

MENNONITE FEDERAL ELECTORAL BEHAVIOUR ON  
THE WEST RESERVE IN MANITOBA, 1887 - 1935

by

Theodore J. H. Dueck

A thesis  
presented to the University of Manitoba  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
in  
The Faculty of Graduate Studies

Winnipeg, Manitoba

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## ABBREVIATIONS

PAM	Provincial Archives of Manitoba
PAC	Public Archives of Canada
RMRA	Rural Municipality of Rhineland Archives

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## Chapter I

### INTRODUCTION

In the writing of history, interpretations are usually based on a set of accepted historical facts. The validity of these facts is, ideally at least, established through rigorous testing of sources and corroboration by independent witnesses. There are times, however, when the mere repetition of assertions of learned writers is taken as sufficient proof of a premise.

There are many cases in which the hard facts are difficult to discover. When one speaks of attitudes, perceptions, emotions and beliefs, the objective facts may be surrounded by a nebulous haze of subjectivity. These highly elusive variables are often alluded to in historical writing in a speculative way--persons X and Y behaved in a specific fashion and this may be due to factors A and B or mitigating circumstances C and D.

In the study of electoral behaviour, determining how a particular group voted (or did not vote) can be a useful tool in arriving at general conclusions regarding the attitudes and perceptions of that group to certain issues. This process of extrapolation usually depends on the existence of accurate descriptive data of voting behaviour.

It is important that necessarily qualitative and subjective conclusions be placed on a solid quantitative base. This is not to say that only quantifiable topics ought to be addressed in historical study. Instead, this is an argument for a history where interpretations are based on facts-- where those facts can be measured, they should be, and carefully so. The conclusions reached in such a study will have more credibility than a work wherein the researcher has not bothered to verify his premises. Political activity lends itself to statistical verification very well, and the amount of discussion which is not grounded on solid statistical evidence is therefore somewhat surprising.

Mennonite political behaviour has been the subject of chapters in several books and of many learned articles. The attitudes of Mennonites to the relationship between church and state, active political lobbying and participation in political parties have been discussed at length. Mennonite political involvement at the level of voting in elections is examined, including considerable investigation into official church positions on members participating in civic elections.

