The Ältester

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HERMAN D. W. FRIESEN,
A Mennonite Leader in Changing Times

Bruce L. Guenther

University of Regina Press

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In memory of Grampa and Gramma,
Herman D. W. Friesen (1908–69)
and
Margaretha (née Banman) Friesen (1908–97)

I will teach you lessons from the past…
we will not hide them from our descendants;
we will tell the next generation
the praiseworthy deeds of the Lord,
his power, and the wonders he has done.
—Psalm 78:1–4

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Herman and Margaretha Friesen, Osler, Saskatchewan, early 1960s. Courtesy Herman and Margaretha Friesen estate.

Foreword

Biography is always more than the story of a single person. Certainly, the account of Herman D. W. Friesen is a fascinating one by today's standards: his life was lived out close to nature, within a small community, surrounded by kith and kin. Born in a farm village in Saskatchewan in 1908 to an Old Colony Mennonite family, he spent his boyhood in a farm household, attended the local, church-run school, and courted and then married his neighbour, Margaretha Banman, shortly after being baptized into the Old Colony Mennonite Church. He and his young bride at first settled with her family and then created their own farm household, rearing a family of twelve children. As a community leader, Herman served on the local school board and roads committee, and then, in his fifties, he was chosen as a minister and then as the bishop, the *Ältester*, of his church. His life was cut short by a horrific tractor accident at age sixty-one. But by that age he had made his mark as a person of commitment, generosity of spirit, and intelligence. Herman was a son, husband, father, neighbour, grandfather, and community leader.

And yet, as Bruce Guenther argues, biography is much more than the simple account of a single person. It is the story of a man navigating tradition and change, and Herman Friesen was a farmer/preacher from a particular "moment" of history, a time of tumultuous change, set in a particular place on the Saskatchewan prairie. His story is one of intersection and even contradiction: as a man committed to a simple lifestyle, he purchases a brand new Plymouth and brings an organ into his home; as a member of the exclusive Old Colony Mennonite Church, he nevertheless serves with non-Mennonites on the local school board and sees his wife spend time in a public mental hospital; as a father with a strong desire to see his children follow traditional teaching, he nevertheless opens his house to his daughter as a single mother and sees most of his children leave for more progressive churches. There is nothing simple about this story.

The story unfolds in central Saskatchewan, on Treaty 6 lands, based on an 1876 agreement by Cree, Assiniboine, and other First Nations groups to share the land with settlers from Europe. These lands attracted large numbers of settlers, especially after the squelching of an armed resistance to Euro-Canadian encroachment in 1885 and the completion of the transcontinental Canadian Pacific Railway in the same year. This land would become part of the dynamic new Canadian province of Saskatchewan founded in 1905, and, in the decades thereafter, the third most populated province in Canada, one bent on assimilating its settlers into an Anglo-Canadian home. Among a myriad number of settlers were well-received Scandinavian and German immigrants, less easily assimilated Ukrainian and Doukhobor farmers, and even distinctive African American and Jewish communities. Within this cultural matrix, Low German–speaking Mennonites from Russia, by way of Manitoba and Kansas, found their own communities. Historians have commented on the unusual characteristics of a pacifist, Low German–speaking group living in farm villages on this prairie. But the Mennonites in their communities, such as the Hague-Osler Reserve, were part of the diversity of settler communities that comprised rural Saskatchewan.

But this story also recounts the resistance to assimilation and one from a traditionalist group of Mennonites, the Old Colony Mennonite Church. It would stand up to the province's 1917 dictate that children must be educated by the nation-state, and, in 1924, the Old Colonists from Hague-Osler joined a mass migration to Mexico, choosing the State of Durango as their home. For those who remained in Canada, old traditions in particular were tested. The Old Colony Mennonite Church had been one of the largest Mennonite denominations to form in Canada, established in 1875 on the banks of the Red River, announcing itself as comprising an idealistic people committed to the simplicity of Christ. It would mean they would resist state-run schools, members who ran for municipal office, and those who wished to leave the farm villages or purchase the latest technologies, most specifically the car.

