

Ethnic Novel About An Ethical Dilemma

This Week's Writer:
ALICE W. LAPP

ON MY DESK is **Mennonite Soldier** by Kenneth Reed, published in 1974 by Herald Press, Scottsdale, Pa. 518 pp. \$6.95.

KEN REED, writer, teacher, editor, and resident of Lancaster County, Pa., writes an ethnic novel about an ethical dilemma. Two Lancaster County Mennonite brothers, Ira and Mastie Stoltzfus, during World War I face the problem of whether or not to cooperate with the U.S. Army and the military draft. Ira is the obedient, serious one who thinks before he acts. Mastie is nasty, headstrong, and quite ready to make his parents suffer a little. Their father Isaac speaks to Mastie about his attitudes and conduct which do not become The Faith. Mastie slams out of the house and rushes to town where he volunteers for the army, goes through basic training, and ships out to the front lines in France.

PASSIVELY, Ira is drafted, transported to a training camp, refuses to cooperate with military orders and is roughed up by a sadistic drill sergeant as well as by other soldiers. Each brother has a more or less continuing relationship with a Mennonite girl back home.

IRA FACES court martial where he and other conscientious objectors explain their reasons for non-cooperation. His speech is long and full of circumlocutions. The colonel's rebuttal is equally long and circuitous. Ira is sentenced to 25 years at Ft. Leavenworth for refusing to plant marigolds, a symbol of cooperation with the military. He subsequently becomes bitter and disillusioned.

THE PRODIGAL Mastie leaves one leg in France as well as any residual shreds of innocence he may have had previously, but he returns to the Susquehanna Valley and the open arms of both girl friend and father. He decides to be a good Mennonite after all. He has a religious experience of sorts.

represents an unambiguous position. It is possible to gain the impression that the C.O. not only got the worst deal but lost his faith in mankind as well, while the returned veteran, in spite of a certain amount of shell shock and pangs of conscience, was welcomed as a hero and approved by the community of both Mennonites and non-Mennonites.

IN TERMS of plot and narrative, **Mennonite Soldier** is a good story. One does hope, however, that the author will, in time, develop a style that is unique and even quotable. The title suggests that an individual who is out of fellowship can still be considered a Mennonite. That is an ethnic notion, not a believers' church practice. At least one needs to ask whether Mennonitism is a condition one is born into or if it is a voluntary commitment of mind and heart. If the latter, then Mastie, at least, was no Mennonite soldier!

(The writer, Mrs. John A. Lapp of Goshen, Ind., is literature secretary of Women's Missionary and Service Commission—Mennonite Church, a graduate of Eastern Mennonite College and Madison College, and a former English teacher.)

ALTHOUGH the time is set in 1918 or so, the reader is bothered by 1960's and 70's type slang and references. The "Mom always liked him best" kind of jealousy is evident between Mastie and Ira. The Red Dragon Market sounds familiar to natives of Lancaster County although their market is Green. Some textual or possibly proofreader's errors are sprinkled here and there as is a bit of confusion about the gender of Mastie's horse. The lifestyle and church order seem to be more Amish than Mennonite in character.

INTOLERANCE to conscientious objectors by unsympathetic neighbors is a documented fact. Differing methods used by the brothers to handle their conscience and attitudes is undoubtedly one faced by many other brothers through history not only in this country or by this sect. The author develops the main characters in such a way that neither

"The years of World War I were a traumatic period for the Mennonite community in the United States. For the first time in over 50 years, the church was faced with a national mobilization in which their young men would be drafted into the military service. . . . The long period that had passed without a major war meant that many young Mennonite men were not as committed to their church's historic peace testimony as in past years. . . . Based on this historical experience, **Mennonite Soldier** does a commendable job in examining these problems and tensions, and the ways in which Mennonites dealt with them."—Duane Shank, associate director, National Interreligious Service Board for Conscientious Objectors.

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