

P. M. Friesen: the Historian

by Abraham Friesen

We Mennonites have often expressed our thinly veiled contempt for the scholar's profession in more subtle ways than did the area administrative officer who, on the occasion P. M. Friesen received the commission to write his history, remarked: "That is a nice piece of work exactly suited for Friesen. But he will also earn handsomely from it, for he will complete it in fourteen days!" The officer's obvious implication was that scholars do not really work; at the same time, they are vastly overpaid for whatever it is they do. We have come a long way since then, however, for when J. A. Toews was recently commissioned to write his history of the Mennonite Brethren Church, the Board of Christian Literature magnanimously gave him a full year! P. M. Friesen (and I really do not think that the P. M. had anything to do with the delay!) recalled the remark of the area administrative officer some twenty-five years later in the introduction to his history when that magnum opus finally rolled off the press and he was preparing to meet his ~~maker~~ Maker. Although Friesen was modest enough at the time not to believe that he could accomplish the task in fourteen days, he did not think it would take him twenty-five years. What had happened? Why the delay? And what about the finished product?

Friesen's most immediate problem seems to have been the fact that he was writing Zeitgeschichte. This confronted him with an apparent dilemma he described as follows in his introduction:

. . . I visited many 'old folks,' loving uncles and brothers. They contradicted one another: one said this, another that.

They contradicted themselves: they narrated things differently than they were given in the minutes of meetings they had themselves signed, differently than their own letters and 'reports' (given to me by themselves or through the Rueckenau Church Council). In a period of ten-to-twenty-five years (indeed, in one-to-five years!) traditions regarding these events had developed in rural areas which interpreted the events the way they wished them to have happened! And they were quite honest in all this. Nor was there any difference between those belonging to the Mennonite Church or the 'brethren' in this regard. Under these circumstances it was not easy to write in opposition to the 'common brother' /who had suggested that P. M. Friesen should prove 'them' wrong and 'us' right/ and in line with father Reimer's principle of truth. Emotions and historical conscience came into severe conflict. Time and again I listened to dozens of honorable men and women from the various factions and read and reread their documents — and a great sorrow overcame me! I could not possibly present loving old men of this or that faction in all their nakedness in a cold-blooded fashion during their lifetime, a nakedness of which they had themselves been unaware. Indeed, as I shall elaborate below in the delineation of my historical procedure, it became very difficult for me to treat men from the fellowship, who had already been in their graves for fifty years, in a truthful historical fashion: all of them have left a circle of admirers behind who see them in the light of a pious tradition. Their children and grandchildren live in our midst. To write contemporary history is a difficult task for one's psyche!

To avoid being forced to take hold of one or the other ~~of the~~ horns of this dilemma (i. e., either be dishonest or cold-bloodedly lay bare the truth), Friesen turned to the task of organizing the materials he possessed into a kind of documentary chronicle of events. When this was accomplished, he left Halbstadt, moving to the Kuban, Odessa, and Sevastopol, collecting and organizing his materials on the way. Eight years in Odessa and thirteen in Sevastopol were spent in this manner. Whereas the material at first oppressed him, as he proceeded one gets the impression that it began to overwhelm him. As any historian knows, the easiest part of his task is the collection of material; the difficult part is its digestion. The temptation to go on collecting interminably is vividly brought to mind by the story,

contained in the obituary column of an Eastern newspaper some years ago, reporting the death of a college professor who had been killed in an aeroplane crash on one of his many research trips — gathering material for his doctoral dissertation some twenty-five years after having completed his residency requirements. To a certain degree, F. M. Friesen fell prey to this temptation as a way to escape the troubling task of destroying pious traditions while, as he put it in another place, "the graves were not old enough to be opened calmly and in cold blood" (page 201). He could not bring himself to unmask the idealized version of history — on both sides of the quarrel — and lay bare the less than flattering reality. And so he sought solace in gathering and organizing his massive materials. Some have called this providential since it resulted in the vast amount of source material contained both in the documentary supplements, as well as in his own narrative sections. Being a mere profane historian, I cannot presume to know about such things. But I do know that as a well-integrated, comprehensive history, Friesen's study suffers as a result.

