

Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies

Volume 4
Issue 2 *Special section: Old Colony Mennonites*

Article 10

2016

Review of Loudon, Mark. 2016. *Pennsylvania Dutch: The Story of an American Language*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 473.

Steve Hartman Keiser

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ideaexchange.uakron.edu/amishstudies>



Part of the [German Language and Literature Commons](#)

Please take a moment to share how this work helps you [through this survey](#). Your feedback will be important as we plan further development of our repository.

Recommended Citation

Keiser, Steve Hartman. 2016. "Review of Loudon, Mark. 2016. *Pennsylvania Dutch: The Story of an American Language*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 473." *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* 4(2):222-27.

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by IdeaExchange@Uakron, the institutional repository of The University of Akron in Akron, Ohio, USA. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Amish and Plain Anabaptist Studies* by an authorized administrator of IdeaExchange@Uakron. For more information, please contact mjon@uakron.edu, uapress@uakron.edu.

helpfully peaceful role, during the formation of the EPMC, of such bishops as David Thomas and Raymond Charles of the Lancaster Conference, and Homer Bomberger and Isaac Sensenig among those withdrawing. (3) There is due recognition of and appreciation for the remarkableness of the Lancaster Conference's "amiable" release, which did not replicate the bitterness of former divisions. (4) There is acceptance of what happened as a divine gift to "a remnant": an opportunity for restoration and reversing the process of change by regaining "lost ground." (5) There is interesting explanation of why the emerging group, though its ordained and lay members confer on matters of faith, does not consider itself as a "conference."

Questions arising in a reader's mind include such as: (1) What issues produced some early division in the 1970s? (2) What illustrations might back up the assertion that separation and nonconformity do not hinder the witness of the church? (3) How did the withdrawal relate to the continuing evangelistic mission of the fellowship? Since the planners of this project decided to deal with the founding rather than the full history of the EPMC (certainly a defensible choice), perhaps these are issues for another book.

I would have also been helped by a chronology based on the data given in the text.

Certainly, had the story as here carefully presented been available two decades earlier, it would have enriched and more accurately focused its place in the larger *The Earth is the Lord's*. The further perspective of years during which I have observed a growing respect for the consistency of the EPMC witness, the experience of informal cooperation on historical projects, and now this book, have all confirmed for me the valuable function of shared historical insight in our too-often fractured Christian life.

Review of Loudon, Mark. 2016. *Pennsylvania Dutch: The Story of an American Language*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pp. 473.

By Steve Hartman Keiser, *Marquette University*

The title of this book neatly captures the arc of its narrative: Pennsylvania Dutch is a language—not "just a dialect." Those who speak it—though popularly perceived as peculiar—are thoroughly American; and the tale of how this language was birthed, bloomed, faded, and yet thrives into the 21st century is well worth the telling. And in this telling, Loudon succeeds in linking the lively present and future of Dutch among the plain people with its rich and revealing history among the non-plain Dutch people of Pennsylvania.

The book is structured in six chapters of approximately sixty pages each, plus a short concluding seventh chapter.

Chapter one provides an overview of the language and its name. Loudon describes the historic connections to continental German dialects of the Palatinate, while also noting the clear

differences that demonstrate that the language has developed quite independent of its origins: “Pennsylvania Dutch and Palatinate German are at least as different from one another as, say, Norwegian is from Swedish” (18). The use of the term “Pennsylvania Dutch” is grounded both in the 18th century folk equivalence of “Dutch” with “German” and “in the usage of the majority of the speakers themselves, especially those residing in Pennsylvania” (9).

Louden’s concise description of the sounds, sentence structure, and vocabulary of the language also provides ample evidence against the charge of the corrupting influence of English. On the contrary, Loudon notes that English words often enrich the vocabulary of Pennsylvania Dutch by focusing on particular meanings, e.g., the English borrowing *ebaut* (“about”) is used only for the meaning “approximately,” and the older Pennsylvania Dutch word *ungfaehr* which previously meant both “approximately” and “by chance” is now used only to mean “by chance” (30)—arguably, a gain in clarity and economy for the language.

Also highlighting the first chapter are an 1819 newspaper posting about a lost horse that may be the earliest example of written Pennsylvania Dutch, and evidence that some people of non-German ethnicities (including African-Americans, Romani, and Irish) living in Pennsylvania in the 19th and early 20th centuries spoke the language. Finally, the loss of the language among non-sectarians is put into perspective alongside the similar loss of heritage languages among nearly all immigrants to the United States—and indeed globally among small, rural, minority populations as a result of urbanization and industrialization.

