New Icelandic Ethnoscapes: Material, visual, and oral terrains of cultural expression in Icelandic-Canadian history, 1875-present

By

Laurie K. Bertram PhD

A thesis submitted in conformity with the requirements for the degree of PhD

Graduate Department of History

University of Toronto

© Copyright by Laurie K. Bertram (2010)
Abstract: New Icelandic Ethnoscapes: Material, visual, and oral terrains of cultural expression in Icelandic-Canadian history, 1875-present

Laurie K. Bertram, Doctor of Philosophy

Department of History, University of Toronto, 2010

This dissertation uses the Icelandic-Canadian community to discuss alternate media and the production of “ethnoscapes,” or landscapes of ethnic identity, on the prairies from 1875 to the present. Drawing from larger historiographies of food, gender, material culture, oral history, and commemoration, it offers an investigation into power, acculturation, and representation using often-marginalized terrains of Canadian ethnic expression. Each of the project’s five chapters examines the cultural history of the community through a different medium. The first chapter uses clothing, one of the most intimate and immediate ways that migrants experienced transition in North America, to explore the impact of poverty, marginalization, disease, climate, and eventual access to Anglo commercial goods on migrant culture. Chapter two analyses the role of food and drink, specifically coffee, alcohol, and vinarterta (a festive layered torte) in everyday life and the development of migrant identity. The third chapter analyses the growth of conservatism and depictions of women in the Icelandic-Canadian community in the twentieth century, with a focus on the decline of radical Icelandic language publications and the rise of ethnic spectacles. Chapter four analyses the impact of centennial and multicultural heritage campaigns on Icelandic-Canadian life, popular narrative, and domestic space by tracing the emergence of the koffort (immigrant trunk) in intergenerational family commemorative practices. Chapter five continues the discussion of popular memory with an examination of the compelling hjátru (superstitious) narrative tradition in the community. It illustrates that Icelandic migrants imported and adapted this tradition to the North American context in a way that also reflected
their understanding of colonial violence as an unresolved, disruptive, and damaging intergenerational inheritance.

Providing an alternate view of the community beyond either cultural endurance or assimilation, this dissertation argues that the multiple material, visual, and oral conduits through which members have experienced life in the New World have been crucial to the construction of Icelandic-Canadian identity. It is through these terrains that community members have continually engaged with public expectations and demands for both ethnic performance and suppression. The fluidity of these forms and forums and their facilitation of members’ engagement with, adaptations to, and contestation of images of ethnicity and history have enabled the continual construction of Icelandic identities in North America 135 years after departure.
For my parents and my grandparents
Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Franca Iacovetta and Nelson Gerrard for their wonderful guidance and support throughout this project. I would also like to extend kind thanks to those who provided additional feedback, including Frances Swyripa, Elspeth Brown, Steve Penfold, and Adrienne Hood. The completion of this project would not have been possible without the creative input, care, and strong support of my family and several wonderful people who helped me stay motivated and in front of my laptop during a time of transition: Maya Fontaine, J.J. Kegan McFadden, Jón Olafson, Freya Olafson, Jo Snyder, Caitlin G. Brown, Tinna Grétarsdóttir, Colin Druhan, R. Arthur Charles, Robbie Richardson, Ryan Van Huijstee, T. Iman Dupree, Benjamin Lefebvre, Jodi Giesbrecht, Sarah Michaelson, Maggie MacDonald, Emily Bitting, Andrea Bertram-Ladouceur, Sheila Shewchuk, and Stephen Bertram. Thank you also to the many members of the Icelandic community for their generous support, including Atli Ásmundsson, Sigrid Johnson, and those who shared their stories and thoughts over some lovely cups of coffee. Warm thanks also go out to several devoted Icelandic teachers who helped me læra íslensku including Margrét Björgvinsdóttir, Helga Hilmisdóttir, the language staff at Stofnun Árna Magnússonar and Háskólasetur Vestfjarða, and particularly to Haraldur Bessason. Kind thanks also to Donald Bailey, Tamara Myers, Alexander Freund, Darlene Abreu-Ferreira, and Ruth Frager for their support. This research was made possible in part by funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council.
Contents

Note regarding language VII

Introduction VIII

I. Fibre terrains of early New Iceland: Labour, class, and clothing, 1875-1895 1

II. Coffee, booze, and The Striped Lady: Icelandic food and drink in the Canadian context, 1875-present 44

III. From Freyja to Fjallkona: Gender, Dissent, and political containment in Icelandic-Canadian Visual Culture, 1910-1955 83

IV. Public Spectacles, Private Narratives: Canadian Heritage Campaigns, Maternal Trauma, and the Rise of the Koffort in Icelandic-Canadian Popular Memory 120

V. Graftarnes: Space, Power, and Superstition in New Iceland 146

Conclusion 179

Figures 190

Works Cited 254
Note regarding language

Abbreviated Icelandic Character Pronunciation Guide

Á (á)- “ow”
Í (í)- “ee”
Ð (ð)- “th”
Ö (ö)- “ehh”
Þ (þ)- “th”

The Use of Icelandic Words and Names

This dissertation contains many Icelandic words. To avoid distraction, Icelandic words are italicized and translated in their first use only. Icelandic names are mostly patronymic. Last names are usually created using the first name of the father (or occasionally the mother) and the gendered suffix “son” or “dóttir” (daughter). For example, Stefan, the son of Jón would be named Stefan Jónsson, while his sister Solveig would be called Solveig Jónsdóttir. Traditionally, women do not adopt their husbands’ names upon marriage. Unlike the English, European Icelanders also do not refer to people by their last names in formal situations. Even the most famous authors and politicians are simply referred to by their first names, such as “Halldór” (Laxness, Nobel-winning author) and “Jóhanna” (Sigurðadóttir, Prime Minister of Iceland). Early historical documents reveal that Icelandic migrants to North America quickly adopted the English emphasis on the last names of husbands and fathers in formal situations. Canadian registration protocol also required that children born in Canada be given their fathers’ last names. This resulted in the disappearance of last names ending the suffix “dóttir” in Canada and women’s adoption of male names, to the amusement of European Icelanders. This dissertation applies the European Icelandic model of using the first names of individuals in references to European Icelanders and applies the more formal use of last names to Icelandic North Americans. Similarly, it has also retained the anglicized spellings of names of Icelandic-North American authors and figures.
Introduction

I was scheduled to meet with the Icelandic consul in Winnipeg on October 6, 2008, to discuss research opportunities in Iceland the following year. I arrived in the sprawling consulate overlooking the Red River, not too far from where the shacks of early Icelandic labourers living in Shanty Town in the 1870s had originally stood. The consulate’s cavernous interior, impressive art collection, and pale marble floors covered by hand-woven Persian carpets were largely the product of Iceland’s recent financial boom. The residence stood in stark contrast to the earliest shacks made of scrap lumber where poor male Icelandic labourers had gathered together to rest, eat, and drink together beside the same river in the 1870s. The consul greeted me politely but appeared rushed and distracted. He led me into his office where his desk lay buried beneath papers, folders, and several mugs of coffee in various states of consumption. Our conversation would have to be brief, he apologized. My meeting was, by chance, poorly timed to coincide with the first official day of the *kreppa*, or Icelandic banking crisis.

The *kreppa* was a result of a refinancing crisis and bank run that affected all three of that country’s major banking institutions and signaled the start of what many observers have deemed the worst banking crisis in global economic history. It also marked a new period of tremendous political and social unrest in Iceland, including the 2009 “Saucepan Revolution” in which unprecedented protests, featuring Icelanders banging in saucepans, forced the resignation of the reigning coalition government. In the following year, amid intense inflation, growing unemployment, and skyrocketing mortgage and car payments, Icelandic emigration began to rise.

Emigration has doubled in the past four years, prompting many Icelanders to revisit the mass exodus of the nineteenth century in which one-quarter to one-third of the island’s population emigrated to the New World. The majority of these migrants, also known in Icelandic as *Vestur-Íslendingar*, or Western Icelanders, established a block settlement called New Iceland in Manitoba and a number of other settlements across the Canadian prairies and the American plains. Their departure was a response to the brutal climate conditions in the country, including a devastating volcanic eruption in 1875, as well as the promise of economic opportunities in North America. Prior to a recent renaissance in Icelandic North American culture and history, some Icelanders viewed nineteenth-century emigration in a negative light, accusing migrants of abandoning their country in its hour of need. Until the financial collapse virtually halted
economic immigration in the twentieth century, Iceland faced international accusations of xenophobia and discrimination against Polish economic immigrants, the largest ethnic minority in the country.\(^1\) The negative reactions to both nineteenth-century emigration and twentieth- and twenty-first century immigration to Iceland reflects an older belief that migration is a fundamentally destructive cultural and economic force. The prospect of a new exodus, however, has pushed Vestur-Íslendingar to the front of public consciousness. This dissertation responds to this renewed interest as an opportunity to reassess and reframe the history of Icelandic migration to the New World as culturally productive, rather than degenerative process.

The kreppa and this new external focus on Vestur-Íslendingar in many respects also prompted a re-evaluation of what constitutes Icelandic-Canadian identity. In an attempt to restructure their economy, Icelanders have also identified the almost 90 000 Icelandic identifying Canadians as a vital market for tourism and commercial goods. As Arjun Appadurai writes, in the “fertile ground” of deterritorialized communities “money, commodities, and persons are involved in ceaselessly chasing each other around the world.”\(^2\) He also cautions, however, that the ideas and images produced by mass media often are only partial guides to the goods and experiences that deterritorialized populations transfer to one another.”\(^3\) Yet, after 135 years of separation, what will these cousins “recognize” in each other beyond a propensity for sunburns and a few words of broken Icelandic? This dissertation replies to this renewed interest and a recent increase in transatlantic cultural exchanges between the two by providing an in-depth examination of the shape of Icelandic-Canadian cultural history. It does not attempt to fit migration into Icelandic or Canadian nationalist historical narratives, including an imagined tradition of linguistic endurance or a multi-ethnic nation building project. Rather, it uses the Icelandic-Canadian community to discuss the role of alternate media in the production of “ethnoscapes,” or landscapes of ethnic identity, on the Canadian prairies from 1875 to the present.

---


\(^3\) Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 38.
Appadurai argues that the notion of landscapes offers an important framework for understanding global cultural flows. Ethnographic studies, he writes, must respond to the deterritorialization of migrant identities by moving beyond the older focus on “tightly territorialised, spatially bounded, historically unselfconscious or culturally homogenous” communities.\(^4\) Ethnoscapes and other ‘scapes, including “mediascapes” (bodies of images that obscure divisions between real and fictional landscapes) and “ideoscapes” (images that represent ideologies of the state and its opponents) better reflect the construction of transnational notions of community and belonging by illuminating “the building blocks of [these] ‘imagined worlds.’”\(^5\) Attention to deterritorialization is essential to the study of the Icelandic-Canadian community, since even the histories of relatively cohesive Icelandic colonies and neighbourhoods, such as New Iceland and Winnipeg’s West End, have also been characterised by mass-emigration. Yet, as this dissertation contends, community members have continually engaged in the construction of a sense of “Icelandic-Canadianess” that transcends national identities through a range of images, things, spaces, and bodies. As Frances Swyripa illustrates in her work on ethno-religious identities in Western Canada, notions of identity and belonging have been shaped by “emotional attachment to the land at personal and group levels... [as well as] a series of relationships both internal and external to the prairies.”\(^6\) Matthew Frye Jacobson argues that this kind of attention to diverse modes in the cultural production of diasporic imagination is important to moving beyond the “hegemonic frame of migrant nationalism” by studying the ways in which community members employed symbols, objects, and images, including nationalist icons, often for “quite different purposes and to quite different effects by different factions.”\(^7\) In so doing, writes Jacobson, historians can access not only the diverse and shifting internal life of the community, but also the “texture,” or the appearance, feel, and consistency, of migrant cultures.\(^8\) Appadurai similarly supports this more tactile, de-centred, and three-dimensional approach to the analysis of migrant culture and identity, including the inclusion of

\(^8\) Jacobson, *Special Sorrows*, 8.
smell, sight, and sound. Migrant culture, he asserts, depends on forms of expression that are “fluid, irregular,” and “profoundly interactive.”

From the “peculiar hats” worn by nineteenth-century Icelandic migrants, to the twentieth-century appearance of vínarterta, a festive, layered Icelandic dessert in the pages of *McCall’s Magazine* and *Martha Stewart Living*, images and objects have played a crucial role in public and private constructions of Icelandic-North American identity in the past 135 years. Icelandic-Canadian cultural history has been characterised by remarkable change, the vast majority of which has remained unexplored. This project focuses on the implications of cultural forms and forums deemed inauthentic, trivial, and taboo, including material culture, food, family narratives and popular commemoration, trauma, bodies, fibre and clothing, landscape, and superstitious belief. It incorporates hitherto neglected sources on the community, including collections of Icelandic objects in museums and homes, folklore archives, as well as Icelandic language sources, such as migrant letters and periodicals. These sources shed new light on the history of the Icelandic community which, as Gunnar Karlsson notes, is too “often shrouded behind the veil of the language.” Examining these forms and forums also responds to the need for a cultural history of the Icelandic-Canadian community and larger discussions on new and emerging methodological approaches to Canadian ethnic history.

Many Icelanders who moved to North America in the nineteenth century described their experiences using an array of historical symbols imported from their homeland. Though they faced criticism from officials, family members, and friends who remained behind, most migrants believed that their journey to the New World was an expression of their innately Icelandic traits, especially ùtbrå (adventurousness) and independence. Icelanders saw themselves not as impoverished mass-migrants, but as authors, scholars, and adventurers following in the footsteps of Leifur Eiríksson, who “discovered” North America almost 900 years prior. To help contextualize the historical and cultural framework in which the migrants operated and expressed themselves this dissertation must first provide a brief overview of Icelandic and Icelandic-Canadian history. It will then describe the historiography surrounding the community, with an

---

emphasis on major developments and works, followed by synopses of this project’s five chapters.

Locating the Community

Migrants departed from Iceland almost exactly 1000 years after the arrival of the first Norwegian settlers on the island. Steeped in the romantic nationalism of the Icelandic independence movement, they were keenly aware of the timing of their departure and used it to justify their decision to leave. Unlike many other European nations, Icelanders enjoy a relatively complete and well-documented history of human habitation, thanks to texts such as Landnámabók, or the Book of Settlement. As an isolated subarctic island formed by oceanic volcanic eruptions, Iceland was unpopulated until the ninth century CE. Early written sources suggest that Irish or Scottish monks were the first to inhabit the island, settling in another smaller island just off the south-eastern coast that the Norse called “Papey” in reference to their discovery of Papar (priests) there. Several Scandinavian sailors visited Iceland for short period before the first permanent settler, Ingolfur Arnarson, arrived in 874 on the site of modern-day Reykjavík. He reportedly chose the site after casting his rune staves, similar to totem poles, into the water. He built his first home near the beach where they washed ashore. The appearance of successive waves of pagan Norse settlers on the island coincided with the disappearance of the Papar, who were either murdered by the new arrivals or opted not to live among non-Christians.

Early Icelandic society was comprised largely of Norse settlers and a substantial population of Celtic (predominantly Irish female) slaves. Recent research into the genetic composition of the Icelandic population reveals that more than 50% of Icelandic women were originally of Celtic origin. The island officially converted to Christianity in the year 1000, though Pagan Icelanders were still permitted to practice the old faith in private. Elements of Pagan belief endured on the island over the next few centuries and pre-Christian Norse texts, such as Hávamál (Sayings of the High One) and Völuspá (Prophecy of the Seeress) are still read widely and cited by Icelanders. The country remained officially Catholic until the middle of the sixteenth century, when the Danish crown imposed Lutheranism on the populace in a bloody conflict that ended with the execution of Bishop Jón Arason in 1550. European Icelandic society has remained predominantly Lutheran since this period, though religious diversity and several schisms have shaped the history of their Icelandic-North American counterparts.
Icelanders widely regarded the Commonwealth Period (930-1262) as the country’s golden age. During this period the country established and maintained a representative assembly known as the Alþingi, one of the earliest such assemblies in Europe. This period overlapped with what European scholars termed the Viking Age (800-1050) in which Icelanders established a number of colonies in the Atlantic world, stretching from the British Isles to Greenland and the Eastern coast of North America. The Norse were some of the most technologically sophisticated European groups in the early medieval period, which helped them to wage an extensive series of successful military campaigns and occupations against other European regions and establish trading routes extended into Russia and the Middle East. This period was also one of literary and scholarly development, which culminated in the transcription of the Icelandic Sagas, one of the cornerstones of Icelandic culture; but scholars have been critical of assertions that this period was an economically and socially prosperous one.11 This golden age ended during a long period of civil conflict in the thirteenth century, largely due to the accumulation of power and wealth by a few influential families and more than sixty years of ensuing blood feuds. Exhausted chieftains agreed to accept the rule of the Norwegian king in 1262 to end this long period of strife, and with it, one of Iceland’s most culturally prolific and economically successful periods. Title to Iceland passed to the Danish royal family in 1380. Iceland remained a colony of Denmark for over five and-a-half centuries, until Iceland declared independence in 1940.

In his book, *Iceland’s 1100 years: History of a Marginal Society*, Gunnar Karlsson argues that the country suffered from the combined effects of the oppressive effects of colonial control, inadequate governance, and brutal climate conditions for most of the second millennium.12 Scholars widely regard this long period as an economically and culturally stagnant one, though Icelanders largely maintained the rich oral and literary traditions they inherited from earlier periods. The twelfth century signaled the beginning of Europe’s entrance into a general cooling trend, also known as the Little Ice Age. For Iceland, this decline in temperature had a disruptive effect on food production, particularly fishing, as the growth of pack ice around the island made sailing dangerous and more difficult. Pandemics also radically affected life on the island. In the fifteenth century alone the bubonic plague killed approximately 50% of the

12 See for example, Karlsson, *Iceland’s 1100 Years*, 100, 177, 205.
population. Widespread disease returned in the eighteenth century, complicated by the eruption of the volcano Laki in 1783. The poisonous gasses from the eruption killed approximately one-quarter of the population and innumerable livestock, contributing to widespread starvation. The eruption was so severe that it blanketed parts of continental Europe with poisonous gas and caused widespread economic disruptions. An estimated 23,000 people died in Britain alone when the cloud spread across the North Atlantic in 1783. These periods of devastation coupled with popular belief in Pagan and Christian fatalism, or the belief in the pre-destination of history, have shaped cultural expression on the island, as will be discussed further in chapter five.

Though climate conditions continued to hamper economic activity and quality of life, the nineteenth century was a period of intense cultural change in Iceland. Icelanders who had left for school in Copenhagen in the middle of the century were exposed to the spread of European independence and nationalist movements that culminated in widespread revolt in 1848. Students, such as the artist Sigurður Guðmundsson and independence leader Jón Sigurðsson, transported the lessons and values of these movements back to Iceland, and created a comprehensive campaign to remove Danish political and cultural influence from the island. This period also signaled the start of the linguistic preservation movement, which responded to the endangerment of the Icelandic language and the prevalence of Danish across the country. The Icelandic nationalist movement also signaled a renaissance in history and literature that glorified the period of independence and cultural achievement during the country’s golden age.

Another long period of severe climate conditions involving pack ice and volcanic activity in the nineteenth century still seriously affected the lives of Icelanders, particularly those on the northern and eastern coasts of the island. These conditions, coupled with the publication and dissemination of accounts of opportunity in North America in newspapers and letters from migrating Danes sparked several emigration movements in the country. The country’s migration movement began in 1855 with the departure of a small group of Icelanders to Utah after a visit from Mormon missionaries ended in successful conversions. Influenced by the European Brazilian migration movement in the mid-nineteenth century, which promised migrant farmers lucrative shares in the country’s coffee industry, a small party of Icelanders also left for Brazil in 1863 to investigate the possibility of a colony there. This expedition created significant interest from Icelandic families and widespread protest from Icelandic officials, but did not result in
large-scale migration. Many Icelanders began to seriously contemplate opportunities for migration to Canada and the United States again in the 1870s. Páll Þórðarson became the primary advocate and organizer for immigrants to the United States, while Sigtryggur Jónasson promoted and organized mass-Icelandic settlement in Canada. The Canadian government initially hoped to use Icelanders to develop un-cultivated land in central and eastern Canada. Icelanders began to arrive en masse in 1873 but found the land and provisions the state provided to be insufficient. Icelanders who initially settled in Nova Scotia found the area ill-suited to their needs, while other migrants marooned in the Muskoka wilderness outside of Kinmount, Ontario, struggled with hunger, cold, hard labour, and the spread of disease in a poorly appointed settlement.

Migrant leaders began to seek out alternatives to these early settlement locations and received favourable reports about possibilities in and around the newly founded province of Manitoba. Jónasson and John Taylor, an immigrant agent, lobbied the federal government for funds to relocate the group onto land on the western shores of Lake Winnipeg, approximately eighty kilometers north of Winnipeg. The government initially rejected the request, arguing that “they had an immigration but not a migration allotment.”13 Fortunately for the party, the Governor-General of Canada, Lord Dufferin, had a well-established interest in Icelandic history, culture, and geography. Dufferin was among numerous nineteenth-century educated “gentleman travelers” drawn to the island’s unusual geography, fishing and hunting opportunities, and Norse past.14 He visited there in 1856 and published Letters from High Latitudes, a popular book on the subject.15 Dufferin intervened on the group’s behalf and helped to secure support for the move. In 1875 the majority of the group at Kinmount left for Manitoba and arrived in Winnipeg in October that year.

Winter was approaching when the group arrived in Winnipeg in October of 1875. Several Icelanders chose to stay in Winnipeg, but the bulk of the group decided to press on to the site of the colony. The colonists arrived at Willow Point on the southern border of the colony on

October 21, a place that has since become a significant site of commemoration in the community. As will be discussed further in chapter four, these campaigns often focus on a large white rock on the beach where an Icelandic woman reportedly gave birth shortly after arrival. Though the weather was unseasonably warm, the group was disappointed to find that the government had made little preparation for their arrival. Accustomed to building houses out of turf in their treeless island home, the Icelanders struggled to erect cabins for themselves on a site they called Gimli, after the hall where the Norse Gods arrived after the destruction of the universe in The Prose Edda. Wilhelm Kristjanson writes that these early houses were “hastily constructed” shanties, with “walls of unpeeled logs, plastered with mud or clay.” Each structure was about twelve by sixteen, he added. Augustus Baldwin visited the settlement eighteen months later and recalled that these buildings “were of the worst description.” He reported that the crowded houses contained up to nineteen people as well as livestock, probably in an effort to stay warm. “I had to stoop to go into nearly every house, there were some doors so low that I had to go on my hands and knees to get in and such filth,” he wrote. “I cannot describe it,” he continued, “they would all be huddled together like so many pigs- and then those houses that had room, they would have their cows in them…you can imagine it did not smell very sweet.” But, as Lord Dufferin recalled from his visit to the struggling colony, literature remained a mainstay of migrant life. Even in the miserable conditions of the early settlement, he wrote, “I scarcely entered a hovel that did not contain a library.”

The eruption of the volcano Askja showered parts of eastern and northern Iceland with ash and poisonous gas again in 1875, causing widespread livestock death and intensifying hunger and the desire to migrate. In spite of the efforts of Icelandic officials who hoped to stem the tide of emigration, the eruption triggered a second, larger wave of departures. During their journey the group passed through the migration sheds in Quebec City. Here, members speculated, one

16 Kristjanson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, 35.
17 Augustus Baldwin, Augustus Baldwin to Phoebe (Baldwin), 13 March 1877. Letter. Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM) MG8 A6-3.
boy was exposed to smallpox, either through contact with another child or infected clothing. The group brought the disease to New Iceland where an epidemic ensued in the winter of 1876-7. Due to overcrowding, severe cold, and lack of food, few households escaped unscathed. The disease spread to neighbouring First Nations with devastating effects. The epidemic killed the majority of the Sandy Bar Band and travelled to other First Nations communities around the Lake. The provincial government imposed quarantine on New Iceland in the early winter of 1876 that remained in place for 228 days, long after the last suspected case of smallpox had ended. Angered at the needlessly long duration, Icelanders threatened to march en masse across the quarantine boundary in July of 1877. The board of health conceded and lifted the quarantine.

Icelandic migration continued to North America until the start of the First World War. In total, approximately one-quarter to one-third of the island’s population left for the New World over a span of four decades. Though many remained ardent nationalists and supporters of the independence movement, the seemingly endless periods of hardship imbued migrant culture with a strong sense of political and social critique. Rebel rousers such as Sigurður Júl Johannesson, who faced censure for their public critiques of the Icelandic and Danish elite, viewed the old regime at home with contempt, as did others who witnessed Icelandic officials attempting to rid themselves of poor families on district relief by encouraging them to migrate.\textsuperscript{19} Migrant literature was rife with references to the economic and political stagnation at home, while attempting to cope with a very long period of what appeared to be divinely imposed punishment. The colony’s early paper, \textit{Framfari}, took up the issue in an article entitled “Are the Icelanders born to everlasting hunger and suffering?”\textsuperscript{20} Using the medium of prose, one anonymous poet announced to Iceland that “I love you little or not at all...” in justifying his decision to migrate. “I love everything blooming, living and bright,” he wrote, “but see here most things that destroy them, and drag them into a battle with piercing suffering which chokes and destroys all life.”\textsuperscript{21}

Historians have hotly debated the establishment of a municipal council in the colony, also popularly referred to as “The Republic of New Iceland.” The council’s primary focus was municipal governance and the establishment and maintenance of Icelandic-language schools. It is

\textsuperscript{19} For references to Icelandic officials attempting to dissuade migrants from departing see J.B., “Farewell to Iceland from one leaving for America,” \textit{Framfari} 1.18 April 1878: 177-9.
\textsuperscript{20} “Are the Icelanders born to everlasting hunger and suffering?”\textit{Framfari} 1.18, (5 April 1878): 173-6.
\textsuperscript{21} J.B., 3.
clear that the council did not intend to supplant new loyalties to the Canadian state, though it did reflect their desire for a degree of political and cultural autonomy. The “republic” has since become a popular topic for twentieth- and twenty-first century community members, who frequently place the creation of an autonomous migrant state within a larger imagined tradition of Icelandic freedom and independence. Though Icelanders hoped to establish a new, linguistically and culturally cohesive colony capable of reviving their culture in the New World, conflict, climate, and poverty created early fissures. Poor soil, dense brush, and isolation hampered early farming efforts and colonists were forced to subsist on a diet comprised almost entirely of fish. Reports of the impressive success of Mennonite farmers south of Winnipeg further discouraged the settlers.22 During these years the community also endured an intense period of religious strife.23 Most Icelanders aligned themselves with one of two pastors in the community: Páll Thorláksson, who represented conservative Norwegian Lutheran Synod, or Jón Bjarnason, a Lutheran minister who travelled from Iceland to serve in the community. Thorláksson’s conservatism, as well as his criticisms of community leaders and the editorial staff of Framfari who backed Bjarnason created tension in the colony. Bjarnason’s followers also criticized Thorláksson for securing badly needed aid for colonists from the Norwegian Lutheran Synod after sending them a request that Bjarnason followers referred to as “the begging letter.” Motivated by the tense social climate and harsh physical conditions in New Iceland, Thorláksson led a segment of the colony’s population to a new settlement in Mountain, North Dakota in 1878. This departure signaled the beginning of a larger exodus from the colony, as families began to scout out new homes in other regions in Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and the United States. Even after the Dakota departures there were 1,029 people in New Iceland in 1879, but by 1881 only 250 people remained in the colony.24

The colony eventually recovered from the exodus but lost their right to independent Icelandic-language schools under the Manitoba Schools Act in 1890. New Iceland was also opened to non-Icelandic settlers in 1897. The site of the colony has continued to function as a

---

22 Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 98.
symbolic centre for the community in North America, but it was quite clear that by the end of the
nineteenth century it was neither the biggest, nor the most successful settlement of Icelanders in
the New World. By 1883 there were three times as many Icelanders living in Winnipeg as there
were in New Iceland. Migrants flocked to several different neighbourhoods within the city,
including Point Douglas and Shanty Town, drawn by the promise of plentiful manual labour jobs
for men and a very strong demand for female domestics, seamstresses, and laundresses. At the
turn of the century, however, the city’s West End had drawn the bulk of the migrants and their
descendants. The establishment of Icelandic households, boarding houses, cafes, and
employment agencies also drew new arrivals to Winnipeg, rather than to the colony. When the
colony’s newspaper Framfari folded in 1880, it was succeeded by a series of publications, most
of which were printed out of Winnipeg. The most prominent of these newspapers were the
weeklies Heimskringla (established in 1886) which who drew its membership from the growing
Unitarian Church and supporters of the Conservative Party and Lögberg, (established in 1888)
which represented the views of the Lutheran Church and Liberal Party supporters. The Lögberg-
Heimskringla divide does not adequately reflect the range of political belief in the community,
however. As will be discussed further in chapter three, the Canadian community produced more
than twenty Icelandic and, to a lesser extent, English-language periodicals before 1956, including
the anarcho-feminist monthly Freyja (1898-1910) and the radical, Winnipeg General Strike-era
paper, Voröld (1918-1921).

Although scholars such as Birna Arnbjörnsdóttir write that the Icelandic language
endured longer than the languages of other Scandinavian groups in Canada, the process of
anglicization began almost as soon as Icelanders encountered others living in Canada.\(^{25}\)
Language loss amongst the young was a significant source of concern for community leaders and
prompted the establishment of Icelandic-language children’s columns in Icelandic-language
ewspapers and Icelandic classes for Canadian-born generations at institutions such as the Jón
Bjarnason Academy (1913-1940). Xenophobia, wartime nationalism, urbanization, as well as the
complexity of the language, all contributed to the limited appeal of teaching the language to
successive generations in twentieth-century urban centres, though Birna notes that the language

---

Press, 2006).
endured longer in the isolation of New Iceland. In the past twenty years, classes and exchanges have also contributed to the endurance of the language and some Icelandic community members continue to speak and read Icelandic. The establishment of the English-language magazine *The Icelandic Canadian* in 1942 and the 1959 amalgamation and eventual anglicization of *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla* all reflected the steady decline of the language in North America. This decline coincided with the dissolution of other Icelandic cultural institutions and forces during this period, including the dispersal of the Icelandic neighbourhood in the West End, secularization and the decline of the Lutheran church, the collapse of Icelandic organizations and libraries in urban and rural areas, and the death of Icelandic-born and first-generation Canadian born community members.

**Historiography**

Yet, in spite of the decline of traditional points of cohesion, including core cultural organizations, language, and faith, a strong sense of Icelandic-Canadian identity endures into the present. The number of Canadians who identify as Icelandic has actually increased in the past fifteen years. The *Lögberg-Heimskringla* has also survived into the present, despite numerous predictions of its demise in the past fifty years, and new events such as the Icelandic arts festival Núnanow have become popular draws for young audiences. Such developments confront the tendency within Icelandic-Canadian historiography to depict twentieth- and twenty-first century ethnic cultural expression as part of the long decline towards total assimilation. Scholars and community members alike have long referenced the “growing reality of [the] impending death” of Icelandic institutions and identity in North America. Scholars claim that this impending death is a reflection of a variety of factors, but most frequently attribute it to the disinterest of younger generations and the growth of heritage spectacles in place of more “authentic” forms of ethnic expression. Birna contends that the interest of fourth and fifth-generation Icelandic Canadians in their culture in the 1960s was actually “a sign that the assimilation process is near

completion or complete.”  

Anne Brydon writes that older community narratives and identities have little currency with younger community members and that “few young people are motivated to identify actively with an image of Icelandicness” that she argues has been “largely drained of the rich complexity of human existence.”

Older ideas about Icelandic assimilation and cultural death are based in the pervasive nineteenth- and early twentieth-century notions of the racial and cultural similarity of Icelanders to the British. The assumption that Scandinavians are more easily assimilated into Anglo-North American culture also characterizes broader scholarly depictions of Scandinavian migration. The result has been little work on the ongoing construction of Scandinavian identities more than fifty years after nineteenth-century arrivals. Most often, scholars such as Hildor Arnald Barton work on the life and “death” of the Swedish-American community, depict the transition from a largely European-born membership to one composed of predominantly anglicized, modern North American subjects as one of the final stages of cultural degeneration and death.

This belief in Icelandic Canadian assimilation has not hampered the production of numerous works devoted to its history. Scholars and community members alike have produced a considerable number of academic and popular historical works in the twentieth century. Early, multi-volume Icelandic language publications such as Thorstein Thorsteinsson’s *Saga Íslandinda í Vesturheimi* (History of the Icelanders in the New World) and Ólafs S. Thorgeisson’s *Almanak* provided comprehensive retrospectives on community events and personalities for Icelandic-Canadian audiences during the first half of the twentieth century. Such publications are part of a larger body of *minningarrit* (commemorative biography) histories that paid tribute to community members while also responding to broader Anglo-Canadian notions of “meaningful” history and experience. The attempts to fit the early experiences of migrants into Canadian metanarratives is evident in the histories such as the *Minningarrit Íslenzkra Hermanna* (In

---


Commemoration of Icelandic Canadian Soldiers) volumes published following World War One and Two by the Jón Sigurdsson Chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire.\textsuperscript{33} (IODE)

The emergence of numerous migrant autobiographies in the 1930s similarly reflects the influence of the Western Canadian “pioneer” genre, which celebrated the rustic encounters of early settlers in the wilderness. This rise in the popularity of pioneer histories coincided with the fiftieth anniversary of the settlement of New Iceland in 1925 and the Canadian Diamond Jubilee celebrations in 1927, a subject that has recently received considerable attention by cultural historians such as Robert Cupido.\textsuperscript{34} Cupido writes that organizers hoped to use jubilee pageants to replace parochial allegiances and prejudices with “an authentic Canadian national feeling.”\textsuperscript{35} The jubilee celebrations paid tribute to surviving “Old Settlers,” and “more particularly, those in the West who took up land in the picturesque manner of the ox-train and the prairie-schooner.”\textsuperscript{36} This specific vision of “pioneering,” or limited numbers of people crossing the scenic Canadian countryside, was a direct response to the prevalence of anti-migration sentiment in the interwar period and sought to exclude less-picturesque forms of migration, notably mass-migration into industrialized urban areas. As Cupido contends, such spectacles “offered an escape from the pressures and strains of modern life to a simpler, preindustrial world of heroism, moral purity, and fortitude.”\textsuperscript{37}

Though it had roots in the commemorative spectacles of the interwar period, national historical campaigns, internal anxieties surrounding anglicization, and the ageing and demise of migrants who had arrived in the earliest days of Manitoba’s settlement period also contributed to the increasing popularity of pioneer historical narratives in the post-war era. Minningarrit literature focused on cataloguing personal achievement and biographical details but post-war

\textsuperscript{33} Jón Sigurdsson IODE, 	extit{Minningarrit Íslenzkra Hermanna 1914-1918} (Winnipeg: Félagið Jón Sigurdsson, 1923). Reflecting the different references to the independence leader Jón Sigurðsson in Icelandic and English this dissertation retains the semi-anglicized spelling of his name to refer to this branch of the IODE and reverts to the original Icelandic spelling for direct references to Jón himself.
\textsuperscript{35} Cupido, 157.
\textsuperscript{36} Executive Committee of the National Committee for the Celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, 	extit{Diamond Jubilee of Confederation: General suggestions for the guidance of committees in charge of local celebrations} (Ottawa: National Committee for the Celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, 1927), 6.
\textsuperscript{37} Cupido,172.
histories attempted to construct accounts of broader community development. Some of these histories, such as the work of women authors, including Laura Goodman Salverson’s *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter*, and Thorstina (Jackson) Walters’ *Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America*, continued to blend personal recollections with narratives of community development and change.\(^{38}\) These works reflect the enduring importance of the biographical and autobiographical tradition in Icelandic-Canadian popular culture. This tradition is most evident in multiple family publications of *Amma* (grandmother)-based biographies, such as Agnes Bardal Comack’s “This, Too, Will Happen to You”: The *Stories of an Icelander*, Evelyn K. Thorvaldson’s *My Amma and Me*, and Katrina Anderson’s *Blessed: The Story of Asdis Sigrun Anderson*.\(^{39}\) The popularity of autobiographical writing with farmers and fishermen, including Magnus Gudlaugsson, Guðbrandur Erlendsson, and Helgi Einarsson, reveals that Icelanders from all classes placed significant value in the recording of personal histories.\(^{40}\) Thorstein Thorsteinsson, the historian who produced the early three-volume history of the community, was himself a house painter.\(^{41}\)

In contrast to the celebrations surrounding the nation’s Diamond Jubilee in 1927, mass-migration and ethnic history assumed a more prominent place in the celebration of the Canadian Centennial in 1967. Federal committees and institutions, including the Centennial Commission and the National Museum of Man (NMM) created initiatives to identify, collect, and re-disseminate ethnic histories, and particularly Euro-Canadian folk traditions. Under the leadership of Icelandic-born curator, Magnús Einarsson, the NMM devoted substantial resources to the development of an extensive Icelandic oral history archive and material cultural collection from 1969 onwards. Einarsson published selections from the collection in three volumes, *Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse, and Icelandic-Canadian Memory*

---


Lore, released as part of the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies’ Mercury Series.\(^{42}\) Manitoba’s centennial in 1970 as well as the declaration of Canada’s multicultural policy in 1971 fostered more ethnic history initiatives, including the establishment of community museums and history book committees across the Canadian West. Local production of Icelandic community histories, including Gimli Saga, began during this period, reflecting the new emphasis on ethnic and community history, as well as the impending town and municipal centennials.\(^{43}\) Icelanders on both sides of the ocean also celebrated the 100\(^{th}\) anniversary of the establishment of New Iceland in 1975. Special state visits, parades, more publications, and a series of popular and commercial initiatives, including Eaton’s production of a New Iceland souvenir wool blanket, marked the occasion. The anniversary also attracted scholarly interest from European Icelanders such as Hallfreður Órn Eiríksson and Olga María Franzdóttir who created an extensive collection of oral history narratives in the community from interviews they conducted with Icelandic Canadians in 1972-3. The collection, called Sögur úr Vesturheimi (Stories from Icelandic North America), remains in the possession of the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavík, but has been underutilised by North American scholars.\(^{44}\)

Two major overviews of the Icelandic-Canadian community also emerged around the centennial period: Walter J. Lindal’s The Icelanders in Canada and Wilhelm Kristjanson’s The Icelandic People in Manitoba.\(^{45}\) Both sons of Icelandic migrants, Lindal and Kristjanson blend episodes of migrant life with a comprehensive overview of major political and economic developments. Lindal was an influential judge and his work was published as part of the federally-funded Canada Ethnica Series. Although the text ultimately emphasizes progress and community development, Lindal provides unusually frank and critical analysis of community leadership, including the shortcomings of Icelandic immigrant agent, John Taylor.\(^{46}\) Kristjanson, a historian trained at Oxford and the University of Chicago, provides a more detailed overview of Icelandic-Canadian history, including demographic research and analysis and coverage of

\(^{42}\) Magnús Einarsson, ed. Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1991); Icelandic-Canadian Memory Lore (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992); Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse (Ottawa: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1994).

\(^{43}\) Gimli Women’s Institute, Gimli Saga: The History of Gimli Manitoba (Gimli: n.p., 1975).

\(^{44}\) Hallfreður Órn Eiríksson and Olga María Franzdóttir, Sögur úr Vesturheimi (Stories from North America) (Reykjavík: Stofnun Árnar Magnússonar, 1973).


\(^{46}\) Lindal, The Icelanders in Canada, 122.
Icelandic organizations. In contrast to Lindal’s work, Kristjanson is much more subtle in his critiques of community figures. The quality of Kristjanson’s research has helped to establish his text as one of the twentieth-century authorities on the history of the community.

Though academic histories tend to shy from popular genealogical studies, these texts are essential to studying Icelandic-Canadian history. Much of the scholarship on multiculturalism and cultural production has focused on the role of the state in the rise of official pluralism and post-centennial Canadian identities. These works have focused on both the development of state policies and commissions, such as the Royal Commission on Bilingual and Biculturalism, or “the abduction of minority identities pressing them into the service of nation building.”47 This narrower scope has largely bypassed analysis of how communities have received, reproduced, and altered the images of heritage and culture broadcast by these policies. This dissertation explores the ways in which Icelandic cultural spectacles have been employed in projects that benefit the state, but it also focuses on the needs, desires, and motivations of community members engaged in their production. It analyses community responses to notions of acceptable difference and variations in community-produced heritage campaigns through a range of media, including often-neglected volumes of locally published town, village, and family histories.

These histories illuminate how communities have negotiated their own definitions of meaningful history. For example, the wealth of genealogical works and resources related to Icelandic migration illustrate the centrality of kin bonds to modern Icelandic identity on both sides of the ocean. Beyond individual biographies, the community has also produced extensive genealogical research that blends indexes of recent generations with early histories of migration and Icelandic history more broadly. These works illuminate both the details surrounding the lives of migrants as well as patterns of myth making, such as fatalism and matrilineal family narratives, in community life. The comprehensive records of births and deaths in Icelandic archives have also enabled Icelandic-Canadian genealogical histories to incorporate detailed accounts of family histories stretching back to the Middle Ages. Though such indexes are popular fare at family reunions, Nelson Gerrard’s *Icelandic River Saga*, a 600-page history of the Riverton area, has emerged as one of the most comprehensive overviews of life and history on

the northern border of the Icelandic colony. Published in 1985, the book blends detailed genealogical data, often beginning with the earliest written references to the family in Iceland, with oral history accounts, letter translations, and photographs. In addition to Kristjanson’s book, Gerrard’s work has become the subject of academic scholarship, including Anne Brydon’s critical assessment of narratives of First Nations friendship surrounding a conflict with the Sandy Bar Band in the same region. Though it was published as a community history, the book has also helped to create a foundation of historical knowledge for scholars such as Daisy Neijmann’s survey of Icelandic-Canadian literature and Jónas Thor’s overview of the history of Icelandic migration.48

In addition to a new 2010 monograph on ethno-religious identities on the prairies by Frances Swyripa and two articles by Brydon, Neijmann’s and Jónas’s books constitute the two most recent major academic publications on Icelandic-Canadian history and culture. Neijmann traces the large body of Icelandic and English-language works produced by the community, with an emphasis on cultural symbolism and the political and cultural diversity of literary expression. Jónas has completed other smaller works on the community’s history, including a history of the Icelandic Festival in Gimli, Manitoba. His book, *Icelanders in North America: The First Settlers*, was produced by the University of Manitoba Press, in keeping with their Icelandic publishing mandate. Until recently, UMP’s other Icelandic texts generally have focused on early European Icelandic history and Icelandic-Canadian literature, with the exception of Jonas’s work, which provides a general overview of the events surrounding migration. He offers comprehensive coverage of the early years surrounding migration, but frequently places too much emphasis on progress, community cohesion, and shared traits, such as the love of literacy. In contrast, Brydon and Swyripa’s research into Icelandic symbolism, claims to space, and myth-making provide compelling insights into the construction of community identity in the past 130 years. Brydon’s 2001 article on a popular oral account surrounding one Icelander’s dream of John Ramsay, a prominent local chief, illustrates the role of early myth in Icelandic attempts to neutralise histories of inequality and their role in Canadian colonialism. Similarly, her discussion of the tension surrounding the erection of a controversial monument to the Fjallkona (mountain

woman) in Gimli, Manitoba reveals the gendered limitations of twentieth-century ethnic symbolism. Conversely, Swyripa’s work examines the Icelandic-Canadian community within a broader analysis of ethno-religious culture on the prairies, including the formation of Ukrainian, Mennonite, Jewish, and Hungarian subjectivities. She contends that for Icelandic Canadians, migration and settlement “forced the creation of a wide range of new constellations and identities onto individuals and groups for whom an equally complex mix of old-world constellations and identities no longer sufficed.”

Her intergenerational focus also fruitfully illuminates the role of commemorative practices and changing notions of heritage within the community. “The best access to these imagined communities, and especially the narratives and assumptions that transcended internal group divisions,” she writes, “is through the milestone anniversaries of immigration and settlement.”

Swyripa’s work illustrates the centrality of place to Icelandic-Canadian identity and constructions of heritage. She argues that this attachment to place even transcends geographical dispersal. In spite of the general failure of the colony of New Iceland, she notes, it succeeded in becoming “the foundation for a regionally-based group founding story and identity...and capital of all Icelanders in North America.”

The life of the Icelandic language has also shaped the writing of the community’s history. Often, scholarly works either focus on the early migration period prior to anglicization or the construction of Icelandic identity after language loss. Celebratory histories of the community, including Lindal and Jónas’s work, tend to avoid the issue of anglicization altogether. This avoidance reflects the centrality of language to nineteenth- and twentieth-century European Icelandic identity. The preservation of the Icelandic language was a cornerstone of anti-Danish sentiment during the independence movement, though some migrants were exposed to English prior to departure. Icelanders who dropped or partially forgot their mother tongue in English-speaking urban centres were viewed with amusement and a degree of scorn by their fellow Icelanders.

Anxieties surrounding the disappearance of the language have shaped community

---

49 Swyripa, Storied Landscapes, 8.
50 Swyripa, Storied Landscapes, 8.
51 Swyripa, Storied Landscapes, 102-3.
52 Guttormur Guttormson’s popular poem, The Winnipeg Icelander, written in a blend of Icelandic and English slang is the most frequently cited example of this sentiment. Guttormur Guttormson, “The Winnipeg Icelander” Bóndadóttir (Winnipeg: Hecla Press Ltd., 1920), 50-51.
histories, which most often emphasize the endurance, rather than the demise of the language in Canada in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

Symbolism, rather than the Icelandic language has been the main focus of recent scholarship on the community. Using the often-cited metaphor of “fire and ice,” John Matthiasson writes that Icelandic-Canadian culture is shaped by older connections between geography and culture imported from the homeland. Matthiasson’s reference to fire and ice are part of a larger discussion of dualism that frequently characterizes scholarly analyses of the community. Neijmann, Jón Karl Helgason, Swyripa, and Brydon all cite Matthiasson’s 1979 article to extend this dualism to a range of relations, ideas, and symbols within the community. These include more traditional nineteenth-century Norse and golden age imagery, references to Christian scripture, and literary achievement and more recent twentieth and twenty first century incarnations such as pageant queens and ethnic dessert. Jón even notes that Icelandic Canadians have used vínarterta, an elaborate multi-layered torte to replace the volcanic symbolism of the distant island, writing that if Icelanders are made of “fire and ice,” Icelandic Canadians are made of “pastry and paste.”

All five authors contend that the private identities of members differ from public representations of the community. Public symbolism, they argue, responds to expectations of ethnic performance imposed by Anglo-Canadian notions of cultural authenticity, whereas private ethnic identities are more fluid and often evade definition. As Neijmann argues, “that which is experienced as being Icelandic Canadian is private, largely invisible to outsiders, and not what is publicly expected to be authentically Icelandic.” Brydon writes that this turn towards symbolism reflected the decline of “a shared, everyday life, such as working in the Lake Winnipeg fisheries.” “Rather,” she argues, “making ethnic identity has become the project for

---

organizations and institutions which strive to generate it self-consciously by evoking certain foods, songs, stories and other nostalgic references to an idealized past.\textsuperscript{57}

Though recent scholarship on the community has fruitfully explored the limitations of public symbolism and the importance of private identities, there has been very little investigation into the history of popular Icelandic-Canadian culture beyond folklore studies. Matthiasson, Lindal, and Kristjanson contend that popular Icelandic identity is generally defined by “patterns of adaptation that are uniquely Icelandic, reflecting the basic structural features of Icelandic culture dating back to the Viking past and the writing of the sagas.”\textsuperscript{58} Such an approach neglects the vast majority of community activities and relationships that have originated in or been shaped by the North American context, but are still labelled as “Icelandic.” More recent works by Swyripa, Brydon, and Neijmann move beyond the image of static cultural endurance and emphasize the continual construction of Icelandic identity in relation to conditions, and particularly the pressures of Anglo-conformity and multicultural nationalism in Canada. Very few histories have critically explored the role of Icelandic nationalism in the North American community. Furthermore, this emphasis on the divide between an artificially constructed public façade and an enduring private culture neglects the interplay between the two and fails to account for the popular usage of certain symbols in the home.

This dissertation hopes to contribute to existing discussions of the community by focusing on the media through which Icelandic-Canadian identity have been produced instead of constructing a chronological narrative of progress or assimilation. Methodology is central to writing a community history that reflects popular ethnic culture without making claims to describing qualities or traditions that are innately “Icelandic” or “Canadian.” As Swyripa successfully illustrates, studying the many physical, spoken, spatial, and imagined terrains through which members of this migrant community expressed themselves and experienced life in Canada illuminates a continual process of construction and negotiation of Icelandic identities that varied broadly according to the gender and class of community members, as well as the periods and places they lived in. Though the culinary conservatism of the community illustrates that it is


\textsuperscript{58} Matthiasson, “The Icelandic Canadians,” 195.
still possible to locate nineteenth-century practices that have changed very little in the past 135 years, a singular focus on unchanging cultural traits imported from Iceland would result in a study that neglected the vast majority of the community’s history and membership. Rather than approaching anglicization as the final stage of cultural degeneration and death, the cultural history of Icelandic Canada illustrates that anglicization was a complex, transformative process that had a range of impacts on different aspects of community life.

This project offers an investigation into the previously neglected cultural history of late nineteenth- and twentieth-century Icelandic Canadians as well as a case study that contributes to the broader historiographies of gender, migration, and material culture. In the past twenty years, historians have fruitfully examined the intersection of gender, race, and class in the histories of North American migrant communities. In addition to maintaining social historians focus on marginalized figures, such as women, working-class men, and children, their work has also long since pushed past the older approaches to ethnic communities that emphasized migrant progress, unity, and cultural authenticity. Roberto Perin’s early critique of multicultural spectacles and histories refuted the tendency of multicultural history campaigns in the 1970s and 80s to impose static images of culture onto migrant communities that did not reflect prescribed national identities and forms of cultural expression.59 This turn towards examining the popular culture of migrant communities outside of national frameworks, as well as broader developments in cultural history contributed to broader scopes of analysis that emphasize diffuse networks of power and expression within migrant community life.

Ethnic historiography has also experienced considerable methodological expansion in the past twenty years, responding to critics’ calls for a “greater experimentation with diverse and challenging approaches.”60 As discussed further in each chapter, historians have begun to fruitfully examine the role of objects and spectacles in ethnic material culture and spectacles in particular. Such studies acknowledge the important role of ethnic foods and clothing in politically charged constructions of the past and present. This project joins a small but important body of scholarship that focuses on the role of gender and the body in the production of ethnic culture and spectacle, specifically those that have studied clothing and textiles, domestic space,


and the place of the female body in popular commemoration. It blends the focus on food, objects, narratives, and spectacle with oral history and memory studies. In so doing it examines the ways in which state the projects of community leaders employ images of the past, but the way in which community members have also received, accepted, altered, rejected, or redeployed these images. In keeping with the emphasis on community cultural expression and adaptation it also illustrates the benefits of studying other, hitherto neglected terrains of popular ethnic expression, including everyday clothing practices and fashion, familial commemorative practices, and superstitious narratives.

Chapter one begins by looking at one of the most intimate and immediate ways in which migrants experienced transition in North America: clothing. It responds to several broader historiographical gaps, including those in the histories of early (pre-Eaton’s) migrant aesthetic transformation, Canadian clothing and style, and ethnic material culture beyond the destruction or reconstruction of the folk. It uses textiles as a terrain capable of discussing and revealing both personal and communal histories and experiences. First, it uses cloth to retrace the contours of bodies and labour in relation to lived experiences of poverty, marginalization, disease, cold, and eventual access to Anglo commercial goods. Second, it employs textiles as a method of investigating broader cultural change, particularly as it related to migrants’ negotiation of class, gender, and racial identities in the nineteenth-century Canadian West. It discusses the impact of xenophobia on politically charged components of Icelandic clothing and style, rise of hybrid Icelandic-First Nations dress and diet, and the role of cloth in the re-establishment of class divisions as it relates to anglophilia, middle-class migrant respectability, and the growth of waged urban women’s labour.

The second chapter analyses the role of food and drink in the lives of migrants. The flurry of writing in newspapers, personal letters, and memoirs reveal that coffee, alcohol, and vinarterta, an elaborate Icelandic layered torte, were three of the most defining forces in migrant culinary culture. Far from simply revealing consumption patterns, the discourse surrounding alcohol, “kaffi”, and vinarterta reveals that food and drink were important media through which Icelanders negotiated relations with Anglo-Canadian society and culture. Drawing on a wide range of sources, including police records, photographs, newspaper articles, recipes, and oral testimony, this chapter demonstrates how drinking and eating became important sites for the internal and external construction of ethnic identity by addressing three major developments.
First, it considers the significant shifts in the production and consumption in food and drink, namely, the community’s early transition from virtual starvation into the establishment of early food markets and the dedicated pursuit of good coffee. Second, it considers the role of alcohol in the definition of private space and the community’s public image. Finally, the chapter turns to an account of the emergence of vinarterta as a compelling, indeed definitive symbol of Icelandic Canadian and American identity in the post-1945 era.

The third chapter analyses the relationship between anglicization and the growth of conservatism in the Icelandic-Canadian community in the twentieth century. Using the decline of radical Icelandic language publications, it argues that anglicization eliminated subversive forums previously left unscathed and unregulated by Anglo-Canadian public opinion and state interests. It then traces the rise of a visually based Icelandic identity involving the construction of symbolic representations of the community, including film and parade spectacles, capable of reaching anglicized generations while also controlling the public image of the community. This section studies two conflicts; the rise of the Fjallkona (female embodiment of the Icelandic nation) during the “bald women epidemic” of 1924, and the use of the film, Iceland on the Prairies (1941) to contain dissent during the Allied occupation of Iceland. These contests over community image suggest that public symbolism and spectacle were more easily employed by conservative leaders in their pursuit of an image of the community in-line with Anglo-Canadian nationalism and national interests, conservative gender norms, and notions of middle-class respectability. This public discourse did not reflect the innate conservatism of the Icelandic community, but the mechanisms through which images of Icelandic identity were increasingly limited.

While chapter three covers the familiar terrain of ethnic spectacles, chapter four attempts to bridge the often-referenced gap between private and public Icelandic-Canadian culture by focusing on the impact of centennial and multicultural heritage campaigns on the lives, popular narratives, and domestic space of Icelandic Canadians. It traces the emergence of the koffort, or immigrant trunk, in familial commemoration with the proliferation of trunk imagery in state sponsored history campaigns in Canada after 1967. Using oral testimony, museum displays, monuments, film, advertisements, and photographs of kofforts in Icelandic Canadian homes, it compares intergenerational family narratives of maternal trauma to state narratives of the
redemptive suffering of settlers. So doing, it explores the effectiveness and disruptive potential of objects and family narrative in the transmission of traumatic memory and conflicting historical narratives surrounding mass-migration to Canada.

Chapter five continues the discussion of popular memory with an examination of the compelling hjátru (superstitious) narrative tradition in the Icelandic-Canadian community and traumatic landscapes on the prairies. Though a sense of taboo pervades open discussions and admissions of belief in the supernatural, this chapter’s examination of community oral narrative archives, including several previously untranslated stories, illustrates that Icelandic migrants brought a rich narrative tradition and system of popular belief with them to North America. In attending to the particular characteristics of Icelandic ghost stories, it challenges Anne Brydon’s assertion that such popular narratives are dedicated to distancing Icelanders from troubling pasts, notably their role in the colonial project. By focusing on Graftarnes, an infamously haunted cemetery near the northern border of New Iceland, it argues that the appearance of First Nations ghosts in Icelandic-Canadian oral narratives must be understood within the larger hjátru tradition. In these narratives Icelanders reassert the importance of observing the land claims of First Nations spiritual figures, who appear as real, powerful, and occasionally violent ghosts. Rather than signalling the fossilization of First Nations populations, this chapter argues that hjátru narratives reveal the popular Icelandic understanding of colonial violence as an unresolved, disruptive, and damaging intergenerational inheritance.

The dissertation closes by returning to a discussion of the two distant and distinct claims to Icelandic identity set forth by Icelanders from both sides of the Atlantic. Using the images of Icelandic protest and recent developments in transatlantic connections between the two communities, it offers an overview of the history of the divergent shape of Icelandic North American culture. Providing an alternate view of the community beyond either cultural endurance or assimilation, it argues that the multiple material, visual, and oral conduits through which members have experienced life and expressed themselves has resulted in the development of a changing series of Icelandic ethnoscapes that have been crucial to the construction of Icelandic identity in the North America. It is through these terrains that community members continually have engaged with both personal and public expectations and desires for ethnic performance and suppression. Though there are signs that certain Icelandic forms have remained
relatively unchanged in the New World, including specific food traditions and superstitious beliefs, this project does not assert that a more “authentic” private sphere exists in the community. Rather, it illustrates that Icelandic-Canadian ethnoscapes operate in tandem with multiple media of public and personal expression. It is the fluidity of these forms and forums and their facilitation of members’ engagement with, adaptation to, and contestation of images of ethnicity and history that has enabled the continual construction of Icelandic identities in the North American context 135 years after arrival.
Chapter One

Fibre terrains of early New Iceland: Labour, race, class, and cloth, 1875-1895

In the autumn of 1873, two Icelandic migrants, Friðjón Friðriksson and his teenage wife, Guðný Sigurðardóttir, wandered alone through the streets of Milwaukee (Figure 1.1). The couple had just left a floundering settlement of Icelanders in Kinmount, Ontario, and after misjudging their expenses, realized that they were alone in a strange city with only fifteen cents to their name. With no shelter and little money for food, the couple was desperate to find other Icelanders who could help them. Friðjón scanned the streetscape of Milwaukee. The couple was having little luck until one of them looked up and immediately recognized the undeniable mark of an Icelandic family: a pair of homespun Icelandic woollen underwear, waving in the breeze on a nearby clothing line.61 When they found the owners of the unlikely flag, Friðjón and Guðný secured shelter and employment through their connections, and eventually returned to Canada to start a store in Manitoba’s Icelandic colony. The couple moved into the nicest house in the settlement and secured a comfortable life for themselves, selling moose meat, coffee, farm supplies, knitting needles, and of course, underwear.

