



Special Collections

Rudy Wiebe

Biocritical Essay

by

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Rudy Wiebe has mocked the "personal fallacy" in literary criticism, which "sees every work of art as arising directly out of the artist's experience" and sanctions "a great deal of snooping" into his "life, surroundings and digestion while he was writing."¹ In contrast, Wiebe insists that novels "acquire a life and character of their own, independent of and quite beyond the artist himself" (*VL*, 40). They are self-sufficient. However, he would agree that even in their independence, they can be suffused with the passions and preferences of their authors. Without being autobiographical, they will testify to a background, especially one as unique and forceful as Wiebe's. Paradoxically, a writer is most fully present in his work when he completely effaces himself; or as he says: "as a writer, writing, when you are most profoundly yourself you are no longer yourself."² Personal traits are assimilated and transformed into a well-crafted fiction. Therefore we are justified in snooping into Wiebe's life if only to see how he has digested diverse influences and used them to give his novels vigorous and complex personalities of their own.

His parents came to Canada from the U.S.S.R. with their five children in March 1930. They were part of the emigration of Mennonites who, since the sixteenth century, have gradually wandered eastward through Europe and Asia to North and South America. Usually farmers, Mennonites have been pioneers, living in small communities, often working rough terrain and existing "chiefly on a fare of Bible and Bread."³ The Wiebes lived first in southern Saskatchewan and then moved to the rugged Speedwell-Jackpine region, about ninety kilometres north of North Battleford. The nearest railway stop was Fairholme. Rudy Wiebe was born on October 4, 1934 in what later became the family's chicken barn. For thirteen years he lived in an isolated community of about 250 people, as part of the last generation of homesteaders to settle the Canadian west. He grew up in "a world of heavy man's work" (*VL*, 20) shared by all, and in a landscape that could be lonely and fierce as well as lovely. He did not speak English until age six since Mennonites customarily speak Low German (*Plautdietsch*) at home and High German at Church. He attended the small school three miles from

his farm and the Speedwell Mennonite Brethren Church.

Speedwell appears as Wapiti in *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, but its atmosphere - the sense of reality it first gave to Wiebe - can be detected in many of his works. He frequently recalls his early days with affection and with a suggestion that they belonged geographically, historically and psychologically to a different world. In it, life was more basic because it was strongly physical, owing to the rigours of daily existence; but also strongly spiritual, owing to the piety of Mennonite belief. This combination of the intensely physical and spiritual pervades Wiebe's writing. It links him sympathetically to Indians and Métis, whose lives are at once sensual and mystical. The twin figures of Gabriel Dumont and Louis Riel, the soldier and the visionary, will sum up these characteristics. The combination influences his themes and even his style which, as Dick Harrison notes, fuses the "immediate experience" of sensory detail with the "ultimate significance" of religious truth.⁴ Together, they forbid any sentimentality, and although Wiebe speaks of the "romance" (*VL*, 22) of his youth, he never idealizes childhood or the pioneer world. His novels unite realism with fervour, and when they draw on the romantic tradition, it is on a sterner sort of romanticism. They reject the easy, convenient or sentimental attitude, sometimes associated with modern, urban liberalism, in favour of a response that is both more sober and more exalted. Wiebe describes this attitude when he says that the aim of his writing is "to see situations and people with a coldly understanding, and passionate, discernment" (*VL*, 218).

In 1947 Wiebe's family gave up farming and moved to Coaldale, Alberta, a town east of Lethbridge. It consists, a character in *Far As the Eye Can See* quips, of "Ukrainians, Mennonites, Mormons, and Hungarians, in that order." To this list must be added the Japanese who had been sent there during the War. At first, feeling lonely and insecure, Wiebe befriended Japanese children who were also outsiders. Alberta offered him his second vision of the world. Its landscape was gentler, dominated by wind and distance, but still intimidating: "in every direction the earth so flat another two steps would place me at the horizon, looking into the abyss of the universe. There is too much here, the line of sky and grass rolls in upon you and silences you thin, too impossibly thin to remain in any part recognizably yourself. The space must be broken somehow or it uses you up..."⁵ If he felt like an intruder in the town or in this setting, his sense of isolation was countered by a close community spirit. Coaldale appears in "Chinook Christmas," and the communal warmth in that story is in keeping with Mennonite practice. The Church is a close body of believers, a brotherhood. It organizes social, educational and recreational as well as religious activities. It stresses "close communion" and obliges the "brethren" to aid each other and to guide each other spiritually. As portrayed by Wiebe, such behaviour can be intrusive, but it can also create a highly cohesive, supportive society.