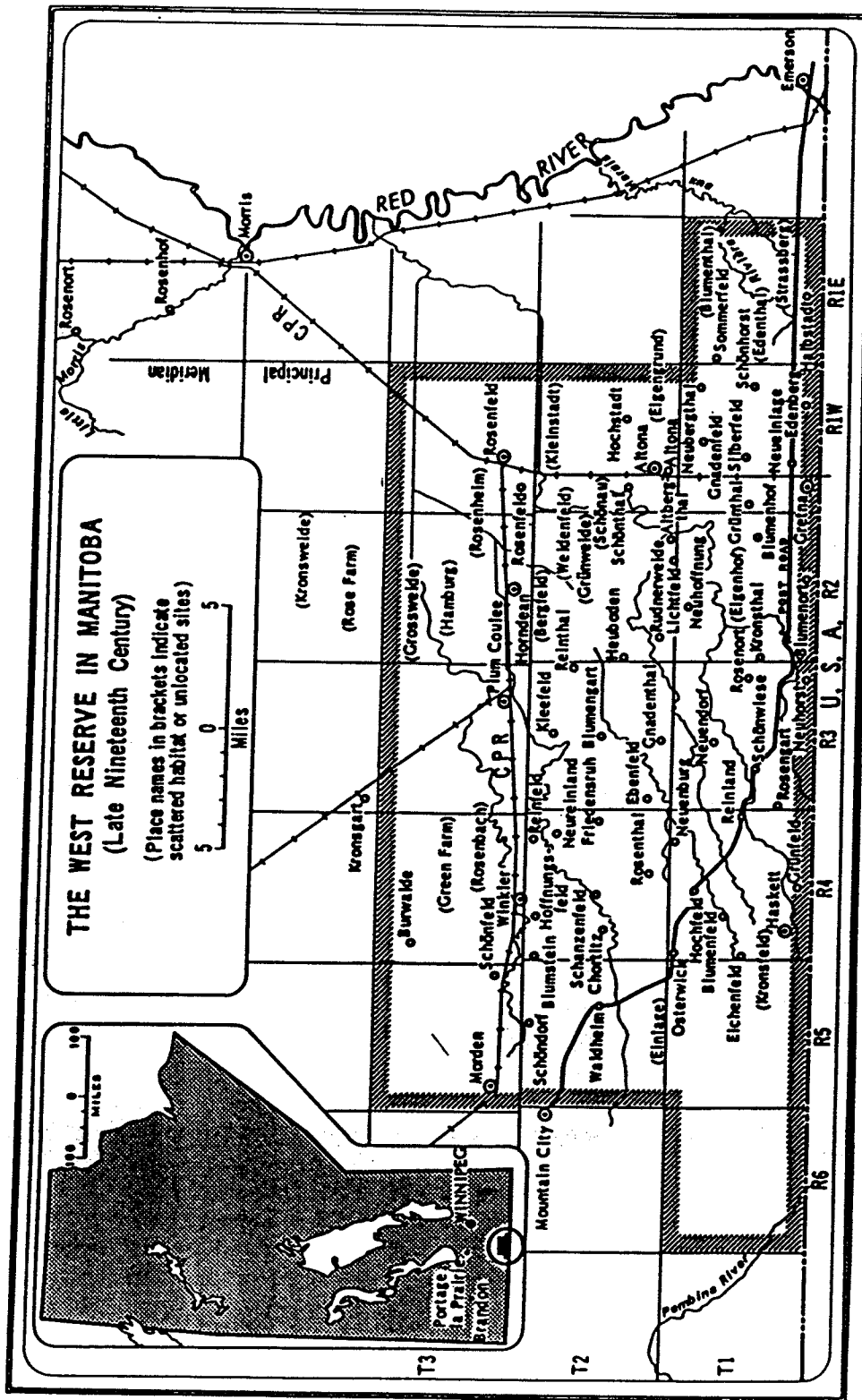
In most cases though, the analysis is almost entirely qualitative, utilizing an impressionistic historical method, and dealing in broad generalizations. The role of Mennonites in the political process at the electoral level in Canada has never been thoroughly investigated in a statisti-

cal manner. This thesis is an attempt to provide an example of how studies of Mennonite voting behaviour can be conducted. It provides a quantitative study of federal political activity in one small geographical area in Southern Manitoba, commonly known as the West Reserve (see Map 1.1), during a period in which Mennonites were, at least in rural areas of the reserve, by far the predominant group.

There are numerous situations in which a study of this sort would be useful. It might provide fairly solid statistical evidence in a discussion of Mennonite acculturation or accommodation to outside society. Trends toward increasing voter turnout could be seen as indicators of a weakening of church control or a relaxation of prohibitions against participation in secular political activities. Interpretations and conclusions regarding Mennonite involvement in politics can be more confidently made if methods similar to those found in this thesis are applied.

It is not sufficient to state, "everyone knows that Mennonites voted for X." What "everyone knows" is, as often as not, wrong. Therefore, a careful examination of twelve federal elections and one federal bye-election on the West Reserve in Manitoba from 1887 to 1935 in which Mennonites were eligible to vote will be undertaken. Through utilizing available statistical political and census data, a more complete history of the West Reserve can be written.

Map 1.1 "The West Reserve in Manitoba (Late 19th Century)"



Source: Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920  
 (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), p. 221.

There can be problems in this type of historical research and they will be discussed. Notwithstanding the difficulties though, a contribution can be made to an important aspect of Mennonite history by a thorough analysis of voting statistics in terms of both percentage voter turnout and party preferences. At the same time, the work undertaken here could provide an example of how future studies could be undertaken for the larger population.