The original material collected by Friesen is contained especially in those chapters beginning with Section D, the section on the origins of the M. B. Church in Russia. The earlier sections, especially those dealing with general Mennonite history prior to the emigration to Russia, rely largely on secondary sources. But they manifest some of the same characteristics of the subsequent chapters. Rather than digesting his material, Friesen begins this first part with extensive quotations on the origin of the Anabaptist movement from Reilswitz and Wadzeck's Beitraege zur Kenntnis der Mennoniten-Gemeinden in Europa und Amerika, which he follows with Menno Simons' "Withdrawal from the Catholic Church" and excerpts from some of his other writings. From

Menno he moves to Johannes Deknatel and The Martyrs Mirror. The same is true of many of the later parts. The kind of history this leads to is graphically illustrated in Friesen's own introductory words to the chapter on "The Spiritual Character of the Churches and Clergy" at the end of the book: ". . . we want to try to describe the spiritual character and development of the churches and their ministers in the important period from 1860 to 1910 by presenting a few biographies and discourses, as well as other accomplishments of the ministers" (pp. 928-929). The same can be said of the chapter on missions, as the one on intellectual and cultural matters. Consequently, we have a series of vignettes, sermons, anecdotes, but not a comprehensive, synthetic interpretation of the subjects.

Whereas much of the earlier material comes from secondary sources, much of the material for the second half of the book comes from reports sent in to Friesen by various people. And very little of either is critically evaluated. In the section from about page 200 to 500, however, we have the meat and potatoes — the documents Friesen collected, largely relating to the schism of 1860. Whereas he "freely" uses many of the reports sent in to him, as he quite candidly admits — for example: "freely adapted from Brother Heinrich Epp's 'Reports' and the author's personal recollections" — we become a little more concerned when Friesen does this in the very heart of his book, as he does on occasion. A case in point is his remark on page 280: "This church [Kronsweide] had a unique and independent historical development which we will present according to the careful 'accounts' of Brother Heinrich Epp, Andreasfeld, which he wrote for the above-mentioned 'History of the Mennonite Brethren Church' of

January 6, 1885. We will use letters and notes written by the brethren: Elder Abram Unger and Elder Aron Lepp. (We abbreviate freely without indicating omissions.)" So we cannot really rely on the fact that Friesen has always given us the material in as pure a form as possible. And does he always tell us when he has "abbreviated freely without indicating omissions?" Even where he does use quotation marks and we can assume that he has given us a verbatim rendering, we must ask ourselves: has he left anything out? And if so, why? Furthermore, on what basis did he select the material he has included? What were the questions he asked of the documents when he made his selections? For perhaps, just perhaps, what Friesen has left out might now — as the result of a different set of questions, a different perspective on the part of the historian — appear as important as what he has incorporated. That Friesen asked many of the same questions of his evidence we would today goes without saying. And yet the evidence he incorporated is the direct result of his interests, not necessarily ours. For as the result of the passage of time we have not only gained a somewhat different perspective on those events — which is virtually inevitable — but the interests of the historian himself has broadened incredibly over the last thirty or so years. And so we have reason to temper our elation somewhat over the amount of original material contained in Friesen's history. Perhaps providence was not quite as providential in this instance as some have thought.

One of the reasons why Friesen presents so much of the original material is obviously to allow it to speak for him in dealing with an issue that appears to him — for reasons given earlier — too hot to handle. The other reason is that he regards this kind of evidence

as nearly impossible to misinterpret. In the introductory remarks to the section dealing with the schism, he makes the following observation:

. . . The mass of material available for an 'inner' history both with regard to its light and dark aspects, is so surprisingly large that few of the contemporaries, who participated in and partially brought about these events, would believe it. A great number of letters, documents, diaries, 'reports,' 'memoirs,' etc. are available. The collection of letters (the ones he received as well as his own) left behind by Johann Claassen of Liebenau, who died in the Kuban, is especially rich. These letters — as accurate as photographs — of persons who, differing in their persuasions, were involved in the brethren movement, characterize that movement better than even the official documents . . . (pp. 201-202).

