

A Retirement Tribute to Dr. Royden Loewen

It is a particular honour for me to write a few words by way of tribute to Dr. Royden Loewen on the occasion of his retirement, and to celebrate, in this way, the career of a person who has made such a mark on the Mennonite studies landscape, in the very journal of which he was the editor. Roy has been an important mentor, partner, and friend, and his retirement is a milestone in the academic study of Mennonites writ large.

Roy grew up on a farm in the village of Blumenort in Manitoba's Mennonite East Reserve. He trained as teacher and for a time taught in Fisher River Cree Nation. Roy's academic beginnings came by way of a village history of Blumenort, the home of the Loewen family. This, in turn, became the basis for his MA thesis, and the wealth of sources the project uncovered allowed for its expansion into a PhD dissertation and eventual book. *Family Church and Market* won the Albert Corey prize of the American and Canadian Historical Associations and became a seminal monograph, not only for Mennonite studies, but for ethnic studies in general. It was an important beginning and there would be many books to follow. Roy went on to examine the worlds of Mennonite diarists, the rural disjuncture in North American farming communities between 1930 and the 1980s, Canadian Mennonite migrants to Mexico, and the genius of



conservative horse-and-buggy Mennonites. He also co-authored a volume in the Global Mennonite History series and together with his PhD supervisor Dr. Gerald Friesen published a study of immigrants in prairie cities. Roy employed a variety of approaches and methods that gave us richly textured portrayals of gender relations, everyday worlds of Mennonites, and the cosmology of both the village farm family and their neighbours.

To say that Roy Loewen is a prolific scholar is certainly an understatement. I have heard frequently in our work together his adage that “when all was said and done, more should be done than said,” and although he was not a quiet person, he certainly got a lot done. Roy was a regular recipient of SSHRC research grants, and his books were often either nominated for, or the winners of, awards. While lists of what Roy produced are not the only measure of his work, they are significant. The University of Winnipeg honoured his work with its Erica and Arnold Rogers Award for research and scholarship in 2009. By then he had produced seventeen scholarly articles, forty book reviews, thirteen book chapters, four monographs, one co-authored monograph, and one co-edited volume. He had either been convenor or co-convenor for seventeen conferences, organized eight, and had given more than seventy lectures and presentations. He would not retire for another eleven years and, as his latest SSHRC-supported project indicates, Roy is far from finished publishing.

Roy became the Chair in Mennonite Studies at the University of Winnipeg in 1996. The Chair is embedded in the History Department with a mandate for research and scholarship, community engagement, and a Mennonite Studies teaching program at the university. The most visible community engagement activities of the Chair under Roy’s direction were the annual Mennonite Studies conferences held at the university each fall. Roy had a wonderful gift of weaving together scholarly and community participation that afforded rare opportunities for academics to escape their isolation to engage with an interested audience. The conferences were packed with papers, and lively discussion followed the sessions around the inevitable cookies and coffee that became the mark of any meeting Roy convened. The conferences broached many aspects of Mennonite history, but also embraced the social sciences and literature. Conference themes included gender (1998), relations with Indigenous peoples (2000), wealth and poverty (2008), mental health (2010), and land and the environment (2016). The annual fall event also became the venue for two Mennonite/s Writing conferences. Papers presented at the annual conference became the core articles for the issue of the *Journal of Mennonite Studies* the following year.

The journal was a second “face” of the Chair, and Roy’s skill in navigating the peer review process, cajoling authors, and managing the production of a book-sized journal issue every year demonstrated his wonderful talent for judicious attention to trends in scholarship and the sensitivities of the audience.

Roy was also an important mentor for so many of us that either studied under him as graduate students, were given opportunities to present our first academic work at his conference, or became his research assistants when we needed to sustain ourselves both financially and intellectually while we waited for our chance at the all-too-rare openings in academia. I and many others are deeply indebted to the opportunities we were given by Roy, who took us on, while gently and pointedly critiquing our work, opening doors for us, and helping us to move forward. As one of us put it, Roy “taught us to have the confidence to ignore the obstacles in favour of the possibilities.” As he emerged as a giant in Mennonite and ethnic studies, Roy was increasingly called upon to act as examiner for many MA and PhD theses, which helped to grow his astounding number of contacts in the scholarly community. For me, the relationship of a graduate student grew into that of a colleague, partner, and friend. While the assistant we shared for a number of years at the University of Winnipeg often commented on how different the two of us were, I have very much enjoyed disagreeing with Roy, being inspired by him, helping him, and taking his advice.

What the community outside the university rarely saw were the skills and integrity Roy demonstrated in fully participating in the myriad tasks that accompany an academic position. Roy has done everything at the university. He chaired departmental committees, adjudicated tenure applications, negotiated relations with other Mennonite institutions and the Chair’s place within the university, all while reimagining the Mennonite Studies program to include a major stream, developing new courses, and reworking older ones. He has also been an intrepid traveller. His scholarly interests and research have taken him to Indonesia, Zimbabwe, Mexico, Bolivia, Siberia, and Ukraine, along with a sabbatical at Cambridge University and a Fulbright in Chicago.

Although worldly-wise, Roy never severed his connection with farming and the land that he grew up with. He continued to farm and kept his home address in Manitoba’s East Reserve for most of his working years. Roy and Mary Ann raised three wonderful children, Rebecca, Meg, and Sasha, and Roy has become a doting grandfather. Although he once told me he would never retire but would “die in the saddle,” it seems he is enjoying his new role. After all, you can only miss academic politics and committee work so much.

The work is not done. Roy continues to lead the D. F. Plett Historical Research Foundation as board chair and is working on a SSHRC research project and, not surprisingly, an accompanying book is in the works. It will be interesting to see how the role of senior statesman will suit Dr. Loewen, but if the past is any indication, we can look forward to his continued engagement in the Mennonite history project.

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