## Chapter II

### PROBLEM

In the study of Mennonite voting patterns on the West Reserve in Manitoba at the federal level, several questions are apparent: to what extent did Mennonites, at least in the first half century of settlement on the Reserve, participate in the electoral process? If it is found that a significant percentage of the population of the Reserve voted, other questions can be asked. Were there important differences between Mennonites and non-Mennonites in the surrounding area in terms of party preference? Did Mennonites turn out to vote in greater or lesser numbers than their non-Mennonite neighbours? Were there major differences within the Mennonite community as a whole in voter turnout and/or party preference? And, to lend a dynamic element, how did the responses to the above questions change over time?<sup>1</sup> The answers to all of these problems can be determined to a large extent through statistical analysis and, at least for the period from 1887 to 1935,<sup>2</sup> the answers are contained below.

<sup>1</sup> As Lee Benson points out, much electoral analysis before 1957 has had a static rather than a dynamic approach. See Lee Benson, "Research Problems in American Political Historiography," in Common Frontiers of the Social Sciences, ed. Mirra Komarovsky (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), p. 114.

<sup>2</sup> 1887 is the first federal election for which there is evidence of Mennonite registered voters on the Reserve.



Of course, myriad additional questions can be asked, but if one is to answer them intelligently, the above problems must first be solved. For example, it would not make sense to write an article on "Why West Reserve Mennonites voted Liberal in Federal Elections from their arrival in Canada until the Diefenbaker Sweep", unless the writer first determined that the majority of eligible Mennonite voters on the West Reserve actually did vote for the Liberal candidate in almost every federal election until 1958.<sup>3</sup>

#### HISTORIOGRAPHY

The examination of Mennonite voting patterns can be placed into a considerably broader context of Mennonite historiography and ethnic studies in general. This broader context encompasses a vast range of literature, and only a limited selection will be dealt with here.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Benson also addresses this issue in "Research Problems," pp. 182-183.

<sup>4</sup> Some theses on ethnic electoral behaviour include Paul R. Beaulieu, "The Transfer of Allegiances in Ethnic Politics: A Study of the Voting Behaviour of Franco-Manitobans 1969-1974" (M. A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1976); Elliot Hart Katz, "The Participation of a Cultural Minority in Politics: Jewish Voting Preferences in Seven Oaks and River Heights, 1969 and 1973" (M. A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1980); R. Turenne, "The Minority and the Ballot Box: A Study of the Voting Behaviour of the French Canadians of Manitoba 1888-1967" (M. A. thesis, University of Manitoba, 1969); and Roger Epp, "Mennonite Involvement in Federal and Provincial Politics in Saskatchewan, 1905-1945" (B. A. (Honours) thesis, University of Alberta, 1984).

### Ethnic Literature

It is not the purpose of this thesis to argue for or against describing the Mennonites of Southern Manitoba as an "ethnic group." However, according to several definitions of ethnicity, it appears that for the purposes of this discussion, Mennonites are an ethnic group and an examination of their voting behaviour thus fits into the field of ethnic voting studies. Milton Gordon, a sociologist, defines an ethnic group as "any group which is defined or set off by race, religion or national origin, or some combination of these origins."<sup>5</sup> Michael Novak, in a more detailed interpretation, defines an ethnic group as

a group with historical memory, real or imaginary. One belongs to an ethnic group in part voluntarily, in part by choice.... Ethnic memory is not a set of events remembered, but rather a set of instincts, feelings, intimacies, expectations, patterns of emotions and behavior; a sense of reality.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps Wsevolod Isajiw has the most concise definition. He describes an ethnic group as "an involuntary group of people who share the same culture or to descendants of such people who identify themselves and/or are identified by oth-

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<sup>5</sup> Milton M. Gordon, Assimilation in America: The Role of Race, Religion and National Origins (New York: Oxford University Press, 1964), p. 27, cited by Stuart Rothenberg, Eric Licht, and Frank Newport, Ethnic Voters and National Issues: Coalitions in the 1980s (Washington, D. C.: Free Congress Research and Education Foundation, 1982), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Novak, The Rise of the Unmeltable Ethnics (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1973), p. 56, cited by Rothenberg, Licht and Newport, Ethnic Voters, pp. 2-3.

ers as belonging to the same involuntary group."<sup>7</sup> If these definitions are accepted as valid, Mennonites of Southern Manitoba, and of North America must be seen as an ethnic entity.

