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Review of Loewen's "No Permanent City: Stories from Mennonite History and Life"

Bill Jolliff
George Fox University, wjolliff@georgefox.edu

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Reviewed by William Jolliff*

In the preface to *No Permanent City: Stories from Mennonite History and Life,* author Harry Loewen states clearly his narrative boundaries: "The stories are historically true rather than fictional in that most are placed within their historical setting and significance. However, some stories are more "historical" than others, while a few are human interest tales from Mennonite life" (p. 10). It seems, then, that he has drawn for himself the widest possible playing field, and readers are led to anticipate everything from fiction placed in an historical setting to history placed in a fictional setting.

But in spite of the breadth of the field, Loewen chooses to play conservatively. He is essentially a historian who has chosen to incorporate a small handful of the techniques of fiction, and what he has written here does not differ in genre from what might now appear in many college history texts. Nevertheless, his stated purpose leaves the reviewer little alternative but to judge the book not only for its historical presentation but for its use of narrative techniques as well.

In the majority of the stories, Loewen maintains a third-person omniscient narrator indistinguishable from the author.

*William Jolliff is Assistant Professor of Writing at Messiah College.*
To the degree that he is writing history, this is fine; to the degree that he wishes to engage the readers with compelling narrative, it is not. Readers of historical fiction expect something of an inside view, and Loewen seldom goes into a character's mind for the kind of psychological insight that might have made this book a more intriguing one. As if to tempt us, he does come close in one story, "Exiles." There he tells the first half of the story through the character of Uli Steiner, a man whose wife is leaving him to flee the country with a group of Anabaptists. Though it is not maintained, this kind of point of view made the first half of this story more compelling than any other two pages in the book: the more sophisticated technique gave the story an immediacy the others do not achieve.

By and large, however, Loewen's narrative style lacks the sophistication of the serious contemporary raconteur. Probably the most annoying narrative failure is the inconsistency in the way the stories are framed. Most often, the tales begin with a narrative lead that stands, stylistically, somewhere between a Nathaniel Hawthorne tale and a contemporary magazine article—a perfectly functional approach not without aesthetic possibilities. But intermixed with this potentially successful technique are some of Loewen's own first-person, non-fiction narratives; framed first-person narratives in voices other than Loewen's; non-framed first-person accounts in voices other than Loewen's and purely functional source-related introductions. The variety in itself is not a problem; but often it seems to have been done more by accident than with aesthetic and rhetorical anticipation: too little thought was given to what the readers—at least those who read the claims of the preface—would be anticipating.

A related flaw becomes apparent in Loewen's use of dialogue. Twentieth-century fiction writers from Hemingway on have made great artistic progress in this key area, but Loewen's dialogue seems relatively unaware of such progress.
Too often characters tend to speak in lengthy set pieces, monologues that give little illusion of ever having passed the lips of a human. As a result, while the dialogue fulfills a certain telling function, it does not draw us into its reality. This problem, coupled with the author's hesitancy to risk inside points of view, makes satisfying identification with the characters difficult at best.

In short, the book does not take advantage of the possibilities its own parameters present. But having passed beyond this failure of technique, even the most critical reader is face-to-face with an inescapable strength: the stories themselves are, for anyone with the slightest interest in the history of the Anabaptist faith, tremendously engaging. Loewen shows his Anabaptist foreparents in all their spiritual glory—and the lack of it.

If the community of faith may be seen, intertextually, as the protagonist in this collection, there is, it seems, a two-faced antagonist: the first face is political authority that fails to practice religious tolerance, and it is the enemy we are most accustomed to seeing in popularizations of Anabaptist history. Stories in which this face is most clearly worn tend to be tales of hardship; of painful migration; and, to a great degree, faithfulness in the face of life-threatening oppression. Elizabeth Dirks in "No Man Ever Touched Me" and Pieter Plockhoy in "Dreamer and Visionary" fit clearly into this category. Their stories and others like them are a crucial part of the faithful history of the Mennonites.

The second face of the antagonist is worn more subtly: commercial prosperity. Time and again, a common sub-theme in the book is the spiritual failure that comes with material success. The Mennonites portrayed are least appealing when their cities are, in contradistinction with those of the title, most permanent. It is then that readers experience the failures of rich Mennonite farmers who keep their faith a secret to avoid loss; Mennonites who refuse a translation of
Martyrs Mirror to their brethren who are in need of literary encouragement in the face of war; and Mennonite citizens who through "some peculiar twist in the logic . . . did not draw fine distinctions between direct and indirect [military] service" (p. 81).

The genius of this two-faced antagonist is that neither face ever totally fades; the discerning reader can never be certain, for example, if the various hardships were suffered for the spiritual riches of religious freedom or for freedom to become rich. The result is a portrait as complex as human motivation, and this confusion is the greatest strength of Loewen's presentation.

In sum, Loewen has done the Anabaptist community a valuable service in No Permanent City. He has put between two covers a collection of compelling vignettes otherwise largely inaccessible to the nonspecialist audience. And though the tellings often lack the technique of expertly done historical fiction, they are nevertheless quite readable and, for the Anabaptist community of faith, instructive.