The correlative ideas of individuality and community, privacy and civility, are fundamental to western Canadian literature. In Wiebe's novels they appear as a web of interdependent themes - freedom, responsibility, solitude, justice, isolation, communion. He is especially fascinated by extreme cases: individualism becomes anti-social and eventually criminal; communalism becomes tribal. On one hand, he portrays the essential isolation of the individual who must challenge social norms and work out his own fate in a land that, especially in the north, isolates him even further. In *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, Thom Wiens questions a Mennonite community which can be lively and supportive, but which, when dominated by the tyrannical Dean Block, can also be repressive, legalistic and hypocritical. The closeness of the community makes it strong yet vulnerable, since its failings are quickly shared and exaggerated. Because of its strength, however, Thom never has to abandon it, only to reassess it and himself. Other characters can find no virtue in society and reject it entirely. They then undergo a solitary ordeal which usually involves an encounter with

death. Abe Ross (*First and Vital Candle*) and Albert Johnson (*The Mad Trapper*) both escape to the Arctic. Whereas Ross eventually discovers a new community, Johnson severs all human contact, even through language. The novel is based on the true story of a man who for no apparent reason killed an R.C.M.P. officer and then led the police on a torturous chase through the wilderness. Johnson's isolation is so absolute that his past, motives and even identity remain mysterious. Although the narrative occasionally enters his mind, he remains an enigma who has chosen an ultimate, violent freedom. There is some risk in leaving so much unsaid: the novel may seem to have a void at its centre. To Johnson's pursuers, who are honest, sociable men, that central emptiness is a madness they cannot understand. But to Wiebe: "in the last weeks of his life, when he with such single-minded violence labors to preserve his intact privacy, he does flame with a sheer human mystery."⁶

On the other hand, Wiebe studies communal experience as both coercive and sustaining. Modern society is presented in various tones as threatening, bland, conformist, excessively rational, mechanical or dehumanizing. In *Far As the Eye Can See*, a group of farmers defend their land against the political bureaucracy. *First and Vital Candle* opens with a nightmarish picture of a social dance of death in Winnipeg. Even more fiercely, "Did Jesus Ever Laugh?" is a perverse tale of alienation and murder, set in a high-rise apartment. These deadly or deadening societies are contrasted with older and richer communities. In *The Mad Trapper* an Indian remarks to Johnson: "White men...they live alone, Indians never." Indians, Métis and Eskimos illustrate a tribal life which defines, sustains and strengthens its citizens. They can hardly grasp the notion of private property. They live, feel, rejoice and suffer collectively. They share legends and songs which bind them together imaginatively and root them in their native soil. They are also doomed, as Wiebe shows in *The Temptations of Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People*. Although he portrays white society unfavourably, he does not present it as simply villainous. He avoids melodrama and patiently builds a contrast between two radically different and incompatible cultures. He manages to evoke the consciousness of each, examining each from within and through the eyes of the other. Nevertheless, it is clear where his sympathy lies. The tragedy of the Métis is not just that they were defeated and dispossessed, but that they were destroyed collectively. Although individually they appear proud and independent, their existence is essentially communal. They too are vulnerable. *The Scorched-Wood People*, Wiebe said, is "the story of a people, a people who have almost disappeared because they no longer live to express a communal will....The world has broken down their whole sense of community."⁷

In Coaldale Wiebe attended the Mennonite High School, and he has acknowledged the encouragement of a teacher, Peter Bargaen, who taught English and history. Wiebe loved books and from an early age read as much as possible. His first exposure to literature was in the Bible, the Eaton's Catalogue and the *Free Press*. He also recalls hours of oral storytelling, when his parents recounted their adventures in Russia. As he grew older, he enjoyed Victor Hugo's *Toilers of the Sea*, *David Copperfield*, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*, Greek myths and Norse legends. At this stage he knew little of Canadian literature, and he mentions only a distaste for the "feeblest semi-philosophic sonnets" of Archibald Lampman (*VL*, 215). Clearly he would require something more robust. These titles suggest the influence of the classic, European nineteenth century novel, an influence which has remained strong on Wiebe's work. This does not mean that he is old fashioned or conventional and certainly not that he is dominated by foreign models. On the contrary, his narratives are often experimental and ingenious. He admires Sheila Watson, Faulkner, Marquez and Borges as well as Tolstoy. It does mean that he remains committed to the traditional principles of the novel. In his essays and introductions to anthologies he rejects the trendiness of contemporary literature and criticism and declares his adherence to the fundamentals of fiction - plot, character, narrative logic and, above all, story. The novelist is

a storyteller.

For Wiebe, the concept of story is complex. It involves, first, a respect for fact. Human events, whether real or invented, are the raw material of stories. The world is littered with facts, which are at once obvious and mysterious because they are unintelligible until organized as plot or history. Wiebe's respect for them and for the past where they reside is evident in the painstaking research he conducts for his historical novels, insisting that every date be accurate. His respect for the craft of writing is evident in his belief that when facts are suitably selected and presented, they compose a story which then has a form, voice, life and significance of its own: "Stories are discrete entities made with language."⁸ Or as the narrator of "An Indication of Burning" says: "A poem is a pot, a made thing small and precise and complete, but made with words." Pot, poem and story are intricate shapes, and the difficulty of designing them is the subject of one of Wiebe's most famous tales, "Where Is the Voice Coming From?" The fact at issue - the death of a rebellious Indian who killed a policeman - is obvious. But the narrator who tries to interpret that fact by examining documents, names, titles, photos and other clues, discovers first, that by telling the story he participates in it and does not merely report it impartially; and second, that the simple fact grows mysterious the more it is examined. His story fractures into "unknown contradictory words about an unprovable act." His voice cannot speak with authority for another voice (the Indian is called Almighty Voice) that in turn expresses the elegy of its people. The story ends with the Indian's terrible death chant, an "unending wordless cry" which is eloquent yet unintelligible. The narrator admits defeat (though the story itself has succeeded by dramatizing his defeat) and confesses he is not qualified to be a true storyteller.

