

## Manufacturing Mennonites

### Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba

*Manufacturing Mennonites* examines the efforts of Mennonite intellectuals and business leaders to redefine the group's ethno-religious identity in response to changing economic and social conditions after 1945. As the industrial workplace was one of the most significant venues in which competing identity claims were contested during this period, Janis Thiessen explores how Mennonite workers responded to such redefinitions and how they affected class relations.

Through unprecedented access to extensive private company records, Thiessen provides an innovative comparison of three businesses founded, owned, and originally staffed by Mennonites: the printing firm Friesens Corporation, the window manufacturer Loewen, and the furniture manufacturer Palliser. Complemented with interviews with workers, managers, and business owners, *Manufacturing Mennonites* pioneers two important new trajectories for scholarship – how religion can affect business history, and how class relations have influenced religious history.

JANIS THIESSEN is an assistant professor in the Department of History at the University of Winnipeg.

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## Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba

Janis Thiessen

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*For ‘the Folks’*  
*and especially*  
*Frank James Thiessen*  
*1925–2005*

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**Manufacturing Mennonites**  
**Work and Religion in Post-War Manitoba**

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# Introduction

A few ethnic and religious groups, not including the Mennonites, dominate the literature in Canadian labour history. The traditions of labour radicalism within the Jewish, Finnish, and Ukrainian communities, for example, are examined in numerous publications, as are the work narratives of Italian immigrants.<sup>1</sup> But Mennonites, if they are thought of at all, are connected with Old Order barn raising or with images of farming without the benefit of rubber-tired tractors. By contrast, the agrarian and entrepreneurial roles of Mennonites in Canada and the United States have been addressed in survey works by sociologist Calvin Redekop and historians Frank Epp, Ted Regehr, and Royden Loewen.<sup>2</sup> The history of Mennonites as industrial workers within twentieth-century North American capitalism remains largely unexplored.

Mennonites' behaviour often has not conformed to traditional understandings of labour struggle and resistance. Mennonites may have been the 'left wing of the Reformation' in the words of historian Roland Bainton, but they were certainly not known in the twentieth century as radicals of the labour movement.<sup>3</sup> Union records, which remain important primary sources in labour history, are virtually useless when studying North American Mennonite workers in this century, as these workers tended to be non-unionized.<sup>4</sup> If this kind of traditional labour history is not an option, how does one study Mennonite labour? Is there even a Mennonite working class to be studied?

What little statistical information is available reveals that this neglected group constituted a significant portion of the North American

#### 4 MANUFACTURING MENNONITES

Table I.1. North American Mennonite occupations (%)

Occupation	1972	1989
Professional	16	28
Business proprietor/manager	5	9
Sales/clerical workers	7	11
Craftspeople	5	5
Machine operators	5	4
Service workers	4	4
Farmers	11	7
Labourers	2	1
Housewives/husbands	32	25
Students	14	6

Source: Kauffman and Driedger, *The Mennonite Mosaic*, 38.

Mennonite population in the late twentieth century. Counting only those who are baptized members of Mennonite and Brethren in Christ churches,<sup>5</sup> there were more than 1.3 million Mennonites worldwide in 2003; the third largest national group was Canadian Mennonites, numbering 127,851.<sup>6</sup> Within Canada, Manitoba had more Mennonites in 2001 than any other province (51,540), and Winnipeg had the highest urban concentration of Mennonites in the world (18,240).<sup>7</sup> A survey of North American Mennonite church members in 1972 by Kauffman and Harder showed that some 23 per cent of Mennonites at that time were working class (which they defined to include sales/clerical workers, craftspeople, machine operators, service workers, and labourers). A 1989 survey by Kauffman and Driedger found that 25 per cent of North American Mennonites were working class (see table I.1). Another survey was conducted by the now defunct *Mennonite Reporter* in Winnipeg in 1980; researcher Elfrieda Rempel found that 27 per cent of Winnipeg Mennonites were blue-collar workers.<sup>8</sup>

It is surprising then that so little has been written, even by Mennonites, about a group that comprises roughly one-quarter of all Mennonites in North America. Not only is the Mennonite working class itself neglected, but 'practically no discussion [of work] exists' in Anabaptist-Mennonite history and theology,<sup>9</sup> declares Calvin Redekop in *The Global Anabaptist Mennonite Encyclopedia*. A perusal of the index for *Mennonite Quarterly Review*, the oldest North American academic

journal of Mennonite history, supports this view. Since its founding in 1927, only two articles were published on the topic of 'industrial relations' – the first in 1939 and the second sixty years later.<sup>10</sup>