The phrase that strikes the historian is: "These letters — as accurate as photographs — ." Now, it is quite true that the original sources are the best evidence, as the Renaissance scholars repeatedly informed their contemporaries. But written documents are never "as accurate as photographs." Irwin Panofsky has observed that until Leonardo da Vinci began to study and depict the human anatomy in his drawings through the newly-discovered art of perspective, medical techniques were lost with the practitioner when he died, even though he may have left a detailed written description behind. With regard to the interpretation of these documents, then, it appears to me that Friesen was overly sanguine. And he himself should have known this, for with regard to the interpretation of the essence of Mennonitism, he complained; "We have seen how infinitely variably — to the point of grotesque, mutually exclusive contradictions — sincere, believing, respected, well-educated Mennonite authorities — widely-read men — who think deeply, can define the essence of Mennonitism." (p. 311).

Along the same line, another somewhat disconcerting practice of Friesen is his penchant for attempting, on occasion, to resolve conflicting evidence by merely presenting both — or more — sides of an issue. In the section dealing with baptism, after delineating his own view in extenso, he remarks: "One should also hear the other side! Remaining true to this principle even in this matter is made possible through a letter . . . from Isaak Peters of America, a vehement opponent of baptism by immersion and . . . one of our foremost authorities on old Mennonite literature . . ." (p. 305). Now, this is a laudable principle to follow in historical scholarship, but the historian's obligation goes beyond simply presenting opposing positions. Like the jury — and ultimately the judge — he must evaluate the conflicting evidence, the arguments of the opposing lawyers, and arrive at some conclusion. It is at this juncture that his true task first begins, for, surely, truth does not lie at the opposite poles of an argument; nor, on the other hand, does it necessarily lie somewhere in between, as some historians, who have not done their homework, would have us believe. And even though 'however' or 'on the other hand' are favorite catchwords of the historical profession, the historian has an obligation to assess the veracity of the witness, determine the position from which he is speaking, and thus arrive at an evaluation of the evidence itself. This kind of analysis of the historical evidence is largely absent in Friesen — with notable exceptions where he is sure of himself, i.e., those parts of his book which treat the 1860 schism. There his judgments are balanced, his insights astute, and his perception by and large unerring.

Friesen himself recognized many of the shortcomings of his book. In his concluding chapter he wrote: "What we have written in the last sections of the book (indeed, in a large part of the book) is not 'history'; it is a statement of the subjective viewpoints of a contemporary; it is made up of 'chronicles' and 'memoirs' which will have to await the objective analysis of future historians. ✓

Nevertheless, the contemporary who reads these accounts will react to them according to his personal understanding or according to his sympathies or antipathies. Here, too, we desired to allow 'both sides' to speak." (p. 978). It is our contention that Friesen could have done more in this regard to help his reader. For not only had he spent twenty-five years with the material, he was perhaps more eminently qualified to make the judgments he tried to avoid than anyone may ever be.

But I do not think we can let him off the hook even at this point. Had Friesen faced his responsibility as a historian immediately and had he set to work laying bare the "loving old men of this or that faction in all their nakedness in a cold-blooded fashion during their lifetime," he could have avoided many of his other organizational and procedural problems. Indeed, I believe the historian must insist that it is the obligation of every historian seriously interested in truth to do what Friesen postponed doing. Should we allow people to delude themselves, even if they do so piously? Do we not have an obligation to unmask even the most pious frauds of which we are all guilty? Why wait to do this until the guilty parties are in their graves? Just because people will react to rather than learn from such unmasking and condemn the historian — as Friesen was to learn after his book

was published — does not excuse one from fulfilling his duty.

