

Book Review

Leroy Martin. *South of the Equator: Stories of Mennonites in South America*. Leroy Martin, 2023. 238 pp.

Leroy Martin. *Mennonites of South America*. Leroy Martin, 2023. 448 pp.

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Since the 1920s, Mennonites with roots in Europe have migrated to South America from Canada, Mexico, Central America, and Europe and established colonies or large settlements in countries like Bolivia, Paraguay, Peru, and Colombia. These Mennonites often have religious practices that involve differences in dress from the surrounding context and particular understandings of technology and are members of the Old Colony church.

All kinds of people from North America have engaged with these Mennonites for academic, journalistic, and missionary or related reasons. Cameron Dueck, in *Menno Moto: A Journey Across the Americas*, wrote about his travels between multiple Mennonite settlements in Mexico, Central America, and South America.¹

Leroy Martin's two books are somewhat different. They are part of a more recent engagement by Plain people in the United States with Old Colony Mennonites in Latin America, particularly in the realm of education.² *South of the Equator* tells us that Leroy Martin and Lavern Martin drove from their home in the United States to Mexico and then to South America. This book chronicles their visits in Paraguay, Argentina, Bolivia, Peru, and Colombia. *Mennonites of South America* is a coffee-table-size book with photographs and captions from the same trip. The photographs in *Mennonites of South America* enhance the travel reflections and smaller photography section in *South of the Equator*.

South of the Equator is written in the style of articles one might be familiar with from the *Mennonitische Post* or *Plain Communities Business Exchange*—where Martin published some of

¹ Cameron Dueck, *Menno Moto: A Journey Across the Americas in Search of My Mennonite Identity* (Windsor, ON: Biblioasis, 2020).

² Steven M. Nolt, "Amish Stories, Images, and Identities: Two Windows and a Mirror on Contemporary Culture," *Conrad Grebel Review* 33, no. 1 (Winter 2015): 4–28; Rebecca Janzen, "American Old Order Teachers Write Home from Mexico: Reflections on Gender, Religion and Caregiving," *Journal of Mennonite Studies* 36 (2016): 237–258.



his impressions as he traveled. It describes day-to-day activities, including the weather and the way it affects people. This points to the author's deep understanding of what happens when a community's livelihood depends on the weather, likely because of his own personal experience. Martin attempts a descriptive style, which highlights his surprise at the lack of work on Sundays, and the poverty evident in many of the places he traveled. The afterword makes it clear that he tries to avoid creating a sense of pity for Mennonites in Latin America, and he specifically calls out those who think that the Mennonites in Latin America have some kind of "moral decay." This book shares some of their reality and develops further understanding between his audience and the people in the book.

This book makes several important contributions. Martin's observations about Mennonite colonies in Colombia and Peru are, as far as I know, the first reporting in English outside of two articles in the *New York Times*, and part of a growing group of material by and for Plain people in the United States about Old Colony Mennonites.

The author/photographer is also part of a Plain community so his photographs are sensitive to their subjects—many of the pictures of people have their heads facing down or are out of focus. Martin's work also includes many examples of agriculture and farm buildings, which would be of interest to his intended audience. This is different from other collections of photographs of Old Colony Mennonites, like Eunice Adorno's *Las mujeres flores* or Larry Towell's *The Mennonites*.³

I hope that, in the future, Martin's work could be informed by greater knowledge of the Latin American context, because most of the issues that affect Old Colony Mennonites affect all people who live in the same countries they do. I would also be interested in more information about the lives of women, although given cultural norms this may be more challenging for him to write about. I understand that Martin will continue to write about his travels and about Old Colony Mennonites, and I look forward to reading his work.

³ Eunice Adorno, *Las mujeres flores* (Madrid: La fábrica, 2011); Larry Towell, *The Mennonites: A Biographical Sketch* (London: Phaidon, 2000).