigenous communities in the sixties, MCC formed a Native Concerns Committee (later Indigenous Neighbours) in the mid-1970s with Menno Wiebe, who also taught anthropology at Canadian Mennonite Bible College, as its first director. As part of an ecumenical "Project North" group, its members challenged northern development and hydroelectric initiatives as forms of environmental racism against Indigenous communities. By the 1980s, some MCC volunteers were also supporting land claims with groups such as the Lubicon Cree.²⁰

Though the preceding examples might read as a uniformly progressive trajectory in Indigenous-Mennonite encounters, the reality, as Koffman also suggests for Jewish-Indigenous engagement, was far more complex. Increasing solidarity on the part of some Mennonites was sometimes dampened by concerns about the perceived limits of pacifist engagement. Culturally informed, collaborative engagement existed alongside Mennonite-run residential schools. Most troubling (and least explored), in the very moment when Mennonites turned to Indigenous advocacy in the late 1960s, Mennonites across Canada, like Jewish Canadians, were also encouraged to take part in the Sixties Scoop by church leaders.²¹ They did so in significant numbers through adoption and fostering of Indigenous children. Indeed, the two messages were in-

tertwinced in Mennonite discourse. In addition to the violence of family separation, some Indigenous children in Mennonite homes and communities encountered experiences of marginalization and racism very similar to those of Nakuset Shapiro.²² All of these initiatives from mid-century onwards produced a plethora of primary sources that demand further attention from scholars.

Conclusion

How to respond to these two countercurrents within the discourse of Canadian Mennonite belonging? A celebratory narrative of “heroic immigrant ascent” meshed easily with currents of official multiculturalism in the 1970s.²³ But it could not account for the quarter of a million individuals whose legacy was directly tied to a rejection of Canadian national education through Latin American migration. It was equally silent on the question of Indigenous “disempowerment” that accompanied immigrant empowerment. In the short term, we should insist, as with the title of this compelling edited collection, on maintaining the question mark that follows the title “no better home?” Mennonite Studies, as with Jewish Studies, must continue to hold such national narratives in tension with settler colonial and transnational perspectives on diaspora. As Melanie Kampen has suggested, Canadian Mennonites, in their approaches to Indigenous reconciliation and advocacy in the TRC-era, must also avoid championing a forgetful “peacemaker myth” and reflect on the way in which these aims sit “uneasily”—to borrow from Koffman with historically unequal relationships with Indigenous communities.²⁴ Notably, it is a question that Latin American Mennonites—who may have rejected Canadian belonging through participation in new rounds of settler colonialism in Paraguay, Bolivia, Mexico and elsewhere—must also address.

Ben Nobbs-Thiessen is an associate professor in History at the University of Winnipeg, where he also serves as chair in Mennonite Studies, editor of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies*, and co-director of the Centre for Transnational Mennonite Studies. His first book *Landscape of Migration: Mobility and Environmental Change on Bolivia's Tropical Frontier, 1952 to Present* was published in 2020. His current research explores the “return” migration of Mennonites from Latin America to Canada since 1950.

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The term regularly used to describe Mennonite communities across imperial Russia is from David G. Rempel, "The Mennonite Commonwealth in Russia: a sketch of its founding and endurance, 1789-1919," *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 48, no.1 (1974): 5-54.
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As recounted in Joseph Wiebe, "On the Mennonite-Métis Borderland: Environment, Colonialism, and Settlement in Manitoba," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 35 (2017): 112.
- 4**
Hasia R. Diner, "Destination World Jewry: The United States versus the World," in *No Better Home? 35*.
- 5**
James Juhnke, "Mennonite History and Self-Understanding: North American Mennonitism as a Bipolar Mosaic," in *Mennonite Identity: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Calvin Redekop Wall (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1988), 96; Diner, "Destination World Jewry," 39.
- 6**
Koffman, "Introduction," 10.
- 7**
Ibid., 14.
- 8**
Royden Loewen, "Competing Cosmologies: Reading Migration and Identity in an Ethno-Religious Newspaper," *Histoire Sociale/Social History* 48, no. 96 (2015): 87-105.
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David S. Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History: Towards a Tangled History of Jewish-Indigenous Encounters," in *No Better Home? 82*.
- 11**
Yolande Cohen, "Forgetting and Forging: My Canadian Experience as a Moroccan Jew," in *No Better Home? 242*.
- 12**
Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History," 82.
- 13**
Shelisa Klassen, "'Heroes of a Flat Country': Mennonite Life, Agriculture, and Mythmaking in Manitoban Newspapers, 1870s-1890s," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 39 (2021): 175.
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- 15**
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- 16**
Koffman, "The Unsettling of Canadian Jewish History," 81.
- 17**
See Kimberly D. Schmidt, "'Christianizing and Civilizing the Heathen': Gender and US Policy on the Cheyenne Missions, 1896-1934," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 39 (2021): 91-118; and John D. Thiesen, "The Contested Legacy of the First Mennonite Anthropologist, H. R. Voth," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 39 (2021): 69-89.
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Ibid., 103.

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Melanie Kampen, "The Mennonite Peacemaker Myth: Reconciliation without Truth-Telling," *The Conrad Grebel Review* 37, no. 1 (Winter 2019): 42-61; Koffman, *No Better Home? Jews, Canada, and the Sense of Belonging*, 101.