I think we need to ask ourselves the same question: Erasmus asked Martin Dorp when the theologians of his day objected to his edition of the Greek New Testament: "Who is more indulgent to error, he asked, the one who corrects and restores the mistakes, or the one who would sooner see a blunder added than removed, especially since it is in the nature of mistakes that one causes another?" Surely it is better that we be made to face the truth about ourselves by the historian, no matter how painful that may be, than that we be allowed to go to our graves having glossed over or piously reinterpreted our mistakes. After all, it is not only the historian who calls us to such an honest evaluation of our past; it is above all Christ Himself who does so.

But on to the interpretive frame of reference of Friesen's study. One of the major components of this frame of reference is his ability to transcend narrow, confessional perspectives. To a certain degree, this characteristic undoubtedly derives from his "Alliance" leanings; to a certain extent it is based on his conviction that all human perception is relative, even theological perceptions and formulations. The former is illustrated in the following reference to the influence of the Moravian Brethren on the Russian Mennonites: "We have all benefited from these blessings and thank God for this advance against 'confessional self-consciousness' by those dear old people of the Neumark! It was really an emerging awareness of the Una Sancta, 'the one holy universal Christian Church, the fellowship of the saints.'" (p. 101). The second appears on the last page of his book. Referring to outstanding Christians from the Catholic, the mainline Protestant as well as from the Believers' Churches, he observed: "Who of us would wish to deny that this or that member of this group

of men was not sent by God to carry out His work of salvation in a time of darkness?! 'Moreover it is required of stewards that they be found trustworthy' (according to the gifts and understanding granted them). Everything that has been considered 'right' and 'perfect' with regard to these questions has, until now, always proven itself to have been only 'relative.'" Since Friesen views the factions from the perspective of the Una Sancta — that is, from a higher truth — he is forced to the conclusion that human 'truth' is largely factional 'truth' and hence always only relative.

The second of the basic pillars of Friesen's interpretive frame of reference came to him via Jakob Reimer of Felsental. As Friesen put it: "As he turned some important documents over to me with his blessing, he said: 'Write truth, the good and the bad, as the Bible did concerning David!'" (p. 2). The choice of models could not have been better, for as A. T. Olmstead has written about the author of that history:

His complete objectivity is uncanny. David is, to be sure, his hero and we realize why he stole the hearts of all with his winning ways, but he paints David's weaknesses as unsparingly, the banditry of his early life, his repeated lies, his flight to the enemy of his people, his forgetfulness that Michael had saved his life, his intrigue with Bathsheba and its terrible consequences in his family, his degeneration through success and luxury. The other members of the court, even the Zadok who supplanted Abiathar as chief priest, are treated with equal objectivity. Whether Abiathar or not, he is our first great historian.

And it became Friesen's concern to write truth — the good and the bad. In pursuit of that goal he was concerned to allow all sides to speak.

Whether Friesen was led to the Alliance movement through his historical studies — which seems eminently possible to me — or

whether he arrived at it theologically, it gave him the kind of elevated vantage point above the factional strife which aided his pursuit of truth, a vantage point which every historian must strive to achieve. It also permitted him to recognize that human beings, caught in the vortex of human affairs, rather than being agents acting dispassionately, are more often than not reactors, grasping at partial truths as the consequence of reactions against partial failures. A classic example of this is his evaluation of Anabaptism and Lutheranism:

. . . Evangelical Pietism in its wholesome essence has, like renewal, a harmonious effect on Mennonitism, just as Mennonitism is the critique and complement of Lutheranism. During the earliest period, both seemed to be mutually exclusive. In reality, together they form a whole when balanced in an apostolic arrangement. And as such a unified balance, and therefore a purified whole, they were to lead the largely deteriorated and impoverished Christianity of the West during the Middle Ages, back to its source. In the meantime, they long regarded it as their duty to condemn one another absolutely . . . (p. 212).

