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Review of *Reflections on Old Order German Sects in Berks County: Past, Present and Future*—Owen Reitenauer, et al. (eds.)

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Berks County with its diamond-shaped area of 864 square miles located in southeastern Pennsylvania is rich in history and scenic resources. Its mild climate, fertile soil, and the Schuylkill River attracted European settlers in the beginning of the eighteenth century. Looking at a map of the county and reading the names of towns such as Hamburg, Womelsdorf, Rehrersburg, and New Berlinville, the German origin of these immigrants is easy to identify. In fact, Berks County is known as part of Pennsylvania Dutch Country, with Mennonites having settled this land as early as 1717. The county is also home to the first known Amish congregation in America, established sometime between 1736-38 along Tulpehocken Creek, and to numerous other Old Order Germans, less “plain” Moravians, Mennonites, and mainstream Protestant Pennsylvania Germans. These German immigrants have put their stamp on all facets of religious, economic, and cultural life of the area, creating a rich heritage and diversity of denominations that is explored by the eleven contributors of the book entitled *Reflections on Old Order German Sects in Berks County*.

The publication marks a collaborative effort between Penn State Berks and the local community. In the fall semester of 2011, a dozen of the college’s Global Studies and Communications students conducted research on Amish and other Old Order communities in the county. They were also involved in physical work at the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead, roughly one mile from campus, and detailed their research on various aspects of community life and piety in essays and term papers. In 2013 the college sent another group of students to the Stoltzfus site to conduct archaeological digs and prepare the text of placards for museum exhibits. These work-study initiatives built a relationship between students and local Old Order communities that bore fruit both in restoration of the homestead and in a compilation of writings collected in this book.

Research papers and additional writings from members of the religious communities were brought together and edited by students and faculty. The contributions—essays and personal accounts—vary in style, reflecting the many individuals involved in this joint project. Apart from outlining the college-community collaboration through text and pictures that capture students’ on-site work, the introduction provides a short discussion of relevant terms such as Plain People vs. Fancy Dutch, Pennsylvania Germans vs. German-Americans, and basic information about German as a language and its presence in North America. The brevity of these explanations and simple distinctions suggest a more general approach to the subject matter. This approach becomes even more noticeable in the first chapter’s broad overview of European history from the Roman Era to the nineteenth century Franco-Prussian War, leaving the readers wondering what the invasion of North Africa by the Vandals in the fifth century has to do with eighteenth century Anabaptist and Pietist migration to America. To be sure, the text is sprinkled with some interesting facts such as St. Boniface’s initiation of the Christmas tree tradition; however, a greater focus on pre-and post-Reformation Europe would perhaps better guide the readers’ understanding of Berks County’s wide spectrum of German religious groups.

The description of developments in the “Old World” is followed by five short chapters on the various groups, their histories, tenets of faith, practices, and missionary work. Zachary Stoltzfus, Penn State student and descendant of early Amish settlers, links the migration of Old Order groups with the religious ideal of striving for a perfect place. In his research essay, he presents the Anabaptist history of persecution, dispersion, and settlements in America. He also lists the various Old Order Mennonite and Amish groups in Berks Co. and details Nicholas Stoltzfus’ biography. In the chapter on the Moravian Church, the Rev. Ron Rice gives a brief account of Jan Hus, his followers, and their refuge at the estate of Count Zinzendorf in Saxony. He also highlights the church’s beliefs, practices, and eighteenth century missionary work among Native Americans. For the chapter on the Schwenkfelders, Penn State student Michal Komemi interviewed two members of the faith community to learn about the group’s history and original beliefs. In the chap-

ter “Brethren,” Randall Fegley, a political historian at Penn State Berks, offers an introduction to Pietism, with emphasis on the history, theology, and structure of the German Baptist Brethren and the Brethren in Christ. Smaller Pietist groups with a former presence in Pennsylvania, e.g. Hermits of the Wissahickon, Community of True Inspiration, and Conrad Beissel’s semi-monastic community in Ephrata, are briefly mentioned. In the chapter “War and Peace,” students Collin Haas and Samantha Kerling examine Pennsylvania German influence—both as pacifists and participants—in warfare at home and overseas.

The last four chapters of the book pertain to the contemporary situation of Amish in Pennsylvania, their traditions, limited interactions with the outside world, and decline of early communities. In his research essay, the student Owen Reitenauer discusses Amish resilience to modernization and cultural change. Sam Stoltzfus, an Amish carpenter and historian, vividly describes the barn raising at the Stoltzfus site. Global Studies major Erin Wade addresses the historical development of the Amish quilt, choices of fabric and patterns, and the economic importance of this textile tradition. Jennifer Screvane, Penn State student, explains the decline of early Amish communities and the current situation of Amish families in Berks County.

Each chapter is unique in its approach and structure. The entire collection of writings is special as it presents actual student work and accounts from community members. The title of the book, however, is misleading. Those who expect thorough and geographically specific research on the county’s Old Order communities will be somewhat disappointed. Some chapters provide general information about the religious groups that is easily accessible in other publications and does not relate to the particular locale. Reitenauer’s essay on Amish and modernization appears much like a summary of Donald Kraybill’s 1980s and 1990s oeuvre on Amish culture and struggles with modernity. Neither does the chapter address issues that Amish encounter in the twenty-first century nor does it relate to the current or past situation of Amish in Berks County. Perhaps even more confounding is the content of the war and peace chapter, which is introduced as a description of the difficulties faced by pacifist Old Order groups during times of war. Although the chapter starts out with the Hochstetler Massacre, which is narrated in two

other chapters of the book, the essay then shifts to the portrayal of a few Revolutionary War heroes from Pennsylvania, e.g. Bartholomew von Heer, an immigrant with previous military experience in Germany, and Joseph Hiester, a Reading-born politician who raised a militia with which he took part in the battle of Long Island. Both examples, as interesting as they may be to military historians, seem out of place in a chapter claiming to discuss pacifist Old Order communities.

Discrepancies are also apparent in form and language. Fegley, a Penn State professor serving as faculty advisor of this Global Studies project, has contributed one third of the book without appearing on the list of authors. Although his texts are well written, it becomes noticeable that—as an expert on African politics—he is less familiar with the intricate elements of Anabaptist and Pietist history. Moving beyond his field of expertise with this publication on German religious groups and migrations, some consultation with a German language specialist would have been beneficial, as his and other texts lack precision in German spelling and inflection. More careful editing is also needed in some of the bibliographical information.

Despite inconsistencies with regard to content and form, the project’s intention is commendable. The book documents a concerted effort of students and faculty to engage with the community and share their findings with a larger audience. The initiative promotes diversity on multiple levels: it portrays the heterogeneity of Berks County’s religious landscape and it enables a religiously and racially diverse group of students to interact with Old Order communities. The task of writing and editing essays allows these students to take ownership of their learning and to bring visibility to their research achievements. The publication is an inspiration for educators and students alike to share their course and fieldwork with interested readers. Although *Reflections on Old Order German Sects in Berks County* is not a significant sourcebook for historians or sociologists, it offers introductory information for first-time visitors to the Nicholas Stoltzfus Homestead and brings together community and college to record aspects of the ethnic-religious heritage of the area.

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