In addition to the studies discussed above, there is a considerable body of ethno-political work available.<sup>8</sup> Mark Levy and sociologist Michael Kramer illustrate the importance of the ethnic vote in their look at "political clout, political power and how it is and can be wielded by some 65-million Americans termed collectively the ethnics."<sup>9</sup> They use precinct-level returns to determine the strength of ethnic political solidarity (particularly in six major ethnic groups in the United States).

Few studies, however, are devoted to the question of Mennonite involvement in politics at the electoral level. A wealth of theoretical treatises exist on Mennonite attitudes to the state,<sup>10</sup> but empirical studies are in short supply.

<sup>7</sup> Wsevolod W. Isajiw, "Definitions of Ethnicity," Ethnicity 1 (July 1974): 122.

<sup>8</sup> A good select bibliography can be found in Mark R. Levy and Michael S. Kramer, The Ethnic Factor: How America's Minorities Decide Elections (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972), pp. 242-244.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 9.

<sup>10</sup> For examples, see E. K. Francis, In Search of Utopia: The Mennonites of Manitoba (Altona, Manitoba: D. W. Friesen and Sons, 1955); Harold S. Bender, "Church and State in Mennonite History," Mennonite Quarterly Review 13 (April 1939): 83-103; Hans J. Hillerbrand, "The Anabaptist View of the State," Mennonite Quarterly Review 32 (April 1958): 83-110; John H. Redekop, "Mennonites and

The Kansas Mennonites are the subject of James Juhnke's A People of Two Kingdoms,<sup>11</sup> in which the author concludes that "Mennonite voting and interest in politics may have been limited, but it surely took place from the very beginning."<sup>12</sup> Basing his conclusions on documentary and statistical evidence, Juhnke does not, however, ignore that part of the Mennonite community which did not vote. Although those who abstained from electoral activity did not constitute a majority, Juhnke stresses that "the persistence of Mennonite non-voting in regular elections indicated that this minority was a significant element in Mennonite community political behavior."<sup>13</sup>

According to Juhnke, an organization like the Mennonite Central Committee,

standing as it did for the Mennonite positive response to the suffering world, was a kind of political surrogate for Mennonites whose distaste for politics was an ingrained tradition.<sup>14</sup>

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Politics in Canada and the United States," Journal of Mennonite Studies 1 (1983): 79-105; and Howard J. Kauffman and Leland Harder, Anabaptists: Four Centuries Later (Kitchener, Ontario: Herald Press, 1975), pp. 150 and 151.

<sup>11</sup> James C. Juhnke, A People of Two Kingdoms (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1975).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 150.

This search for non-political responses to what society at large generally regarded as political problems raises some interesting questions concerning the similarities and differences with Manitoba's West Reserve.

In a more general study of the political behaviour of sectarians similar to Manitoba's Mennonites, Howard Kauffman and Leland Harder statistically verify the wide spectrum of Mennonite political activity in North America, which ranges from non-participation to Mennonites running for political office.<sup>15</sup> Kaufmann and Harder go back to the Anabaptist origins of the Mennonites in addressing the issue of church-state relations. They claim that the Anabaptist forebears

firmly believed that a Christian owes obedience to civil laws and authorities insofar as the prior claims of God are not violated by that obedience. But they also believed that the church and church members are not responsible for policies of the state and ought not to presume to direct them.<sup>16</sup>