Readers may have difficulty categorizing this study as it attempts to address some gaps in the literature. It is simultaneously a labour history, a business history, a history of 'lived religion,'<sup>11</sup> an intellectual history in so far as it examines theology – and, above all, it is a social history. While conversations between some of these fields have occurred, too often it is religion that continues to be omitted from the debate. Specialists in any one of these fields may feel that their area of expertise receives inadequate emphasis, but that is the risk of the approach taken here.

Business history is a comparatively new field in the discipline of history. Fogel and Engerman's *The Redefinition of American Economic History* ushered in cliometrics (the mathematical analysis of history) in 1971 and led to the division of economic history into a statistics-focused economic history and an institution-focused business history.<sup>12</sup> Alfred Chandler's publication of *The Visible Hand* in 1977 dominated the field of business history for decades, turning the focus from the role of entrepreneurs to that of management in the success of large-scale industries.<sup>13</sup>

Social history has been successfully – though insufficiently – integrated into the study of business history. Scholars have incorporated the roles of state intervention, small business, family firms, ethnicity, gender, and culture.<sup>14</sup> The organization and management of a business, management scholar Gordon Redding asserts, are culturally dependent in that they 'do not consist of making or moving tangible objects, but of manipulating symbols which have meaning to the people who are managed or organized.'<sup>15</sup> His is a view shared by business historian Pamela Walker Laird, who notes that 'business decisions are not always about business, narrowly speaking. Instead, they are often complicated by social and cultural considerations, including social capital's blend of cultural values and social mechanisms.'<sup>16</sup> Redding invokes anthropologist Clifford Geertz's notion of 'thick description,' arguing that international business theory needs to draw on history, culture, and geography in a more systematic manner.<sup>17</sup> Social historian John Walton agrees that business history remains too wedded to Chandler, and its engagement with other fields of history is unsatisfactory.<sup>18</sup> Indeed, he asserts that

some of the 'liveliest' business historians are not, in fact, business historians: he cites Patrick Joyce's work on paternalism as an example.<sup>19</sup>

Despite these calls for, and examples of, the integration of social history and business history, 'lived religion' and business history remain independent fields of study. Much as labour history has expanded beyond the bounds of institutions and organizations to explore the social history of the working class, so too has the study of religion; the focus has shifted from denominational studies to investigations of religion as lived in people's everyday lives. While race, ethnicity, and gender have been incorporated into the study of religious history, class (and thus labour history and business history) remains largely ignored.<sup>20</sup> Historian Patrick Pasture notes the limited attention religion has received from labour historians, and suggests they need to become more 'open and reflective' towards religious history.<sup>21</sup> Another related problem is the neglect of the twentieth century in the study of lived religion; historians have embraced the secularization thesis and fail to see the continued relevance of religious beliefs for many in the modern world.<sup>22</sup> This study of Mennonite-owned businesses in Manitoba, then, is a step towards addressing these absences and integrating these disparate fields. My exploration of Mennonite religious identity in the workplace attempts to answer Laurence Moore's challenge that historians 'should investigate how religion, among other sorts of institutions, operates within particular societies to reify particular structures of inequality.'<sup>23</sup>

The study of lived religion entails risks, however. Robert Orsi, an oral historian and scholar of lived religion, observes that the researcher's 'most deeply held existential orientations and moral values are on display with an obviousness not found in earlier ethnographic or, especially, historical accounts.'<sup>24</sup> Nor are the dangers confined to the researcher. Interview participants can be 'hesitant or unable to talk about their beliefs ... There may be generational or denominational differences in the narrator's comfort level when talking about religion, with younger people and those in groups that emphasize testifying more able to verbalize their inner experience.'<sup>25</sup> Awareness of one's own biases and respect for interview participants' views can be complicated by a common religious background. Participants may make assumptions about the researcher, ascribing a shared philosophy that may or may not exist. The researcher may make assumptions about the meanings behind a participant's words, interpreting from her own



experience rather than that of her informant. 'The challenge of a lived religion approach is to balance carefully and self-reflectively on the border between familiarity and difference, strangeness and recognizability, whether in relation to people in the past or in another cultural world.'<sup>26</sup> Such challenges are not limited to the work of oral historians, though, as the work of postmodern theorists has made all historians more aware of the problems of discourse analysis.