As a sign of ethnic difference or assimilation, status, and personal expression, clothing was a mediating skin that migrants used to negotiate interactions between themselves and society. The intimate nature of such objects offers historians insight into a myriad of public and private spaces and relations by tracing the contours of bodies, relationships, money, and labour. A more detailed analysis of the material lives of migrants also helps to interrupt the uniform, commemorative image of classless, hard-working pioneers in picturesque sunbonnets and suspenders. Instead, revisiting the fibre terrains of nineteenth-century migrant life in Western Canada reveals a more critical vision of labour, class, and gender by examining modes of production and consumption and uneven developments in Manitoba’s Icelandic colony that have been traditionally excluded from ethnic historiography.

This chapter studies migrant experience through material culture, with an emphasis on clothing. After a discussion of the historiography of migration, ethnic identity, and clothing in

Canada, it explores the political implications and context of Icelandic migrant clothing in the nineteenth century. The chapter then traces the initial impact of the Anglo-North American social pressure, climate, and labour on the destruction and disposal of certain aspects of migrant dress. The destruction of Icelandic clothing corresponded with a significant aesthetic shift in the community, including the development of hybrid First Nations Icelandic clothing practices and the re-establishment of class divisions through conspicuous consumption and middle-class Icelanders’ emulation of Anglo-Victorian style. Given this relatively rapid adoption of Anglo Victorian style, how should we understand clothing in the mediation of relations with Anglo populations in the West? This shift simultaneously reveals much about class-inflected aspects of material practice, including consumption of regional or imported goods. Class divisions also influenced Icelandic aesthetic and cultural change in urban centres, where migrants lived in close proximity to Anglo-Canadians. Oral histories, editorials, and letters reveal that clothing was entangled in internal contests over and concerns about the community’s image.

Middle-class temperate migrants expressed disdain for and attempted to regulate those who threatened the façade of a clean, modern, and temperate ethnic group that conformed to Anglo-Canadian standards. Responding to the considerable number of female migrants who worked in urban centres and provided their families with supplementary income and access to consumer goods, this chapter also discusses the relationship between clothing and urban female migrant labour. Through a review of the development of Icelandic-friendly stores, labour-based clothing demands, and personal and familial desires for store-bought goods, it argues that many urban women experienced the pressures and possibilities of Anglo-Canadian society through clothing. The chapter closes with an exploration of the final stages of nineteenth-century clothing life, usage, and destruction, with an emphasis on intergenerational family value. The disposal of some pieces and the conversion of others into heirlooms or parade costumes expose cultural change in the community, namely the rejection of certain elements of the past and the celebration and reinvention of others. All of these processes reveal the rich and complex history of migrant clothing in Canada, one that illuminates the establishment of class divisions within the community itself and members’ responses to Anglo-Canadian social pressure.

Ethnic identities are constructed and critiqued through the material world, and historically clothing has occupied an important place in discourses of Canadian migration and difference.
Clifford Sifton’s often-quoted description of the nation’s desire for “stalwart peasants in sheepskin coats” has become shorthand for the embrace of difference in both histories of Canadian migration policy and constructions of a national pluralist tradition. However, the use of clothing in the creation of simple, romantic, folksy images also spoke directly to Sifton’s attempt to prevent the arrival of more “complicated” migrants tainted by urban life and labour radicalism. Over seventy years later, Neil Bissoondath similarly referenced the role of migrant clothing in the creation of contained and one-dimensional displays of Canadian pluralism. The multicultural spectacles of the 1990s, he argued, merely used “evil-smelling” food and “folksy” clothing and crafts to perpetuate synthetic stereotypes and whitewashed or “Disneyfied” visions of ethnic difference. As Franca Iacovetta, Ian McKay, and Mike Wallace’s works on folk spectacles also illustrate, heritage planners and state agents employed romantic images of folk populations to create a simplistic and picturesque image of complex populations living in a world untouched by radicalism, poverty, and other modern political and social problems. The construction of migrant and ethnic populations through “folk” clothing reinforced established hierarchies through the performance of colourful but politically contained roles.

The existing historiography surrounding ethnic clothing implies that certain forms of material cultural expression can be innately conservative, simplistic, or prone to manipulation by the elite. Rather than reflecting the intellectual and emotional possibilities of cloth and food, the manipulation of such forms draws, often unconsciously, from an older division between high and low culture as well as older, Anglo-Canadian definitions of modern and primitive cultural expression. The objects identified as the most trivial, unsophisticated, and meaningless are those most often produced by women in the domestic sphere. Older scholarship that referenced ethnic clothing frequently limited itself to the eventual demise of folksy homemade national costumes, while more recent works have examined the use of folk costumes in the creation of

62 “I think a stalwart peasant in a sheep-skin coat, born on the soil, whose forefathers have been farmers for ten generations, with a stout wife and a half-dozen children, is good quality. A Trades Union artisan who will not work more than eight hours a day and will not work that long if he can help it, will not work on a farm at all and has to be fed by the public when his work is slack is, in my judgment, quantity and very bad quantity.” Sir Clifford Sifton, "The Immigrants Canada Wants," as reprinted in *Maclean’s Magazine* April 1, 1922, 16, 32-4.
politically-charged campaigns motivated by anti-modern sentiment and middle-class notions of authenticity.\textsuperscript{65} As Carmella Patrias notes in the Horthy Regime’s sponsoring of costumed Hungarian folk spectacles, folk clothing was deployed as part of larger campaigns against “modern, cosmopolitan (i.e. leftist) values and ideologies.”\textsuperscript{66} Yet such discussions of the role of clothing in the construction of “authentic” and “primitive” culture still relegate discussions of clothing that does not perform colourful folk identities or exhibit signs of Anglo-North American influence, to brief references to the fears about modernization, cultural loss, and corruption. The absence of scholarship on inauthentic or hybrid clothing practices, including the transformation of older textile traditions through the inclusion of modern styles, construction techniques, and materials, implies that clothing is a form of expression imbued with only a limited range of intellectual and emotional meaning. Here historical scholarship has neglected the ingenuity and autonomy/unfaithfulness of the producers of material culture, as well as a myriad of political, religious, and social forces that shape ethnic experience, self-definition, and expression through fibre.

Despite the potential of textile scholarship and the broad availability of related sources, there remains a general dearth of material cultural scholarship in Canadian history. In most economic and labour histories, textiles and fibre themselves are too often reduced to the status of shadowy props, despite their centrality to the fur trade, industrial manufacturing, and the rise of consumerism, to name a few. Some scholars have attempted to address the marginal place of clothing in Canadian cultural and historical research, but limit their analysis to the development of Canadian fashion commerce and a “national design identity” while others offer a simple catalogue of the changing clothing worn by Canadians.\textsuperscript{67} This search for a “Canadian style” limits our understanding of clothing production outside of the fashion industry, particularly since working-class women often only appear in these histories as employees in textile and garment factories, not as designers and creators of clothing for their own means. The works of Ruth B.

\textsuperscript{65} See for example, Ellen Mary Easton McLeod, \textit{In Good Hands: The Women of the Canadian Handicrafts Guild} (Montreal: MQUP, 1999.)
\textsuperscript{66} Carmella Patrias, \textit{Patriots and Proletarians: Politicizing Hungarian immigrants in interwar Canada} (Montreal: MQUP, 1994), 34.
Phillips, Dirk Hoerder, and Swyripa are significant exceptions. Phillips’ work on First Nations souvenir production recasts previously marginalized objects into a larger framework that explores their role in constructions of otherness as well as the development of First Nations survival and resistance strategies. Much Canadian material cultural scholarship related to craft and textile analysis focuses on First Nations communities and modes of production. This approach helps to circumvent the limited number of written sources from First Nations perspectives, yet it is seldom applied to non-indigenous populations, particularly those that stray beyond folksy traditions and into the realm of manufactured clothing and cloth. These transformations are no less indicative of complex changes in communities beyond simple assimilation.

Prior to the period of the mass-emigration of Icelanders to North America, clothing was an intensely political form of expression. The wave of migrants who left Iceland in the late nineteenth century did so during the heat of that country’s nationalist movement, which sought independence from Denmark, their colonial ruler of more than five centuries. Though Icelandic women used nationalist costumes as a way to express their opposition the colonial rule, they quickly began to abandon elements of their costume when they first arrived in North America. A discussion of the roots of the politicized clothing worn by female migrants and their early encounters with North American populations reveals the pressures behind and significance of their dramatic aesthetic transformation.

Clothing was an important part of other, more informal forms of popular cultural expression prior to the mid-nineteenth century, but they differed from the independence movement’s highly organized and politically articulate approach to dress. Sigurður Guðmundsson, an artist and devoted nationalist, was chiefly responsible for the politicization of women’s dress following the publication of his 1857 treatise, “On Women’s Clothing in Iceland.” The treatise envisioned a new aesthetic for women using a narrative of textile and clothing history based on cultural figures that reinforced the movement’s claims to protect and


promote indigenous culture. Like others in the movement, Sigurður frequently drew upon the cultural resonance of the Icelandic Sagas and incorporated designs and cuts referenced in these narratives into his designs. Documenting the clothing of saga heroines was not simply a way of studying what was worn in Icelandic history; it imbued the sleeves, belts, and dresses of nineteenth-century women with the attributes of some of the most revered female figures in Icelandic culture. Sigurður used nationalist costumes’ references to famous Icelandic women, including Bergþóra of Njál’s Saga, to harness cloth, female labour, and existing notions of exemplary womanhood to the independence movement.

Sigurður’s work employed the signs and symbols of golden age Icelandic culture and history, but he was equally influenced by the external growth of mid-century European nationalism. Like other leaders and intellectuals within the movement, he was educated in Copenhagen and was influenced by that country’s establishment of a constitutional monarchy in 1848 in addition to agitation and revolt in broader continental Europe that year. His work drew heavily from the same thinkers, whose work fuelled these revolts, including Johann Gottfried and his notion of a “national spirit” or the organic link between people and the nations. Upon returning to Iceland, Sigurður focused on the usage of aesthetics in the Icelandic independence movement. He viewed clothing as a potentially powerful and productive force, capable of reflecting the organic link between Icelanders and Iceland, as inspired by Gottfried. Sigurður’s focus on historical styles and indigenous materials also spoke to his disdain for Icelandic women who had adopted foreign fashions and materials. As inhabitants of an isolated island nation with a short growing season, Icelanders were dependent on trade for all textiles outside of those made from wool and leather. Nationalists argued that women’s preference for imported styles and fabrics had contributed to the strength of Danish trade and shipping monopolies. Imported fabric was also closely tied to status, given the scarcity and cost of fibres such as silk and the inability of women to reproduce imported colours, including blue and red, with vegetable dyes. Two of the most commonly-worn costumes he developed reflected anti-Danish sentiment, including the widely-used peysuföt (jacket outfit) and its more formal counterpart, the skautbúningur (headdress costume) (Figures 1.2 and 1.3). The peysuföt was used for both ceremonial and everyday dress by women from an array of class backgrounds. It was named for its tight, often

70 Karlsson, Iceland’s 1100 Years, 251.
black, woollen jacket or peysa, which was edged with black velvet on its cuffs and lapels and opened at the chest. The peysuföt also featured a neck scarf, usually made of white silk, though women also used coloured or patterned silk as well. Below the jacket women wore a simple, long dark woollen skirt made from approximately four to five metres of fabric. For formal occasions women often wore a brightly-coloured apron on top of the skirt, usually made of patterned silk, though more sedately-coloured silk was also used. A black knitted skullcap with a long tassel known as the skotthúfa or “tail hat” was also an integral part of the outfit. One of his earliest drawings of the outfit reflects Sigurður’s desire to remove foreign fabrics and influence from women’s bodies by emphasizing indigenous forms and materials. His 1854 depiction of the outfit offered an image of ideal Icelandic femininity, a mother reading to a male child and passing on the nation’s literary heritage (Figure 1.4). In the image the woman’s long dark dress is punctuated only by a plain white apron, a small dark handkerchief and a slight opening at the front of the jacket. Most of the costume was made of black woollen cloth, which distinguished it from popular mid-century middle-class dresses that relied instead upon imported fabric. Wool was not only an indigenous fibre; it also reflected the demands of the Icelandic climate. This was part of Sigurður’s assertion that the climate and geography of a nation naturally shaped the temperament, appearance, and culture of its people. Colour was as important to national dress as fibre, since as Sigurður wrote, dark colours better suited those who lived in more northerly climates with less sunshine. Clothing construction was not simply dependent on material availability, he argued, but was a pure reflection of the formative relationship between geography, climate, and culture.\footnote{Sigurður Guðmundsson, “Um Kvennbúninga,” 2.}

Although he frequently receives credit for the invention of the modern Icelandic national costume,\footnote{See for example, Karlsson, Iceland’s 1100 Years, 251.} this vision of authorship largely ignores the many unnamed women who developed the styles from which he drew his inspiration, as well as those who altered his designs following their initial release in Iceland. Sigurður is then perhaps best understood not as the male creator of these styles of female dress, but as an artist who modified and anchored female forms of expression to the nationalist cause. These dresses are therefore a collaborative creation between the artist, those upon whom he based his designs as well as the women who subsequently
adopted and adapted the costume to suit their own needs and tastes. The rise of such forms of dress also relied heavily on female labour, modes of production and forms of personal and cultural expression. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century the clothing of women migrants departing for North America reflected the general overall form of the costume promoted by Sigurður, but rejected the conscious omission of imported fabrics, colours, and patterns. For migrant women that left at the turn of the century, the dark form of the peysuföt jacket and skirt became a striking backdrop that ironically highlighted silk pieces that incorporated foreign patterns such as roses, and decidedly non-indigenous colours, including hot pink and gold floss. The small kerchief he originally proposed also morphed into an oversized silk bow accented with fringe (Figure 1.5).

This collaborative approach to studying the development of clothing styles also reflects the relationship between objects and meaning. Textile and costume production offered Icelandic women a semi-public forum for political expression, but not simply because male independence leaders invested certain pieces and forms with political meaning. As much as Sigurður desired to imbue certain items of clothing with a cohesive nationalist narrative, female users, producers, inheritors, and disposers of the garments understood them in a range of ways. For migrant women in particular, the meaning of the peysuföt differed considerably from those who remained behind in Iceland. Instead of acting as symbols of independence and protest, they became entangled in the more complex arena of international migration, acculturation, and assimilation in North America.  

The peysuföt’s place within the Icelandic nationalism movement illuminates the significance of migrant clothing in Canada, but a more detailed, micro-level analysis of certain components of the outfit offers promising insight into the complexity and significance of clothing in community life and the changes fostered by migration. Focused material cultural studies most frequently begin with an in-depth analysis of object construction in an attempt to understand finer elements of object significance that are easily lost in more generalized, superficial observations. As mentioned above, the skotthúfa or tail hat’s usage of wool is part of

---

73 Here acculturation refers to the adaptation of clothing to fit the material availability and broad range of Anglo-Canadian style with the intent to retain certain elements of cultural distinction while assimilation refers to the conscious effort to eliminate all signs of otherness by both Anglo North Americans and Icelandic migrants themselves.
a larger attempt to distance Icelandic consumers from Danish rule and commerce. Women made their own hats and the gauge of knitting used to create them also suggests that the hat was also meant to create a particular image of the wearer. In contrast to the bulky weight of lopi (thick, single-ply wool yarn) knitting from the second half of the twentieth century, nineteenth-century Icelandic knitting is characterized by much more intricate, labour intensive and highly skilled work. Most knitting needles from this period are often gauge two or smaller, even for the production of more commonplace items like socks and mitts. More formal, high profile items were made with needle gauges as small as size zero, or about the width of a darning needle. Knitting with such small needles created pieces so fine that skotthúfur took on the appearance of woven cloth or felt. The attention to creating flawless, exquisite work that could pass as cloth as well as the highly visible placement of the skotthúfa on a woman’s head suggests that these pieces were also used to claim status based on the wearer’s skill.

Although the hat part of the skotthúfa was almost always made of wool, other components of the hat varied according to class, material availability, and personal style. The hat’s stem, usually around eight centimetres long, ends with a hólkur or straight engraved cylinder, usually made of silver (Figure 1.6). Most hólkur ranged in size from approximately four to five centimetres, sometime featuring variegated edges. Hólkur decoration varied widely, from etched abstract geometrical or floral patterns to smooth surfaces and thin borders. The personality and status of hólkur owners are reflected in this range as well as in elaborate and unusual examples such as the Manitoba Museum’s undated silver hólkur features a brass or gold snake with a ruby eye wound around it (Figure 1.7). In contrast to the usage of indigenous wool, skotthúfa were also characterised by a long, thick silk tassel. Usually black in colour and ranging from fifteen centimetres to two feet long, the skott or tail emerges from the hólkur and hangs down over the shoulder of the wearer.74 Hidden beneath the skott itself is a heavy ball attached to the hat through the hólkur (Figure 1.8). The skotthúfa was generally attached to the hair using long straight pins. While wearing the skotthúfa, late nineteenth-century women frequently did their hair into long, upturned braids. As an integral component of the peysufót, the skotthúfa was worn

74 The lengths of these tassels vary and some photographs of skotthúfa depict the tassel hanging down to the wearer’s waist.
by older women in public well into the twentieth century and the hat is still used in more formal national celebrations.

Despite the centrality of the skotthúfa to Icelandic dress around the time of migration, women arriving North America almost immediately abandoned the hat. Images captured during migration such as the semi-formal 1875 photograph of Icelandic passengers aboard a ship heading for North America in the collection of Pjóðminjasafn Ísland, indicates that women did not anticipate a rejection of the style and wore their hats en route to the New World (Figure 1.9). Neither was it immediately abandoned in earlier encounters with non-Icelanders in other British urban centres, as portraits of young women taken during stopovers in Scotland reveal. Yet as the comprehensive migrant portrait archive at the Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre reveals, public usage of the skotthúfa ceased shortly after their arrival in North America.

The centrality of movement to the skotthúfa drew attention to migrants’ ethnic and aesthetic difference from Anglo Canadians. An analysis of object construction reveals that each hat had a weight hidden in the tail. In addition to weighing down and preventing tangling in the long strands and exaggerating the volume of the tassel, the weight created a swinging motion when women moved their heads or leant forwards or backwards. The role of movement in the visual impact of this garment meant that Icelandic migrant women appeared in North American ports wearing pieces of clothing that not only clashed with Anglo notions of proper dress, but that were also constructed to draw attention. The New York Star remarked on the role of movement in the “peculiarity” of the hat’s appearance in its coverage of the arrival of Icelanders in the city. It reported that:

The women were attired in dresses that reached down below the top of their shoes, the material being mainly alpaca. Their peculiar headdress consisted of a flat black pad - about the size of a common saucer. This was worn directly on the caput, while from it was suspended a tassel nearly a foot long, which swept the left shoulder at every step the wearer took.75

Similarly, Thorstina Walters recalled Anglo-American interest blended with more overt disdain for her mother’s clothing when she arrived in Glyndon, Minnesota in 1881. Her account suggests that Anglo-American women enjoyed appraising the form, style, and material usage in the

75 Interview, New York Star (1876) as reproduced in Kristjanson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, 118.
clothing of new arrivals, as well as their compatibility with Anglo dress. Such appraisals speak to a more direct condemnation of migrant clothing and the role of social pressure in their abandonment of certain styles. She writes that some aspects of Icelandic clothing were tolerated and even appreciated, but that the skotthúfa was openly ridiculed.

Her Icelander costume of black wool, with its tight fitting skilfully embroidered bodies, full skirt, and multi-coloured silk apron was greatly admired, but the small, tasselled cap under which she turned up her heavy braids of brown hair did not find favour. In fact she was advised to keep the costume and send the cap back to Iceland. 76

The fate of the skotthúfa illuminates the effectiveness of this pressure on migrant women to adopt Anglo notions of proper dress, and its disappearance reveals the ways in which migrant women experienced the political and aesthetic components of Canadian assimilation in relation to their bodies. As Walters noted, other parts of traditional Icelandic women’s dress were used for years following their arrival, particularly among women who could not afford to purchase fabric for new Anglo-style dresses. It is unclear whether the first migrant women to settle in the isolated Icelandic reserve replaced the skotthúfa with more Anglo-style head coverings, such as bonnets and straw hats. Women who lived and worked in urban centres, however, were among the earliest to adopt Anglo-style hats, as will be discussed shortly.

Dirk Hoerder argues that the illustrated catalogue was central to the spread of Anglo Canadian style amongst migrants. Catalogue illustrations made them both popular and accessible for those with limited or no English literacy and instructed them on how to bring Canadian aesthetics and values into the most personal parts of their lives. Also referred to as the “Prairie Bible,” he writes that this mail-order publication was an aesthetic force in the West that determined the styles worn by Canadians from all walks of life. The catalogue not only offered “the possibilities of consumption; it was a book to dream over.” 77 Even farmers and labourers far from urban centres could imagine and work towards acquiring the images of style, respectability, and happiness found on its pages. Catalogues also encouraged migrants to adopt the images of food culture they presented through the sale of dishes such as covered cheese plates and hot chocolate sets, designed according to Canadian notions of food status and taste. Draperies and

76 Thorstina Walters, Modern Sagas: The Story of the Icelanders in North America (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953), 11.
77 Hoerder, Creating Societies, 200.
furniture listings offered migrants exposure to tactile expressions of Anglo notions of space, privacy, beauty, and comfort or formality. The catalogue, he asserts, became a guide book that transformed immigrants into Canadians. It suggested ways that migrant women could both cover and transform their bodies by keeping them informed of shifting notions of physical beauty in Anglo-Canadian urban centres, while providing the clothing and accessories to help them minimize or maximize their physical attributes accordingly, including corsets, petticoats, and hair pieces. The book also provided migrant men with an image of Canadian masculinity and style. As one Galician Jewish migrant to Saskatchewan recalled in 1927, “leafing through the Eaton’s catalogue, I had decided to look more like a Canadian and ordered knee high boots and other western style garments.”

Hoerder’s work offers insight into the role of consumerism in transforming migrant aesthetics in the twentieth century; however, the nineteenth-century predecessors of such shifts remain unexplored. The earliest Eaton’s catalogues produced in 1884 were text-only and did not include the popular illustrations that transcended English literacy skills that made them so popular with rural migrants. The catalogue introduced a small number of illustrations in 1887, but the more heavily illustrated format did not appear until the 1890s. The Canadian context had already transformed early Icelandic migrant aesthetics long before the rise of the illustrated catalogue. How can we understand the importance and transformation of Icelandic migrant bodies and clothing before 1890? What other forces outside of catalogues spread Canadian style?

Migrant letters were one important source of information about fashion and clothing in the New World and suggest that the use of Icelandic garments other than the skotthúfa endured to some extent after arrival. As Friðriða Baldvinsdóttir advised family members considering migration, “you mustn’t part with much of your clothing since here you can use them here... it is good to bring dark coloured cloth and dresses which are very much customary.” Many migrant women were poor and depended on clothing alteration, rather than consumption, to “dress

---

78 Harry Henig, Orphans of the Storm, ed. Lawrence F. Jones, (Toronto: Pitt, 1974), 96, as quoted in Hoerder, Creating Societies, 201.
Canadian.” As Friðríka’s letter suggests, women could take advantage of the simple cut and black colour of the peysuföt and skautbúningar and their similarity to Victorian women’s suits. Halldóra Bjarnadóttir was a poor woman dependent on parish relief when she and her family migrated to Canada with the financial support of Icelandic officials and she depended on the similarity of dark Icelandic clothing to garments worn in Canada. Halldóra faced extremely limited resources in the care and clothing of herself and her family and was forced to foster out their children to other families, a common practice in Iceland and Icelandic North-American communities. In a photograph of the family shortly after their arrival in Winnipeg, Halldóra appears in the best set of clothing she had access to: a dark skautbúninga embroidered with a floral pattern along the lapels and cuffs. In keeping with the North American-style clothing of the other family members, Halldóra altered her own dress by omitting the headdress and leaving the collar open. Beneath she wore a high necked lace blouse to make it appear more like a Victorian waistcoat (Figure 1.10).

Like other migrant women, Halldóra’s attempt to make her Icelandic clothing “pass” in the North American context through alteration and the omission of highly visible signs of difference, illustrates the immediate impact of pro-assimilation sentiment on material culture and the outward appearance of migrant bodies. Yet, the clothing and bodies of migrants were not singularly subject to the pressure to conform to North American notions of style and beauty. Accounts from the arrival of Icelanders in Manitoba illuminate dual demands from Anglo-Canadians for both the performance and suppression of ethnic difference. Reports of initial encounters with new migrant populations reveal that established Canadians were often actively interested in the physical and material appearance of newcomers, particularly those they saw as “primitive.” Following a reference to arriving Icelandic migrants as “Eskimos” in the Winnipeg Free Press, Reverend Friðrik J. Bergmann recalled that a crowd of misinformed Winnipeggers gathered at the docks to demand a display of the new arrivals.

Some rushed aboard the ship and the barges and impatiently asked: “Where are the Icelanders? Show us some Icelanders.” John Taylor [the immigrant agent] obviously was the man to reply... “These are Icelanders. There you can see them.” But people didn’t believe him. They had expected to see people totally different. “We know what

---

81 Photograph courtesy of Gerrard, Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre, (EIHC) Hnausa, Manitoba.
Icelanders look like,” they said, “they are short of stature, about four feet high, rather short and sturdy, long jet-black hair, a good deal like Eskimos! These are not Icelanders, they are white people.\footnote{Rev. Friðrik J. Bergmann, \textit{Almanak} 1908, as translated in Lindal, \textit{The Icelanders in Canada}, 116.}

Such demands for displays of new arrivals reveal an underlying sense of concern and anxiety amongst Anglo Canadians regarding migrants’ racial and cultural compatibility. As the first exhibit of Icelanders on the Winnipeg docks in 1875 illustrates, the physical appearance and clothing of migrants was one of the first ways they were assessed by Anglo Canadians. Migrant leaders were anxious to refute beliefs about racial inferiority, including the assumption that they were related to the Inuit. Aside from well-read and well-traveled government officials, including Lord Dufferin, who travelled to Iceland in 1856, most North Americans believed that Icelanders were of “Eskimo” rather than European extraction. Dufferin himself lamented that “even the most educated people firmly believe the Icelanders to be a ‘Squawmuck,’ blubber-eating, seal-skin clad race.”\footnote{Dufferin, \textit{Letters from High Latitudes}, ii.} This assumption was a source of considerable concern for community members and leaders who were eager to assert their status as fellow Protestant, Northern European cousins to the Canadian Anglo-Saxon elite.

Early popular belief in the racial inferiority of Icelanders had a negative impact on the community’s socio-economic standing, including labouring conditions for men. Magnus Magnusson recalled that he felt the “keenest disappointment” from the scornful attitudes of his new English co-workers, which bothered him more than the mosquitoes and rats that plagued his days working as a farm labourer. “They taunted us and called us ‘Greenland Eskimos’”, he remembered. “They refused to use the same basin and towels as we used. We bore their contempt with as much dignity as we could summon, but…the treatment they accorded us was no better than the treatment of convicts at Stony Mountain Prison.”\footnote{Magnus Magnusson, as quoted by Kristjana Magnusson, \textit{So Well Remembered} (Winnipeg: A & K Publications, 1978), 19.}

Conversely, Ólöf Sólvdóttir, an Icelandic woman with dwarfism who immigrated to Manitoba, built a successful career upon North American demands for spectacles of immigrant primitivity and racial difference. While working as a waitress in a North Dakota hotel in the 1880s, she became “bored, annoyed, and outraged” by frequent comments from customers that...
“we never saw an Eskimo before!” Ólöf eventually turned such assumptions into a career for herself after being offered five dollars by a minister to present a lecture on Eskimo culture to his church group. Performing, publishing and lecturing under the pseudonym “Olof Krarer”, Ólöf crafted a fictional public persona as the member of a race of miniature people in Greenland. She reported to growing audiences that before arriving in North America, she lived in a small snow house, rode on a dog sled made from a giant frozen fish, and drank the blood of polar bears (Figure 1.11). According to her fictional autobiography, her light skin was a result of learning to bathe from missionaries and that the darkness of Greenland skin and hair colour was simply the result of not washing “from the day he is born till the day he dies” and the constant application of animal grease. While Icelandic-Canadian leaders were working steadily to cultivate an image of a “sober, industrious… and serious minded race,” Ólöf appeared dressed in polar bear skins and created a brutal and stark image of life in the North, where, she asserted, Greenlanders punished their children with severe burnings, regularly practiced infanticide, and murdered young male suitors as part of a traditional courting ritual. Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir estimates that throughout her prolific career Ólöf delivered as many as 2,500 lectures, including several at American universities. Moreover, her claims were reproduced in popular American school textbooks, including Geography By the Brace System.

Though she may have enjoyed fame and recognition in the United States, Icelanders in Manitoba remained quiet about her claims as well as ties to the community outside of Icelandic language forums. The Icelandic press described her lectures as “absolutely crazy” but Ólöf appeared to care little about what other Icelanders thought of her. She had already become estranged from her family by 1880 and distanced herself from the community after the start of her lecturing career. Vilhjálmur Stefansson suggests that Olöf may have resented the

86 Olof Krarer, The Esquimaux lady: a story of her native home Albert S. Post, ed. (Ottawa: ILLS, 1887.)
87 Krarer, The Esquimeaux Lady, 13.
88 J.S. Woodsworth, Strangers at Our Gates or Coming Canadians (Toronto: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1909), 95.
89 Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, Ölöf eskimói: Ævisaga íslensks dvergs í Vesturheimi (Eskimo Ólöf: Biography of an Icelandic dwarf in the New World) (Reykjavik: Mál og Menning, 2004.)
90 John M. Boyer and John F. Wicks, Geography By the Brace System or How to Study Geography: Prepared for the Use of Teacher and Pupil (Chicago: A. Flanagan, 1891), 341-7.
91 Íslandsur Eskimói,” Lögberg March 24, 1898, 7.
92 Stefansson, Adventures in Error, 246.
patronizing treatment she received from community members. She was an ambitious woman, he
recalled, and felt that there were few opportunities for advancement working as a domestic or in
hotel barrooms. Rather than remaining with the community, she constructed a lucrative career
for herself that depended instead on external audiences and their “hazy” image of the geographic,
racial, and cultural distances between Greenland and Iceland.  

The physical appearance and clothing of migrants factored into early popular evaluations
of their compatibility with Anglo-North American culture, but extended into broader analyses of
suitability as migrants settled into their new reserve along the shore of Lake Winnipeg in 1875.
The image of Icelanders changed from “Eskimos” and “peculiarly” dressed foreigners into a
more nuanced notion of cultural and racial difference based on language, poverty, poor
reproductive practices, superstitious belief, general bad health, and extreme stoicm. A smallpox
epidemic in the winter of 1876 inflamed negative public opinion of the arrivals and drew
national attention to the poverty, illness, and abject living conditions on the Icelandic reserve.

A range of factors contributed to shortages leading up to the epidemic, including the
poverty and/or poor preparation of migrants and the failure of the immigration agents and scouts
involved to ensure migrants’ access to essential resources, including temporary housing, livestock, some cleared land, and hay.  

Even an emergency government loan in 1876 neglected the issue of clothing shortages since, with the exception of one crate of boots, it simply prevented starvation by providing farming implements and seed.  

Accounts from visiting officials and their escorts reveal the severity of the living conditions and suggest their role in the spread of disease, which is transmitted by droplets produced by sneezing and coughing. Clothing and food shortages also weakened immune systems. A letter from Augustus Baldwin, who provided medical service during the epidemic, notes that people were largely dependent on human and animal body heat generated in overcrowded dwellings to keep warm. Even Baldwin, who had stocked up on provisions and supplies for the trip, was forced to share blankets with an infected guide when the temperature dropped below minus forty, though he had “the eruption out on

93 Stefansson, Adventures in Error, 263, 265-6.
95 Thomas Taylor, Dealer in Dry Goods, Groceries, Wines and Liquors, Etc., Etc., Bill of Sale for 125 pairs of boots
to The Canadian Government, 28 February 1876 LAC RG 17 A-1-7 Department of Agriculture, General
Correspondence v. 175 d. 18194. Bill copy provided by Ryan Eyford.
him.” “I had a pretty hard time myself,” he told his sister, “but when I looked at the poor Icelanders I fared like a King.”

As Ryan Eyford discusses in his article on quarantine in New Iceland as an instrument of colonial power, officials interpreted Icelanders’ susceptibility to the disease as a sign of biological inferiority. Migrant homes, clothing, families, and bodies were not only contaminated by the virus, but also the signs of much deeper physical and cultural inadequacies. Only the adoption of Anglo modes of living, argued officials, would transform them into successful colonists. One report of a visitor to the colony shortly following the epidemic described their living conditions as dank, dirty and “most squalid.” Reports of migrant poverty and contagion were complicated by reports of their stoicism and apparent lack of decorum and sanitation in relation to dead bodies. The Globe and Mail reported that medical officials visiting the settlement “were compelled to threaten force in order to induce the removal of decomposing corpses.”

...Centuries of isolation from the rest of the world and constant intermarriage with each other without any infusion of foreign blood have reduced their physical condition to a point below which they are likely to be successful in the rude contest with western pioneers... It is very desirable that they should mix with the outside world, and that their young men and women should take to themselves wives and husbands from the lusty bone and sinew of young Canada.

In addition to shaping Anglo notions of migrant difference, the containment, isolation, and government intervention sparked by the epidemic also created significant pressure on the personal, domestic, and aesthetic lives of migrants. Government sanitation regulations created

---

96 Baldwin, Letter to Phoebe (Baldwin), 1-2.
97 Baldwin, Letter to Phoebe (Baldwin), 4.
99 “With the Governor General,” The Globe and Mail September 26, 1877, 2.
100 “With the Governor General,” 2. Augustus Baldwin similarly noted that many families lacked the barest supplies, including cloth and boards, to cover and bury the victims, Baldwin, Letter to Phoebe (Baldwin), 2.
101 “With the Governor General,” 2.
intensive quarantines at the boundaries of New Iceland including the enforcement of disinfectant baths and a two-week isolation period for those wishing to leave the colony. Prior to the crossing, the quarantined also had to shed their old clothing and put on a new set provided by the government.\textsuperscript{102} Clothing and bedding in private homes were also targeted by medical officials as potential storehouses of disease and all settlers received orders to boil their clothing and bedding in hot soapy water. Families used sulphur to fumigate articles that could not be washed. The quarantine also interrupted access to textile markets and Anglo commercial goods. Migrants who had passed through urban centres such as Toronto and Winnipeg could purchase goods and clothing on their way to settlements in New Iceland, but poverty prevented many (but not all) from purchasing more than the barest of personal supplies. For many migrants during the quarantine, supplies of quality clothing were a badly needed but scarce resource in their battle against communicable disease.

The quarantine remained in place for 228 days, months after the final case of smallpox had disappeared. The economically crippling extension stemmed from fears of a provincial epidemic as well as what John Taylor called “the insulting and threatening” attitude of provincial employees towards the struggling colony.\textsuperscript{103} Though the head of the Keewatin Board of Health reported the colony free of smallpox on April 7, the quarantine did not end until hundreds of Icelanders assembled in Gimli and threatened to march across the boundary on July 22, 1877.\textsuperscript{104} However, the lifting of the quarantine on the reserve in the summer of 1877 did not mark the beginning of a new era of prosperity in the colony. Migrants continued to struggle with shortages of food, housing, and proper clothing, which were complicated by the heavy labour demands involved in establishing farms and fisheries. Numerous accounts of the early days in the community refer to the impact of hard labour on the shortening of garment life-spans. Clothing stretched, split, and was worn thin in a range of activities, including travelling, tending livestock, and fishing. Lack of adequate clothing was a significant problem capable of retarding economic development and contributing to starvation, since migrants could not fish during the winter without protection from the elements. Winter weather around Lake Winnipeg was severe, and the temperature regularly dropped well below minus thirty degrees. Encounters with the cold in

\textsuperscript{102} Gimli Women’s Institute, \textit{Gimli Saga}, 21.
\textsuperscript{103} John Taylor: S.P.A. 1878 (No. 8) no. 15, 66, as reprinted in Kristjanson, \textit{The Icelandic People in Manitoba}, 52.
\textsuperscript{104} Kristjanson, \textit{The Icelandic People in Manitoba}, 51-2
the early years proved disastrous for some unfortunate migrants, including both Hjalmar Hjalmarson and Magnús Magnússon who lost feet to frostbite after getting lost for three days on the ice in 1876. Hjalmar, who lost both of his feet, continued to homestead by walking on his knees.105

Letters from migrants suggest that the form of labour with the highest material demands was that related to the transformation of the scrubby, boggy, brush of the Interlake into pasture and fields. As Friðriða Baldvinsdóttir wrote, “it’s good for boys to pack strong clothes which rip in the woods and mittens [because they] don’t last long against the cuts.”106 Migrants who had only brought their better suits of clothing to Canada to begin their new lives found themselves underdressed for the winter, and by the end of their first year, struggling to save the few pieces they owned. The cold, coupled with the demands of labour on cloth meant that rags and old clothing were valuable, essential parts of dress in the early years. In an 1877 letter, Björn Andrésson advised potential migrants:

anyone planning to join us here should bring all their clothes, both old and new, as they are quickly worn out here. Constructing houses and working in the bush is hard on the clothes, as is travelling through the bush, which is thick and difficult to penetrate.107

Though many migrants found that their clothing wore out quickly, most could not afford to buy even the cheapest store-bought fabric to replace pants, skirts, jackets, and shirts. As a result, using rags and recycling cloth were important strategies that migrants used to keep themselves clothed. In response to the need for warm and durable cloth for life in Manitoba, many families opted to dismantle and reassemble clothing from home to create new suits of clothing. Old skirts contained upwards of four to five meters of fabric each which could be reassembled into pants, jackets, dresses, and skirts for children. As Hrund Skulason recalled, women’s large shawls were also valuable sources of woollen cloth for children’s clothing, but to her chagrin, these clothes were not simply reserved for the colder months. “My mother had a beautiful red shawl in Iceland and made it into dresses for me and my sister,” she noted. “They

105 Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 130.
106 Baldvinsdóttir, Letter to to Baldvin Helgason, 60.
were scratchy and uncomfortable but it probably saved us from sunburn.”¹⁰⁸ Patching, mending, and darning garments were essential to extending clothing life. Pálina Dahlman recalled from stories of her father’s youth in the 1880s, “every stitch of clothing they owned was overhauled and mended.” Yet, she concedes, this strategy didn’t prevent children from wearing winter clothes with holes in them. Finding the material and time to keep clothing mended was an uphill battle and the ragged garments of children working on farms often “allowed snow to fall against their skin as they got hay for the animals or went for firewood.”¹⁰⁹

The poverty of migrants, coupled with the labouring conditions in Manitoba, meant that in the earliest years of settlement Icelandic Canadians had insufficient access to good, warm clothing well-adapted to life and work in a new climate. Clothing shortages and the wearing of ragged clothing were extensions of the colony’s larger struggle with poverty and isolation. The chronically poor transportation between the colony and the city meant that migrants remained isolated from markets and manufactured goods, aside from essentials. The inadequacy of the clothing supply in the community pressured members into seeking out new kinds of cloth and garments available in Manitoba, including manufactured fabric and First Nations clothing. Icelanders with access to savings or tradable goods could begin to buy manufactured cloth as early as 1876 when Friðjón Friðriksson and his wife Guðný Sigurðardóttir established the first store in Gimli after their sojourn in Milwaukee. Friðjón, who incurred significant debt to start his business, offered colonists competitive, “unusually low” prices on a range of goods, including fabric from five cents a yard.¹¹⁰ Yet sales of manufactured cloth were slow in the early years of the settlement. Even the cheapest cotton was still out of the price range of many poor settlers and was also undesirable given cheap cotton’s increased susceptibility to wear and tear and poor insulation qualities. Cotton was a poor substitution for the warm and hardwearing woollen cloth traditionally available from Icelandic weavers. Weavers procured wool from the herds of sheep in the colony to produce quality woollen fabric for clothing as well as thicker and more colourful textiles such as coverlets or bedspreads (Figure 1.12).

Yet, by the 1890s, even the families of skilled weavers often decided to purchase fabric. Tracing the rapid decline of weaving in North America is slightly more complex than the history of knitting, since the value of knitted goods remained relatively stable until late the mid-twentieth century. It is clear, however, that weaving was more easily supplanted by manufactured goods as they became available. Weaving was a more labour intensive, time consuming and stationary form of textile production. Icelandic-Canadian weavers began to find difficult and frustrating to try to keep up with competing work demands as well as the shorter life-span of clothing in the rural west. From carding to knitting to weaving, wool production was not a gender-specific activity in Icelandic families on either side of the ocean and men and women in North America were both engaged in the production of woollen cloth. Yet, weavers such as Björn Jónsson also found it difficult to balance the demands of cloth production with other forms of labour in Canada. He and his wife Ólafía Stefánsdóttir settled in Thingvallanýlenda outside of Churchbridge, Saskatchewan in 1886 and Björn still maintained a loom in their home until at least 1898. That year Ólafía sent her mother in Iceland a photograph of her growing, well-dressed family accompanied by a letter. She noted with pride that she had made all of the clothing herself but explained why the whole family wore store-bought fabric (Figure 1.13).

The dress I wore cost $10 (40 kronur). It’s brown with red appliqué and gold piping. (Two women borrowed it to sit for their pictures.) You likely won’t believe that I sewed it and all the clothing for the family... All these clothes cost a great deal as the material is all purchased. Björn has so much to do that he simply hasn’t time to weave.111

Ólafía’s reference to the cost of store-bought fabric reflects the fiscal realities that shaped migrant aesthetics. Very few families could afford new sets of clothing for themselves in the years following the initial arrival of Icelanders in rural Manitoba. Though store bought cloth may have been out of the question for some women, borrowing and recycling helped ease the financial pressure of clothing families.

111 Ólafía Stefánsdóttir to Ólafía Magnúsdóttir, Churchbridge, December 4, 1898, as reprinted in “A Photograph to Bridge the Ocean/ Ljósmynd” (Exhibit Text) Silent Flashes/ Pögul Leifuttur Ljósmyndir Íslendinga í Vesturheimi (Museum Exhibit) Nelson Gerrard trans. Icelandic Immigration Museum/Vesturfarasafn, Hofsós, Iceland.
Supplies of manufactured fabric first became available around the most northerly edge of the reserve when Friðjón and Guðrún left their store in Gimli and moved to Icelandic River to run the Jónasson & Fredricksson Saw and Store in 1881. The couple entered into partnership with the well-established immigrant agent, editor, and mill and store co-owner, Sigtryggur Jónasson, but fabric sales remained slow. The store’s ledger illustrates that very few families in the community had earned enough to purchase shirting for men or the standard six yards required to sew a dress for an adult woman in the first few years after the store was established. Guðrún Jóhannesdóttir, was one of several exceptions when she made a new dress for herself out of grey or green cotton in 1882 at fifteen cents per yard. The most cheaply priced cotton (five cents per yard) was not suitable for making clothing, but was more likely reserved for lining. Fancier, better quality fabrics, such as men’s shirting (twenty-two cents per yard) and sturdier varieties such as cottonade (twenty-five cents per yard) were more expensive and often only purchased one or two meters at a time, probably in response to dire need, carefully accrued savings, or an attempt to patch existing pieces of clothing.

The food shortages, as well as the inaccessibility of manufactured textiles and the disintegration of clothing initially shipped from Iceland also meant that migrants relied heavily on the economies, food, and material culture of their First Nations neighbours, the Sandy Bar Band. Initial exchanges between the two groups had a devastating impact on the band, evident in the spread of smallpox brought by the Icelanders. The historiography surrounding the Band has been generally limited to native mortality during the epidemic, but it is crucial to also acknowledge that some band members survived, moved on, and built new lives for themselves after 1877. Following the loss of his wife and several children during the epidemic, Chief John Ramsay and his family built a prosperous network of goods and services exchange that revolved around facilitating migrant access to local resources for food and clothing. Local histories of the Icelandic community frequently reference the consumption of venison and fish and visits from band members in their descriptions of relations between the two, but records from the Jónasson & Fredrickson store describe a booming economy in moose meat caught, processed, and shipped by Sandy Bar members. Moose was a colony staple in 1881 and 1882, as food demands grew.

---

112 Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 231.
113 "Tómas A. Jónasson," (store account) Journal of Jónasson Fredrickson and Co. Sawmill and Stove, 1881-1884 Icelandic River, (Riverton) Manitoba, Icelandic Collection, University of Manitoba, 72. (No call number)
with the establishment of a boarding house at Viðirnes for labourers involved in the Jónasson & Fredrickson Sawmill. In March of 1881 alone, labourers at the boarding house consumed close to 300 lbs of moose meat. The caloric demands of new industry in the community, coupled with the absence of reliable shipping routes meant that local hunters such as Ramsay were well-positioned. He regularly sold smaller orders of moose meat to the store for six cents a pound, earning anywhere from $1.25 to $30.66 per transaction. By the spring of 1881, Ramsay was earning some of the highest wages around the settlement. In one deal on March 17, 1881, he sold 2 194 lbs of moose meat to the store for $109.70. Meat provision was part of a larger, financially lucrative series of arrangements Ramsay made with colonists during the post-epidemic period. Store records show that Ramsay also led expeditions for the Icelanders in the region and offered other services for which settlers paid him in goods. Band members also benefitted economically from the clothing demands of new arrivals. First Nations clothing and material culture was better suited to the climate, and migrants quickly adapted to wearing garments like buffalo robe coats.

Many migrants also depended on the moccasins sold by band members due to the expense of store-bought shoes and the shortcomings of traditional homemade Icelandic footwear. Aside from the very few who could afford store bought shoes, most Icelanders arrived in North America wearing slipper-style shoes known skinnskor (skin shoes) made from a range of animal hides, including sheep, seal, or fish according to availability (Figure 1.14). Written descriptions of skinnskor frequently reference their similarity to moccasins, but these two styles of shoes differed significantly in their construction and functionality. Winter moccasins from the Interlake provided full coverage of the wearer’s feet and ankles and were insulated with fur, but skinnskor had a much lower cut and relied upon the wearer’s socks to cover the tops of their feet as well as a decorated inserts called “ileppar” to provide additional warmth on the soles of the feet (Figure 1.15). W.J. Lindal attributes the skimpiness of skinnskor to the Icelandic belief in wet feet preventing colds. Though the making and wearing of skinnskor continued into the twentieth century in some rural settlements, migrants found the footwear of First Nations better suited to the geography and climate of the prairies. As informants in Nelson Gerrard’s Icelandic River

115 Andrésson to his father, 34.
Saga recalled, skinnskor were slippery on the ice, hard, uncomfortable, and prone to shrinking. Guttormur Guttormsson recalled with delight the first time he received a pair of flexible, soft and beautifully decorated mocassins.

And to compare the shoes that the couple had; made from light-brown cured hide and embroidered with silk roses all around - to compare them with our rock-hard, Icelandic leather shoes! What a difference! I can't describe how great my joy was when I received my first pair of mocassins.117

Icelanders had ample access to mocassins through trade relations with their neighbours. As Guttormur’s account suggests, some migrants received mocassins directly from Band members and occasionally as gifts. Community members could also purchase the shoes through the Jónasson and Fredricksson store, but prices were high. A pair of mocassins for an adult ranged in cost from $1.00 to $1.50, or enough to by eight pounds of moose meat or enough cloth for two children’s dresses.118 This expense, coupled with periods of separation from band members and their wares, meant that Icelanders also continued to make their own footwear, including hip-waders as well as shoes out of the thicker hide of cattle. Mocassins, however, undeniably offered labourers warmer, more flexible and comfortable footwear.119

Community clothing production was also shaped by the material cultural exchanges that resulted from personal relationships between Icelanders and First Nations. Though racial tension undoubtedly existed in the community, Icelanders and their First Nations neighbours worked and socialized together frequently in the nineteenth century. Community narratives often reference both groups assisting one another in times of crisis by providing shelter, clothing, food, and emotional support. Friðjón and Guðný lost their young son prematurely in 1883 at the same time as the death of one of Chief John Ramsey’s daughters. In a gesture that reveals a strong personal relationship that extended well beyond the provision of moose meat and mocassins, the two families agreed to bury their children together.120 Economic relationships also fostered romantic

---

120 Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 231.
relationships between Icelandic fishermen and trappers and their First Nations colleagues’ families and intermarriage was not uncommon in the Interlake in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. While fishing and trading in an area north of the Icelandic reserve known as The Narrows, Helgi Einarsson began a family with and eventually married Sara Stagg, the daughter of one of his Native colleagues. Tómas Jónasson and his wife Guðrún ran a boarding house named Engimýri in Icelandic River for fishermen and traders travelling north to camps and traplines along Lake Winnipeg in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The house hosted men from many different backgrounds, including Métis men whose personal and cultural ties to both European and First Nations communities made them excellent mediators. Not surprisingly, these boarding arrangements fostered the development of stronger personal ties and two of Tómas and Guðrún’s children married into Métis families. Their daughter Rannveig married Joe McLennan in 1906 while their son Jónas married Victoria Flett in 1911. Flett, who came from a Scots-Métis family, was “an extremely talented individual in handiwork of any kind.” Nelson Gerrard writes that she was responsible for designing and sewing many of the parkas and tents used by Icelandic fishermen on Lake Winnipeg for many years after moving to Riverton in 1912.

Victoria Flett’s work as a seamstress helps to explain the appearance of traditional Métis attributes in the working clothing of Icelandic fishermen during this period. Canvas parkas featuring pointed hoods and coloured, woven sashes worn around the waist by men in photographs of fishing camps are strikingly similar to the cut of the Métis capot (blanket coat) and the usage of the ceinture fleche, a colourful, woven sash worn as a belt (Figure 1.16). Similarly, the large leather mitts that protected the wrists of men working in the snow and ice are clearly versions of Métis gauntlets (Figure 1.17). Such aesthetic exchanges were not limited to early encounters between desperate under-clothed Icelanders and “helpful” First Nations people but reflected significant economic, social, and personal ties that persisted into the twentieth century. This is also evident in the popularity of moccasin treyjur (moccasin jackets) with Icelandic men working in fish camps or freighting on Lake Winnipeg. According to Gerrard,
these embroidered or beaded pieces were made from moose hide or buckskin and were popular around the turn of the century, while photographic evidence suggests that men wore these pieces in addition to Icelandic woollen garments such as socks (Figure 1.18).

Though many may have preferred First Nations style jackets and shoes, Icelandic-style wool socks also remained an essential, albeit less visible aspect of footwear in the community. Felted socks and mitts, which were created by knitting oversized pieces that were then shrunk to close the small gaps between stitches, were well-suited to labouring in the extreme cold as well as wet conditions. Wool fibres wicked sweat away from the skin and prevented drops in body temperature, while the solid, felted exterior helped keep out wind and moisture. Icelanders were adept at producing large amounts of knitted goods since, unlike their Anglo neighbours, they did not divide wool-based labour according to gender. Children contributed to this economy since boys and girls learned to knit and produce garments at a young age. Knitting was also a highly portable form of clothing production that required minimal equipment. Men, women, and children owned needles and could make socks, mitts, hats, scarves and sweaters while doing other activities such as travelling, visiting, and walking.

References to the smallpox quarantine interrupting the sale of knitting speak to the economic importance of the knitting industry in drawing income from outside the community in the earliest days of the settlement.\textsuperscript{125} Thick, felted mitts and socks were popular with non-Icelanders who worked on and around the lake, including First Nations hunters and White freighters and fishermen from Winnipeg and the surrounding districts. In 1883 Miles Lyons, an Anglo labourer working in the community, bought three knitted items when he purchased new winter work clothes at the Jónasson & Fredrickson Store. He began work that week with one pair of regular socks, one pair of felted socks, a new pair of mitts, a pair of overalls and new moccasins.\textsuperscript{126} As Walter Lindal notes, “Icelandic mitts and stockings always found a sale.”\textsuperscript{127}

Knitting was an important medium through which Icelanders exchanged goods and formed relationships with non-Icelanders. Hybrid material cultural practices emerged from these exchanges in which Icelanders, band members and external labourers adopted blended styles,

\textsuperscript{125} Kristjanson, \textit{The Icelandic People in Manitoba}, 51.
\textsuperscript{126} “Miles Lyons,” (store account) \textit{Journal of Jónasson-Fredrickson and Co.}, 331.
\textsuperscript{127} Lindal, \textit{The Icelanders in Canada}, 157.
including the wearing of Icelandic socks with moccasins, to best meet the harsh conditions
around Lake Winnipeg. Despite the increasing availability of manufactured products, home
woollen production endured amid the rapid shift towards other forms of cloth and clothing
production. Migrants may have abandoned other garments and modes of production for social,
economic, and practical reasons, but knitting and knitted clothing had impressive staying power.
The importance of wool production to daily life, including the processes of carding and spinning,
is evident in Jóhann Briem’s open letter to prospective migrants in 1878. Briem encouraged
migrants to prepare for a life in Canada that continued to rely upon the domestic production of
wool cloth and anticipated isolation from North American fabric and clothing markets.

It is also good to have the iron components of looms and all kinds of good weaving
implements, those not constructed of wood, likewise all the implements used in the
manufacture of wool yarn, spinning wheels and combs. Many of these implements and
tools are not available in this country and those that are far more expensive than at
home. I should also advise those intending to come here to provide themselves with a
good supply of clothing, especially underwear and socks; also with as many bedclothes as
they need for themselves and their dependents; in addition, a considerable quantity of
wool for making repairs to clothing.\textsuperscript{128}

The wool work industry, from the sale of knitting supplies and patterns as well as advertisements
in Icelandic newspapers for socks “like mama used to make,” continued to thrive well into the
twentieth century.\textsuperscript{129}

Power relations within the development of clothing-based systems of exchange between
Icelanders and First Nations rested on the ability of producers to regulate access to their goods.
Icelandic wool work was in high demand, but prices for these garments remained low as a result
of overproduction and widespread availability in the colony. In contrast, the prices of First
Nations produced goods such as moccasins and moose meat, remained comparatively high, given
the ability of middlemen and producers such as John Ramsay to regulate non-Native access to
both resources and knowledge. Guttormur Guttormson recalled the assistance and seemingly
limitless hospitality of Ramsay and other band members with fondness, but wrote that even
Ramsay placed limits on access to knowledge and skill that could potentially compromise the
Band’s economic interests. He may have helped Icelanders acquire skills required for basic

\textsuperscript{128} Jóhann Briem, “A few hints to Icelandic emigrants,” \textit{Framfari} January 4, 1878, 63.
\textsuperscript{129} “Þykkir Alullar Sokkar,” ("Thick All-wool Socks") \textit{Lögberg} October 30, 1919, 8.
survival, but “generally the native Indians were not inclined to teach the Icelanders their arts, nor
did they seek to learn anything from us.” As a boy, Guttormur amused Ramsay with his failed
attempts to “make a bow and arrow.” When Ramsay produced transformed a crooked stick into
a perfect arrow, Guttormur “asked him [how]- as I so often did- he simply shook his head and
smiled. Here was something he cared not to teach a white man...”

In spite of poverty, relative isolation from textile and clothing markets, and the social
pressures of urban centres, Icelandic clothing and material culture in the colony underwent
considerable changes in the ten years following settlement. As the abandonment of the skothúfa
and the acquisition of First Nations jackets, coats, gauntlets, and moccasins attest, some of these
shifts were a result of economic and personal encounters and climate conditions in the Canadian
context. Yet these changes and the adoption of Anglo-Canadian manufactured goods also
reflected internal developments, such as the rise of consumerism and the re-establishment of
class divisions in the community. In addition to offering the inhabitants of one of the colony’s
most northerly towns access to the otherwise distant world of wages and consumer goods in the
1880s, the store journal of the Jónasson & Fredricksson Co. Sawmill and Store also provide a
detailed image of class stratification in the community according to purchasing power and
labour. The mill side of this operation harnessed the labour of often single and impoverished
Icelandic men to the harvesting, processing, and shipment of lumber, while encouraging
dependence on services and goods provided by the business. Men such as Kristján Sigvaldson
laboured for long hours “at logs and lumber” supplying and transporting wood to the mill in the
winter of 1880-1881. He received 14 cents per hour for regular labour and a flat rate of $1 dollar
per day for labour with horses. Kristján purchased very little from the store except for a pair of
mitts (.25), a box of heart pills (.25), a pair of drawers, (1.25) an undershirt, (1.25) and a pair of
moccasins for $1.50 in the winter of 1882-3. The inclusion of a single yard of cloth for .15 in the
order suggests that Kristján depended on patching his own existing pieces of clothing instead of
purchasing more substantial (and expensive) pieces, such as shirts and pants from the store.