That this was to be the perspective from which Friesen wished to view the history of the origins and development of the M. B. Church is made apparent in the introduction to the chapter on the establishment of what he calls the "Christian Anabaptist Mennonite Brethren Church in 1860." There he proclaimed: "With God's help, we shall be guided by justice and impartiality according to the law of brotherly and universal love, and that which will truly profit the one universal Church of Christ in all its parts." (p. 202).

It is with the above in mind that we must read his interpretation of the emergence of the M. B. Church. His regard for that church, which he had himself joined as a youth, is determined by his belief that evangelical Lutheranism (i.e. Pietism) came together with

Anabaptism at its inception. As he states in his section on Wuest:

. . . Just as we placed Menno Simons' 'Withdrawal from the Catholic Church,' the best of his works, at the beginning of our story of the Mennonites, so we place Wuest's inaugural sermon at the beginning of the section on the M. B. Church. Next to God's Word and His Spirit, Menno and Wuest have actually made the M. B. Church what it is and will be in the Church of Christ. If the joyous doctrine of justification is overly prominent in Wuest's Christian teaching, it counterbalances Menno's very serious, somewhat melancholy theology, which is, however, based on justifying grace, and in their amalgamation, the two streams achieve an apostolic balance . . . (p. 212).

Thus the error of either side, as he remarks a little later on, "is to be corrected, by the Alliance and fellowship movements on a broader scale and the M. B. Church on a smaller scale, each in its own way and sphere of influence." (p. 212).

In order to demonstrate the truth of the above with regard to the fledgling M. B. Church, Friesen is at pains to establish the fact that the secessionists were intent on going<sup>back</sup> to Menno, and he establishes this on the basis of a number of citations from the documents of the secessionists. But does he establish in any convincing manner how much the latter really knew about Menno Simons or the early Anabaptists? To what extent were their repeated references to Menno tied to the attempt to establish themselves as a legitimate "Mennonite" group with access to the established Mennonite privileges? On the other hand, were not the excesses of the young M. B. Church largely the result of Wuest's own one-sided preaching of free grace? (see page 211.) And if that M. B. Church really did strike the ideal balance between Anabaptism and Evangelical Lutheranism, should these excesses have occurred? Was not the young M. B. Church in fact more influenced by Wuest — in some respects even an aberration of Wuest — than by any profound

complement derived from a study of Menno, and did she not arrive at Friesen's "apostolic balance" -- if she arrived at it at all -- as a result of the initial problems? These questions, it seems to me, are not sufficiently investigated by Friesen. Indeed, some of his own critical remarks about the M. B. Church later in the book would tend to put his broader frame of reference in doubt.

These two aspects -- the broad frame of reference and the contradictory specific evidence -- become apparent as early as the second paragraph of the section dealing specifically with the M. B. Church. There Friesen observed:

. . . The author wishes at the outset to present his judgment with regard to the origin of the M. B. Church reached on the basis of the material, personal recollections and diligent inquiry from the 'older generation.' a) The organization of a separate 'M. B. Church,' in the midst of the 'South Russian Mennonite Brotherhood,' based on the Scriptures and the most essential ideas of Menno, given the secularized state of the largest part of the Russian Mennonites and the inability and partial reluctance of the church councils generally to oppose the corruption, was necessary and proved salutary for all of the Russian Mennonites. Generally speaking, however, the founders of the M. B. Church were neither intellectually nor spiritually well enough prepared for the task: several of the co-founders were decidedly incompetent and were exposed by the subsequent events graciously directed by God; many were expelled from the group by the wholesome element; others left of their own accord . . . (p. 213).

Does this really mesh with Friesen's broad interpretation? What we have here, it seems to me, is an idealized theology on the one hand, and the reality of the historical events on the other. Nor do the two seem ever quite to come together. To put it another way, the history of the events themselves do not justify the model supposedly drawn from them. Or was it not rather drawn from Friesen's theological perspective?

