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Review of The Windmill Turning; Nursery Rhymes, Maxims, and Other Expressions of Western Canadian Mennonites

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The Windmill Turning: Nursery Rhymes, Maxims, and Other Expressions of Western Canadian Mennonites. By Victor Carl Friesen. Foreword by Al Reimer. Edmonton: The University of Alberta Press, 1988. Illustrations, photographs, bibliography, index, appendices. xv + 139 pp. \$24.95.

Canada and the United States provide the home for two basic types of Mennonites who have little more than their beliefs in common. The older group settled mainly in the east and came to America directly from various German states. Their immigration began in 1683 and initiated the broader stream of German immigration. The other group were the West Prussian Mennonites who left their homes in Russia and came to Canada and the United States in the 1870s.

The latter group was a blend of Frisian and Flemish Mennonite refugees from the Spanish Lowlands who were persecuted in their homelands and sought greater freedom in West Prussia, in the lower Vistula delta region, where their congregations were joined by native German converts. Their lingua franca was a hybrid of Dutch and the Low German spoken in Northern Germany.

After 1789 large numbers of these Mennonites migrated to what is now the Ukraine. At that time its official name was the "New Territory," for Russia had recently acquired it from Turkey. Here the Mennonites lived in relative isolation, had complete religious freedom, their own schools, and even their own local civic administration. During this period they developed an ethnic identity somewhat like that of the Jews—their culture and religion overlapped until it was difficult or impossible to distinguish between their religion and ethnicity.

When imperial Russia introduced compulsory military service in 1873, many Mennonites left the country for Canada and the United States, settling initially in Manitoba, Kansas, Nebraska, and Minnesota. The Russian Revolution of 1917 and World War II accounted for further departures from Russia. Today West Prussian Mennonites make their homes not only in Canada and the United States but also in Mexico, Belize, Paraguay, Brazil, Bolivia, and West Germany. Others who did not succeed in leaving the Soviet Union are scattered in that country, concentrated mostly in the Central Asian soviet republics and Siberia.

Besides their beliefs and Low German language these West Prussian Mennonites shared a common heritage of rhymes and maxims, or sayings, which have been collected by Victor Friesen and published in a most attractive volume. The author has not only carefully selected this treasure in Low German but has also translated it into English with great intuitive talent. The book is enthusiastically recommended to anyone interested in Mennonite history, sociology, or folklore.

In his introductory chapters Friesen covers with scholarly insight the history, the language, and the rich folklore of the West Prussian Mennonites. In succeeding chapters he deals exhaustively in Low German and translation with nursery rhymes and games, riddles, jokes, and tongue-twisters, and continues with pages of maxims on marriage and the raising of children, maxims for housewives and farmers. One example of the latter will strike a response from all farmers and vacationers:

Dauts en Wada-profeet
De fäl frat enn nuscht weet.

(That's a weatherman for you -
Eating much and not a clue!)

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