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Review of Weber, Urias. 2018. *New Beginnings: A History of the Old Order Mennonites of Ontario*. Wallenstein, ON: Vineyard Publications. Pp. 237, h/c.

By Andrew C. Martin
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Old Order Mennonites do not write many books so when they do it is worth paying attention. Urias Weber's first book makes a significant contribution by providing details of the growth and expansion of new Old Order Mennonite communities in Ontario. Urias grew up in the established Waterloo district, where pioneering Mennonites have lived since the early 1800s and Old Orders were founded in the division of 1889. However, in 1968, the young Weber family was one of several founding families to begin a new Old Order community in Mount Forest. At the time, this was a contentious and risky venture, far from the mother community (about 65kms/40 miles). The concern about new communities was probably due in part to the history of the past seven decades, when virtually all Old Order communities in Ontario had become extinct except for the flourishing Waterloo district.

Farming is the backbone of Old Order Mennonite life, and as land prices rise, finding farms for their large families becomes more and more difficult. For every family of eight children, it is ideally going to require eight new farms, which means land acquisition is always an issue. What began in the late 1960s in Mount Forest grew into a second thriving Old Order community in Ontario, which eventually had growing pains of its own. Starting in the 1990s, numerous new Old Order communities have been founded in Ontario as far away as the provinces of Manitoba and Prince Edward Island. Weber's book gives details and stories of these quests and new settlements.

As expected, Weber utilizes a distinctly Old Order, non-theoretical approach to history and is obviously writing for that audience; he does an engaging job of this. Community outsiders may be less intrigued with the details of how churches are built or who died when. Weber's style is frequently familial and genealogical, so, for example, he notes that Absalom Martin was a caretaker of the Linwood church and oversaw "Dan's Ervin's grave." Also, farms are often identified by

"x" lived on the farm on which "y" now lives. It is also primarily patriarchal; women are important, but men have greater responsibility and thus families are identified by the patriarch. This is indicative, of course, of the "old" way and simply the normal, inherited legacy for Old Orders who are rarely self-reflective about the context of their life against the backdrop of modern society.

Chapter one provides an illustrated overview of the Ontario Mennonite founders in maps and charts with names and locations, as well as maps showing Old Order residences in 1944 and 1956. The next chapter is more explanatory; it briefly notes the breakaway Old Order groups, the David Martin and the Orthodox or Elam Martin groups and the car driving Markham-Waterloo Conference. A more detailed account of these happenings can be found in Donald Martin's book, *Old Order Mennonites of Ontario*. Weber notes various difficulties and influences that have inflicted the Old Orders, including at its founding. He also gives a short description of all the Ontario Mennonite church locations up to the founding of the Old Orders.

Chapter three provides information on the local Ontario history of communities that Mennonites settled in. The author puts a personal touch on this history with stories from his family and childhood. Starting in chapter four, the rest of the book traces the expansion of new church settlements and buildings. This chapter outlines the mother settlement – Waterloo; it is subdivided by a discussion of each of the church districts. This is a folksy history with anecdotes and the occasional dry humour that helps to lighten the dry statistics of burials, building projects, and ordinations.

The Old Order settlement of Mount Forest is the subject of the longest chapter, chapter five. This, and the rest of the book, provides significant first-hand information about new Old Order communities that have not been documented elsewhere. Information is given about land acquisition, church and school buildings, deaths, marriages, and ordinations, but a significant portion of the chapter tells personal stories by the author as well as various guest contributors. The next major Old Order community established in Ontario was in Chesley, which the author had some personal involvement with along with his two brothers, Wesley and Amon. This is documented in chapter six, which is mostly a list of significant events and

does not have the same personal narrative of the previous chapter.

Chapter seven returns to some pre-Old Order history before briefly documenting some of the new, smaller Old Order settlements. The Kinloss settlement is a unique Old Order development in that they retained fellowship with the main Old Order group, but they have a separate and stricter *Ordnung* (set of rules). The last two chapters, eight and nine, introduce the new Old Order communities of Massey and Matheson in northern Ontario. The former chapter is largely a compilation of personal stories from various of the first settlers' experience of a completely foreign environment. In the last chapter, the author is again personally involved in the exploration for new land and in its settling, so while he provides all the usual information, he ends the book with numerous stories that are simple, honest, and spiced with his dry wit.

To the completely uninitiated, this book may present more questions than answers about Old Order Mennonites. As an Old Order writing for an Old Order audience, Weber does not attempt to explain the whys or hows of Old Order life and the way decisions are made but mostly reports on events. The grammar is solid, and the text is easy to read, but there are some words that may stump the ordinary reader. For example, "scholars" are elementary school children, "tables" refer to households, and there is no glossary for words like "sadirons" or German translations of *Umfrage*, *Abendmahl*, and *Erntefest*. In fact, there are no footnotes, endnotes, references, or bibliography even though there are clearly numerous pieces of borrowed information. In some cases, this information can be confusing, as when on page 55 Weber appears to borrow verbatim from an earlier report on "Wellesley Village" which claims it "is now almost exclusively German speaking." This may have been true in the eighteenth or early nineteenth century but clearly not today.

The stories and personal accounts of events make this a worthwhile read for anyone with a basic interest in Old Order Mennonites. A major portion of the over-200 pages is narrative, but details of deaths, marriages, ordinations, and family connections will be of less interest to those who are not part of this community. Researchers of Old Order Mennonites will find information here not found elsewhere, but depending on the area of

study, such as my own interest in spiritual theology, there is not a lot of new or relevant content. Sociologists may find more, given the numerous details of daily life, but for those studying the growth, migration, and settlement of new Old Order communities, this is a must read.

Given the scarcity of books written by Old Order Mennonites, we can only hope that Weber and his Old Order Mennonite publisher will continue to write and produce books which provide us more details and insights into this vibrant, growing faith community.

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