The true storyteller is Pierre Falcon in *The Scorched-Wood People*. He is the man of words who observes the man of ideas (Riel) and deeds (Dumont). He accomplishes alone what requires the co-operation and competition of many discordant voices in *Big Bear*. Where they each comment on a small portion of the truth, he speaks with authority for the Métis people. He is their almighty voice, witness to their glory and prophet of their tragedy. He speaks for the individual fate, for the community and for the land, which he consecrates through his songs and tales. As storyteller he claims the very land which his people have lost, by giving it voice and character. Wiebe indicates the triple duty of Pierre Falcon when he explains "how story can create the continuing consciousness of a personality, of a community, how it can hold them in a living relationship to a past and a future that helps them live in a present context of a physical and spiritual landscape: it makes people aware of their unique and changeable and yet never-changing humanity."⁹

Ultimately, therefore, the importance of story is not simply that it records and interprets facts; or that it is a beautiful artifact in its own right; or that it tells an enjoyable and attractive tale; but that it embodies truth. Wiebe follows the classic novel by insisting that art has a moral purpose which is served by its historical and aesthetic interests. He is not afraid to speak of the wisdom of art. He scorns, on one hand, the "pipsqueaks" of modern literature who devote themselves to petty, usually sexual, problems; and on the other, the stylists who waste their energy in word games. The artist must "get at the truth of things" (VL, 237), which means there is a truth, and it is accessible. It is "something that is in a sense beyond, larger than yourself, the other to which you can commit yourself."¹⁰ Wiebe's fondness for epic tales about heroic characters, or of simple people who are miraculously touched by the divine, follows from his belief that stories begin in the specific and local but expand into "a human truth larger than any individual."¹¹ Although he does not treat art as a substitute for religion - a common modern ploy - he does use religious terms to suggest the high calling of the storyteller, who through parables offers his "witness of his vision for man" (VL, 45).

Wiebe's own gift for storytelling became apparent when he attended the University of Alberta in Edmonton. He studied literature and took a writing course from F.M. Salter, perhaps the most important in a series of teachers who guided him. He began writing poems, plays and stories and submitting them to Salter's detailed, conservative and often infuriating criticism. One story won first prize in a contest and was published in the magazine *Liberty* in September 1956. Now called "Scrapbook", it recounts a young boy's response to the painful death of his sister - an event Wiebe himself observed when he was eight or nine years old. Salter encouraged his young student to write from his own experience and background. This prompted Wiebe to re-examine the world he grew up in but only partly knew, and his explorations of western and northern Canada continue to this day.

He received his B.A. in 1956 and then studied under a Rotary International Fellowship at the University of Tuebingen in West Germany, near Stuttgart. In 1958 he married Tena Isaak; they now have three children. In Germany, he studied literature and theology and travelled to England, Austria, Switzerland and Italy. From a few articles written for Alberta newspapers and preserved in the Calgary collection of Wiebe's papers, we can catch a glimpse of his responses to Europe. Tuebingen is an ancient university (founded 1477), and it proclaimed a rich, royal, complicated, but orderly, past: "here everything has its root in a tradition that fades back into medieval history." The contrast with Canada is implicit here, but becomes clearer when Wiebe comments on sight-seeing in London, architecture in Italy, agriculture in Switzerland or folk customs in provincial Germany. He even compares the *Narrenzug*, a traditional, Catholic "Fool's Parade", with the Calgary Stampede. "I saw a totally different kind of world in actual practice in front of me," he later told Donald Cameron (a comment from the Calgary papers not included in the published version of the interview). The essential differences between European and Canadian cultures, and the fact that western Canada has a distinctive past of its own which Europeans and even eastern Canadians have ignored, will appear later in Wiebe's work. At this point it is more interesting to note how little of his experiences in Europe appears in his writing.

Continuing his studies, Wiebe returned to Edmonton where he received his M.A. in Creative Writing in 1960. His thesis had begun a few years earlier as a short story - presenting another death scene - but under Salter's direction it grew into *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. Wiebe and his family then moved to Winnipeg where his life became very busy. He studied education at the University of Manitoba and for a while taught high school. In 1962 he earned his Bachelor of Theology degree from the Mennonite Brethren Bible College. There he studied Scripture closely and gained, as he admitted to Cameron, a passing familiarity with theology. At one point, he considered becoming a minister. In 1962-1963 he was editor of the *Mennonite Brethren Herald*, a position which he resigned because of the controversy over *Peace Shall Destroy Many* (1962). Mennonites objected to the novel's frank and sometimes unflattering portrait of them. While it is not likely true that "Wiebe was soon given a one-way ticket out of Winnipeg",¹² there was considerable opposition to the book, as Wiebe reports:

I wasn't exactly sacked as editor...but the committee came to me and said 'Ahem.' I resigned....