Even discounting these recent trends in the fields of business, oral, and religious history, the secondary literature on business in Manitoba is limited at best. There are few studies of industry in Manitoba that are not corporate commissioned histories, and even fewer that are comparative social histories rather than single industry studies. The Manitoba Trucking Association, for example, commissioned the writing of *Trucking in Manitoba: A History*, which focuses on legislation and, to a lesser extent, economics and its effects on the trucking industry.<sup>27</sup> A history of market gardening in the province is a notable exception, with consideration given to Aboriginal and (im)migrant farmers and farm workers, marketing cooperatives, government legislation regulating farm workers, and international trade agreements.<sup>28</sup> Henry Klassen's *A Business History of Alberta* similarly focuses on federal and provincial government regulations, corporate structures, and biographies of entrepreneurs; there is no similar comprehensive, scholarly overview of the history of business in Manitoba.<sup>29</sup>

As for studies incorporating Mennonites, businesses and their founders have received far more scholarly attention than workers and their relations with their employers. Calvin Redekop's assertion that business is 'one of the most underrated, ignored, and misunderstood topics in Mennonite life' is no longer tenable, though it is an argument with a curious persistence, which in itself says something about class relations within the North American Mennonite community. A variety of works recount the personal histories of individual Mennonite business owners. Some are privately published memoirs.<sup>30</sup> Other works attempt to find commonalities in the experiences of Mennonite entrepreneurs in Canada and the United States.<sup>31</sup>

Economist Roy Vogt was among the first to criticize the tendency to promote triumphalist entrepreneurialism over labour history.<sup>32</sup> Vogt deplores the focus on the relationship of Mennonite entrepreneurs to their church congregations at the expense of the arguably far more

significant shop-floor relationships. 'The modern business organization is a highly inter-dependent social organism in which the dreams and aspirations of hundreds and more persons are played out. This is the community in which most entrepreneurs spend by far the largest portion of their time. What does it mean to foster community values in such a setting? This question is not even asked in these studies.'<sup>33</sup> Further, the role of the entrepreneur in the Mennonite church is open to different interpretations. When employers and employees worship in the same congregation, is this indeed evidence of employer-worker solidarity? Or does the cartoon drawn by a worker at one Mennonite business, depicting the employer praying in front of his workers with his folded hands clasped tightly around the neck of a worker, convey a more accurate truth?<sup>34</sup> Vogt warned that work in this field would remain 'suspect and parochial' unless and until academics ask more challenging questions and examine the history of Mennonites from a more critical standpoint.<sup>35</sup>

A valuable counterpoint to the entrepreneurial and business histories Vogt critiques are the very small number of works that present the oral histories of employees.<sup>36</sup> In some instances, the perspective of workers differs greatly from that of their employers with respect to labour relations and the attempted integration of religious identity and economic practice.<sup>37</sup> A few studies examine the gendered and ethnically divided labour process, noting that Mennonite religious commitments were not always sufficient to overcome shop-floor tensions.<sup>38</sup>

In addition to these rare worker histories, there are a limited number of studies in the fields of economics and sociology.<sup>39</sup> Vogt contributes one of the few explicit academic examinations of Mennonite workers with his investigation of the effects of class position on religious beliefs among North American Mennonites.<sup>40</sup> He makes use of unpublished data from the 1972 Church Membership Profile, which assessed Mennonites' degree of adherence to Anabaptist principles, pacifism, and fundamentalism; their attitudes towards ecumenism, political participation, relations with other races, and the role of women; their degree of social and religious prejudice; and their stance regarding organized labour and communism.

