

Book Review

Review of Loewen, Royden. 2016. *Horse-and-Buggy Genius: Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World*. Winnipeg, MB: University of Manitoba Press. Pp. 243.

By Janelle Zimmerman, Millersville University

Royden Loewen's *Horse and Buggy Genius* brings a different voice to the ongoing conversation about the place of horse-and-buggy groups in contemporary Western society. The subtitle—*Listening to Mennonites Contest the Modern World*—implies the questions Loewen asked and the answers he found. As a practicing Old Order Mennonite, I found his analysis intriguing, if not always entirely compelling.

Loewen does not use the term *genius* in the typical sense of brilliance or ability. Instead, he defines *genius* as a way of approaching life with insistence and intention, which is the “heart and substance of the community” (p. 9). Genius in this sense exists in complex simplicity, a combination of tradition, innovation, and considered change.

The book is based on interviews with 31 Old Order Mennonites and approximately 200 Old Colony Mennonites. With a team of graduate and postgraduate students, Loewen asked these Mennonites to describe responses to change that they have seen in their lifetime, thus indirectly assessing their approach to modernity. Loewen attempts to permit their voices to speak for themselves and is generally successful. He resists the temptation to default into academic theory and instead gives us the hesitant, sometimes incoherent, voices of the people. While academic concerns and points of view inevitably influenced the transition from transcript and field notes into legible chapters, Loewen manages the difficult balance between incoherence and forced coherence.

Chapters 1 & 2 focus on the approximately 8,000 Old Order Mennonites living in Ontario. This is a relatively tidy narrative, but it feels incomplete—perhaps inevitable with the small sample size. These first chapters are largely based on work by graduate student Andrew Martin, and his interest in religion and faith shine through in the text. We get a much clearer picture of what the Ontario Mennonites believe and how faith influences their lives than we do in the later chapters about the Old Colony groups. Loewen devotes chapters 3 through 7 to the larger group (approximately 100,000) of Old Colony Mennonites, based on extensive fieldwork in Paraguay, Mexico, Bolivia, and Belize. This section is lengthier and uneven but provides a more accurate picture of the untidy reality of life. We get a sense of the voices of the Old Colony Mennonites, in their unique blend of Prussian/Canadian Anabaptist with Mexican influences.

I was struck by the difference between the reasons the Old Order and the Old Colony gave for traditional practices. The Old Orders spoke more openly of their faith and were far more likely to give reasons for practices that were rooted in ideals connected to faith and religion. However, the Old Colonists were more likely to speak of maintaining tradition, more likely to

speak of resisting the modern world. It is unclear, however, how much of this difference is rooted in the interviewees and how much is attributable to the interviewers. While Andrew Martin appears to have done the majority of the fieldwork in Ontario, a different team worked in the South, and the differing responses may simply reflect Martin's interest and attentiveness to spirituality, as compared to the more diverse interests of other members of the research team.

Anecdotes about Old Colonists' poor education and near-illiteracy are common among Old Order Mennonites, so I expected Loewen to address this at some point, if only to refute or confirm, but he does not. While it is obvious that Canadian education laws were part of the push to move to the South, there is almost no discussion of what education looks like in Mexico or Paraguay.

Chapters within *Horse and Buggy Genius* address multiple aspects of life in the Old Order and Old Colony communities, and their responses to various developments. I discuss several in more detail below. Loewen addresses far more than what I discuss here, and my choices are a somewhat random sampling.

The theme of agency and self-efficacy in relating to government persists throughout the book. Of the Old Order Mennonites in Canada, Loewen notes that their relationship to local government is a one of practical independence, "a fusion of healthy self-respect and deference" (p. 41). The Old Colonists have a similar relationship to the various South American governments under which they reside, seeking favor with leaders while passively resisting or ignoring mandates that do not fit with their cultural and religious values (p. 167). As Loewen perceptively puts it, they are "loyal subjects, but not good citizens" (p. 168).

Faith and culture are strongly linked, influencing lives from birth through death. Children are welcomed as both future members of the church and as workers for the farming community. For both Old Order and Old Colony Mennonites, baptism represents entry into adult membership in the community and represents both a religious and social commitment. Marriage is a covenant, forming a social and spiritual union. Rituals enmesh the process of death, and quiet acceptance is rooted in faith.