I had never been in Steinbach, in Altona, in Winkler, and in all these places things were really popping. They were identifying people in the book. I guess it was a kind of bombshell because it was the first realistic novel ever written about Mennonites in western Canada. A lot of people had no clue

how to read it. They got angry. I was talking from the inside and exposing things that shouldn't be exposed. Some people seriously suggested that books like that should never be sold to anybody but church members. (VL, 51,127)

Wiebe left Winnipeg for the Mennonite college in Goshen, where he taught from 1963-67. Goshen is an agricultural town in northern Indiana, with a large Mennonite and Amish population, but Wiebe had not returned to another Coaldale. Instead he entered a lively intellectual and literary community where he committed himself to writing, study, teaching and travel - activities which have directed his life since then. He taught as Assistant Professor of English. In the summer of 1964 he attended the Writers' Workshop at the University of Iowa, and in 1966 published his second novel, *First and Vital Candle*. He began to explore the western United States, and for five months in 1966 visited the Mennonite settlements in Paraguay. His notebooks contain interviews and copious notes about the families, stories, attitudes and social life of the Mennonites, and about their hazardous voyage from Russia to South America. Precise and evocative details (the sponginess of the soil in Russia, the baptismal ceremony when crossing the equator) drew his attention; they would reappear in his fiction. His few comments about his years in Goshen suggest that they were very important for him intellectually and artistically. They helped him to mature and to refine his skills as a novelist. They widened his view of the world, of Christianity and of Mennonite history far beyond anything he could have imagined in Speedwell. They gave him a new perspective on Canada by allowing him to view it from abroad. He later returned to familiar territory and saw it "in a whole new dimension" (VL, 239). Most important, these years in Goshen stimulated him intellectually.

There, for the first time and over an extended period, I encountered men and women of real perception who had thought through a lot of these things, really literate Christians who saw themselves as Jesus's followers and at the same time were acquainted with the thoughts of others and had brought that kind of understanding to bear on what it means to be a Christian.

The best thing that ever happened to me was the meetings we had every two or three weeks in one home or another--seven or eight of us, a psychiatrist, a couple of theologians, a couple of literary people. There were the best theologians there, I think, the Mennonite Church has ever had; I still correspond with one of them, John Howard Yoder....This man's a brilliant thinker: I think he has influenced my thought about what it means to be a Christian more than almost anything else. (VL, 242-43)

It is at this point, when Wiebe immersed himself in religious and literary studies and when he was beginning his most important Mennonite novel, *The Blue Mountains of China*, that I wish to consider the importance of Mennonite belief and history in his work.

The Mennonites arose as part of the Anabaptist movement in the Protestant Reformation. They were led in Switzerland by Conrad Grebel (1498-1526) and in the Netherlands by, among others, Menno Simons (1496-1561). From Menno comes the name Mennonite, a label applied rather loosely to several Mennonite, Amish and Hutterite churches. These groups vary widely in traditions, practices and in the distance they keep from the world, but they share certain beliefs. Mennonites assert the fundamental authority of Scripture, especially the New Testament, as a practical guide to life. They regard the church as a brotherhood of believers whose conviction, and hence baptism, comes from conscious choice rather than accidents of birth. The rejection of infant baptism in favour of "believer's baptism" accounts for the name Anabaptist (late baptisers). Adherence

to the Bible results in strict pacifism, the refusal to swear oaths or to serve as magistrate, strong church discipline, and a separation of church and state which, in varying degrees, enforces exclusion from ordinary society. Menno Simons recommended the virtues of *Bussfertigkeit* - humility, contrition, repentance - and Mennonites are distinguished by simplicity of life and sobriety in conduct and dress. The essence of Christianity is "discipleship", a faithful following (*Nachfolge*) of Christ through strict adherence to the New Testament. Menno urged his followers to accept the opposition their piety would arouse and to "take upon themselves the cross of Christ, and to forsake father, mother, husband, wife, children, possessions and self, for the sake of the testimony of His holy Word when the honor and praise of God require it."¹³

In Wiebe's short story "All on their Knees", Herman Paetkau helps an Indian who was wounded when he murdered his brother-in-law. Herman bathes the Indian's frozen feet, nurses him and, despite the crime, protects him from the R.C.M.P. When the Indian recovers and leaves: "He seemed to stoop forward, as if accepting a weight, then turned and limped heavily out on the porch." The reader does not need to be a Mennonite to appreciate this story (originally published in *The Mennonite*) about a secret sharer and his burden of guilt. But a Mennonite reader will see in the foot washing a biblical ritual traditionally followed by Mennonites, and he will recognize in the final image an acceptance of the weight of the Cross. Again, in the final section of *The Blue Mountains of China*, John Reimer walks along the trans-Canada highway carrying a heavy cross.

