

***Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women.* By Pamela E. Klassen. (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994. Pp. ix + 151, index, bibliography, ISBN 0-88920-244-3 pbk. \$19.95)**

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national interest in inclusiveness; indeed, when the Society for the History of Authorship, Reading and Publishing — the main international forum for scholars in book history — meets for the first time in Canada in 1998, a proposed theme will be “interactions and boundaries between print and oral culture.” It is to be hoped that this move signals more lasting work in joint folklore/book studies to come.

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***Going by the Moon and the Stars: Stories of Two Russian Mennonite Women.***

By Pamela E. Klassen. (Waterloo: Wilfred Laurier University Press, 1994. Pp. ix + 151, index, bibliography, ISBN 0-88920-244-3 pbk. \$19.95)

This engaging and well-written book revolves around the life histories of two Russian Mennonite women displaced by WWII and exiled to Canada. Using their evocative stories of childhood under communism, early adulthood during the war, and middle age in Canada, the author addresses several issues of theoretical and methodological importance. Her general concern is to shed light on the manner in which Mennonite women construct their religious identities. In view of the patriarchal overtones of Mennonite public culture, this comes down to an examination of how two strong women who had overcome extreme hardships unaided by men reconcile their personal experiences with the official definition of womanhood upheld by the church they belong to. Beyond this scholarly task, the author — a Mennonite herself — sets out a quasi-political goal, namely: “I wish to take my place with other Mennonite women embarking on the disassembling of patriarchal Mennonite history and epistemology, which has left so little space for women’s lives, thoughts, and power” (p. 2).

The three biographical chapters in which the two women describe their lives present compelling evidence for the inclusion of women’s voices in the official Mennonite historiography. The reader learns much about the crucial role of women in maintaining Russian Mennonite identity at a time when many male residents of the Ukrainian settlements had been killed or deported by the Soviets, or drafted into the advancing German army. Unfortunately, the captivating stories are often overshadowed by the voice of the compiler and interpreter. Klassen, who describes herself as a “feminist ethnographer”,

wants to minimize the power imbalance inherent in classical ethnographies. We learn that the goal of the feminist method is to achieve “a reciprocal relationship” between the informant and the researcher, giving the former the right to shape the outcome of the work (p. 13). In spite of personal disclosures and repeated statements of concern about the dangers of “silencing” her subjects’ voices, in the end it is once again the author who figures out the real meaning behind the two women’s stories.

It is Klassen’s contention that autobiographical stories lead us to the core of “informal religion”. It is in this realm of unstructured relationships and personal reflections that women’s lives allegedly “display a way of being religious not acknowledged in formal religion” (p. 137). Without doubt personal narratives provide insight into informal religion (who would claim otherwise?), but I have difficulty with Klassen’s conclusion that “our definition of religion must be modified to focus on individual experience, based on personal history and context, as it is articulated in personal narrative” (p. 126). Surely, religion is much more than the sum total of personal histories?

I suspect that Klassen’s radical disregard for the social context of religion derives from two serious flaws in her methodology. First, the marginality of the two informants (stemming from both the trauma of the war and the difficulty of finding understanding and acceptance in Canada) could very well explain why in this particular case personal memories overshadow contemporary relationships in shaping religious identities. Klassen provides no evidence that this emphasis on the personal (at the expense of the social) constitutes a general trend among Mennonite women.

The second flaw derives from Klassen’s peculiar understanding of the ethnographic method. Her fieldwork appears to have taken place exclusively in her two informants’ homes “sitting around the kitchen table, eating, laughing, and exchanging stories...” (p. 129). Again, as with her truncated definition of religion, Klassen focuses on one component of fieldwork and makes it seem as though there is no more to it. A real ethnography, feminist or not, would introduce the reader to the significant others in the two women’s *present* lives. Unfortunately, this dimension is entirely absent. The women appear in a social vacuum, and the little we learn about their lives *outside* depends far too heavily on the excessively subjective personal narrative.

Klassen's work makes a valuable contribution to the genre of religious biography. It is marred, however, by theoretical and methodological ambitions which cannot be realized on account of insufficient empirical evidence.

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**Jeannie Robertson: Emergent Singer, Transformative Voice.** By James Porter and Herschel Gower. (Publications of the American Folklore Society, New Series. Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1995. Pp. xlvii + 357, song texts with musical transcriptions, genealogy, appendices, glossary, bibliography, index, \$48 U.S., ISBN 0-87049-904-1 cloth.)

Jeannie Robertson ranks among the best known ballad singers of all time. This statement, which I think few would challenge, points not just to the achievements of an individual but also to certain ironies of balladry in mass media culture. During the present century, some singers of this putatively oral, "folk" genre have gone from local favourites to international recording stars, albeit stars with a limited audience. Robertson was a "traveller," a member of a class of itinerant peddlers found in many parts of Britain and well noted as active preservers of traditional beliefs and arts. She grew up steeped in those traditions, and even as a young girl she was regarded an unusually gifted singer by her family and their circle. Later in life, however, she was subject to national and international attention after being "discovered" — a word used often in the present study, always in quotations and so never comfortably — by Hamish Henderson, a founder of the School of Scottish Studies and a seminal force in the post-War folk revival in Scotland. Her revival career, which extended from the 1950s until illness forced her to retire in the mid-1960s, placed her in front of many different kinds of audiences, from the intimate and (somewhat) familiar folk clubs in her native Northeast Scotland to the large anonymous concert stages of England and appearances on BBC television. Moreover, held forward by her promoters as the epitome of the traditional singer, she was sought out by young revival acolytes who wished to study her style and technique (Ray Fisher is perhaps the one best known to North American audiences). Members of her family, notably her daughter Lizzie Higgins and at least two nephews, also became important figures in the Scottish folk revival.