However, death and disability are not accepted passively in all situations, and Loewen provides a discussion of healthcare practices and relations to the medical profession. The section on healthcare in the Old Colony (pp. 124-28) was of particular interest because of my own knowledge and practice in nursing. While Old Colonists have not hesitated to use modern medicine, Loewen focuses more on healers within the community, the lay healers, midwives, reflexologists, pharmacists, and chiropractors. These lay practitioners gain their authority through association, through generational and autodidactic knowledge, and through apprenticeship and personal experience. A sense of calling leads to self-confidence and authority in the practice of healing. The lay healers know that they are capable of helping their

coreligionists, who often prefer in-group providers over outside authorities versed in modern medicine.

Physical and sexual abuse has been a troubling topic for horse-and-buggy Mennonites, and Loewen presents well the tension and anguish of those who must confront the limitations of the church's ability to deal effectively with the abuser and provide help to the abused. Loewen is frank about the failures of the horse-and-buggy Mennonites but presents the essential struggle with clarity and frankness, recognizing an inherent ambivalence: "the Old Order church leaders rightfully advocate an alternative form of justice, but [...] one with limitations" (p. 29). The Anabaptist convictions of forgiveness have resulted in inappropriate forgiveness and re-victimization and have sometimes forced a re-examination of old ways of dealing with compulsive and habitual sins. The boundaries that encompass the community have sometimes kept out needed help and have enabled sin.

Boundaries are both spiritual and pragmatic. Material markers provide social distance and religious identity. Horse-and-buggy Mennonites are bound by vows, by which they have pledged obedience not only to the Body of Christ but also to the specific local church (pp. 88, 186). They have a strongly religious identity, manifested as a commitment to ideals and practices that have coalesced over multiple generations into a dynamic set of traditions that define horse-and-buggy culture. As Loewen eloquently puts it, "their very existence is the text on which religion is inscribed" (p. 100). The visible is symbolic of the invisible. Loewen explicates the *habitus* of the horse-and-buggy Mennonites with their intentional every-day adaptation to life in the modern world, using common sense and a deeply rooted reliance on traditional practices and understandings of the world.

Loewen's writing exists in a tension, a dialectic, between his own anti-modern framing and the religious / faith orientation of the horse-and-buggy Mennonites. While Loewen captures both well, the missing piece is his awareness of how much his own framing has influenced his interpretation of the Mennonite life-world. Like many academics, Loewen is fascinated with the concept of modernity as a force and of horse-and-buggy life as a deliberate, intentional response to this force. In this, he misses an essential point: the horse-and-buggy way of life isn't anti-modern, it is pro-Christ. We are trying to live out the teachings of Christ to the best of our ability and this has necessarily included rejecting some of the possessions and attitudes of the mainstream culture.

Loewen frames the Old Order approach with a theme of continued negotiation and contestation, an anti-modern orientation. However, the Old Orders are not faced outward against the world, but inward and backward, striving toward maintenance of the old ways. In the two-kingdom theology, modernity is not the enemy, though often seen as a tool of the enemy. This faith-based view is particularly evident in chapter 2, where the Gorrie Orthodox Old Order Mennonites frame their decision to relocate and adhere to a more restrictive *Ordnung* as a return to "true Anabaptist ideals of simplicity and community" (p. 53). This community mandates

simplicity for the sake of encouraging a surrendered spirit. In this framing, anti-modernity is not the goal, but is a means of progressing toward the goal.

The teleology of anti-modernity doesn't quite resonate with the world of the horse-and- buggy Mennonite. The purpose of this non-modern lifestyle is not captured by the idea of resisting modernity. Instead, this intentional life is rooted in an active Anabaptist faith, lived out by necessity in a modern world. Thus anti-modernity is almost coincidental to the real narrative, to the lived experiential world. They are intentionally counter-cultural. The struggle to adopt or resist technologies, tools, and fashions is intentional, as is the maintenance of old dialects, horse-and- buggy transportation, and plain dress. But to frame these solely as anti-modern is to miss an important component of the horse-and- buggy worldview.

Loewen's expressed purpose for *Horse-and-Buggy Genius* is to share the voices of the horse-and- buggy people (p. 221). In this, he has succeeded remarkably well despite his anti-modern frame. *Genius* is a welcome addition to the corpus of writings on the horse-and- buggy people.