The result is a conflict in which the political ethic of a religious group incorporates both assent and dissent--a "dualism of holding that God ordained the state with its sword, yet claiming that the state's operation involved non-Christian principles."<sup>17</sup> Although brief, this section by Kauffman

<sup>15</sup> Kauffman and Harder, Anabaptists, pp. 150-169.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 150-151.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., p. 151. Other examples of this view of the state can be found in Robert Kreider, "The Anabaptists and the State," in The Recovery of the Anabaptist Vision, ed. Guy F. Hershberger (Scottsdale, Pennsylvania: Herald Press, 1957), pp. 189-193; Harry Loewen, "The Anabaptist View of the World: The Beginning of a Mennonite Continuum?" in Mennonite Images: Historical, Cultural and Literary Es-

and Harder provides a coherent summary of Mennonite attitudes to politics in the 1970s.

John Redekop addresses a similar topic in "Mennonites and Politics in Canada and the United States."<sup>18</sup> In what amounts to a literature review, Redekop laments the shortage of "major works by scholars with a doctorate in Political Science." He points out that despite the large amount of interaction between Mennonites and civil authorities, "the political activities and experiences of North American Mennonites, although extensively described in mainly fragmentary, tangential or 'popular' fashion, constitute probably the least analyzed of the major facets comprising Mennonite life in the two countries."<sup>19</sup>

Other aspects of Mennonite life have certainly been described, analyzed and discussed at length.<sup>20</sup> Manitoba Mennonites are the subject matter in E. K. Francis' thorough In

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says Dealing With Mennonite Issues, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), pp. 80-89; Hillerbrand, "Anabaptist View," pp. 83-110; and Adolf Ens, "Mennonite Relations with Governments, Western Canada, 1870-1925" (Ph. D. thesis, University of Ottawa, 1978), pp. 6-7.

<sup>18</sup> Redekop, "Mennonites and Politics," pp. 79-105.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p. 79.

<sup>20</sup> See ibid., pp. 79-105; J. Howard Kauffman, "Toward a Sociology of Mennonites," Mennonite Quarterly Review 30 (July 1956): 194-212; Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada 1920-1940: A People's Struggle for Survival (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1982), pp. 608-609 and pp. 613-628, for an idea of the extent of literature available regarding Mennonites.

Search of Utopia, which traces the development of the Mennonites from a religious movement to an ethnic group, examining their migrations, and finally concentrating on the East Reserve and the West Reserve in Manitoba. He discusses political behaviour only tangentially and does not quantitatively verify his conclusions.<sup>21</sup> The same is true of Frank Epp's two-volume history of the Mennonites in Canada.<sup>22</sup> Epp does, however, provide a good, general survey of all groups of Mennonites in Canada, with some discussion of the Manitoba Reserves.

In another fairly broad study, John Warkentin examines the impact of geography on the Mennonite way of life in Southern Manitoba.<sup>23</sup> His treatment of the role of trade centres, the incursion of the secular world into the West Reserve, and the way this has molded modern Mennonite society is particularly interesting. For the purposes of this thesis, one point Warkentin makes is particularly relevant. He inadvertently presents a clue to the marked increase in the level of electoral participation on the West Reserve when he claims that "by 1890 the church leaders were in control of

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<sup>21</sup> Francis, Utopia, pp. 97-98. See also the index references to "Political ideology," "Nationalism," "Elections," "Government," and the ubiquitous "Church and State" in *ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Frank H. Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1786-1920: The History of a Separate People (Toronto: Macmillan of Canada, 1974), and Epp, Mennonites in Canada, 1920-1940.

