

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

Pamela E. Klassen

Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1994. vii + 151 pp. \$19.95 (paper)

*Reviewer:* Helene Demers

Malaspina University College

This innovative work attempts to apply the life histories of two Russian Mennonite women to the understanding of gender and religious identity. Klassen challenges the absence of women's stories from the collective Mennonite consciousness and illuminates the dynamic relationship between the courses of these women's lives and the patriarchal culture and religious structures within which they evolved. Like many personal histories, Katja's and Agatha's not only reveal dominant ideologies but also record a rebellion against them.

The introduction provides a brief history of Russian Mennonites and an explanation of the study's research methodology. Chapter 1, which I find particularly compelling, presents edited narratives of Agatha's and Katja's lives. The subsequent three chapters elaborate on what Klassen considers the most significant aspects of their life stories: marriage and motherhood, war and Mennonite identity. The final chapter covers theoretical and methodological reflections.

The author draws her methodology from feminist ethnography, its theory and practice, as well as its attempts to reduce the power imbalances in the ethnographic process. The line between research and exploitation is perhaps nowhere as finely drawn as in the intensely personal process of writing and interpreting life histories. Two important tenets of feminist scholarship are that: (1) women should be presented as speakers in their own right, as the authorities of their own experience, and (2) description should be accompanied by analysis or explanation, in order to lay the basis for social change. Klassen succeeds only partially in resolving the contradictions present in feminist ethnography. Her editing of the recorded material and the dispersal of re-interpretation, explanation and analysis throughout most of the book at times obscures the voices of Katja and Agatha. This approach contradicts the feminist goal of validating women as speakers in their own right and as authorities of their own experience. The relationship between the recorder and narrator is critical to the telling of the story and, ultimately, to the understanding of the final result, but it is possible to accompany a life history with analysis or explanation without intruding on the account itself. An excellent example is Sarah Preston's *Let the Past Go: A Life History of Alice Jacobs* (Canadian Ethnology Service Paper No. 104, 1986), which represents a non-hierarchical approach by presenting recorded sessions intact, without absenting the author, and offering a separate academic analysis following each chapter. These strategies allow a true reflection of the emphasis and interests of the narrator, and they are useful for transmitting information at many levels. When presented in this way, life-history narratives are understandable and meaningful to both the academic and the non-academic world.

In working with Katja and Agatha simultaneously, Klassen makes an interesting and effective methodological choice. Comparative analysis can generate more questions and directions for interpretation than a single life history. The differences between the individual women's lives, particularly in their experience of World War II, is central to Klassen's interpretation of the religious identity of Russian Mennonite women in

Canada. *Going by the Moon and the Stars* is of great value to the study of Mennonite women, history and religion. It joins a growing body of works that attempt to disassemble patriarchal history and epistemology.

### **Eagle Down Is Our Law: Witsuwit'en Law, Feasts, and Land Claims**

Antonia Mills

Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1994. xx + 208 pp. \$49.95 (cloth), \$24.95 (paper)

*Reviewer:* Leland Donald

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The Gitksan-Witsuwit'en land claims case (*Delgamuukw v. the Queen*) has become somewhat notorious among Canadian anthropologists both for the judgment rendered against the land claim and for Chief Justice Allan McEachern's negative assessment of the reports and testimony that several anthropologists provided as expert witnesses for the Native peoples. The core of this book is the report which one of these anthropologists, Antonia Mills, presented to the court in an attempt to explain the Witsuwit'en perspective on many issues that the Witsuwit'en themselves see as important to understanding their way of life and their land claims. Most of the remainder of the book consists of Mills's discussion of the background and context of her report.

This publication will allow anthropologists and others to decide for themselves about the report and Chief Justice McEachern's comments on it. The book should be read alongside McEachern's "Reasons for Judgment," and the various commentaries about this case that continue to come out (the most useful of which remains the special issue of *BC Studies* 95 [1992]).

In a scholarly context, valuable information is presented about the contemporary Witsuwit'en (an important "Carrier" group), especially on feasting, social groups and names (titles). The book is, however, neither orthodox nor "postmodern" ethnography. The author makes it clear that she is presenting a view that Witsuwit'en themselves wish presented. Her claim is validated by the fact that one of the Witsuwit'en chiefs contributed a preface to the book and that the book is copyrighted by the Gitksan-Witsuwit'en Tribal Government. The book is not, however, an "insider's" account of Witsuwit'en society and culture. It was written by an "outsider," and Mills makes no claims to speak from "inside," using aspects of traditional anthropological scholarly apparatus and ideas, while striving to communicate a Witsuwit'en perspective. Even so, this is not an anthropologist's "translation" of another culture; nor is it a standard scholarly monograph. Its role as a court document precludes this. But a comparison with the anthropological "evidence" given in many U.S. land-claims cases (see the many examples published by Garland in their American Indian Ethnohistory series) reveals great differences in approach, perspective and topics covered when the indigenous point of view controls the agenda.

This Witsuwit'en-controlled document challenges both the Euro-Canadian legal and political system, as well as anthropological approaches to ethnography. At least in the opening round, the legal system rejected the challenge. Anthropologists will, I hope, be more receptive. But many will see this new ethnographic form as a complement to, rather than a replacement of, other more traditional ethnographic forms.