In a nice double irony, he assures a reporter who asks about his unusual "walk of repentance": "None of this is typical of Mennonites." Reimer enacts literally the *Nachfolge* that Mennonites are supposed to follow symbolically, but Wiebe uses his literal action as a further symbol of the behaviour of Mennonites in Canada who, in growing proud and prosperous, have forgotten their strict, ethical tradition. He criticizes Mennonites from the vantage of their own values and of the painful history which the novel has traced. These two examples show how subtly Wiebe can treat Mennonite subjects and images and use them to dramatize universal themes. In both his Mennonite and non-Mennonite novels, he repeats these encounters. A meeting, crisis, trial or emergency, usually involving physical hardship and death, provokes a deeper, spiritual crisis. It forces a character to reassess his life and to make a deliberate commitment to faith and action. The theme of the quest or spiritual ordeal is, of course, a familiar one, but Victor Doerksen relates it specifically to a religious tradition of "Christian fiction" which since the eighteenth century has provided "the framework within which the Mennonite imagination has functioned." This genre presents the initiation of a Christian soul as it overcomes obstacles, temptations and the false enlightenment of reason, and follows a path of faith and knowledge on its pilgrimage to salvation. The allegory was inspired by *Pilgrim's Progress* but derives directly from the work of the German writer known as Heinrich Jung-Stilling (1740-1817). These features reappear in Wiebe where they are adapted to modern realism, skepticism and sophistication. According to Doerksen, Wiebe both inherits and shatters the model, and is "perhaps the first major Mennonite writer to place the Mennonite experience in a broader framework."¹⁴

The two examples cited also illustrate a conflict between legal and moral obligations, between cultural and spiritual duties, between literal and symbolic levels of the narratives. This conflict, which is dramatized in Wiebe's novels, also finds its roots in Mennonite tradition. Mennonites are both a people and a church. The first feature is cultural and conservative. It involves the innumerable conventions of attitude, behaviour, dress, homemaking, and so on, which have been established over the centuries. For example, Leonard Sawatzky explains how preachers often wear leather knee boots in keeping with the German translation of St.

Paul (Ephesians, 6:15). Wiebe mentions the custom of singing hymns in unison, never in harmony.¹⁵ These practices, though slight separately, combine in an elaborate tradition by which Mennonites define themselves and participate in their culture. This is the "'Mennonitism' of culture" or of "history and genealogy" (VL, 27-28) which Wiebe contrasts with the more radical and even subversive element inherent in any fundamentalist Christian doctrine. As a system of belief and commitment, Christianity calls for continual spiritual renewal. Far from being reassuring and quiescent, it challenges its adherents to be daring. It looks to the present rather than the past, and, as in the quotation from Menno Simons given above, demands that they forsake all that binds them to their old lives. In an interview, Wiebe explained: "To be an Anabaptist is to be a radical follower of the person of Jesus Christ - that's really what it's about - and Jesus Christ had no use for the social and political structures of his day; he came to *supplant* them."¹⁶

In an essay of 1964 (VL, 25-31), Wiebe spoke strongly for the spiritual as opposed to the ethnic side of Mennonite life. He chose faith over culture, the Holy Spirit over borscht and shoofly pie. In his own life too, he rejected "heavy fundamentalist" and "narrow, legalistic" practices and espoused "a radical Jesus-oriented Christianity."¹⁷ He also rejected a third alternative which he called "the middle-class paradise" (VL, 29). The freedom, prosperity and relative tolerance of Canadian society undermine both Anabaptist traditions by simply ignoring them and offering a seductive, secular materialism in their place. These three factors conflict in his first few novels. They are brought into focus by the image of young John Reimer, bearing his cross along the trans-Canada highway.

The conflict between the letter and spirit of Mennonite law, and the place of both in Canada, are themes of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*. It presents a detailed, sympathetic but critical portrait of the Mennonite settlement in Wapiti. Set in 1944, it uses the Second World War to counterpoint the struggle of young Thom Wiens to understand his heritage and his place within it. His pacifism and his faith are challenged by the increasingly violent conflicts in his community. The story shows a network of antagonisms between father and child, tyrant and victim, Métis and Mennonite, flesh and spirit, tradition and progress, the community and the outer world, Mennonite practice and doctrine, the peace that destroys and God's peace. Through his own good intentions, Wiens is drawn into the conflict and even participates in the fight near the end (ironically, if too deliberately, set in a manger at Christmas). However, the values he invokes to criticize his community are drawn from his Mennonite faith, which he does not reject but painfully reasserts. Therefore, it is not faith, but Wiens himself who has been tested. As a result, his faith is strengthened. The novel, which is occasionally given to sermonizing, ends with a reaffirmation of Mennonite belief:

Christ's teachings stood clear in the Scriptures; could he but scrape them bare of all their acquired meanings and see them as those first disciples had done, their feet in the dust of Galilee....Only a conquest by love unites the combatants. And in the heat of this battle lay God's peace.