Vogt uses the 1972 data to compare the responses of professionals, business people, farmers, and blue-collar workers. The 1972 profile had divided the Canadian and American respondents into four socio-eco-

Table I.2. Beliefs of North American Mennonites, differentiated by class, 1972. Workers who scored 'high' on issue (%)

Type of issue	Professional	Business	Farmer	Blue collar
Anabaptism	48	34	55	48
Pacifism	45	25	34	21
Fundamentalism	18	39	52	47
Political participation	64	50	57	41
Race relations (favourable)	53	28	20	24
Social prejudice	6	24	34	24
Ecumenism	30	21	15	17
Role of women (favourable)	43	23	15	17
Religious prejudice (against Jews, Catholics)	13	26	28	24
Anti-labour	16	21	30	25
Anti-communism	12	27	25	28

*Source:* Vogt, 'Impact of Economic and Social Class,' 145.

nomic groups on the basis of their education, occupation, and income, which blurred distinctions between business people and professionals. Vogt re-examines the raw data to take into consideration such differences (see table I.2).

Four of the scales in this table require further clarification. The Anabaptism scale included questions that tested adherence to the 'Anabaptist Vision.'<sup>41</sup> The pacifism scale included questions regarding opposition to war and militarism and support of peacemaking. The fundamentalism scale questioned whether respondents believed in the virgin birth of Jesus, the Great Flood, the inerrancy of the Bible, Christ as Saviour from eternal punishment, and the literal interpretation of Genesis. The anti-labour scale investigated attitudes towards and involvement in labour unions.

The data reveals that in the 1970s North American Mennonite blue-collar workers<sup>42</sup> were more opposed to union membership than most other Mennonites. They were less committed to gender equity and pacifism and less interested in political involvement than Mennonites in other occupations. Vogt explains these responses in terms of the degree of Mennonites' involvement in the class struggle. He maintains that one of the attractions of the white-collar professions for many Mennonites

is that these occupations permit them to be commentators on, though not participants in, class struggle.<sup>43</sup> The Mennonite worker, by contrast, cannot withdraw from class struggle, and subsequently 'becomes conservative and inner-directed in his religion and selectively uses Anabaptist principles to thwart those forces in his immediate environment which most threaten him. Such principles are dropped, however, when world problems are considered.'<sup>44</sup> Vogt concludes that neither professionals nor blue-collar workers 'really [want] to be involved in urban society. The professional withdraws and then pretends that he is involved. The nonprofessional is really involved, but pretends that he isn't.'<sup>45</sup>

The historical experience of Mennonites is important in understanding their adaptation to the industrial work experience. Mennonites arrived in Manitoba from Russia in 1874 and settled south of Winnipeg on two reserves of land set aside for them by the Canadian government. Farmers constituted the first immigrant group. The arrival of more educated and urbanized Russian Mennonites in the 1920s and the decline of the small family farm resulted in Mennonites moving to Winnipeg to establish or find work in businesses, a process that accelerated dramatically after the Second World War. In 1941, 87 per cent of Canadian Mennonites lived in rural areas; by 1971, that figure had dropped to 53 per cent.<sup>46</sup> This rural-to-urban migration necessitated a re-examination and recreation of Mennonite religious identity.

Historically, Mennonites have made use of traditions, experiences, and influences external to themselves to shape their identity. Sociologist Calvin Redekop observes that persecution, pietism, humanism, nationalism, religious fundamentalism, and education all have influenced Mennonites' understanding of themselves. By the end of the twentieth century, the pace, scope, and quantity of change was so great that integration of broader cultural phenomena with Mennonite identity became difficult.<sup>47</sup>

The subsequent diversity of definitions of Mennonite identity has resulted in efforts to reduce Mennonitism to either religious or ethnic traits.<sup>48</sup> Sociologist Daphne Naomi Winland has argued that both religious and ethnic components are necessary to the definition of Mennonite identity and that the integration of these components is continually renegotiated.<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, Mennonite identity is not a static set of religious and ethnic attributes, but is historically conditioned and subject to ongoing transformation.<sup>50</sup>

This century was not the first in which Mennonites examined the interplay between their religious beliefs and their economic circumstances. From their beginnings in the sixteenth century, Mennonites have been interested in economic questions from a religious perspective. No division was made by the sixteenth-century Anabaptists between the realms of the secular and the sacred.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, for the Anabaptists, the validity of one's spiritual beliefs was revealed by their application in the material world.<sup>52</sup> A key New Testament passage was the last half of chapter 2 of the Letter of James, culminating in the words: 'faith without works is dead.'<sup>53</sup> According to Mennonite economist Roy Vogt, the influence of these early Anabaptist examinations of the connection between faith and economics lingers today in such Mennonite principles as the rejection of the use of force in labour relations, the importance of a simple lifestyle, the refusal to exploit labour, and the treatment of all property as common though such property is privately owned.<sup>54</sup> The practical operation (or absence) of these religious principles in Mennonite-owned businesses, though, has rarely been studied.<sup>55</sup>

