

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

If anyone who watched the CBC TV popular crime-drama *Pure* in winter 2017 came away with many questions, then this book is a must-read. Perhaps viewers with no questions, who took the show at face value, should read it too. Loewen's book focuses exactly on the two distinct branches of Mennonites that the drama conflates into one—the Old Order Mennonites of Swiss-Pennsylvania-German descent, and the Old Colony Mennonites of Dutch-Russian descent. Both of these historically ethnic branches display a continuum from “modern” to “anti-modern.” Loewen uses the latter term to describe what might seem the most “conservative” of Mennonites, whom outsiders note for their agricultural work, use of horses and buggies, and plain dress; they also limit the use of electricity.

Using interviews with 250 individuals in 35 communities, which Loewen and his research assistants conducted in Canada and Latin America, this study helps us understand why they live that way. Part one has two chapters on the Old Order in Ontario and in other regions of Canada, and part two has five chapters on the Old Colony in Mexico, Belize, Paraguay, and Bolivia, reflecting the disparity in numbers—8,000 and 100,000, respectively. The chapters explore transportation, agricultural methods, responses to technology, church practices, family life, migrations, social mores, and relations with host societies, governments, and other outsiders.

A central question throughout relates to the question of “change.” At one level, the fundamental goal of the horse-and-buggy peoples to resist change—particularly rapid technological shifts that cause acculturation among modern folk. But Loewen exactly differentiates “lesser” changes—dress fabric, fuel source, house materials, buggy styles, tire type—which are permissible, from significant changes that might challenge “the close-knit, self-sufficient agrarian community” (p. 218) that lies at the heart of the groups' anti-modernity. In short, motorized vehicles are not a problem *per se*; rather, the resulting speed and distance compromise shared religious beliefs and kinship relationships. The interviews reveal that many customs exist because “it has always been that way.”

What outsiders often view as a “lifestyle” turns out to be much deeper than superficial choices based on trends, income, or peer pressure. Loewen uses the intriguing descriptor “genius” to characterize the vital links between “religious faithfulness” and lives “lived in the local and in simplicity” (p. 3). He proposes that suspicion of technological progress, urban living, distance from nature, and individualism may well provide a better way into the future than does modernization.

The book notably brings together historic branches of Mennonites into one study revolving around their common anti-modernism. These streams share comparable views on scripture regarding their place (or non-place) in “the world.” One might have wished for more discussion of the groups' differences, beyond a brief section in the Conclusion; for example, the impact of ongoing migration (Old Colony) versus a more stationary history (Old Order) on responses to the

external world. How important, or not, is the national and geographical context (Latin America versus Canada) within which each group lives?

Scholars and the general public tend to either romanticize or vilify horse-and-buggy people. To his credit, Loewen appears to do neither, but rather allows conservative Mennonites to explain their traditions and choices in their own words—allowing the outsider a rare chance to thus “listen in” on these communities. Even so, at times the analysis stops short of dealing with apparent inconsistencies of thought and practice among these peculiar people. The study cites the advantages of large families to the family economy and community survival, but not the difficulties that numerous childbirths pose to women. As well, outsiders find it difficult to reconcile the co-existence of pacifist religious beliefs co-existing with domestic violence, sexual abuse, and corporal punishment; Loewen at least does point to the limitations of traditional teachings on forgiveness and patriarchal privilege. Throughout the volume, the horse-and-buggy people themselves acknowledge, in their own words, that they are not perfect.

A dilemma faced by all users of oral interviews is how to “name” one’s sources in published text. Anonymity flows most often from subjects’ requests and/or research ethics requirements, and the writer applies pseudonyms. In this study, many subjects gave permission to use their real names. The author refers to interviewees in terms of “a pseudonym,” or an “anonymous interview,” or “a pseudonym for [name is given].” A brief explanation in the book’s preface does not elucidate these various usages.

It is extremely difficult for modern folk, especially urbanites, to understand what “genius” might lie at the heart of a way of life that eschews “personal achievement, ease, progress, ever-increasing knowledge, certainty, and ... self-interest” (p. 4). Loewen is clearly drawn to these people whose stories, explanations, and wisdom he has been fortunate to receive. His ability to weave their words through his own scholarly analysis is admirable and makes this book a delight to read and an exemplary oral history. To think of the horse-and-buggy way of life as “genius,” however, seems ironic, because formal education ends before high school for both Old Colony and Old Order. Yet their survival and indeed growth is remarkable, in light of their persistent rejection of modernity. There is no better way to understand their choices than through their own anecdotes, explanations, and story-telling, whether in a thoughtful reflection on theological precepts or a humorous account of a farm mishap.

In a modern world, where popular views of peculiar horse-and-buggy people increasingly reflect television portrayals such as those in *Pure* or *Breaking Amish*, this volume’s detailed, knowledgeable, and sensitive analysis is sorely needed.

Marlene Epp  
*Conrad Grebel University College*  
*University of Waterloo*