130 Guttormur Guttormson, “John Ramsay the Native Indian,” Andvari, Nýr flokkur, 1975, 75-83, as translated and
reprinted by Viður Hreinson and Jón Karl Helgason in Islandssöguféfurinn: Vesturfaranir, Reykjavik: RUV, 1999-
In New Iceland class and labour shaped the clothing worn by migrants and their families. Poor and working-class migrants relied on mending and recycling their clothes as well as using First Nations-style garments that were better adapted to working in the harsh conditions around Lake Winnipeg. Yet, it is clear that by the turn of the century, the wearing of First Nations-style parkas and gauntlets was mostly limited to men working in fishing and freighting. Middle- and upper-class community members, in contrast, could afford to purchase manufactured cloth and garments at the local store, including more impractical articles less-suited to working in the bush or on the lake, like Anglo-style shoes. Yet the village store and First Nations neighbours were not the only conduits into the supply of cloth and clothing or North American style and consumption.

Middle-class Icelandic men and women who spent time in urban centres also acted as conduits of style who imported North American fashion into isolated Icelandic communities. The clothing of women such as Rannveig Ólafsdóttir Briem, wife of Sigtryggur Jónasson, and Frú Lára Bjarnason, wife of religious leader Séra Jón Bjarnason, illustrate the role of urban life, disposable income, and the desire to emulate Anglo-Americans in migrants’ adoption of North American contemporary fashion. Both women spent time in North American urban centres before settling in rural New Iceland. During her husband’s varied career in the United States, Frú Lára lived in Milwaukee, Chicago, and Minneapolis from 1873-1877. A portrait of Lára from this period reflects her early adoption Anglo-American fashion, including a bare head, earrings, and a dress featuring lace trim and a lace scarf (Figure 1.19). She and her wardrobe arrived in New Iceland in 1877 where she quickly became a well-regarded figure in the community who also symbolized the possibility of success and achievement for Icelandic migrant women. Her status was bolstered by her husband’s role as an immensely popular, though also divisive spiritual leader, her connections to Iceland’s cultural elite (her father Bjarni was an influential composer, often referred to as the “father of modern Icelandic music”) and her own work with women’s organizations and as a teacher.

Similarly, Rannveig spent time in Toronto 1876 for health reasons before heading to the colony.\(^{132}\) There she lived off of part of the earlier proceeds from one of her husband’s

---

successful business deals involving railroad tie production that had netted him $1,100 in 1873. Sigtryggur reinvested this money into developments within the colony, purchasing horses and constructing buildings that he rented to colonists. He even purchased a steamship for the shipment of lumber, goods and passengers between businesses in and around Winnipeg and the colony. A photograph taken of the couple upon Sigtryggur’s return to Toronto in 1878 illustrates their appreciation for expensive clothing and Anglo style (Figure 1.20). Rannveig’s time in Toronto was not the sole reason for this adoption, however. As an English-speaker, businessman, and representative for the Icelandic migrants, Sigtryggur developed significant ties to the Anglo-Canadian political and commercial elite. Moreover, the couple came from a prosperous farm called Möðruvellir in Iceland, home to the governor Pétur Hafstein. The governor’s residence was also a well-established political and intellectual circle that promoted an appreciation for British culture and language and parliamentary governance as an alternative to Danish rule.133

Sigtryggur wrote that the pro-British sentiment at Möðruvellir shaped his decision to chose Canada over the United States, and that he had come to “like the British form of governance more than the American.”134 Rannveig and Sigtryggur named their house in New Iceland “Möðruvellir” in honour of their old home. Building on Sigtryggur’s initial success in the East, the Canadian Möðruvellir became a home and cultural centre complete with many of the trappings of the couple’s wealthy Anglo counterparts, including store-bought furniture, coffee, and expensive clothing. Though many families still struggled with inadequate housing and heating, Sigtryggur purchased thirty-one yards of carpeting at a cost of $31.50 in 1882 as well as a $14.00 robe that was shipped from Alexander and Bryce, an upscale store in Winnipeg.135 Perhaps most telling of the couple’s income and social status were Möðruvellir’s orders for fine liquor and cigars imported from British colonies. In a period of fourteen months fourteen months Sigtryggur had sixteen bottles of brandy, including at least six bottles of Hennessy, and three hundred cigars from Trinidad shipped to his address at the isolated northern border of New Iceland.136

133 Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 222.
134 Sigtryggur Jónasson, as quoted in Lindal, The Icelanders in Canada, 88.
There were no fabric shortages for the wives of the elite in the young colony, rather, cloth and clothing became an important sign of status, respectability, and progressive cultural adaptation. Though poorer family members also boarded at Möðruvellir, Rannveig cultivated a social circle of women whose class backgrounds complemented her own, including the Copenhagen-educated author Torfhildur Holm. Also living at Möðruvellir for a time was the widow Sigriður Jónsdóttir (Figure 1.21), also called “Meiriháttar Sigga” or “Fancy/Stuck-up Sigga” because of the “air of superiority she had acquired during her years of association with the upper class in her homeland.”\(^{137}\) A portrait of Sigriður from around 1885 illustrates her slightly overstated love of finery, including an elaborate beaded headpiece featuring an ostrich feather and striking patterned collar, that stood in stark contrast to the generally sedate and unadorned appearance of other sixty-year-old women in the community. Sigtryggur and Friðjón’s accounts reveal that neither of their wives suffered from the fabric shortages that poorer families faced. In the spring of 1883 Friðjón purchased an impressive amount of fabric for new clothing for women in his family, including 36.5 meters of printed fabric, (enough to make six women’s dresses,) a broach, silk scarf, photo album, four pairs of women’s shoes and a doll, probably for the couple’s daughter Aurora.\(^{138}\)

Sigga’s nickname suggests that working-class and poor community members did not always simply admire the attire of their wealthy neighbours, but also may have resented and mocked their ambitious pursuits of Anglo-Victorian style and status. Notions of appropriate dress and conduct created tensions between the emerging middle class and elite in the community and their poorer counterparts and aesthetic change became an important component in the reestablishment of Icelandic class divisions in North America. Clothing and bodies were a pressing source of concern for middle-class migrants who feared that North Americans would make no distinction between respectable Icelanders and their poorer countrymen, some of whom were welfare recipients shipped at the expense of Icelandic district councils. The appearance of community members dressed in tattered clothes and First Nations garments also threatened to undermine migrant leaders’ attempt to contain older accusations that Icelanders were racially and culturally inferior to Anglo Canadians. In a letter from Reykjavík reprinted in the colony’s early

newspaper *Framfari,* an unnamed sender expressed concern about the potential impact of the arrival of migrants of “poor character” in Canada. “Some of the trash that has gone,” he warned, “will bring upon you other men both disgrace and harm.”

Isolation and forced proximity to poor migrants was also a source of displeasure for middle-class Icelanders like Sigga and those who congregated at Möðruvellir, who complained about their poor manners and hygiene. Friðjón included reports about the poor manners and hygiene of some of his indigent compatriots in letters to Reverend Jón Bjarnason. “Their uncleanliness was intolerable when they first came here,” he wrote of some who stopped in Kinmount before proceeding to Manitoba, “resulting in my having to express time and again my disgust for this filth.”

For Icelanders living in Winnipeg, the tattered clothing of poor children also threatened the community’s image. When the province decided to implement mandatory schooling for children in 1888, parents in Winnipeg’s Icelandic neighbourhoods protested that they could not financially meet the schools’ demands for suitable school clothing. Even as earlier arrivals began to achieve material success, subsequent influxes of newly arrived, impoverished Icelanders rekindled concerns about the reputation of the Icelandic-Canadian community. Thora Arnason, who was born in Iceland and immigrated as a child, recalled that the clothing, poverty, and language of new arrivals embarrassed established, middle-class Icelandic Canadians.

[Before we got new clothes] we were not very happy that the children weren’t very good to us, and it wasn’t the Anglo-Saxon children, it was the Icelandic children. I think they were ashamed of us, you know, we didn’t speak English, our clothes were different...  

As references to anxieties about the speaking of Icelandic in Anglo-urban centres and towns illustrate, the adoption of Anglo aesthetics did not completely ensure equality for Icelanders. W.J. Lindal, who attended a virtually all-Anglo school himself, recalled that “some Icelandic parents were initially reluctant to send their children to English schools because of hostility towards foreigners.” He notes that although “this aversion to the public schools

---

141 “Skolanam Íslenzkra barna,” (School enrolment of Icelandic children) *Lögberg* February 15, 1888, 2.
142 Thora Arnason as interviewed by Laurence Gillespie. *Icelandic Canadian Oral History Fonds,* Winnipeg, October 25, 1989. PAM Tape C-1649 Side A, 8:45-11:00.
disappeared very quickly, the Icelandic boys often had to fight it out on the school grounds.” Reverend Albert Kristjanson similarly noted that “the Icelanders were looked down on by the Anglo-Saxons, who are the lords of law and promises [as] foreigners, foreigners... we had to fight for recognition as men among men.” New arrivals who attempted to deflect negative attention and integrate by purchasing what they understood to be Anglo-style clothing in advance were also sometimes frustrated to find that even the best imported clothing available in Iceland appeared out of place and outdated in Canada. Families with some savings purchased new clothing and fabric in Reykjavík or during stopovers on the trip to Canada including the widow Jóhanna Antoniusardóttir, who bought straw hats for her daughters Inga and Margrét during a break in Britain in 1888. Thora Arnason also arrived with new clothes. She had only ever worn skinnskor and homespun woollen clothing prior to her family’s migration, but in preparation for the trip her mother bought patent leather shoes with velvet tops and buttons for her. As Arnason’s own experience suggests, however, even those able to afford store-bought shoes and clothing in Iceland found them no match for clothing produced, purchased and worn in Canada.

It was very hot when we arrived it was in May and my Uncle Nick met us... and he met his daughter and she was in a white dress with patent leathers slippers and my clothes didn’t look very nice- my shoes that I thought were so beautiful, ha, they were horrible looking!

While early records indicate that Anglo Canadians and Icelanders alike expressed disdain for newcomer aesthetics that implied poverty or difference, the history of clothing in the community is not one of simple loss and abandonment in response to social pressure. The eagerness with which urban Icelanders embraced Anglo-Victorian clothing also speaks to their attraction to it, as well as the accessibility of the Victorian clothing market to new Canadians. By the 1880s many Icelanders had begun to leave the struggling colony for work in Winnipeg and opportunities in the other provinces and the United States. In Winnipeg, Icelandic-speaking consumers could purchase clothing and fabric from a number of businesses who offered Icelandic language service. In 1883 there were at least twelve Icelandic tailors operating in the

143 Lindal, *The Icelanders in Canada*, 162.
146 Arnason, *Icelandic Oral History Fonds*, 8:45-11:00.
city, including Erlendur Gislason who ran a small shop on Ross Street in Winnipeg. Many English-speaking Winnipeg merchants also recognized the purchasing power of the rapidly urbanizing Icelandic community and hoped to attract their business through Icelandic language advertisements and the promise of fair, respectful treatment. In an ad entitled “Icelanders!” Mrs. Finney’s Trade in Second Hand Goods informed readers of Framfari that “I have hired Mr. Halldor Sigfusson as my clerk. He is Icelandic and will look after you in every respect. Our policy is: Low prices for cash sales and fair treatment for all.” Similarly, the editor of Framfari reported, “many businessmen and others would willingly take Icelanders into their employ, if for no other reason than the hope of obtaining as many Icelandic customers as possible.” Companies used Icelandic staff and Icelandic language service ads to create an image of respect and special treatment for Icelandic patrons. In addition to their storeroom filled with “finum tizkufötum” (fashionable clothing) and largest selection of women’s hats in the city, Carley Brother’s Clothing Company announced to readers of Heimskringla: “we have Icelanders in the store especially for Icelanders.”

The limited purchasing power of most migrants in rural New Iceland in the 1870s and 1880s suggests that the emerging Icelandic consumer market in Winnipeg was mainly comprised of emerging middle-class business owners and professionals. It is clear, however, that when it came to urban markets in Winnipeg, images and examples of Anglo style were not only appropriated by the wives of the middle-class elite. Large numbers of working-class Icelandic women spent time in Canadian farms, towns, and cities working as domestics, particularly in Winnipeg. In the early days of settlement many young, unmarried women remained behind in cities while their relatives moved into the rural settlements. As conditions worsened in New Iceland, married women with children also began to leave their families in pursuit of domestic work as a way of supplementing their family’s income. Simon Simonson’s wife, Valdis, left he and his two children on their isolated farm in the colony to earn money in Winnipeg. She made at least one of these trips during the winter with her foster daughter, travelling by foot and

---

147 Kristjanson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, 171.
151 “Carley Bro’s.” (Advertisement) Heimskringla August 20, 1892, 1.
by sled to Winnipeg. Domestic service, recalled Simonson “was one of the most prosperous economies.”

As a former domestic herself, author Laura Goodman Salverson frequently referenced her own experiences labouring in the homes of the Anglo middle-class in her writing. Her recollections of her term as a maid in the home of “Mrs. H.” illustrate the importance of clothing to maintaining employment. Employers demanded that their employees’ aesthetics complemented their own and that workers did not bring their worn out shoes and outmoded clothing into the workplace. These demands also meant that domestics were often forced to apply much of their own salaries to purchasing manufactured shoes and new clothing that they could otherwise not afford. Salverson recalled with bitterness how the aesthetic demands of domestic labour in these homes consumed much of her wages during the early months of her employment, despite her mother’s struggle to save for the purchase of a stove.

The most sainted thrift falls short on three dollars a week. Out of my first week’s salary (bless the word!) I had to pay the employment bureau and buy blue percale for two dresses. I would look so nice in blue, Mrs. H. thought. I was much too young to go about in a black skirt and blouse. A pair of shoes ate up the next week’s earnings, then I paid my debt, and now I had only to wait six weeks to get a spring coat.

Demand for female labour for fibre-based industries, including laundries, sewing factories, and shops also drew women into the cities in the 1880s, though the demand for domestic labour remained strong. Letters between Iceland and Canada emphasize the salaries and disproportionately plentiful opportunities for waged work for women in the city. Fourteen year-old Kristín Arnadóttir encouraged her half-sister and other girls and women at home to consider coming straight to Winnipeg to work. “I am sure that we have it much better here... respectable, temperate women can make a profit here with the usual wages that women get.” City wages helped her mother save for an impressive purchase, she reported; “a new sewing machine that cost twenty dollars which we have been paying off bit by bit.” As Ingveldur

---

153 Simonson, Icelandic Pioneers of 1874, 10.
154 Salverson, Confessions, 330.
156 Árnadóttir to Guðrún Jónsdóttir, 106.
Jónsdóttir warned, however, “there is by all means never a shortage of work for women... but few women make it rich.”\(^{157}\)

Working women became ambassadors of Anglo-Canadian style and consumption during their visits home to see their families in rural settlements and their access to urban Anglo clothing markets contributed to the allure of domestic service. Women’s waged labour was also a means of directly supplying rural family members with supplemental income and store bought goods. The emotional sacrifices that migrant women and girls made to work in the city were a popular topic with writers in the community. In Salverson’s *The Viking Heart* 16-year-old Borga panics at the thought of being separated from her parents to work on an English farm, but she comforts herself with “visions of herself returning to her mother loaded with luxuries.”\(^{158}\) Similarly, Halldór Laxness described children consoling themselves with a song about getting new dresses during their mother’s sojourn in Winnipeg in his short story “New Iceland.”\(^{159}\)

These fictionalized depictions of the emotional sacrifices migrants made for money also reveal the moral ambiguity of using family members for access to manufactured goods and domestic wages. The protagonist in Laxness’s story, who compares himself to a starving, abandoned dog, laments that “I’ve just chased out my wife, yes, yes, and she went away yesterday to try to shift herself for a washerwoman down in Winnipeg.”\(^{160}\)

Salverson’s writing similarly conveys the necessity of such labour as well as a sense of bitterness for the isolation and hard labour “the most prosperous economy” demanded of young women. These factors fuelled an overt sense of contempt for the particularities of middle-class styles of housekeeping in her coverage of these jobs. Police records from Winnipeg during this period also illustrate that several Icelandic domestics reported rape and assaults at the hands of their employers and their relatives. Rona Anderson charged William McBean with rape shortly after she arrived in Canada.\(^{161}\) Anderson worked as a domestic for McBean’s father, a prominent Winnipeg barrister, in the summer of 1888. When the Icelandic maid approached the Winnipeg

---

\(^{157}\) Ingveldur Jónsdóttir to her brother, March 20, 1892. Letter reprinted in Guðmundsson, 345-351, 350.

\(^{158}\) Salverson, *The Viking Heart* (Toronto, McClellan and Stewart, 1975), 33.


\(^{160}\) Laxness, “New Iceland.”162.

\(^{161}\) “An Alleged Rape Case” *Manitoba Free Press* August 13, 1888, 4.
Police, friends and associates of the McBean family began a slur campaign against her. Helga “Indridator” also reported that she was assaulted at the home where she worked as a domestic to Winnipeg Police in 1894. Indridator’s account was supported by men working on a neighbouring house that had heard her scream. In spite of the witnesses, Earl’s friends and sympathizers managed to keep his name out of the papers, since they were confident that that he would “easily establish his innocence.” As Salverson contends, the marginal material benefits of domestic wage labour failed to compensate for the dangerous, emotionally lonely, and physically exhausting lives of domestics. “For girls like us the dice were loaded from the start,” she wrote. “The ensign of the mop and the dustbin hung over our cradles... Just eat and sleep, propagate your misery and die!”

In her work on Ukrainian domestics, Frances Swyripa writes that isolation and loneliness were not the only concerns surrounding young Ukrainian migrant girls labouring in Anglo homes in the city. Journalists and satirists viewed Ukrainian domestics as symbols of moral ruin, rebellion, and the collapse of traditional values. The wardrobes of these women became shorthand for cultural erosion, including women’s emerging claims to independence and the seemingly unstoppable spread of modern Anglo culture. She argues:

village girls returning from work in the city were bearers of modernization, although they became sources of tension when they lorded it over their peers, flaunting their foreign phrases, for example, and making fun of the peasants’ clothes... they bore eloquent testimony to the difficulties of competing with the material attractions of North American society for the allegiance of Ukrainian-Canadian youth.

Conversely, male Icelandic leaders joined a chorus of Anglo officials who encouraged young people to leave their families for work on Anglo farms and urban centres as a method of assimilating aspects of Canadian life and culture. John Taylor wrote that young Icelanders living with Canadian families assimilated quickly. “I am often misled by their appearance, their dress, and their speech, so much and so closely resembling our own,” he wrote. “A perfect

162 The court reporter for the *Manitoba Free Press* described Anderson as a blackmailer “of unremarkable appearance” in the paper’s coverage of the case. “An Alleged Rape Case” 4.

163 Two witnesses named W.A.B. Hatton and J. Leach were sworn as witnesses into the case. Helga Indridator vs. Geo. W. Earl, City of Winnipeg Police Court Record, PAM, October 19, 1894.

164 “Local and Provincial (news,)” *Manitoba Free Press* October 18, 1894, 1.

165 Salverson, *Confessions*, 323.
identification in all respects with our people will eventually take place.”

Halldór Briem wrote in an 1878 editorial that “it is of particular value for our boys and girls to spend a shorter or longer time in the service or employ of Canadians...by paying careful attention we can learn so infinitely much from them, especially where working methods and public service are concerned.” Learning from work and life with Canadians, he argued, did not threaten their existence as “a unique independent ethnic group,” but was crucial to reinvigorating “the ancient Icelandic spirit of progress, which was so soundly asleep for so long a time at home in Iceland.”

For Briem and other leaders in the community, migration and acculturation were productive forces that could counteract the negative influences that bad climate and foreign domination had inflicted on Icelandic culture. This vision was not solely the product of migrant leaders, but stemmed from the larger critique of Icelandic cultural degradation instigated by the nationalist movement at home. Friðjón Friðriksson described the transformative potential of migration in terms of an all-encompassing purge of sins identified and led by the emerging Icelandic North American elite. “Icelandic bigotry and conceits are fading away and stupidity, narrow-mindedness, superstition, and conservatism is disappearing but common sense and liberalism- both in worldly and spiritual matters- is gaining grounds....”

Migration and adaptation to the North American context, continued Briem, would allow Icelanders to “rise up in a revised version, more vital and influential than ever before.”

By the 1890s Icelanders in the city and the country had embraced the selective destruction of old Icelandic cultural traits by broadly adopting the dress of their Anglo-Canadian neighbours. Though some, mainly middle-aged, women still opted to appear in the skautbúningar or peysuföt for formal portraits, the clear appetite for Anglo-Canadian clothing is evident in the overwhelming number of portraits of Icelanders dressed in store-bought shoes and clothing that emulated Anglo-Canadian style. Community leaders viewed acculturation and aesthetic transformation as deliberately destructive and productive processes. This vision of both purging

---

166 John Taylor, as quoted in Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 104.
169 Friðjón Friðriksson to Jón Bjarnasson, 11 August, 1881. Letter in *Correspondence of Fridjon Fridricksson* PAM MG 8 A 6-7 1874-85, letter 23, 2.
170 Briem, “My Good Countrymen!” 89.
and transforming migrants through clothing illustrates that tracing material cultural change in a community involves studying both the creation of new garments and new styles as well as the disposal and elimination of others. As discussed earlier, some pieces of clothing, including skirts and shawls, were recycled and others were simply worn out through hard labour and excessive use. But what about pieces that met neither of these fates? As a small, easily stored piece of clothing that women stopped wearing upon arrival, returning to the fate of the skotthúfa offers a compelling vantage point into the destruction, disintegration, and preservation of certain forms of clothing. The proliferation of disembodied metal hólkur in museum collections indicates that once the hats stopped being used and were often either dismantled or destroyed by their owners, or by vermin. Since they were both natural fibres, the wool cap and silk tail would have been prone to damage by moth infestations. Stored clothing may have also succumbed to mildew and moisture-related degradation, since the roofs of some of the first farmhouses were poor and leaks and floods soaked everything, including the bedding of settlers. As Simon Simundsson recalled, the leaks and floods that plagued settler homes persisted for years after arrival and made it difficult to keep textiles dry.

We were unable to keep a stitch dry in the clayey leakage of Skapti’s newly plastered house. The rain commenced around bed-time, and we stood knee-deep in water for most of the night. We were unable to protect our bedclothes from the rain, and they were soaked. Such was the comfort of most of the homes at that time, and this state of affairs continued for some years to come, in a number of cases. 171

Issues with mildew and vermin damage may have seriously affected the intergenerational value of family-owned textiles, yet the value of better preserved objects also decreased significantly for anglicized second and third generations. Textiles were less valued than other objects, such as jewellery or dishes, because they were in many respects “unusable.” The association of vermin with older organic objects and the labour and cost involved in maintaining wool and silk garments (washing, ironing, moth balls, etc.) probably also dissuaded people from taking old Icelandic homespun into their closets, drawers, and chests after their original owners had died or moved into seniors’ homes. Furthermore, the association between clothing and death or absent bodies meant that old peysus, skirts and skotthúfas offered the kind of memento that inheritors may have preferred to avoid.

171 Simonson, Icelandic Pioneers of 1874, 10.
Though old clothing was prone to damage and disposal, certain examples of Icelandic nationalist costumes survived into the twentieth century. As photographs and newspapers from the community illustrate, garment endurance indicates a certain degree of aesthetic retention and reinvention amongst successive generations. Several turn-of-the-century photographs show middle-class women in the community wearing skautfaldar, the skotthúfa’s more formal counterpart, to have their portraits taken. The most noticeable aspect of the skautbúningur is the faldur, or the white curved form worn on the top of the head, covered by a long white veil, and topped with a gold-coloured crown. Unlike the peysufót’s use in everyday life and labour in Iceland, outfits that used the skautfaldur were reserved solely for formal occasions. Portraits of community members in the Eyrarbakki Heritage Centre archive show women wearing skautfaldar in North America several years following migration. In contrast to the speedy abandonment of the skotthúfa following their arrival in Canada, Winnipeg Icelanders began to appear publically in this more formal Icelandic costume as early as the turn of the century. In contrast to the plain dark peysufót, the expensive material, jewellery and elaborate headdresses used in the construction of the skautbúningur speaks to its role as a ceremonial costume that emphasized community wealth and their desire to participate in North American spectacles and pageantry in the first quarter of the twentieth century. As will be discussed further in chapter three, this costume became firmly entrenched into the public image of the community following the creation of the Fjallkona spectacle in 1924 and Icelandic-Canadian parade floats in the 1920s and 30s more broadly.

The more public usage of formal Icelandic costumes at the beginning of the twentieth century creates questions about the role of textiles and clothing in the acculturation and assimilation of non-Anglo cultural groups in North America. Is the limited continuation of Icelandic dresses into the twentieth century a sign of cultural endurance or part of a larger, more complex transformation? A turn-of-the-century peysufót in the Manitoba Museum’s collection in Winnipeg offers insight into the changing role of clothing and female spectacle in ethnic identity in the province. The jacket is fitted and features velvet edges on the front and on the cuffs. Eye and hook closures at the front only close the jacket partially. A single eye and hook closure at the top of the peysu gives the jacket its characteristic gaping look which was partially covered by the silk scarf but also revealed the peysubrjóst, a small insert featuring needlework. The dress shows
two significant signs of alteration that speak to larger processes of cultural change in the history of clothing in the community (Figure 1.22).

First, the bodice of the original peysa or jacket was altered using black panels lined with pale pink cotton. Museum records indicate that the dress was originally worn as a wedding dress in Iceland in 1903, but the alterations in the jacket suggest that it was altered later to fit a larger woman. The comparative lack of wear on the panels suggests that the dress was worn infrequently after the alterations were completed. Second, the dress has two separate, but fairly similar sets of accessories. The first set of accessories included a long, simple cream silk scarf with a machine sewn hem and a deteriorating black silk apron. The second set of accessories is almost identical, but uses different fabric. The second black apron shows no signs of wear and was made with black synthetic fabric that was visually similar but coarser in texture. The second scarf is also cream but also featured long yellow manufactured fringe sewn onto the ends. The unnamed woman responsible for the alterations to the dress and the creation of the second set of accessories clearly hoped to replicate the original look of the dress, but intended it for use in a different context. Though the dress was originally worn around the turn of the century, the usage of synthetic fibre in the second apron reveals that the dress was altered for usage again after 1951. Given the attempt to replicate the original dress as closely as possible, it is clear that this garment was re-employed as part of a mid-twentieth century ethnic performance. The inclusion of bright, flowing fringe on the second scarf also suggests that the simplicity of the original garment didn’t offer enough show quality for a public display of ethnic identity and had to be adapted to fit into modern notions of colour, spectacle and “ethnic dress.”

The duality of this dress, as an object removed by an Icelandic-born woman so she would look more Canadian and later altered and re-worn by a Canadian woman so she could look more Icelandic, speaks to role of cloth and clothing as a medium of expression in changing constructions of migrant culture and the self in Canada. Textile and clothing history is a path of inquiry that examines the often subtle but powerful shape of multiple relations and structures of power, offering an anchor for an investigation into both personal and communal experiences and challenges. The study of clothing offers insight into some of migrants’ most intimate experiences of labour, poverty, and personal expression. In the Icelandic community, migrants used fabric as part of a larger political campaign protesting Danish rule. In their adaptation to the political and
social climate in North America migrants recast themselves, as they were able, into respectable Anglo-Canadians. More directly, cloth was an integral component of migrant experiences with poverty and illness. Clothing shortages directly affected immune systems, the spread of disease and more immediate issues such as frostbite. The crucial relationship between labour and clothing is clear in the community’s struggle to stave off starvation and maintain a basic standard of living. The nature of the labour performed by migrants, especially clearing bush, accelerated clothing deterioration. Given the geographic and financial inaccessibility of manufactured cloth, the destruction of clothing also contributed to food shortages by preventing under-clothed Icelanders from labouring in the cold. While this perspective of reveals the immediate relationship between cloth, health, and bodies, the material shortages that faced migrants on a personal level also illuminate larger cultural processes in the community.

Cloth and clothing usage was entangled in a range of social, cultural, and economic networks and was both a component and a reflection of the forces involved in the transformation of migrant bodies and minds. Unlike the vision set forth by Sigurður Guðmundsson, in which nationalist costumes contained and transmitted specific ideas about femininity, independence, and Icelandic culture, the history of clothing in the Icelandic community reveals its remarkable flexibility in the construction of systems of exchange. Although Icelandic women may have initially felt the xenophobic scorn of Anglo Canada through fabric, it quickly became part of the commercial and aesthetic framework that First Nations clothing providers and Anglo merchants used to draw Icelanders in as consumers. Geography, climate, labour conditions, and xenophobia may have forced Icelanders to abandon certain material cultural traditions, including weaving and the skotthúfa, but other forms of clothing production such as knitting endured as important sources of supplementary income and the development of hybrid Icelandic-First Nations styles that benefitted labourers working in the extreme cold on and around Lake Winnipeg. Cloth was also a medium through which power in the community was expressed, evident in the role of Anglo-Canadian style in the establishment of class divisions within the community. The clothing, along with the language and conduct of poor or working-class Icelanders was a source of concern for the emerging middle class and elite in the community. As evident in both their consumption patterns and the creation of disparaging reports of poor Icelanders affecting their general reputation, a positive, respectable external image was a priority for the middle-class and migrant elite. Interestingly, however, the adoption of Anglo Canadian style was not solely the
result of efforts by image conscious Icelanders. While they may not have uniformly accepted the prescriptive image of respectability set forth by wealthier migrants, working-class women were also important agents in the adoption of Anglo-Victorian style, but in a way that reflected their own ambition and desire for material wealth in addition to the demands of their employers. Here the details of labour and cloth reveal the complexity of what initially appeared to be a simple shift towards Anglo clothing. Rather, the history of clothing in the community offers vantage points into multiple aspects of migrant life and experience. Most notable of these is the use of cloth as an alterable terrain through which migrants pursued, altered, destroyed, and created images of themselves to negotiate life in Canada.
Chapter Two

Coffee, booze, and “The Striped Lady”: Icelandic food and drink in the Canadian context, 1875-present

In November 1889, Helga Johnson of Calder, Saskatchewan, sat alone in her isolated home with fresh memories of the North-West Rebellion and an insatiable desire for coffee. Johnson’s husband Fred was away stack threshing and the surrounding area was blanketed by snow. The Johnsons had already used up the last of their beans and the way to the neighbour’s house, the nearest available source of coffee, was blocked by a potentially hostile First Nations encampment. Helga Johnson waited for three days until she could stand the craving for coffee no longer. That Sunday, she grabbed a pair of her husband’s overalls and disguised herself as a man “so she could pass by the encampment with confidence.” When she finally arrived at the house in search of beans, it was filled with company. Her neighbours and their guests were reportedly upset when she finally arrived, not because she had potentially risked her life for some coffee beans, but that she had the audacity to appear in public dressed as a man.172

Helga Johnson’s journey provides a compelling example of the rich social, cultural, and gendered terrain that food and drink comprised in the lives of migrants. Studying the consumption of non-essential food and drink, or items that were ingested for purposes other than nutritionally sustaining community members, reveals that they were both sources of desire and media through which Icelanders pursued pleasure, mediated relations, and constructed or challenged gender, class, and ethnic identities. Taking a long historical overview, this chapter explores the ways in which alcohol, coffee, and vínarterta, an elaborate festive dessert, emerged as three of the most defining culinary forces in the construction of modern Icelandic-Canadian identity and the mediation of relations with Anglo-North American society.

Drawing on a wide range of sources, including police records, photographs, newspaper articles, recipes, and oral testimony, this chapter demonstrates how drinking and eating became important sites for the internal and external construction of ethnic identity by addressing three major developments. First, it considers the significant shifts in the production and consumption

172 Lindal, The Icelanders in Canada, 158.
of food and drink, particularly the community’s early transition from virtual starvation into the establishment of early food markets, and the dedicated pursuit of good coffee. This section illustrates the parameters of Icelandic Canadian culinary acculturation through their rejection of Anglo preferences for tea and the maintenance of Icelandic coffee practices. Second, it examines the role of alcohol in the definition of private space and the community’s public image. Anxieties about male alcohol consumption within the community reflected older antagonisms toward Danish colonial monopolies and their perceived connection to Icelandic social ills. Migrants used the temperance movement not only to prevent being labeled as intemperate foreigners by Anglo-North Americans, but also as a way of regulating the “bad desires” of Icelandic men. Attempts to control male drinking, however, met with limited success, and alcohol consumption continued to shape male sociability, including relations with men outside of the community. Finally, the chapter turns to an account of the emergence of vínarterta as a compelling, indeed definitive, symbol of Icelandic-Canadian and American identity in the post-1945 era. It asks: why did this dessert in particular emerge as one of the most popular symbols of Icelandic-North American culture in the twentieth century? Moreover, why have community members largely rejected any alterations to the recipe? By studying the remarkable conservatism surrounding vínarterta recipes, it argues that this visually-intriguing dessert offered external audiences a palatable and contained image of ethnic difference, while providing community members with a ritualistic, edible memento of familial identities, particularly those related to the Amma, or Grandmother.

At a public lecture in 1998, the Icelandic scholar Jón Karl Helgason asserted “Icelandic Canadian identity is frequently and generally experienced by way of digestion.” The consumption of certain food and beverages has been an integral component of the personal, social, cultural, and political bonds and divides in Icelandic Canada, yet, with the exception of Helgason, recent scholarship on the community has tended to downplay the place of consumption in Icelandic-Canadian community formation and its continuing maintenance. In recent years scholarship on migration and North American ethnic communities has well illustrated that an investigation into food and beverage consumption can enrich histories of immigrant women and families. Donna Gabaccia’s We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans traces the role of immigrant foodways in transforming consumption.

patterns in the United States through the spread of items such as pickles, bagels, beer, and pasta and the establishment of ethnic food businesses.\textsuperscript{174} Gabaccia’s work, as well as Amy Bentley’s detailed investigation into the place of gender, class, and race in wartime rationing policy represented the growth of a newer wave of global food scholarship in the 1990s. A broad array of additional works have been produced in the new millennium, including Hasia R. Diner’s discussion of migrant memories of hunger in \textit{Hungering for America: Italian, Irish, and Jewish Foodways in the Age of Migration} and Panikos Panayi’s study of the impact of migration and British cuisine in \textit{Spicing Up Britain: The Multicultural History of British Food}.\textsuperscript{175} This growth has also fostered a range of community-specific studies and micro histories such as Meredith E. Abarca’s \textit{Voices in the Kitchen: Views of Food and the World from Working-Class Mexican and Mexican American Women} and Colleen Taylor Sen’s newest work on the history of curry.\textsuperscript{176} Canadian scholarship on the subject has also increased, including the recent anthology, \textit{What’s to Eat? Entrees in Canadian History}, edited by Nathalie Cooke and Steve Penfold’s analysis of mass-consumption and identity politics in through a history of the donut in Canada.\textsuperscript{177} Feminist historians, including Frances Swyripa, Marlene Epp, and Franca Iacovetta have used food history as a lens to explore women’s history, particularly as it applies to migration and ethnic history in Canada. Swyripa’s work on the Ukrainian-Canadian community illustrates that the commodification of ethnic women’s food production reflected the centrality of food-related symbolism to Ukrainian culture as well as the larger role that the \textit{Baba} (Grandmother), the chief figure associated with food production, played in popular Ukrainian identity.\textsuperscript{178} Epp’s research

\textsuperscript{174} Donna Gabaccia, \textit{We Are What We Eat: Ethnic Food and the Making of Americans} (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998.)


\textsuperscript{177} Nathalie Cooke, ed. \textit{What’s to Eat? Entrees in Canadian History} (Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2009), Steve Penfold, \textit{The Donut: A Canadian History} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.)

into the Mennonite community’s experience with both feast and famine demonstrates the ability of food practice and food-related narratives to "illuminate patterns of meaning and myth."\(^{179}\)

Food scholars are as interested in narrative as they are in the history of food production. As Annie Hauck-Lawson and Jonathan Deutsch argue in their anthology devoted to the history of food in New York City, “food voice” or narratives about food, work “in tandem with the spoken and written voice in order to enact a holistic representation of identity, politics, and human existence.”\(^{180}\) Food narratives are particularly rich resources for the study of Icelanders and other anglicized and secularized ethnic communities by reflecting the subtlety of cultural identity or “expressing what the spoken voice struggles to articulate.”\(^{181}\) Valerie Korinek and Franca Iacovetta write that food functions as a signifier of difference as well as a site of conflict and accommodation. In her discussion of the role of food and spectacles of pluralism and plenty in political containment during Canada’s Cold War period, Iacovetta illustrates that “the culture of food is no less political” than the state policies and ethnic organizations upon which historians have tended to focus.\(^{182}\)

The history of alcohol consumption and fears about alcoholism in the Icelandic-Canadian community must also be understood within a larger historiography surrounding drinking. Though the temperance movement has received good coverage by historians since the 1970s,\(^{183}\) scholars have only recently begun to look at a history of alcohol beyond prohibition campaigns. Books such as Marianna Valverde’s *Diseases of the Will: Alcohol and the Dilemmas of Freedom* have moved away from the anti-alcohol discourse of the temperance movement to refocus on a much broader range of relationships and experiences surrounding drinking, including the pursuit of pleasure and the role of science in defining appropriate and inappropriate kinds of


\(^{181}\) Hauck-Lawson and Deutsch, *Gastropoliis*, xv.

\(^{182}\) Iacovetta, *Gatekeepers*, 137.

consumption.\textsuperscript{184} Craig Heron’s recent work on alcohol consumption in Canada similarly investigates the role of alcohol in the history of male sociability and masculinity. Julia Roberts also analyses the ways in which alcohol shaped class, race and space in colonial Canada through her discussion of the history of the tavern.\textsuperscript{185} This chapter hopes to balance coverage of the strong temperance movement within the community with this new, more nuanced approach to alcohol consumption to incorporate the histories of the community members who drank. Thus, this focus on food and drink in the Icelandic-Canadian community hopes to shed new light on a vast range of developments, including personal identity formation, community making, and nationalist and transborder myth making. In focusing on drink and food consumption in Icelandic-Canadian history, this chapter also brings together the histories of food and drink in ethnic communities, two literatures that are often treated separately.

Food scholars have frequently discussed the impact of starvation and hunger on the lives of migrants from around the world and Icelandic Canadians are no exception. For many impoverished Icelanders on their way to North America in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, food and the lack of food affected their decisions to migrate and resettle, as well as their experience of the journey. The inability to provide enough food for one’s family motivated many poorer migrants on the margins of Icelandic society to depart, though nineteenth-century records from the island illustrate that Icelanders of all backgrounds were affected by food shortages. Bitter climate conditions seriously affected local economies and food supplies during this period. During the 1870s pack ice clogged many Icelandic harbors and prevented fishing vessels from leaving port and trapping those at sea in ice. The eruption of the volcano Askja in 1875 also killed livestock and poisoned farmlands in northeastern Iceland. Sveinn Þórarinsson documented the harsh climate conditions that preceded the migration, noting that people were subsisting on dried juniper berries, fried fish skin, moss, and wild thyme water, while their livestock starved.

\textsuperscript{185} Craig Heron, \textit{Booze: A Distilled History} (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 2003); Julia Roberts, \textit{In Mixed Company: Taverns and Public Life in Upper Canada} (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2009).
“[I] lay in bed all day from cold and hunger,” he wrote of the summer of 1869. There was “no fish to be caught, the nets drag nothing. Hunger closes in on us, rich and poor alike.”

For migrants en route to North America, the journey aboard steamships and through cities was also tinged with hunger. Icelanders relied on a variety of means to secure enough food for themselves and their families. Simon Simonson complained of food theft amongst the desperate migrants at the floundering settlement in Kinmount, Ontario. While feminist scholars have highlighted women’s fierce determination to feed families even in difficult circumstances, men too could be motivated by their sense of family responsibility to action to secure food for their children. Histories of women and food frequently detail the range of strategies they employed to secure and extend supplies, yet records related to men’s pursuit of nourishment for their families suggest that notions of gender also guided their actions. Male migrants’ pursuit of food was obviously informed by social pressure to succeed as breadwinners. When dire poverty, famine, and other factors threatened this identity, as well as the well-being of their families, male migrants were more likely than women to employ physical intimidation and violence, if necessary, to get food. Frustrated with the insufficient provisions onboard one ship, Guðbrandur Erlendsson took a public stand in an effort to get better fare for his young daughters. He approached a young man in charge of provisions “with my fist clenched, and more in Icelandic than English I told him that my children were crying from hunger every day as a result of his badly prepared and scanty food.” In spite of Guðbrandur’s broken English, the intimidated employee “promptly took me with him and gave me a good supply of bread.” Guðbrandur’s actions created a virtual riot onboard, prompting other passengers to surround and harass the young man and the ship’s agent. “After that,” he noted, “the situation improved.” Once in North America, new arrivals also relied extensively on help from their more established counterparts, even when they had no prior connections. Sigurbjörn Guðmundsson and his wife arrived hungry in New Iceland only to find that they knew no one in the settlement.

---

187 Sveinn Þórarinsson, “June 6 1869.”
We stood on the beach, my wife and I, alone with our baggage. An Icelandic woman Elin (Halldorson) appeared and invited us to her home for refreshments...There we had gold-eye, bread and butter, skyr and cream and coffee. We were extremely thankful, especially my wife, who was nursing her baby. We had not eaten since the previous day when we left Winnipeg.\(^{191}\)

Though migrants hoped to quickly establish prosperous farms and a fishery in the new colony, hunger was one of the defining features of early winters in New Iceland in the 1870s. State officials had promised the group provisions for basic housing and hay for livestock, but migrants arrived in Manitoba in late autumn to find that few preparations had been made. Icelanders were eager to access the fish stocks in Lake Winnipeg, but were unfamiliar with fishing on such a shallow body of water and on ice, when it arrived in the early winter. As with other European settlers in North America, Icelanders’ access to food was often dependent on the generosity of local First Nations during these early years. Food history in North America has highlighted the role of food in intercultural encounters, and the Icelandic-Canadian case sheds light on some of the dynamics of food exchanges and relations between European migrants and First Nations. Members of a nearby band noticed that the isolated migrants faced starvation in their first winter in Manitoba and brought dried moose meat and frozen milk to help ease the situation.\(^{192}\) Sigurbjörn Guðmundsson was hungry and half frozen after spending a night out in the bush when he got lost and fell through the ice on Lake Winnipeg just before Christmas in 1879. In the morning two First Nations women who were at home with three children in a nearby cabin assisted him and gave him “a crust of bread, a leg of rabbit, and black tea in a tin cup.”\(^{193}\) First Nations people were also responsible for teaching Icelanders how to fish on the lake in winter. Early Icelandic attempts on the Lake resulted in frozen, empty nets until nearby band members showed prospective fishermen how to adapt to ice fishing on a shallow lake. First Nations fishing as well as transport technology, including dog sleds, were crucial to establishing the fishery that became the foundation of the colony’s food supply.

It is not enough, however, to simply highlight positive food exchanges, especially since European settlement could be harmful to First Nations. The emphasis on First Nations help and

---


\(^{192}\) Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 36.

benevolence in staving off starvation in Icelandic accounts from this period, for example, tends to downplay tensions between the two communities. The establishment of Icelandic fisheries, homesteads, and transportation routes disrupted First Nations trapping lines and fishing areas. Walter Lindal notes that when an Icelandic boat tore through some carefully laid fishing nets on a river in the area the passengers were berated by a First Nations woman with "shrieks and cursings understood by all." Similarly, Wilhelm Kristjanson claims that some Icelanders embarked on a moose hunting trip north of Big Island during the first hungry winter in the colony, but were thwarted by Indians who “had scared away the game.” Given the migrants’ unfamiliarity with both the terrain and moose, they were probably more likely to have scared away game than more experienced First Nations hunters.

Though migrants may have enjoyed a steady supply of fresh fish, the chronically poor transportation between the colony and the city meant that Icelanders remained isolated from food markets. In the midst of the smallpox epidemic in 1876-1877, Augustus Baldwin noted that in many houses “they had no flour, in fact they had nothing but fish.” The overreliance on fish still characterized diets in 1879, according to Sigríður Jónsdóttir, who wrote that grain shortages meant that some Icelanders enjoyed nothing but a remarkably monotonous diet of fish and even depended on fish to feed their cattle.

Our usual work, for the women here, is when the sun wakes us we set up the tea kettle and a pot to boil fish, which is often served here with tea and bread, for those that have it. Then we eat from 8 until 9, and then we feed the fish broth to the cows, who drink it all, then we boil more for midday and this goes day in and day out, day after day, week after week... Simon Simonson wrote that this reliance on fish to feed livestock worked poorly and pigs often died from it. Not surprisingly, this reliance also had an unmistakable olfactory effect in migrant households, since the smell of fish easily permeated fibres such as cloth and hair. As Wilhelm Kristjanson notes, “houses smelled of it and even milk tasted of fish.” The overdependence on fish and the inability of colonists to export neither their catches nor their meager crops to external markets meant that in the early years, fishing seems to have done little

---

194 Lindal, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 119.
195 Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 36.
196 Baldwin to Phoebe (Baldwin), 3.
197 Sigríður Jónsdóttir to Þuríður Jónsdóttir, June 14, 1879. Letter, as reprinted in Gúðmundsson, vol. 1, 374.
199 Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 84.
more than prevent starvation, though fish also emerged as a type of currency in the community. Vigfus Sigurdsson of Viðirnes announced in 1878 that he would bind books for payment in whitefish, butter, or cash. S.B. Olson tried to sell fish to local farmers in exchange for flour, butter, or money but the low value of fish in the community, particularly boney jackfish, hampered his efforts.

At one place where I called, I was invited in to have lunch with the family. The meal consisted of boiled, unpeeled potatoes, but no meat; there was a large plate of excellent home-made bread but no butter; the tea was good, but no sugar or milk... I could not make a deal for my fish however, although these people had harvested a good crop.

Access to external markets improved with the establishment of small stores in Gimli and Icelandic River, as well as Sigtryggur Jónasson and Friðjón Friðriksson’s purchase of steamship in the early 1880s named the S.S. Victoria. The partners added the S.S. Aurora, another steamer, to their operation in 1884. These ships vastly improved transport between Winnipeg and New Iceland, an eighty-three-kilometre stretch that most migrants had previously been making on foot or by sled. The purchase of the steamships was part of a larger economic revival within the colony following the exodus of many migrants to Winnipeg and North Dakota in 1877-1878 in response to religious strife and intense poverty. Though the colony lost a substantial portion of its population, new infrastructure and economic developments, including the establishment of the Jónasson-Friðriksson Co. Sawmill and Store, emerged at the close of the decade.

The sawmill offered migrants living in the Icelandic River area with employment working with sawing, working with horses, and hauling logs and also drew a number of other men from other Icelandic settlements to the village. Many unmarried male labourers depended on the mill-run boarding house, Viðirnes for lodging and access to domestic goods, including coffee and tea, dishes, and bedding. Viðirnes was an expensive place to call home, however. Olgeir Friðriksson slept and ate there in the spring of 1883 but paid fifty cents per day, or over half of his income for the privilege. Viðirnes was Icelandic owned and operated, but it depended on a blend of Anglo-Canadian commodities and First Nations economies and labour to feed its lodgers. The owners purchased household goods from the company store, such as feather ticks, dishes, and mirrors, but expenditures for the boarding house also reveal the caloric

200 Kristjanson, *The Icelandic People in Manitoba*, 120.
201 Olson, *Pioneer Sketches*, 38.
dependency of labourers and the mill on meat provided by Chief John Ramsay and other hunters from the Sandy Bar Band, specifically moose and whitefish. In March of 1881 the boarding house consumed $17.58 in moose meat alone.\textsuperscript{203} The reliance on local meat over more expensive imported varieties, like salt pork and tinned beef, also illustrates the role of food and imported commodities in shaping culture and everyday life along class lines. Much to the chagrin of many Icelandic labourers, this divide had also significant impact on coffee consumption in the community.

In the early years following migration to North America, many labourers and poorer migrants were restricted to tea, due to lower price and availability. Aid sent to the struggling colony by the Canadian government in the 1870s reflected the tastes of Anglo-Canadians, including their preference for tea. "I could get tea from the government," observed Jón Jónsson of Mæri, "but little coffee."\textsuperscript{204} Guðbrandur Erlandsson recalled with a slight hint of bitterness that he had been “restricted to drinking tea” while working in a predominantly Anglo Nova Scotia because there “was no coffee available in the stores.”\textsuperscript{205} As they had in Iceland, families in Manitoba also relied on birch tea made from the dried, crushed leaves of birch trees. Magnus Gudlaugson wrote that people preferred to use the leaves of young birch trees, which many believed to have medicinal properties. “It did not have a strong taste,” recalled Gudlaugson, “but it made a pretty good drink.”\textsuperscript{206}

It is clear that although Icelanders may have tolerated tea, coffee was an essential part of working and social life. Coffee occupied a central place in the lives of most Icelanders in the first half of the nineteenth century. In spite of poverty and the expense of importing the beans and became a cornerstone of most adult social interactions. Icelandic priests who had been educated abroad in the 1780s were partly responsible for the spread of popular coffee consumption in Iceland and by the 1840s coffee beans could be found in most Icelandic homes. In 1860, the newspaper Islendingur (Icelander) published a report on coffee drinking in the country which included descriptions of various types of coffee beans and the health benefits and consequences of coffee drinking. It also described, with a somewhat disconcerted tone, the cost of the passion

\textsuperscript{203} "Viðírnes," Journal of Jónasson Fredrickson and Co., 69.
\textsuperscript{204} Gimli Women's Institute, Gimli Saga, 57.
\textsuperscript{205} Erlandsson, Autobiography, 181.
\textsuperscript{206} Gudlaugson, Three Times a Pioneer, 49.
that Icelanders had developed for coffee, noting that imports of the bean rose from 87,808 pounds in 1849 to 327,272 pounds in 1859, or five pounds of coffee per person annually. The dedication to purchasing so much coffee, wrote Íslendingur, was fueling the coffers of Danish state monopoly stores at the expense of the poor. In contrast, coffee had many passionate advocates. The intensity of this new love for coffee and its indispensible place in social relations and homes even prompted one priest to remark in prose that “anyone who can’t brew up coffee, among our people, can hardly be called a Christian.”

Coffee permeated multiple aspects of working and social life in nineteenth-century Iceland. It marked the beginning of the working day for family members, most of whom were served coffee in bed to help them warm up and wake up. Guðbrandur Erlendsson observed in his autobiography that:

the first one to rise was the cook, who made coffee and brought it into the living quarters, to lady of the house, along with a bowl of coals to keep it hot. The lady of the house then poured the coffee into cups that were distributed by the cook to everyone in bed. After drinking this cup of coffee, everyone dressed and quickly and went to work.

Good coffee beans and skilled coffee making were also linked to the status and reputation of women and their families. For most of the nineteenth-century women’s provision of quality coffee to guests was “the generally accepted custom.” Guests’ assessment of the coffee offered by their hosts could positively or negatively shape their status in the community since hospitality and generosity were highly esteemed attributes that were also essential for group survival in the an often harsh, unpredictable climate and rural, mountainous landscape. Guðbrandur so enjoyed one cup of coffee offered to him by one woman that he reserved a special place for it in his autobiography. After a long and difficult haul with packhorses in Iceland, he arrived at a local farmhouse renowned for its hospitality. “Coffee was then brought to us, and never in my life

207 “Um kaffi, lit þess, einkenni og notkun” (On coffee, about its characteristics and uses), Íslendingur June 29, 1860, 49.
208 “Um kaffi, lit þess, einkenni og notkun,” Íslendingur, 49.
209 Erlendsson, Autobiography, 104.
210 “Um Landhagsskyrslur” (On the national economic report), Gangleri December 30, 1871, 87.
have I enjoyed coffee so much as then,” he remembered. “I would even have paid a dollar for that cup…”

As Helga Johnson’s story at the opening of this chapter illustrates, the lack of access to good coffee was a significant source of displeasure for migrants and some went to great lengths to get enough grounds to brew a pot. Augustus Baldwin, a medical official who was working in the colony during the height of the smallpox epidemic, recalled that though many lacked food, one Icelandic woman offered him coffee during his time there. Shocked to find such a luxury amid the squalor of the early settlement during the winter quarantine, Baldwin eagerly accepted, but was horrified to see her clean the cup by licking it out with her tongue first. Even after the smallpox quarantine was lifted in the summer of 1877, poverty continued to interrupt regular access to coffee for years. Sigríður Jónsdóttir, marooned without coffee on Hecla Island in 1879, described her inability to satisfy her deep-seated longing for “kaffi” to her sister.

Much did I long for coffee in the fall when I got better-- and I would get weak in the middle of the day for it, but we never had the remedy. However, for Christmas I got a little because Jón saved a few cents to buy coffee for Christmas. You can’t get coffee here except for those who can afford it.

Those who could afford coffee, however, expressed dissatisfaction with the quality of coffee available in North America, particularly pre-ground, pre-roasted coffee. Coffee aboard migrant ships was notoriously bad. Prominent Icelandic minister and community leader, Jón Bjarnason, deemed ships’ coffee “unbearable for the Icelandic palate.” Thorstina Walters recalled that the coffee available in North America was also unpopular with women in the Dakota Territory, who found the coffee beans available from merchants “a very inferior quality.” Instead, she writes, women “preferred to buy the green coffee and roast it at home.” Icelanders also rejected popular methods of brewing coffee in Manitoba and the Dakota Territory, namely the boiling of coffee with hot water. Records reveal that Icelanders looked upon Anglo coffee preparation with distaste and sometimes revulsion and preferred their own method of preparing coffee with a handmade cloth filter, also called a kaffipoka (coffee bag) or coffee sock (Figure: 2.1).

---

212 Baldwin to Phoebe (Baldwin), 3.
213 Jónsdóttir to Þuríður Jónsdóttir, 374.
Coffee socks were made with thick pieces of metal wire fashioned into a circle about four inches across and outfitted with a handle. Makers sewed the bag part of this coffee maker using dense flannel or cotton before finally sewing it onto the wire frame. The bag was then seasoned with coffee grinds prior to use. Migrants would then fill the bag with freshly roasted, freshly ground coffee and pour water over top. The semi-watertight bag would then hold the hot water with the beans while it steeped and slowly allow the coffee to drip into the pot. A well-seasoned coffee bag stained almost black from the grounds enhanced the flavor of the coffee, and dark, battered coffee socks were a common sight in farmhouses and fishing camps alike. Kristjana Magnusson recalled however, that some Anglo visitors found the sight of these darkly stained filters unpalatable. During coffee with her Icelandic neighbor Laura, one English-Canadian woman named Iris decided to surprise her host by scrubbing out her “filthy” coffee sock with lye while her Laura was away from the kitchen. When she returned, Iris presented the gleaming white sock to her horrified host.216 Community members began to express interest in the development of gas-powered, and later electric coffee machines in the first quarter of the twentieth century. Young, class-conscious Icelandic Winnipeggers bought electric coffee makers as they became available through stores such as Eaton’s during this period, however, Margaret H. (Jónasson) Holmes recalled that despite the availability of electric percolators in Winnipeg in the 1930s, the ladies of the First Lutheran Church still preferred the taste of traditionally-made coffee and relied on “several huge coffee bags fitted with dowel sticks to support them over enormous coffee pots.”217 Most Icelanders living in rural communities such as Riverton also relied on more traditional coffee-making methods until the community received electricity in 1941. In spite of the arrival of electricity in Icelandic homes and the availability of coffee makers that stores and manufacturers argued were more “convenient,” many Icelanders continued to use the kaffisokkur method throughout the twentieth century, often with older, metal coffee pots.218

As, Magnus Gudlaugson asserted, the coffee sock method “makes excellent coffee, and no

---

216 Magnusson, So Well Remembered, 39.
218 The older metal coffee pots still used by Icelandic Canadians have a wider opening at the top and are more conducive to supporting coffee socks while letting the water drain into the pot.
respectable Icelandic housewife would entertain for a moment the idea of boiling the coffee she serves to her household and her guests.”

Migrant desire for good coffee led to greater availability and better quality of beans in Manitoba and other Icelandic communities in North America. Icelandic grocers in Winnipeg provided shoppers with a range of coffee beans, including whole unroasted coffee beans. Non-Icelandic stores quickly caught onto the demand for a range of better beans, including Finkelsteins’ Store who boasted “beszza grant kaffi” or the “best green coffee” in Winnipeg. Green beans, rather than pre-roasted and pre-ground Anglo-style coffee were the norm in rural Icelandic homes at the turn of the century. “The smell of roasting coffee and the purring sound of the coffee grinder,” wrote Magnús Guðlaugson, were familiar smells and sounds in migrants’ homes. He also recalled with fondness the important place of these coffee rituals to hospitality and social life in New Iceland, noting “no sooner had a visitor arrived at a farm home then the coffee-rites were in full swing!”