Chapter two covers the early history of the language until 1800—a time when one critic humorously labeled it “no language at all. It is not English, and it will never be German” (96), even as another observer first grants it the title “Pennsylvanishcen Deutschen dialect” in 1784. Loudon notes that not only was there a great deal of interaction between sectarians and non-sectarians during this time when the language was born, but that they shared (and continue to share) a conservative worldview founded on “religion, and agrarian mores” (72). The theme of commonality among Pennsylvania Dutch speakers is woven throughout the book; later, in the following chapter, the moralizing, nostalgic tone of Pennsylvania Dutch poetry written by non-sectarians is linked to skepticism about progress, which is a sentiment that Old Order speakers certainly share. At the same time, many of these poems also illustrate a strong sense of patriotism and political activism among non-sectarians which clearly distinguish them from plain people. Loudon helpfully connects these traits to Nolt’s concept of “peasant republicanism,” which then serves as background for the lively debates about Jacksonian Democratic politics among the 19th century Pennsylvania Dutch.

This is one of the fascinating pleasures of the book as a whole: as we learn about the development of the language, we are also learning about the culture and history of the people who spoke (and occasionally wrote) it. One additional memorable example is the Pennsylvania Dutch speaking ordinary-Joe character Stoffel Ehrlich (“honest dullard”), used by newspaper writers to poke fun at fancy German-Americans and Yankees. For example, “Stoffel compares

lawyers to wagon wheels, stating that both have to be ‘greased’ (*geschmiert*), a clever pun, since the verb...also means ‘to bribe’ in both German and Pennsylvania Dutch” (105). Thus the language already has become a “marker of positive virtues such as honesty, humility, and conservatism, leavened with a healthy dose of folksy humor” (118).

In the third chapter, Loudon clears up two common myths: the “Muhlenberg legend” that German was nearly declared the official language of the United States (it wasn’t, though there was a committee level vote in 1794 on whether to consider a request by a county in Virginia to print laws in German), and the misconception that Swabian German is the source from which Pennsylvania German descends (it isn’t, though 19th century German-American newspapers printed a lot of Swabian dialect material). Also explained is how the language and its small number of speakers—fewer than one-hundred thousand—remained independent of the nearly six million German-speaking immigrants during the 1800s, the *Deitschlenner*.

Even as the language was thriving in the mid-19th century—Louden uses several examples of translations of the Declaration of Independence to illustrate changes in the formal written Pennsylvania High German—there is also evidence of widespread bilingualism and a shift toward literacy in English. The possibility that their children are not “keeping Dutch” raises two concerns among the non-sectarians: they are becoming “citified” (which Loudon humorously paraphrases “rural parents, don’t let your sons grow up to be gentlemen”) and they are becoming indifferent to religion (in this case the Lutheran or Reformed traditions). These concerns and others, both personal and political, are penned in poems, columns, and personal letters, all of which provide a “fascinating window on early Pennsylvania Dutch culture, including the place of language in it” (160).

In chapter four, Loudon profiles several prominent 19th century figures in Pennsylvania Dutch literature. Henry Harbaugh is noted as the prolific author of the famous poem “Das alt Schulhaus an der Krick”. In Edward Rauch, who in 1879 published the primer *Pennsylvania Dutch Hand-Book*, Loudon seems to find a special kinship. For one, Rauch is “adamant about identifying his native tongue as Pennsylvania Dutch” (as opposed to German), saying “We like it because it is emphatic, simple, and expressive, and everybody knows just what it means” (206). Rauch’s first-ever dictionary of the language includes sample sentences that demonstrate his “Dutch first” attitude, e.g., *De Deitshe ouslender sin goot om hoch Deitsh, awer Penn. Deitsh missa se larna*, “The German foreigners are good with High German, but they must learn Pennsylvania Dutch” (211). Abraham Reeser Horne is also notable for his 1875 *Pennsylvania German Manual*, which set forth the progressive educational idea that “teachers of Pennsylvania Dutch-speaking students should...take their knowledge of their native language as a starting point from which acquisition of English might proceed” (225). Loudon is astute in pointing out the irony that, in stark contrast to the blue-collar agrarian identity of Pennsylvania Dutch language and culture, all of these important figures in the history of the language were highly educated white-collar professionals (201).

In chapter five, the story of the language enters the 20th century when Pennsylvania Dutch and its speakers entered the public eye during the world wars and as Dutch country became a tourist destination. Though in decline, Pennsylvania Dutch was still widely used even in cities, as Loudon demonstrates by noting its use in a murder case in an Allentown court in 1903. Loudon effectively dismisses the myth that World War I began the decline of the language among nonsectarians—the evidence in previous chapters clearly shows that the shift to English was well underway in the 1800s. He also critically analyzes the (mis)representation of Pennsylvania Dutch in novels, stage performances, and commercial trinkets—the latter of which Alfred Shoemaker in 1955 labeled “Tourist Dutch, a much distorted Pennsylvania Dutch English which was invented in the past ten to fifteen years to make ‘Amish Stuff’ more palatable to the tourist-buying public” (274). Finally, the Grundsow (Groundhog) Lodge, founded in the 1930s, is noted as a site for the celebration of Pennsylvania Dutch language and culture.