<sup>23</sup> John H. Warkentin, "The Mennonite Settlements of Southern Manitoba" (Ph. D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1960).

the religious sphere only."<sup>24</sup> This indicates that if church leaders were the strongest opponents to electoral activity, a decline in their influence might result in a subsequent increase in Mennonite electoral activity.<sup>25</sup>

A Ph. D. thesis by Adolf Ens contains a discussion of the historical background to the attitudes of Mennonites to secular government, focusing on Western Canada between 1870 and 1925.<sup>26</sup> Ens' thesis traces the development of the Mennonites from a group strongly opposed to political involvement in any civil government to an important source of support for various politicians. He discusses the success of Valentine Winkler in the largely Mennonite riding of Rhineland in the 1915 provincial election, and reports that "several prominent Mennonites applauded this result, some of them even expressing pride in the part played by their people in the 'cleanup of the province.'"<sup>27</sup>

In addition to being a very useful study of Mennonite relations with government at various levels in Canada, Ens' thesis also provides a good example of what has become part of Mennonite folk history--the widespread belief that Mennonites "vote Liberal."

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p. 86.

<sup>25</sup> A similar argument is made by Adolf Ens. Interview with Adolf Ens, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 9 December, 1986. See Appendix A.

<sup>26</sup> Adolf Ens, "Mennonite Relations".

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 377.



The fact that it was the federal Liberal government of William Lyon Mackenzie King which repealed the offending order-in-council barring Mennonite immigration, when the previous Conservative government had refused to do so, ensured that western Mennonites would again be Liberal for at least another generation.<sup>28</sup>

Interestingly, as will be shown below, the statistics, at least at the federal level, do not exactly correspond with this commonly accepted generalization. In fact, Ens' statement provides a good case for the importance of statistical verification of implicitly quantitative assumptions.

### Local History

One other genre of historical writing must be discussed before concluding this literature review. Local history is an important part of the historiography of West Reserve Mennonites. Contributions in this area range from the committee-produced survey<sup>29</sup> to the scholarly study. Luckily, there are at least four local histories of various parts of the West Reserve which fall into the latter category.<sup>30</sup> Altona and Rhineland are thoroughly researched, well-documented and

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 373. Emphasis added.

<sup>29</sup> An example is Gnadenhal 1880-1980 (Winkler, Manitoba: Gnadenhal History Book Committee, 1982).

<sup>30</sup> See Gerhard J. Ens, The Rural Municipality of Rhineland, 1884-1984 (Altona, Manitoba: R. M. of Rhineland, 1984); Esther Epp-Tiessen, Altona, The Story of a Prairie Town (Altona, Manitoba: D. W. Friesen, 1982); Peter D. Zacharias, Reinland: An Experience in Community (Reinland, Manitoba: Reinland Centennial Committee, 1976); and Zacharias, Footprints of a Pilgrim People: Story of the Blumenort Mennonite Church (Gretna, Manitoba: Blumenort Mennonite Church, 1985).

provide useful descriptions of their subject areas. These studies, together with Zacharias' history of the village of Reinland and his look at the development of the Blumenort Mennonite Church, allow one to understand some of the differences between a few of the main groups of Mennonites on the West Reserve. One common thread in most of the local histories of the area is the gradual acceptance of an ever-increasing amount of influence from the "outside world".

Nowhere in the literature discussed above is the level of Mennonite political activity treated in a systematic, quantitative manner. A body of reliable Mennonite voting behaviour data and analysis is needed. In ethnic historiography we see more and more analyses of the electoral activity of various groups. It is time for the qualitative, impressionistic history of the Mennonites of North America to be augmented with a series of reliable quantitative studies of various aspects of the Mennonite experience.

## Chapter III

### METHOD

#### THE WEST RESERVE

The West Reserve in Manitoba was established by Order-in-Council of 25 April 1876. Mennonite settlers first came to the area in 1875 and by 1877, about 2,500 Mennonites had migrated to the Reserve, a tract of seventeen townships<sup>31</sup> (as shown in Map 1.1). Later, in 1898, the West Reserve was opened to general settlement. Non-Mennonites began to move onto the Reserve and Mennonites started to leave.<sup>32</sup> Still, Mennonites continued to comprise a majority of the population, especially in rural areas.<sup>33</sup>

Within the overall Mennonite population there were important differences. In order to describe the range of attitudes held by various Mennonite groups, traditionally de-

<sup>31</sup> Gerhard Ens mistakenly claims in Rhineland that the West Reserve covered twenty-five townships, for a total area of over 500-thousand acres, p. 1.