Once early financial and geographical obstacles to the acquisition of coffee lifted, most Icelanders turned away from tea and “kaffi” resumed its central place in the lives of migrants from all classes. The provision of coffee was also a mandatory component of both social and economic interactions. Though the Jónasson and Friðriksson Sawmill and Store may have tried, Icelandic labourers rejected their employer’s attempts to save money by using tea and generally expected to be provided with coffee at no or little cost, as part of the conditions of their employment. Oral accounts frequently reference the multiple coffee breaks that farmers and farm hands enjoyed each day on Icelandic farms in the New World (Figure 2.2). Prior to her career as a Greenlandic impersonator, Olóf Sólvadóttir worked as a domestic in Winnipeg. She wrote that she had to drink the tea offered by her employer until she learned enough English to tell her that she preferred coffee. Albert Kristjanson’s story about a man named Sigurður’s surprise when his wealthy Icelandic employer failed to provide him with coffee illustrates this expectation. The employer found his farmhand kneeling next to a hay bail in prayer and approached him once he

219 Gudlaugson, Three Times a Pioneer, 49.
220 “Fritt Fyrir Alla,” (Free for all) Freyja February 1, 1898, 10.
221 Gudlaugson, Three Times a Pioneer, 49.
222 Gudlaugson, Three Times a Pioneer, 49.
223 Krarer, The Esquimeaux Lady, 25.
got up. He commented, “I see, dear Sigurður, that you are at prayer.” “Yes,” replied Sigurður, “I was asking the Holy Spirit how it was that He sent me to the only Icelandic home that doesn’t offer people coffee in the afternoon.”

Coffee was even more plentiful for working urban migrants and their families. Icelanders established several popular kaffihús (coffeeshops) in Winnipeg. Icelandic coffeeshouses didn’t only provide migrants to the city with stronger coffee, but also with informal cultural and social space. In 1888 migrants could congregate at an Icelandic coffeeshouse at 17 Market Street. The establishment offered chessboards and cards for patrons to use as well as Icelandic-language service and newspapers.

Gullfoss Café claimed to have “beztu kaffi” (the best coffee) and also offered patrons “all kinds of baking, tobacco, cigars, soft drinks, and skyr” (Icelandic yogurt). Others, such as the Wevel Café on Sargent Avenue, were widely recognized sites of cultural production and political debate. The café opened in 1915 at 692 Sargent Avenue. Its proximity to local Icelandic businesses meant that the editors and staff of the local Icelandic newspapers and publishing houses frequently met there, including editors and staff of the Lögberg newspaper, and noted physician and radical, Dr. S.J. Johannesson, also known as “Siggi Júl.” Artist Charlie Thorson was also a regular at the café, due in part to his personal interest in waitress, Kristín Sölvadóttir. Disney later hired Thorson and he contributed to the development of characters such as Bugs Bunny. He reportedly used sketches of Sölvadóttir while contributing to the development of the character Snow White for Disney’s production of the movie in 1937, which has led community members to claim that Snow White was both Icelandic and served coffee at the Wevel Café.

Significant gender patterns also developed around coffee drinking. Though cafés such as the Wevel were run and staffed by women, they were often predominantly male haunts. Former waitress Metta Johnson recalls that all of her regulars, or “old coffee drinkers,” were men and that women only came into the café if they were visiting Winnipeg with their families for a

---

224 Albert Kristjanson, “Afternoon coffee not served!” as translated in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 207.
225 “Heiðrøðu landar!” (Honourable countrymen!) Lögberg January 25, 1888, 1.
227 For a discussion of Kristín Sölvadóttir’s relationship to Thorson and her inspirational role in the creation of Snow White see Gene Walz, Cartoon Charlie: The Life and Art of Animation Pioneer Charles Thorson (Winnipeg: Great Plains Publications, 1998), 76-8.
The devotion of public spaces to male coffee consumption did not mean that they drank more coffee than women. Most Icelandic women’s coffee consumption took place in the home or at events such as meetings of the Icelandic Women’s Society and the Lutheran Ladies’ Aid. As the Helga Johnson narrative indicates, women’s reputation for passionate devotion to coffee was often the source for jokes in the community. But, women also faced more serious accusations of unhealthy coffee addictions. “Often it is said among the womenfolk how safe coffee is to drink,” wrote one contributor to Löðberg in 1906, and “many people have five, six and even seven cups of coffee [a day], and these cups are often quite strong to help anaesthetize the longing, which one cannot otherwise be suppressed once it takes hold.” The article equated coffee’s relationship to nervous disorders in girls and women to the ills that alcohol caused in men. “Men have intoxicating drinks to refresh themselves,” asserted the article, but “women use coffee with the same intention.”

Löðberg’s 1906 critique of women’s coffee consumption illuminates the tension between men and women on the issue of alcohol consumption in the Icelandic-Canadian community. Though Icelandic Canadians may have been economically and culturally bound to a fish-based diet and unified in their quest for good, strong, coffee, no other food or beverage cemented the nineteenth-century Icelandic community like alcohol. “Goolie,” Prairie slang for an Icelander, reportedly comes from the voracious Good Templar movement in the Icelandic community.

Guðjón Arngrímsson notes that the external image of the community was marked more by their opposition to alcohol, than their consumption of it. In spite of this reputation for temperance, the community has also long struggled with more private, internal concerns about alcohol abuse. Icelanders on both sides of the Atlantic have often claimed that they are genetically pre-disposed to alcoholism. Concerns about this susceptibility even persist among younger generations, though no data exists to support the claim to a genetic weakness. Assertions that Icelanders are innately susceptible to alcoholism generally invoke anecdotal evidence, particularly in regards to

---

228 Metta Johnson, Interview by author, December 21, 2009, Gimli, MB.
230 See for example, Magnea Hannesson, as interviewed by Laurence Gillespie, Icelandic Oral History Fonds, PAM C1684-1686, C-1685 Side A 03:45.
232 For a recent reference to fears of genetic predisposition to alcoholism amongst youth, see Klemens Ólafur, “Hi my name is Thor and I’m an alcoholic,” The Reykjavík Grapevine November 5, 2004.
alcoholism within families, or to the qualities of “Icelandic blood.” As one MP declared during that country’s temperance debate in 1934: “Icelanders are not able to use alcohol as civilized persons, their nature is still too much of the Viking kind, they get too excited and brutal with alcohol usage.”

As scholars of alcohol studies have shown, alcohol consumption is shaped by a variety of social, political, economic, and cultural forces. In her analysis of the historic and cultural roots of Icelandic attitudes towards alcohol, Ann Pinson suggests that Icelandic views on drinking reflect the close relationship between the country’s temperance and independence movements. Danish merchants enjoyed a trade monopoly in Iceland until 1855 and alcohol was a profitable import. Pinson writes that this monopoly fuelled both the early temperance and independence movements, though the popularity of the temperance movement in Iceland declined after the Danish crown relinquished the monopoly in 1855.

For Icelandic migrants, however, the temperance movement was incredibly popular and permeated many aspects of social, political, and religious life. Migrant leaders viewed the prohibition of alcohol in their communities as an important part of building a new Icelandic society free from the colonial restraints that they argued were responsible for stagnation and social ills at home. Frances Swyripa argues that migrant communities and Anglo-Canadian expansionists envisioned the Canadian West as “virgin land capable of regenerating a tired and corrupt civilization.” Yet, as Friðjón Friðriksson wrote to Sera Jón Bjarnason, the establishment of a new Icelandic-Canadian community liberated from colonial oppression also meant purging of the old “sins” and negative “desires” embedded within Icelandic men. “First the old Icelandic Adam- along with all his sins and bad desires- must be drowned,” wrote Friðrikson in 1881, “then the new American can emerge.” The first Icelandic temperance association was established in Winnipeg in 1884 as part of this effort to reform the Icelandic population and to protect the community’s reputation. The creation of multiple lodges in rural Icelandic centres followed the establishment of the Winnipeg lodge, including Íslendingá Stúku.

---

234 Swyripa, Storied Landscapes, 189.
235 Friðjón Friðriksson to Jón Bjarnason, August 11, 1881. Letter, Correspondence of Fridjon Fridricksson PAM MG 8 A 6-7 1874-85, Letter 23, 2.
(Icelandic River Lodge) and Gimli’s Vonin Temperance Lodge all blended migrant dedication to homeland reform with a desire for acceptance in Canada as a White, Protestant, temperate migrant community. Reflecting the political and religious divisions within the community, two separate lodges emerged to serve Icelanders according to their beliefs. Hekla Lodge served Icelanders opposed to membership in the Lutheran Synod and readers of the conservative paper *Heimskringla*, while Skuld Lodge membership was comprised mainly of *Lögberg* readers and supporters of the Lutheran Synod.

The temperance movement was, in many respects, an unusually cohesive force in a community otherwise fragmented by political and religious divisions. Most Icelandic associations, including The Progressive Society, The Jón Sigurdsson Chapter of the Imperial Order of Daughters of the Empire, and the Icelandic Student Society were affiliated or ideologically allied with the movement. Temperance sympathies and conduct were an important component of accessing resources and public space in the community, especially for those who wished to use the large, well-equipped Icelandic Good Templar’s Hall built in the city’s West End in 1906 (Figure 2.3). The hall was the site of multiple events, from plays to dances, to lectures, and sales, and was a focal point of social activity for Winnipeg Icelanders.

For many migrants involved or sympathetic to the temperance movement, alcohol was a reminder of the ills that perpetuated the poverty and underdevelopment of their homeland. In keeping with the links observed by Pinson, temperance was intertwined with political and social critiques of the poor conditions in Iceland. Alcoholism, wrote migrant temperance activists, lay over their homeland like a “malevolent illness” causing accidents and strife. Migrants also often personally recalled the negative impact of alcohol consumption in their working and personal lives. Guðmundur Erlendsson recalled the dangers of working with man who drank too much Brennivín, or the anise-flavoured vodka also known as “Black Death”, when he hauled a shipment for his parish by horse train as a teenager. His older coworker Gísli regularly fell asleep on the job and on several occasions caused horses in his party to drop their packs. This type of behavior was not unusual, he recalled, “in those days heavy drinking had become a national

---

custom.” Though many migrants acknowledged the negative implications of heavy drinking, many viewed it with more humour than organized temperance activists. Kristján Ásgeir Benediktsson wrote that similar drinking habits prevailed at weddings in Iceland which “were usually happy occasions, talked about for a long time afterward,” but that some guests and participants “got into fights, while others fell asleep, and there were those who became ill.” The “minister in particular was plied with liquor, and he often became quite merry – sometimes even joining in the fisticuffs.” But these fights, he argued, “were more in fun than in earnest, and never resulted in any longstanding grudges.”

Thorstina Walters also recounted a funny story involving the aftermath of an alcohol-related fight in North Dakota. Walters accompanied her mother, a midwife and local healer, on a call to assist a stout, muscular, and injured “neighbourhood strong man” in the 1890s. She writes that they discovered the transplanted “Icelandic troll” lying on his back, moaning in pain, after taking a kick or stomp to the chest the night before in a bar room brawl in the border town of Pembina. Treating the belligerent man proved difficult for the midwife. After seeing her add a few drops of camphor to a glass of water, he accused her of stinginess, grabbed the bottle from her and took a large swig of pure camphor oil, which probably induced vomiting.

As Canadian historians have documented, the drive to contain or eliminate the drink spurred various temperance movements and social reform campaigns and Icelandic Canadians had their own version. The establishment of the first Icelandic temperance organizations in Winnipeg in 1884 was a response to the marked increase in the arrest of Icelanders for public drunkenness. Wilhelm Kristjanson notes that twenty-four Icelanders were charged that year amid a larger boom of arrests for drunkenness in the city. This boom coincided with both the growth of saloons and breweries in the city and shifting labour opportunities in the province. By 1882, the city boasted five breweries, eighty-six hotels (many with saloons) and sixty-four grocers who sold whiskey, which was the drink of choice for many workingmen during this period. The availability of construction and other manual labour jobs drew many migrants away from the Icelandic reserve and into the city. In the 1880s Point Douglas and an area around modern day

---

238 Kristján Ásgeir Benediktsson, “Kelduhverfi fyrir 40 Árum,” as translated in Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 153.
239 Walters, Modern Sagas, 4.
240 Kristjanson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, 198.
Broadway Avenue called “Shanty Town” were home to the highest concentrations of Icelanders (Figure 2.4). New arrivals could stay in Icelandic boarding houses in the city, such as Jón Thordarson’s or Gísli Jónsson’s, though Thordarson’s enjoyed a much better reputation among temperate Icelanders.242

In spite of this increase and persistent anxieties surrounding alcoholism, Icelanders were still not overrepresented in arrest records for public drunkenness.243 Yet, leaders from the Manitoba migrant community were very concerned about the community’s potential affiliation with intemperance. The first major reports of city Icelanders consuming alcohol and partying in Winnipeg created outrage in the rural reserve in 1879. Sigtryggur Jónasson and other editorial members of the early newspaper Framfari became embroiled in a public conflict on the issue with Icelanders living in Shanty Town, where they claimed that some of their countrymen “waste more or less their time in idleness… and squander more less of their money and time in saloons in the city itself.”244 The editor wrote that he had received reports of heavy drinking, squalid living conditions, and partying at Gísli Jónsson’s boarding house, also known as “The Icelandic House”. Gísli was also known by his nickname, “Saura Gísli” (Filthy Gísli),245 which was a pun on Saurum, the name of his place of origin in Iceland (Figure 2.5). Gísli was an infamous and divisive figure on both sides of the ocean. O.S. Thorgeirsson wrote that many Icelanders knew him from his frequent involvement in lawsuits and legal trouble over his “questionable dealings” at home. Gísli was, he recalled, a “brazen, ruthless, sly fox, and a thorn in the side of his superiors.” When it came to his dealings with impoverished and marginalized Icelanders, however, he enjoyed a reputation for daring and honourable conduct.246 Gísli’s talent for irritating community leaders continued during his years living in Winnipeg. Framfari editors named him specifically as a source of shame and legal trouble. “There is a considerable amount of irregularity going on among the Icelanders here,” reported Framfari, “especially in that building known as “The Icelandic House,” which Saura-Gísli is now renting. There are dancing

242 Kristjanson, The Icelandic People in Manitoba, 153.
243 I base this observation on my survey of all court cases in Winnipeg in 1883. That year only six Icelandic men (mostly labourers) were arrested for drunkenness. City of Winnipeg Police Court Record Book, 1883, PAM ATG 0030.
244 “Icelanders in Winnipeg,” Framfari, February 22, 1879, 473.
245 The nickname “Saura” was a also a pun on Saurum, Gísli’s place of origin in Iceland.
246 Thorstína Jackson, “Gísli Jónsson Frá Saurum,” (Gísli Jónsson from Saura) Saga Íslendinga í North Dakota (The History of Icelanders in North Dakota) (Winnipeg: The City Printing and Publishing Co. 1926), 457.
and drinking parties, often every evening, and the police have begun to keep their eyes on it.”247 Gísli himself had also recently been arrested in the city, they reported, “when he lay in the street drunk.”248 Other migrants, including one “Icelander with an unpronounceable name”, also publically embarrassed the community by appearing in the province’s English language news coverage for being arrested after “giving his tuneful voice too full scope in an Icelandic version of ‘Pinafore’ yesterday.”249 Yet temperate and intemperate urban labourers alike resented the accusations and interference from rural leaders. The “Shanty Town Dwellers,” as they were known, fired back an angry letter at the editor of Framfari, protesting their innocence and accusing the paper of “blacken(ing) their neighbours with false propaganda.”250

This letter is an unusually public response from Icelanders accused of intemperance. In contrast to the well-organized and well-documented activities of temperance groups, it is difficult to locate sources that represent the perspectives of the reportedly large body of drinkers in the Icelandic community. As Craig Heron notes in his research on alcohol consumption in Canada “most booze-swilling friends of John Barleycorn scoffed at the temperance enthusiasts, but never created a solid oppositional movement based simply on their fondness for alcohol.”251 Testimony in temperance publications as well as the reports of parties and drinking at the Icelandic House in Framfari emphasize the negative consequences of drinking and do not offer an adequate explanation as to why migrants consumed alcohol. An analysis of popular oral narratives provides some insight into the role of alcohol as an important part of Icelandic male culture and notions of masculinity. As in other communities, class shaped (but did not determine) notions of appropriate and inappropriate forms of alcohol consumption. Though the temperance movement was very popular in the community and bound up in notions of respectability and upward mobility, community leaders such as Sigtryggur Jónasson frequently indulged and allegedly appreciated alcohol’s politically lubricating qualities. His store account in Riverton reveal an unyielding appreciation for cognac, though it appears that these orders were also potentially intended for entertaining male guests at his home in Icelandic River, a well-known political and cultural centre. When Jónasson ran as a provincial Liberal candidate, one angry

248 “To the Shanty Dwellers,” 584.
249 “Local and Provincial (news,)” Manitoba Free Press October 20, 1879, 1.
250 Jakob Eyfjörd et al. Letter to the Editor, Framfari May 31, 1879, 584.
251 Heron, Booze, 187.
temperance advocate accused him of using liquor to sway the crowd in his favour during a
debate in Gimli and agitating the audience. Many of the rowdy farmers in the audience, argued
the anonymous author, were “under the influence of alcohol…and assailed (his opponent) with
their resounding political wisdom like horseflies attacking a cattle beast.”

Nelson Gerrard notes that New Iceland was subject to the ban on liquor in Rupert’s Land
until 1881, though thirsty Icelanders could access to alcohol via the freighting routes established
after 1878. Jónasson’s purchase of the steamship Victoria in 1881 also increased the availability
of imported liquor. In rural areas, taboos against alcohol consumption and the popularity of the
temperance movement meant that the community seldom acknowledged or discussed the
seemingly widespread consumption of liquor that took place in the community. As the
anonymous commentator at the election debate in Gimli in 1891 argued, “it is considered little
better than a profanity to state that liquor is sold here in New Iceland, but it is easy to prove that
liquor is nonetheless being brought in the settlement… Things are just as they were back in
Iceland.”

Gender played an important role in shaping alcohol consumption in Icelandic
communities. Though alcohol consumption existed among women, it was much more rare than
among men. The Icelandic temperance movement was, in many respects, intensely critical of
the role of gender norms in the perpetuation of alcohol consumption and devoted itself to the
reform of male culture as much as it did to the application of liquor laws. While male drinking
crossed classes, the association between drink and masculinity was more strongly articulated
when it came to working-class men. Icelandic men’s drinking habits were the product of cultural
pressure in the homeland, reported one Hekla Lodge publication, where “the prevailing opinion
amongst the general public was that a man who wouldn’t drink hardly count as a man.”

Like their Anglo-Canadian counterparts, Icelandic women became involved in the
temperance movement as a response to male violence and sexist economic divides. As Katherine
Harvey and other historians of the temperance movement have written, alcohol became part of
the coded language through which nineteenth-century Canadians discussed gender inequality and

252 S.B. “Frá Íslendinga-Fljóti,” (From Icelandic River) Heimskringla April 1, 1891, 1, as translated in Gerrard,
Icelandic River Saga, 154.
253 J.B., 1. (Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 154.)
254 Erlendsson, Autobiography, 15.
255 Minningarri Stúkunnar Heklu Nr. 33 af Alþjóðareglu Good Templara, 1.
domestic violence. Some women established total bans on alcohol in their homes and sometimes in their marriages. George Asgeirson’s mother made his father swear that he would never touch a drop of alcohol as a precondition for marriage. Men who wanted to drink often found themselves ostracized by adult women as well as their temperate male friends and relatives. Metta Johnson recalled that her parents’ strict views on alcohol forced those who wished to have a beer or a whiskey into the family icehouse. In private discussions of taboo social problems, such as domestic abuse, depression, and suicide, Icelanders believed that alcohol played a pivotal role in unhealthy male behavior. In one oral narrative about an unusual string of suicides in the Icelandic community of Wynyard, Saskatchewan, Guðrún Þórðardóttir wrote that the victims were all men who drank too much and were subsequently isolated from female company. “They were all drunks,” she noted. “They were all men without women.”

In spite of periods of intense popularity, Icelandic temperance advocates lost a crucial battle in 1905 when the first liquor license was granted to a hotel owner in Gimli, Manitoba (Figure 2.6). Yet, the opening of the Gimli bar did not mean that it became the sole site of alcohol consumption. Prior the establishment hotels and taverns in New Iceland, many men frequently relied on outbuildings and other spaces beyond the home to enjoy whisky, beer, or homebrew. Though fewer historical documents exist that describe their perspectives, much can be gleaned from drykkjuvisar, or drinking verses. Kristján Niels Júlíus’s ode to his drinking buddies poked fun at the marginal locations that they relied on for nights out “lent à tür” or “on the piss.”

Our countrymen were mighty then,
Mightier than giants in cliffs.
Many got a blow to the chops, I remember still,
When we drank in outhouses.

258 Metta Johnson, interview with author, December 22, 2009, Gimli, MB.
260 Attributed to Kristján Niels Júlíus by Páll Hallson, as transcribed in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse, 138.
Drykkjuvisar not only describe the role of alcohol in Icelandic men’s friendships and rivalries, but also relationships with members of other ethnic communities. In Canadian towns and cities, and after the Icelandic reserve was opened to other migrants in 1897, access to and consumption of alcohol shaped economic interactions with became one of the ways that Icelanders interacted with their new neighbours. When Sigtryggur Jónasson first arrived in Montreal an elderly Scottish man advised him to mix scotch with the local water.\textsuperscript{261} Another man recalled with amazement the intensity of the homebrew that his Jewish employer offered him. “Now I know for certain,” he wrote, “that the earth really moves.”\textsuperscript{262} For some migrants from temperate families in Iceland, working in North America meant drinking alcohol for the first time. Thorvaldur Thorarinson, a devoted temperance man, only touched alcohol once in his life when he accepted a drink at the urging of his coworkers on a construction job on the Canadian Pacific Railway. He disliked the feeling of dizziness and lack of control and snuck away by himself to sleep it off under a tree.\textsuperscript{263} In the nineteenth and twentieth century Anglo men who worked on the freight lines supplying fish to Winnipeg became important sources of alcohol as they passed north into the fishing camps on Lake Winnipeg. Icelanders were also capable of making their own liquor and some ran their own stills but Ukrainian homebrewed vodka enjoyed an infamous reputation among Icelanders, and was known colloquially as “Gallahlandið,” or “Galician piss.”\textsuperscript{264}

By all outward appearances, New Iceland was a dry settlement until the turn of the century. After 1905, however, Icelanders with enough money or credit drank in popular establishments like the Gimli Hotel and the Sandy Bar Tavern in Icelandic River/Riverton. Men living in Winnipeg also often patronized the Icelandic pool hall in the West End during this period. While alcohol was a significant factor in the social lives of some Icelandic men, it was also a source of health and safety concerns within the broader community. References to alcohol consumption often appear in Icelandic-language oral narratives, most frequently as a contributing factor to accidents and near-death experiences. Fears about and references to drunken accidents were commonplace, particularly for those who lived around Lake Winnipeg. Stefan Björnsson’s

\textsuperscript{261} Gerrard, \textit{Icelandic River Saga}, 222.
\textsuperscript{262} Valdimar Pálsson, “Employer offers man a drink,” \textit{Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse}, 126.
\textsuperscript{263} Gerrard, \textit{Icelandic River Saga}, 186.
\textsuperscript{264} Lúðvik Kristjánsson in Einarsson, \textit{Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse}, 122.
verse about a local drunk named Pétur, described his leaving a large tab before meeting his end in Lake Winnipeg.

His eyes red after a treat,
Fell off a boat from Gimli,
Away from wealth, on credit,
Splashed to his death, Randy-Pete.265

Cold winter weather was also hazardous for those who had been out drinking. Guðrún Þórðarson saved her drunken neighbour from death by exposure in rural Manitoba on a dangerously cold night in early March 1930. Guðrún could see something black in the snow far from the house. She initially told herself that it was “just a dog” but then realized it was a human being.

So I woke my husband and said “we’d better put on our clothes and go and see what’s out there”… it was his best friend. He had gotten drunk and had tried to come visit us, though it was really late. Around 1 AM. He fell in the snow and fell asleep. He was incredibly stiff with cold…he could have died there.266

Icelandic men carved out their own spaces for social alcohol consumption and some of wrestled with problem drinking. Yet, the lack of affiliation between the community and alcohol consumption in broader Western-Canadian culture illustrates that community leaders and temperance advocates were successful in discouraging drinking patterns that drew attention to alcoholism within the community. Forcing drinking into outhouses, fishing shacks, and other marginal spaces also reflected the establishment of the divide between the public face and private realities of Icelandic-Canadian popular culture.

Though some community members are unfamiliar with the older generations’ concern with alcohol, this divide largely endures into the present. When asked about the community’s internal reputation for heavy drinking, twenty-first century respondents often initially deny any familiarity with the issue, while others openly associate the community with drinking. “I’ve always thought of Icelanders as heavy drinkers,” replied Sarah Arnason in a recent interview, “to

265 Attributed to Baldvin Halldórsson by Timoteus Böðvarsson in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Popular Verse, 117.
266 Guðrún Þórðarson, “Vakin um nótt og bjargar mannin úr kulda” (“Waking up at night and bringing a man in from the cold,” Sögur úr Vesturheimi, 371-2.
Interviewees from families who were active in the temperance movement, such as Agnes Bardal Comack, are more likely to discuss the problem openly, while others remain hesitant to discuss the issue. Records from the oral history interviews conducted by Icelandic researchers Magnús Einarsson, Hallfreður Órn Eiríksson and Olga María Franzdóttir reveal that Icelandic-speaking community members in the late 1960s and 1970s most often chose to discuss stories about alcohol and other potentially embarrassing or taboo subjects in Icelandic only. Though Einarsson reproduced numerous accounts of drinking and drunkenness in his series on Icelandic-Canadian oral traditions for the Canadian Museum of Civilization, other researchers and heritage organizers viewed alcohol as a contaminating force. Gustav Tryggvason, a researcher with the National Museum of Man, noted with dismay that he had to omit the stories of one Icelandic man because of his battle with “the demon rum,” which made him an outcast in the community and a generally unsuitable interviewee for his research on Icelandic folklore. Conflicting accounts regarding alcohol consumption continue to illuminate community member’s hesitancy to speak openly about alcohol consumption. One respondent denied hearing about drinking problems in the community until he referenced both of his Ammas’ decisions to never get their driver’s licenses in passing. When asked why, he conceded that both of their husbands were heavy drinkers and their wives did not want the responsibility of shuttling them back and forth from the bar. As he slowly began to talk about the issue of drinking in the relatively isolated Icelandic community where he grew up, he argued that “I guess it was one of the ways that they learned to cope, you know, with life around there, with life on the farm and with fishing.”

Though protests against alcohol once offered a sense of cohesion for temperate Icelandic North Americans, the erosion of the temperance movement and the repeal of prohibition in the 1920s signaled the eventual demise of the once-popular movement. Alcohol has since remained a source of concern in the community, but no longer mobilizes or binds members together. Icelandic Canadians may discuss the issue privately but concerns about alcohol consumption now tend to inform Icelandic familial identities, rather than a larger non-familial ethnic identity.

---

Scholars and community members alike have commented on the absence of effective Icelandic-Canadian cultural symbols for twentieth and twenty-first generations after the decline of the Good Templar movement as well as the Lutheran Church, and the Icelandic language itself.

Anne Brydon writes that “making ethnic identity has become the project for organizations and institutions which strive to generate it self-consciously by evoking certain foods, songs, stories and other nostalgic references to an idealized past.” Formal symbols such as the Fjallkona have limited popularity, however, and are most familiar to those who live in the Gimli area or are involved with formal Icelandic organizations, such as the Icelandic National League. Such spectacles do not explain the persistence of Icelandic-Canadian identity outside of local clubs or annual parades and pageants that are not attended by all community members. With the exception of Jón Karl Helgason, scholars also seldom distinguish between public spectacles and symbols that frequently appear in private, particularly when it comes to food. Yet food and the spaces and people that produce it have become some of the most salient cultural markers in the post-war era. Can we reduce pervasive edible symbols of identity to the efforts of community organizations? How have domestic space and family relationships also affected the adoption of certain symbols?

Vínarterta is one of dozens of recipes that migrants brought to Canada but has emerged as one of the most highly recognized symbols of Icelandic-Canadian culture. “It is the queen of desserts and chief festive food of Canadian Icelanders,” writes Jim Anderson. “It also serves as a major symbol of ethnic and cultural identity.” As Helgason noted, if Icelanders are made out of fire and ice, then Icelandic-Canadians are made out of “pastry and paste”. Yet, vínarterta is, in many respects, an unusual symbol of Icelandic identity in North America. In contrast to indigenous popular symbols related to Icelandic nationalist movement, such as the Fjallkona and the Icelandic Sagas, vínarterta is a cultural symbol that exists only in North America. Several spellings (including vinatarta, vinartarta) and translations (friend torte, wine torte) of the dessert’s name exist, but most cookbooks provide the correct English translation of its name: “Viennese Torte.” In an attempt to assign it more mythic roots, the Cooking for Today cookbook

---

270 Brydon, “Mother to her distant children,” 93-4.
produced by the Ladies Aid of the Unitarian Church claimed that “the recipe for this torte is one of the recipes brought to Iceland by the Icelandic members of the Constantinople guard who passed through Vienna as they crossed Europe going between Iceland and Constantinople (in the eleventh century).”274 Most other cookbooks, however, are strangely silent on the Viennese connection. Vínarterta has nineteenth, rather than eleventh-century roots. Its reliance on non-indigenous ingredients (sugar, dried plums, flour) signals its connection to Danish merchants.

Food historian Kristin Olafson-Jenkyns notes that the growth of the torte’s popularity directly coincided with the increased availability and lower prices of imported flour in Iceland via Danish merchant ships as well as the country’s transition from open-hearth cooking to the use of iron stoves.275 Vínarterta probably came to Iceland first through a Danish merchant household, since Danish merchant families maintained cultural and culinary connections to mainland Europe. The expense of vínarterta ingredients similarly illuminates its association with status while also explaining the tendency to make it only during Christmas celebrations and other special occasions.

The transplantation of vínarterta into migrant communities in North America around 1875-85 reveals that vínarterta was clearly en vogue among rural women in Iceland during this period. Yet how can we explain the absence of vínarterta in Iceland after 1885? The torte does not appear in Þóra Þóraðóttir’s seminal cookbook Stutt Matreiðslubók fyrir Sveitaheimili (A Little Cookbook for the Country Home) published in 1906, but Icelanders could still purchase it in local bakeries like Freia in Reykjavík in 1935.276 The Icelandic newspaper Fálkinn published a recipe for it in 1941, but it is quite clear that vínarterta was far less popular in twentieth-century Iceland than in North American migrant communities.277 The reasons for vínarterta’s decline in Iceland are difficult to locate. The torte’s association with both Danish merchants and foreign cultural influence may have made it an unpopular dish for Icelandic nationalists, although this does not explain the endurance of other desserts that relied on imported ingredients, such as sitrónuhringir (lemon rings) and sukkaðikøku (chocolate cake) or reflected international

276 Grønfeldt does, however, provide recipes for other Viennese desserts, including vinarkökur (Viennese cake) and vinarbraud (Viennese bread) Þóra Þóraðóttir, Stutt Matreiðslubók fyrir Sveitaheimili (A Short Cookbook for the Country Home) (Reykjavík: Prentsmiðjan Gutenberg, 1906.)
influences, including Spánskir hringir (Spanish rings) and Rússneskar kökur (Russian cake). The amount of time, labour, and expense required to produce vínarterta may have also contributed to its replacement with faster, cheaper alternatives, such as cookies and pönnukökur (crepes). Vínarterta’s popularity may have also been affected by its reliance on ingredients like prunes that were more popular in the nineteenth century. Icelandic Canadians who serve the cake to guests occasionally encounter reluctance when they describe the recipe’s reliance on prunes. As Sarah Arnason notes, “people who have never heard of vínarterta tend to think it sounds very odd when you tell them it is a layered cake with prunes and cardamom...I suppose it doesn't sound terribly appetizing, but it is!”

The decline in the popularity of prunes also accounts for the preference for chocolate and rhubarb and raspberry jam in twentieth-century recipes for randalin, a crispier version of the vínarterta also known as “the striped lady”, which has almost completely replaced the torte in Iceland. European Icelandic artist Haraldur Jónsson recalled seeing his first vínarterta at an art gallery show opening in Winnipeg, which he compared to the randalin made by his mother and grandmother. Randalin and vínarterta looked similar on the outside, Haraldur noted, but “vínarterta is more compressed, solid and thinner in its own way. It tasted much sweeter than the one I remember from my childhood. It is also more humid and the texture is more granular.”

“Chromatically speaking,” he added, “the jam looks a bit darker in the vínarterta, like older blood between the lines.” Brett Lamoureux recalled being served randalín in Iceland as a substitute for vínarterta at a reception for Icelandic Canadians: “We were served a layered vínarterta-like cake at a reception a bank put on for us—except it had strawberry filling! When the server put the tray on the table in front of us 13 western-Icelanders, we all gasped!”

Vínarterta’s nineteenth-century roots in addition to a conservative Icelandic-North American baking tradition that has tended to resist change and variation accounts for the difference between these desserts. Randalin’s relatively flexible recipe and aesthetic has lent itself to a much wider range of acceptable variations. Conversely, slight variation in vínarterta recipes, including the use of cardamom, icing, sprinkles, and almond extract, as well as the

---

278 Sarah Arnason, Interview by author, February 4, 2010.
“correct” number of layers, are hotly debated by community members from all generations. Jennifer Miller recalled that vínarterta caused more disruption than unity at family gatherings.

One Auntie's layers were thicker than Amma’s. One had too much almond extract in the icing. Another used a lot of cardamom. Yet another produced cake layers that were more brown than white... it was always a big deal to see a plate put out with coffee, but it was always a bit unsettling too.281

Some makers also enjoy adding their own ornamental flare to their tortes. Helga Gerrard uses round, multi-coloured sprinkles (nonpareils) in the frosting while Ben Sigurdsson’s Amma enjoys using maraschino cherry juice to turn the icing pink (Figure 2.7). For others, however, aesthetic simplicity or a strong position on the inclusion or exclusion of certain ingredients, especially cardamom and almond extract, are invoked as proof of the strength of a family’s Icelandic cultural identity. Such real or imagined deviation from the “original” recipe is taken as a sign of cultural degeneracy. One woman wrote that her “cousin has a small grocery store in Manitoba, and he sells vínarterta with fillings such as blueberry, raspberry, etc... [but] I just think it's wrong.”282 Women’s historians, including Epp, Swyripa, and Hunchuk, have quite rightly underscored the importance of women’s production of food, but vínarterta illustrates that men too were invested in ethnic food production. Bill Holm described the divisive passion that vínarterta debates instilled in community members, while noting his own preference for the inclusion of brandy.

Say Vínarterta in a room full of the descendants of North American Icelandic immigrants and quarrels begin. In Canada, Vínarterta is in six or seven layers, flavoured with almonds, frosted with butter cream—wrong! One lady (with a Norwegian half in her family) used apricots instead of prunes between layers—wrong! Some leave out cardamom—oh-so-spicy, you know—wrong! A fearless and large-hearted Icelander in Minneapolis spikes her prunes with bourbon or brandy. This is daring and unconventional—the bobbed hair or pierced ears of Vínarterta-dom—but it might possibly be right.283

Though vinarterta is most often consumed at Christmas and weddings, it also appears in a broad range of community activities. Brett Lamoureux and Nick Neufeld of Winnipeg created a vinarterta t-shirt campaign to express their appreciation for the dessert in 2007. The pair sold one

282 Arnason, Interview by author, 1.
hundred shirts bearing the slogan “Let’s Get Vinated!” at Gimli’s annual Icelandic festival and created a facebook fan page for the torte. Community members can also purchase “I LOVE VINATARTA” (sic) bumper stickers and buttons at Icelandic celebrations including Íslendingadagurinn at Gimli. A broad range of non-Icelandic North American families also make and serve the torte at Christmas and other special occasions. The dessert often appears in community cookbooks and sold at multiple Icelandic and non-Icelandic owned bakeries in Manitoba to a range of clientele, including the Mennonite bakery Oma’s and Tall Grass Prairie, a bakery run by former Hutterites in Winnipeg. It is particularly popular in communities that neighbor Icelandic districts or contain Icelandic families, including Peguis First Nations, where it is often simply called “Icelandic cake.”

In spite of the centrality of vínarterta to contemporary Icelandic-Canadian identity, the torte has only emerged as an iconic symbol of ethnicity in the post-war period. References to vínarterta appeared regularly in community newspapers and cookbooks before this period, but only as one of a longer list of other popular Icelandic foods. The Lutheran Church’s Ladies Aid in Lundar advertised the availability of vínarterta at the Spring Tea in March of 1938, but only as one of several other desserts on hand, including kleinnur (knotted donuts), pönnukokur, and Calla Lilies. Icelandic bakeries in Winnipeg’s West End similarly announced the availability of vínarterta in their shops, but as one of many different kinds of Icelandic desserts for sale. Community cookbooks published before the 1970s, including The Ladies Aid of the Lutheran Church’s cookbook, (ca. 1930) also most often include a recipe for vínarterta among a long list of other Icelandic desserts.284 Yet, the singular popularity of vínarterta has increased so much in recent years that the community’s latest major publication on food, Kristin Jenkyns-Olafson’s Icelandic Culinary Saga, includes five recipes to account for subtle variations, such as the inclusion or exclusion of cardamom or almond extract.285

Though Icelandic Canadians have appointed vínarterta as an ethnic symbol, the tendency to focus on vínarterta as the consummate Icelandic food has roots in the Icelandic-American tradition. Unlike their Canadian counterparts, Icelandic Americans have long favoured vínarterta above other Icelandic foods. In her description of the community’s early days in the Dakota

284 Lutheran Ladies Aid, Cookbook (Riverton: n.p., 1930.)
Territory, Thorstina Walters writes that this very popular dessert was the Icelandic-American “pièce de résistance.” This focus on vínarterta as the best Icelandic dish was shaped by the American community’s isolation from other traditional staples found in New Iceland, notably fish. The Dakota Territory lacked substantial bodies of water and so Icelandic migrants who left the floundering Manitoba settlement also traded in a mixed fish-based economy for an agrarian life on the American Plains. This shift also meant the demise of popular fish-based food practices that thrived in New Iceland, including harðfiskur (dried fish), fiskurbollur (fish dumplings), and common, affordable dishes like skeppa (fish hash). Traditional fish practices continue to be important points of reference and cultural practices for Icelandic Canadians, in spite of migration to urban centres and the decline of the commercial fishing industry on Lake Winnipeg. Museum exhibits, murals, and Icelandic children’s books, such as Thor, frequently invoke the Lake Winnipeg Fishery as a picturesque symbol of Icelandic Canadian life, while traditional dishes such as harðfiskur are still popular in Manitoba’s Interlake district and have become part of the community’s public image (Figure 2.8, 2.9). Though some American migrants continued to enjoy meat dishes such as rullupylsa (rolled mutton roast) and lifrapylsa (liver roast), Icelandic diets south of the border were shaped by a reliance on North American meat stocks, including beef, pork and chicken at an earlier stage. The availability of flour, dried fruit, and other popular things like coffee, however, ensured the endurance of Iceland baking and coffee preparation.

The popularity of vínarterta in the United States, (and later Canada) also stems from external recognition and praise for the dessert and the importance of food to spectacles of pluralism and plenty after 1945. As Franca Iacovetta illustrates in her discussion of the effect of Cold War tension on Canadian ethnic expression, Canadian pluralism was a “practical strategy for ‘consolidating the nation,’ or bolstering the state and its key institutions and value systems” against the threat of communism. State planners hoped that images of peaceful integration of immigrants, including anti-Soviet Finnish and Hungarian refugees in costumes performing folk dances and presenting their holiday ethnic foods would help to contain and convert the waves of newly-arrived post-war migrants. Yet, as Iacovetta notes, such spectacles were “narrowly restricted to celebration of individual talents and achievements and thus of liberal capitalism’s

286 Walters, Modern Sagas, 132.
287 W.D. Valgardson, Thor (Toronto: Groundwood Books, 1994.)
288 Iacovetta, Gatekeepers, 51.
opportunities and freedoms and of cultural forms such as food dance and music, that were considered to be least threatening to the state and its dominant classes.”

Vínarterta emerged as the main culinary symbol of Icelandic identity as part of the North American pageant of peaceful, culinary pluralism in 1949 in McCall’s Magazine’s Christmas edition amid recipes for “Chewy Noels,” “Sugarplum Trees,” and “Gingery Ginger Fudge.” That year food columnist Helen McCully chose to feature Mrs. Svein Peterson, (Jóna S. Goodman) a 56-year old a caseworker for the County Welfare Office in Bottineau, North Dakota, for her food column, “The Best Cook in Our Town.” McCully wrote that visitors to the Peterson home always “find a pot of coffee brewing on [Peterson’s] old fashioned range and, almost certainly, a fabulous Vínarterta, ripe and ready for slicing.” Peterson was, according to the article “an Icelander by birth and as friendly and comfortable as an open grate. Characteristics this writer associates with all people from that shining land.” A large portrait of Peterson, her detailed recipe, along with instructional photographs of her baking “Iceland’s Christmas Cake” accompanied the article.

Peterson being featured in a popular American magazine created a stir with Icelandic Canadians, who discussed her newfound fame in Lögberg’s women’s column, “Áhugamál Kvenna” (Women’s Interests). The column celebrated the magazine’s praise of Icelandic food, reporting that Helen McCully “who had travels far and wide to find the best cooks in the United States” found vínarterta “so light and delicious compared to other cakes.” The article marked the emergence of vínarterta as an ethnic symbol on both sides of the border. One year later it was invoked at a Canada Day celebration in Hnausa, Manitoba by “Miss Canada” as played by Margret Sigvaldson who asked rhetorically “who can deny that Icelandic coffee, made with a bag, and vínarterta, have not added to our Canadian way of life?” Vinarterta has since emerged as the almost singular Icelandic dish in external depictions of the community, particularly in prairie media, but it has also earned a place in larger publications such as the magazine Martha Stewart Living (November 2009), which featured the torte as part of a

289 Iacovetta, Gatekeepers, 51.
290 Helen McCully, “The Best Cook in our Town,” McCall’s Magazine December 1949, 72.
thanksgiving feast on an elaborately dressed family table in a New York loft (Figure 2.10). It is, after all a dessert with an interesting visual effect.

In many respects, vinarterta’s popularity stems from this success as an external marker. Many Icelandic Canadians refer to its recognition by others as part of its importance. Although it is not widely known in provinces and states without large Icelandic populations, people from a range of ethnic backgrounds in Manitoba, North Dakota, and neighboring regions are familiar with the torte as a traditional Icelandic food. As one woman interviewed by Helgason remarked, “I think most people in Winnipeg, non Icelanders, know what vinarterta is and they love it, they just love it. So I guess we are kind of proud of it. It just sort of identifies us...”293 Helgason notes that vinarterta has similarly become a vital symbol of the difference between Icelandic North Americans and their cousins overseas, yet it has also illuminated tensions between the two groups. Icelandic visitors to Icelandic North American communities are often surprised by both the ritualistic serving of the dessert, as well their hosts’ assertion of its Icelandicness. Frequent and enthusiastic North American references to the torte, as well as the rigidity of the recipe, have been a source of confusion in Iceland.

In his controversial film, *The Importance of Being Icelandic*, Icelandic-born Jón Gustafsson, now based in Canada and the director of several films that have explored Icelandic and Canadian themes, pokes fun at Vínarterta and other popular forms of Icelandic-Canadian cultural expression.294 The film uses sparse, and at times crass images of rural community members at the annual Icelandic festival *Íslendingadagurinn*, wearing plastic viking helmets, fogging for mosquitoes, and assembling lawn chairs, and even an interview with Fjallkona attendants while they shave their legs in the backyard of a house in Gimli (Figure 2.11). Gustafsson also provides viewers with an image of a community hall where a dry erase board reading “Icelandic ethnic food by Frances” stands before some folding tables with vinarterta for sale (Figure 2.12). The camera then pans over to a man wearing a Thor’s hammer necklace holding vinarterta on a paper Chinette plate. At the heart of the film are Gustafsson’s own reservations about the use of the term “Icelandic” to describe Icelandic-Canadian culture,

293 Shirley Syms, as quoted by Helgason, “The Mystery of Vínarterta,” 10.
294 Jón Gustafsson, *The Importance of Being Icelandic* (film) (Winnipeg: Marble Island Pictures, 1999.)
illuminating the tension between Icelandic and Icelandic-Canadian notions of cultural authenticity.

Gustafsson’s focus on rural kitsch and parades provoked an intense reaction from community members, including anonymous, threatening phone calls and letters in the Lögberg-Heimskringla accusing his film of “seeking out and portraying - out of all proportion - the petty and the absurd, both of which appear deliberately collected and orchestrated to demean and degrade.”295 Gustafsson’s attempt to address the concerns of community members failed to quell the anger surrounding the film and its appearance on CBC television in 1998. Popular Icelandic-Canadian historian Nelson Gerrard condemned the film for trivializing the history of the community. He argued that the focus on ethnic kitsch, which for him evidently included the dessert, was an offence to the nineteenth-century women who lost children during the migration period. In his letter published in Lögberg-Heimskringla he also provided a litany of the twenty-three infants that all of his nineteenth-century migrant ancestors had buried in Iceland.296

Gerrard’s reference to maternal trauma is characteristic of popular Icelandic-Canadian historical narratives, as discussed further in chapter four. Gustafsson’s jab at the use of viking symbolism in Gimli also reveals the ambivalence with which some community members view North American spectacles of Icelandic identity. Swyripa contends that this ambivalence reflects “the disjuncture between ancient old-world symbols and Icelanders’ lived Canadian experience” capable of provoking “doubts and defensiveness” amongst community members who are atune to external definitions of “authentic” culture.297 As a dessert that no longer exists in Iceland, vínarterta fails to represent a cultural inheritance shared between European and North American Icelanders. Instead, it illustrates the centrality of family identities to constructions of North American Icelandicness. More than vikings, ethnic costumes, and the Fjallkona, vínarterta illustrates the close proximity between private family histories and public symbols. Bill Holm writes that vínarterta and other Icelandic foods provide a physical link between the diner and their ancestors. Such foods are a sort of “historical Eucharist” that community members eat “whether consciously or not, to honor their ancestors, the poverty, grief, and uprooting in their

297 Swyripa, Storied Landscapes, 228-9.
own history.” Food consumption as a symbol of family connection is similarly evident in the narratives and practices surrounding vínarterta that most often reference female family members.

As Marlene Epp similarly notes in her analysis of Mennonite women, “Women, especially in ethnically distinct communities, were often viewed as cultural carriers, with responsibility for maintaining traditions, customs, language and other group distinctives across generations.” Though community members from a variety of ages and genders can make the torte, it is most often discussed as inextricably connected to one’s Amma (Grandmother). Interviewees most often reference their Amma’s experience with or recipe for making vínarterta, even when their parents, siblings, and other relatives also make the dessert. For many, the grandmothers’ connection is vital to food’s importance. “Real” vínarterta can only come from one’s Amma. “All my grandmothers - Ammas - made it,” wrote Carol Chapman, “as well as numerous aunts etc. I always liked it.” Sarah Arnason, 28, bases her position on vínarterta on her Amma’s recipe. “It has to have cardamom” she writes, “and my Amma always told me it HAS to have 7 layers [and] it has to have icing!” In her review of Kristin Olafson-Jenkyns culinary saga, Elva Jónasson writes that Icelandic food and cookbooks offer a surrogate for “those children and grand-children who did not have the opportunity to be immersed in their cultural roots by their ammas and lang-ammas” (great-grandmothers).

The reason for the popularity of vínarterta does not lie solely with its external recognition but in its ability to blend ethnic identity with powerful familial narratives and ties. Swyripa contends that importance of the Baba (grandmother) to popular Ukranian Canadian culture reflects her “intensely personal” role in constructions of Ukrainian identity as well as her association with the perpetuation of handicrafts, family, and food. She argues that grandmothers may be associated with the “heart” rather than the “head” in ethnic culture, yet Baba symbolism reveals much about complex commemorative and identity strategies at work within families and communities. Much as the Ammas who faithfully reproduce nineteenth-

298 Holm, The Heart Can Be Filled Anywhere on Earth, 208-9.
301 Arnason, Interview by author, 2010.
302 Elva Jónasson, as quoted by Olafson-Jenkyns, The Culinary Saga of New Iceland, back cover.
303 Swyripa, Wedded to the Cause, 238.
century Icelandic foods, Babas who “drank beer and raised chickens in downtown Winnipeg...personified their Ukrainian peasant heritage, even traits once branded as foreign and inferior.”

Swyripa and S. Holyk Hunchuk also argue that public food spectacles, including giant roadside food monuments, similarly act as tributes to and representations of now absent generations of women in the Ukrainian community. As Hunchuk argues, Ukrainian foodways act as a historical bond between generations by “feeding the living and commemorating the dead” by using wheat sheaves and other symbols as a reference to ancestors as well as the famines they endured. Epp similarly contends that Mennonite cookbooks, such as Food that Really Schmecks, blur the line between food and the female body by “linking women’s physicality and their personality with their foodways,” including the Mennonite “lack of concern for waistlines.” Jennifer Miller’s response to a survey on Icelandic foods illustrates that vinarterta also clearly operates as an intergenerational binding agent that feeds living generations of Icelandic Canadians while reminding them, in an often very personal way, of past generations. Miller’s Amma always provided her family with a whole vinarterta each year but at a recent family reunion she wrote:

it was clear that her health was declining rapidly. She managed one last vinarterta for the reunion, but there weren't any extras, and we all knew no more were coming. I had vinarterta at breakfast, lunch and dinner that week, but I’ve had none since. Amma passed away in fall. I'm down to half a cake in my freezer, and I just can't make myself cut it. I need to eat it soon, or it won’t be good any more (and Amma wouldn't like that, either), but I just can't let it be gone.

The inextricable connection between the torte and female relatives identifies its role in the construction of familial and gendered ethnic identities. As Jón Karl Helgason reiterates, vinarterta with its strange filling and foreign origins makes it a poor symbol of Icelandic nationalism, and Canadian critics of multicultural spectacles such as Neil Bissoondath have similarly dismissed the reliance on “foul-smelling food” in “Disneyfied” spectacles of Canadian pluralism. Vinarterta’s popularity then, can only be partially attributed to the performance of

---

304 Swyripa, Wedded to the Cause, 238.
308 Miller, Interview with author.
national identities, and must also be understood as a form of cultural expression that also reinforces and reflects familial identities and personal ties.

For external observers, coffee, alcohol, and vinarterta may initially appear as arbitrary markers of Icelandic identity in the history of this community, yet an analysis of these three illustrates their complex histories and effects. The passionate pursuit of good coffee in the New World illuminates the boundaries of Icelandic-Canadian acculturation, including their refusal to alter their coffee traditions, their shaping of Anglo-Canadian markets, and their and challenges to Anglo-Canadian notions of good taste and respectability. Icelanders may have altered multiple aspects of their public appearance to fit into Anglo-North American society, but they also rejected more personal and immediate alterations including the conversion to drinking tea. Indeed Icelanders openly voiced their disgust with what they saw as an inadequate coffee culture and supply in the New World and remained steadfast in their private coffee practices, in spite of Anglo disapproval of their stained coffee socks. This endurance of Icelandic coffee practice in Canada not only reflected migrants’ refusal to change but also their ability to transform Canadian markets and public spaces, evident in the rise of Icelandic coffeehouses and the availability of better quality coffee beans, particularly green beans, in Canadian stores.

Private consumption patterns involving alcohol similarly illustrated the ways in which drink was part of a larger mediation of relations with Anglo-Canadian society. Rooted in migrant critiques of colonial rule and socio-cultural stagnation at home, anxieties surrounding alcoholism resulted in the creation of a public façade for the community that emphasized temperance. As Icelandic-language forums and oral accounts reveal, however, this public image reflects a larger division within the community itself that relegated drinking and drinkers to the margins of Icelandic-Canadian society and space. According to many sources, drinking was commonplace in the colony and in the city and was an integral part of male culture and relationships, including those with men outside of the community. The popularity of the temperance movement with Icelandic women, however, meant that alcohol consumption was also part of a larger, gender-based contest over power and definitions of appropriate masculinity.

Vinarterta, in many respects, replaced temperance organizations as one of the defining features of the community’s public image in the post-1945 period. Much as the temperance movement had created a palatable vision of Icelandic values, vinarterta offered the community a
pleasant public façade that harmonized with discourses of domesticity and benevolent Cold War pluralism. The popularity of the torte as an ethnic symbol has also illuminated tensions with some European Icelanders as well as critics of Canadian multicultural spectacles who have dismissed such foods as strange and ultimately meaningless symbols. However, the culinary conservatism surrounding the production of the torte as well as its association with Ammas reveals that the torte’s unusually static form reflects the differences between Icelandic and Icelandic-North American culture, as well as a more complex discussion of cultural authenticity in the community. In addition to acting as a marker of difference, vínarterta also reflects the role of female food production in the construction of modern Icelandic identity. Indeed, as Bill Holm asserts, the torte is best understood as kind of a Eucharist through which community members continually produce and consume representations of what they consider to be meaningful histories and historical figures.

In closing, Icelanders encountered the New World, mediated relations, and negotiated pleasure for themselves through food and drink. Fostered by the shelter of domestic spaces, Icelandic-Canadian drinking patterns and foodways exhibited less dramatic and immediate change than clothing practices. Women may have discarded the skotthúfa in a matter of weeks, days or even hours after arriving in Canada, but 135 years later, their descendents might be brewing coffee in almost the exact same manner and bickering over the recipe to a prune torte that has changed very little, if at all, since the family left Iceland. Yet this culinary conservatism in Icelandic-Canadian kitchens does not mean that food and drink statically perpetuate nineteenth-century pre-migration Icelandic culture in North America. Instead, food and drink have acted as both cohesive and divisive forces that have helped to draw the lines in conflicts over claims to “Icelandic” behavior, including those who observed temperate, hospitable, and “authentic” practices, and those who did not. The history of coffee, alcohol, and vínarterta illustrates, then, that food and drink have been a dynamic medium for expression through which community members engage in a range of compelling discussions and debates surrounding gender, power, and identity in the Anglo-Canadian context.
Chapter Three

From Freyja to Fjallkona: Ethnic symbolism and visual culture in Icelandic-Canadian political expression and containment, 1920-41

Fresh out of jail, Dr Sigurður Júlíus Jóhannesson rushed to the Icelandic neighbourhood in Winnipeg’s West End to attend a birth in the summer of 1919 (Figure 3.1). The Winnipeg Police were forced to release the local physician when they received an urgent message that he was needed by one of his patients. Dr. Jóhannesson, also known as “Siggi Júl,” had been arrested earlier for speeches and editorials he had delivered as editor of the radical Icelandic newspaper Voröld (Age of Spring) which supported workers and leaders in the Winnipeg General Strike. Siggi Júl’s arrest reflects his estrangement from many middle-class Icelanders who opposed the strike, including several community members who provided the police with sworn affidavits regarding a “contemptuous” speech he delivered in the International Order of Good Templars (IOGT) hall and English translations of his editorials. The physician and pacifist had also earlier alienated himself from those who supported the war effort during his term as editor of Lögberg and had been removed from his post by the newspaper’s editorial board. Yet it was Siggi Júl’s reputation as a humanitarian and his personal connections as a physician that helped him survive accusations of sedition and disloyalty. He continued to work in the community as a writer and physician and supported the Allied war effort during World War Two, even appearing in the National Film Board of Canada’s (NFB) wartime film Iceland on the Prairies in 1941.

When the doctor died in 1956, writers for the English-language magazine, The Icelandic Canadian, published a full page tribute entitled “Dr. S.J. Johannesson: A Humanitarian.” The article detailed his accomplishments as a writer, father, and compassionate physician as well as his reputation for being a “great friend” to children. Notably absent from the tribute, however, were any references to the intensity of Júl’s radicalism during the strike or his arrest in 1919. This chapter revisits the role of language and visual culture in such omissions. It studies the role of the Icelandic language in fostering political diversity in the community during the first quarter of the twentieth century and the community’s transition to a largely visually-based language by

---

mid-century. This shift reveals a remarkable change in the Icelandic-Canadian community of Júl’s day and the one experienced by the generations he helped to deliver.

Since their arrival on Canadian soil, the Icelandic community has used ethnic symbols in a myriad of political campaigns designed to sway community members and mediate relations with the outside world. This chapter traces migrants’ negotiation of Canadian political change and their ability to communicate, conceal, and contain an array of political motives through ethnic symbolism and spectacle. Beginning with a brief historiography of the scholarship surrounding heritage spectacles, it then examines two pre-Centennial developments in political and cultural expression. The first part of the chapter covers the conservative shift within the community, or the decline of the radical left and the rise of conservative Canadian nationalist leadership in public representations of the community. It argues that this political transition was fundamentally tied to anglicization and the decline of the Icelandic language media in Canada. Icelandic symbolism and print media were popular tools for a range of radical, pacifist, and feminist activists and their supporters during the first two decades of the twentieth century. By the 1920s and 1930s, however, the diversity of this symbolic and political expression had declined significantly. These forms and forums were replaced by a new approach to ethnic expression which limited the radical potential of traditional symbolism in public politics, purged Icelandic nationalism from elements that irritated the community’s Canadian loyalties, and responded to the limitations imposed by Anglo-Canadian notions of politically acceptable cultural expression. The decline of these forums coincided with a new, more centralized public image of the community that blended both Icelandic and Canadian nationalism with twentieth-century ethnic spectacles and visual culture.