It is in this second area — the area of the reality of events, especially as they pertain to the origins of the M. B. Church — that Friesen's judgments are, on the whole, unerring. Here it was that he was able to apply Reimer's admonition to "write truth, the good and the bad, as the Bible did concerning David." As Friesen himself repeatedly says, one example shall stand for many: it is his treatment of Johann Classen, obviously one of his Mennonite heroes, and comes in a letter Friesen wrote to Abram Peters on January 11, 1901, which he incorporated in his history. It reads in part as follows:

. . . I received your letter and have sent it to the brothers Kroeker, the editors of the Kalender, with the explanation that I know you as one of our oldest and most revered members, and that I consider your objections with the highest regard. I knew nothing about the article in the Kalender before it was published. (Only now have I looked through the article in its entirety.) Kroeker is to be blamed only to the extent of having thrown a shadow upon Classen without also making reference to positive aspects of the matter. One cannot deny the negative side of Classen — he did promote emotional fanaticism for a time in a manner I still cannot understand. I have all the hundreds of letters and numerous other articles and I believe I know him even better than you do. You could never rise to more independent criticism of him because you loved him so dearly and love him still. Because you were so deeply impressed by his personality, you could never allow yourself an objective judgment of him. That is the impression I gather from all your interesting and instructive accounts. That Classen could go along with Kappes against Wuest, is something that can never be forgiven a historical figure like him (God and the brother can forgive him, but not the historian), just as David's sin and Hezekiah's folly, Luther's flirtation with the princes, Menno's cowardice in the face of the fanatics, the so-called 'harsh Banners,' and the lengthy blindness of the distinguished Wuest concerning the nature of the same Kappes, cannot be forgiven. But as surely as David, Hezekiah, Luther and Menno belong among the greatest of the world's men, so surely Classen belongs among the greatest men in Russian Mennonite society, and for the Mennonite Brethren Church he is no less a figure than is Zinzendorf for the revived Brethren Church of the Bohemian-Moravians. Classen is a much greater man than you make him out to be. I say that, convinced that I know him best in all his

weaknesses, but also in the totality of his intellectual stature, that is, through the gigantic literary legacy (gigantic for a farmer, even though very intelligent), in the way he borders on the childish and the exalted in a biblical kind of open-heartedness, even when that open-heartedness turns out to his disadvantage (for the status of his person). It is my conviction that the greatest men in our society (if one may speak of greatness in our microscopic Mennonite world) are Johann Cornies, John Claassen and Bernhard Harder. Cornies' achievement embraces Mennonite agriculture and education, Harder's achievement the present Mennonite pulpit, and Claassen's achievement — our Brethren Church, which I, despite all the criticism which I have directed at it from time to time (and which I do not retract), consider to be the salvation of Mennonitism in its purely Christian significance and its final purpose. (pp. 501-502).

Clearly, though Claassen is one of Friesen's heroes, he has no intention of accentuating the positive while deemphasizing the negative.

Whereas the Christian must forgive, the historian cannot. He must write the 'good and the bad.' It was because Friesen would allow himself to do nothing less, that he had such a difficult time laying bare the "nakedness of loving [and not-so-loving] old men." And yet it is to be lamented that Friesen did not digest more of his material, give us more of the distilled essence of his thought, and less of the sometimes tedious material — the rambling discourses, the uninspired reports from the various churches and the meandering recollections of the itinerant ministers.

The above quotation concerning Claassen also clearly reveals Friesen's intention to pass judgment and to instruct in his history. And here he becomes more than a mere historian, for, more often than not, his judgments are combined with spiritual counsel. Two salient reasons appear to account for this. First, Friesen believes it is the historian's obligation to pass judgment. Secondly, his profound love for 'his' Mennonite brotherhood drives him to try to instruct

them. Whereas many might have expressed their love by defending and justifying, Friesen recognizes that truth alone can make us free. History can only have relevance if we reconstruct it faithfully and honestly. An idealized history, or a history made 'relevant,' is in the profoundest sense irrelevant. And Friesen expresses his love for the Mennonites quite unabashedly in many parts of his book, but especially in a little pamphlet written in 1914, entitled "Konfession oder Sekte."