<sup>32</sup> More information on this is available in Francis, Utopia, Epp, Mennonites in Canada: Separate People, especially pp. 211, 227 and a map on p. 221; Gerhard Ens, Rhineland, p. 1; Epp-Tiessen, Altona, pp. 15-17; and Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements," p. 40 and p. 200.

<sup>33</sup> Canada, Parliament, Census of Canada, 1880-81, vol. 1, pp. 196-199; 1891, vol. 1, pp. 226-231; 1901, vol. 1, pp. 156-157; 1911, vol. 2, pp. 14-15 and pp. 148-149; 1921, vol. 1, pp. 706-707; and 1931, vol. 2, pp. 526-529 and pp. 638-639.

scribed as 'conservative' and 'liberal', James Urry argues that the term 'maintainer' is more accurate than 'conservative' and that so-called 'liberals' would be better described as 'progressives'.<sup>34</sup> However, in many contexts, 'progressive' is an even more value-laden concept than 'liberal'. For the purposes of this thesis, Mennonites who were relatively more willing to accommodate to Canadian society are called 'accommodators'.<sup>35</sup>

Moreover, since Mennonites did not maintain or accommodate absolutely, most were likely to fall somewhere on a broad continuum of maintaining traditional values or accommodating to secular society. Those who clung most tenaciously to the old ways are nearer the maintainer end of the continuum and those who were most willing to accommodate to secular society are nearer the accomodator end. As Urry explains, in Russia

the maintainers learnt(sic) to recognize, isolate and finally to reject certain features of the wider world order. They became skilled in their rejection of a whole corpus of social and technological innovations and learnt to resist external ideas, allegiances and beliefs. The reaction was essentially true to their earlier traditions...and resulted in a turning inwards.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> James Urry, "The Transformation and Polarization of the Mennonites in Russia, 1789-1914," paper presented at the 1977 Conference on Russian Mennonite History, Winnipeg, Manitoba, November 1977.

<sup>35</sup> Gerhard Ens, Rhineland, p. 117, also uses this term.

<sup>36</sup> Urry, "Transformation," p. 4.

Adolf Ens, an instructor at the Canadian Mennonite Bible College in Winnipeg, sees accommodators as

those who attempt to fit in with mainstream Canadian society as rapidly as the inertia of the group settlement will allow. That means that they would, for example, be...open to having their children acquire English as a usable language.<sup>37</sup>

He suggests that religious factors are involved in these tendencies, especially for the maintainers, and believes that the maintainers

would be far more committed [than would accommodators] to having church leadership determine what kinds of things in Canadian society are acceptable, and what kinds of things are not....they would be less inclined to make independent judgments about what kind of school [their] children should go to, or whether [they] should participate in municipal office, or whether [they] should have commerce with the towns or not.<sup>38</sup>

Differences between maintainers and accommodators are accordingly less a function of personal attitude than they are of the degree of willingness to allow the church, as a community, to make decisions for the individual. Terminology aside, most discussions of the West Reserve mention various denominational disputes which occurred, at least in part, because of this question of maintenance of tradition and acceptance of aspects of Canadian culture.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Dr. Adolf Ens, Canadian Mennonite Bible College, Winnipeg, Manitoba, 9 December 1986. (See Appendix A.)

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> All of the local histories mention this to varying degrees, and works like Francis, Utopia, Epp, Mennonites in Canada, Adolf Ens, "Mennonite Relations;" Warkentin, "Mennonite Settlements;" and Henry J. Gerbrandt, Adven-