But, as the title of this book suggests, this story is about navigating change. A traditionalist church remnant held course in Canada, and lengthy sermons (seven of which are reproduced in this book's Appendix B) laid out

the principles by which parishioners were encouraged to stand apart from a complacent and individualistic modern society. The Old Colonists would not fare well in Canada. They would flee the policies of Saskatchewan's education department into far-flung places in northern British Columbia and Alberta, leaving families such as the Friesens a distinct minority within central Saskatchewan. The Friesen children would mostly reject their father's ideas. Some embraced a more open and evangelical faith, one that saw ethics in terms of personal morality rather than communitarian commitment. This is also a story, then, of how evangelical Protestantism arose within a particular community and served to guide a family into the heart of a wider society.

This story is also one of agricultural change. It recounts the move from horse and organic farming to one reliant on fossil fuels and electricity, and the tools and tractors that followed. The steel wheel, that sign of inviolable progress, carrying both the trains that brought the settlers from Manitoba, as well as the massive steam engines that broke the prairie sod, also carried the small gasoline-driven tractors that brought mechanical power and fossil fuels to every farmstead. Along the way, it also introduced full mechanization of the farmstead, bringing unprecedented efficiency to the farm economy. And, given that agriculture is ultimately circumscribed by the availability of land, it was a key factor behind the migration of large numbers of Saskatchewan Mennonites to nearby towns and cities, plying new trades and professions. Agriculture after the Second World War increasingly became the economic activity of the few.

Finally, this is the story of a patriarchal family and household economy, the marriage of a man to his neighbour, and the creation of a family within a close-knit community. Herman Friesen is first and foremost a communitarian man, rejecting the individualistic and personally meritorious masculinity of Anglo-Canada. He is a man because he works hard for his family and identifies with his neighbour, and because he answers the call to lead his community. His identity is linked not to achievement but to belonging, and his household, for one, does not welcome the radio and TV. He is a strict disciplinarian and holds the view that childhood is molded in the early years, but he seems dubious about the idea that adolescence can better a child through higher education and skill development; teenaged

years for him are a time of apprenticeship on the farm, when age-old wisdom is passed down through the generations. But it is also a time when parents step back and allow the seeding of "wild oats," in the hope that youth will eventually come home to roost. And, yet, because his is a time of change, some of his children never do return to Old Colony ways, electing instead the path of assimilation.

Bruce Guenther is eminently qualified to tell this story. He is one of Herman's fifty-four grandchildren and a gifted writer. But he is much more. He has been a farmer in Saskatchewan, earned a PhD in history from McGill University, served as a leader within a seminary and a largely urban Mennonite denomination, and is himself a father and husband, and, like Herman, a friend to many. I first got to know Bruce a long time ago and at once enjoyed his affable and intelligent approach to life, a person who ponders the meanings of life in a changing social context, caring deeply for a society trying to find its way, but he is also an optimist, a person of deep faith, who sees within the foibles of humans a hope for a better future. He has published broadly on evangelical Protestantism in Canada, more specifically on the Bible School movement that took Saskatchewan by storm earlier on in the twentieth century, a pathway through which he himself learned to negotiate the wider society.

Most importantly, Bruce is tied emotionally to this story of his grandfather and, indeed, to the extended Friesen family. He is also a thinker, and throughout the book he wonders about the meaning and the context of the information he reaps. He interrogates the historical texts at his disposal, both oral interviews and written texts. He especially contemplates Herman's sermons and has overseen their translation. Mostly it seems Bruce wants to tell us the story of his grandfather, and he does it with the skill of the consummate communicator. He knows when to laugh and cry, when to pull back and contemplate, when to speak broadly or focus narrowly. This is the book that is in your hands; enjoy it as you might Bruce's company.

—Royden Loewen, Chair of Mennonite Studies,
University of Winnipeg

Introduction

Our stories are all stories of searching. We search for a good self to be and for a good work to do. We search to love and be loved. And in a world where it is often hard to believe in much of anything, we search to believe in something holy and meaningful and life transcending.