. . . When, in 1912, a short while after I had completed my History of the Mennonite Brotherhood in Russia and was once again able to leave my sick-bed, I had the irresistible urge to see, hear and taste my deeply beloved Mennonites in the very flesh, no longer merely on paper. During the extended period of time I had been at work on my history and had lived outside of the Mennonite community, a Mennonite patriotism and an optimism with regard to their future had grown so powerfully within me that I had begun to see things through rose-colored glasses. Especially with regard to the relationship of the Mennonite Church to the M. B. Church . . . (p. 3).

This love led him to attempt to teach, to instruct through his history. He shared this desire with the Renaissance Humanists who believed that history was philosophy teaching by example. They too hoped to inspire their readers to better things. In Friesen's case, however, history was not merely to aid in understanding the past, it was to serve as a handmaiden to theology. Thus his criticisms were intended to incite correction. Listen to one of them:

. . . This artificially pious and reserved attitude was one of the most repulsive aspects of the M. B. Church until recent times . . . (we talk about that which we — as members of the M. B. Church have witnessed with boiling blood and burning brain). This sin of the M. B. Church, too, must be named in a truthful history. We have granted the M. B. Church the great right, in its origination and continuation, of being a Mennonite communion and have established this thoroughly on the basis of the documents. Not only have we presented the great triumphs over its

ecclesio-political opponents, but also — and this is even more important — we have incontrovertably documented its triumphs over the ailments of its childhood days. For this reason we have of necessity devoted a vast space to it in our book, and also generously shown our love and appreciation. But we love and appreciate our brethren in the older Mennonite congregations just as much; (especially the determined believers and honest seekers after God) and every injustice which is perpetrated by the 'brethren' against them arouses our indignation as much as that which they experience from the Mennonites . . . (pp. 645 - 646).

*cautions* Because Friesen loved much, he criticized severely and hoped the criticism would be taken as intended and the guilty parties induced to improve. But he was forced to concede in 1914 that this was not the case. His honesty was seen as bias — and his advice rejected, particularly by many in the Mennonite Church ("Konfession oder Sekte," p. 3). And in the M. B. Church the counsel appears to have been more admired than acted upon, as Machiavelli complained about the use of ancient histories in his own day.

Yet it is in these counsels that Friesen's theological beliefs and his irenic spirit surface again and again. Nor are the two — as we noted already in his description of the confluence of Evangelical Lutheranism and Anabaptism as the recovery of Apostolic Christianity — isolated from one another. His irenic spirit leads ✓ him to adopt mediating positions on a number of theological issues, as for example the question of free will and predestination. (See page 100). But even where he cannot espouse a mediating position — as in the case of baptism — he says the following about other Christians: ". . . the author has from his youth to old age traced God's footprints in the history of His servants and has found no difference in the power of grace between those who were baptized according to our understanding and were strict immersionists or not

*Confused conception of his role  
as historian*

so strict, and those who were baptized as infants and came to an awareness [of God] through confirmation or otherwise . . ." (p. 302). Hence the counsel that comes to us repeatedly is that we should not think of ourselves in exclusive terms. For, as he continued, "Membership in our churches is after all, not synonymous with membership in 'God's Church,' to which all 'children of God' belong." (p. 302).

Not only does Friesen hope to instill a more tolerant attitude in his readers — and the sin of the M. B. Church he castigates most severely is precisely its self-righteous intolerance — he wants them to become active reconcilers. He directs this counsel to the true believers in both camps. Speaking of the spiritual life in Gnadenfeld and Rueckenau (the M. B. Church), he said:

. . . That which is alive in Gnadenfeld, and that which is alive in Rueckenau (the center of the M. B. Church) must unite in a spontaneous handshake of brotherly love above the grave of the old quarrels and old resentments. And this shaking of hands must take place between all vital Christians in all Mennonite congregations — and in all Christian confessions — even while faithfully adhering to one's peculiar insights and duties. I believe that if Lenzmann and Nikolai Schmidt had — unperturbed by Heinrich Franz and Johann Schmidt and similar harsh and one-sided men in the Mennonite Church and 'Templers' — been able to hold together with a Johann Claassen and Jakob Reimer — uninfluenced by the extremists in their camp — as they should have, since all four of them were Christians — held together in spite of and for all that! — the story of our spiritual and intellectual development would have taken a different course." (p. 261).

