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Review

Hans Landis: Swiss Anabaptist Martyr in Seventeenth Century Documents, introduced, transcribed, and translated by James W. Lowry, co-edited by David J. Rempel Smucker and John L. Ruth (Millersburg, Ohio: Ohio Amish Library, 2003), Pp. 234.

This book focuses on Hans Landis, an early Anabaptist ordained minister and leader of Anabaptists in the area around Zurich, Switzerland. As such, he was a likely target for persecution by church and civil authorities. On various occasions they questioned him, banished him from the state, and ordered his execution in 1614.

This is not a narrative biography. Rather, the book brings together twenty-five documents (drawn from several archives in Europe), relating to these events. The documents are illustrative of early Anabaptist thought and action, and of the mindset of authorities towards the Anabaptists.

As the documents show, basic to the position of the authorities was the threat to both church and state that Anabaptists appeared to be. In an "Official Statement Against Some Anabaptists," including Landis, the authorities describe Anabaptists as those who "would shake and upset not only all Christian order, but also the earthly government, and remove sovereign authority and snatch away the obedience of the subject." Such actions "demand that such evil will be warded off with a serious punishment" (pp. 91, 93).

Responses to specific charges show the position of the Anabaptists. To the charge that he was against civil authority, Landis protests the opposite, namely, that he honors government: he "had conducted himself correctly on matters dealing with his outward duties as a citizen, and that God would be satisfied with his conscience somehow..." But he enters the Anabaptist caveat that "where his conscience is concerned, he followed God's Word" (p. 119).

The Reformed ministers ask whether he thought he had sinned because he rebaptized as adults those who had received infant baptism (a key concept of Anabaptism). Landis's response is clear: "I should say not! I did not baptize anyone unless he had departed from his sins and had the testimony of a repentant life" (p. 123).

Landis is accused of encouraging Anabaptists to practice community of goods and of taking collections for the "common good" as a means "to entice the poor and the hungry." Landis denies the charges: Anabaptists

have no revenues, no treasurer; although they lend money (as individuals), they charge no interest (pp. 123, 125).

His responses on the established church also illustrate Anabaptist thought. People are saved by grace; however, to be Christians they must act right (implying, of course, that people of the established church do not) (p. 141). Once in addressing ministers, he declares: "I might grant that you preach the Gospel and teach what you want, but at the same time do not lead a pious life." Earlier in the same passage he reminds the ministers that he told them "a long time ago" that they "should live and walk according to the command of Christ and after the example of the Apostles...." But because they do not live and walk in this way, "I do not want you, nor do I need you: I do not desire you" (pp. 143, 145).

Landis was jailed several times, as were some fellow Anabaptists (briefly included in the documents). Condemned to work in the galleys, he was taken to the prison at Solothurn. From there, however, he escaped—apparently with the collusion of the guards. Banished from the state, he insisted on returning (out of love for family and friends), but this action to the authorities seemed to invite recapture. In protesting the authorities' right to banish him, Landis argues from scripture (Ps 24:1) that the world belongs to the Lord, thus as a follower of the Lord, he has a right to remain in the state (p. 193).

Illustrative also of early Anabaptists is the manner of Landis's death. Immediately before his execution, he declared, "It is not enough to believe in Christ, one must also suffer for him." He informed his persecutors that he had pardoned and forgiven everyone, then he "looked at the executioner and said, 'and you too,' and smiled at him." The writer of the account states that at the "main pit" where he was executed, "he knelt down and, for his faith and upon his confession, died willingly and gladly. He was cheerful and brave until his end" (pp. 145, 147).

A significant feature of the book is the availability of the documents in both the original language (on the left pages) and in their English translations (largely literal) on the opposite, facing pages. Accompanying the documents are numerous helpful notes, placed at the bottom of the pages, as befits a scholarly production. Of great value is the introduction to each of the documents, as is a brief (perhaps too brief) introductory chapter which appears to be designed for the general reader unversed in early Anabaptist history.

The last document in the book is an unrhymed, forty-six stanza ballad recounting the life and death of John Landis. The ballad is still sung, in part, on occasion by Amish groups. Following the ballad is a three-page

bibliography listing archival sources (in France, the Netherlands, and Switzerland), and books and articles relating directly and indirectly to the Landis story, slightly less than half of which are English titles. The index is substantial, listing not only names of people and places but also subjects (the failure to do the latter is the fault of too many indexes). The book contains fifteen pictorial illustrations, including maps, woodcuts, photographs, and early drawings of towns, castles, and prisons.

The sponsors of this book were fortunate to obtain the services of Mennonite historian James W. Lowry as translator and author of the introductions to the documents. His facility in the German, Dutch, and Classical languages made him a valuable, indeed rare, choice to be producer of this volume.

The book is the first in a projected series that will bring together scattered and often unpublished documents on early Anabaptism. This is good news. The series will make available for the first time many sources of value to scholars in the field and of interest to the general reader.

Those who find pleasure in the appearance and the handling of books will be delighted with this volume. The graphics, print, paper, illustrations, even the “feel” of the hardcover binding are unusually well conceived and carried out. To hold such a book in one’s hand is to have some hope that the printed word may survive along with the electronic word. That the publisher of the book is the Ohio Amish Library of Millersburg, Ohio is witness that even small publishers can create, in poet John Keats’s words, “a thing of beauty.”

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