While the first part of the chapter is limited to an analysis of Golden Age symbolism and radical expression in Icelandic language media, the second half will examine the political implications of the visual campaigns created to bridge the language gap for Canadian-born generations and external audiences. This new visual vocabulary had specific implications for women in the community. Spectacles such as the first Fjallkona pageant in 1924 and the 1941 NFB film, *Iceland on the Prairies*, often used images of women and women’s bodies to broadcast narrowly defined versions of ethnic identity that complimented conservative versions of both Icelandic and Canadian national identities. Deemed too androgynous for the pageant, the
short hair of the first woman to play the Fjallkona in 1924 created a panic amongst older generations who felt that the aesthetics of urban, working women and girls were an affront to traditional Icelandic femininity and identity. This panic, also referred to as the “nation-wide epidemic of bald women,” prompted a written campaign against the haircut in Icelandic newspapers. The campaign ultimately pressured organizers to use a long wig to cover up the controversial haircut of Fjallkona Sigrun Lindal. Embarrassing reports of women spurning the advances of Allied troops during the occupation of Iceland in 1940 similarly prompted a publicity campaign to confront an unsettling image of Icelandic women. These reports painted Icelandic women as “unfriendly” or frigid and hostile to men who represented North American military interests. Icelandic-Canadian community leaders used film to respond to these accusations through the construction of highly palatable images of Canadian ethnic identity that emphasized loyalty, assimilation, good food, and friendly women. Through an exploration of the historical context of the pageant and the film, this chapter reveals that Icelandic-Canadian spectacles during this period were as concerned with the containment of political sentiment as they were with the behaviours of women that violated notions of femininity and conservative Icelandic and Canadian nationalisms.

Previously relegated by historians to the status of kitsch, Canadian scholars have begun to seriously focus on heritage spectacles, such as parades, tableaux, and monuments, since the late 1990s. Colloquially speaking, the term “heritage” usually refers to the process of inheriting traditions, possessions, and positions from predecessors. Newer scholarship on the issue critiques the claims of heritage spectacles represent the past by drawing from the work of Raymond Williams. The notion of tradition, writes Williams, is the most “evident expression of dominant and hegemonic pressures and limits. It is always more than an inert historicized segment.” 311 The claim of heritage spectacles to represent traditional values and identities is part of a politically-informed selection process that reframes public memory or “heritage” as an instrument of power. The political motivations behind heritage spectacles are often concealed by popular assumptions of an organic relationship between predecessor and inheritor, one that is inherently passive. Some of the most compelling global scholarship on the subject has applied this framework to understanding the role of heritage in colonial projects, particularly the dual process of

commemorating and fossilizing of colonial Others. These scholars illustrate how heritage spectacles, monuments and displays are part of a larger struggle for authority over the telling of the past. As Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett contends, “the world imagined under the banner of heritage is a battlefield.”

Canadian historians such as Craig Heron, Steve Penfold, Ian Radforth, Allan Gordon, and H.V. Nelles have all focused on a range of campaigns, including royal visits, Labour Day parades, and anniversary pageants, as part of larger contests over power and the past. Such texts often focus on the construction of predominantly Anglo, and to a lesser extent, Franco-Canadian identities, yet several volumes have also specifically addressed ethnic heritage spectacles. In addition to Franca Iacovetta’s recent work on ethnic spectacle and Cold War tension, Carmella Patrias’s work on the Hungarian community illustrates the role of plays and pageants in the perpetuation of the deep political divides in North America, while Ruth Frager’s work on Jewish garment workers in Ontario similarly references the interplay of ethnic, gender, and class concerns in parades and protests. In Frances Swyripa’s work on iconography in Western Canadian Ukrainian churches, she references the role of gender and religious identity in the merging of homeland and Canadian symbolism in the adornment of sacred spaces, one


313 Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture: Tourism, Museums, and Heritage (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 159.


example being the Mother of God wearing a wreath of maple leaves. American historians such as Diana Selig, Erica Rand, and Matthew Frye Jacobson have also introduced innovative approaches to the analysis of migration commemoration more generally. Selig’s work on the ethnic spectacles in the interwar period explores the limitations and contributions of anti-prejudice activists and the pluralist campaigns they sponsored. Jacobson and Rand use visual and material culture to explore the role of gender, memory, and race in the construction of American campaigns for the commemoration of sites and stories of migration, particularly Ellis Island. These scholars draw from a range of American spectacles that reconstruct the immigrant past, from Rand’s focus on Ellis Island souvenirs and corporately-sponsored monuments, to Jacobson’s look at migrant themed films that helped White Americans evade uncomfortable accusations from the civil rights movement. Citing Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Jacobson writes that “heritage is a mode of cultural production in the present,” but the “harsher realities of power are most often hidden within [its] celebratory rhetoric.”

The cultural history of the Icelandic-North American community has been shaped by the commemoration of multiple, significant anniversaries. Icelanders on both sides of the ocean devoted significant time and energy to commemorative campaigns to mark the 1000th anniversary of the establishment of the Alþingi, the island’s representative parliament, in 1930. The anniversary celebrations drew heavily from the symbolism of Iceland’s Commonwealth Period or “Golden Age” (930-1262) which also encompassed the Norse voyages to North America (999-1000), the adoption of Christianity (1000), the recording of the Icelandic Sagas by historian Snorri Sturluson (1179-1241), and the Viking Age more broadly. Golden Age symbolism was not only an important part of Icelandic nationalist expression, but helped to legitimize the community’s presence in North America. Central to Icelandic-Canadian commemorative spectacles during this period were the Vinland Voyages, the millennial sagas describing the arrival of Leif Eiríksson and his crew and the establishment of a small settlement

319 Jacobson, Roots Too, 56.
in on the north eastern coast of North America at the turn of the first millennium. Icelanders and Scandinavians were long aware of the accounts of Eiríksson’s successful navigation and settlement in North America, but evidence of the voyage did not spread to the rest of Europe and North America until the publication of *Antiquitates Americanae*, the first modern edition of the Saga of the Greenlanders and Eirik the Red’s Saga, in 1837. Originally printed in Copenhagen, this edition inspired the production of several subsequent works on the Norse presence in North America. Sigríður Matthiasdottir writes that foreign appreciation of Icelandic culture was an important part of nineteenth-century nationalism. By “synthesizing ‘Westernization’ with their own ‘national history’ [and] advertising their nations as ‘centres’ of high culture during their ‘Golden Age’ periods,” independence leaders hoped their projects would gain international legitimacy.

This recognition was equally important to migrant groups in North America. As Geraldine Barnes notes in her study of the popular currency of the Vinland Voyages in nineteenth-century North America, Scandinavian spectacles that celebrated the arrival of Leif Eiríksson were popular with both migrant communities and Anglo-North American Protestants. “Icelandic nationalist myth-makers enjoyed the privilege of recognition from foreign scholars of their own ‘ethnic past,’” she notes, while offering Anglo-Protestants a founding father capable of unseating the Catholic Christopher Columbus. The flurry of scholarship on the Vinland Voyages in the nineteenth-century transformed the first American centennial, as well as 400-year anniversary of Columbus’s arrival. In challenging the traditional narrative of Columbian discovery, the Voyages “extended the course of the continent’s European history by five hundred years and placed a Christian hero from an Atlantic “republic” at its helm.” For Icelandic Canadians and Americans who had endured criticism from nationalists at home for their decision to leave, the Voyages provided a potent image of the interconnectedness of Icelandic and North American identity.

---

320 Although the Norse presence in North America was not conclusively proven until the archaeological excavation of the settlement at L’Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland in from 1960-8, numerous nineteenth-century scholars claimed to have discovered archaeological “proof” of the Norse presence in North America.  
American history. These narratives reconciled an Icelandic and migrant identity by re-envisioning a prominent Golden Age figure as a migrant to North America. Eiríksson was also frequently cited by community members and historians as evidence of the centrality of Útprá (voyaging spirit), to the Icelandic character. In North America the Voyages also elevated the status of the many Scandinavian communities who claimed a connection to Eiríksson, by asserting a claim to North American settlement that pre-dated those from Britain and mainland Europe.

Eiríksson quickly became the historical patron saint for Icelandic-North American communities, evident in the popular usage of viking symbols in community life and spectacle during the twentieth century. In addition to the establishment of the newspaper *Vinland* (1902-8), and the creation of a large fibreglass viking statue by the Gimli Chamber of Commerce in 1967, the community also used highly-recognizable viking imagery in its Anglo-oriented spectacles such as one of many viking ship parade floats, which bore costumed Icelanders down Manitoba avenues throughout the twentieth century (Figure 3.2). Such ships, including a 1922 float in Winnipeg, reminded spectators that “Leif Eiríksson, an Icelandic man, was the First to discover North America.”

The enduring popularity of viking imagery, evident in the proliferation of Norse recreationists and cartoon viking shirts and mugs at Gimli’s annual Icelandic festival, Íslendingadagurinn, as well as innumerable viking-themed roadside statues and sports teams throughout North America, also speak to the broader acceptance of Norse imagery in Anglo-North American society. Frances Swyripa argues that viking symbolism offered Icelanders a chance to compete for recognition as co-founders of Canadian society who belonged “within the traditional pantheon of Canadian heroes.” Beyond a cartoonish impression of ethnic identity then, the success of Vinland Voyage symbolism lies in its ability reconcile and legitimate Northern European migrant identities in a transatlantic context.

In addition to establishing claims to “belonging” in North America, this popular narrative also reflects the compatibility of viking imagery with Icelandic and North American political conservatism in successive generations in the twentieth century. From business ventures and

---

326 See for example, Lindal, *The Icelanders in Canada*, 82.
327 Untitled photograph, courtesy of Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre, Hnuasa Manitoba.
associations, to wartime recruitment campaigns, conservatives frequently associated vikings with independence, democracy, and “adventure” or the entrepreneurial spirit. In 1956 Fred Bjornson of Cedar Falls, Iowa created a viking ship logo and the slogan “sailing uncharted insurance waters” for his new insurance business “Bjornson Incorporated of Iowa.”

Manitoba businesses and business people also frequently adopted Viking references and symbols, including Winnipeg’s Viking Investments Limited and Eaton’s line of Viking appliances.

This is not to say, however, that these popular symbols are inherently conservative. Golden Age symbolism evaded singular meaning at the turn of the century. Community members and leaders employed figures from the Norse past in an array of political campaigns. Editor and author Margret Benedictsson transformed the figure of the Norse goddess Freyja into a symbol of anarcho-feminism by publishing a women’s weekly under that name from 1898-1910 (Figure 3.3). As Ryan Eyford has illustrated in his research on Benedictsson, Freyja built upon a pre-existing suffrage movement to become a popular forum anarchist women’s activism in Icelandic-speaking North American communities, featuring essays, editorials and news stories on the cause, including an account of Emma Goldman’s visit to Winnipeg in 1907. By redeploying Freyja’s somewhat contradictory association with both love and war, Benedictsson crafted a more subversive image of the Norse goddess, capable of unhinging traditional gender norms.

She is the goddess of love, and she is more. She was to hold “halfum val” (half the warfield). In her is combined love and war. And now she is making war on the old fashioned world—the quiet submission of enslaved woman and womanhood.

---


330 Signy Stefansson, and Icelandic-Canadian woman who grew up in Winnipeg’s West End, married John David Eaton. Stefansson’s presence in the family and the business infused both with elements of Icelandic culture and she became known as “the matriarch of the Eaton clan… who had led the family's mighty retail chain in the halcyon days of the 1950s and 1960s, when the company controlled half of the country's department store sales.” Jennifer Wells, et. al, “Eaton’s Seeks Bankruptcy Protection,” The Canadian Encyclopedia Available online at http://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.com/index.cfm?PgNm=TCE&Params=M1ARTM0011177 Accessed March 22, 2010.


332 Margret Benedictsson, Letter to the Woman’s Standard (magazine) Des Moines, June 1898. Courtesy of Ryan Eyford.
In addition to references to historical and symbolic figures in the Icelandic-Canadian media, literature was another, even more popular form of cultural expression as well as an important component of the community’s claims to cultural achievement and character. The Icelandic Sagas repeatedly appeared in popular and academic histories alike as one of the foremost representatives of Icelandic cultural achievement. References to love of literature and high educational standards also often characterize celebratory public assessments of the community. In his 1967 history, W.J. Lindal calls the Icelandic Sagas one of the “chief works of human genius” and asserts that Iceland "has surpassed practically all others in steady education of its children and in continuous output of excellent literature for a thousand years." Literary scholars similarly reference the high social status enjoyed by an accomplished skáld (poet) in the community. Daisy Neijmann writes that “being a skáld meant much more than a just a writer of stories.” Rather, it was an intensely political and intellectual profession central to the shaping the direction of the community.

Like Benedictsson, many other Icelandic-Canadian radicals understood the importance of Icelandic literary form and forums in crafting attractive political campaigns. While history was an integral component of Icelandic notions of culture and the self, radical writers often blended images of the past with progressive visions of the future, creating visions of social change that were sanctioned by traditional cultural elements and figures. For pacifist leaders and activists, Icelandic print media offered a vital forum for launching critiques of the Great War and other protest campaigns. The poet Stephan G. Stephansson, one of Icelandic Canada’s foremost literary figures, used poetry to broadcast his own critiques of war and capitalism, while maintaining his status as an esteemed skáld capable of drawing audiences and readers from a variety of political backgrounds. Within the confines of the Icelandic language media and with the blessings of the Icelandic literary tradition, Stephansson could broadcast some of his most stinging critiques in Icelandic-language poetry during the First World War, including the following stanzas of his 1916 poem, “In Wartime”:

In Europe’s reeking slaughter-pen
they mince the flesh of murdered men

---

while swinish merchants, snout in trough,
drink all the bloody profits off. 335

Though Stephansson farmed in Alberta, he maintained close ties with Winnipeg’s radical Icelandic political and literary community, including Siggi Júl, whose radical newspaper Vörold was a reference to a utopian social rebirth described by Stephansson in a poem of the same name. Júl was also a noted pacifist during the First World War and, with the exception of the vocal and influential Icelanders who supported the war effort and lobbied for his removal as editor of Lögberg, enjoyed the support of the many urban and rural Icelanders who also questioned the war effort. Public figures such as historian Wilhelm Kristjanson may have attempted to craft and image of loyalty and military service for the community in his writing, but did not necessarily represent the views of most Icelanders. According to one community member Kristjanson arrived in uniform at a country dance in an Icelandic community during WWI “trying to get people to sign up.” Rather than convincing them to join, the display angered and annoyed men at the dance, who rebuked his invitation and told him to leave.336 Einar Arnason, who grew up in the Icelandic neighbourhood in Winnipeg’s West End, recalls that there was not overwhelming support for the war in the community. “Most of the people were pacifists...” he asserted. “The war in Europe was very remote.”337

Pacifist sentiment and activism endured in the community well into the 1930s. In 1937, just two years before Canada officially entered WWII, Icelandic-Canadian author Laura Goodman Salverson was awarded the Governor General’s Prize for her pacifist novel, The Dark Weaver.338 Like Benedictsson and Salverson, Salome Halldorson a Social Credit MLA (1936-41), used Golden Age motifs and figures for her English and Icelandic language pacifist, feminist and economic reform campaigns (Figure 3.4). As the first non-Anglo woman elected to the Manitoba Legislature, Halldorson initially used a blend of pioneer and Viking imagery to create persuasive English-language speeches for Anglo Canadian colleagues.

338 Laura Goodman Salverson, The Dark Weaver (Toronto: The Ryerson Press, 1937.)
My parents came to this country as pioneer settlers from Iceland- the land of the Vikings- so I come of a strong and sturdy race, who had an instinctive love of freedom and were the first to establish a representative parliament... I too am a freedom-loving pioneer, with a strong will to set out in search of a new and better world.\textsuperscript{339}

Following Canada’s declaration of war against Germany in September 1939, Halldorson retreated into Icelandic language forums to broadcast her more subversive critiques of the Canadian state and the war. Here too she relied on the political currency and legitimating potential of Golden Age figures in Icelandic forums. In one undated speech, she delivered a scathing rebuke of Icelandic women who devoted their energy to supporting the war effort through activities such as knitting socks for soldiers. “It is so much easier to knit than to think”, she argued. Halldorson announced that Icelandic women needed to organize to stop the war in the spirit of their forbearers, like Auður from Gísla Saga.\textsuperscript{340} Auður, as many of the audience members would recall, was a thirteenth-century saga heroine who tricked and assaulted a bounty hunter searching for her husband. In keeping with the centrality of economic reform to Halldorson’s politics, Auður was an apt metaphor, since her name also means “wealth” in Icelandic and she used a heavy bag of coins to break the nose of the bounty hunter. She asserted that:

it is especially important for all men and all women to stand up for good and defend it with all our might, just as Auður did in her time, because this war which is now beginning has its origins in hatred, vengeance, cruelty and greed.\textsuperscript{341}

In contrast to the pervasive anti-war sentiment that had characterized the community during the First World War, the Icelandic-Canadian community had shed many of its older vestiges of radicalism by 1941. An earlier generation of radicals, who had devoted themselves to the feminist, pacifist, and labour movements, including Margret Benedictsson and Stephan G. Stephansson, had either entered retirement or died. Siggi Júl continued to write letters to the editor of the Lögberg, but he was an ardent anti-fascist and supported action against Hitler. Moreover, health problems had begun to seriously affect his mobility by 1948. His own paper, Voröld, had already closed by 1921. The closure of Voröld marked the end of an earlier period of a prolific and diverse period in Icelandic language media which began in the late nineteenth century.

\textsuperscript{341} Halldorson, Untitled Speech.
century and had begun to wane by the first decade of the twentieth. The urbanization and anglicization of successive generations of Icelandic Canadians contributed to the general decline in demand for these publications. The demise of radical papers such as Freyja (in 1910) and Voröld cannot be entirely attributed to language decline, however, since conservative and liberal Icelandic language forums and institutions continued to enjoy relatively strong support.

The Jón Sigurdsson Chapter of the Imperial Order Daughters of the Empire (IODE) an all-Icelandic chapter of the larger pro-empire women’s movement, offered particularly well-attended events and programs for Icelandic women, including organizing gift and letter distribution campaigns for soldiers overseas as well as the knitting circle lambasted by Halldorson. In keeping with the longer tradition of Icelandic fascination with and appreciation for British culture discussed in chapter one, a group of urban, middle-class Icelandic women formed the chapter in the midst of the First World War to promote both the Canadian war effort and ties to the British Empire more broadly. During both World Wars members dedicated themselves to offering services for veterans and their families, including the production of two extensive books about Icelandic veterans. Similarly, the more mainstream news coverage and editorial policies of the liberal and conservative newspapers, Lögberg and Heimskringla, account for the survival of those two Icelandic language papers into the late 1950s. While these papers were forced to merge due to dwindling subscriptions, the Lögberg-Heimskringla successfully navigated the transition and continued to publish largely in Icelandic well into the 1980s. Though it has since anglicized, the paper still continues to publish out of Winnipeg.

Just as radicals employed Golden Age Icelandic figures in their campaigns for social change, so too did conservatives appreciate and appropriate nationalist symbols. By 1940, however, the conservative shift within the community, coupled with the demands of a growing English-speaking Icelandic audience had contributed to significant changes in the symbolic landscape. The decline in Icelandic literacy reduced the political and cultural currency of nuanced discussions of saga figures, such as Halldorson’s discussion of Auður, to increasingly

342 Jón Sigurdsson IODE, Minningarrit Íslenzka Hermanna 1914-1918 (Winnipeg: Félagið Jón Sigurdsson, 1923) and Jón Sigurdsson IODE, Veterans of Icelanadic Descent, World War II,1939-1945 (Winnipeg: Jón Sigurdsson IODE, 1990.)
older, rural Icelandic-speaking audiences. This decline was part of a larger reduction in the number and diversity of cultural and political symbols that had cultivated the range of expression prior to the 1920s. In their place community leaders began to construct new figures that spoke to the immigrant experience as well as the increasingly conservative, Protestant nationalism of Icelandic Canada. These new figures included the migrant minister Jón Bjarnasson, after whom an Icelandic Lutheran Academy in Winnipeg was named; the Icelandic nationalist leader Jón Sigurðsson who was appropriated by Icelandic members of the IODE as a representative of both Icelandic and now Anglo-Canadian service and patriotism; as well as the newly reinvented figure of the Fjallkona, the female embodiment of the Icelandic nation.

Translated as “Mountain woman” or “Maid of the mountain,” the figure of the Fjallkona is a symbolic, collective mother to the Icelandic people. She first emerged as a popular literary trope in the Icelandic independence movement in the mid-nineteenth century, but did not take any specific visual or physical form until the Icelandic scholar, Eiríks Magnússon, commissioned J.B. Zwecker, a German artist, to create an etching of her for a volume of folktales he published in 1866 (Figure 3.5).343 In this image the Fjallkona appears in the style of broader popular romantic nationalist European movements but surrounded with specific references to Iceland’s Golden Age, including a raven on her shoulder, (a reference to Odin) and with traditional rune staves at her feet (a reference to Ingólfur Arnarson and the first settlement in Iceland). The Fjallkona’s fiery crown and the mountain range behind her are references to the country’s volcanic, mountainous landscape. The later addition of a snowy veil referred to the country’s glaciers, as well as the “purity” of Icelandic women.

Aside from the 1866 illustration, the Fjallkona existed as a purely literary symbol in Canada and Iceland until community leaders in Winnipeg decided to merge the figure with North American style pageantry in 1924. In an attempt to draw larger crowds to Winnipeg’s declining Icelandic festival, organizers decided to hold a “Fjallkona contest” that year. Half-nationalist display, half-beauty pageant, the contest used the Lögberg to circulate photographs of the contestants and encouraged readers, friends and family to cast their ballot in favour of their choice (Figure 3.6). Sigrún Lindal was elected Fjallkona for the August 2 celebration and

343 Jónas Thor, Islendingadagurinn: An Illustrated History (Gimli: The Icelandic Festival of Manitoba, 1988), 38.
became the first person to act as Fjallkona on either side of the ocean. As Jónas Thor notes, however, the strategy of including a live Fjallkona to bolster attendance at the Winnipeg Icelandic Day festival met with only short-term success. By 1932 the festival and its Fjallkona spectacle were forced to merge with the August celebration in Gimli. Yet the Fjallkona pageantry proved to be immensely popular with many Icelandic communities, evident in the establishment of annual nominations and ceremonies throughout North America.

The personification of the Fjallkona in Canada was also a significant cultural export to Iceland in the twentieth century. The first live representation of the Fjallkona appeared there six years after the Winnipeg pageant in 1930 for the millennial celebration of the establishment the Alþingi. It remains a major staple at most formal Icelandic celebrations on both sides of the ocean, though European Fjallkonas continue to favour the original beauty pageant format of the spectacle while Icelandic North American versions have shifted towards the nomination of older, matronly figures in the 1930s. The symbol of the Fjallkona has been a popular tool for nationalists but scholars write that it is also an inherently limited political venue for women. In her compelling analysis of the role of gender and class in modern constructions of Icelandic-Canadian identity, Anne Brydon writes that the Fjallkona has been a remarkably flexible symbol capable of transcending political and religious divisions within the community. Yet, she argues, the Fjallkona is not an active female agent but a maternal figure and an instrument for the voices of male nationalists and ethnic leaders. She does not write the annual address that she delivers to festival goers, nor has the festival committee frequently chosen a woman with a formal background in politics. Swyripa notes that until the 1970s, Fjallkona nominees were “chosen for her husband’s prominence as much as her own.” As Brydon contends, the Fjallkona better reflects current “preoccupations with ‘family values’ than with her original literary associations” and is “tied to the norms and values of patriarchal bourgeois society.” Community historian Elva Simondsson, who is featured in Brydon’s work, rejects this characterization of the modern pageant. She argues that women are now largely responsible for organizing the event, which they

344 Thor, Islandingadagurinn, 42.
345 Swyripa, Storied Landscapes, 234.
use to celebrate the unpaid and often unrecognized labour of female community members. Instead, she argues, the pageant’s largely female administration stands in stark contrast to the administration of other ethnic spectacles and that the all-female Icelandic convoy at an annual association of multicultural festivals stood out amongst the predominantly male representation from other Canadian ethnic communities.\(^{347}\)

The aesthetic development of the figure also illuminates a more complex debate between men and women surrounding the earliest Fjallkona spectacle, one that was not only imbedded in speeches and ceremonies, but also in her body and clothing. The development of the Fjallkona’s costume, beginning with Lindal’s version in 1924, illuminates conflicts over gendered aesthetics in the community. Lindal’s homemade costume consisted of a loose, floor length cream-coloured satin gown with bell sleeves. In an attempt to replicate heavy traditional embroidery on the dress’s hem, cuffs and yoke, the maker stitched prefabricated, rust-coloured beaded trim into a clover leaf pattern to dramatically reduce the amount of labour usually required in the decoration of national costumes (Figure 3.7). Over the dress Lindal wore a grass-green velour cape with “ermine” trim made from white rabbit fur, interspersed with tufts of black fur. On her head she wore a gold-coloured crown and traditional metal belt.\(^{348}\) Lindal’s rendering of the Fjallkona was informed by a blend of a kyrtil, one of the national women’s costume designed by the nationalist artist Sigurður Guðmundsson described in chapter one, as well as the theatrical aesthetics of the 1920s. Though it would later change, her initial version of the Fjallkona image appears in a portrait from her personal collection, which was later reproduced in a commemorative booklet, Fjallkonas of Íslendingadagurinn (Figure 3.8).\(^{349}\) Unlike her Victorian predecessor, Lindal’s impression of the Fjallkona incorporated garçonne aesthetics, including cropped curly hair and her preference for a lean, low-waist. The costume maker’s inclusion of high-luster fabrics, contrasting textures, and slightly loud colour choices speaks to an appreciation contrast and spectacle. Unlike the emphasis on fine detail and fabric, ornate, carefully executed needlework,

---

\(^{347}\) Elva Simundsson, conversation with author, April 24, 2010, Toronto, Ontario.

\(^{348}\) Lindal’s crown and belt probably came from one of the dozens of Icelandic women in Manitoba who owned or had inherited these pieces, since smaller metal or semi-precious costume pieces were kept long after migrants had worn out or eased wearing fabric pieces from the old country. Given the Art Nouveau style of the belt and matching broaches, these pieces may have been ordered directly from Iceland or brought by a migrant who arrived following the largest waves of migrants in the nineteenth century.

\(^{349}\) Elva Simondsson, Fjallkonas of Íslendingadagurinn 1924-1989 (Gimli: 1990), plate one.
and the popular preference for *kyrtill* in dark colours made for personal use, the components of Lindal’s dress speaks to the role it played as the highly visible focus of a large public festival (Figure 3.7). Here the focus was not the elevation of status for an individual woman through a display of her skill, style, and access to expensive fabric, but the creation of a dramatic, highly-visible impression of a symbol in female form. (Hopefully far enough away for viewers to forgive fake embroidery and a rabbit fur trim.)

As the flurry of editorials, articles, and letters printed in the *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla* in 1924 illustrate, organizers and many other community members were dissatisfied with the prospect of Lindal’s cropped hair appearing in the pageant. This protest against short hair was a late response to a style that already had a firm grasp on the heads of North American women. Bobbed haircuts began to spread across Europe in 1917 and by 1924 already dominated women’s fashion in the Canadian West. The bob characterized most public images of women in Winnipeg that year, from movie stars to catalogue illustrations and even advertisements for insect repellent. Adopting the bob had specific implications for migrant women. Canadian-born women viewed short hair as a hallmark of cleanliness and modernity. In contrast, long hair became a symbol of outdated and archaic femininity and hygiene practices in the 1920s. One Ukrainian-Canadian schoolteacher wrote that when she and her sewing machine personally subjected her students to an aesthetic process of Canadianization, this project included haircuts. “Dresses were shortened,” she wrote in 1920, and “thin, untidy hair was bobbed.”

As a series of articles on women’s haircuts in the *Manitoba Free Press* illustrate, the haircut was also popular with Canadian women of all generations, including older women. As one woman writing under the name Jane Doe commented in 1924, “I’ve seen many charming bobbed heads on elderly women.” The cut was no less popular with fashion-conscious Icelandic women, evident in advertisements in the Icelandic newspapers, including Parisian Hairdressing and Beauty Parlour’s Icelandic-language notice commanding women: “Don’t throw out your hair! We will make elegant hair pieces for you!”

The surplus in human hair in Winnipeg that year also helped to fuel the creation of theatrical wigs that Icelanders used in large scale spectacles. In 1927 community

---

351 Jane Doe “How to Keep that Young Look,” *Manitoba Free Press* (Stories Section) January 19, 1924, 11.
352 “Fleygðu ekki burtu hárinu sem kemist af þér,” (Don’t throw out your hair) (advertisement) *Heimskringla* February 6, 1924, 5.
costumers used long Norse-style wigs and beards for each of the sixty costumed men that rode in their award-winning mobile Áþingi float for Winnipeg’s Diamond Jubilee parade (Figure 3.9).

Though Sigrún Lindal’s cut was not out of step with the majority of women in Winnipeg that year, the thought of a short-haired Fjallkona was a reprehensible one for may community members. Members of the Íslendingadagur planning committee in Hnausa, Manitoba officially voiced their protest at a meeting that summer and sent their concerns to Heimskringla. “At the close of the meeting there was a protest resolution passed regarding the Fjallkona reproaching her castration by cutting her hair,” reported one present at the discussion. The members agreed that “her beauty and nobility will be reduced if it doesn’t get to her waistline.” Heimskringla later printed a protest ríma (four stanza poem), on the same subject.

The brides are bobbing their hair,                      Hárið bobba” brúðulrnar
Robbing themselves of their beauty,                    Beauty "robba" sína
Greedy ones are boasting about it,                     Af því grobba gírugar
Making themselves terribly fancy.                     Gera sig "obboð" fina.354

The ríma was the first of many jokes and assaults against what Editor Jón Bildfell referred to as a “nationwide epidemic of bald women.” “Combs are for the hair as ploughs are for the earth,” he argued; hair was a symbol of cultural cultivation and its loss represented the destruction of ancient cultural values by modern fashion and the follies of “fashion blind and unmarried” women who wanted to work outside of the home.355 The gender-bending haircuts of working women were causing mass-confusion in the Icelandic community, he wrote. Icelandic grandfathers struggled to understand why all of these “pretty girls [were] sitting with their sweaty, hairless, baldheads working in their futuristic offices.” Heimskringla warned women that such styles threatened to turn them into men in some of the most unappealing ways, and

---

353 “Íslendingadagsnefndafundur að Árborg” (Icelandic Day Planning Meeting in Arbog) Heimskringla June 11, 1924, 1.
published the findings of one German doctor who suggested that the haircut caused beard growth in women and their female offspring.\textsuperscript{357}

The bald women epidemic of 1924 shaped Lindal’s performance at the Icelandic Festival that year. Though she retained a copy of the portrait of her initial short-haired version of the Fjallkona, she agreed to appear with a wig in her public appearances. Portraits of Lindal in costume in \textit{Heimskringla} and Lögberg created a more sedate copy of the 1866 engraving of the independence symbol. In these photographs she sits in costume with her eyes lowered while an unconvincing wig of long blond hair sits uneasily over her own hair (Figure 3.10). Lindal’s initial vision of a bolder, shot-haired Fjallkona speaks to the experimental nature of constructing a physical representation of the symbol in 1924. Despite alterations to her presentation, broader dissatisfaction with this version of the Fjallkona is evident in the use of a more sedate all black costume the following year, and later, the decision to only nominate older, more “matronly” candidates. Young women could still participate in the pageantry as a subordinate attendant to an older Fjallkona in the role of “Miss America” or “Miss Canada.” This shift confirms Brydon’s argument that this female figure was an inherently conservative one that did not elevate women to a position of leadership, but rather objectifies them as nameless vessels of a national spirit.

The spectacle does, however, reflect contests over gender, ethnicity, and representation within the community. In a recent and particularly graphic example of such contests over ethnic heritage, a photograph of a Black woman dressed in the historic Fjallkona costume, both in the past and present a gendered marker of White Icelandic, provoked a racist backlash when it appeared on a 2004 cover of \textit{The Reykjavík Grapevine} (Figure 3.11).\textsuperscript{358} \textit{The Grapevine} was inundated with letters from Icelanders, international White-supremacist organizations, and even a disappointed American tourist who came to Iceland to “engage in social and cultural activities [that are] Icelandic/Norse and not African.”\textsuperscript{359} Though some Icelanders applauded the cover image, others protested, including one anonymous person who wrote “you ought to be ashamed

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{357} “Fróðleikur og forvitni,” (Knowledge and curiosity) \textit{Heimskringla} October 22, 1924, 1.
\item \textsuperscript{358} “Independent Women,” \textit{The Reykjavík Grapevine} 2.2 June 11, 2004, cover.
\item \textsuperscript{359} G. Pomrenke (Virginia USA) to \textit{The Reykjavík Grapevine} as reprinted in “Letters”, \textit{The Reykjavík Grapevine} 2.3 25 June 2004, 4.
\end{itemize}
of yourself, lending the national costume to a negress. You won’t make the same mistake twice.”

In addition to Norse imagery, the Fjallkona was one of the most prominent, popular, and easily recognizable public symbols of the Icelandic-Canadian community, as well as Icelandic sovereignty, culture, and national character on the eve of the Second World War. Although the Fjallkona served as an expression of the increasing community conservatism and anglicization, neither guaranteed the Icelandic community political or cultural acceptance during wartime. Ethnic communities in Western Canada were subject to a variety of responses to political developments and military campaigns overseas, depending on the rapidly changing European political map. For some ethnic communities, this meant sudden ruptures between previously accepted family, cultural, and national identities. As fears of war and invasion grew, so too did intolerance of non-Anglo language, food, names, and loyalties, particularly those that strayed beyond Allied lines. Ethnic organizations that had enjoyed a brief reprieve from negative public opinion during the interwar years in Manitoba once again disbanded or closed for the duration of the war. The changing climate affected Canadians who had migrated from countries that had since become part of Axis forces after 1939, including Italian, Hungarian, and German Canadians. Wartime pressure led to the dissolution of ethnic spectacles and campaigns more broadly. Even Anglo-led groups such as the Manitoba Handicrafts Guild, closed their ethnic branches. As president Mary McDonald announced to the guild shortly before the wartime closure of ethnic sub-guilds, “we’ll meet from now on as Canadians, not as nationalities.”

This changing European climate would also affect Icelandic-Canadian ethnic expression and raise concerns within Canadian officialdom. Canadian officials were not simply concerned with the political and military threat of Axis nationalisms on Canadian soil, but with any form of European nationalism not explicitly and unquestionably anchored to the Allied cause. This initially included Icelandic nationalism. Firmly embedded within Icelandic-Canadian culture, Icelandic nationalism was initially a source of concern for Canadian officials, particularly in light of that country’s declaration of neutrality and the presence of suspicious German activity there in

---

361 Mary McLeod, Speech to the Manitoba Handicrafts Guild, 1939, as quoted in Dot From, The History of the Manitoba Crafts Guild (Winnipeg: Manitoba Crafts Museum and Library 2001), 47.
the months and years leading up to the Allied occupation of 1940. The Canadian media began reporting on the German activity in Iceland early in 1939. Large teams of German scientists visiting the country, flights, and visiting personnel signalled the start of a strategic military tug of war over the island. Already a strategically significant country in terms of northern shipping routes, Iceland, feared North American politicians, military leaders, and journalists, could potentially act as a base for German aerial assaults against Canada and the US. “It would be easy for Germany to establish bases for gas, oil, and bombs in Greenland, Iceland and along the Arctic coast,” warned Lieut.-Colonel George A. Drew, Ontario Conservative leader in an address to the Canadian Club on January 25, 1939. “These bases [would be] within striking distance of such vulnerable points as New York, Chicago, Pittsburgh and Detroit.”362 Six months prior to Canada’s declaration of war, Mackenzie King similarly informed his caucus of the seriousness of a potential Nazi occupation of Iceland in March 1939.

I spoke of Germany demanding an air-base at Iceland, and how near that was-- between that paraphernalia of war and Canadian shores. I asked if it were not a fact, if London were shelled tomorrow, our own ships in all parts would not be shelled as well, with probability of immediate attacks on the St. Lawrence.363

As Winston Churchill noted, “whoever possesses Iceland holds a pistol firmly pointed at England, America, and Canada.”364

Canadian fears of a Nazi invasion of Iceland increased following the German invasion of Denmark, Iceland’s colonial ruler of 400 years, on April 9, 1940. Although Allied nations saw the invasion as a display of seemingly unstoppable Nazi military expansion that year, Icelandic nationalists on both sides of the ocean saw the invasion as a crucial opportunity to strike at Danish colonial claims. Following the severance of communication with Denmark, the Alþingi, Iceland’s parliament, abruptly freed itself from the authority of the Danish King on April 10, 1940.

Prior to the invasion of Denmark, British and Canadian officials had been concerned that nationalists would pursue independence through a Nazi alliance. With the invasion and

subsequent declaration of independence and neutrality in April 1940, (albeit free from Nazi support) the Allied forces now also feared that the island nation’s lack of a powerful ally or its own standing military meant that it would quickly succumb to German invasion.\textsuperscript{365} Publically, however, Iceland angrily rejected unwelcome overtures from both Nazi and Allied forces, firing diplomatic condemnations at Allied and Axis nations that infringed on their territory and airspace. Despite its assertions of neutrality and sovereignty, however, a unit of 746 British marines landed in Reykjavík harbour one month following the invasion of Denmark, on May 10, 1940.

Icelandic Canadians eagerly kept informed of the events that followed. (There were also plans to raise a Icelandic Canadian volunteer contingent though it never materialized.) At the request of the British military, Canadian forces accepted responsibility for the island in June 1940, though Mackenzie King noted that it was “quite clear that we are being expected to do much more than we properly can.”\textsuperscript{366} Some Canadian troops stationed in Iceland expressed dissatisfaction with their Icelandic posts, due to both the reported hostility of Icelanders and the lack of military action there.\textsuperscript{367} While British and Canadian forces did not meet with organized resistance from the state or civilians, Donald Bittner writes that Icelanders occasionally clashed with soldiers and officials in minor episodes in and around the capital, Reykjavík. Icelanders responded with informal acts of hostility over issues such as the killing and theft of livestock and the sexual harassment of women through small tokens of resistance, such heckling or spitting in the faces of troops.\textsuperscript{368}

While the Icelandic state had, according to Bittner, tacitly accepted the Allied occupation, Anglo-Icelandic relations reached a critical point when British forces arrested and deported the editorial staff of the \textit{Pjöðvilljinn} (The People’s Voice) in April 1941. Published by Kommúnistaflokkssins Íslands (the Communist Party of Iceland) since 1936, the paper quickly became one of the most inflammatory Icelandic newspapers in its critiques of the Allied occupation. The paper’s anti-occupation editorials spread fear about a permanent foreign military

\textsuperscript{366} King, \textit{Diaries}, June 14, 1940, 6.
\textsuperscript{368} Bittner, \textit{The Lion and the White Falcon}, 95.
presence and also published allegations of troop misconduct, including reports of rape and sexual impropriety and destruction of property. According to Bittner, other Icelandic newspapers had formed a gentlemen’s agreement with Allied administrators and avoided open critiques of the occupation.\textsuperscript{369} Dýóðvílljinn, with its limited distribution, was initially ignored by Allied officials until January 1941, when its staff leafleted British troops to prevent them from scabbing during a worker’s strike. Bittner reports that when news reached British Commander Smith that Dýóðvílljinn staff were organizing a rally at the aerodrome, he wrote “editorial staff has brains and ability and should not be left longer at large.”\textsuperscript{370} On April 27, 1941, without the permission of the Icelandic government, British officials arrested and deported the editorial staff, among them an elected member of the Alþingi, Einar Olgeirsson. These deportations became one of one of the most unpopular moves ever made by the British during their time in Iceland. The Alþingi openly condemned the move and successfully pushed for the return of the deportees during Anglo-Icelandic negotiations in July 1941, though the Icelandic-Canadian community (which had few direct links to the paper and the Alþingi) remained relatively silent on the issue.

While many Icelanders accepted the necessity of the Allied occupation, few openly embraced the presence of foreign troops in Iceland. Reports of the public’s open or barely-concealed hostility towards Allied personnel in Iceland reached Icelandic Canadians through the Icelandic and English language media, as well as through reports sent by family members. Initially, Canadian intelligence regarding the occupation expressed concern about the threat posed by Icelandic nationalists and their relatives in Canada in cultivating anti-occupation and anti-Allied sentiment. On July 30, 1940, J.B. Skaptason, the editor of the conservative Icelandic-Canadian paper Heimskringla, wrote to G.H. Lash, the Director of Public Information, to draw his attention to the issue of Icelandic resentment of the occupation. The occupation, he wrote “has given rise to mixed feelings, both here and at home, judging by papers that have lately arrived from the old country.”\textsuperscript{371} Skaptason told Lash that Heimskringla “had considerable circulation in Iceland” and offered to publish additional information provided by the government to justify the occupation as a means “to cultivate better feelings and even friendship and co-

\textsuperscript{369} Bittner, The Lion and the White Falcon, 103.
\textsuperscript{370} Bittner, The Lion and the White Falcon, 104-5.
operation from our people on both sides of the ocean.”372 Skaptason’s report of “mixed feelings” alarmed Lash who forwarded the letter to O.D. Skelton, head of the Department of External Affairs. Lash and Skelton’s reaction to this letter from the community’s conservative paper illustrates their initial concern with conservative nationalists, rather than radicals. While forces in Iceland saw left wing organizations and organs, such as Pjóðviljinn, as the main opponents to the occupation, Canadian officials understood that the paper had little to no circulation in Canada and that no Icelandic-Canadian organizations had openly criticized the occupation. Instead, officials and pro-occupation community leaders were concerned with the centrality of ending foreign rule to Icelandic nationalism. Would Icelandic Canadians resent the Allied infringement of Icelandic sovereignty?

In his letter regarding Skaptason’s comments, Lash suggested that Skelton notify the Prime Minister regarding the apparent growth of “mixed feelings” in Iceland and Canada. Instead, Skelton turned to the King cabinet’s chief informal advisor on Icelandic affairs, Joseph T. Thorson, an Icelandic-Canadian MP from Winnipeg. While Canadian troops were stationed in Iceland, King and his cabinet frequently relied on Thorson for insight into Icelandic Anglo relations and the Icelandic-Canadian political climate. Born to an Icelandic migrant family living in Winnipeg, Thorson was both a Rhodes Scholar and a veteran of the First World War who also served as the first dean of the Faculty of Law at the University of Manitoba from 1921-1926. His own illustrious political and legal career was rivalled by his aforementioned brother Charlie’s work as an animator first for Disney on the development of major characters such as Snow White and Bugs Bunny. Joseph Thorson was one of many descendants of Icelandic migrants to pursue a career in electoral politics as the community attained wealth and middle-class respectability into the twentieth century. The community’s voracious, albeit divisive, devotion to education and politics fuelled the development of numerous political careers, including the community’s first MLA, Sigtryggur Jónasson (Liberal) in 1896, the first non-Anglo woman elected to the Manitoba Legislature, Salome Halldorson (Social Credit) in 1936, and prominent CCF and NDP organizer, Magnús Eliason. Unlike Thorson, however, most had only enjoyed success on the provincial level, most often as representatives of Icelandic communities and neighbourhoods such as the ridings of St. George, Gimli and Winnipeg’s West End. King named Thorson Minister of

372 Skaptason to G.H. Lash, 1.
National War Services in June 1941, following his term as committee chairman of a special Commons committee on war expenditures designed to minimize wastage. Thorson’s appointment surprised members of King’s own party, as well as the Canadian media. King noted in his diary that when he announced the appointment of this previously low profile MP it came as a surprise as Thorson’s name had not been prominently mentioned. However, King “had much in mind Thorson’s appointment being something that would please those of foreign extraction in the country,” and strengthen their support for the war effort.\(^\text{373}\) Thorson also served on the board of the NFB and as the head of wartime censorship as part of his broader role in “supporting [King] against tendencies which were perhaps too assertive in times of war.”\(^\text{374}\)

When Skelton requested that the Minister of War Services “kindly advise on the matter” of potential political obstacles to the occupation that Icelandic Canadians might present, Thorson completely dismissed the notion. “I have not found any trace of resentment among Canadians of Icelandic origin and I feel quite sure that they perfectly understand the purpose of the occupation,” he wrote. “There is no need of any statement explaining the reasons or purpose of the occupation in Iceland.”\(^\text{375}\) Thorson was largely correct. Many Icelandic Canadians appear to have accepted the inevitability of the conflict and the occupation and protesters such as Salome Halldorson enjoyed limited support during the early days of the war. In the 1941 provincial election she lost her seat in the legislature, due largely to her central role in organizing a vote of non-confidence in the wartime administration. Political pragmatism, bred by the threat of Nazi aggression even transformed dedicated pacifists like Salverson. She wrote extensively in support of the Second World War as editor of the newly formed all-English magazine, *The Icelandic Canadian*. The magazine and its wartime coverage became a new bastion of Canadian nationalism in the community whose Canadian-focused content was endorsed by King, Thorson, and Watson Kirkconnell. In addition to Salverson’s work for the war effort, seasoned radical Siggi Júl co-authored an Icelandic language manual for the Canadian Legion War Services following the departure of Canadian troops for Iceland with Löberg editor Einar P. Jónsson. *Icelandic for Soldiers* provided troops with the basic language skills required to find washrooms, buy beer, cigarettes, and groceries, and communicate with barbers, dentists, and doctors. The

\(^{373}\) King, *Diaries*, June 11, 1941, 2.

\(^{374}\) King, *Diaries*, June 11, 1941, 2.

manual’s section “The Army” also envisioned military collaboration with a hypothetical Icelandic army in engagements against German forces by including translations for phrases such as “okkur er skipað að vera í sambandi við íslenska herinn” or “our orders are to remain in contact with the Icelandic troops.”

Despite the strength of the independence movement in Canada, the reports of Nazi intentions to establish an Icelandic airbase for assaults against North America fuelled the acceptance of an occupation that Icelandic Canadians believed was crucial to protecting the sovereignty of both nations. Though they were aware of protest and widespread resentment towards the occupiers overseas, the Icelandic-Canadian media only broadcast pro-Allied reports and editorials that supported the occupation, including biographies of Icelandic-Canadian service personnel. Thorson and other community leaders also frequently insisted that Iceland itself had accepted the necessity of the occupation and that “there may have been some [initial] feeling of resentment in Iceland but my information is that this feeling has passed.”

The newly created *Icelandic Canadian Magazine* reproduced an article written by a captain with the British occupying forces for the *Civil Service Review of Ottawa* in 1944, illustrating Iceland’s gradual acceptance of Allied forces there. Entitled “Breaking the Ice in Iceland,” Singleton Gates wrote that during the invasion “there was no hostility. The only angry person was the German consul purpling with rage while his wife was burning secret documents in the bath.”

The “perfect understanding” and approval of the occupation described by Thorson, however, were based largely on the frequent assertions that the Allied occupation of their country “implies no threat to their national independence…and that they will withdraw as soon as such withdrawal is possible.” The promise of withdrawal was the central issue in securing latent and explicit consent to the occupation for Icelanders abroad and at home. Like other Icelandic nationalists in Canada, Thorson saw little contradiction between the sovereignty and the wartime occupation of Iceland. In a letter to King he wrote, “I am sure that the people of Iceland fully appreciate that the occupation was necessary and are deeply thankful that it has

been a British and Canadian occupation rather than German... and that [Allied forces] will withdraw as soon as possible.” In addition to preventing a Nazi invasion, Thorson wrote that the occupation as an opportunity for Iceland to pursue “a closer relationship between Iceland and the British Commonwealth” and a well-positioned Icelandic-Canadian business community in pursuit of “the severance of the relations between Iceland and Denmark.”

Despite Thorson’s assurances of friendly relations and Icelandic appreciation, correspondence between Canadian and British forces illustrate the seriousness of popular Icelandic hostility to the occupation. The High Commissioner for Canada in Great Britain telegraphed the Secretary of State for External Affairs in London over two months after the arrival of troops with a warning.

Local and political situation is a delicate one and you should exercise great tact and consideration with local authorities accordingly. You should do your utmost, in collaboration with His Majesty’s Minister, to cultivate friendly relations with local authorities... and community at large.

According to Bittner, the extent of armed resistance to the Anglo-Canadian occupation involved a drunken city official who attempted to run down an Allied soldier with his horse. There was little threat of violent responses to the occupation, but Thorson and Allied military leaders were concerned with more subtle forms of resistance that would affect the strength of the forces stationed there and damage the international public image of the occupation. Beyond the arrest of the editorial staff of Pjóðvilljin, officials were also not necessarily concerned with the threat of Nazi agitators or radicals, but with the muted but palpable hostility of the Icelandic public. As Singleton Gates conceded, “resentment and scorn by the Icelanders was evident, and coldness and disdain facially expressed... [they] had for generations known no soldiers, seen no weapons of war, [and] wanted neither.”

Larger English language media reports of the occupation also referenced the “coldness” of Icelanders towards Allied soldiers. In January 1941, TIME magazine published an article called “Iceland: A Hard Life,” and wrote that reception of Canadian soldiers “by the natives was

---

380 J.T. Thorson to Mackenzie King, March 18, 1941.
382 Bittner, The Lion and the White Falcon, 96.
anything but warm.”\textsuperscript{384} Much to the chagrin of the Icelandic-Canadian community, the article’s report of the occupation, ignorance of Icelandic history, and poor impression of the Icelandic public created a backlash from an array of Icelandic representatives from both sides of the ocean. In addition to slights against the nation’s cultural and historical significance, \textit{TIME} announced that the uncordiality of Icelanders was a thin veil for widespread Nazi sympathy and that their resistance to the occupation. Joseph Goebbels’ brother, reported the magazine, had recently vacationed in Iceland and the hostility of Icelanders “was the result of patiently spread German propaganda to the effect that Iceland and Germany were brother states.”

\textit{TIME}’s chief sources for the article were “16 unpoetical Canadian soldiers, who, after a stint in Iceland, had deteriorated to Class E, unfit for active service (mostly stomach ulcers).” They reported that restrictions on food, hospitality and female companionship made their stay in Iceland unbearable. They complained of lack of adequate food, specifically sources of protein that met Anglo standards of nutrition and taste. “When the soldiers bought eggs, they had to be watched as they had to pay $1.20 a dozen,” reported \textit{TIME}, “and then the Icelandic grocers had to be watched as they would only put ten in a bag.” Soldiers also wanted for “proper” meat but were restricted to the “narrow” diet of Icelanders in which “mutton appeared in nearly every dish, stewed, boiled, broiled, roasted, fried.”\textsuperscript{385}

\textit{TIME}’s reference to the deterioration and eventual dismissal of these soldiers drew from the wartime vision of food as a weapon. Soldier nutrition was a rallying point for wartime support campaigns at home, motivating Canadian and American civilians alike to reduce their own meat and dairy consumption to enrich the diet of fighting forces. In the 1941 film, \textit{Food: Weapon of Conquest}, the NFB linked a healthy diet to the war effort and the strength of soldiers, pilots and marines. This focus on food and nutrition as weapons meant that deliberately withholding food from soldiers was a serious and unsettling threat to the Allied cause and a form of resistance capable of endangering soldier bodies and weakening the armed forces. As the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) announced in \textit{Food: Weapon of Conquest}:

The modern fighting man deserves a menu twice as high in food value as that of a civilian. Fresh meat, fresh vegetables, dairy produce, fruit and eggs: all the very foods

\textsuperscript{385} “Iceland: A Hard Life,” 23.
that make for energy and health. In World War Two, as in Napoleon’s time, a nation
marches on its stomach.\footnote{Stuart Legg, \textit{Food, Weapon of Conquest} (film) (Ottawa: National Film Board, 1941.)}

In response to the blame for poor diet of soldiers, Icelandic officials wrote to \textit{TIME} and explained that it was the occupying forces responsibility to feed and clothe their forces, that eggs in Iceland were sold by the weight, not the dozen, and that Iceland was also encountering a food shortage during the occupation.\footnote{Thor Thors to editor of \textit{TIME}, January 14, 1941. Letter, as reprinted in Lögberg January 30, 1941, 3.} Yet these references to depravation and starvation also related directly to a larger conflict between Icelanders and their occupiers over the sexualized connotations of hospitality. \textit{TIME} wrote that food restrictions entailed both nutritional and social depravation particularly since “soldiers were not admitted to Icelandic homes.” This reported refusal to allow soldiers into Icelandic private life was also an important component of what \textit{TIME} termed “the soldier’s greatest problem: the stubborn womankind of Iceland.” \textit{TIME}’s Canadian informants lamented their poor luck with Icelandic women, noting that a few women might accept invitations to dance, “but they would not be escorted home by them.” According to the magazine, soldiers having learned the Icelandic word \textit{stúlka} (girl) encountered only silence from women on the street when they called out “hi stulka!” The soldiers attributed the unresponsiveness of Icelandic women to taboos against dating foreign men. “Any girl indiscreet enough to accept an Englishman,” they reported, “would have all her hair shaved off like Maria in \textit{For Whom the Bell Tolls}.”\footnote{“Iceland: A Hard Life,” 63.}

While most letters of response denied such forms of retaliation, sexual liaisons and other forms of interaction between soldiers and Icelandic women were indeed a source of concern for many in Iceland. As an informant in Herdís Helgadóttir’s history of Iceland the 1940s recalled, “any girls seen talking to soldiers, even if they were just asking the way... were ‘Englishmen’s whores.’”\footnote{Herdís Helgadóttir, \textit{Úr fjötrum. Íslenskar konur og erlendur hér} (Out of chains: Icelandic women and Foreigners in Iceland) Reykjavík: Mál og Menning, 2001), 185-6, as translated and reproduced by Minjasafn Reykjavikur (The Reykjavik Museum), 2005. Available online at \url{www.Fjallkonan.is/en/1944.htm} Accessed October 1, 2009.} Another woman remembered that:

a married women in the house next door took in soldiers’ washing... that meant that soldiers were seen on our street more than before, and some of the neighbours went on about how scandalous it was for a respectable married women to carry on in such an
unpatriotic manner. She gave it up after a few weeks. I heard that her husband had forbidden her to earn money that way…\textsuperscript{390}

The focus on women’s sexuality during the occupation reveals a dual condemnation of the Allied occupation and the Icelandic women who ignored and transcended patriotic lines with their bodies. In a letter intercepted by the Canadian postal censorship agency, “J.S. Thorarensen” of Akureyri in Iceland described the situation to his Canadian son:

You see here all kind of nations- Yankees, Negroes, Poles, Australians, Mulattoes and God knows what nation you not see. (sic) And them girls like them all and become mothers about 17 years of age and I don’t think I will be going to my grave before I meet a white or black soldier boy born in Iceland…\textsuperscript{391}

Young Icelandic women enjoyed the company of Allied soldiers for a variety of reasons, including access and exposure to Western goods, culture, and music. A one woman recalled, officers’ dances were enjoyable and Allied military personnel sometimes provided better company than Icelandic men (Figure 3.12).

Then we girls from work went to an Officers’ Dance, to which we were invited by an Icelandic who worked for them as an interpreter. He got blind drunk, and we left him there and went home, but there was no sign of drunkenness among the soldiers. I’d never been to such an elegant dance, and the soldiers were so polite and entertaining.\textsuperscript{392}

While some women married their Allied suitors, sexual liaisons also led to an increase in illegitimate births and the establishment of a work school in Borgarfjöður for “wayward” girls who had been associating with soldiers.\textsuperscript{393} Their perceived failure to reject Allied soldiers and the corresponding surplus of illegitimate babies became widely known as Ástandið or “The Situation.” Widespread concern with morality and control over Icelandic women’s reproduction informed formal and informal campaigns designed to regulate young women’s leisure time and habits. Icelandic women, feared social reformers and civic officials, would be too easily swayed by Western goods, music and manners.

While Icelandic moral regulators may have been concerned with too much hospitality on the part of young women, their Canadian counterparts attempted to contain and combat the

\textsuperscript{390} Helgadóttir, Úr fjöðrum, 121-1.
\textsuperscript{392} Helgadóttir, Úr fjöðrum, 173-4.
\textsuperscript{393} Helgadóttir, Úr fjöðrum, 174.
image of too little. The many letters submitted to the editor of *TIME*, as well as Icelandic language letters printed in *Lögberg* and *Heimskringla*, frequently targeted the “sixteen sour-stomached soldiers” responsible for the report, particularly regarding their ill-fated advances towards Icelandic women. Revered V.J. Eylands, head of the Icelandic National League, asked: “Where in all the civilized world would a young lady be expected to respond to a: ‘Hi stúlka’ yelled at her on a street corner by a total stranger? It was hardly surprising that they were luckless in love,” he said in references to *TIME*’s informants. “There must have been something ‘sour’ about them besides their stomachs!”394 Thorson and other political leaders were concerned about the report and the potential impact of a negative public image of the occupation. Thor Thors, consul general to the United States accused *TIME* of damaging the war effort, arguing that “misunderstandings and unfriendly comments such as in this case on the part of the British troops, is perhaps the only, and certainly the most effective German propaganda we experience in Iceland.”395 Eylands wrote to both Prime Minister King and Thorson to request that King respond directly to the article and that *TIME* be barred from Canada.396 King responded such requests by contacting Thorson. While forwarding him a letter of complaint from arctic explorer Vilhjálmur Stephansson, he asked Thorson for advice and information on the situation, but expressed reluctance to comment publically on the “scurrilous report.”397 Thorson hoped that Thor Thors’s letter, free of any connections to the Canadian state, would act as the chief rebuttal to the article.398 Unfortunately, *TIME* refused to print the letter since “the dozen or so Iceland (sic) descendants who have felt it necessary to send us written complaints would only complain all over again, and the discussion of this case would be endlessly prolonged.”399

While Thorson may have had little luck intervening in the work of American journalists, as the head of National War Services and board member of the NFB, he employed popular mediums to protect the Canadian political, military and economic interests invested in the occupation. In the early days of the occupation he initiated a film project with the NFB to create an image of Anglo-Icelandic compatibility and Icelandic-Canadian loyalty. Similar to other NFB

394 V.J. Eylands to *TIME*, as reprinted in *Lögberg* 16 January 1941, 4-5, 4.
395 Thors to *TIME*, 3.
wartime films such as *Polish Dance, Ukrainian Dance*, and *Ukrainian Winter Holidays*, *Iceland on the Prairies* used images of Canadian ethnic pluralism featuring ethnic women dancing and making food to promote a friendly image of Canadian cultural diversity and inter-ethnic social and military collaboration on both sides of the ocean (Figure 3.13).