Nor was the twentieth century the first time in which changing economic and social conditions resulted in redefinition of ethno-religious identity by Mennonites. The acculturation of Dutch Mennonites in seventeenth-century 'Golden Age' Netherlands presents some parallels to this study of twentieth-century Canadian Mennonites. With the transition to capitalism in the Low Countries, many Mennonites became wealthy business owners, merchants, and shippers. They questioned how to apply Mennonite religious principles to their business activities.<sup>56</sup> As early as 1649, Dutch Mennonites were publishing books on business ethics which critiqued capitalism and consumption.<sup>57</sup> At the same time, these writings justified capital accumulation provided that profits benefited the community rather than the individual; thus 'Mennonites could go about their businesses without guilt.'<sup>58</sup> In practice, many of these Dutch Mennonites gave generously to the poor while simultaneously indulging in conspicuous consumption. They rationalized such contradictory behaviour by convincing themselves that 'restructuring society was not on their agenda, for God had created the rich and the poor.'<sup>59</sup>

Three centuries later and a continent away, twentieth-century North American Mennonites continued the debate regarding how to reconcile their religious beliefs with the capitalist system in which they were im-

mersed. This interaction of religion and economics raises a variety of questions. How have ethno-religious groups redefined their identity in response to changing economic and social conditions? Conversely, how have they attempted to use their ethno-religious identity to shape those material circumstances themselves? Have these processes transformed the unity of ethno-religious communities over time? These are questions that can best be answered through comparative micro-histories of businesses and workforces, using an approach that acknowledges the interaction of ethno-religious identity, corporate structure, and the labour process. This book explores these questions in the context of the post-war Mennonite community in Manitoba.

Three major Canadian businesses, founded, owned, and originally staffed by Mennonites, are the geographic focus of this study. These three companies, all based in Manitoba, are Friesen Printers, Loewen Windows, and Palliser Furniture.<sup>60</sup> These companies were chosen to provide a representative sample of Mennonite manufacturing in Manitoba. All three are national leaders in their fields. In addition, they were situated in three different but well-established Mennonite communities in Manitoba.

Friesen Printers is located in Altona, a town in Manitoba's Mennonite West Reserve. One of Canada's largest printers, it had more than six hundred employees in 2003. The company was established in 1933 when David K. Friesen, a descendant of Russian Mennonite immigrants of the 1870s, bought a Gordon press. He operated this press for two years in the basement of the confectionery store of his father, David W. Friesen, and then bought a second press and rented his own building. Originally incorporated as D.W. Friesen & Sons in 1951, the business was renamed Friesens Corporation in 1995. While the company was involved briefly in publishing, in the early twenty-first century it specialized in printing full-colour art books, producing school yearbooks, and manufacturing Birks blue boxes.<sup>61</sup>

Loewen Windows was founded in 1905 by C.T. Loewen, a descendant of Russian Mennonite immigrants of the 1870s. Originally named C.T. Loewen & Sons, the business began as a lumber planing mill in Steinbach, a town in Manitoba's Mennonite East Reserve. The company began making windows in 1917. In 1972, the business was renamed Loewen Millwork, became Loewen Windows in 1985, and was christened Loewen in 2001. Loewen became Canada's largest wood window manufacturer, with more than one thousand employees in 2003.<sup>62</sup>

Palliser Furniture was founded by Abram A. DeFehr, a Russian Mennonite who immigrated to Canada via Mexico in 1924. Abram formed the A.A. DeFehr Furniture Manufacturing Company in the basement of his suburban Winnipeg home in 1944, making occasional tables and clothes-drying racks. Within two years, he had moved the operation into a factory in the same Winnipeg suburb of North Kildonan, an area heavily populated by Mennonites. Renamed Palliser Furniture, the company became Manitoba's second largest employer and Canada's largest manufacturer of wood and leather furniture. In 2003, the business employed more than five thousand workers.<sup>63</sup>