In chapter six, “Pennsylvania Dutch and the Amish and Mennonites,” Loudon’s deep knowledge about the language and its speakers shines through. He adroitly describes both the changes that have taken place that have produced two recognizable dialects—“Eastern” and “Western”—among the plain people, as well as the continued commitment to the language as part of the lived out faith which values *demut* (“humility”), and for which a “low” status, unstandardized language like Pennsylvania Dutch is perfectly matched. What is more, he provides insight into the daily intimate language practices of sectarians such as the connection between understatement and honesty, the use of English-flavored speech when addressing infants and toddlers, and interactions between young Amish teachers and *Plautdietsch*-speaking Old Colony Mennonites in Mexico.

Finally, in the brief concluding chapter “An American Story,” Loudon offers an expansive take on the past and future of the language. He notes that “the sociolinguistic wonder” that is Pennsylvania Dutch did not become so by remaining static in contact with American society and the English language. “Hybridity is not a symptom of cultural impurity but rather a sign of the adaptability of a cultural group to changing circumstances, which in turn promotes survival” (359). He makes fascinating connections with other faith groups who speak an uprooted, dual-language Germanic variety: Old Colony Mennonites, Hutterites, and Ultra-Orthodox Jews. These people take their portable communities across the country and indeed around the globe. When asked where their language is spoken, Loudon concludes: “he or she will say, ‘everywhere our people live’. Just as God accompanies God’s people wherever they may go...” (369).

For the 80 years in which modern academic study of the Pennsylvania Dutch language has been conducted, it has been dominated by research with narrow focuses on particular communities, genres, or time periods. In particular, the focus has been either on sectarian or nonsectarian communities—but not both—or, at best, narrow comparisons of the two communities with respect to particular linguistic features and accessible only to linguists. This book is the first attempt at researching and synthesizing the historical, cultural, and linguistic development of Pennsylvania Dutch across all the communities that speak it. It is a bold and

broad goal. I'm happy to say that Louden has set the highest standard for any subsequent attempts.

One of the few possible downsides to a book of such comprehensive scope is length. The book is a fascinating read, but not one to race through. Louden's meticulous research is extensively footnoted, and scrupulously accurate. For example, he compares three editions of Horne's *Pennsylvania German Manual* and discovers one paragraph on pronunciation that is omitted in later versions, possible evidence of a change in the author's pedagogical views.

Although the book is organized by historical periods, it is not strictly speaking chronological in the narrative. In a few instances, a person, poem, or event is mentioned again several chapters later, which may require the reader to turn to the extensive index to find the first mention.

The chapters are, to a certain extent, self-contained. If one were so inclined, it would be possible to read chapters 1, 6, and 7 to focus primarily on the language among the plain people. But to do so would also be to miss the larger point of the narrative: that the plain people, like their non-sectarian neighbors, are Americans, shaped by the culture and politics of this land.

Louden's linguistic descriptions are by and large made easily accessible to the lay reader, though the table of vowel comparisons in the first chapter will undoubtedly overwhelm many. Louden makes a number of distinctions in the development of the language: Denglish, Dutchified German, Early Pennsylvania Dutch, etc. that may pose a challenge as well. But technical analyses take a rightful back seat to actual examples of the language in living use in poems, letters, conversations, and letters to the editor.

There are only a few minor points on which one could question the content. The footnote on the Berne, Indiana, Amish community describes it as a "southern Indiana town." It is not clear why the counties of Bucks and Montgomery are not included in the map of the "Heartland of the Pennsylvania Dutch Country" on page 66, when numerous references to these counties appear throughout the book and in works such as Seifert's dialect study.

But the flaws are few and barely noticeable when set in the scope of such a compelling narrative.

Louden is just the scholar to tell this tale. Over the course of three decades of research on Pennsylvania Dutch he has developed an extensive network among academics in both Germanic linguistics and plain Anabaptist studies as well as a remarkably broad network of ordinary speakers, primarily among the plain people. As a result, his descriptions of the language are detailed and accurate, and his discussions of its speakers, their communities, histories, and beliefs are insightful, genuine, and respectful.

The strength of the book is in the synthesis of Loudon's new and thorough research on the history of the language among non-sectarians with his encyclopedic and personal knowledge of the language among the plain people. It is wonderful story to follow from 1683 to the present.