*Iceland on the Prairies* was in editing when the *TIME* article appeared in January 1941. Segments of the film reflected Thorson’s initial desire to establish the community’s loyalty to the Canadian state by broadcasting images of accomplishment and respectability, yet subsequent alterations attempted to address specific accusations made by *TIME* and their soldier informants. The film begins with a look at the arrival of Icelanders in Canada and their establishment of farms and fishing industries in Manitoba. It also attempted to mediate the tensions between Canadian and non-Canadian nationalisms more openly. Several references to Lutheranism reminded Anglo-Canadian viewers that Icelanders were fellow Protestants, an attribute that Anglo-Canadian leaders, such as J.S. Woodsworth, had long appreciated. The religious schism between Lutherans and Unitarians in the community was also completely omitted in favour of a simpler, strife-free image of an all-Lutheran community. The film also initially attempted to downplay the power of Icelandic nationalism through general references to assimilation, history, and tradition and the omission of contemporary connections to Iceland. It created a banal image of Icelandic language forums that were inaccessible to Anglo-Canadians, and like many other non-Allied ethnic newspapers, a potential source of suspicion. The only political content in *Heimskringla* and *Lögberg*, argued the film, was “gossip,” and readers were not especially engaged with the current situation in a country “which many of their readers left when they were young and will probably never see again.” Instead, the film emphasized community members who had made significant political, economic, military and academic contributions to Canada, including professors, (B.J. Branson and Skúli Johnson) Winnipeg

400 Laura Bolton, *Polish Dance* (Film) (Ottawa: NFB, 1944); Laura Bolton, *Ukrainian Dance* (Film) (Ottawa: NFB 1943); James Beveridge, *Ukrainian Winter Holidays* (Film) (Ottawa: NFB 1942.)
401 In a letter to S.J. Jóhannesson, Thorson referenced tension between himself and the production team. “I have been a little critical of some aspects but the film has been done and there is nothing that can be done about it.” Thorson may have been concerned about the film’s inadvertent inclusion images of poverty in the Icelandic community, including footage of an older man arriving in Glenborough wearing torn clothing as well as farm families driving “ancient family cars” with broken windows. J.T. Thorson to Dr. S.J. Jóhannesson, March 7, 1941. Letter, LAC MG 31, E38 Vol. 25, File 8.
The film also focused extensively on food, beginning with an image of a farm family seated around the table on a Saturday evening meal eating “meat from their own cows, eggs from their own chickens and vegetables from their own fields.” The centrality of food to the film reflected the discourse of wartime pluralism and was both a symbol of the community’s exemplary Canadianness as well as their Icelandicness. The inclusion of two separate dinner scenes, however, suggests that the film’s production was also a direct response to reports of scarcity and poor hospitality during the Allied occupation of Iceland. Following the initial farm dinner scene, the film makers return to a decidedly fancier Icelandic table, complete with china and a silver tea set, laid out on a traditional white hardanger table cloth. Rebuking reports of hungry soldiers barred from Icelandic homes and swindled in grocery stores, Iceland on the Prairies created an image of fine food and hospitality as inseparable from Icelandic culture (Figure 3.14). Over a shot of a well-dressed grey-haired Icelandic matriarch serving her dinner guests with teapot in hand, the narrator informed the audience that:

Hospitality is a tradition with the Icelanders. At the head of the table, the lady of the house ensures that her guests are well provided for. Friends are continually invited for meals or coffee and everyone in the community knows his neighbours. Icelanders were “true Canadians now,” he continued, but “they still retain some of the customs of their homeland, [such as] their meals, which are often Icelandic meals.” As the camera slowly panned across the coiffed family members and their guests at the table, the narrator slowly pronounced and explained each dish. Audiences were introduced to “roola-peelsa, rolled, spiced mutton, a bowl of skyr, cheese made from sour cream and sugar, and crisp, hot pannekokkur, the rolled Icelandic pancakes...” To finish the meal, he announced, guests enjoyed “vínarterta and the fruit cake called jólabread (sic).”

The language of food in this film illuminates the parameters of wartime pluralism. The retention of the original Icelandic names for their dishes is paired with a description of those

---

403 Radford Crawley, Iceland on the Prairies (film) (Ottawa: National Film Board of Canada, 1941.)
dishes in English terms. Skyr’s yogurt-based lineage is replaced by “sour cream.” The traditionally cold pönnukökur and its soft texture are transformed by the Canadian preference for “crisp, hot” pancakes. While these translations subtly alter the Icelandic culinary repertoire to match the vocabulary of non-Icelandic viewers, they also reflect a refusal to eliminate certain cultural elements. The film’s narration and inclusion of Icelandic words reflect careful coaching in the proper pronunciation of words, possibly by Thorson, who was invited to be the narrator of the Icelandic-language version of the film. The Icelandic names remain and are made accessible for an English speaking audience, who are also taught how to say “takk fyrir matinn” or “thank you for the food” at the end of their meal. The table is set mostly with desserts in an attempt to appeal to the palate of Canadian viewers who may have not appreciated a broader range of traditional meat dishes, including as hangikjöt (fermented shark) and svið (singed sheep’s head). Yet, in this dessert-heavy context, the decision to keep mutton on the table is significant. As TIME’s 1941 article illustrates, soldiers viewed the centrality of mutton with contempt. Despite the unpopularity of mutton in Anglo-Canadian kitchens, the production team and the hostess featured in the film refused to bow to notions of the meat as unpalatable or substandard by presenting a plate of “rolled spiced mutton” on a gleaming silver tray.

Despite their dedication to the Anglo-Canadian state and the war effort, community leader responses to criticisms of the occupation also reveal a slightly muted sense of resentment towards Anglo-Canadian xenophobia. Colleagues of Thorson’s targeted intolerant behavior from soldiers in the language manual Icelandic for Soldiers. The manual included a section on terms for Anglo dietary staples such as baked potatoes, carrots, apples, roast beef and ham, but Siggi Júl and co-author Einar Jónsson clearly understood food’s potential as a source of tension between occupiers and civilians. On the very first page of the manual they instructed soldiers:

Don’t be prejudiced. Food is quite different in Iceland- try things before you proclaim they are no good... If you don’t understand some of their customs, ask the why and wherefor. Because they do things in another way, don’t become impatient and jump to the conclusion that our own is invariably better.

Try to understand. Reynið að skilja.404

404 Jónsson and Jóhannesson, Icelandic for Soldiers, 5-6.
Similarly, the manual instructed soldiers on decorum and generosity in the bar when socializing with Icelanders. “If an Icelander invites you to have a drink with him don’t argue about who pays the bill,” instructed Júl and Johannesson. In an attempt to foster friendship and good relations between male soldiers and civilians they explained that “in Iceland, the man who invites always pays,” and provided a translation for the phrase “This round is on me!”

Just as these campaigns sought to mediate relations between Icelandic and Canadian men and replace the image of closed doors and icy stares with that of a gracious, matronly hostess and a long dinner table filled with food, so too did they attempt to dispel reports of “cold” or “stubborn” young women. *Iceland on the Prairies* also addressed accusations of Icelandic women being cold by presenting images of friendly but respectable young women laughing and socializing together in groups. Smiling young women in their best clothes and neatly done hair were prominent subjects in the film. The fancier dinner scene featured two close ups of the daughters of the matronly hostess laughing, eating, and talking with guests. Similarly, footage of the Icelandic Festival in Gimli included several shots of groups of young women socializing, fit young women competing at archery, and one close up of a smiling young blonde woman in a sleeveless dress laughing and leaning against a male companion seated beside her (Figure 3.15). These women were frequently the focus of close up shots in the second half of the film, perhaps a reference to the *TIME* article’s impact on the editing process. This cordial, but still relatively restrained image of women reflects Thorson’s vision of military hospitality as intertwined with middle-class respectability and reflected the influence of having an Icelandic Canadian in charge of the film’s production. Thorson and the NFB’s depiction of Icelandic femininity stood in stark contrast to another film created to address the role of women in the occupation’s image problem.

*Iceland* was a feature-length film released by Twentieth Century Fox in 1942 that sought to refurbish the image of the occupation after American forces assumed control of the island in the summer of 1941. The film opened with street scenes of Icelanders celebrating the arrival of American forces with cheering and dancing. In the film the Norwegian Olympic Gold Medal winning figure skater Sonja Henie plays an Icelandic woman named Katina who dumps her frail and homely Icelandic boyfriend, Sverdrup, for a strapping American soldier played by John

---

The plot of the film revolves around wedding proposals, but it is clear throughout that soldiers like Payne’s character aren’t looking for wives. As he explains to Katina, “honey, a soldier’s not looking for a wife, he’s looking for company.”406 Though Katina is disappointed, her portrayal of Icelandic women, her low cut costumes that frequently relied on sheer fabric and short skirts, and the film’s narrative, promotes women’s provision of sexual hospitality for soldiers. As the film’s theme song announced, when it came to soldiers, women shouldn’t “say no” (Figure 3.17):

You can’t say no to a soldier,

a sailor, or a handsome marine.

No, you can’t say no if he wants to dance,

if he’s gonna fight he’s got a right to romance...

Scenes and expensive skating numbers such as the elaborate “Iceland’s Salutation to American Marines” similarly featured a chorus of grateful and enthusiastic “Icelandic” women in American military uniforms. Such images illustrated the desire of film makers to promote the image of warm welcomes for soldiers by occupied peoples around the world. As Henie and the chorus of Icelandic women finish their tribute, they are replaced by a large troupe of skaters in elaborate Chinese and Panamanian costumes who perform in unison for military personnel in the audience. For Twentieth Century Fox and their military funders, Iceland was not a country as much as it was a stage for the performance of a pageant that celebrated American foreign intervention.

News of the release of the Henie film, with its gross cultural inaccuracies and references to “Eskimo love rituals,” was met with disgust in Iceland. Icelandic journalists, who read about the film in the magazine Modern Screen, lambasted the release and accused film makers of “total ignorance and recklessness.”407 Lögberg and Heimskringla responded similarly to the film’s almost total lack of knowledge of Iceland’s geography, population, and culture and its construction of a snowy, “ridiculous” land that was Iceland “in name only.”408

---

406 *Iceland* (Film) Directed by H. Bruce Humberstone, (Los Angeles: Twentieth Century Fox, 1942.)
407 “Faránleg kvikmynd, sem er látin gerast í Reykjavík,” (Ridiculous film supposed to be set in Reykjavik) *Morgunbláðið* September 19, 1942.
408 “Faránleg kvikmynd, sem er látin gerast í Reykjavík,” *Heimskringla* December 9, 1942, 8.
decided not to screen the film in Iceland. In contrast, Iceland on the Prairies was released in the early summer of 1941 and screened in both Canada and Iceland. Joseph Thorson did the narration on the Icelandic version and it was, at least publicly, well-received by Icelanders. The Prime Minister of Iceland expressed his thanks to the Canadian government for the Icelandic version he received that and commented that the film’s distribution would “bring closer together the kinsmen of Icelandic birth and origin and to strengthen the ties which it is hoped that may always exist between Icelanders at home and abroad.”

While this successful release marked the first formal representation of Icelandic culture produced and sanctioned by the Canadian government, it was part of a longer media exchange between the two countries. Icelandic Canadians were an important market for Icelandic books and periodicals and in exchange published their own works in Canada for export to Iceland. By the 1940s, however, anglicization had dramatically shaped transatlantic exchanges of Icelandic language media and literature. Thorson’s role in the creation of the film spoke both to his role as a censor and a diplomat engaged in the regulation of information, as well as his appreciation for the attraction and accessibility of film as a medium. More broadly, Iceland on the Prairies also represented the growing importance of visual media to third and fourth generations of Icelandic Canadians. The decline of Icelandic print culture in Canada corresponded with the rise of multiple new forms of public expressions based on symbolism, spectacle and visual culture. This shift resulted in shared access to new forms of ethnic cultural expression capable of reaching both the older, Icelandic-speaking generations and their anglicized offspring.

As a film, Iceland on the Prairies reflected the dual possibilities and power of visual culture as an instrument that Thorson and other wartime leaders used to both contain internal dissent and diffuse external criticism and suspicion. The film’s ability to transcend language boundaries meant that visual culture and ethnic spectacle were also excellent methods for shaping the external image of the community and its interests. Icelandic language forums were vital to organized radical expression in the community, evident in the campaigns of Siggi Júl, Margret Benediktsson, and Salome Halldorson. In contrast to Benediktsson and Halldorson’s radical redeployment of female Golden Age symbols such as Freyja and Auður in their anarcho-feminist and pacifist campaigns, the regulation of women’s bodies in spectacles of Icelandic

illustrates that this shift also had specific connotations for Icelandic women. As the push to hide Sigrún Lindal’s “bald head” and the broadcasting of images of “friendly women” and female, food-based hospitality in *Iceland on the Prairies* illustrates, male community leaders were as interested in containing political radicalism as they were with women’s aesthetic expression and disruptive sexual behaviour.

The political implications of the shift from the diverse terrain of North American Icelandic-language forums to the anglicized nationalist spectacles of Icelandic culture and heritage after World War One is perhaps nowhere as clear as in wartime transformation of devoted pacifists such as Laura Goodman Salverson and Siggi Júl. In *Iceland on the Prairies* the film makers provide two images of Júl: one of him in a heated discussion with other men over coffee at the Wevel Café, and the second of him hard at work on his Icelandic language booklet for Allied soldiers (Figure 3.18). These images speak to the endurance of political debate and radical expression amongst Icelanders, but in a way that was fundamentally detached from a more organized sense of ethnic identity. Instead, the new crop of formal, Anglo-compatible Icelandic-Canadian organizations and spectacles that emerged with community anglicization established loyalties to North American national interests in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly defence. The community’s transition away from the political and linguistic culture of Icelandic-born and towards the visually-based heritage spectacles that characterized expression from successive anglicized generations did not necessarily reflect their innately conservative character or a longstanding political tradition. Rather, it illuminates the role of visual media in shaping the public identities and political loyalties of Icelandic Canadian-born generations and their offspring, loyalties that were now fundamentally tied to the Anglo-Canadian state.
Chapter Four

Public Spectacles, Private Narratives: Canadian heritage campaigns, maternal trauma, and the rise of the koffort in Icelandic-Canadian popular memory

Icelandic-Canadian ethnic spectacles, from the Fjallkona to wartime images of friendly women and delicious food, projected a certain image of the community that reflected the Icelandic and Canadian nationalisms of male middle- and upper-class leaders. But what did the throngs of Icelanders who attended their parades, screenings, and exhibits think of the images of Icelandic culture and identity set forth by these leaders and the Canadian state more broadly? Did they understand and agree with new official narratives that used women to celebrate community and national achievement? Did these images reflect community members’ experiences, identities, and ideas about the past? How did such spectacles shape local and private commemoration practices? In responding to these questions, this chapter sheds light on a number of significant but hitherto insufficiently explored themes in Icelandic-Canadian commemorative history and popular memory. First, it identifies and analyses both official heritage campaigns and the mobilization of the koffort or immigrant trunk in official Canadian and Icelandic Canadian circles. Second, it examines the ultimately limited impact of such post-Centennial official heritage campaigns on Icelandic-Canadian popular narrative and material culture. A major reason for this limited impact, and the third theme explored in this chapter, is that community members have employed the koffort for their own purposes, that is, designating them as an embodiment of ethnic and familial history through private commemorative practice. An interesting paradox is at play; while the trunks were newly imbued with value on account of these public heritage campaigns after 1967, people themselves have assigned to them an alternative set of different meanings.

Once considered “a worthless box in Canada,” kofforts recently began to appear regularly in Icelandic-Canadian public and private commemoration, that is, since the late 1960s and early 1970s. Visits to Icelandic-Canadian homes across the prairies suggest that these objects have become a popular feature in households, where they often serve as spaces

---

dedicated to the identification and preservation of cultural identity and family memory. This shift represents the endurance of an older, kin-based oral tradition dedicated to reconstructing and retelling family stories of migration. But it must also be understood within the context of migration-centric heritage movements, including the celebration of the federal and provincial centennial anniversaries from 1967 onwards and the implementation of heritage programs following the federal government’s adoption of multiculturalism in 1971. Many neglected kofforts were retrieved by families, community groups, and museums following the development of a series of federally and provincially funded museum displays, films, curricula, and advertising campaigns that used the immigrant trunk as a central motif. Using comparisons to the commemorative spectacles of the 1920s, this chapter argues that the rise of the koffort reveals a compelling shift within popular Icelandic-Canadian material culture commemorative practice that mimics the forms set forth in public heritage campaigns, but contains more complex and challenging private narrative and mnemonic strategies.

As oral history interviews and family reunion publications illustrate, Icelandic Canadians most often use kofforts and other mementos to tell stories that very clearly privilege narratives and symbols of migrant maternal trauma over the Golden Age nationalist symbolism that characterised public heritage spectacles. This chapter contends that the rise of the koffort and other commemorative Icelandic-Canadian material cultural and commemorative practices reveal a blend of Icelandic, Canadian, and transnational elements in post-Centennial popular culture, including the endurance of matrilineal, or female-centred family identities, fatalist narratives of migration, and the alteration of multicultural narratives of redemptive trauma. Studying the use of such objects in the telling of traumatic intergenerational family migration narratives, or intergenerational stories about migration told in private between family and friends, reveals that community members use such objects to engage with, adopt, alter, and reject different facets of heritage spectacles to tell their own stories about the past.

Just as material cultural analysis offers a critical venue for exploring migrant adaptation through clothing, as discussed in chapter one, so too does it offer insight into changes in the construction of historical narratives and identities across time. The role of objects in the construction and commemoration of the past has been a popular subject of scholarship in recent years. As Swyripa notes:
heritage relies heavily on the material as well as the imagined past, its artifacts ranging from embroidered folk costumes in the museum to picturesque ruins, historic buildings and old monuments on the land... [these] are both physical places and places of the mind, the stories the multilayered, sometimes contested narratives and material legacies that immigrant settler people mobilised in both shaping and claiming those places.

Rather than investigating objects as manifestations of past cultures, scholars such as Judy Attfield contend that objects are most usefully employed in the study of how people use objects in the present to make sense of the past. She argues that objects are “wild” and their shifting significance and connotations mean that they frequently escape rigid categorisation. Understanding the messages or philosophies within objects, she argues, should stem from the desires that people place onto the material world, including the search for an unchanging “authenticity”.

Rejecting the notion of autonomous and cohesive presents and pasts, post-structural material cultural scholarship offers a compelling framework that re-imagines the material world as entangled within complex conduits of power. Museum scholarship has been particularly attuned to this relationship. Tracing the history of the museum both as a regulatory institution and one that shapes the subjects that it presents, this scholarship sees all aspects of museum practice and other coordinated material representations of the past as exercises in power. Historians such as Steven Conn, for example, write that institutions such as the American Commercial Museum must be understood as “manifestations of the cultural and intellectual apparatus that made American imperialism possible.”

Jane Becker similarly contends that craft shops established to preserve and market Appalachian craft traditions in the 1930s and 1940s that the “protection” of craft traditions by middle-class middlemen also entailed regulation of these traditions. Ian McKay similarly argues in his analysis of the twentieth-century Nova Scotia craft and tourist industry that hooked rugs and souvenir postcards are not simple representations of historic folk cultures, but are manifestations of liberal anti-modernist projects that objectified
impoverished rural people to satisfy the “intensely individualistic thirst” of cultural planners and tourists.415

As illustrated throughout this project, the expectations of their Anglo neighbours have long shaped of Icelandic spectacles of difference. While North American audiences supported and applauded displays that reinforced their own ideas about the racial and cultural characteristics of Icelanders, including the erroneous performances of “Greenlandic Eskimo” Ólöf Sólvadóttir, they also often demanded that migrants anglicize their public image. The adoption of English names, language, and clothing, meant that Icelandic material culture related to domestic space and private practice endured longer than objects that were more openly visible in public interactions with non-Icelanders. Outward markers of difference were gone or visibly fading fifty years following migration, but private material cultural practices, such as food, knitting, and coffee making, were more likely to retain distinctive Icelandic characteristics. As Carol Hryhorchuck and Agnes Bardal recalled, many Icelandic Canadian children may have worn store-bought Anglo-Canadian style clothing to school and to church in during the first half of the twentieth century, but they often wore Icelandic underwear beneath.416

Icelandic scholars have been attuned to this divide between public spectacles and private culture. Daisy Neijmann cautions that public depictions of Icelandic-Canadian history reinforce the idea of inevitable assimilation by creating an image of Icelandic culture as having “existed with greater authenticity in the past.”417 She argues that heritage planners’ imposition of definitions of what constitutes “distinctive” cultural traditions has simultaneously implied that private practices and beliefs of Icelandic Canadians are insignificant, or “not Icelandic enough.” Their demand for visual and material representations of ethnic identity in multicultural celebrations has prompted Icelandic Canadians to produce what Neijmann sees as anachronistic and artificial symbols of Icelandic-ness.

That which is experienced as being Icelandic is private, largely invisible to outsiders, and not what is publicly expected to be authentically Icelandic…Yet it is exactly the visual and the objectified that multiculturalism expects, as it relies on an

---

415 McKay, Quest of the Folk, xv.
417 Neijmann, The Icelandic Voice, 373.
ossified view of culture, stuck in the time of immigration and does not take into consideration that cultures and identities change with time and circumstances. Yet, the assertion that a contrived public image has been imposed onto a cohesive private culture does not reflect the ways in which popular historical imagination has formed in the community during the second half of the twentieth century. A dual exploration of Icelandic-Canadian popular oral narratives and material culture reveals that community members have appropriated and redeployed nineteenth-century objects and stories in ways that reflect both Icelandic and familial private culture as well as the imagery of post-Centennial heritage spectacles.

Recent developments in material cultural scholarship offer important insights into the relationship between objects and the construction of historical narratives and memory. Such studies ask: how and why are certain historical objects invested with value? How are they deployed in the construction of certain stories about the past? How can objects privilege or conceal histories that disrupt or challenge regimes of “meaningful” experience? Answering these questions requires an investigation into the role of heritage agencies and spectacles in framing popular understandings of the past as well as changing definitions of historically significant objects. The many transactions involved in the “life” of objects more than a century old, including their creation, gifting, sale, and destruction, illuminates shifting historical narratives and notions of value in community life and memory. Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes that these exchanges are vital to understanding changes to the value of objects and the histories they are employed to tell. “Before objects find a final resting place, (either the garbage dump or the museum) they pass through many circuits of exchange,” she argues. “Their value fluctuates with each transaction.”

Koffort value has certainly fluctuated dramatically since migration from Iceland, but little is known about the cultural history of these objects and their place in the homes of Icelandic Canadians. Accessing records of nineteenth-century migrant domestic space and material culture is challenging. Aside from a few scant photographs of carefully prepared, cleaned, and well-furnished upscale migrant homes, there are very few interior photographs of early Icelandic-Canadian homes in the first twenty years after settlement. Surviving artefacts, as well as migrant letters and memoirs offer an important glimpse of these personal spaces. These sources reveal

418 Neijmann, The Icelandic Voice, 373.
419 Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, 259.
that migrants actually brought very little furniture with them from Iceland. Occasionally authors reference the shipment of carved bed boards, but it is clear that the koffort was the only piece of furniture that most migrants brought with them across the Atlantic. Migrants were unable to ship furniture for a variety of reasons, including cargo premiums on transatlantic vessels. Letters from New Iceland also reveal that Icelanders were also concerned that changes in humidity would destroy some of their highly-valued wooden objects. Cracks in Icelandic wooden objects in Canadian museum collections reflect the negative effect of the dry prairie air on objects such as spinning wheels, wooden bowls, and ornamental boxes (Figure 4.1). As Björn Andresson advised Icelanders considering migration to Canada in 1877, “there is little use in bringing wooden vessels as they dry out and become useless.” Yet, he argued, this rule did not apply to kofforts, which were “indispensable” for life in Canada.

Migrants did not simply use kofforts to ship their possessions across the Atlantic. Images of nineteenth-century domestic interiors in Iceland illustrate that kofforts served as both storage and seating there, owing both to the premium on space in many Icelandic turf houses and the relative scarcity of wood on the largely treeless island (Figure 4.2). Icelanders relied almost totally on the use of driftwood for furniture construction, including the boards, luggage, and furniture from shipwrecks that washed onto Icelandic beaches. Most frequently Icelandic carpenters who constructed kofforts for migration used such wood to create vessels in one of two general styles. The first, more ornamental style characterised the kofforts of earlier migrants. This distinctive style incorporated a curved lid and a tapered lower body whose corners were reinforced with ornamental black strips of metal, though some trunks simply mimicked these strips with black paint (Figure 4.3). The second, more utilitarian style employed a more space-efficient, rectangular shape and seldom incorporated ornamentation, aside from a coat of paint (Figure 4.4).

Migrant accounts and signs of wear on the lids of surviving pieces in both styles illustrate that rather than converting to the use of chairs, Icelandic migrants to North America continued to use kofforts as both storage and seating. As Walters writes, “the colourful Icelandic travelling chests that lined the walls were…the favourite resting place in the new home.” She argues that

420 Björn Andresson to his father, 24.

they were also “better risks [than chairs] for they could withstand even those individuals who leaned backward and forward, not to mention sideways...” Though kofforts retained their value as useful pieces of furniture in migrants’ homes, Walters writes that they often became damaged and worn out from continual use.

Even they [kofforts] were becoming the worse for wear, not so much because of that long journey from Iceland, which they had stood fairly well, but because of the present wear and tear and the daily moving from the walls to the table and back at meal time, as well as when coffee was served. Such perpetual motion as they were subjected to in the pioneer’s homes took its toll of even their sturdy frames.422

While Walters’ account suggests that many kofforts were used until they became damaged beyond repair, other sources suggest that their value was affected by generational shifts. Migrants often defined the value of kofforts according to both utility and their connection to now distant social and family relationships. As the story of Elinborg Samuelsdóttir’s koffort suggests, function and emotional significance both defined object value.

All her possessions were in a wooden trunk about 70cm long by 50 by 40… She treasured it and kept it all her life. It sat in the kitchen beside the sewing machine where it served as a seat and to store things to be sewn… It was made of boards about a centimetre in thickness, but wide- and it was painted grey. Though an almost worthless box in Canada it had been a truly great going-away present. It had been made for her by a kindly old man in Burstafell. She knew and appreciated how valuable the wood had been and what labour had gone into shaping it and shaping the hinge and hasp.423

Kofforts and other functional objects from Iceland may have helped to reinforce and remind their original owners of friends, family, and home, but successive generations who never traveled to Iceland or met their kin there, did not necessarily inherit these ties. As a result, family members who inherited kofforts either disposed of them or continued to use them as storage. Though many kofforts were destroyed or discarded by uninterested family members, their sturdy construction and continued usefulness as storage containers meant that they were still more likely to survive across generations than smaller objects such as the skotthúfa or Icelandic language books. Beyond domestic storage, sturdy kofforts were reused for work on Icelandic-Canadians farms. Until around 2003, Charlie Ostertag of Riverton, Manitoba, used a family koffort as a tool chest in his farm machine shed (Figure 4.5). Logan Bjarnason’s family similarly

422 Walters, Modern Sagas, 73.
423 Sivertz, Elinborg, 3.
used theirs as a tool chest which they attached to the back of a threshing machine. They repainted another one and tipped it on one end for use as a cupboard and well-worn stand for their drinking water pail. The koffort was remarkably sturdy, writes Bjarnason, “considering we ten children, in turn, carried and plunked pails of water on it and rummaged inside for whatever was needed, it has weathered very well.”

During the 1930s scholars and community associations, including the Icelandic National League, began the process of cataloguing and collecting artifacts that migrants brought to Canada. This new archival urge coincided with the deaths of many of the original, now elderly migrants during this period, as well as the continual decline of the Icelandic language. Even Anglo-Canadian institutions, such as the Manitoba Handicrafts Guild, sought items for their collections based on the assumption that old-world migrant “treasures in art culture were being lost by want of encouragement.” Most of these collectors, however, focused on accumulating smaller objects that reflected their own definitions of authenticity and cultural-significance. Migration itself had shaped early material culture in the community and objects not intended for labour were often physically smaller, reflecting premiums on space during migration, the poverty of migrants, and the relative scarcity of certain materials, including precious metals, in the homeland. Museum collectors in the 1930s sought out family heirlooms from Iceland that could be used as examples of fine craftsmanship and traditional Icelandic design, including small carved wooden dishes, knitting needle boxes, jewellery, and textiles. Traditional Icelandic spinning wheels and women’s national costumes were some of the physically largest popular symbols of Icelandic culture brought by migrants and, as such, were frequently used in public displays and celebrations. Images of women seated at a spinning wheel wearing Icelandic clothing were popular with Icelanders and non-Icelanders alike and responded to demands for performances of the “pristine” pre-industrial folk cultures from heritage organizers (Figure 4.6). As McKay and Stewart Henderson have argued in their work on folk and handicraft spectacles, such images were encouraged by Anglo-Canadian heritage organizers who were anxious that “racial groups [were] failing to interact with one another and engage with a cohesive national

425 “Seytjánda ársþing þjóðráðnafelagsins,” (Seventeenth annual meeting of the Icelandic National League,) Lögberg April 16, 1936, 2.
426 “Picturesque Scene Marks First Western Canadian Handicrafts Exhibition," Manitoba Free Press June 20, 1928, 4.
identity [and that] the essential identities, the very *meanings* of each group, were disintegrating through the relentless progress of modernity.” Images such as Icelandic women at the spinning wheel, then, were part of a larger nationalist and anti-modernist project that tried to stem both anti-migrant sentiment and the decline of traditional modes of production in industrialised Canada.

In spite of this desire to capture and preserve the “dying” culture and endangered artifacts of Icelanders, kofforts were largely excluded from collections and displays. Icelandic-themed floats and booths became regular fixtures at Manitoba celebrations but community members carefully avoided any association with the lowly image of the “immigrant.” Instead, Icelandic-Canadian floats, tableaus, and exhibits focused on log cabins, schooners, and spinning wheels to cast early Icelandic arrivals in Canada as pre-industrial “pioneers” who could claim a place within the picturesque process of nation building, in addition to the Vinland imagery described in the previous chapter. In 1925 community members celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of settlement in New Iceland by reconstructing a “pioneer cabin” that they filled with objects such as spinning wheels, an old stove, and even surviving pioneers such as Sigtryggur Jónasson (Figure 4.7). These visions of the past fit well into the commemoration of the arrival of earlier, pre-industrial British settlers in Canada, including the eighteenth-century Loyalists and the early nineteenth-century Selkirk settlers. In recasting themselves as pioneers, Icelanders hoped to detach themselves from the stigma of “mass-migration,” including its connection to the community’s smallpox epidemic, through the construction of a largely rural, sparsely populated, and “rustic” image of arrival and settlement. As Swyripa argues, “where once the pioneers had been the actors – asserting their presence and imposing order on the wilderness - they now became objects, albeit much revered and respected objects, furthering the agenda of ethno-religious communities acting in their name and profiting from the foundations they laid.”

Spectacles such as the construction of the Pioneer Cabin at Gimli were locally produced, but community heritage campaigns were clearly shaped by the recommendations and expectations of Anglo-Canadian heritage organizers. In their instructional booklet for parade planners, the federal government’s Diamond Jubilee pageant guidebook recommend that local

---

spectacles should focus in particular on “those in the West who took up land in the picturesque manner of the ox-train and the prairie-schooner.” This generalized image of migration was part of a larger strategy to foster a sense of national identity and mediate regional differences. As Robert Cupido notes in his history of the Diamond Jubilee, organizers felt that “a ‘vigorous, virile patriotism’ could only be founded on a common stock of memories and traditions.” In keeping with the boon in anti-migration sentiment during the 1920s, these depictions of more picturesque forms of transport and life were eagerly reproduced in float and tableau form, but signs of mass-migration and international steamships loaded with the “foreign born” were omitted. Not surprisingly then, the immigrant trunk, with its affiliations with steamships and crowded urban train stations, possessed little to no cultural value for heritage organizers and collectors during the first half of the twentieth century.

Pre-industrial images of the folk similarly characterised the federal centennial fifty years later, although non-Anglo migrants and culture arguably occupied a more important place within the images of history set forth during the 1967 celebrations. The identification, collection, and re-dissemination of Euro-Canadian folk traditions were an important part of the initial festivities, which were further fostered by the declaration of Canada’s multicultural policy in 1971. Smaller scale local initiatives in Manitoba, such as the Ukrainian Catholic Women’s League’s St. Volodymyr Museum in Winnipeg and the official opening of the Mennonite Heritage Village in Steinbach in 1967, created a new heritage landscape on the prairies that focused on the histories of non-Anglo migrant communities. In addition to these local campaigns, post-Centennial federal initiatives and agencies, including the National Museum of Man’s Canadian Centre for Folklore Studies in 1970, devoted themselves to capturing and preserving the folk traditions and identities of ethnic communities.

Canada was not alone in shifting its focus towards migration and ethnic cultures in the 1960s and 1970s. In his work on ethnic revivals/“reveries,” Matthew Frye Jacobson notes that mass-migration became an important component of American commemorative campaigns and popular culture during this period, including films such as Roots and The Godfather. The origins of this shift, he writes, emerged from the desire of White Americans to deflect the civil rights

---

429 Executive Committee of the National Committee for the Celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, 7.
430 Cupido, “Appropriating the Past,” 159.
movement’s critique of White privilege by reimagining themselves as equally oppressed “newcomers.” Canada’s new desire to commemorate its diverse ethnic roots similarly coincided with the intensification of Quebec nationalism in federal affairs as well as the growth of First Nations organizations such as the National Indian Brotherhood and their demands for the acknowledgement and defence of treaty rights. In both Canada and the US then, national creation narratives were shifting away from the claims to privilege and status of the Loyalist Pioneers and the pilgrims at Plymouth Rock and towards those that broadcast competing White European claims to distinction and oppression.

Once shunned from the picturesque displays of the 1920s, trunks became a popular symbol of settlement history from the 1970s onwards as part of a new national historic narrative that emphasized migrant sacrifice. Centennial museum displays such as the Manitoba Museum’s “Mass Migration to Manitoba” used groupings of trunks as central motifs and educational tools for exploring the role of mass migration as part of a larger chronology of nation building. Upon entering the galley, visitors met the sole figure of a young immigrant woman seated on a trunk (Figure 4.8). Her generic clothing concealed the mannequin’s potential ethnic affiliations, since her shirt, shawl and headscarf were made from plain, un-hemmed, pieces of fabric pinned to her body. The display conveyed a sense of isolation, poverty, and anonymity while providing a generalized vision of arriving migrants. The personal hardship of migrants during transit was also an important component of the Canadian Museum of Civilization’s Everyman’s Heritage permanent exhibit and corresponding coffee table book that first appeared in 1978. The museum created a full-scale diorama of the hold of an immigrant ship, featuring sleeping and seasick mannequins. The lantern suspended from the ceiling of the diorama even swung back and forth to convey the experience of motion sickness to visitors (Figure 4.9).

Larger national and provincial museums continue to use the trunk to emphasize migration as part of a continuous and relatively generic process, but smaller ethnic museums in Manitoba

---

434 "K77-494" (Photograph of Museum Exhibit) VMMB- Photos of Permanent Exhibitions, Canadian Museum of Civilization Institutional Archives (CMCIA) ACQ. 2001-10036 Box 1-9A.
employ these pieces to help locate the time and the space of specific community histories of migration. The entrance to the museum at Oseredok, the Ukrainian Cultural and Education Centre in Winnipeg, uses a grouping of trunks and luggage as the starting point for museum guests.\textsuperscript{435} The trunks and bags sit beneath pictures of early Ukrainian settlers and the words “The Promise of Freedom. The Promise of Land. The Promise of a New Beginning.” Despite the emphasis on the details of their own group, however, few of these museums focus on history and life in the home country. Instead, migration appears as the point of origin in most displays and the arrival of migrants and their luggage in Canada are often the focus of community creation narratives.

The trunk was not simply a prop in multiple post-1967 depictions of migration. It was a central motif and symbol through which heritage agencies connected the personal experiences and trials of migrants to the larger process of nation building. One woman’s trunk was the central focus of the film \textit{1911}, which aired on CBC in 1979 as part of Imperial Oil’s television miniseries, and accompanying coffee table book, and school curriculum package called \textit{The Newcomers}.\textsuperscript{436} This film uses the image of packing and unpacking a trunk to discuss assimilation, oppression, and cultural retention. It depicts the arrival of a Danish migrant couple in an exploitative lumber company town in New Brunswick. The film treats the woman’s initial refusal to unpack her trunk, filled with china and linens from Demark, as a symbol of her resistance to settling in Canada and her angry rejection of assimilation (Figure 4.10). Her eventual decision to stay in Canada following the birth of her two children coincides with her unpacking the trunk’s contents. In the final scene, the woman’s thoroughly Canadian daughter returns to the family home in the 1940s dressed in a military uniform after the death of her parents. Upon seeing her mother’s trunk at the foot of the stairs, she decides to leave it behind. The film’s depiction of personal encounters with cultural loss and assimilation reflected the popularity and effectiveness of immigrant trunk symbolism in broadcasting the emotive aspects of migration. Such images encouraged viewers to personally identify and sympathize with prescribed images of the hardship of migration, including alienation, poverty, and illness.

\textsuperscript{435} Oseredok Ukrainian Cultural and Educational Centre, \textit{The Promise of Freedom} (Museum Exhibit), Winnipeg, 2008.
\textsuperscript{436} John McGreevy, \textit{The Newcomers: 1911} (Film) (Toronto: Imperial Oil Canada/ CBC Television, 1979.)
Migration itself was also recast as a traumatic, difficult, but ultimately fruitful process in campaigns such as Museum of Civilization’s 1980 opening of the Everyman’s Heritage and A Few Acres of Snow exhibition halls. Curator Magnús Einarsson used trunks as a reoccurring theme throughout the exhibit using a series of examples from different Canadian communities in his displays. An advertisement for the opening of the halls also used a drawing of a large Icelandic koffort filled with artefacts from the homeland, the advertisement asked viewers: “Could you pack your life in one trunk and come to Canada?” (Figure 4.11) The koffort used in the advertisement is highly ornate and was painted by renowned folk artist Sölvi Helgason in the 1830s before being brought to Canada in 1920. Filled with richly coloured textiles, a folk costume and a langspil (an obscure Icelandic musical instrument), the advertisement uses the image of the trunk as a cultural treasure chest, offering Canadian viewers a rich and colourful vision of Icelandic culture. Yet, though the contents and koffort are Icelandic, the ad stresses their symbolic, unifying power as part of “the common heritage of all Canadians.” It reads:

Most of the immigrants didn’t really know what to expect when they packed their meagre belongings, sometimes into a single trunk, and came to this rich and harsh new land. They were pulled here by the promise of land, the possibility of work, the promise of religious and political freedom; a chance to share in the building of this country.

This ultimately redemptive image of migrant hardship and isolation fostered by national heritage agencies also informed the creation of smaller, local heritage displays and campaigns. Until very recently, the Manitoba government offered a lesson plan for elementary teachers and students who visit the Icelandic village at Hecla Island Provincial Park that used a koffort to teach children about migration history. Using a koffort on display at the park, the Hecla Island School Teacher’s Guide instructed students to recreate the process of packing. “Immigrants often had to pack everything they wanted to bring with them into one trunk of this size,” announced the guide’s lesson plan called “From Iceland to Hecla Island”; “everything else had to be left behind.” It suggested “students make a list of items they would take with them if they had to move permanently to another country with only one trunk and without hope of ever returning or

437 Magnús Einarsson, “‘Everyman’s Heritage: The Canadian Odyssey’ Storyline and Press Release,” CMICIA CCE-C-1 Box 84 f.4, 5.
having things sent later.” The plan encouraged students to think about this process as a traumatic one by writing a paragraph “explaining their choices and what they found most difficult to leave behind.”

The migration exhibit in the New Iceland Heritage Museum in Gimli, Manitoba, also encourages visitors to engage with the emotional and psychological experience of packing luggage. The exhibit uses several kofforts as display cases on the beach of a faux Icelandic harbour as mannequins dressed as migrants prepare to depart (Figure 4.12). The first of three kofforts is a simple, unadorned black chest which sits beside a panel bearing the emotional poem about family separation by Matthías Jochumsson entitled “Vertu sæl til módir minnar” (Farewell to my mother).

Farewell to thee mother,

to far distant places destiny calls me away from thy side.

Keep me no longer.

thy parting embraces fondly detain,

when I must not abide.

The second koffort, opened to reveal women’s sewing and spinning implements beside a panel entitled “Setting Sail,” includes written testaments about the dangers of the voyage to Canada and the premature deaths of group members. A third simple koffort sits propped open to reveal a selection of horn spoons, china, ornamental textiles and carvings beside a panel entitled “Difficult Choices.” The panel instructs visitors to imagine what they would pack for life in the New World and includes a translated letter from a migrant who recommended certain items (Figure 4.13). A postscript by museum staff emphasizes the importance of books to migrants, noting that “every family brought as many books as possible- to keep the Icelandic language alive and to teach the children their heritage.”

Assertions that literacy, language, and books constitute the heart of Icelandic culture in Canada seem strange considering the generally low value that many migrants’ descendants attach to Icelandic language books. Anglicization has dramatically affected the cultural relevance of these objects and their limited decorative value makes them less popular as either a marker of ethnicity or as mnemonic tools. Although Icelandic books appear occasionally in depictions of Icelandic-Canadian material culture, such as the Icelandic National League’s 2003 “Heritage Treasures” calendar, they are often strictly ornamental. The calendar’s depiction of people with family heirlooms from Iceland only shows older community members reading family books, while younger members stare straight at the camera either holding or standing beside closed books (Figure 4.14). Similarly, the NIHM in Gimli carefully partitioned their displays of kofforts and other cultural treasures from less valued and less visually interesting Icelandic language books. The museum, which receives regular inquiries about the donation and/or value of Icelandic language books, previously stacked dozens of books on the carpeted floor of their gallery without any protection, while its carvings, dishes, and textiles lay carefully protected by glass (Figure 4.15). This pattern may also illustrate the decline of religiosity in the community. Migrants brought many religious books that would be of limited interest to more recent generations. More likely, however, Icelandic language books have been rendered inaccessible by years of anglicization and offer unpleasant reminders of cultural loss, rather than continuity and retention. In contrast, family kofforts and other non-literary mementos of migration create accessible, familiar image of the past that reflects the cultural changes Icelandic Canadians have faced in the past 135 years.

Though trunks emerged as new symbols of emotional migrant experiences, including homesickness and separation, their popularity in heritage displays did not mean that all trunks or kofforts became more valuable after 1967. Collectors had begun to seek Icelandic antiques during this period, but the aesthetic simplicity, general availability, and primary relationship of kofforts to migration meant that the antiques market and museum collectors still viewed such items as being of limited cultural significance. As such, they seldom invested significant time or money into attempting to separate these objects from their owners. In his report to the Canadian Museum of Civilization, Kenneth Peacock photographed two family kofforts that John

443 Icelandic National League, *Heritage Treasures* (Calendar) (Winnipeg: Icelandic National League, 1999.)
Kjartanson of Hecla, Manitoba was offering for sale. Although both trunks bore Icelandic folk motifs, Peacock was annoyed at the very high price that Kjartanson set for such a commonplace object, exclaiming that “$500 seems like an exorbitant price for either trunk.”444 Icelandic-Canadian historian Nelson Gerrard similarly recalled the disproportionately high price of a simple koffort in a Winnipeg antique store. “Over the years I stopped by the same shop a few times, and each time I saw the old ‘koffort’ still in its place,” he recalled, “obviously not a hot collector item as far as the ordinary antique collector was concerned.”445

While kofforts may not have been worth much more on the antiques and museum collections markets after 1967, their value clearly increased with Icelandic-Canadian families. Though much of the original social context and significance of these objects was lost to the third, fourth, and fifth generation Icelandic Canadians, many began to take interest in these “almost worthless boxes” and retrieve family kofforts from barns, basements, and garages and bring them into the house. Though many neglected kofforts had actually remained in the possession of the family, community members interviewed in New Iceland often described the recovery of these objects as an exciting and important event. Margaret Wishnowski found a small family koffort in her garage, where it had been placed by a family member after the death of her uncle, Bjössi (Figure 4.16). Wishnowski not only retrieved and refinished the little trunk but decided to put it in her living room. She recalled the surprise that she felt that the object had received so little attention prior. “It was sitting in my garage for a long time and then I started thinking: ‘don’t tell me this is the trunk he brought from Iceland!’”446 While visiting family in Iceland she noticed a matching koffort in her cousin’s house, which was made by the same person during the same time period. Wishnowski now uses her own small koffort to display and store gifts from her family in Iceland, including a hand-woven woollen cloth, Icelandic language books, and older family mementoes, including a small collection of family photographs.

The rural background of many koffort owners suggests that these objects were perhaps more likely to stay in the possession of farm families because of the plentiful storage space available in rural homes. Many Icelandic families who remained in the Interlake stored kofforts

446 Margret Wishnowski, Interview by author, February 8, 2003, Lundi, Riverton, Manitoba.
in unfinished basements and in outbuildings on farms (Figure 4.17). In some cases they remained virtually forgotten for long periods until later generations took interest. Lynne Johannsson recalls that before she decided to reclaim an old family koffort, it remained untouched in an unused granary and later a chicken coop.

This one I found in the granary and I asked my aunt what this was and she told me it was her grandmother’s. So then of course I said “Well if nobody wants it can I have it?” Then I took it from the granary and put it in that little shed there- an old chicken coop- and it actually sat there for several years. I didn’t know what to do with it because it was such a mess.447

Like Wishnowski, Johannsson began to strip away at the many layers of paint in an attempt to return the koffort to its original appearance. “It had been painted several times,” she recalled, “and it was a real mess- the paint was all falling apart and chipping off like so I scraped it down.” After discovering probably original “red iron-oxide paint” underneath, she painted it that colour again so it would “look like it maybe was when it came over.” Once the project was complete, she placed the refurbished koffort in the centre of her living room where it is now stores books related to Iceland and her family history (Figure 4.18). The prominence of the koffort in the home as well as the many hours she dedicated to its refurbishment speaks to her significant investment in its preservation and her desire to recreate an aspect of the experience of migration. The process and the object itself, she comments, offers a venue for both preserving the stories of and showing respect for the difficulties her family experienced during migration. “It’s important to remember the hardships that people went through, and who they were,” she said. “I think they would appreciate that. I think that they [kofforts] were one of the most important things for them.” 448

Other community members have carefully refurbished old kofforts at the urging of younger generations. After using the family koffort as a toolbox for years, Charlie Ostertag stripped and refinished it at the request of his daughter.449 Some community members have stubbornly retrieved kofforts despite their advanced states of decay. Logan Bjarnason recalls collecting what was left of a family koffort in a pasture before bringing the old hewn boards into

the house to protect them. “I first remember seeing it, sitting out in the pasture, near where my father had dismantled the threshing machine” he recalled. When he learned of its origin he “rescued the pieces from the relentless rubbing of the cattle.”450

At first glance, the incorporation of kofforts into Icelandic-Canadian households after an onslaught of trunk-centred heritage campaigns suggests that community members have simply mimicked the new image of the migrant past set forth by the state. Certainly heritage agencies have used the migrant trunk to encourage certain emotional connections and responses to what they argue was an ultimately positive, unifying, and often generic experience. Yet Barbara Kirschenblatt-Gimblett writes that scholars must be mindful of the implications of the uses of and changes to object value beyond the museum. Such shifts illuminate larger processes and narratives invested in the construction and contestation of history.

What was once discarded may recover its value, not only in organized heritage production…but also in everyday life, which is not only where the process of converting heritage begins but where an ongoing process of distinction makes and remakes social hierarchy.451

The reclaiming of multiple family kofforts from barns, attics, and basements initially suggests that Icelandic Canadians have also adopted this practice of using the trunk to contain memories of the past. In her work on the relationship between Icelandic Canadians and their First Nations neighbours, Anne Brydon argues that this approach typifies foundational community narratives. Such omissions are certainly characteristic of narratives of early, tense interactions with the neighbouring Sandy Bar Band. Popular stories about early settlement, argues Brydon, have long been involved in “breeding amnesias,” surrounding traumatic histories that is, omissions that are part of a strategy “to suppress, displace and transmute pain.”452 Brydon’s work offers a compelling critique of the omission of colonial displacement, but the endurance of intergenerational narratives of trauma suggests that community members use objects to revisit and reconstruct the traumatic past in a range of ways.

Though heritage agencies hoped to harness the image of migrant hardship to an ultimately positive image, the role of family migration mementos suggests that in popular

451 Kirschenblatt-Gimblett, Destination Culture, 260.
452 Brydon, “Dreams and Claims,” 164.
practice the material world functions as both a container and a conveyer of uncomfortable, unsettling pasts that also illuminates loyalty to familial, rather than national systems of identification. Community members do not use family objects to discuss their origins in terms of a redemptive story of nations, but of often female bodies who endured trauma in significant, highly memorable, and unresolved ways. This reflects the tendency of members to identify and commemorate familial bodies, rather than nations, as points of origin. The preference to discuss maternal bodies over nations as a point of origin is evident in the absence of references to living in Iceland in Icelandic-Canadian popular narratives. Older interviewees whose parents and grandparents migrated often note that they “never really talked about Iceland.” Margret Wishnowski recalls that “coming from Iceland” was sometimes a very abstract concept for those who had never been, particularly when parents did not feel the need to talk about the home country to their children. She remembers her dad “telling me stories about Winnipeg, but not stories about Iceland. We didn’t ask and they didn’t tell. I guess it was just like this foreign place that they’ve come from and nobody will ever go there again…”

This loss of memory regarding life in Iceland illustrates that although kofforts continue to serve as a mnemonic tool, later generations have constructed new strategies to help identify their roots outside of Canada. Kofforts still offer an accessible reference point for an otherwise abstract point of national origin, but they act first as an embodiment of lineage. Far from accessorizing a simple genealogical chart, these objects help to express and engage with family history through the creation of dynamic and multi-faceted historical landscapes. Icelandic Canadians envision lineage through multiple, complimentary spaces of origin, including maternal and paternal migrant bodies, settler homesteads, prairie landscapes, the country of origin, and heirlooms, to name a few. These spaces are essential to creating and maintaining a sense of memory of otherwise absent and abstract family members and experiences. Due to their role in the commemoration of long-dead family members, the koffort and other mementoes of migrant experience and trauma often represents what Kenneth Foote refers to as “shadowed ground.” Here the koffort and other material points of contact function as a point of “negative remembrance,” in which people fold the remembrance of traumatic incidents into their daily lives.

---

lives. These objects similarly identify and reiterate some of the most unforgettable, often traumatic episodes in the history of the family. As such, the narratives that community members employ kofforts to tell often carefully incorporate memories of familial trauma that fit poorly within the histories of settlement set forth in Centennial and Multicultural campaigns. Rather than identifying migration as a point of celebrated origin, an enduring Icelandic belief in fatalism that emphasizes migration’s relationship to tragedy and death shapes the narratives surrounding the koffort.

In her analysis of Icelandic-Canadian authors, Neijmann argues that the fatalism that frequently characterizes literature and popular narratives from the community stems from ragnarök, or a cyclical, apocalyptic, pre-Christain view of the universe. Neijmann attributes the continuation of this tradition and the popularity of black humour to both the cultural weight of Norse literature as well as the poor living conditions in Iceland prior to the twentieth century.\footnote{Neijmann, The Icelandic Voice, 140.}

Premature death in any context is certainly a popular subject in Icelandic-Canadian family lore, but those connected to migration carry considerable weight. Oral narratives often discuss early death related to the trans-Atlantic passage, settlement, and the community’s smallpox epidemic as a way of asserting status and constructing the family’s foundational story. These narratives focus on the generation that migrated, even when they are told by family members who were born long after the deaths of the original migrants, illuminating their role in constructing larger familial and ethnic identities, rather than simply commemorating deceased family members. They use the notion of sacrifice to express a conflicted relationship to migration that also carefully acknowledges the shortcomings of life in Canada. Ken Melsted of Wynyard, Saskatchewan, used his grandfather’s smallpox vaccination certificate from 1871 to commemorate the tumultuous circumstances of life in Iceland, but he uses the story of his great-grandmother to carefully acknowledge the experience of suffering, and tragedy on both sides of the Atlantic.

I may remember the past, the nineteenth century in northern Iceland with its poverty and near starvation, but that is not “special,” nor is it a fond memory… My great-grandmother had six small children when her husband was lost in a fishing accident in the North Atlantic. They virtually starved in Iceland, [before] they were moved to a farm about three miles out of Gimli which was rock, gravel, and bush. Again they
virtually starved until they were moved to the Mountain district of North Dakota where everyone began to prosper.456

As Melsted’s account illustrates, popular Icelandic migration narratives from both the United States and Canada, frequently reference instances of trauma involving female family members. The Bjornson family also settled in North Dakota and carefully reproduced detailed accounts of the five children that Rosa Guðmundsdottir, their grandmother and great-grandmother who migrated from Iceland, lost prior to migration.457 In a booklet published in honour of their 1984 family reunion, multiple members of the Bjornson family contributed accounts of their migrant forbearers, most of which frequently referenced infant mortality and the endurance of “pioneer” mothers and grandmothers. Interestingly, the Bjornsons reference the sudden deaths of male family members, but discuss them primarily in terms of the effect that they had on grieving female family members. Mrs. M.F. Bjornson wrote that when her grandfather died “the next day my grandmother walked several miles to get a carpenter to make a coffin…the day he was buried there was a blizzard, so my grandmother could not accompany my grandfather to his final resting place. It was a very sad day for her and my mother.”458

One family living in the small Icelandic community of Point Roberts, Washington, similarly use objects to commemorate maternal trauma. The family preserves a nineteenth-century skautbúningur, an Icelandic dress that belonged to one of their a great-grandmother along with a locket that also belonged to her. As chapter three illustrates, skautbúningar were popular costumes in Icelandic spectacles on both sides of the ocean and are a central component of the Fjallkona pageant. For this Point Roberts family, however, the dress is a highly-valued heirloom that commemorates family tragedy. The family originally settled initially in Brandon Manitoba and later in the Icelandic community in Churchbridge Saskatchewan in the nineteenth century, but left for Point Roberts after the loss of one of their daughters. The family keeps the dress, in addition to photographs of child relatives that died in the nineteenth century as a memento of this narrative as well as their broader family history. The preservation of the dress is

a very personal and physically immediate reminder of those stories, since, as the current owner notes, the locket it contains locks of “hair from the children that were lost.”

The theme of child mortality is also pronounced in Icelandic-Canadian literature and film including Laura Goodman Salverson’s *Confessions of an Immigrant’s Daughter*, Kristjana Gunnars’ *Wake Pick Poems*, Guy Maddin’s 1988 film, *Tales from the Gimli Hospital*. Salverson discusses the experience of living through periods of high child mortality in the community in the nineteenth century and what she terms “the institution of the little white coffin.” Conversely, Gunnars and Maddin’s work deals with the cultural weight of the memories of these traumatic episodes as they are remembered and understood by twentieth-century members. Gunnars’ depiction of the smallpox epidemic suggests that maternal trauma is one of the foundational stories of the community while her poem “Jóhann Breim VI” blends the imagery of arrival of migrants and their kofforts with that of a funeral procession. Maddin’s film juxtaposes the celebratory imagery of public Icelandic-Canadian spectacles with the persistence of morbid, fatalist narratives in private culture by opening with an image of an Amma dressed in a skautbúningur telling her grandchildren a story about three Icelandic girls that disappear in the woods and are found floating down the Icelandic River in coffins several days later.

