

Gloria Neufeld Redekop — *The Work of Their Hands: Mennonite Women's Societies in Canada*. Studies in Women and Religion, no. 2. Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1996. Pp. 172.

*The Work of Their Hands* is a brief and straightforward account of the growth and decline of Canadian Mennonite women's "sewing circles" from the beginning of this century until the early 1990s. Concentrating on women's missionary and fellowship societies in Mennonite churches founded between 1874 and 1952, Gloria Neufeld Redekop argues that, for Mennonite women, these societies acted as a "parallel church". In a church where women were allowed few formal roles of authority, praying together, reading and reflecting on scripture with each other, and administering the large sums of money acquired through fundraising were just some of the ways in which women developed their own versions of religious and administrative leadership in women-only societies.

Redekop's choice of topic is fascinating, both for what it might disclose about Mennonite women's own self-understanding and for what it might reveal about how Mennonite women selectively drew from the wider society around them in creating their own devotional culture. The first issue — Mennonite women's self-stated goals and desires in meeting in women-only societies — is thoroughly presented in this book. The other more challenging task of showing how Mennonite women worked within the broader context of Canadian society in fashioning their versions of religious fellowship is not as well accomplished.

Redekop bases her analysis on various written sources, including church yearbooks, periodicals, and meeting minutes from the two Mennonite groups she studied — the Conference of Mennonites in Canada (CMC) and the Mennonite Brethren (MB). Much of her study is also based on the results of a survey she sent out to 304 women's societies. With a return rate of over 60 per cent, Redekop's survey data constitute a valuable written source for these small women's organizations with relatively little documentation. While these sources provide the grounds for writing a history of Mennonite women's societies, Redekop does not seem to take them far enough, for a number of reasons.

First, the chapters in this book are remarkably short (one consisting of only two and one-half pages) and left me wishing for more exploration of some complex issues. For example, how did the shift, beginning in the 1950s, from sewing circles focused on aid projects to "fellowship-based" societies centring on religious devotion relate to the religious revival percolating in Mennonite communities at the time? In a related vein, how did a women's conference in the 1970s come to discuss issues tied to therapeutic culture, such as "dreams, bio-feedback [and] crying as therapy" (p. 92)? In this shift to a focus on fellowship, did women start attending nondenominational prayer groups, like Women's Aglow, thus contributing to the demise of strictly Mennonite women's societies? Enthusiasm for revival and a sometimes tentative embrace of therapeutic culture are themes that cut across twentieth-century evangelicalism, and from hints within Redekop's text it seems Mennonite women's societies may have shared an interest in such themes. Exploring

this further and paying attention to whether there were differences between CMC and MB Mennonites on these issues would have strengthened her analysis.

A second reason that Redekop's analysis falters is that she refrains from setting her discussion in what would be illuminating comparative contexts. Though she often draws helpful comparisons to other Canadian women's missionary societies, she does not pursue some of the most obvious comparisons, namely with American Mennonite women's societies. For example, among American Mennonites, conflicts between the women who led the financially prolific women's societies and the men who eventually took them over have been clearly documented (Sharon Klingel-Smith, "Women in the Mennonite Church, 1900–1930", *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, vol. 54, no. 3 [1980], pp. 163–207). In contrast to the overt criticism of male-dominated hierarchies that American Mennonite women voiced, Redekop describes Canadian Russian Mennonite women as "pleased" to follow men's guidance in their societies (p. 41). Using the American example as a foil might have allowed Redekop to develop a more nuanced discussion of conflict or its absence amid Canadian Mennonite women's societies and their church institutions. Overall, a certain hesitancy to discuss conflict characterizes Redekop's analysis.

The limited discussion of conflict is perhaps related to a third reason that Redekop's analysis does not go far enough — the limitations of her sources. While her survey results are an important contribution to Mennonite women's history, she might have been able to go further if she had devoted more time to oral history as well. Women writing down their recollections for a scholarly project may feel more intimidated and more self-censoring than had they been conversing in their kitchens about the same topic. Eliciting some oral histories might have allowed Redekop to answer some questions about the devotional culture and the presence or absence of conflict within these women's societies.

Redekop's book left me wanting to know more about these and other issues. For example, how did pacifist Mennonite women feel about knitting for soldiers in the war? How did European-Canadian Mennonite women conceive of the "heathen" they were paying their missionaries to convert? How did Katie Funk Wiebe come to review *The Feminine Mystique* in the *Canadian Mennonite* in 1966? (In general, more context for the life of Wiebe, a path-breaking Mennonite feminist whom Redekop frequently quotes, would have been welcome.) In some ways, these questions are a sign that Redekop's book has the potential to inspire necessary and important work in the future. Her study is a useful first step in the history of women's societies among Mennonites, and it provokes intriguing questions about the gendered basis of Mennonite devotional culture.

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