The research for this work incorporates the techniques and perspectives of labour, ethnic, gender, religious, and oral history, as well as theology. Interviews conducted with Mennonite workers as well as Mennonite business owners and managers are a major source for this study.<sup>64</sup> Oral narratives are no longer dismissed by historians as subjective, anecdotal accounts.<sup>65</sup> Historians, thanks in large part to the work of Alessandro Portelli, are aware that how an individual remembers an event is an important part of the event itself, and that individual memory is shaped by collective memory.<sup>66</sup> 'How people view their past is always grounded in their experience, but how they frame their remembrances depends on the social context.'<sup>67</sup> Thus individuals repress, reinterpret, and recall various experiences in accordance with their need to be part of a community and the community's need to create a mythic identity.<sup>68</sup> Marlene Epp, in her study of immigrant women's narratives of war and relocation, for example, observes that collective memory is particularly significant for a religious community – such as the Mennonites – that 'imbues history with religious significance and for whom, as has been said about the Jews, the memory of history is a religious duty.'<sup>69</sup> History thus is not the dry recollection of facts: it is the emotion-laden memories of historical actors.<sup>70</sup>

Interviews for this study were conducted under the auspices of the University of Manitoba's Faculty of Arts Ethics Review Committee and the University of New Brunswick's Research Ethics Board. Five interviews were conducted with workers and managers at Friesen Printers in 1995 as part of the research for a Master of Arts in history at the University of Manitoba. Thirty-one interviews were arranged with workers and managers at various Manitoba Mennonite businesses from 1996 to 1999 while I was employed as a research associate with the Winnipeg Immigration History Research Group, under the direction

of Gerald Friesen and Royden Loewen and affiliated with the Prairie Centre of Excellence for Research on Immigration and Integration (the Metropolis Project). Interviews with an additional thirty workers and managers at Loewen Windows were held in 2003 while I was a doctoral student at the University of New Brunswick.

Potential interviewees were identified primarily by use of snowball sampling. At my request, the president of Friesen Printers also provided me with the names and home phone numbers of a number of long-term employees as potential interview participants. Some interviews with employees and managers at Loewen Windows were arranged by office staff at that company. The majority of interviews were conducted in the homes of the participants; two were conducted in coffee shops, one was conducted in my own home, and the interviews arranged by Loewen were conducted in an office at the factory.

Efforts were made to interview a representative sample of workers and managers at the three firms. Key informants included (where possible) founders and owners, the first employees of the firms, as well as long-term employees. The history of these businesses meant that there was some overlap in the categories of worker and manager. In the early decades of these companies, it was not unusual for the earliest employees to migrate from shop-floor to supervisory positions. Such individuals thus were able to discuss their experiences both as workers and as managers; in some cases, they personally identified more with one role than with the other. The overwhelming majority of those contacted accepted my request for an interview, which typically lasted from one to two hours. In a few cases, follow-up interviews were conducted. Recorded interviews were taped with the participant's approval and transcribed before archival deposit; otherwise, detailed notes were written during the course of the interview.

Participants were given the choice of remaining anonymous: most participants chose to allow the use of their real name. For those who preferred to retain their anonymity, I have used pseudonyms in the text that follows. In some cases, the nature of a participant's responses to questions led to my decision to use a pseudonym despite his or her desire to be named.

An interview guide was prepared prior to contacting interviewees. Topics addressed included immigration history, settlement experiences, educational background, career aspirations, the labour process, social relations with co-workers and employers, strategies to address



job stress, ethno-religious identity, and self-determination. Participants were explicitly asked to make value judgments on their work experiences and (if they were immigrants) to compare their experiences in the host country of Canada with their country or countries of origin. The interviews were semi-structured, which allowed participants to direct the conversation to a degree, thereby permitting the introduction of questions and themes not anticipated by the researcher. Unscripted follow-up questions often were used during the course of the interview to draw out further details from an interviewee's response to a question, or to invite participants to compare their experiences against that of other (unnamed) participants.