Such depictions do not come solely from the work of established community artists and authors, but also characterise popular narratives, including *hjátru*, or superstitious narratives, as discussed further in the next chapter. Mothers appear as powerful figures in Icelandic *hjátru* narratives, capable of protecting and healing family members or harming and harassing their enemies. Lárus Nordal of Leslie Sasktachewan recalled an encounter with an Icelandic-Canadian man who was plagued by a *fjölgja*, also known as a fetch or spirit follower. The man had accidentally shot a young girl who was working for him several years prior and had been plagued by her ghost. In the narrative Nordal contended that the man was actually haunted because the girl’s mother, a spiritually powerful woman who refused to accept her daughter’s death, had sent

---

her daughter’s spirit after him in revenge. Several other narratives describe the appearance of deceased children or mothers to their living counterparts as evidence of the spiritual power of maternal bonds, including a narrative in which a man’s deceased mother comes and sits on his koffort every evening. Herdís Eiríksson of Wawanesa, Manitoba, contended that the spirit of her mother, who had died in childbirth, visited her as she lay in the late stages of typhoid fever. Though “English doctors and nurses” had already given up on Eiríksson, she recovered after a woman who fit the description of her mother appeared in her room and laid her hands on her.

This tendency to reconstruct and emphasize narratives of trauma that relate to mothers is reflects what Richard M. Rice observes as the “matrilineal bias” in the community. Through a survey of family ties separated according to maternal and paternal lines, Rice contends that in the Icelandic-Canadian community family bonds tend to be gynocentric, or stronger through the maternal line. It is unlikely, however, that Icelandic Canadians are less interested in the commemoration of female relatives on their paternal sides, since representations of migrant maternal bodies from both sides are important sites of commemoration and contest in the community. Agnes Bardal Comack commemorated the nineteenth-century death of her paternal grandmother in Iceland by travelling there to visit her gravesite and ornate tombstone, which the family had commissioned for her after arriving in Canada (Figure 4.19). Though she kept a mounted photograph of herself standing beside the tombstone in her living room, she noted that the grave of her grandfather, whose alcoholism had reportedly hastened his wife’s death, remained unmarked in a Winnipeg cemetery for years.

Bardal-Comack’s commemoration of her Amma and the narrative of her Afi’s role in her demise, is characteristic of Icelandic-Canadian migration narratives. Frequent allusions to the mistreatment, neglect, or abuse of women in these intergenerational family accounts suggest the

---

464 Herdis Eiríksson, “Mother’s ghost travels from Iceland to Manitoba,” as translated in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 276-9.
466 Bardal-Comack, 2009.
gravity with which many Icelandic Canadians view historical gendered violence and/or forms of trauma endured by women. Lynne Johannsson, who carefully restored her family’s koffort, alludes to stories of both child death and wife abuse in her accounts of her maternal and paternal families’ arrivals in the West.

[My family] didn’t come straight to Canada, they came to North Dakota first. Now I don’t remember the year [but] when they were first coming they had four sons but by the time they got to North Dakota there was only two sons left. [On the other side] my grandfather’s mother–her name was Ragnheidar Davidsdottir–she came when her son (her son came down here first) he was getting married and he sent for her. She was in a marriage that was--was with a man-- a man who was a drunk or something-- so he sent for her.467

Although private Icelandic-Canadian commemorative practice and material culture reflects the forms made popular in state-funded campaigns, including kofforts, these objects are also employed in the construction of a vision of the migrant past that reflect the needs and experiences of their owners. The experiences of migrant women also appear in public depictions of migration, but discrepancies between public and private narratives of migrant mothers often arise around the issue of trauma. For some community members, the ultimately redemptive image of migrant “hardship” set forth by these agencies conflicts with familial memories of trauma relation to migration. The tendency of heritage agencies to downplay or ignore stories that offer an unsettling image of migration is evident in Gimli’s White Rock Monument to Jón Jóhannsson. The beach upon which Icelandic migrants first arrived in the Gimli area, Willow Point, has been the subject of several commemorative campaigns. In 1950 Árni Sigurðsson commemorated the seventy-fifth anniversary of the arrival of migrants in his painting, “The Landing at Willow Point” (Figure 4.20).468 His work was later reissued as a print and postcard and eventually a stamp for the Icelandic Postal Service in 2000. In the painting, migrants busily unpack cultural symbols onto the beach, including spinning wheels and kofforts filled with migrant’s possessions. In the foreground a woman wearing a skotthúfa and an Icelandic lace pin shawl cradles a baby. While private accounts of migration often emphasize the difficulty with which family members faced infant mortality, this public image is most likely a direct reference to the story of the birth of a baby on the beach shortly following the landing.

Since migration, community leaders and historians have invoked the narrative of the birth at Willow Point as a symbol of new beginnings for the migrants. All his life, Jóhannsson enjoyed a certain degree of status as this first Icelander born in Western Canada, including special mention in local history books and a monument dedicated to the landing and to him by name.\(^{469}\) Also known as the White Rock Monument, the marker was created in the 1950s, using a large white rock resembling the one beside which Jóhannsson’s mother reportedly gave birth (Figure 4.21). The rock has now become an annual site of pilgrimage for Icelandic Canadians during the Icelandic National League’s Gimli chapter’s “Walk to the Rock” where participants contemplate “the hardships that the first pioneers overcame in establishing the community of Gimli and how they persevered to ensure the New Iceland settlement would survive and flourish.”\(^{470}\)

As Nelson Gerrard notes, however, Jóhannsson was actually born in November, not October.\(^{471}\) Moreover, he was not the first, but the third child born in the settlement. The use of the October birth date is a reference to a different male baby born shortly following the arrival by the name of Jónas Friðrik Bjarnason. A second female child named of Steinvör Wilhelmina Pálsdóttir was born after Bjarnason.\(^{472}\) Unfortunately, both children died before their first birthdays from complications arising from the poor living conditions in early New Iceland, Bjarnason of smallpox and Pálsdóttir of “cramps.” These children died young, but they lived well past their birth dates and should not be confused with miscarriages or stillbirths. While the lives and deaths of both Bjarnason and Pálsdóttir would be important components of a popular family narrative of migration, these stories offer a critical vision of migration and settlement as an unsuccessful venture. In contrast, Jóhannsson’s survival into adulthood marked his birth as the only legitimate and “memorable” of the three.

The public disavowal of incidents that occupy a central part of private Icelandic-Canadian identity and family narratives illustrates the community’s continual navigation of the demands and recommendations set forth by Canadian heritage agencies. As in the usage of folksy images of pioneer settlers in Icelandic spectacles during the 1920s, the rise of the trunk and public

\(^{469}\) See for example, Gimli Women’s Institute, \textit{Gimli Saga}, 15.


\(^{471}\) Nelson Gerrard, Personal communication with author, 27 August 2008.

spectacles of mass-migration since 1967 create a palatable, recognizable image of the community that reinforces the image set forth by often state-funded heritage agencies. The visual campaigns of these heritage agencies, including films and museum displays have clearly influenced popular Icelandic-Canadian material culture. By recasting migration as a universal creation narrative for all Canadians, such campaigns invested cultural value and historical significance into trunks, objects that often lost much of their value following the deaths of their original owners. At first glance, the decision of community members to retrieve previously “useless boxes” from barns, attics, and basements following the creation of multiple visual campaigns celebrating the historical significance and emotional power of these objects, suggests a straightforward appropriation of the new images of the past set forth by heritage agencies. Yet, in this case prescriptive images of the past and popular material cultural practice are divided on the issue of trauma.

In keeping with the spectacles of migration set forth by agencies such as the CBC and Canadian Museum of Civilization, public representations of the history of Icelandic communities encourage the identification and commemoration of hardship as a significant, but ultimately redemptive experience. Though Icelandic Canadians may have re-appropriated the form of the trunk as a result of these campaigns, they did not simply accept the accompanying narrative. Rather, the rise of the koffort and the use of other commemorative objects in modern Icelandic-Canadian popular culture reveal the importance of the object in the construction of familial, rather than national identities. In popular practice such items help to construct images of the past that critique and confront the image of redemptive trauma. As in public heritage campaigns, Icelandic Canadians continue to identify migration and settlement as the point of origin, however, this process is made memorable not because of its affiliation with nation-building, but because of its relationship to unredeemed trauma, that is instances of loss that offer a critical image of migration.
Chapter Five

Graftarnes: Space, Superstition, and Power in New Iceland

In keeping with a community affinity for ghost stories in turn-of-the-century Riverton, Manitoba, a boy named Skrámur worked hard at attempting to scare two local girls he knew who lived beside the community’s neglected and notoriously haunted smallpox cemetery, Graftarnes or Nes (Figure 5.1). Skrámur told the girls many stories about the site which had circulated in the community, stories that included the appearance of the ghosts of First Nations children, a drowned boatman, a woman in white, herds of black horses, and úppvaknar (the walking dead) crawling out of the cellar of a house on the site. Thinking that the girls’ father, Björn of Viðimýr, was away working on a threshing gang, Skrámur decided to play a prank on the two girls by hiding in the long grass with a white sheet. When he leapt out of the grass at them the two screaming girls ran back to their house, prompting their father to return to the site with a gun. When the farmer arrived at the site he saw movement in the grass and fired, hitting the boy in the buttocks with a round of buckshot. Skrámur survived but spent several weeks convalescing in the Selkirk Hospital.473

The multiple stories surrounding what now appears as a simple vacant grassy field close to the old northern border of the Icelandic Reserve illustrates the rich history of hjátru or superstitious narratives, and their role in the construction of space in Icelandic communities in Manitoba. These narratives have endured into the twentieth and twenty first centuries and continue to characterise Icelandic-Canadian discussions and analyses of trauma and history. Since the creation of a large smallpox cemetery during an outbreak amongst Icelandic settlers as winter approached in 1876, community members have largely avoided the space, with the exception of grazing cattle and the arrival of the occasional, usually short-term boarder in the first half of the twentieth century. Nes is short for this site’s longer name, Graftarnes (Burial Point) or Náströnd (Corpse Beach).474 The disease, which original sources attribute to shared or bought blankets or clothing in the Quebec City immigration sheds, had a serious impact on Icelandic women and children. While the large proportion of unvaccinated Icelandic women

473 Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 153.
474 Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 315.
and children were seriously affected and/or killed by the disease, it had a far worse impact on
the nearby members of the Sandy Bar Ojibwe Band who were in the midst of a heated land
claims contest with the Icelanders. The epidemic overwhelmed and killed 70% of the band
members.\footnote{According to a doctor sent by the provincial government to investigate the epidemic, only sixteen members of Sandy Bar remained out of a band of fifty to sixty while other smaller bands were totally wiped out. Letter from Dr. J.S. Lynch to J.A.N. Provencher, 12 April 1877, as reprinted in Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 38.} The wooded fringes and fields of long grass and marshy land at Nes are, according
to historical records, the unmarked final resting places for up to eighty Icelandic and First
Nations victims of this epidemic,\footnote{It is difficult to identify an exact number for the graves at Nes. Nelson Gerrard writes that records from Thorgrímur Jónsson, a local carpenter who made coffins during the epidemic, names nineteen Icelandic smallpox victims buried there, but numerous other unaccounted for burials also took place on the site. Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 37. Nes is also possibly the site described by Dr. J.S. Lynch in his April 1877 letter which describes newly dug graves around the tents of the Band’s smallpox survivors on the South Side of the White Mud River (aka Icelandic River) next to the Icelandic settlement.} though Icelanders contend that the space was already
heavily used as a burial ground before they arrived. More than any other site in New Iceland, Nes has been the subject of multiple draugasögur (ghost stories). Using never previously
translated hjátru narratives about Nes from the Árni Magnússon Institute archives in Reykjavík,
in addition to those translated and published by Magnús Einarsson at the Canadian Museum of
Civilization, this chapter explores the complex, emotionally charged, and painful cultural
history of the space. In so doing, it also illuminates the Icelandic narrative structures and tropes
that migrants brought with them to Canada and the ways in which “haunting” has shaped
memories of colonial trauma and claims to land in Icelandic-Canadian popular culture.

Nes has been an intensely marginalised space that has been largely avoided by
community members for 130 years, yet it is still a very complicated cultural site. I visited the
site in 2007 during a trip to assess the preservation of a family home named Engimýri, an
important stopping place, a dancehall, and a boarding house for men working in the fisheries on
Lake Winnipeg. The house was built about a kilometer from Nes and my uncle and cousin and
I decided to hike over and take a look at the site. We walked through the long dried grass and
marshy field until we arrived at the grassy outline of the foundation of the old house that an
Icelandic farmer had inexplicably built on top of the graves only ten years after the epidemic on
the banks of the Icelandic River. It was my uncle who first spotted the large white skull lodged
into the muddy shore of the river, a few feet from the edges of the foundation (Figure 5.2).
Climbing down from the eroding bank into the drying clay we found the scattered fragments of what remained of Nes’s unsettled inhabitants, including teeth, vertebrae, ribs, jaws, clavicles and arm bones. Later an archaeological team would identify these remains as belonging to at least eight different Icelandic women and children who had died from smallpox and been buried in shallow winter graves too close to the rapidly fluctuating river. As I stood on the banks of the river, I was stunned by this somewhat grotesque display of Icelandic-Canadian forgetfulness so close to the town itself. Also compelling was the literal neglect of the otherwise celebrated “pioneers,” a group of people usually heroized and mythologized in the community as “the descendents of the high mettled warriors and matriarchs of the Icelandic sagas, whose feats were no less heroic.”

It also provided a startling breech in the traditionally concealed space of the cemetery, a space usually associated with gates, markers, and neatly kept lawns. In addition to the eroding Icelandic graves there were also a number of First Nations graves in the area that were well-hidden under the surface of the space. The unexpected exposure at Nes, as well as the initial invisibility of other bodies and histories prompts us to question how ethnic communities have made visible, neglected, or enshrined spaces and histories associated with traumatic colonial pasts.

This chapter compares and contrasts traditional Icelandic strategies for reconciling histories of trauma with recent developments in trauma theory to provide an analysis of the role of landscape, bodies, and narrative in the construction and parameters of Icelandic-Canadian space. At the heart of this chapter is an investigation into how traumatic spaces and histories complicate and confront colonial regimes of power. Achille Mbembe writes that in gazing upon skeletons, one is struck by both their simplicity and “undifferentiated generality” as “simple relics of unburied pain, empty meaningless corporealities, strange deposits plunged into cruel stupor.” Despite the “strange coolness,” of skeletal bodies, Mbembe also asserts that they possess a “stubborn will to mean, to signify something.” Yet, as the uncomfortable history and exposure at Nes suggests, this “stubborn signification” does not mean that all bodies become “memorable.” The story of Nes is a familiar history of landscape and memory in the West, particularly in the uneven terrain of the commemoration of certain populations and the

---

477 Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, iv.
trauma they endured, and the suppression and community amnesia surrounding others. Swyripa notes in her work on ethnic prairie cemeteries that the commemoration of pioneer bodies is often a very complex process, one that has been shaped by community values, desires for external acceptance, and the drive to express ethnic possession of and reaffirm connections to Canadian land.\footnote{Swyripa, \textit{Storied Landscapes}, 264, 275.} Responding to the questions that arise from the unsettling landscape at Nes, this chapter examines the destructive and productive potential of revisiting underground landscapes of trauma and the uneven ways in which they are reworked, enshrined or ignored by those above through narrative and commemorative projects. It focuses in particular on the multiple ways in which the migrant settler body itself has operated in the colonial past and the colonially inscribed multicultural present in reinforcing and disrupting Canadian nationalist narratives and non-Native land claims.

The rich history of Icelandic superstitious belief and the reputation of Icelanders as having a “greater than average preoccupation with ghostlore”\footnote{Elizabeth Stern, \textit{Legends of the dead in medieval and modern Iceland}, (PhD dissertation) (Berkeley: University of California, 1987.)} has long attracted the attention of a range of scholars, including folklorists, anthropologists, and Old Norse literature specialists.\footnote{Hilda R. Ellis Davidson, “The Restless Dead: Icelandic Ghost Stories”, in Hilda R. Ellis Davidson and W. M. S. Russell (eds.), \textit{The Folklore of Ghosts} (Cambridge, 1981); Loftur Reimar Gissuarson and William H. Swatos, \textit{Icelandic Spiritualism: Mediumship and Modernity in Iceland} (New Brunswick: Transaction, 1997); Kirsten Hastrup, “Getting it right: Knowledge and evidence in anthropology,” \textit{Anthropological Theory} 4.4 (2004): 455-472; G. Turville-Petre “Dreams in Icelandic Tradition,” Folklore 69.2 (June 1958): 93-111.} Hjátru belief is still common amongst Icelanders on both sides of the ocean and tends not to carry the same sense of stigmatism that characterizes discussions of the “occult” in North American Anglo culture. Rather, Icelanders believe in an active, fruitful, and important relationship to spiritual beliefs, practices and narratives that fall outside of Christian doctrine and faith. Hjátru translates roughly as something that is “beside” or an “additional” belief. Such beliefs and narratives do not compete with Christian authority and faith, but exist alongside and outside of them. It refers to a large number of practices and beliefs, including prophetic dreaming, (\textit{klárdrauma}) and the belief in a range of non-Christian spiritual agents and practices, such as human and animal fetches (\textit{fylgjur}), ghosts, (\textit{draugar}) land spirits, (\textit{huldufólk}) and psychic ability (\textit{dulreynsa}). Though such beliefs emerge frequently in many other Canadian cultural communities, Icelandic hjátru belief and narrative possess distinctive traits, including a
relative lack of stigma and descriptions of the physicality and sometimes violent nature of ghosts. Moreover, the Icelandic-Canadian hjátru tradition illustrates a unique blend of older Icelandic narrative structures with Canadian and regional-specific components, such as landscape, technological developments, and other Canadian populations.482

There are no fewer than eighteen different kinds of ghosts in Icelandic popular belief, each one representing a distinct character, set of practices, and beliefs about origin.483 For example, ættarfylgjur or fylgjur (followers) are ghosts or spiritual counterparts that run in families. Fylgjur (plural) may follow families as a curse, while an individual’s fylgja (singular) can act as a representation of their activities and well-being. Family fylgur often appeared as human children, while animals, such as cats, or apparitions of the person themselves often served as an individual’s fylgja. Whether human or animal, explains Thorstina Walters, community members saw fylgjur as “miraculous beings who seemed to arrive out of nowhere, to announce the arrival of guests, unexpected events and other such matters.”484 In contrast, staðardragur were largely stationary ghosts who could only haunt specific places. Spirits that wander are called gangári while uppvakningur, or “the awoken,” are ghosts resurrected through the imposition of curses. Ghost character is most often defined according to their origin. There are, for example, separate beliefs and names for the ghosts of drowned men, exposed children, improperly buried corpses, and even the greedy fépiki, or the ghost of someone who cannot bear to leave their worldly wealth behind. Ghosts often tend to play a more pronounced role in the oral life of specific communities and families. They frequently possess names that reflect the beliefs about their origin as well as the place or family to whom they are attached. These characters are often used to evoke fear in narratives, yet can also evoke a range of other emotions, including affection.

482 As the broad range of Icelandic Canadian hjátru narratives illustrate, however, narrative components that were borrowed from the North American context were not simply grafted onto older, unchanging Icelandic narrative structures. Magnús Einarsson, for example, collected narratives that were fundamentally driven by spiritualist symbolism or narratives, including several narratives about a female ghost in white named “Duða” who was eventually contacted and put to rest through a community séance. Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 311. Similarly the Einarsson collection includes a “vanishing hitchhiker” narrative about an Icelandic Canadian couple en route to visit Expo 67. Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 315.
483 Gissuarson and Swatos, Icelandic Spiritualism, 49.
484 Walters, Modern Sagas, 10.
Scholars have been drawn to the unique properties of Icelandic hjátru oral traditions, particularly the endurance of pre-Christian narrative structure and belief. The relative isolation of the island, its late industrialisation, and its sparse, predominantly rural population has meant few radical alterations to hjátru narrative structures. As G. Turville-Petri and other mid-century scholars have commented, this large body of narratives show “little discontinuity between Norse pagan times and twentieth century.” More recent scholarship on hjátru belief, however, concedes that change has occurred. In their study of modernity and the rise of spiritualism in Iceland, William H. Swatos and Loftur Reimar Gissurarson write that the pre-Christian “saga past provided a fertile cultural soil into which the seeds of a distinctly modern form of life could be planted.” As Elizabeth Stern points out, however, popular, pre-Christian worldviews and belief in spirit figures have also enjoyed significant endurance despite radical change, including the island’s official adoption of Christianity in 1000. In addition, she argues, hjátru belief and narrative also reflect social change in the lives of the tellers. “Ghostly activity presented physical danger,” she writes, “but also manifested spiritual and social dislocation in the community of the living.”

Hjátru narratives from the Icelandic-Canadian community attracted significant attention from folklorists in the 1960s and 1970s. As mentioned earlier, this attention resulted in the creation of two large oral collections: the translated Icelandic folklore collection by Magnús Einarsson at the Canadian Museum of Civilization and Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and Olga María Franzdóttir’s untranslated collection of tales at the Árni Magnússon Institute in Reykjavik. In spite of the wealth of primary sources on superstitious belief collected by folklorists in Canadian ethnic communities, Canadian historians have been slow to attend to these remarkably diverse and compelling collections. The tendency of scholars to relegate such texts to the study of folklore helps account for the larger aversion to superstitious narratives in historical studies.

The place of superstition within Icelandic popular culture is also a contentious topic on both sides of the ocean. Modern Iceland has wrestled with the implications of the country’s

---

486 Swatos and Gissuarson, Icelandic Spiritualism, 37.
487 Stern, Legends of the Dead, ix.
reputation for folk belief, which has attracted tourists and anthropologists for decades. The most notable and problematic of these is the reported belief in *huldufólk* or hidden people, also popularly referred to as “elves.” Huldufólk are better understood as a form of land spirit, and the narratives that describe them incorporate both Christian and pre-Christian elements. According to folklore, they are descendants of Eve but were not blessed by God when he came to visit her because she hadn’t had enough time to bathe them before he arrived. Varying degrees of belief in huldufólk persist in Iceland, particularly in rural areas. Tourist brochures and anthropological surveys of the country frequently cite the decisions of developers and construction workers to not disturb certain areas or rock formations because of their belief in huldufólk. Most of these reports exaggerate the intensity of belief, however, and most Icelanders find these descriptions of their culture and landscape annoying.

The relative absence of huldufólk narratives in migrant communities reflects the impact of migration on popular spiritual belief. Some communities, like Point Roberts, Washington, retained huldufólk belief and reconstructed traditional narratives to apply to certain fields or oddly shaped or situated boulders. However, scholars of the Icelandic community in North America widely acknowledge that because of the geographical specificity of huldufólk, most migrants did not import this belief to the New World. By their very nature, migrants believed that huldufólk could only exist in Iceland. In spite of the absence of a huldufólk tradition in Canada, they have emerged as a popular symbol of Icelandic identity in Manitoba, largely thanks to the author of a children’s book on the subject and to the Manitoba tourist industry (Figure 5.4).

Yet for Icelanders in Europe and North America, ghosts and other hjátru spiritual figures are important and real ways of thinking about the past. One of the primary characteristics of Icelandic ghost narratives that separate them from popular Anglo North American ghost stories is a belief in the physicality of ghosts themselves. While popular Canadian ghost stories often describe ghosts as physically benign, wispy and translucent figures that hover around places designated as haunted, Icelandic ghost narratives emphasize the violent, physical nature of ghosts, who are able to bite, beat, scratch, and even kill living people. Björn Bjarnason of Arborg, Manitoba claimed that a girl who stayed with his family in Iceland was killed by the ghost of a “feeble old woman” who had lived with them during her life. The girl “had been
rather a tease and made it her habit to provoke the old woman until she had become so difficult of temperament that she swore a curse on her and said that since she could not repay her while still alive, she would do it when she was dead.”

The old woman committed suicide and “the same evening this young girl was so violently attacked [while she was sleeping] that people rushed to her, and were only just able to get to her and awaken her, and she woke up alive.” The girl left the farm for the sake of her safety but returned later after the house had been thoroughly swept out with juniper, which Bjarnason explained “was an antidote, [since] ghosts were, supposedly, more reluctant to seek out a well swept place.” She went up to bed “but after a short while a terrible racket is heard from the bed where the girl lay” and when the household rushed to her bed they found her dead. He argued that when they “started investigating whether everything had been carefully swept [they realised that] they had forgot to sweep the loom and the ghost had been able to stay there...”

As the Bjarnason narrative illustrates, Icelanders who migrated to Manitoba brought hjátru narratives and beliefs with them. That being said, migration also signalled a rupture in certain forms of popular spiritual belief, particularly those associated with land. Migrants did not believe that certain spiritual figures could migrate to the New World; thus, community narratives also indicate the limited endurance of huldufólk belief in North America.

Observing a turn-of-the-century assertion by an elderly woman that a large boulder in the neighbouring field was home to one or more “hidden person,” community members in Point Roberts, Washington still avoid moving or ploughing too closely to the rock (Figure 5.4). Thorstína Walters also notes that migrants told stories about some ghosts being “too afraid” of the conditions aboard migrant ships to migrate. Walters’ parents were plagued by a skotta, an intergenerational family ghost in the form of a little girl. Such figures were a source of real concern for some Icelandic families, who often blamed them for dangerous accidents in the kitchen, such as suddenly upsetting pots of boiling water. However, as Hrund Skulason asserts, skotta also aged and could appear as a short old woman capable of playing funny tricks on

---

488 Björn Bjarnason, “Ghost of old woman takes revenge,” as translated in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 119-120.
489 Bjarnason in Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 120.
490 See also, Hallgrímur Stadfeld, “Elf woman tries to lure young boy,” as translated in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 345.
people; for instance, causing women to spill chamber pots on themselves. Thorstína Walters’ family skotta, known as Kelduskóga-skotta followed the family as a result of a curse, yet the “shadowy little girl” decided not to accompany them to North America after seeing the conditions aboard migrant ships. She recalls hearing that:

*Kelduskóga-skotta* took one look at the outward bound vessel on which the family left for America and decided to remain in Iceland… for when it came to putting up with the immigrant quarters in the steerage and becoming used to the new land, [she] just “could not take it.”

Though huldufólk and some family ghosts may have remained in Iceland, other aspects of hjátru belief have endured in the migrant community in North America from the late nineteenth century into the present. Psychic experience, dreams, ghosts, and a-Christian spiritual figures comprise one of the most popular forms of oral tradition in the Icelandic community. In the 1960s and 1970s, Einarsson recalled the surprise he felt when his oral history campaign in Manitoba revealed a thriving superstitious tradition. “The purpose of my field work was to collect Icelandic and Icelandic Canadian folklore... anything they cared to tell me that was humourous, strange, or somehow out of the ordinary,” he wrote. Inundated with hjátru narratives, Einarsson remembered that he “didn’t expect to find alive such a keen and pervasive interest in dreams and ghostly visions.” Other Icelandic anthropologists working in the 1970s, such as Hallfreður Örn Eiríksson and Olga Maria Franzdóttir experienced little trouble in amassing extensive collections of hjátru narratives from oral history interviewees. Hallfreður and Olga collected over 120 separate narratives during their research in 1972, while Einarsson notes that most of his 462 narratives express some degree of belief in the supernatural. Although fragmentary, evidence points to the continuation of such belief systems in the community.

---

495 Although admittedly anecdotal, my field research from 2003-2010, which included interviews and conversations with two dozen community members, also gathered recent reports of incidents at “haunted” community places, psychic dreams and fylgja stories. When I visited community members and “haunted sites,” the continuing importance of hjátru belief in community life was conveyed to me.
Though hjátru stories are one of the most popular forms of Icelandic-Canadian oral narratives, they have been both suppressed and protected by an ingrained sense of taboo and scepticism. Scholars have mistakenly assumed that the reluctance to speak about superstition in the community meant that such narratives have become extinct. Icelandic Anthropologist Tinna Gretarsdóttir recalls that during her visits to New Iceland in 2004 that most English-speaking Icelandic Canadians denied belief in the supernatural and declared that most community members were unfamiliar with such narratives.\(^{496}\) Even hjátru narratives collected by scholars frequently begin with the negation of belief in the supernatural. When Magnús Einarsson asked Margrét Arngrímson to tell him a ghost story she replied “I—I have nothing to say. Well, I could tell you one thing that happened to my uncle.” She then told the story of a family being harassed by the ghost of a Norwegian man who had drowned in the area and had then banged loudly on the walls of their house until his body was found and buried. Arngrímson concluded the story by stating “I am certain of that—that my kinsmen didn’t make this up.”\(^{497}\) Similarly, Bergþóra Sigurdsson provided Eiríksson with an extensive list of different narratives associated with Nes, but concluded her stories by laughing and stating, “but I, I don’t really believe in ghosts.”\(^{498}\)

The matter raises some interesting points about gender dynamics within the community. Although discussions of the supernatural in Iceland were relatively non-stigmatized, migrant hjátru narratives often reflect a sense of anxiety in admitting belief in such stories, particularly within the narratives of women. Lára Gudmundsson told Einarsson that as a young girl she saw an apparition of a woman “dressed like she had just gotten off a ship” while she lay in bed with her sleeping grandmother in Riverton, Manitoba. Gudmundsson asserted that this was a premonition of the death of a girl her grandmother was sponsoring to come to Canada. When she woke her grandmother to tell her, however, she blamed the apparition on Lára “not saying my prayers” and then added “don’t tell anyone you saw that.”\(^{499}\) Other storytellers in the Einarsson collection, which included men such as Björn Bjarnason, openly identified as

\(^{496}\) Tinna Gretarsdóttir, personal communication with author, June 30, 2008, Winnipeg, MB.
\(^{497}\) Margrét Arngrímsson, “Noises heard until body of drowned man is found,” as translated by Einarsson, *Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives*, 121-2.
\(^{498}\) Bergþóra Sigurdsson, “Reimt í húsi hjá indjánagrafreit á Nesí við Íslendingafljót,” (Hauntings in a house by an indian graveyard at Nes on Icelandic River,) as published in Eiríksson, *Sögur Úr Vesturheimi* 517-520, 520.
sceptics and denied belief in the supernatural. And yet, they clearly valued the ability of these stories to move and frighten their audiences and appeared reluctant to wholly refute such narratives.\(^{500}\)

Icelandic Canadians may have been reticent to acknowledge belief in the supernatural in English or in front of mixed company, but often readily identified themselves as superstitious in private, particularly in Icelandic language forums. Migrant leaders such as Friðjón Friðriksson and Jón Bjarnason saw superstitious beliefs as part of a series of ills associated with cultural stagnation, ignorance, and bigotry that needed to be purged from the community.\(^ {501}\) Yet, most Icelanders retained a degree of belief in the supernatural. Even ministers such as Reverend Albert Kristjanson confessed to being afraid of certain spaces and premonitions when interviewed in the 1970s.\(^{502}\) When asked about superstitious belief, Jón Arnason confessed to Einarsson “sure I was superstitious, just like any other Icelander.”\(^{503}\) Arnason joked about the severity of superstitious belief in New Iceland by using a story about a recently deceased woman whose body had been placed temporarily in one family’s cellar. When Jón absent-mindedly threw a sack of potatoes down the cellar steps, it landed on the body, which made an “umph” sound. “So amongst the Icelanders she immediately became a ghost, according to their theory,” he laughed. “You couldn’t get an Icelander near [that house] after dark [after that].”\(^{504}\)

Whether they were intended to scare audiences or to make them laugh, community members clearly appreciated the entertainment value of hjátru narratives. Yet these narratives also performed more complex functions in the community, including the illumination of class-based labour concerns. The large body of narratives dedicated to apparitions of fishermen illustrates the anxieties surrounding the dangers of labouring on Lake Winnipeg, as well as the use of hjátru belief in compensating for poor communication between fishermen and their camps and homes. After a party of three men left a fishing camp on Ling Bay, Jón Melsteð, one of the fishermen who had remained behind, told his cabin-mate that he had a dream that

\(^{500}\) See footnote 16, Einarsson, *Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives*, 396.

\(^{501}\) Friðjón Friðricksson to Jón Bjarnasson, 11 August, 1881.


\(^{504}\) Arnason in *Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives*, 317.
“something was wrong.” In the dream Melsteð said he saw the “men come into his cabin and they were wet… and they had ice frozen into their clothing.” According to fisherman Magnús Elíasson, the party of men were discovered frozen on the lake several days later. Elíasson noted that these kinds of “precise dreams” about accidents were common when he was working in the northern camps on Lake Winnipeg. Melsteð’s dream is typical of such narratives in New Iceland and also illustrates that superstition was not simply the domain of women, but was an intensely popular and indeed an important way of coping with trauma and harsh working conditions in all-male Icelandic spaces.

While such stories focus on adult male community members, ghosts in many Icelandic-Canadian hjátru narratives are usually marginalized figures, including women, children, elderly people, and even abused animals. Stories about the ability of the wronged to haunt and harm their abusers in death illuminate popular critiques of class, gender, age, and/or race-based power structures. Narratives about the ghosts of workers who died as a result of poor labouring conditions reflected community members’ condemnation of exploitative employers. The appearance of the ghosts of children who died while working for or being fostered by other families reflect larger anxieties about their exploitation and abuse. For example, Lárus Nordal’s narrative about the noisy and unsettling fylgja of a girl shot and killed by her employer described in chapter four illustrates that the ghosts of these children served as disturbing warnings about the spiritual consequences of child exploitation and mistreatment. As Björn Bjarnason’s story about the ghost of the elderly woman who killed her younger tormentor illustrates, Icelanders believed that people who lacked physical power in life could possess tremendous physical and spiritual power that surpassed that of the strongest community members in death.

Haunted related to labour also reflected community concern about employer negligence. Tímoteus Böðvasson reported that one man who ran a fishing outfit on Lake Winnipeg was “followed” by a fylgja in the form of a young man who died while working for

---

505 Magnús Elíasson, “Draumur um blauta og klakaða menn sem frusu á Winnipegvatni” (Dream about soaking wet and frozen men that froze to death on Lake Winnipeg), as recorded by Eiríkson, Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 356-7, 356.
506 Elíasson in Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 357.
507 See for example “Dog ghost haunts camp” as translated by Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 300.
508 Nordal, as translated in Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 255-8.
him. The employer, who Einarsson referred to only as “Axxx,” and his two young employees ran into “an earth-tossing storm” on the lake with their dog team. The dogs instinctively began to head for shore “but the foreman, he didn’t trust the dogs... took the lead away from them and took a wrong turn... before they got to shore one of the boys had died of exposure. They tried to keep him warm on the sled, bundle him up, but he was both exhausted and cold through and through.” The surviving employee froze his feet, which had to be amputated at the instep.

Böðvarsson explained that the appearance of the fylgja around the boss was proof of his responsibility for the young man’s death. He reported that his wife, who had known the dead employee quite well, saw him long afterwards outside of her window. Böðvarsson recalled that “a man who was there said ‘then Axxx will probably be coming today.’ That was the foreman on this—the cause of this man’s death. He died because of him. Oh yes, yes, after about an hour, Axxx has arrived.”

According to another community member, the dog team of another Icelandic man was terrorized by a strange visitor while he was camping on an island. The island was haunted, he explained, because it was the site of a large number of “abandoned Indian shacks” as well as the location of a terrible accident at a lumber mill that had claimed the lives of several men.

In another narrative, Ingólfur Bjarnason, a fisherman working in a station on Lake Winnipeg, reported to his colleagues one morning that he had a strange dream the night before. In the dream he passed his Métis co-worker’s bed and saw “lying there in his bed a totally naked Indian.” As in the Melsteð narrative, Bjarnason responded to the Icelandic belief in the importance of dreams by informing the bed’s owner of his dream when he arrived at the camp the next day. Upon hearing the account, the young man “blanched” and reported that his grandfather had robbed and murdered a man of the same description many years before. Bjarnason explained this apparition as part of the Icelandic belief in intergenerational ghosts.

---

that reminded descendents of their ancestors’ transgressions. The naked Native man, he argued, “hafði verið fylgja drengrsins” or “was the lad’s fetch/spirit follower.”

Anne Brydon uses the story of an Icelander’s dream of John Ramsay to explore the role of forgetting in the Icelandic-Canadian community’s foundational myths. According to a number of narratives recorded in the community, the spirit of Chief John Ramsay of the Sandy Bar Band visited a poor farmer named Trausti Vigfusson in a dream shortly following his death in 1910. Ramsay informed Trausti that he wanted him to protect the grave of his wife Betsy, who had died in the region’s smallpox epidemic in 1876-1877 and was buried between Hnuasa and Riverton, close to the shore of Lake Winnipeg (Figure 5.5). After consulting with his family, Trausti collected enough wood to make the fence and made the long trip to the grave. In some variations of the story Trausti enjoyed good luck and better wealth after erecting the fence, while other versions of the tale state that he understood the gravity of the dream and simply “felt much better” after he had completed the task. Brydon creates a compelling discussion of the role of the dream in the creation of a myth of “good relations” between First Nations and Icelanders. Moreover, Brydon writes that this narrative has been “purified” of the community’s implication in the colonial project.

Indeed, with few exceptions, popular and scholarly histories often treat Icelandic settlement and First Nations displacement as two separate events. Heritage planners privilege the stories and sacrifices of pioneers and migrants in commemorative campaigns, while minimizing references to their role in First Nations displacement. This is typical of the popular Canadian vision of migration to the West, one that emphasizes migration as a creative drive with beneficial and productive personal, cultural, economic, and political effects. Central to this vision is the multifaceted figure of the migrant himself/herself, as a nation builder who is both “saved” by and labouring within the project of “making Canada.” The migrant-settler-centered chronology of “making the West Canadian” often infers a wider temporal distance between First Nations dispossession and European migrant arrival in the West, attempting to disconnect these often historically simultaneous processes.

---

513 Bjarnason in *Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives*, 343.
514 For variations of this dream narrative see alternate versions recorded by Eiríksson, *Sögur Úr Vesturheimi*, 348-51 and Gerrard, *Icelandic River Saga*, 151.
Previously under the jurisdiction of the Hudson’s Bay Company, the newly formed Dominion of Canada purchased the title to Rupert’s Land (modern day Southern Manitoba) and broader regions within the Northwest Territory (Northern Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia) in 1869. The purchase ignited long-standing grievances for existing Métis and First Nations’ inhabitants surrounding rights to land and governance and economic activity, which resulted in the Red River Rebellion of 1869-1870. Responding to the grievances set forth by provisional government head and rebellion leader, Louis Riel, the Dominion of Canada entrenched Métis land rights into the Manitoba Act of 1870, guaranteeing 1.4 million acres for Métis families and their descendents. These rights were quickly eroded and erased by virtually non-existent government acknowledgement of the legislation while First Nations treaty negotiation in Manitoba was hastily organized amid the arrival of European settlers. The resurrection of armed Métis struggle and the ensuing military engagement with the Canadian state in 1885 during the North-West Rebellion, more than ten years following the arrival of the first large waves of migrants to the prairies, further illustrates that the land claimed by migrant settlers was by no means vacant, nor uncontested.

While the federal government may have focused on containing First Nations and Métis communities within a range of either poorly implemented, ignored, or marginal settlements, the Canadian government began to negotiate more generous block settlements for two large new populations from Europe. Driven by business and railroad interests, the federal government signed land deals with Mennonite and Icelandic community leaders in 1872 and 1873, respectively. Areas within both land parcels were also still occupied by Métis and First Nations communities. Early European block settlement groups enjoyed preferential treatment from the Canadian government even though this land had only recently been granted and was also inhabited by the Sandy Bar Band at the time. Chief John Ramsay contested this expansion both through official legal channels and through confrontations with the settlers, but these claims to the land, as well as official recognition of the band itself, were rejected by the government. The decision to refuse recognition of the Sandy Bar Band while simultaneously

---


autonomy to a group of European migrants speaks to the early expression of sovereign power through the creation of race-based states of exception. While block settlement agreements slowed settler integration and assimilation into Anglo-Canadian society, the federal and provincial governments assumed this risk in order to attract the maximum number of settlers. This emphasis on maximum European population growth had a disastrous effect on the negotiation of settlements and land grants for Aboriginal people in Manitoba. As Olive Dickason notes, “the pressure of incoming settlers made officials move quickly to force land surrender in situations bereft of equality- officials seem to have regarded the exercise as little more than a formality” made after the federal government had already promised Icelandic migrants the land. The band’s claims to land and the marginal status offered by treaties were erased for the sake of bureaucratic expediency demanded by the arrival of settlers. After their exclusion from official channels for redress, they were finally forced to disperse and join newly formed reserves in the region following the onset of Icelandic-introduced smallpox, which killed approximately 10% of the Icelanders and 70% of the Sandy Bar Band during the winter of 1876-7, including those buried at Nes.

The use of settler bodies in Aboriginal displacement was a sometimes very intimate and direct affair, as evident in Sandy Bar Chief Ramsay’s discovery that Icelandic settlers had moved onto the land surrounding his camp and garden plot while he was away on a hunting trip. Far from popular depictions of vacant prairies and noble pioneers, this skirmish between Ramsay and the Icelandic settlers he attempted to evict and the loss of his wife and children in the ensuing smallpox epidemic further illuminates the central role of migrant settlers in the violent and/or biopolitical displacement of First Nations people.

…Three settlers rowed across the creek to their work. Ramsay was awaiting them with an angry look, and when they attempted to land he pushed the boat out again, making it very clear by his actions that he was forbidding them to step ashore… the three put into shore a second time, and once again Ramsay shoved the boat away, but the third time Ólafur walked to the bow with an axe and instructed the others to row in. They succeeded in getting ashore…

517 Olive Dickason as quoted in Brydon, “Dreams and Claims,” 175.
519 Thorleifur Jóakimsson, Brot af Landnámssögu Nýja Íslands, (Winnipeg: 1919), as translated in Gerrard, Icelandic River Saga, 27.
While this Icelandic account emphasizes settler bravado, or the often referenced “pioneer spirit,” other narratives express concern over the “restlessness of the Indians and the half-breeds,” particularly the recent armed conflicts over land and rights such as the very recent Riel Rebellion and the Battle of Little Bighorn.\(^{520}\) Like other migrant settlers, Icelanders were very cognizant of and dependant on the violent repression of organized Aboriginal resistance. Thorstína Walters writes that at least on one occasion Icelanders travelling from Manitoba to a new settlement in North Dakota avoided a potentially violent confrontation with a large group of First Nations men gathered on the prairies. Icelanders were terrified of the men in the recent wake of Custer’s defeat at Little Bighorn and hid for hours in the tall marshland grass until they realized that the group had disbanded. According to one man, the Icelanders had been spared by virtue of their likeness to local militia members who were notoriously “quick on the trigger” in enforcing new legislation in the wake of the Battle at Little Big Horn that prohibited “Indians [from] gathering in large groups on the Prairies.”\(^{521}\)

This account, as well as the story of John Ramsay and the Icelanders armed with an axe, speak to two crucial and historically intertwined processes: the relationship between migrant success and survival, and the violent suppression of First Nations as well as the lack of distinction between the armed, violent enforcers of colonial boundaries and the colonially sanctioned bodies who maintained them, particularly since migrant settlers could potentially invoke a military presence. As Brydon notes, representatives from the Icelandic group notified Lieutenant-Governor Morris of competing claims to the land and its resources between the Icelanders and the Sandy Bar Band. In a letter dated August 3, 1875, they noted that band members were “contemplating a settlement on…the very spot which we have selected as the nucleus of our settlement” and asked whether the government could establish “some very distinct and clearly defined line of division [that] could be adopted and enforced.”\(^{522}\) While such official reports arguably represent only the actions of the Icelandic community leadership, the role of individual settlers who did not participate in the negotiation of claims, including women and children, must also be examined. As Eyal Weizman asserts in his discussion of

---

\(^{520}\) Walters, Modern Sagas, 63.

\(^{521}\) Walters, Modern Sagas, 63.

\(^{522}\) Letter dated August 3 1875, Morris Papers, Provincial Archives of Manitoba, MG12 BI 1066, as quoted in Brydon, “Dreams and Claims,” 171.
Israeli suburbs, settler bodies and the settler gaze can be “hijacked for strategic and geopolitical aims.”\(^{523}\) This use of the home, including settler living room windows, yards, roofs, and sewage as boundary markers and points of surveillance, speaks to the role of family life and family members in colonial claims to territory. Yet how do reports of settlers seeing spectres of violence and displacement complicate the separation between migration and colonialism? According to community members, who haunts spaces in New Iceland and why? How has the idea of haunting shaped their observances of claims to land?

The extensive archive of Icelandic hjátru narratives from the Icelandic-Canadian community reveals that while Trausti’s dream may have emerged as a popular public narrative in the twentieth century, it was by no means the only story that Icelanders told about First Nations trauma, the smallpox epidemic, and affiliated burial grounds. Brydon and Swyripa’s work are representative of the growth of scholarship on commemoration and the cemetery in Canadian history, but this scholarship often focuses on the graves of publically-recognized figures. Indeed, Betsy Ramsay herself appears in the John Ramsay dream narrative as little more than a location, rather than as an individual, whose body deserves recognition primarily because she is the wife of an important chief. Swyripa argues that Icelanders are unique amongst Canadian Scandinavian communities for their usage of cemeteries as “group symbols [they] incorporate into community ritual.”\(^{524}\) Yet her analysis of such sites of pilgrimage examines only the somewhat ambivalent recognition of the graves of Sigtryggur Jónasson, founder of New Iceland, and the reknowned poet, Stephan G. Stephansson.\(^{525}\) Still, the sheer number of stories about Nes alone reveals that community members responded to the traumatic history of the epidemic and its everyday victims in a range of ways. Many of these narratives suggest that the epidemic and the death of Icelanders and Band members alike maintained a painful, unredeemed presence in popular community imagination. Magnús Hallgrímsson, a local farmer, inexplicably decided to build his new house overtop of the smallpox cemetery only ten years after the epidemic, and reportedly even used the log markers on the graves in the construction of his house. Hallgrímsson reportedly referred to his new homestead as both


\(^{524}\) Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 321.

\(^{525}\) Swyripa, *Storied Landscapes*, 321-3.
Graftarnes (Burial Point) and Náströnd (Corpse Beach).\textsuperscript{526} As other Icelanders knew, “Náströnd” was one of the grizzliest settings in the Norse Age narrative \textit{The Prose Edda}. In sharp contrast to the public celebration of Vinland in Anglo-oriented spectacles, Hallgrimsson invoked the Edda’s description of Náströnd as the site of “a great hall of evil” where the bodies of perjurers, murders, and seducers a hall were torn apart by wolves\textsuperscript{527} alongside “rivers of venom.”\textsuperscript{528} Community members viewed Hallgrimsson’s usage of the space with a mixture of fear and dismay, and reports of hauntings spread after he died in the house a few years later in 1890. The farmer had succumbed to a ruptured abscess on his neck\textsuperscript{529} related to cancer and, according to local accounts, was discovered dead in the house in a pool of his own blood.

Most of the stories that Hallfreiður Órn Eiríksson and Olga María Franzdóttir recorded about the site deal with the inability of travelers and renters to stay in the house and the appearance of ghosts. Some accounts simply state that men who tried to stay in the house came banging on the doors of neighbouring homes “snow white,” looking for shelter, and unwilling to speak about their experiences in the middle of the night.\textsuperscript{530} Tómas Jónasson was a devoted sceptic who lived close to Nes and chose to ignore local warnings and walked past the house at night on his way home. When Jónasson looked over at the house he saw “six black horses coming out from around the house” though none of the neighbours owned black horses.\textsuperscript{531} Guttormor Guttormsson, who also lived beside Nes recalled that “I never saw anything unusual there, but that might have been because I never dared go near the place once evening approached.”\textsuperscript{532} Bergþóra Sigurðsson recalled that an old woman who lived across the river

\begin{thebibliography}{9}
\bibitem{Gerrard1916} Gerrard, \textit{Icelandic River Saga}, 152.
\bibitem{Hallgrimsson1916} Hallgrimsson also probably used this reference due to the large population of timber wolves around this area. There are no wolves in Iceland and those around New Iceland would have been the first that migrants would have heard or seen outside of references in the \textit{Prose Edda}.
\bibitem{Gerrard1916} Gerrard, \textit{Icelandic River Saga}, 317.
\bibitem{HallgrimurStadfeldt1916} Hallgrimur Stadfeldt, “Rauðar eða brúnar kindur styppast út um glugga á húsinn á Nesi.” (Red children pouring out of the windows of the house at Nes.) As published by Eiríksson, \textit{Sögur Úr Vesturheimi}, 516.
\bibitem{BergþóraSigurðsson1916} Bergþóra Sigurðsson, “Reimt í húsi hjá indjánagrafreit á Nesí við Íslendingafljót” (Haunted in a house by an indin graveyard at Nes on Icelandic River,) as published in Eiríkson, \textit{Sögur Úr Vesturheimi}, 517-520, 518.
\bibitem{Guttormson1916} Guttormson, as quoted by Gerrard, \textit{Icelandic River Saga}, 152.
\end{thebibliography}
from Hallgrímson’s house saw so many strange things at the house that she “splashed her eyes with holy water every time she went to church.”

Some of the stories from Nes focus on the ghosts of Icelanders buried on the site, but stories of First Nations ghosts and graves receive more attention. Icelandic ghosts often appear in connection with the house built over top of the graves, though not to the exclusion of First Nations figures. Jóhann Stadfeld decided to stay in the house but told his neighbours that he was forced out by ghosts. Stadfeld recalled that he saw “gruesome” things in the house, including the figures of bearded Icelandic men crawling out of the cellar. Community members have also long claimed that the site is haunted by a “white lady,” who locals claimed appeared as recently as 2007. As many as eighty Icelanders are buried at Nes, but community narratives often declare that there are under one dozen Icelandic graves at the site. For example, Bergljót Sigurdsson, who grew up on a neighbouring farm asserted that at Nes “were buried many Indians and eight Icelanders.” The lack of emphasis on Icelandic graves and ghosts at Nes illustrates that the traumatic memories that fuel ghost stories about the site often focus on the unresolved deaths and claims of First Nations victims.

While Brydon and other post-colonial scholars have challenged the archetype of the “Indian ghost” in popular North American lore as part of a larger fossilization of the colonial past, the appearance of First Nations in Icelandic hjátru narratives must be understood as part of a distinct oral tradition that reflects how Icelanders discussed traumatic incidents. The physical and spiritual power of ghosts in Icelandic narrative traditions imbues the appearance of First Nations figures in hjátru stories with specific attributes. Icelanders, for example, often respected the claims of ghosts to certain territories. Hallgrimsson, Jónasson, and several startled boarders may have ventured onto the land around Nes, but other community members only went there during the day or avoided it altogether because “it was a real ghost den.” Similarly, the appearance of Ramsay’s ghost to Trausti Vigfússson has resulted in the intergenerational maintenance of the graves of he and his wife, the spaces most closely

533 Sigurdsson, Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 177.
534 Sigurdsson, “Reimt í húsi hjá indjánagrafreit á Nesi við Íslendingafljót” (Hauntings in a house by an indian graveyard at Nes on Icelandic River,) as published in Eirikson, Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 517-520, 518.
536 Jóhanna Thórarinson, as recorded by Eiriksson, Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 377.
associated with his ghost. The graves are not situated in a park, but are in the middle of a farm field outside of Riverton and are only accessible by foot or by truck. Nonetheless, the local farmer who owns this field carefully avoids the graves and the surrounding area when he ploughs each spring.

This observance of boundaries established by ghosts suggests that hjátru narratives offered a forum for critiques of and challenges to colonial land claims. In keeping with the physicality of ghosts in Icelandic hjátru belief, these stories often describe a direct and sometimes violent response to trespasses on haunted land. In one narrative from Manitoba, an Icelandic man was violently attacked by the ghost of a First Nations man. A party of Icelandic fishermen was caught in a storm on Lake Winnipeg and were forced to take shelter in an abandoned house that many believed was haunted by “an Indian or a half-breed.” The men were concerned about the stories they had heard about the shack, but one man said he wasn’t afraid and promptly went in and fell asleep. But soon the man “start[ed] moaning so loudly that the other called out to him, and it didn’t seem to do any good, until he stepped down and grabbed him and shook him, then he came to and said it had seemed to him as if someone had lain on top of him, as if her were being strangled.” The man who had fallen asleep called the experience “one of the greatest trials he had ever endured.” Afterwards all the men in the group “put on their clothes and stayed up for what was left of the night.”

In many accounts surrounding Nes, community members describe being haunted by First Nations children who had died in the smallpox epidemic. Guttormur Guttormson grew up at Viðivellir, a farm next to Nes, and reported that as a child he encountered the ghost of a First Nations boy of his own age in his house. Guttormur approached the boy but when he spoke to him “he didn’t say anything and did look at him, just looked out the window.” In 1910 or 1911 Tómas Jónasson’s family at Engimýri was disturbed when two men who were boarding with them asked why there were so many “Indian children” at Nes. The two men, who were English boarders and unfamiliar with the history of the house, said that they had seen about fourteen native children crawling out of its windows and running around in the snow outside.

537 “Man attacked in haunted shack” as translated by Einarsson, Icelandic-Canadian Oral Narratives, 290.
538 Sigurðsson, “Guttormur Guttormsson sér indjánadreng sem hverfur síðan” (Guttormur Guttormson sees an indian ghost that then vanishes) as published by Eiríksson, Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 520.
When community members went to check on the house they found it empty with no footprints in the snow around the yard.  

Stories about the appearance of First Nations children illustrated both the disturbance and concern that some Icelandic Canadians felt about the site and their proximity to the devastating displacement of First Nations and their families more broadly. Many community members also recalled seeing the ghost of a young First Nations girl who sat on three graves and refused to vacate the site. Women in the community even expressed concern for the well-being of this particular ghost, but local narratives suggest that sympathy for the victims of the epidemic and colonial displacement did not rectify the situation. One woman who wasn’t afraid of the ghost “always put flowers on these graves, but the ghost of the little Indian girl still sat on them.” Though many of the First Nations ghosts who appeared around Nes were children, an analysis of hjátru narratives reveals that Icelanders considered child ghosts no less powerful than adult ghosts. Indeed, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, powerful and violent intergenerational ghosts, such as skotta and móri, most often appeared in the form of children.

The concentration of First Nations ghosts on this site, including references to it being a “real ghost den” imply that Nes was a significant source of concern for community members. Narratives about Nes and other sites linked to colonial trauma illustrate that Icelandic Canadians were, in some cases, highly cognizant of those histories long after settlement. The continual erosion of the cemetery at Nes into the present also meant that community members were reminded of the epidemic through both narrative and physical evidence. Bergljót Sigurdson grew up close to the site and recalled “we were deeply affected when erosion caused the bank to cave in exposing parts of the skeletons… some were carried away by the river, others my father reburied and I know that he did that with many special thoughts.”

This focus on the disturbing presence of First Nations ghosts revealed that Icelanders understood Nes as part of an unresolved injustice that was capable of haunting, and potentially harming community members for many generations. This ability of the ghost to represent

---

539 Hallgrímur Stadfeldt, “Rauðar eða brúnar kindur styptast út um glugga á húsinu á Nesi.” (Red children pouring out of the windows of the house at Nes.” As published by Eiríksson, Sögur Úr Vesturheimi, 516.

540 Bergþóra Sigurðsson, “Reimt í húsi hjá indjánagrafreit á Nesi við Íslendingafljót,” 519.

541 Sigurdson, “Memories of Father,” 2.
colonial trauma as an enduring and disruptive force offers important insight into the uneven commemorative terrain in the Canadian West. As discussed in chapter four, the depiction of nineteenth-century migrants as quasi-refugees has been popular with Anglo and ethnic communities on the Canadian prairies. The popularity of this narrative is evident in the celebration of ethnic European trauma in more recent commemorative campaigns of settlement and the suppression or reframing of those histories that rightly identify the predominantly economic motivations behind their ancestor’s decision to move to Canada. As Kirby Miller writes of Irish Canadians, the vast majority of whom migrated as middle-class Protestant farmers before the Irish Famine, stories of exile may not reflect the historical reality of individual Irish families, but still perform complex cultural functions. As described in part in the previous chapter, historical trauma is rearranged and re-performed by heritage agencies and blends into personal and familial memories of migration and settlement. Such campaigns attempt to fuse family ties to the powerful and significant process of commemorating and celebrating settler trauma. As the work of Karen Selick illustrates, traumatic settlement and colonial memory can be antithetical.

The land I live on, according to local history books, was never occupied by aboriginals. My ancestors came to Canada early in this century with little more than the clothes on their backs. They survived by hard work. They never stole anything from anyone. There must be millions of other Canadians with similar backgrounds. Taxing us to compensate the aboriginals for past wrongs, suspected or proven, is not correcting an injustice—it’s inflicting a new one.

Such sentiment illustrates that memories of migrant settler trauma or hardship are not the sole possession of the ancestor and can be invoked and employed in the present to claim status as a Canadian nation builder while simultaneously distancing themselves from the colonial project. Rather than simply recalling a family’s traumatic past, the complex origins and loaded usage of “memories” of trauma— that is, memories that are shaped by multicultural narratives, visual culture and regimes of meaningful trauma, must be understood, in this case, as a tool for consolidating power.

