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Review of *Mennonite Women in Canada: A History* By Marlene Epp

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Mennonite Women in Canada: A History. By Marlene Epp. Winnipeg: University of Manitoba Press, 2008. xiii + 378 pp. Photographs, glossary, notes, bibliography, index. \$50.00 cloth, C\$26.95 paper.

Marlene Epp's overview of two hundred years of Mennonite women's history in Canada focuses largely on the two major sites of Mennonite settlement—Ontario and the Great Plains of Manitoba. Her discussion of the Manitoba settlers—so-called “Russian Mennonites” whose Germanic ancestors migrated to Russia in the early nineteenth century—encompasses their history from the group's arrival on the Plains in the 1870s to the present. Her study provides a wealth of material for historians of Great Plains women, immigrants, and religious minorities.

Mennonites' rejection of infant baptism and other aspects of Protestant orthodoxy subjected them to generations of persecution in Europe

before they found refuge in North America. As a result of this history, Mennonites who settled in the Great Plains possessed a number of characteristics conducive to survival in the sparsely populated, semiarid region. These included a desire for community self-sufficiency and an openness to agricultural innovation. In Manitoba, Mennonites transplanted the street village (*Strassendorf*) strategy they had employed in Russia, combining the homestead allotments of ten to thirty families and then building their homes and barns closely together along a central road. For Mennonite women, the close proximity to female neighbors eased their adjustment to Great Plains life and spared them the hardships that many other Plains women endured. In contrast to the isolated female protagonists of numerous Great Plains memoirs, diaries, and novels, Mennonite homesteaders easily shared their domestic labor, child care responsibilities, midwifery skills, and household supplies. Unlike immigrants on widely spaced homesteads, the Mennonites' street village strategy also helped women to continue and reinforce traditional dietary practices, community celebrations, and other ethnic customs. As a result, Mennonites in Manitoba have maintained a strong cultural identity for over 130 years.

Mennonites' commitment to literacy—so that members could read the Bible and the biographies of Mennonite martyrs—enabled Mennonite women to produce the many diaries and other literary sources Epp so skillfully employs. Her rich evidence and insightful analysis remind the reader that ethnicity, religion, and cultural history played important roles in women's reaction to the Great Plains. Her discussion of Manitoba Mennonites provides the latest challenge to historian Walter Prescott Webb's famous statement in *The Great Plains* (1931) that the Plains environment universally repelled female settlers.

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