—*Frederick Buechner, cited in Connie (Letkeman) Braun,*
Stories in Sepia: A Memoir of Grace

Born on February 4, 1908, in the small village of Blumenheim near Osler, Saskatchewan, shortly after the formation of the province, the life of Rev. Herman D. W. Friesen (1908–69) and his wife Margaretha (nee Banman) coincided with the first six decades of the province's history. Their lives reflected many of the patterns that characterized the experience of homesteading pioneers in rural Saskatchewan during the first half of the twentieth century. During this period, the newly formed province of Saskatchewan, one of Canada's last frontier regions, underwent massive change as government leaders aggressively sought pioneers to populate and farm its wide open grasslands. By 1911, its rapidly burgeoning population made the young province the third largest in Canada, a position it held until the early 1950s. Although the size of its population remained static after 1940, the people of Saskatchewan built a complex societal infrastructure that included an extensive transportation network, a public education system, several large urban centres, and an increasingly diversified economy. Herman and Margaretha experienced changes they never imagined possible as young children, as their lives embodied many of the transitions that took place within Saskatchewan: from the rugged and solitary independence on isolated homesteads, to interconnected communities made possible by networks of railways, roads, and communication technologies; from

dependence on horses for pulling farm implements and providing transport, to the use of motorized farm equipment, personal automobiles, and even commercial aviation; from intensive pioneering subsistence farming on homesteads, to specialized automated dairy farm operations producing goods to serve larger urban markets. Their story exemplifies the adaptations made by many different ethnic immigrant groups in Saskatchewan as they participated in the transformation of rural Saskatchewan during the first half of the twentieth century.

In addition to being pioneers, Herman and Margaretha were a part of an Old Colony Mennonite Church community in Saskatchewan throughout their lives, as their parents had been before them. The Old Colony Mennonites are one particular expression of a much larger group of Christians known as Mennonites, whose origins date back to a radical, sixteenth-century movement known as Anabaptism. The Anabaptists were a diverse movement; those led by Menno Simons (from which the Mennonites derive their name) were committed to restoring (not merely reforming) the church to once again being a community of those adult believers who had voluntarily accepted baptism upon their own confession of faith. With remarkable seriousness and devotion, these Anabaptists sought to "follow after Christ," believing that true faith will be verified by one's behaviour, which included loving enemies and a refusal to use violence as a way of seeking revenge. Despite suffering severe persecution, which scattered the movement across and beyond Europe, the movement planted the seeds for ideas that eventually became an integral part of contemporary Western culture (for example, separation of church and state, religious freedom, and religious pluralism).