In his second novel Wiebe enlarged his scope and style as if to escape the narrowness of his background. Yet *First and Vital Candle* retains the debate on pacifism, offset by references to the War; biblical echoes and Christian imagery; concern with native people, who contrast and comment on Christian culture; some of the sermons and much of the earnestness of the first novel. It reverses many of the features of *Peace Shall Destroy Many*, examining them from a different angle. We find a conflict, not within faith, but against it. The main character - who is Scots-Canadian, forty years old and an ex-soldier -struggles with skepticism about

religion. Abe Ross is described as a kind, moral, decent man who has not dared believe in anything except himself. Events force him to become daring in a way that, despite a life of risk and adventure, he had hardly imagined. Disheartened by the ghastly emptiness of the modern world, he is the first of Wiebe's heroes to seek sanctuary in the far north. But the Arctic proves diabolical as well as invigorating, as it forces Ross to contend with a number of forces greater than himself: violence, greed, corruption, evil on one hand; mysticism, faith and love on the other. Although his ordeal leads to the death of the woman he loves, it teaches him abject humility and reveals his need for grace. It permits him to sense, if not embrace, what lies "beyond the human - the spiritual, the beyond-reach divine." *First and Vital Candle* is not a Mennonite novel, but it is a religious one.

It is also the first novel for which Wiebe had to do research in order to recreate a world that was foreign to him, since he had never visited the Arctic. The effect of his research was to lead him into history and the complexity of the past. His choice between tradition and faith seemed easy when expressed in terms of borscht and the Holy Spirit. It grew more complicated in novels which show how historical and spiritual dimensions, far from being exclusive, continually imply, assist and resist each other. *The Blue Mountains of China* presents an epic of Mennonites who, like the children of Israel, wander and suffer, yet are sustained by the very beliefs which their suffering calls into question. Its varied but interwoven stories of endurance, sacrifice, betrayal, penance and renewal are so evocative that they suggest, not a single choice between alternatives, but a complex destiny.

The early Mennonites were persecuted first as heretics and later as a minority or alien group. Theirs is a history of migration and hardship which Menno Simons warned them to expect and accept, a history also of faith and stubborn endurance. They spread from Switzerland and Holland, first to Alsace and South Germany, and then to Prussia in the area near Danzig. The cycle of persecution, resettlement, hardship and prosperity (*Tod, Not Brot*) was to become familiar. In 1786 they were invited to settle in South Russia near the Black Sea, where they were promised religious, social and language rights. Wiebe's family came from one of these settlements, the Molotschna colony. Here his church, the Mennonite Brethren, was founded in 1860 as a reform movement, criticizing the prevailing laxity of conduct and reaffirming Anabaptist principles of piety and discipline. In one summary, the movement is characterized by Biblecentredness, personal conversion, discipleship, missions, freedom of spiritual expression and co-operation in Christian concerns. In spirit the Brethren are noted for being intellectual, rigorous, enthusiastic and, sometimes, elitist.¹⁸ Wiebe's criticism of Mennonites in Canada reflects these principles and this spirit. *The Blue Mountains of China* picks up Mennonite history when intolerance, which arose in the mid-nineteenth century and was renewed during the Russian Revolution, became ferocious under Stalin. Mennonites faced heavy taxes, forced collectivization, confiscation, arrest and murder (chapters 2, 4, 8). Some had settled in Siberia where they had again been granted land. Between 1929 and 1934, in an extraordinary escape (chapter 9), hundreds fled over the Amur River into China. Its blue mountains represent a visionary, promised land; in reality Mennonites suffered greatly in China before making their way (chapter 5) to South and North America. Some settled in northern Paraguay in the Chaco Boreal (chapter 11), an arid region commonly called the "green hell" because of its ruggedness. The Canadian prairie was also inhospitable, but there the Mennonites settled, prospered and even earned their place in "the middle-class paradise" (chapters 12, 13).

The Blue Mountains of China can be obscure in its writing and plot, and sometimes even in the facts that it recounts so obliquely. It has prompted varied reactions, but there is no denying its intensity and richness. Although several sections first appeared as short stories, all thirteen chapters with their different styles and

viewpoints are unified by the organization and vision of the whole. Individual stories, often told in microscopic detail, contribute to a larger pattern of journeys, tests and baptisms, a pattern that is also a modern-biblical pilgrimage, a family saga, the odyssey of a people. The novel is also important because it marks a shift in Wiebe's career. After his first novel, he told James Nickel that he saw himself as a "Christian writer" who dealt with man's conversion, redemption and salvation by Christ, in novels that strove to be both artistically and doctrinally sound. Later, however, he would tell Donald Cameron: "I never consciously think of writing a so-called Christian novel."¹⁹ After *The Blue Mountains of China*, his emphasis changed. Religious beliefs and struggles remain important in his work, and the Mennonite element re-emerges in *My Lovely Enemy*, but they are less prominent. The themes of peace, community, evil and redemption also remain, but are adapted to new and wider interests. The doctrinal aspect - and with it, the danger of preaching - disappears. The perspective shifts north, back to Canada.