---

Wulf Kansteiner writes that “memory is valourized where identity is problematized,” a relationship that is particularly evident in the subtly problematic and inadequate discussion of colonialism in multicultural history campaigns. Rather than pursuing an anti-racist approach to historical understanding that critically engages with the endurance of colonial structures in contemporary Canada, multicultural historical campaigns have instead complicated the relationship between colonialism and nationalism by recasting historical colonial agents and figures as co-victims in a distant Canadian past in which everyone suffered and, consequently, deserve to be commemorated. The use of trauma in these campaigns and in popular historical narratives is particularly significant, given the way in which traumatic memory is formed. To place this process in the larger body of scholarship surrounding memory and trauma, this fixation with settler hardship and trauma functions in a way similar to post-traumatic stress syndrome, which some scholars contend can address the issue of intergenerational traumatic memory. Such studies link the obsessive re-performance of traumatic incidents by sufferers of this syndrome to the unique way in which the brain records and processes traumatic incidents. Ruth Leys writes that “the experience of the trauma, fixed or frozen in time, refuses to be represented as past, but is perpetually re-experienced in a painful disassociated, traumatic present.” Central to this understanding of trauma is the failure of the brain to successfully integrate the traumatic incident as a normal memory. Traumatic memories and the landscapes through which they are imagined and remembered refuse the traditional historicity of the past, occupying instead a painful present that must be repeatedly addressed. Elements of such a process do not necessarily require the first hand experience of trauma, but can also respond to the witnessing of trauma. Kansteiner argues that visuals can play a particularly potent role in the adoption of second hand trauma by collapsing the gap between first and second hand experience. Visions of migrants in multicultural media campaigns stand in for the absent ancestor, potentially reminding audience members of exiting family history narratives or creating new visions of ancestral experience.

Analysing the popularity of traumatic migrant settler histories offers insight into the ways that images and “memories” of traumatized bodies are organized within larger regimes of “meaningful” and “meaningless” history. Beyond museum displays and film, landscapes and the material world relate to the traumatic past in uneven ways, both enshrining and protecting spaces and bodies related to productive trauma, and containing and suppressing those from less redemptive pasts. The centrality of the migrant/settler in imagining the Canadian past and the land claims of settler Canada speaks to the importance of those physical sites associated with their bodies and experiences of trauma. Space plays a particularly important role in the recognition of and respect for the suffering migrant settler body, even in death, evident in the creation of monuments and careful lawn maintenance of migrant settler cemeteries on the prairies. Maintained migrant settler cemeteries and monuments must then be understood as something more than spaces that simply contain of bones; these spaces are also sites of power with complex effects. Such spaces provide nationalist histories of settlement with discreet spaces that are easily invoked as references to the sacrifices made by settlers. They may also be performing a merging and naturalization of the migrant body with land in the Canadian West that reflects Terry Goldie’s discussion of “indigenization,” or the process “through which the ‘settler’ population attempts to become as though indigenous, as though ‘born’ of the land.”547 Additionally, the bodies contained in settler graveyards and monuments also function as a point of origin while also reminding visitors of the role of endangerment and death in the settler will to “make live.” The migrant settler cemetery may be employed, then, as an expression of both victory and tragedy in which migrant settler bodies are privileged in a way that, in public at least, absolves migrant settler Canada of any association with unfair/racist privilege in Canadian colonial history.

The “forgetting” of the first two Icelandic children born in Canada described in the previous chapter and the migrant graves at Nes are more atypical in multicultural educational and commemorative heritage campaigns. The iconic place of Irish tragedy on the North American landscape is well-represented at federally-funded historic sites of trauma such as the Irish Memorial National Historic Site at the former Grosse Ile quarantine station and cemetery

where it is estimated that 5,424 Irish victims of typhoid fever were buried during an epidemic in 1847. Although the site was initially marked by a commemorative plaque in 1974, the federal government accepted a 1984 recommendation to develop the site and transform it into a national historic site in keeping with a new mandate for the commemoration of “the peopling of Canada through immigration as a theme of great national significance” and “the number and quality of the in situ resources on Grosse Île related to the theme of immigration.”

The site, which now features a multimedia exhibit in its old disinfection centre, a tourist trolley, interpretive trails and a series of monuments, welcomed close to 30,000 visitors in 1999, two-thirds of whom visited during the height of Canada’s tourist season in July and August.

In addition to federally funded historical sites of trauma, volunteer committees in numerous communities have begun to reclaim and care for previously abandoned and neglected sites. Previously relegated to physically unmarked or impermanently marked corners of municipal cemeteries, farmyards and fields, sites of migrant settler child trauma and death have re-emerged into the public consciousness and commemorative landscape of many rural ethnic communities on the prairies. Nes itself is currently undergoing a community-initiated transformation into a heritage park. This project will intervene in bank erosion and protect additional graves on the site while reburying the remains of those exposed by the river. It will also convert the currently vacant grassy fields into a well-kept cemetery featuring a proposed monument of a woman cradling a baby and create a corresponding heritage walking and bicycle trail that will open the site to tourists and community members. This site, once relegated to the margins of community memory due to its painful contradiction of celebratory narratives of pioneer endurance and success, has re-emerged as an inhabitable and memorable place, evident in renewed visits to the site by the townspeople on hikes and picnics, cut grass, a fundraising campaign and plans for a new annual commemorative event.

The unevenness evident in Icelandic-Canadian commemoration is not atypical, particularly on the prairies. Other, previously forgotten sites of migrant settler mass trauma

have also emerged as publicly recognized and historically significant sites in community and state heritage initiatives. Like Nes, alternating bouts of amnesia and commemoration have characterized community responses to Olha, Manitoba’s Ukrainian Pioneer Mass Grave Site, a small clearing where forty two Ukrainian children and three women were buried in 1899 after succumbing to scarlet fever shortly after their arrival in Manitoba. Swyripa notes that the struggling group was refused help by settlers in nearby Strathclair, who were afraid of contagion. According to Manitoba Culture, Heritage and Tourism, the burial site was not marked as an official cemetery and became private property when it was included as part of a larger homestead grant shortly after the outbreak. “The unfortunate settler who was allotted the homestead upon which this tragedy occurred, could not bear the sight of the numerous tiny wooden crosses” and left the land to a new owner who was unaware of its history. The community commemorated the space sporadically in response to enduring private memories of the epidemic and community anniversary celebrations, including the erection of a fence and birch cross in 1915, which was finally replaced with a small cement marker as part of the fiftieth anniversary of Ukrainian settlement in Canada in 1941.

Fifty years later the site was formally recognized by the R.M. of Rossburn and a large commemoratory cairn and cross were commissioned to mark the site in 1991. In contrast to earlier responses to the site, these new permanent monuments are also promoted by the province and the region for tourism. The power of this new commemorative response to evoke emotion over one hundred years after the epidemic is evident in the careful maintenance of the surrounding grounds and the occasional appearance of Ukrainian flags and flowers at the site. Corresponding monuments to additional children in Shoal Lake and Strathclair, Manitoba, were erected in 1991 and 1999, respectively. For communities such as Strathclair, this re-dedication included reclaiming marginalized space, figures and histories and implanting them into the larger historical memory of the community. While the graves of the community’s Anglo victims of the 1899 Scarlet Fever and 1918 Spanish Flu epidemic are marked with sometimes ornate stone headstones in the heart of the cemetery, the Ukrainian children born to poor parents who succumbed to the 1899 epidemic were buried at the edge of the cemetery in a mass

550 Swyripa, Wedded to the Cause, 279.
grave without a permanent marker. The Sandy Lake Centennial Committee, a local group comprised of volunteers from the community, erected a gravestone engraved with a red, white, and black band of traditional Ukrainian embroidery and poetry by Taras Shevchenko to commemorate the loss (Figure 5.6). The monument was unveiled in 1999 during a ceremony featuring performances by women and children in Ukrainian dress. Despite the fact that the community members interred here had only arrived on the prairies within weeks or days of their deaths, they are not simply the subject of expressions of loss but are part of the community’s claim to a new “beloved land.” The verse on monument not only speaks to the enduring memory of loss within the community, but also to the importance of that loss to a Ukrainian-Canadian sense of place.

If death should come then let me rest
Up in a simple mound
Encircled by the boundless plains
Of my beloved land.552

The omission and commemoration of settler child death is not a tradition that is necessarily consciously dedicated to the colonial project. Such practices may actually create tense, unstable responses to celebratory narratives of settlement and the “birth” of the Canadian West, but they are now often understood and reconciled within the nation-building narrative of settler trauma. From Grosse Ile to Olha, “recovered” and maintained sites and stories of migrant settler trauma subsume these potentially subversive spaces and histories into redemptive, highly memorable nationalist narratives that leave colonial structures of power and claims to land intact. While these, often personally and community-funded553 commemorative projects speak to poignant attempts to reconcile enduring memories of trauma, it is the corresponding popular rejection of mourning and the recognition for the victims of colonial violence that speaks to their complex function.

552 Taras Shevchenko as quoted by the Sandy Lake Centennial Committee, (Monument) Bend Cemetery, Strathclair, Manitoba, 1999.
553 Monuments such as the Jón Ólafur Jóhannsson rock at Willow Point, Manitoba were commissioned by individual families, in this case, the Arnes family of Gimi, Manitoba. Others, such as the Olha and Strathclair monuments were created via a mixture of provincial and municipal support along with community fundraising initiatives.
Similar sites of First Nations child mortality in Western Manitoba have been excluded from official commemorative campaigns based on their contentious and disruptive potential to challenge redemptive nationalist narratives. With the exception of Batoche, few major heritage sites that deal with First Nations history in the Canadian West address the issue of colonial trauma since 1885. Instead, they favour historical sites that reflect “traditional” First Nations culture prior to the twentieth century, including the Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump in Alberta and the Lower Fort Garry fur trading post in St. Andrews, Manitoba. This preference for sites detached from more recent episodes of colonial violence accounts for the wide-scale abandonment of residential school sites. Approximately fifty kilometres from Olha’s monument to Ukrainian victims of scarlet fever stands the crumbling edifice of the district’s residential school in Birtle where over 50% of the First Nations student body succumbed to tuberculosis between 1912 and 1917.\(^{554}\)

As a site of mass trauma, this space as well as the estimated twenty-eight unmarked mass grave sites on residential school property in the Canadian West, have been largely neglected by heritage agencies. While the land at Nes, Birtle, and Olha all speak to the devastating historical impact of communicable disease on children, Birtle is one of the dozens of unmarked mass-grave sites on residential school sites in the Canadian West. These sites have not been claimed as funded or maintained heritage sites.\(^{555}\)

Other schools in Manitoba such as the Brandon Indian Residential School, one of the largest in Canada, have been demolished, while others have been left to slowly collapse.

The First Nations community is in the midst of instituting a public grieving and reconciliation process. This process is evident in the successful pursuit of a formal apology from the federal government for residential school survivors in June 2008, plans for the development of the first Residential School Museum in Portage La Prairie, the endurance of familial commemoration at school sites, and a series of media reports on the issue, including the special four-part series on residential school graves published in *Grassroots News* in 2007.

---

\(^{554}\) Maureen Katherine Lux, *Medicine that walks: Disease, Medicine, and Canadian Plains Native People, 1880-1940* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2001), 126.

\(^{555}\) Although the Birtle school site currently stands vacant and has not been maintained for years the residential school survivor-led group, Anishinabe Atisokaywin Project, announced plans to purchase the site and eventually turn it into cultural centre in 2006. Alexandra Paul, “Aboriginal Apartheid: Residential schools haunt a community decades after their demise,” *Winnipeg Free Press* October 22, 2006.
to name a few.\footnote{Len Kruzenga, “Lost Spirits: cemeteries, graves at former Residential Schools forgotten and neglected,” \textit{Grassroots News}, February 20, 2007, 20.} The need for the recovery, protection, and reconciliation of First Nations sites of trauma are evident in manifestations of popular personal and intergenerational memories of residential schools, including frequent references by First Nations people to unusually vivid memories, open wounds, and feeling “haunted” by the past.\footnote{See for example interviews with residential school survivors regarding the deaths of childhood friends and siblings, CBC Television, “Hidden Graves,” Stolen Children (Special News Feature), \textit{The National}. Originally aired June 1, 2008. Available online at \url{http://www.cbc.ca/national/blog/special_feature/stolen_children/hidden_graves.html} Accessed 08-07-08} Much of the testimony by residential school survivors and their descendants surrounding the 2008 apology illuminated the ways in which residential school child trauma refuses historicity, occupying instead a painful present in which many experience reoccurring and intrusive thoughts about children and family members who experienced trauma or died at residential school. Beyond the reconciliation of painful family and community histories, these responses to the legacy of residential schools have also begun to imagine an anti-colonial historical landscape that will contest and, arguably, ultimately disrupt, the migrant settler-centric mentality above and below ground on the prairies.

Child mortality may offer a slightly morbid venue for a discussion of multiculturalism, landscape, and memory on the prairies, yet it is the power of these memories that speaks to its importance and critical potential. In \textit{Precarious Life}, Judith Butler invokes the story of Antigone, in which King Creon refuses to permit the burial of the dead and commands the execution of mourners. Defying Creon’s orders and the authority of the state, the heroine Antigone buries her dead brother, Polynices who had been left exposed on a battlefield. “Antigone,” writes Butler, “risking death herself by burying her brother against the edict of Creon, exemplified the political risks in defying the ban against public grief during times of increased sovereign power and hegemonic national unity.”\footnote{Judith Butler, \textit{Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence}, (New York: Verso, 2004), 67.} She argues that such bans on mourning, including the barring of Iraqi casualty photographs in the United States, must be understood as an expression of power that attempts to contain the subversive potential of mourning as a transformative process. Central to the subversive potential of mourning, writes Butler, is the act of looking into the face of the Other, a process that invokes within us a command not to injure or kill others by creating a potentially productive sense of vulnerability.
in which we become aware of our own capacity to be injured or killed. In confronting an absence of recognition for traumatic histories, that is, the hiding of the face of the traumatized other, Butler asks: “what is the relation between the violence by which these ungrievable lives were lost and the prohibition on their public grievability? Are the violence and the prohibition both permutations of the same violence?”

Paul Gilroy notes that meaningful multiculturalism must traverse “bloody histories” to address the power structures that facilitate racism’s tenacious grasp. In the Canadian West, meaningful multiculturalism must also untangle the ways in which those bloody histories are organized, particularly since the fixation with settler trauma often surfaces in rebuttals of First Nations claims to suffering and demands for reconciliation. Visual and geographical historical landscapes constructed or influenced by Canadian multicultural narratives of the European quasi-refuge and redemptive migrant-settler trauma radically depopulates the historical category of “colonial agents.” While their role as colonial agents may seldom appear in multicultural history campaigns, the primacy of migrant settler supremacy is subtly reinforced by creating a new powerful vision of the migrant settler as the subject of redeemable trauma and a grievable, but equitable past.

These new media and landscape based visions of trauma attempts to harness the obsessive contours of traumatic memory, as discussed earlier, to nationalist images of the past, by encouraging the descendents of ethnic migrant settlers to claim for themselves the image of an ancestral quasi-refugee identity. Such an image neglects Canadian colonial history and legacy while creating competing narratives of dispossession and trauma. These sites are indicative of the role of traumatic memory and affective paternalism in legitimating settler land claims, but they also construct both a physical and an ancestral claim to colonial territory by establishing a persistent and arguably irrevocable white presence on the land. This biological, political, and territorial lineage is further legitimated by a Canadian colonial chronology and geography that privilege histories inscribed with Euro-Canadian notions of development, settlement, and permanence. As Terry Goldie asserts, history before a literate colonial presence occupies an alternate chronology, one resembling what Frantz Fanon terms “an unchanging

---

559 Butler, Precarious Life, 67.
dream.” Fanon writes that the vision of the settler is encased in an alternate view of time: “the settler makes history; his life is an epoch, an Odyssey. He is the absolute beginning… he is the unceasing cause.”

In her analysis of the John Ramsay narrative, Brydon contends that the Icelandic-Canadian community has long envisioned its own history as part of larger narratives of “community victory over adversity.” Yet, the substantial body of hjátru narratives in the community illustrates that ethnic groups view their relationship to the colonial past in culturally-specific ways. Rather than attempting to suppress or downplay their relationship to the displacement and deaths of Sandy Bar Band members, hjátru narratives illustrate that migrants also felt haunted by their proximity colonial violence. In the larger context of Icelandic superstitious belief, the appearance of First Nations ghosts signalled not a separation between a fossilized indigenous past and a progressive settler present, but a damaging and unsettling inheritance for migrants. Haunting, then, was not part of the silencing of native voices, but was part of a culturally-specific response from Icelanders that illustrated their understanding of such spaces as autonomous, open wounds that could not be silenced.

In his painting, *The Three Sisters*, artist Anders Swanson envisions the prairies as dominated by an often hidden, but incredibly complex underground landscape, home to a dense and diverse population to which the three sisters, the only live bodies on the canvas who occupy a mere sixteenth of its surface, are unaware (Figure 5.7). It is this vision, as well as the landscape at Nes and other unmarked, unmaintained gravesites on the prairies, that prompts us to reconsider our relationship to the landscapes we cannot see. Reframing the history of the prairies in accordance with landscapes above and below ground disrupts the silences upon which the major Western Canadian myths and chronologies of colonization depend. By reimagining underground landscapes in more archival terms, as complex spaces capable of demanding a sometimes painful but crucial historical democracy, commemorative campaigns in Canada can move towards a more meaningful multiculturalism able to unsettle the nationalist historical narratives that attempt to contain or forget such spaces.

---

561 Franz Fanon, as quoted in Goldie, *Fear and Temptation*, 171.
562 Fanon in *Fear and Temptation*, 171.
Mbembe’s assertion regarding the skeleton’s stubborn will to signify speaks to the possibilities of commemorative campaigns on the prairies, the history of which suggests the instability of the migrant settler-centric landscape. The parameters of memory fluctuate across time and space as a result of multiple factors, including assimilation, prescribed cultural notions of mourning and meaningful death, and the desire to conceal painful pasts. Yet, as the erosion at Nes and the power of traumatic memories that contradict nationalist historical narratives suggest, underground landscapes, bodies, and histories also have the power to make themselves visible in disruptive ways. Such landscapes suggest that concealment and forgetting are potentially impermanent states and pushes towards the reconciliation of pasts constructed above ground and the complex archive below.
Conclusion

On March 30, 1949 plumes of tear gas sailed over the head of the Jón Sigurðsson statue that stood in front of the Icelandic Parliament in Reykjavík (Figure 6.1). The gas and groups of club-swinging policemen quickly dispersed the thousands of Icelanders who had gathered around the statue to protest the establishment of an American NATO military base on Icelandic soil. The Jón Sigurðsson statue was perhaps the best location to take action against what protesters saw as an infringement upon Icelandic sovereignty. Jón was the leader of the Icelandic independence movement and an ardent and ultimately successful activist against Danish colonial rule in Iceland. He was a no less salient figure for Icelandic North Americans who honoured him by erecting a second cast of the same statue on the grounds of the Manitoba Legislature in 1921. Though first generation Icelandic Canadians had devotedly supported the independence movement at home by funding major initiatives such as the establishment of Eimskip, the first Icelandic owned shipping company that helped end Danish shipping dominance in 1914, they remained strangely silent on the unprecedented violence and public anger involved in the NATO riot. The crumbling Icelandic-Canadian left, the aftermath of intense wartime Canadian nationalism, and the anxiety surrounding the spread of communism and militarization in the Cold War period all firmly aligned most Icelandic-Canadian political sympathies with North American defense. As the Jón Sigurdsson IODE’s fundraising campaign to purchase a bomber for the Allied Forces in 1941 illustrates, North American political, economic, and military concerns also shaped Icelandic-Canadian organizations that honoured the independence leader.

Though they had once functioned as symbols of unity, the political locations of the two Jón Sigurðsson statues in Reykjavík and Winnipeg became opposing poles around which Icelanders on either side of the ocean organized in the postwar era. As the bulk of the Icelandic-born and Icelandic-speaking generations passed away in the mid-twentieth century so too did memories of lived experience and personal relationships to the homeland. This decline coincided with the rise of a sense of Icelandic-ness that was more intensely mediated and shaped by North American national identities. As internal and external leaders have continually asserted in public speeches, being Icelandic was actually a reflection of Canadian pluralism, history, and progress and “the process of retention adaptation, and creation of new cultural values greatly contributes
to the material and spiritual enrichment of Canada and the building of a modern, strong and free nation of the American North.”\textsuperscript{564}

Almost fifty years after the NATO riot that provoked little response from their North American cousins, European Icelanders gathered once more in protest around the Jón Sigurðsson statue in Reykjavík. Protesters accused the reigning coalition government of negligence and corruption in the \textit{kreppa}, or the country’s banking crisis. The ongoing crisis, which began in October 2008, threatened to harness citizens with a massive public debt load, significantly increase unemployment, and cause currency deflation that might cost the homes of the many Icelanders with mortgages from international banks. Armed with pots and pans, signs, and bullhorns, protesters lit bonfires, faced more tear gas, and stormed the front doors of the parliament building by the statue. Protesters from the organization \textit{Neyðarstjórn kvenna} climbed up the base and dressed Reykjavík’s Jón Sigurðsson statue in a pink dress to draw attention to the pressures that the kreppa placed on women (Figure 6.2).\textsuperscript{565} The protests, also known as the “Saucepan Revolution,” culminated in the resignation of the elected government.

In contrast to the 1949 riots, when Icelandic Canadians had little access to images of anti-NATO protests, multiple images of the kreppa were broadcast to the migrant community. From Facebook albums, to blogs, to YouTube footage of Icelanders standing toe to toe with police in riot gear, the protesters who energetically photographed and filmed the clashes themselves largely defined the public image of the Saucepan Revolution (Figure 6.3). In contrast to the NATO riots, the collapse and ensuing protests also mobilized Icelandic Canadians who established funds for charities that promised to assist Icelanders affected by the kreppa’s social fallout. The Manitoba government also poured resources into proposals for an assisted migration program for Icelanders, hoping to attract a fresh generation of highly skilled, educated Europeans to the province.

Few prospective migrants have considered tracing their cousins’ footsteps to New Iceland, but the kreppa has shaped and intensified existing and emerging bonds between the two

\textsuperscript{564} Lindal, \textit{The Icelanders in Canada}, 77.
groups. Now deprived of the wealth it once enjoyed from its international banking system, Iceland has turned to tourism to create jobs. Since 2000, Icelandic companies have looked to the 90 000 Canadians who identify as Icelandic as a prime market. Companies such as Icelandair are now even more eager to further develop their emigrant homeland tourism market. Icelandair announced the creation of direct flights between Winnipeg and Reykjavik in 2010 to better facilitate access for Icelandic-Canadian travelers.

The direct flights between Iceland and Winnipeg have garnered considerable attention from the Manitoba community and marks the first time many Icelandic Canadians will visit Iceland. This pending mass “return” of Icelandic Canadians to Iceland marks a tremendous moment of possibility for both exchange and tension as distant cousins prepare to meet each other after a very eventful 135 years. European Icelanders hoping to reconnect through language, the cornerstone of modern Icelandic national identity, will be disappointed to find distant relatives from “Kanada” mustering only “vínarterta,” “pönnukökur,” and maybe “Gleðileg Jól” (Merry Christmas). Icelandic Canadians hoping to discover the overwhelmingly rural country that their forbearers left behind will undoubtedly find the modern urban architecture and culture of Reykjavik unfamiliar. Yet the issue of migration is a timely one. Emigration from Iceland has doubled in the past four years, and tourism, including ethnic homeland tourism, is a large component of the country’s recovery plan. Unlike other nineteenth-century Scandinavian communities in North America, the kreppa has also emerged in a period in which ties to Iceland are intensifying, due in part to the establishment of Icelandic consulates and marketing campaigns in North America in the wake of the 1000th anniversary celebrations of the Vinland Voyages in 2000, and the success of campaigns such as the Snorri Program, which partially funds the immersion of Icelandic-Canadian youth in Icelandic society. This project is in many respects, an attempt to explain and explore these differences between guests and hosts in a compelling transnational reunion that has been shaped by the political, economic, and cultural forces of the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries.

Existing works on Icelandic-Canadian historiography has provided solid coverage of the history of political, economic, and religious events, institutions, and personalities but often shies from descriptions of popular culture. Literary studies have attempted to locate shared cultural mentalities and symbolism, but too often represent the perspectives of the literate middle class,
particularly in the twentieth century. Such vantage points tend to focus on a small minority of influential authors, politicians, church leaders, members of formal Icelandic organizations and business people, while the lives of the vast majority of Icelanders in Canada has remained unexplored. Thanks to the extensive genealogical, biographical, and oral popular traditions in the community, historians have a wealth of rich and detailed resources for exploring Icelandic-Canadian popular culture, ranging from the preservation of narratives about single dreams experienced by a nineteenth-century community members, to rímur describing drunken nights of men who were relegated to partying in outhouses, to one Saskatchewan woman’s foray into cross-dressing for the sake of coffee. Yet such narratives, desires, and experiences fit poorly into or completely contradict the traditional definition of Icelandic culture, which emphasizes the love of language and literacy, loyalty, útprá (adventurousness), industriousness, and sobriety.

This dissertation is a response to the pressing need for a new cultural history of the Icelandic community, one that complicates the existing Canadian image of a nation-building community of pioneers and the Icelandic image of a rustic, linguistically unscathed time capsule or a fully assimilated, anglicized, and slightly bizarre remnant. Through my analysis of Icelandic-Canadian ethnoscapes, I have not attempted to construct a redemptive narrative of Icelandic migration to fit into either Canadian or Icelandic nationalist images of the past or present. Nationalist Canadian migration narratives have neglected the community’s inextricable relationship to colonialism as well as that cultural history of forms of expression deemed inauthentic or taboo. Conversely, Icelandic depictions of their North American counterparts seldom address the endurance of Icelandic identities after language loss, due to the centrality of language to modern Icelandic national identity and longstanding negative attitudes towards cultural and linguistic hybridity. The memoirs of migrants themselves, as well as familial narratives of maternal trauma similarly indicate that many migrants and their descendents sometimes feel ambiguous or even hostile towards the absorption of personal tragedy into nationalist heritage campaigns on either side of the ocean, particularly those that attempt to downplay or redeem difficult periods and events.

Methodology is central to writing a cultural history of a community that reflects popular ethnic culture without making claims to describing qualities or traditions that are innately “Icelandic” or “Canadian.” Studying the many physical and mental terrains through which
members of this migrant community expressed themselves and experienced life in Canada illuminates a continual process of construction and negotiation of Icelandic identities that varied broadly according to the gender and class of community members, as well as the periods and places they lived in. Though the culinary conservatism of the community illustrates that it is still possible to locate nineteenth-century practices that have changed very little in the past 135 years, a singular focus on unchanging cultural traits imported from Iceland would result in a study that neglected the vast majority of the community’s history and membership. Too often historians limit the history of “assimilated” Canadian ethnic groups, particularly Scandinavians, to a description of the transition from a largely European-born membership to one composed of predominantly anglicized, modern North American subjects in negative terms. Rather than approaching anglicization as the final stage of cultural degeneration and death, the cultural history of Icelandic Canada illustrates that anglicization was a complex, transformative process that had a range of impacts on different aspects of community life.

Understanding the cultural history of such communities requires attention to the role of the body and the senses in the experience of migration. Migrant narratives frequently reference sensations other than sight and sound in their descriptions of their lives in Canada and these perspectives reveal valuable and compelling information about the interplay between the body, space, and the material world in Canadian ethnic history. From the pervasive, nauseating smell of fish in early homes on the reserve, to the obsessive quest for freshly roasted coffee, to the intense feeling of cold around Lake Winnipeg in the winters, migrants encountered the New World through a range of senses that shaped how they felt and responded to their new environment. Bodies, especially women’s bodies, were also sites of conflict and tension in the community. As the “bald women epidemic” of 1924 and the TIME scandal surrounding the “unfriendliness” of Icelandic women in 1940 demonstrate, the female form was a highly politicized cornerstone of twentieth-century representations of the community. Yet, depictions of the female body during this period were never uniformly conservative. Women such as Sigrun Lindal and Margret Benediktsson played with gender norms and cultural symbolism to create more radical or relevant images of Icelandic womanhood that spoke to their own political views and aesthetic tastes. The private and public commemoration of settler women’s bodies on the prairies illustrates that women’s bodies can also be unsettling sites of commemoration and
In addition to studying “Icelandic things,” this study has also focused on the construction of cultural forms and forums deemed inauthentic, trivial, and taboo. Individuals and events such as Ólöf “the Eskimo” Krarer’s erroneous performances, the tumultuous parties at Saura Gísli’s Winnipeg boarding house, and the “bald head” of the Fjallkona in 1924 illustrate that Icelandic cultural spaces, spectacles, and claims often produced tension rather than cohesion. Referencing the often-stated reputation for stubbornness within the community, Jón Karl Helgason writes that conflict has cemented the community as much as it has acted as a divisive force. Tensions signal a process of negotiation as well as an opportunity to critically explore change in the cultural history of the community. More than the well-documented religious and political schisms that were expressed in sermons, speeches, and in print, Icelanders experienced, discussed, and negotiated the largest cultural shifts in more immediate and highly personal ways. Returning to the mediums through which they encountered life in Canada reveals the rich subtleties and the seminal forces that defined migrant life, as well as the terrains through which Icelandic-Canadian identity was produced.

Clothing shaped Icelandic experiences in both the new geographic and cultural terrain of the prairies. From the short life span of mittens worn by male labourers clearing the brush to the warm wool shawls that women transformed into clothing for their children, cloth retraces the contours of migrant bodies and labour in relation to early lived experiences of poverty, marginalization, disease, and cold. The community’s heavy reliance on First Nations clothing and economies and the central role of domestic service and urban life in the adoption of Anglo-Victorian dress similarly illuminate networks of intercultural exchange. Icelanders were subject to expressions of disdain and curiosity from their new Anglo neighbours, and experienced the alternating demands for assimilation and ethnic performance on the prairies through clothing. Clothing also played a crucial role in Icelanders’ negotiation of racial categorization and status in the New World. Even the poorest migrants who could not afford new garments still actively pursued Anglo style and the accompanying respectability they hoped it might bring. Migrant leaders believed that domestic service and the accompanying aesthetic transformation required of migrant girls would educate and reform. In addition to middle-class women, urban migrant
women became ambassadors of style and deliverers of Anglo commodities while supplementing the income of rural families. Yet, as the memoirs of Laura Goodman Salverson and the Icelandic domestics who accused their employers of assault reveal, the new clothing of domestics also represented the inadequate compensation that women and girls received for the loneliness, hard labour, and sometimes violence that they faced while working in “the most prosperous economy.” Rather than simply accepting women’s abandonment of Icelandic nationalist costume and the pursuit of Anglo style as evidence of cultural loss, the emphasis on clothing in this chapter responds to the tremendous amount of time, energy, labour, and attention they invested into dress as evidence of the historically significant cultural and economic pressures and possibilities they faced.

Food is another compelling terrain of ethnic expression produced largely in the home. Given the centrality of coffee and vínarterta to modern Icelandic identity, as well as the compelling history of alcohol in the community, no study of the Icelandic-Canadian community would be complete without examining the history of the devoted pursuit of and compelling contests over food and drink. Like clothing, food and drink (or the lack of it) touched almost every aspect of life in the lives of migrants. Beyond simple sustenance, certain forms of food and drink were primarily sources of desire and mediums through which Icelanders pursued pleasure, mediated relations, and constructed or challenged gender, class, and ethnic identities. Certain aspects of Icelandic culinary tradition are unusual for the degree to which they retain the practices and styles of nineteenth-century Iceland. Women may have discontinued the use of traditional clothing pieces like the skotthúfa in a matter of weeks, days or even hours after arriving in Canada, but 135 years later their descendents might be brewing coffee in almost the exact same manner and bickering over the recipe to a prune torte that has changed very little, if at all, since the family left Iceland. Rapid changes to clothing stand in stark contrast to the culinary conservatism of Icelandic-Canadian kitchens and stems largely from the fundamentally public nature of migrant clothing and the community’s upward ambitions and the production and consumption of food and drink in the privacy of the home. Interestingly, this conservatism also reflects the rejection of Anglo-Canadian claims to supremacy and good taste when it came to things like coffee. Frank dismissals of the stale and subpar coffee beans sold in North American stores and the “swill” served on steamships are a remarkable exception in a community that otherwise devotedly praised and appropriated Anglo-North American culture. It was this
devotion to North American ideals and notions of respectability that also fueled the intense anxiety about the liquor consumption of Icelandic men. Like coffee, the concern with an imagined genetic susceptibility to alcohol also has its roots in nineteenth-century Iceland, but served as a source of community cohesion through many members’ opposition to, rather than unabashed passion for it.

By the 1950s the popularity of traditional practices was seriously affected by external recognition and acceptance of certain Icelandic foods. Though vínarterta was only one among many popular recipes in the community, its emergence as a defining symbol of Icelandic North American culture coincided with McCall’s Magazine’s recognition of the dish in 1949 and numerous internally and externally produced image of vínarterta as synonymous with Icelandic North Americans. Critics such as Neil Bissoondath and Jón Gustafsson have dismissed frequent references to the dessert in representations of the community as kitschy, bizarre, and superficial. However, oral narratives surrounding the torte reveal that community members imbue the production and consumption of vínarterta with mnemonic qualities, particularly related to the identification with Ammas. Vínarterta is not simply a remarkably static baking tradition but has been sustained by a changing set of compelling cultural functions, including its role as “Eucharist” in the construction of grandmother-based family identities.

The third and fourth chapters further examined the role of external pressure and visibility in the community amid anglicization in the twentieth century. As mentioned earlier, histories and heritage campaigns from both sides of the ocean have tended to downplay and occasionally ignore language loss and anglicization in Icelandic Canada, emphasizing instead pre-anglicization history and vague references to an “enduring love of literature.” This avoidance reflects the centrality of language to Icelandic national identity. Modern European Icelanders are often most interested in making contact with other Icelandic speakers in North America, much to the chagrin, and occasionally the embarrassment of community members who are unable to perform. This section puts language loss in context as a dual process of loss and production. It asserts that language loss has not signaled the death of the community, but a politically significant transformation in its primary medium of communication.

Anglicization meant the decline of more radical Icelandic language publications, such as Voröld and Freyja, which had largely remained unscathed and unregulated by Anglo-Canadian
public opinion and state interests. It also steadily depleted a once cohesive audience of readers who had been bound together by the same tongue. The rise of a new, more visually-based Icelandic identity for anglicized generations in the 1920s not only helped to bridge the gap between older generations and their anglicized offspring, it also helped to shape the external image of the audience, in accordance with the desires of community leaders and the political climate in the Anglo-Canadian West. The “bald women epidemic” of 1924 and the depiction of “friendly women” and delicious food in Iceland on the Prairies reveal that the construction of “hospitality” and conservative visions of Icelandic women’s bodies became an integral part of the new visual culture in the community. Such images stood in stark contrast to earlier radical traditions. Yet, the tone of visual culture and spectacle in the community from the 1920s onwards did not reflect its innate conservatism, but the increasingly limited mechanisms through which images of Icelandic identity were produced.

While chapter three examines the relationship between ethnic spectacle and the desire to control the community’s public image, the fourth chapter considers the impact of these campaigns on the private popular culture of Icelandic Canadians. Heritage planners like J.T. Thorson may have invested substantial time and effort into carefully worded narratives about the community, but it is unclear to what extent audiences accepted these nationalist images of the past. The use of objects in private and public commemoration presents special challenges to understanding audience reception. Material cultural studies’ new focus on the instability of meaning in the material world, or the inability of objects to independently signify something, means that the messages that state/nationalist heritage organizations attempt to convey through objects can be adopted, reworked, or rejected by Canadian audiences. As the endurance of fatalism and intergenerational narratives of maternal trauma in Icelandic-Canadian families reveals, heritage campaigns have shaped, but not solely defined popular memory in the community. The endurance of narratives that recount marginalized nineteenth-century events and personalities that are often forgotten in other familial and ethnic histories, including spousal abuse and child mortality also complicates our understanding of the large body of pioneer myths that permeate the Canadian prairies. Local and state heritage campaigns may attempt to use images of the traumatic past to create a sympathetic, but ultimately redemptive image of migration history, but this image is subject to alternate popular commemorative traditions. Here,
fatalism and traumatic narratives act as powerful cultural forces that are capable of replacing nationalist narratives of the past with familial and ethnic ones.

The final chapter explores the ways in which community members have also employed hjátru narratives and worldviews in responding to traumatic events and histories. These narratives reveal that for many community members, superstition was an important and popular way of discussing and critiquing race, gender, and class-based power claims, including their own role in the colonial project. This is not to imbue hjátru narratives with a sense of altruism, particularly since many of them promote the notion of malevolent retribution. Rather, this chapter illustrates that these narratives provided Icelanders with an adaptable venue for understanding and analyzing the past. As hjátru stories related to First Nations ghosts and fylgjur illustrate, they reveal the compelling ways in which Icelanders understood their proximity to colonial violence: as an unsettling and potentially harmful intergenerational inheritance capable of establishing powerful claims to land that many were reluctant to ignore. Hjátru narratives and the cultural landscapes they establish are also compelling because of the way that they transcend the divisions between colonially inscribed “above ground histories” and “below ground archives.” Proceeding from the larger literature on the productive potential of traumatic history and memory, this chapter illustrates that some of the most taboo narratives in the community are a rich and complex terrain of cultural expression that offer a useful contribution to the broader history of ethnic communities in North America.

Beyond a seamless image of progress, acculturation, and patriotism, the cultural history of this community reveals that performance and construction of both Icelandic and Canadian identities have involved a range of complex terrains. Engaging with these terrains reveals the subtleties of expressions of power in the community. Continual contests over Icelandic cultural degeneracy and “authenticity” and the adoption of Anglo-Canadian style and allegiances reveal that the formation of migrant culture was often a very physical project. For ethnic leaders, government officials, and Anglo-North American neighbours, migrant bodies were both a potential threat and a medium through which a range of potentially lucrative images of ethnic difference might be broadcast. Diseased, racially inferior, disloyal, or peculiarly dressed migrant bodies threatened to upset the White, Anglo-centric project of Western Canadian settlement. Conversely, images of hospitable, literate, “loyal pioneers from the land of the Vikings”
anchored ethnic difference to Anglo-Canadian claims to land and supremacy through nation-building narratives and even national defense.

Attention to the political impact and motivations behind Icelandic-Canadian spectacles are important to moving beyond claims that anglicized, “racially compatible” ethnic communities are “dying” or have become assimilated. By examining the material and visual conduits through which ethnic difference is continually produced, historians can access the diverse terrains and forums through which community members engage with and contest images of ethnic culture, history, and character. Such an approach also moves beyond an analysis of the motivations and desires of state officials, community leaders, and heritage organizers and reveals the subtleties and diversity of popular ethnic expression as negotiated through images, objects, and narratives. An analysis of community culture reveals that ethnoscapes respond to the dual demands for the performance and suppression of ethnic expression in North America in a range of ways. While the some Icelandic forms, such as food and hjátru narrative traditions, endured relatively intact in the homes and private lives of community members, Icelandic-Canadian culture has mostly been shaped by constant interplay between personal and public expectations, ideas, and desires. It is this fluidity, coupled with the development of compelling, often-shifting material, visual, and oral landscapes that have continued to facilitate the construction of Icelandic identities in the North American context 135 years following departure.

END
Chapter One Figures

Figure 1.1. Friðjón Friðriksson and Gúðny Sigurðardóttir

Figure 1.2. The Peysuföt
Portrait of Halldora þorsteinsdóttir from the photo album of Sigtryggur Jónasson and Ranveig Briem.
(n.d.) University of Manitoba Icelandic Collection.
Figure 1.3. Skautbúningar (c.1870)

Collection of the Canadian Museum of Civilization. Photograph by CMC. Artifact number 69-94.2

Figure 1.4. Sigurður Guðmundsson, Peysuföt (1854)

As printed in Hlutavelta Timans: Menningararfarur á Íslandi (Reykjavík: Íslandshöfundin, 2004), 342.
Figure 1.5. Peysuföt with large bow, 1908

As printed in Sigríður Th. Erlendsdóttir, Veröld Sem ég Vil (Reykjavík: Kvennréttindafélag, 1993), 85.

Figure 1.6. Hölkur

Image by Þjóðminjasafn Íslands (Þjms.) (National Museum of Iceland)

Catalogue numbers Þjms. 13597, Þjms. 13591, Þjms. 13592.
Figure 1.7. Hólkur owned by Icelandic migrant featuring snake with ruby eye
Photo by author, Manitoba Museum collection, G-5500 – SCANDINAVIAN.

Figure 1.8. Icelandic migrant women wearing skotthúfa en route to North America (n.d.)
Collection of ÞJMS.
Figure 1.9. Skotthúfa construction

Photo by author, Manitoba Museum collection, G-5500 – SCANDINAVIAN.

Figure 1.10. Icelandic skautbúningar as Canadian waistcoat

As reproduced by Nelson Gerrard, Eyrarbakki Icelandic Heritage Centre, (EIHC) Silent Flashes (Museum Exhibit) Icelandic Emigration Centre, Hofsós, Iceland.
Figure 1.11. Ólöf Sólvdóttir c. 1885 (left) and in costume as Olof Krarer, Greenlandic Esquimaux in 1889 (right)

As reproduced in Inga Dóra Björnsdóttir, Ólöf eskimói: Ævisaga islensks dvergs í Vesturheimi, (Eskimo Ólöf: Biography of an Icelandic dwarf in the New World) (Reykjavik: Mál og Menning, 2004.)
Figure 1.12. Hand woven Icelandic coverlet (with repairs)

Photo by author, CMC collection. Artefact number 69-55.

Figure 1.13. Icelandic weaver’s family dressed in clothing sewn with store bought fabric, 1898

Photo by Baldwin & Blondal, Collection of the EIHC
Figure 1.14. *Skinnskor* (skin shoes)

Photo by CMC, Collection of CMC, artifact number 67-22.

Figure 1.15. *Ilepar* (shoe inserts)

Photo by EIHC, Collection of EIHC
1.16. Icelandic man in parka, gauntlets, and sash made in First Nations/ Métis style, with wool socks (n.d.)

Photo by author of photograph owned by Rannveig Jónasson, 2009
1.17. Undecorated Métis gauntlets with rabbit fur (2008)

Photo by Chichester Métis Mitts

1.18. Icelandic man in *Moccasin Treyjur* (Moccasin Jacket) worn with wool socks

As reproduced in Gerrard, 66.
Figure 1.19. Frú Lára Bjarnason, c. 1875

As reproduced in Gerrard, 118.

1.20. Sigtryggur Jónasson and Rannveig Briem in Canada (n.d.)

As reproduced in Gerrard, 221.
Figure 1.21. Sigríður Jónsdóttir ("Stuck up Sigga")

Photograph by G.W. Searle, Winnipeg. From the photo album of Sigtryggur Jónasson and Rannveig Briem. (n.d.) University of Manitoba Icelandic Collection.
Figure 1.22. Peysuföt alterations: From nineteenth-century Icelandic political symbol to twentieth-century Canadian parade costume.

Photo by author, collection of the Manitoba Museum, catalogue number H9-24-655
Chapter Two Figures

Figure 2.1. Stained Icelandic coffee sock from Riverton, Manitoba.

Photo by author
Figure 2.2. Unidentified men taking a coffee break in New Iceland (n.d.)

PAM N11324, New Iceland Collection (324)
Figure 2.3. Icelandic Good Templar Hall, Winnipeg, Manitoba. (n.d.)

As reproduced in Guðjón Arngrimsson, Annað Ísland: Gullöld Vestur-Íslendinga í máli og myndum (Reykjavik: Mál og Menning, 1998), 107.
Figure 2.4. Shanty Town, Winnipeg, c.1880
PAM N11249 New Iceland Collection (242)

Figure 2.5. Gísli Jónsson, aka “Saura-Gisli” (Filthy Gisli)
As reproduced in Thorstína Jackson, Saga Íslendinga í North Dakota (Winnipeg: The City Printing and Publishing Co. 1926.)
Figure 2.6. Gimli Bar, 1907

PAM N11231 New Iceland Collection (223)
Figure 2.7. Vinarterta decorated with nonpareils being served at Winnipeg bridal shower, 2008

Photo by author

Figure 2.8. Hardfisk button, Gimli, Manitoba, 2008
Figure 2.9. Local symbols of Icelandic culture in Gimli: hardfisk and the Viking statue

Photograph by as reproduced in “Snooping around Gimli,” Vice Magazine October 27, 2009.
Figure 2.10. Vinarteta served with icing sugar (top right)

2.11. Children with men dressed as Vikings at Íslendingadagurinn, Gimli, Manitoba

Still from Jón Gustafsson, The Importance of Being Icelandic (Winnipeg: Marble Island Pictures, 1999.)

Figure 2.12. Buying vínarterta at Íslendingadagurinn

Still from Jón Gustafsson, The Importance of Being Icelandic (Winnipeg: Marble Island Pictures, 1999.)
Figure 3.1. Dr. Sigurður Júlíus Jóhannesson aka “Siggi Júl”

Figure 3.2. Icelandic Manitobans riding in Viking ship float, Winnipeg, c.1922

Image courtesy of EIHC
Figure 3.3. Front cover of Freyja featuring story on prominent Russian socialist

Catharine Brezkovsky, 1910

Image courtesy of Landbókasafn Íslands (National Library of Iceland)
Figure 3.4. Salome Halldorson, MLA

PAM Halldorson-1, MLA Portrait Collection
Figure 3.5. J.B. Swecker, “Fjallkonan” 1866

As reproduced in “I send greetings! ‘Eg bid að heilsa!’” University of Wisconsin Libraries
www.library.wisc.edu/.../mm/Arnason-front.jpg Accessed April 14, 2010
Figure 3.6. Fjallkona Contestants (Lindal lower far right)

Lögberg May 29, 1924, 1.
Figure 3.7. Fake embroidery (appliquéd beaded trim) and “ermine” (rabbit fur) on Lindal’s costume.

Photo by author, costume from collection of Manitoba Museum
Figure 3.8. Sigrún Lindal as short-haired Fjallkona, 1924

As reproduced in Elva Simondsson, *Fjallkonas of Íslendingadagurinn 1924-1989* (Gimli: 1990.)
Figure 3.9. Mobile Alþingi float bearing Icelandic Canadian men in wigs and false beards,

Winnipeg, 1930

Image courtesy of EIHC
Figure 3.10. Sigrún Lindal as Fjallkona with wig

Figure 3.12. Icelandic women dancing with Allied soldiers (n.d.)
Ljósmyndasafn Reykjavíkur

Figure 3.13. Image of friendly Ukrainian girl and Canadian pluralism
Still from Laura Bolton, *Ukrainian Dance* (Ottawa: National Film Board, 1943.)
Figure 3.14. Images of friendly women and plentiful food in formal dinner scene, *Iceland on the Prairies*

Figure 3.15. Smiling Icelandic-Canadian woman and male companion, *Iceland on the Prairies*
Figure 3.16. Scene from 20th Century Fox’s Iceland: American GI (Payne) prompts “Icelandic” woman (Henie) to dump her frail, nervous Icelandic boyfriend

As reproduced in “Fáránleg kvikmynd, sem er látin gerast í Reykjavík” Morgunblaðið September 19, 1942.

3.17. Still featuring Sonia Henie as Katina in Iceland (1942)
Figure 3.18. Siggi Júl (far left) in scene depicting heated discussion at the Wevel Café, *Iceland on the Prairies*
Figure 4.1. Ornamental money box from Iceland with crack in base
Photo by author, from the collection of the Manitoba Museum Scan-177c.
Figure 4.2. Engraving of kofforts being used as seats in nineteenth-century Icelandic house

A. Mayer, Grímstaðir Fjöll, 1835, as reproduced in Gerrard, 9.

Figure 4.3. Icelandic koffort with curved lid showing signs of wear from use as seating

Photo by CMC, Collection of CMC, Artifact number 89-95.1-2
Figure 4.4. Icelandic koffort with flat lid

Photo by CMC, Collection of CMC, Artifact number 77-256.1

Figure 4.5. Charlie Ostertag with Icelandic koffort used as a tool box, Riverton, Manitoba, 2003.

Photo by author
Figure 4.6. Harry Steel, “Icelandic woman at spinning wheel,” Winnipeg, n.d.

As reproduced in Thorstina Walters, *Modern Sagas* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1953.)
Figure 4.7. “The Pioneer Cabin,” featuring Icelandic “pioneers,” Gimli, Manitoba, 1925
(Sigtryggur Jónasson at far left) As reprinted in Gerrard, 158.
Figure 4.8. Mass Migration to Manitoba exhibit, Manitoba Museum (c.1970)

Photo by author
Figure 4.9. Immigrant ship display, Canadian Museum of Civilization permanent exhibitions (c.1980)

Photo by CMC, CMClA ACQ. 2001-I0036 VMMB- Photos of permanent exhibitions

Box 1-9 A, K77-494
Figure 4.10. Film still from *1911*.

As reproduced in Timothy Findlay et al., *Newcomers: Inhabiting a New Land*, (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1979.)
Figure 4.11. “Could you pack your life in a trunk and come to Canada?”

Figure 4.12. Opening gallery featuring kofforts New Iceland Heritage Museum, (NIHM)

Gimli, 2008

Photo by author
Figure 4.13. “Difficult Choices” display, NIHM

Photo by author
Figure 4.14. Icelandic Canadians posing beside closed books

Image from Icelandic National League’s 1999 Heritage Treasures calendar
Figure 4.15. Icelandic language books on floor of NIHM, 2003

Photo by author
Figure 4.16. Koffort reclaimed from Margret Wishnowski’s garage and placed in her living room

Riverton, Manitoba, 2003

Photo by author
Figure 4.17. Family steamer trunk being stored in farm outbuilding, Riverton, Manitoba, 2003

Photo by author
Figure 4.18. Lynne Johannsson with a refurbished family koffort containing Icelandic souvenirs in living room, Arborg, Manitoba, 2003

Photo by author
Figure 4.19. Agnes Bardal Comack (right) keeps this photograph of the Icelandic grave of her Amma in her Winnipeg living room (n.d.)
Figure 4.20. Arni Sigurdson, The Landing at Willow Point (1950)

Figure 4.21. Girl in Icelandic costume beside White Rock monument

Figure 5.1. Graftarnes, (Nes) Riverton, Manitoba, 2007

Photo by author
Figure 5.2. Skull of adult female Icelandic smallpox victim exposed by erosion, Nes Cemetery, Riverton, Manitoba, 2007

Photo by author
Figure 5.3. “Hulufólk home” (tourist attraction) Gimli, Manitoba, 2009

Photo by author
Figure 5.4. Boulder associated with huldufólk, Point Roberts, Washington, 2009

Photo by author
Figure 5.5. Grave of Betsy Ramsay and John Ramsay (unmarked) Riverton, Manitoba, 1989

Photo by Manitoba Heritage

Figure 5.6. Monument for Ukrainian child victims of Scarlet Fever, Strathclair, Manitoba, 1999

Photo by author
Figure 5.7. Anders Swanson, *The Three Sisters*. Acrylic on vinyl. Winnipeg, 2006.

Reproduced with permission of artist.
Conclusion Figures

Figure 6.1. Jón Sigurðsson statue surrounded by tear gas, anti-NATO riot, Reykjavík, 1949
Figure 6.2. “Jón Sigurðsson bleikklædur” (Jón Sigurðsson dressed in pink)

Figure 6.3. Broadcasting images of *kreppa* protest: Icelandic protesters armed with banners, saucepans, cameras, and video cameras

Works Cited

Primary Sources

No author


Executive Committee of the National Committee for the Celebration of the Diamond Jubilee of Confederation, *Diamond Jubilee of Confederation: General Suggestions for the guidance of committees in charge of local celebrations*, Ottawa, iii. Fisher Library Collection, University of Toronto, cap 00793.


“Fáránleg kvikmynd, sem er látin gerast í Reykjavík.” (Ridiculous film that is supposed to take place in Reykjavik) *Morgunblaðið*, 19 September 1942.

“Fleygðu ekki burtu hárinnu sem kembist af þér” (Don’t throw out your hair). (Advertisement) *Heimskringla*, 6 February 1924: 5.

“Frit Fyrir Alla” (Free for all). *Freyja*, 1 February 1898: 10.


“Icelanders!” (Advertisement) Framfari, 15 February 1879, as reprinted and translated in Framfari: 470.

“Icelanders in Winnipeg.” Framfari, 22 February 1879, as reprinted and translated in Framfari: 473.


“Íslendingadagsnefndarfundur að Árborg” (Icelandic day planning meeting in Arborg). Heimskringla, 11 June 1924: 1.


“Íslenzkur skraddari” (Icelandic tailors). Lögberg, 21 September 1888: 1.


“The Shanty Dwellers’ Reply.” Framfari, 7 March 1879.
“Seyðjanda ársþing þjóðræknisfelagsins” (Seventeenth annual meeting of the Icelandic National League). Lögberg, 16 April 1936: 2.

“Skolanam Íslenzkra barna” (Educating Icelandic children). Lögberg, 15 February 1888: 2.


“Um kaffi, litþess, einkenni og notkun” (On coffee, about it, characteristics and applications). Íslendingar, 29 June 1860.


“With the Governor General.” The Globe and Mail, 26 September 1877: 2.

Author listed


Baldvinsdóttir, Friðriika to Baldvin Helgason, 10 January 1874 as reprinted in Böðvar Guðmundsson. Bréf Vestur-Íslendinga (Letters of the Western Icelanders) Reykjavik: Mál og Menning, 2002: 60.

Baldwin, Augustus to Phoebe (Baldwin), 13 March 1877, Provincial Archives of Manitoba (PAM) MG8 A6-3.

Bardal Comack, Agnes. Interview with author. 10 May 2009, Winnipeg, Manitoba.


Bildfell, Jón. “Sköllóttar konur” (Bearded women). Heimskringla, 10 July 1924: 4.


---. Ukrainian Dance (film) Ottawa: NFB 1943.


Briem, Jóhann. “A few hints to Icelandic emigrants.” Framfari, 4 January 1878, 63.


Einarsson, Magnús. “‘Everyman’s Heritage: The Canadian Odyssey’ Storyline and Press Release.” CMCIA CCE-C-1 Box 84 f.4, 5.


Hryhorchuck, Carol. Interview by author. 21 May 2009, Riverton, Manitoba.

Johnson, Metta. Interview by author. 21 December 2009, Gimli, MB.


Friðrikkson, Friðjón. *Correspondence of Fridjon Fridricksson*, PAM MG 8 A 6-7 1874-1885.


Guttormson, Guttormur. “John Ramsay the Native Indian.” *Andvari, Nýr flokkur*, 1975: 75-83, as translated and reprinted by Viðar Hreinson and Jón Karl Helgason in Íslendssöguvefurinn:


Halldorson, Salome. Speech of Miss Salome Halldorson Member for St. George, Delivered in the Manitoba Legislative Assembly, 26 February 1937. PAM MG 14. B3, 1.


Helga Indridator vs. Geo. W. Earl, City of Winnipeg Police Court Record, PAM, 19 October 1894.


“J.B.” “Farewell to Iceland from one leaving for America,” Framfari, 10 September 1877: 3.

Jochumsson, Matthías. “Vertu sæl til módir minnar” (Farewell to my mother), (poem) as translated and reproduced by New Icelandic Heritage Museum, Gimli, Manitoba, n.d.


Jónsson, Einar and Dr. S.J. Jóhannesson, Icelandic for Soldiers. Winnipeg: Columbia Press, Ltd. And The Canadian Legion War Services, n.d.

Jónsson, Haraldur. Interview by author. (written communication) Reykjavik/Toronto, 6 February 2010.


“K77-494” (Photograph of Immigrant ship display) VMMB- Photos of Permanent Exhibitions, Canadian Museum of Civilization Institutional Archives (CMCIA) ACQ. 2001-10036 Box 1-9A.


Miller, Jennifer. Interview by author (written communication). Ottawa/ Toronto: 15 February 2010.


---. *The Viking Heart*. Toronto, McClellan and Stewart, 1975: 33.


S.B. “Frá Íslandinga-Fljóti” (From Icelandic River). *Heimskringla*, 1 April 1891: 1.


Skulason, Hrund. Icelandic Oral History Fonds. PAM tape C-1733, 9:45

Stefánsdóttir, Ólafia to Ólafia Magnúsdóttir, Churchbridge, 4 December 1898, as translated and reprinted in Nelson Gerrard, curator, A Photograph to Bridge the Ocean/ Ljóssmynd’ (Exhibit Text) *Silent Flashes/ Pogul Leiftur Ljóssmyndir Íslendinga í Vesturheimi* (Museum Exhibit) Icelandic Immigration Museum/Vesturfarasfni, Hofsós, Iceland.


---. Letter to Dr. S.J. Jóhannesson, 7 March 1941, NAC MG 31, E38 Vol. 25, File 8.


Thomas Taylor, Dealer in Dry Goods, Groceries, Wines and Liquors, Etc., Etc., Bill of Sale for 125 pairs of boots to The Canadian Government, 28 February 1876 LAC RG 17 A-1-7 Department of Agriculture, General Correspondence v. 175 d. 18194. Bill copy provided by Ryan Eyford.


Wishnowski, Margret. Interview by author. 8 February 2003, Lundi, Riverton, Manitoba.

Woodsworth, J.S. *Strangers At Our Gates or Coming Canadians*, Toronto: Missionary Society of the Methodist Church, 1909.

### Secondary Sources


S. Holyk Hunchuk, “Feeding the Dead: The Ukrainian Food Colossi of the Canadian Prairies,” in *Edible Histories, Cultural Politics: Towards a Canadian Food History. Edited by Marlene Epp and Franca Iacovetta* (forthcoming)


---. “Immigrant Gifts, Canadian Treasures and Spectacles of Pluralism.” (Unpublished manuscript, 2010.)


