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Review of **Oberholtzer, Beth, and John Herr. 2017. *Plain Meetinghouses: Lancaster County Old Order Mennonites Gather to Worship*. Atglen, PA: Schiffer Publishing. 232pp. Hardcover. \$34.99.**

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By Cory Anderson, *Independent Scholar*

Plain Meetinghouses is a coffee table-style book that explores the artistic angle of Lancaster County, PA's, Old Order Mennonite meetinghouse architecture, the history of these places, and the religious practices occurring therein. The accompanying text breaks no new ground in scholarship on Old Order Mennonite history and ritual but is an attractive packaging of familiar information. In addition to photos, the book contains helpful, to-the-point narrations providing socio-religious descriptions of these places, helpful because the photos contain no people at what are overtly *social* places. The book's contribution, then, is the attractive organization of information, both in photograph and in graphic design. For example, the Old Order Mennonite timeline on pp. 4-5 is easy to read and handsome, with small photos of relevant meetinghouses for each group.

Nostalgia is a default theme for popular—and too often, scholarly—interpretation of the plain people, and a photo book of Mennonite meetinghouses would invite such a default interpretation. The book's layout avoids such cheesy, dreamy framing. Similarly, the compilers astutely avoided a related worn theme, traditional people trapped in modern times, which could have been exploited by juxtaposing the meetinghouse's many traditional symbols against a few, surreal “modern” objects present therein. Such an interpretation would suggest modern objects are foreign and invading a truer essence of humanity that endures time. Again, popular and scholarly depictions milk such juxtapositions but are only thinly informative, if not actually leaving false impressions. The photographs and text given leave no sense of appropriation but rather studious appreciation. As one browses through this book of photos, one is left with the impression that these places and spaces (and the people using them) are our contemporaries and have a rich history of architectural practices informed by their religiosity.

The authors capture this realism by opting to set photos against a white, glossy page, omitting any gaudy graphical embellishments, should any have presented themselves to the project during layout. Restrained fonts communicate professionalism and contemporary treatment. In this sense, the book stands more appropriately alongside books in the visual arts, where the focus is the image, than the nostalgia-heavy plain people photo books popular among tourists and pummeled with references to bygone days, simple ways, and the threat of today. Photo selections further emphasize that these are working, vibrant places: photos of water pumps, hymnals, and hitching rails strike the viewer as functional, not nostalgic. The many photos of hardwood surfaces bring to mind the amount of polyurethane used in these buildings.

I'm glad they chose to include a photo of the benches lifted up and forward, with the front legs hinged to the floor so that they can be leaned forward against another bench. This is so the church ladies can sweep the floors without needing to sweep under the bench or having to slide the benches out of the way, a pragmatic consideration. Other descriptions of practical considerations throughout the meetinghouse show how culturally OCD plain people can be about their systems of efficiency. Then, too, the book includes a number of folk stories about the meetinghouses, which focus on humorous happenstances that partly explain, or at least jest a bit about, a peculiar practice.

The specific meetinghouses are all in Lancaster County, PA, and are mostly those of the Old Orders: the Stauffer, Reidenbach, Groffdale (Wenger), and Weaverland (Horning) groups, plus several historically related groups. The book will be of concomitantly less interest the farther one gets from interest in Lancaster County and Old Order Mennonites, although even the casual observer of plain Anabaptist people will be drawn in by the honest and straight-forward photographs and manageably sized descriptions. My sociological side wished for more interpretations rather than narration that sticks strictly to practice descriptions, historical milestones, and folk stories, although I understand the authors' decision not to venture into the analytical. The descriptions in this book are plentiful, as if an update to some of the meticulous descriptions of Old Order Mennonites by Stephen Scott from his series of books from the 1980s and 1990s.

Turning now from Old Order to Conservative Mennonite in Lancaster County, PA, the *History of the Hope Mennonite Fellowship* is, similarly, a photo book of churches. However, this book is not an artistic showcase but rather an institutional profile of the Hope Mennonite Fellowship produced by this fellowship.

Their history in brief: in 1968, the Eastern Pennsylvania Mennonite Church was established from Lancaster Mennonite Conference members who wished to hold to conservative patterns and theologies during an era when Lancaster Conference was eliminating symbols of distinction in dress, technology restrictions, and limits on leisure; Lancaster Conference is today a mainline Anabaptist group. The young Eastern Church experienced two divisions in its first years, as its members grappled with where to draw the line in conservative practice and how to organize the structure of the new group. The Mid-Atlantic Mennonite Fellowship withdrew first, the Hope Fellowship second; both represented minority positions within Eastern and were more lenient in practice than Eastern and less structured in leadership.

Today, Hope represents a position between Eastern and Mid-Atlantic. As with Mid-Atlantic, a sizeable influx of Weaverland (Old Order) Mennonites has given the churches a new character in its recent history, taking on characteristics of the progressive end of the Old Order Mennonites, albeit not so sweepingly as the Mid-Atlantic.

Hope's eight congregations and its leaders—plus a ninth congregation that disaffiliated—

plus Hope's institutions are profiled from an institutional perspective in this book; photos are mainly of the church buildings and the leaders. Churches and individuals submitted the narratives for these churches, resulting in some unevenness in quality, focus, and depth. Similar to *Plain Meetinghouses*, this book avoids wrestling with deeper questions that underlie church division and difficulties; nevertheless, the basics must be mentioned, but not much more is presented, nor is there an attempt to analyze multiple perspectives on the divisions. This, however, is not within the book's scope; *History of Hope* is not aiming to be analytical and self-reflective but tries to simply present the who-what-when of their church history. The book is an useful reference for those tracking Mennonite history in Pennsylvania and fills a gap about a smaller, often overlooked, Conservative Mennonite affiliation.