In addition to interviews, other sources used in this study include government documents, union records, newspaper and magazine articles, private company records, letters, speeches, and company promotional material (print, videos, and websites). Scholars in the field of business history are dependent to a great extent on the good will of the businesses themselves for primary materials since these resources are generally not available in archives if the business is privately held. Most business owners are reluctant to reveal their innermost actions and transactions to the broader public. Some do not preserve the minutes, private correspondence, and other minutiae that provide a glimpse into the social history of their corporation, preferring to focus their attention on the day-to-day operations of their business. Those companies whose owners do choose to preserve these details of their past, and are willing to share them with outsiders, are therefore comparatively rare. This book has benefited from the openness and generosity of several business executives, particularly Ted and David Friesen of Friesen Printers, Charles Loewen of Loewen Windows, and Art DeFehr of Palliser Furniture.

Ted Friesen was for years the president of the Mennonite Historical Society of Canada; his interest in history has meant that an extensive range of private records have been preserved at Friesen Printers. Since conducting my research at this company, some of these documents have been deposited at the Altona Heritage Centre Archives in Altona, Manitoba. Fewer records are extant at Palliser Furniture, due to a number of plant relocations and a major fire. Private records at Loewen Windows are also limited; as a privately owned, family-run company, minutes of board meetings were not always kept in the earlier years. I was fortunate to have full access to records at both Friesen Printers and Loewen Windows and circumscribed access at Palliser Furniture.<sup>71</sup>

The argument made here is that ethnic identity and religious identity have shaped and been shaped by class relations and that the business and labour history of non-unionized Mennonites is best understood via an approach that incorporates the techniques of business history, social history of the working class, 'lived religion,' theology, and oral history. This argument is developed over six chapters.

Chapter 1 examines the definition of Mennonite religious identity by the Mennonite intellectual elite in the last half of the twentieth century. An overview of the histories and structures of the three factories central to this study in chapter 2 is followed by an examination of Mennonite corporate mythology in chapter 3. Chapter 4 is an exploration of the work experience of the Mennonite employees at these factories, including the labour process and corporate ideology within the plants. The broader North American Mennonite community's theological responses to industrial capitalism, as well as Mennonites' reactions to the election of the New Democratic Party to power for the first time in Manitoba, is examined in chapter 5. Chapter 6 addresses workers' efforts to unionize these Mennonite-owned factories and the subsequent responses of management. A brief personal epilogue gives readers insight into my own interest in this history. The conclusion posits that twentieth-century North American Mennonites, unlike E.P. Thompson's eighteenth-century British religious dissenters, have largely chosen not to use their religious tradition to either question or develop alternatives to the existing economic order.<sup>72</sup>

Historian Kenneth Lipartito asserts that business history that ignores culture 'creates an untenable abstraction of human action.'<sup>73</sup> The reconstruction of Mennonite identity within the workplace as a consequence of late twentieth century industrial and global capitalism is the focus of this book. Given its growing importance in North American Mennonite society after 1945, the industrial workplace was one of the most significant venues in which competing identity claims were contested. The interests of the Mennonite intellectual elite (academics, theologians, historians, and pastors), the Mennonite corporate elite, and the Mennonite working class were not always in accord. The consequence by the end of the twentieth century, however, was the upholding of the capitalist status quo with respect to labour relations among Manitoban Mennonites.

# 1

## The Mennonite Intellectual Elite: Yieldedness, Non-resistance, and Neighbourly Love

During the second half of the twentieth century Mennonite workers and employers in Canada alike received a simplified version of a religious identity in their churches and Bible colleges – a version promoted by the Mennonite intellectual elite. The two most significant intellectuals in this process in Canada were two non-Canadians, U.S. historian Harold S. Bender and theologian John Howard Yoder. Even though these two men had significant influence in Canadian churches and colleges, Mennonite employers in particular did not accept this ideological construction of their identity without reservation. Indeed, Mennonite employers resisted the intellectual elites' construction as put to them in the churches and colleges and strove to create an alternative Mennonite identity, one which corresponded with the ideological requirements of quite a different world, as will be seen in later chapters. The businessmen in this study countered the Mennonite intellectuals' version of Mennonite identity just as the workers seemed to accept that identity. For Mennonite workers and their employers, the workplace was filled with religious meaning.

The historical study of religion has undergone a renaissance in the last thirty years, though investigation of the intersection of labour and religion in the twentieth century remains limited. Certainly some of the credit for the transformation of the field may be placed with E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class*. Thompson's eloquent presentation of the significance of Methodism for industrializing English workers challenged the traditional Marxist rejection of