In 1967 Wiebe returned to Edmonton as Professor in Creative Writing and English at the University of Alberta. In the years that followed he immersed himself in Canadian literature and wrote reviews, essays, articles and a radio documentary. He edited several anthologies, lectured, and served as Writer in Residence at the University of Calgary. He established himself as a major figure in Canadian letters. This has been his most prolific period. After *The Blue Mountains of China* (1970) came *The Temptations of Big Bear* (1973, winner of the Governor General's Award); *Where Is the Voice Coming From?* (1974), a collection of short stories; *The Scorched-Wood People* and his play, *Far As the Eye Can See* (1977), the latter devised with the Theatre Passe Muraille Company after "four intense, crazy weeks in Toronto"; *Alberta: a Celebration* (1979), a collection of stories and sketches accompanied by photographs; *The Mad Trapper* (1980); *The Angel of the Tar Sands and Other Stories* (1982); and *My Lovely Enemy* (1983).

"History doesn't need a uniform," remarks a character in the story "Someday Soon, Before Tomorrow". The unofficial, unrecognized history of western Canada was, in part at least, the immense task Wiebe undertook when he began his research for *The Temptations of Big Bear*. This project required six years of study and travel through the prairies to Ottawa and New York, a journey described vividly in "On the Trail of Big Bear" (VL, 132-141). It led further to the related history of Louis Riel, and then north in pursuit of the legend of Albert Johnson. Wiebe was convinced that he needed a new perspective on the Canadian past and on prairie literature which, rather drearily, was supposed to consist "of equal parts of Puritanism, Monotony, Farmers and Depression."²⁰ His aim was far more ambitious, namely to draw the "imaginative map of our land" by furnishing it with names and stories as the Indians had previously: "Similarly, when we white people will have clothed the places of this land with words, that is, when we will have named it and inhabited it with a shared memory so that we can make it live again in another person's comprehension, then it will be the ancient land for us that it already is for the Indians."²¹ The historian can explore the past, but only the novelist can make it live again. On a small scale, *Alberta: A Celebration* performs the same task. It is a volume of photographs accompanied by Wiebe's accounts of local places, speakers, names, tall tales, pioneers, wildlife, resources and towns - each account a miniature from the province's past. On a vast scale, *Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People* are epics whose purpose Wiebe proclaimed in one of his most famous statements:

to touch his land with words requires an architectural structure; to break into the space of the reader's mind with the space of this western landscape and the people in it you must build a structure of fiction like an engineer builds a bridge or skyscraper over and into space. A poem, a lyric, will not do. You must lay great black steel lines

of fiction, break up that space with huge design, and like the fiction of the Russian steppes, build giant artifact.²²

It is ironic that this grand description should use imagery of technology, especially the railway, since these are the very forces that subdue the west in Wiebe's novels. The ingenuity and violence of breaking up the elemental space of Canada suggest the corresponding assault on native people and on a way of life that was already in touch with the land. However, the violence of civilization is an important theme in *Big Bear* and *The Scorched-Wood People*. They are complementary volumes about the fate of heroic men who are tragic and prophetic representatives of their people. Both men are visionaries who are overwhelmed by the aggressive material and political forces of the new Canadian nation, and finally are tried by a system of justice which they do not accept. Both novels demand patient attention as they weave documentation and invention into an intricate tapestry. *The Scorched-Wood People* takes greater liberty with facts, but *Big Bear* attempts the even more difficult task of evoking an alien state of mind. In both, Wiebe cultivates long, winding, cumulative and periodic sentences, whose purpose is not only to evoke the grandeur of the land and the dignity of the characters, but to suggest the gradual expansion of consciousness as it strives to "touch this land with words." The story of Riel, Dumont and the two Métis uprisings of 1869 and 1884 are widely known, though Riel is more often portrayed as the villain of the tale. As presented here he is sympathetic, dedicated and impassioned, but is necessarily kept somewhat aloof by the mysticism of his passion. Big Bear, who was Chief of the Plains Cree, was the one Indian leader to refuse to sign a treaty or accept a reservation. Set between 1876 and 1888, the novel presents his encounters with white culture and his eloquent defence of his own; his life in the prairie where he witnesses the last buffalo hunt, the coming of the railway, the pacification of the Indian tribes; his failure to control his young warriors, who kill nine whites at Frog Lake; his subsequent trial and imprisonment.

Big Bear and *The Scorched-Wood People* established Wiebe's reputation as a prairie novelist (a label he sometimes welcomes and sometimes rejects) and as a difficult writer. His most recent novel, *My Lovely Enemy*, should force a reappraisal. At first glance it may seem an unexpected departure for Wiebe, since he treats subjects that he had merely mentioned earlier: sex, adultery, feminism, academic life, modern social fashions. However, it is far more than a love story, and in many ways it grows directly from his previous novels. The protagonist, James Dyck, follows in the footsteps of Abe Ross, of the cross-bearing John Reimer, and of Samuel U. Reimer (also in *Blue Mountains*) who chats with God. Dyck is another ordinary man who is touched by extraordinary forces. He too, is a Mennonite who questions "the soft Canadian life" because he senses a larger dimension to human experience, something involving heroism, history, nature, passion and, ultimately, faith. Wiebe evokes the "awesome presence" of these cosmic forces through daring stylistic and narrative techniques. Using imagery, allusion, quotation, stream of consciousness sequences and time shifts, he moves beyond realism into fantasy. In fact, he has always found the conventions of realism constricting, and has enjoyed pushing them to the breaking point. In "The Angel of the Tar Sands", for example, engineers in Fort McMurray unearth an angel, which speaks in Hutterite German before flying away. In showing how the matter-of-fact must yield to the marvellous, this story prepares us for *My Lovely Enemy*.