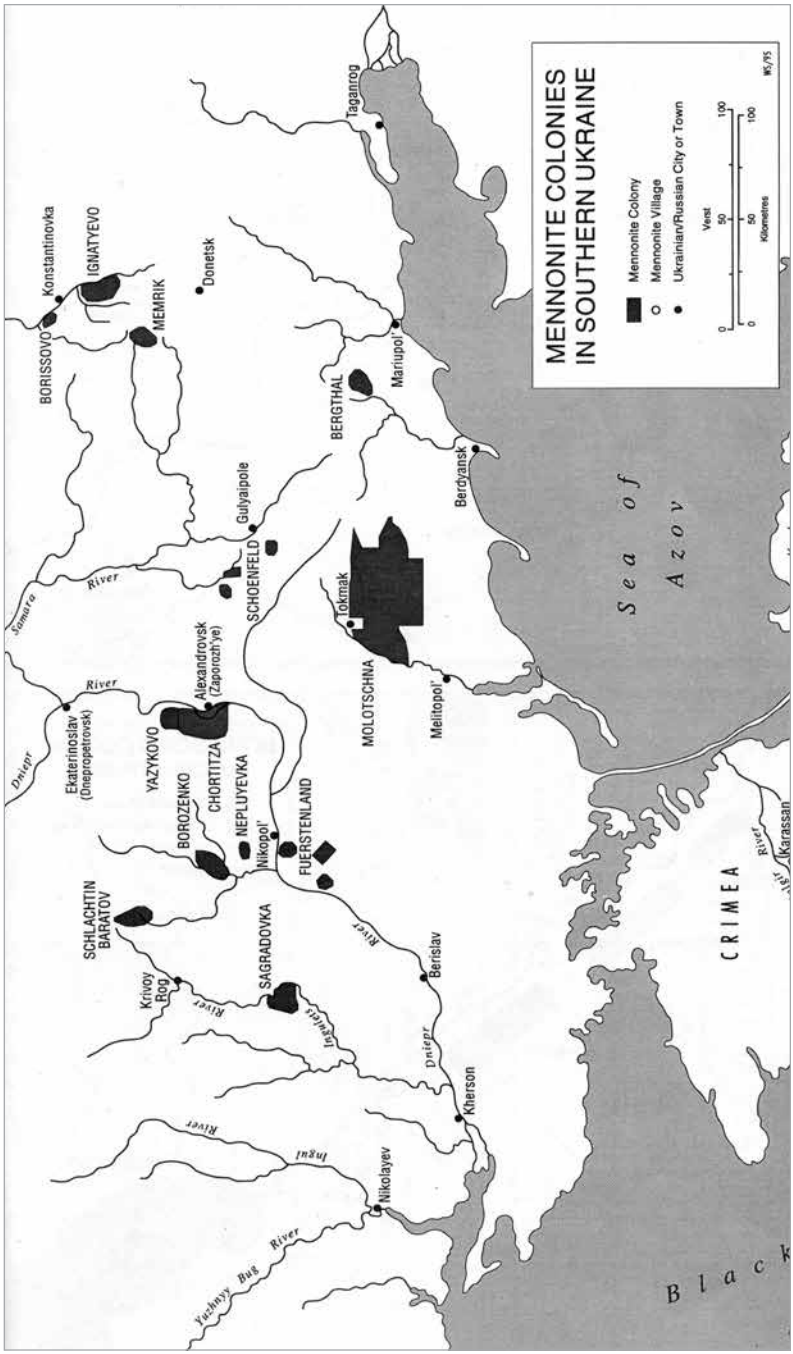
Both Herman's and Margaretha's families were part of a migration of approximately eighteen thousand Low German–speaking Mennonites from southern Russia (present-day Ukraine) to North America during the 1870s. This first group of Mennonites from Russia to arrive in Canada became known as *Kanadier* Mennonites to differentiate them from the *Russlaender* Mennonites who emigrated from Russia during the 1920s.[1] These Mennonites were part of a stream whose origins are rooted in the Dutch and Flemish Anabaptism of the sixteenth century prior to settling in Danzig and West Prussia. In 1789, many relocated to South Russia to

found the Chortitza Colony. After almost a century, the lack of available land for expanding the Mennonite colonies, and the impending threat of military conscription and the assimilation of Russian culture within Mennonite colonies, prompted some to explore new locations for maintaining their separate way of life according to their religious convictions.[2] After sending a delegation to North America, approximately 7,500 responded to an invitation on the part of the Government of Canada to settle in southern Manitoba on two large land reserves (more than five hundred thousand acres) located along the Red River, which became one of the most prosperous and productive farming areas in western Canada. Eager to attract new immigrants, the government promised the Mennonites exemption from military service, and the freedom to educate their children in their own private schools. Here the new immigrants tried to replicate the subsistence, open-field village way of life with which they were familiar. About 3,200 of the Kanadier immigrants came from the Chortitza and Fuerstenland colonies in Russia to a land reserve west of the Red River in Manitoba. The group's first congregation in the West Reserve was organized in the village of Reinland, hence the group officially registered in 1875 as the Reinlaender Mennoniten Gemeinde. Nevertheless, members of the group were commonly called "Old Colony Mennonites" because of their connection to the Chortitza Colony, the oldest Mennonite colony in Russia.[3] They became known for their tenacious commitment to a distinct Anabaptist-Mennonite religious vision that emphasized simplicity and separation from the larger society, and that is best lived out in isolated, agrarian communities.