But lest we should assume that Friesen's irenic spirit submerges his Mennonite-Anabaptist faith, hear this tirade against the innovators:

. . . Though I am not really an 'old' Mennonite, I have for years been tired, tired, tired of the foreign influences and would like to urge all reformers ('old' Mennonite and Brethren), especially the leaders: Stand still for a moment

and ask yourself this question from the perspective of church history: What is Mennonitism? Have we perhaps forgotten to relearn that which was good, as a balance to the endless new, new, new?! Are we not losing a large and essential part of our Mennonite psyche, in the good sense? What does God want of us as a group, a fellowship: that we, while calling ourselves Mennonite, become a conglomerate of Lutheranism, Baptist, and Plymouthism, etc. (we mean in the understanding and manner of expressing our Christianity)? What is the specific direction that God has assigned to us through our original doctrines, history and present situation? Certainly we should now more seriously begin to study our own background, examine the newly-acquired for its values, throw away the ballast and deliberately, discreetly, bring the good old and the good new — for 'every scribe fit for the kingdom' brings forth old and new from his treasures — into a proper relationship.

This admonition, as pertinent today as it was in Friesen's, should probably have constituted the conclusion to this essay. But there is one more aspect to Friesen's history — aside from his very dated discussion of the origins of Anabaptism — which calls for our attention. Like most theological church historians, Friesen believes he can trace the hand of God in the history of the M. B. Church. Hence such phrases as: "it pleased God"; "God had chosen"; "God sent"; "a remarkable guidance of God"; and "God did not wish," etc. Being a historian of the Reformation, such phrases have always left me with an uneasy feeling. For precisely those aspects of Lutheran church history which the Lutherans deemed providential, the Catholics have seen as demonic. The same is true of much of the rest of the confessional and polemical writing of the period. Furthermore, God seems to lead only when things turn out well for our side; if they do not, apparently the forces of evil are at work. Would it not be much wiser simply to explain these events as best we can and leave the rest to God? And is not assigning the responsibility to God a way to avoid doing the historian's hard work? Indeed, could not the

*But historians interpret, do they not?*

hand of God — if it is at work — be seen more clearly were the historian to explain as fully as possible, rather than piously assign the responsibility to God. For, after all, who of us is capable of saying that God was at work here but not there?

There is no doubt that Friesen was a great man. His theological and historical vision transcended the petty denominational boundaries, and yet he had an unerring sense for the importance of the recovery of the "Anabaptist Vision" for the spiritual life of his Mennonite brotherhood. He had a profound love for the M. B. and wider Mennonite fellowship, and yet he chastised them for their many failings with stinging words of rebuke. Whereas he may have held an idealized view of M. B. theology, he never allowed this to affect his interpretation of the events themselves. He took very seriously his responsibility to write truth, the good and the bad, because he recognized there was no point in embellishing the story. After all, like the Old Testament historian of David, he was aware that the God he served was the embodiment of justice, and that He required the same kind of impartial justice on the part of his scholarly servant. Embellishing or idealizing our history can only serve to reinforce our misconceptions of ourselves.

All of this is not to say that Friesen's work has no failings. It has many; and we have pointed to some of them. Much of his work is dated — particularly his interpretation of Anabaptism which he derived from Ludwig Keller and the Martyrs Mirror. In other parts he neglects to take into account many factors — such as economic, social, etc. — which historians today would consider as a matter of routine. In that regard, the approach to his history is also dated. But that is merely to say that he, like us, was a human being with partial vision.