After a fairly uneventful life, Dyck conducts a tempestuous love affair worthy of D.H. Lawrence. He has casual conversations with Christ. His amazement at sexual passion leads him to consider the meaning of sex generally, the mystery of genesis, Christ's passion and God's love for man. Meanwhile, as an historian he not only studies the past and the land, but enters into their spirit. They speak in their own voice through the story of Maskepetoon, an Indian warrior who, in the midst of war, embraced peace. Another quest for peace

appears in memories of Mennonite history. All of these themes are brought together in two, high-charged symbolic scenes where Dyck participates first in a passage through hell into Eden, and then in a resurrection of the dead. By the end of the novel, the reader is properly mystified. However, his response is only proper because Wiebe has led him beyond the ordinary, beyond the testimony of the senses (the love story), beyond the lessons of history (Indian and Mennonite) and of theology (the discussions with Jesus) into the realm of the truly mysterious. Like Wiebe's first novel, his latest presents an ordeal which ends just at the point of revelation, when the truth is about to be spoken.

NOTES

1. W.J. Keith, *A Voice in the Land: Essays by and about Rudy Wiebe* (Edmonton: NeWest Press, 1981), p. 67; hereafter abbreviated VL.
2. *Double Vision* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1976), p. x.
3. J. Thiessen, "Canadian Mennonite Literature," *Canadian Literature*, 51 (Winter 1972), p. 66.
4. Dick Harrison, *Unnamed Country: The Struggle for a Canadian Prairie Fiction* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 1977), p. 203.
5. "Passage by Land," *Canadian Literature*, 48 (Spring 1971), p. 26.
6. "The Death and Life of Albert Johnson: collected notes on a possible legend," *Figures in a Ground*, ed., Diane Bessai and David Jackel (Saskatoon: Western Producer Prairie Books, 1978), p. 246.
7. Alan Twigg, *For Openers* (Madiera Park, B.C.: Harbour Publishing, 1981), p. 212.
8. *More Stories from Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1980), p. vii.
9. Ibid.
10. Donald Cameron, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists: Part Two* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1973), p. 158.
11. *The Story-Makers* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1970), p. xxiii.
12. J. Thiessen, "Canadian Mennonite Literature," p. 71.
13. Quoted by John Christian Wenger in *Glimpses of Mennonite History and Doctrine* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1940), p. 175. See also Cornelius J. Dyck, ed., *An Introduction to Mennonite History* (Scottsdale, Penn.: Herald Press, 1967).
14. Victor G. Doerksen, "From Jung-Stillung to Rudy Wiebe: 'Christian Fiction' and the Mennonite Imagination," *Mennonite Images*, ed. Harry Loewen (Winnipeg: Hyperion Press, 1980), pp. 201, 207.
15. William De Fehr, et al., *Harvest: Anthology of Mennonite Writing in Canada* (Centennial Committee of the Mennonite Historical Society of Manitoba, 1974), p. 26; Donald Cameron, *Conversations with Canadian Novelists: Part Two*, p. 148.

16. Cameron, p. 148.
17. Alan Twigg, *For Openers*, p. 210; K.A. Hamilton, ed., *Canada Writes!* (Writers' Union of Canada, 1977), p. 369.
18. Cornelius J. Dyck, *An Introduction to Mennonite History*; John B. Toews, *Czars, Soviets and Mennonites* (Newton, Kansas: Faith and Life Press, 1982). See also Frank H. Epp, *Mennonite Exodus* (Altona, Manitoba: Canadian Mennonite Relief and Immigration Council, 1962) and Al Reimer, "The Russian-Mennonite Experience in Fiction," *Mennonite Images*, pp. 221-235.
19. James Nickel, "A Conversation with Rudy Wiebe," *The Sceptre* (Hillsboro, Kansas: Tabor College, Spring 1964), p. 28; this pamphlet is in the University of Calgary Library collection. Cameron, p. 156.
20. *Stories from Western Canada* (Toronto: Macmillan, 1972), p. xi.
21. "New Land, Ancient Land," *The New Land: Studies in a Literary Theme*, ed. R. Chadbourne and H. Dahlie (Waterloo, Ont.: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 1978), p. 4. See also Wiebe's article "Western Fiction, Past and Future," *Western American Literature*, 6 (Spring 1971), pp. 21-31.
22. "Passage by Land," pp. 26-27.

The Rudy Wiebe papers: first accession. An inventory of the archive at the University of Calgary Libraries.
Compilers: Jean F. Tener, Sandra Mortensen [and] Marlys Chevrefils. Editors: Jean F. Tener [and] Apollonia Steele. [Calgary]: University of Calgary Press, 1986.