Shortly after 1890, some Old Colony Mennonites in Manitoba began investigating the possibility of moving westward with the hope of finding additional tracts of homestead land in isolated locations. This search led many to resettle on the Hague-Osler Reserve, a four-township area located north of Saskatoon that was designated for their use in 1895.[4] Several subsequent extensions expanded the reserve area. After 1904, other Old Colony Mennonites settled on reserves south of Swift Current and east of Prince Albert.[5] By 1910, services were held in numerous villages within these new reserves, and church membership numbered over 1,500 adults. An equal number were present in Manitoba, making the Old Colony

Mennonite Church the largest Mennonite denomination in Canada at the time. Despite an intense desire to safeguard their agrarian village way of life, to preserve intact their private, church-supervised schools, and to minimize contact with outside influences, they witnessed and experienced many of the changes taking place in the province. Church leaders tried to help their parishioners interpret and navigate responses to these changes.

Dedicated to the well-being of his community, Herman Friesen emerged as a leader among the Old Colony Mennonites in the Hague-Osler region during the mid-1930s by serving as a *Vorsaenger* (congregational song leader) in the church, as well as a public school board trustee and municipal councillor in the community. Beginning in the 1920s, leaders of the Old Colony Mennonite Church in Saskatchewan promoted and then organized a successive series of migrations to other locations in both Central America and other parts of Canada in which most members of Herman Friesen's family did not participate. Then, during the watershed decade of the 1960s, and for what turned out to be the final seven years of his life, Herman was elected first as a minister and, a year later, as the *Ältester* (bishop) of the Old Colony Mennonite Church. As such, he became the leader of a group of Old Colony Mennonites in Saskatchewan that had repeatedly refused, or were simply unable, to migrate elsewhere. Despite growing up in an environment filled with intense governmental conflict, and considerable suspicion toward those outside of the Old Colony Mennonite Church, when Herman became Ältester he did not, unlike his predecessors, attempt to organize another migration out of Saskatchewan. He adopted a stance toward culture that was less separationist, and tried to navigate a gradual process of accommodation to the changes taking place in the province. His own family of twelve adult children represents a kind of spectrum of the different cultural tensions experienced and life choices made by those in the Old Colony Mennonite community as the group gradually (and somewhat reluctantly) began moving away from being an intentionally isolated network of small agrarian villages toward adopting a way of life that permitted involvement in a wide variety of trades and industries. A greater degree of cultural integration took place as more and more members began living outside of the original villages and even within the city of Saskatoon.



Mennonite colonies in southern Ukraine, 1800s. Courtesy William Schroeder.

Reasons for Writing

My interests in writing a biography of Herman D. W. Friesen arise from both my personal relationship to Herman as well as my academic interests in Mennonite history. I am one of fifty-four grandchildren of Herman and Margaretha, most of whom never had the opportunity to get to know him well, and some never had the opportunity to meet their grandfather at all. This biography created an opportunity to get to know my grandfather in a way that was not possible when I was a young boy. Etched with vivid clarity into my memory as a young child growing up on a mixed farm in rural Saskatchewan north of Saskatoon are several events during the 1960s that many have recognized as monumental moments in the twentieth century: the first occurred on November 22, 1963, as everyday activities were interrupted by shocked radio announcers reporting the shooting death of John F. Kennedy in Dallas, Texas. The second was watching the television coverage, at a neighbour's home because there was no television in our home, of Neil Armstrong taking his first step onto the lunar surface on July 21, 1969, with his famous description of the event as "one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." Both of these events occurred a long way from the world of the Old Colony Mennonites living in rural Saskatchewan, but, intuitively, I knew that the world would now be different because of these events, even if I did not understand exactly how.

The third memory was not nearly as consequential as far as global events were concerned but profoundly impacted my immediate world. On the afternoon of September 26, 1969, our family received a telephone call informing us of Herman Friesen's fatal tractor accident. As a ten-year-old boy at the time of his death, my personal experience of Ältester Friesen was entirely as "Grampa," that is, my mother's father. My childhood memories of him are limited to recollections of family gatherings at Grampa and Gramma's dairy farm, with uncles crowded into the living room, talking, laughing, with the passing of time marked by the gradual transformation of the floor into a growing carpet of shelled sunflower seeds, and aunts sitting, chatting, holding and feeding babies, preparing *Faspa* (a light, late