Fall 1984

The Gordon C. Eby Diaries, 1911-1913: Chronicle of a Mennonite Farmer (Book Review)

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Faced with an almost unending litany of celery planting, marketing of various crops, harvesting and butchering, a modern urban reader might become bored with the monotonous routine of rural farm life in Berlin, Ontario, as depicted in The Gordon C. Eby Diaries. Yet, interwoven in Gordon Eby's terse comments on his daily activities, appears the larger picture of the Pennsylvania German rural immigrant's slow acclimation to the progress of the early twentieth-century world. Unlike the more socially withdrawn German Mennonites of that period, Gordon was an involved member of the Berlin community and a keen observer of its changing lifestyle.

In these diary entries, which run almost daily from September 1911 to December 1913, we discover the usual rural community found in North America at the turn of the twentieth century--a traditional world of close family ties and personal interdependency. The Eby family took care of its own problems, such as the probable mental disorder of Gordon's sister, Bella. The passage of life, as that of the seasons, seemed quite regular and unbroken in Berlin. Yet, at the same time, the trappings of a more open and modernized world emerges. The local theater, long distance phones, gramaphones, electricity and even the opening of a Woolworth chain store in town foreshadow the end of rural isolation.

Clearly Eby was affected. He seldom recalls his German immigrant heritage--in fact, he is quite taken aback when he realizes that he lacks a working knowledge of German. While he is a God-fearing man, surprisingly very few religious references surface in his pages. His humorous reaction to the "shriek, groan and moan" of a Pentacostal camp meeting is a typical Mennonite remark born from a tradition which frowned upon overt religious enthusiasm. Yet, it could be the response of any individual uncomfortable with emotional outbursts. Similarly, his mention of the work of the Devil in promoting labor strikes, that he gleaned from a local theater production, sheds very little light on what Eby thought or felt about his Mennonite beliefs.

Nyce's editing of the Eby Diary is well-done and his brief introduction enlightening. His annotations, however, would be more useful if they drew more heavily on the historical underpinnings of the Mennonite tradition. Nyce, for instance, spends more time finding reasons for Eby's father lapsing into spells of drunkenness which he linked to folklore charming than trying to elaborate on the Pennsylvania German Mennonite heritage which would have been much more informative for the beginning reader. This criticism aside, James Nyce's edition of these diaries does provide a valuable contribution to the ethnic history of Ontario, adding a much-needed broader picture to studies which previously were dominated by the emphasis on the English and Scottish immigrants to this region.

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